

Marriage and the Kingdom of God

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[0 : 00] Well, again, let me say welcome to those of you who are returning, and especially welcome to those of you who are visiting for the first time. Again, as I said at the beginning of the service, if I've not had an opportunity to meet you, I'd love to do so after the service.

It's been a busy week in our country. A lot has happened. I think there's been a lot to think about and meditate on. I think, like many of you, the last two days for me, I've spent largely thinking and reading and praying a lot about the Supreme Court decision that happened.

And since it was announced, Laura and I have really been talking about little else. And like many of you, I think that we recognize that this is an epic moment. This, for many of us, will probably be one of the single most significant things that happens in our generation.

It'll be a thing that we look back on as one of the things that defined our generational experience, you know, as mostly young adults here. And I know for many of us, this isn't just an issue.

For most of us in this room, this is an incredibly personal, real, relevant thing that has happened.

Whether you're gay, whether you have brothers or sisters or best friends, you know, for me, I have several family members for whom this is incredibly relevant.

[1 : 26] You know, and since I heard this, I've been thinking a lot about my uncle, a man we love very much, who we watched waste away and ultimately die as a result of HIV-related complications.

And I remember a conversation where he said, you know, Christianity is a religion for straight married people. And he said, there's no place in a religion like that for a gay man like me.

And we have mourned that. And I remember it broke my heart then and it breaks my heart now as I say it. So I think we need to be very careful in how we think about, how we respond to as a community, the events of the last several days.

I've heard from a number of you. I really appreciate it. I've heard from a number of you. Others of you have seen your posts on Facebook. I think it's pretty clear that this community is all over the map with regard to reactions to this.

I think there are, you know, many people in our community who saw the announcement and they celebrated and they're excited and they think this is the best thing that could have happened.

Believe it or not, there are just as many people in our community who responded with a sense of despair.

[2 : 40] There are a lot of people, I think, for whom this issue divides you in your heart. You feel torn apart by it. You're not sure what to think. You know, I would number myself among you.

And so I think it's an incredibly confusing issue. I think that the desire to be a faithful Christian, to be faithful to Scripture, and yet to love is something that we wrestle with.

We all wrestle with. I think as a community of disciples, no matter what is happening at any given moment, no matter what the present circumstances might be, our call is always to ask the same question.

And it's really the question that lies at the heart of discipleship. And that is, what does it look like to follow Jesus in this particular cultural moment? What does it look like to follow Jesus in this particular cultural moment?

And that's why together I want to look at Matthew 19. If you understand or remember the content of Matthew 19, on the surface you have some religious leaders who come to Jesus and they ask him about divorce.

[3 : 49] But underneath, I want to tell you what's going on here, because underneath there's a lot more going on than that. In this culture, at this time, there was a fierce marriage debate underway. And essentially what had happened is they didn't have a constitution, but they had the law, the Old Testament law.

And Moses had made a kind of amendment to this law. And the amendment was an amendment about divorce. And the reason Moses did this was to try to regulate what was already a very widespread practice of divorce that was happening in the time that he was leading the people of Israel.

And so this amendment was a kind of way of trying to regulate and actually bring some justice to the role that women would often play in the divorce. And there was very little, if any, justice for women at any point during all this.

And so he was trying to regulate that a little bit. And so a number of differences had arisen since the time of Moses as to how to interpret and apply this amendment. And as is always the case, you had the liberals and you had the conservatives, right?

And you had the conservative party, the Shammai school of thought, and the Shammai school of thought believed that marriage was, you know, they took it very seriously.

[5 : 14] And the only way that divorce was allowable is through a clear, provable case of adultery. And then you had the Hillel school of thought. They were sort of the liberals of the debate.

And they viewed marriage much more as a contract that could easily be entered into or broken. And they believed that divorce, for a man to divorce a woman, you could divorce for any number of reasons. I mean, if dinner is cold one night, that's grounds for divorce.

And so, again, situation not very good for women in general at all. But there's a huge debate over the nature of marriage. Now, they don't have a supreme court, and so they come to Jesus.

And they did so for a lot of reasons. They came to Jesus primarily because they want to get a ruling from him. They want him to deliver a final ruling as to how to apply Moses' amendment.

And they have an agenda. See, ultimately, what they want to do is to get Jesus to side either with the conservatives or with the liberals. And what will happen, they know, is if they can get Jesus to side with either the liberