

Unity for the Married Ones

Matthew 19:1-12

Halifax: 7 May 2006

Introduction:

Today, we come to our fifth message from Matthew having to do with our Lord's instructions about how we are to live in His kingdom...

- At the end of chapter 17,
 - we saw that we are to relinquish our rights for others...
- In 18:1-14,
 - we saw that we are to receive the little ones...
- In 18:15-20,
 - we saw that we are to confront the erring ones...
- And in 18:21-35,
 - we saw that we are to forgive the repentant ones...

This week, we come to chapter 19.

- Here we have yet another piece of instruction from our Lord about how we live together in His kingdom.
- But the setting is a little different now—
 - Jesus is no longer alone with His disciples.
 - The multitude is with him again, and with the multitude are the Pharisees.
- He has left Galilee and is slowly making His way toward Jerusalem where He will be crucified.
 - He is now on the east side of the Jordon, an area called Perea.
- Even though there has been a change of place and circumstance,
 - I have included this passage in our series about how we are to treat one another in Christ's kingdom.
 - Here He speaks about the foundation of all our other human relationships—marriage!
 - You all know that we are called to love our neighbour as ourselves—
 - this is the second great commandment next to loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.
 - While God is not in need of your service, your neighbour is—and God receives what is done for your neighbour in His name as done for Himself.

- Hearing this, we have a tendency to ask the question, “Who is my neighbour?”
 - Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan to show that even your enemy who is in need is your neighbour.
 - This has been emphasised a lot in our day, and that is good...
 - The people in Jesus day did not consider Samaritans their neighbours...
 - But we have made an even greater omission in our day...
 - We do better than many societies at loving the stranger and the neighbour, but we do worse at loving our very nearest neighbours.

- Who is your nearest neighbour?
 - Your spouse, if you have one, is your nearest neighbour.
 - This is where neighbour love begins.
 - If you have a form of neighbour love that skips over your nearest neighbour,
 - your love is just an empty show.
 - If you can only love people from a distance but can't love those who are closest to you,
 - then your love is seriously diseased.
 - If you are not married, then you can apply this to whoever your nearest neighbour is—probably your parents.
 - Jesus teaches us very plainly that we are to love the stranger and even our enemies who are not near to us...
 - but this teaching should never be understood to advocate that we are to love those who are far away **instead** of loving those who are near—those we are around every day!
 - I don't know how many times I have spoken to distressed wives who have “community service husbands” who are honoured in the community as Good Samaritans,
 - but who are devils at home.
 - True biblical love begins with the nearest ones and overflows even to the stranger and the enemy.

With that in mind,

- Let me show you what Jesus says about your nearest neighbour in Matthew 19.

The conversation about marriage is opened up by the Pharisees who come to test Jesus about marriage.

- Now I want you to think about the Pharisees.

I. The Pharisees provide us with a classic example of what it is to completely misunderstand the purpose of God's law.

- You will always run into people like this...
 - You will run into this kind of attitude in your own soul...
- . The big question for them is this: "Is it lawful?"
 0. That is always what they want to know...
 - For them, a person's whole life boils down to nothing else but this one thing:
 - "Is it lawful?"
 - Their whole life was about trying to live within the boundaries,
 - trying to play by the rules.
 - In their minds, if that was done, then all was well.
 - Nothing else really matters.
 0. In this particular case, they ask Jesus about marriage...
 - and of course their question begins with the words "Is it lawful..."
 - v. 3: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?"
 - . It was a big question in their circles...
 - 0) They disputed about whether a man could divorce his wife for anything that displeased him, or if he could only divorce her for sexual immorality.
 - It all hinged on the interpretation of the Hebrew phrase *erwath dab-har* found in Deuteronomy 24:1—a very difficult phrase to interpret...
 - The New King James Version translates it with the words "some uncleanness:"
 - It says,
 - Deut 24:1: "When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favour in his eyes because he has found **some uncleanness** in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce..."
 - The great question is what does "some uncleanness" mean here?

- Is it adultery, or is it just anything the husband doesn't like about his wife?
- 0) I will quote to you from a Jewish source that describes the various views of three Rabbinic schools—that of Shammai, Hillel, and Akiba:
- “The house of Shammai say, a man may not put away his wife, unless he finds some uncleanness in her, according to De 24:1” which they took to mean sexual immorality...
 - The house of Hillel say, if she should spoil his food, (Jarchi and Bartenora explain it, burns it either at the fire, or with salt,) who appeal also to #De 24:1.
 - R. Akiba says, if he finds another more beautiful than her, as it is said, De 24:1 "and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes.""
- 0) Most of the Jews of Jesus' day (including the Pharisees) sided with Hillel—she had to at least spoil the supper before you could divorce her...
- Oddly enough, even though this was the leading view, divorce was not all that common—
 - it was just that it was permitted on very little grounds—
 - They wanted the comfort of knowing there was an easy way out of the marriage if needed.
 - Having the threat of divorce seemed to them a good way to keep their wives in line... they were always on probation.
 - I should add that the women did not ordinarily want to divorce in those days because of the difficulty they would have on their own.

TRANS> So the great question was whether it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason at all, or were their limitations?

- . It was a great question in their circles, so they bring it to Jesus to test Him.
 - It is hard to know just how they were testing Jesus since this was something about which they themselves did not agree...
- 0) Perhaps they saw it as a way to turn a lot of the people against Him since they knew pretty well that Jesus would probably take the minority position...
- saying that divorce was only lawful in the case of sexual immorality.
- 0) or it may be that they hoped He would waffle a bit since He was now in Perea.

- Perea was the dominion of Herod Antipas.
 - Do you remember him?
 - He is the one who only months before had beheaded John the Baptist...
 - Do you remember why?
 - Largely because John had spoken against Herod's unlawful marriage to Herodias whom Herod had seduced away from his brother Philip.
 - Perhaps Jesus wouldn't be as bold as John...
- If he waffled, the Pharisees could accuse him of inconsistency in his teaching.

TRANS> Whatever the case, they bring this question about the lawfulness of divorce to Jesus to test Him.

- . Instead of immediately answering them,
 - Jesus exposes the fact that they have completely missed the point of marriage...
- 0. In a rather sarcastic manner, He asks them if they have ever read about the original institution of marriage.
 - . Of course they had read it—
 - but Jesus is mocking at the way their legalism has blinded them to the plain teaching of scripture.
 - Instead of looking at what marriage is, they are looking at the boundaries.
 - . Jesus points them back to God's original intention for marriage.
 - It had nothing whatever to do with divorce!
 - It was about the joining together of one man and one woman so that the two become one flesh.
 - It was not about tearing apart, it was about coming together as one.
 - . Marriage is supposed to be like a beautiful garden where love is cultivated,
 - and these guys are wanting to know what the minimal requirement is for breaking the relationship apart!
 - The goal is for husband and wife to build their lives together in love,
 - and these guys are looking for lawful ways to tear their lives apart!
 - There is no greater example of missing the point.

0. Jesus is basically pointing out to them that the regulations about divorce were not brought in to legitimise divorce, but rather to regulate it.
- . The thing to focus your attention on is not:
 - “When can I break off with my wife?”
 - But rather “how can I love my wife?”
 - “How can I be more united with her?”
 - “How can I better love her?”
 - Can you imagine these Pharisees asking Jesus questions like that?
 - It would be completely out of character for them!
 - They were so out of touch with what Jesus was all about...
 - They completely missed the point.
 - . Beware of this mentality that takes God’s law and so grossly misuses it!
 - 0) The law sets boundaries to restrain us because of sin.
 - It puts limits on how far we can go...
 - But our goal should be much greater than simply to keep the rules...
 - What kind of soccer player would he be who is so concerned about keeping the rules that he forgets that the object of the game is to get the ball into the opponent’s net?
 - If his only aim is never to break any of the rules...
 - If he has no concern about gaining control of the ball and moving it down the field with his team to score...
 - he is useless as a soccer player!
 - He could sit in on the bleachers and never break a rule!
 - 0) That’s what the Pharisees were like!
 - They were so focused on the regulations of the law that, as Jesus put it, they neglected the weightier matters!
 - Things like loving their neighbour and showing mercy to those in need were not on their list of things to do...
 - They were just making sure to keep all the rules.
 - Instead of living and moving about **within** the boundaries of God’s law,
 - they lived for the boundaries.

- 0) As far as marriage,
 - Jesus tells them,
 - God is the one who brings man and wife together—
 - He is the one who joins them
 - and nobody is to separate what God has joined together.
 - Divorce has nothing to do with the original plan.
 - Marriage is not about divorce, it's about unity.
- . But of course the Pharisees don't get it—they go right back to the original question...
- 0. You can see by their response in verse 7 that they have missed everything that Jesus has just said...
 - They are still focused entirely on the boundaries...
 - v. 7: “Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?”
 - If you look back at Deuteronomy 24, you will see that Moses did not actually command this...
 - He said,
 - Deut 24:1: “When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favour in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce...”
 - Moses was simply saying, “when this happens...”
 - and then putting regulations on it...
 - Still, the point of the Pharisees is legitimate that by referring to the practice without forbidding it,
 - Moses does, in an indirect way, at least allow the practice...
 - He doesn't say, “This must never be done...”
 - but rather, “when this is done...this must not be done.”
 - 0. And so Jesus responds to their question about Moses, affirming that Moses did indeed permit divorce...
 - “Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.”
- . By this He is showing that the only reason divorce was permitted was because of sin...

- Divorce was never a part of the original plan any more than laws of restitution for stealing...
 - The only reason laws of restitution for stealing were given was because people were stealing...
 - If there had been no sin, there would have been no need for laws of restitution.
 - . So it is with divorce...
 - Permission to divorce became necessary because sin made it necessary...
 - It became necessary because people with hard hearts committed adultery or abandoned their wives,
 - they broke the covenant of marriage and dealt treacherously with their wives...
 - The innocent party was thereby given liberty to divorce...
 - Permission to divorce did not make it lawful to break up a marriage...
 - it gave the innocent party permission to get out of a marriage that had already been broken up by the other party... by adultery or desertion.
 - The innocent party was permitted to be released from their obligations because the other party had broken the covenant.
 - There is much more that could be said about the grounds for divorce,
 - but as I preached about that in Matthew 5:31 in some detail, I will refer you to that sermon.
 - . The point Jesus makes here is that permission was given by Moses to divorce when the marriage covenant has already been broken,
 - permission was not given for divorce itself to be the thing that breaks the marriage covenant.
0. In verse 9, Jesus gives an exception...very much in keeping with the narrower view of Shammai...
- v. 9: And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, **except for sexual immorality**, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.
- . If there is fornication, then the other party has permission to divorce.
 - Jesus really did not need to mention this exception because there was no dispute about it...

- That is why the parallel accounts in Mark 10 and Luke 16 don't even mention this exception.
 - Desertion that cannot be rectified is another exception that was not in dispute...
 - Jesus is excluding divorce for frivolous reasons as allowed by the school of Hillel... for any cause...
- . And look at what he says about divorce for these reasons!
- He says that you are guilty of adultery when you divorce for illegitimate reasons and marry another!
 - It is no light or trivial matter!
 - You become an adulterer in such a case.
 - That is the true rule of God's kingdom!
- . So Jesus gives them their rule...
- Here it is fellows—
 - No divorce for any and every cause!
 - To do it and marry another is to commit adultery, regardless of what your courts may say.

TRANS> But brothers and sisters, don't you miss the point the way the Pharisees did...

- Yes, there have to be regulations about divorce because of sin...
 - because some people's hearts are so hard that they simply will not keep the marriage covenant.
 - They may euphemise it and call it sexual addiction and whatever they want, but the bottom line is hard hearts...
 - They are living contrary to the calling of God for marriage!
- But let us not get all focused on the boundaries the way the Pharisees did...
 - It behoves us to return to Jesus original point...
 - I call you now to:

II. Consider more closely what God's original intention for marriage is according to Jesus...

- . It is about a male and female becoming one flesh in a relationship that takes precedence over every other relationship...
 0. The man is to leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife...

- Here is the most intimate, most permanent, most complete relationship.
 - It is even more binding than the relationship of mother and son.
 - The man leaves his mother to form this new bond.

- 0. About this relationship, Jesus said, “What God has joined together let not man separate...”
 - He is, of course, talking about divorce, but much more than divorce...
 - He is talking about everything that leads to breaking up this relationship.
 - He is talking about the harsh words you use with each other that drive you apart instead of drawing you together...
 - He is talking about the neglect when you allow your work or your hobbies or your parents or even your children to keep you away from your spouse...
 - He is talking about the ugly things you say about each other behind your backs...or in each others presence...
 - He is talking about the selfish spending decisions (when you buy the sports car or the computer you don't really need) that throw your family into hardship...
 - He is talking about the neglect of responsibilities when you sit on the couch instead of washing the bathroom or repairing the roof...
 - He is talking about accusations and blame shifting...
 - He is talking about sulkiness and grumpiness and short tempers...
 - He is talking about the lustful glance at another woman; or the longing for another man...
 - He is talking about refusing to render the duty of conjugal love...
 - He is talking to you men about neglecting to take the responsibility to lead your family in godliness... to teach them the word of God... to correct their faults...
 - He is talking about you women refusing to submit to your husbands in all things as to the Lord...
 - He is talking about lying to each other...
 - He is talking about refusing to forgive one another, about bearing grudges and such things...

- All these are ways that you separate what God has joined together!
 - These must all stop!
 - You are not to separate what God has joined together.

- The legalist thinks only of divorce, but you are to think of anything and everything that tears you apart.

TRANS> Something very different is to be done in this nearest and most permanent of all relationships...

- . It is in marriage that you are to cultivate neighbour love...
 0. As I mentioned at the beginning—yes, you are to love the stranger—you are to love your enemy,
 - but Christian love begins at home and grows out from there...
 - If you are not loving the one God has joined you together to love as one flesh, all the other love you claim to have is a sham...
 0. It is with your spouse that you learn what it means to love another person—
 - to give your life for your neighbour...
 - to love your neighbour as Christ loved you and gave Himself for you...
 - to serve your neighbour as you would serve Christ...
 - to encourage your neighbour and to build each other up in the Lord...
 - to comfort one another in sorrows...
 - to pray together for the kingdom of God...and to pray for each other...
 - to labour together in bearing fruit for God... helping each other to grow, correcting each other and admonishing each other...
 - to give thanks together for God's goodness...
 - to fill the earth by bearing and bringing up children in the Lord...
 - to protect one another...
 - to discover the riches of God's grace together...
 - to enjoy God's good gifts together...
 - to eat together...
 - to live as companions...
 - to share a warm bed.

TRANS> This is God's original intention for marriage!

- Brothers and sisters, this is what you get to do in your marriage!
 - This is why God has put you together with your husband or your wife!

III. But how sad it is when you miss God's purpose for marriage!

- . We have already seen that the Pharisees missed it—
 - in verse 10 we see that the disciples also missed it.
- 0. Look at what they say in response to Jesus' statement that there should be no divorce except for sexual immorality!

- v. 10 “If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry.”
 - “If marriage isn’t something we can get out of easily,
 - it’s better to avoid it altogether!”
 - What a foolish statement!
 - How they miss the point!
0. Brothers and sisters, marriage is God’s good and excellent gift to us at creation!
- It is not something to try to find ways to get out of!
 - . How alien it is to be thinking about at what point you can break off this relationship!
 - It’s like taking a kid to an amusement park and his first question is:
 - “When can we go home?”
 - And the second question is,
 - “What rides do I have to go on?”
 - . Marriage is the relationship above all other relationships where you grow up into the love that God calls you to!
 - It is the place where you become all that a human being is meant to be as the image of God!
 - It is not something to avoid and try to get out of!
 - It is something to pursue with eager delight!
 - . Yes, I know that you are fallen and I know that your spouse is fallen...
 - 0) But are you a Christian?
 - Did Jesus come to restore you, to pardon you, to give you His Spirit of sanctification so that you might be renewed in the image of God?
 - Then start looking for the grace of God in your marriage brothers and sisters!
 - Here is the mountain to climb
 - by the grace of God...
 - Here is that place to wage war against your sinful flesh...
 - by the Spirit of God.
 - It is here in your marriage that your love is to be cultivated,
 - here that it is to blossom and bear much fruit!
 - Do not miss this opportunity!

- 0) The whole reason this relationship is good is because it is permanent!
 - Its permanence is no reason to avoid it and to say “It would be better not to marry if I can’t divorce...”
 - The very value of marriage is that you are joined together as one so that you can learn to love as Christ loved.
 - You can learn to work things out with another person...
 - It is the place God has appointed for growing love!

- . At the same time, Jesus does explain that it truly is better for some not to marry—
 - He Himself was such a one...

- 0. In verse 12, He explains that there are some who are eunuchs—and that in three ways...
 - . Those who are eunuchs from their mother’s womb
 - which speaks of some sort of genetic defect that prevents them from marriage...

 - . Those who were made eunuchs by men—
 - they were castrated in order to serve in a king’s court without the distraction of sexual desires... a common thing in those days...

 - . There are those who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heavens sake...
 - these are not castrated, for such mutilation is forbidden in God’s law...
 - but they are men who are able to put aside their desire for women in order that they may devote their attention to service in the kingdom of God without distraction...
 - Such was Paul who chose not to marry in order that he might devote himself to his apostolic calling...
 - It is far better for a missionary, if he is unwilling to take his children with him into the field, to forgo marriage or else find another calling.
 - There has been a sad example of missionaries putting their children off in boarding school in order to devote themselves to ministry!
 - What a dreadful example this is to the ones who are being ministered to!
 - If a man is called to go to a place that is too dangerous to take his family, let him not have a family.
 - Let him be a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of heaven!

- It is indeed better for some not marry...
0. But Jesus says that all cannot accept this saying—
- the saying that it is better not to marry...
 - . The implication is that they cannot and they should not accept it...
 - 0) The great majority of men are not called to be eunuchs...as Jesus says,
 - “only those to whom it has been given.”
 - It is a special gift of God, given at His sovereign pleasure and not based upon human will or decision...
 - 0) I will be very frank with you...
 - The only man who has this gift is the man who does not burn with desire for sexual intimacy...
 - I realise that it may not seem the most spiritual thing to some of you, but this is the truth of the matter...
 - As Paul puts it in 1 Cor 7:
 - “*It is* good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband.”
 - This is that plain language of scripture!
 - Marriage is your calling if you burn with desire for sexual intimacy.
 - You are not to try to pretend that you have the gift of continence if you don’t.
 - As Paul says later,
 - It is better for you to marry than to burn.
 - . It is God’s will for the vast majority to marry—
 - 0) What the disciples say—that it is better not to marry—is true for a few...
 - but for most, it is better to marry...
 - “not all can accept this saying”
 - You can’t give yourself the gift—
 - If God has not given it to you, then it is better to marry.
 - 0) But what about women who do not always have the option?

- There are generally more women than men in a society and it is often the case that they are not able to find anyone suitable—
 - Yes men, that is an insult to you! It is a fact that there are more godly women than men!
 - And there are men who also, for various reasons, are not able to find a suitable spouse...
 - What are such persons to do?
 - They may pursue marriage within God’s will,
 - but until they find someone suitable, they must trust God to keep them holy.
 - He has lessons for you to learn in your condition just as he has lessons for those who are married.
 - And just as provides grace for the married to live rightly in marriage,
 - so He provides grace for the single person to live rightly without marriage.

TRANS> So it is true, that for some few it is better not to marry—Jesus supports that...

- But let no one say it is better not to marry for the reason the disciples said it—
 - because you can’t get out of it by an easy divorce...
- . I would venture to say that among us there may well be two kinds of wrongful responses after hearing what God wants in marriage—
 0. There are some of you who would look at you spouse after hearing this sermon and say,
 - . “It would have been better for me not have married him (or her).”
 - “If you only knew what my husband is like, you would understand...”
 - “He is not at all like the husband you spoke about this morning—our marriage is nothing like you described...”
 - Or, “If you knew my wife!”
 - . Well, it may be true... you may have an ungodly spouse...
 - Indeed, it may even be the case that you made a foolish choice in the person you married...
 - But God did not make a foolish choice, and your foolish choice was all a part of His providence.

- He has not made a mistake concerning you...
- If you have grown in grace and your spouse has not grown—maybe he or she has even deteriorated...
 - that is still under God’s absolute sovereignty...
 - Your marriage is still not to be dissolved...
 - You are not to separate what God has joined together...
- . The truth is, if God has given you an ungodly spouse, you have a unique opportunity to cultivate godliness in ways that would not be available to you with a godly spouse!
 - You need to draw on God’s grace to love your spouse in spite of how he or she may treat you!
 - You have the opportunity to learn to love your spouse the way Jesus loved you—when you were unlovely.
 - It is for you to seek to overcome evil with good, to return kindness for insult.
 - What an opportunity God has given you in His wisdom!
 - What an opportunity to glorify Him!
 - So start looking to God and quit complaining!
 - You have a calling to fulfill

TRANS> That’s the first sort of wrong response among you married folks...

0. The second is just the opposite...
 - You who fall into this category were listening to me talking about those who heard this sermon and said:
 - “It would have been better for me not marry him—or her...”
 - And you were sure that your spouse was thinking that about you!
 - . Your thought is also that it would have been better for you not to marry because you would say,
 - “I have been a total failure in marriage.”
 - “I am the one who has completely missed the point.”
 - “I should never have gotten married.”
 - . You are quite humble, aren’t you?
 - But you need to snap out of it!

- 0) I don't mean to say you should stop being humble...
 - It's just that you've got the wrong kind of humility...
 - You want to settle down in your humility and use your weakness and your inadequacy as an excuse.
 - Yours is the sorrow of the world that produces death!

TRANS> You need the kind of sorrow that produces life...

- 0) The sorrow or the humility that produces life is the sorrow that says,
 - "I've got to change."
- 0) Yes, you say, but I always have the other kind of sorrow...
 - Of course you do—that's why you talk like that...
 - You've grown quite comfortable with your weakness—it gives you a great excuse to keep shirking your responsibility and avoid loving your spouse.
 - But that is the path to death and you need to repent!
 - Real, Holy Spirit wrought humility is humility that drives you to Jesus Christ for grace to serve God in your calling...
 - It is the kind that rises up to follow Him, all the while looking expectantly to His grace to help you change.
 - You can go with your hard and miserable heart making excuses,
 - or you can believe that God has sent His Son to give you life...
 - and you can start looking to Him earnestly for their life.

Conclusion:

That is the response that you all need to have.

- God has put you in your calling whether you are married to a godly person, an ungodly person, or not married at all...
 - And He has called you to love your neighbour—beginning with your nearest neighbour—
- And because you haven't done this, He calls you to look to His Son, Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sin and for the power to change.
 - So quit with all the excuses and start loving your nearest neighbour!
 - That is God's will for you!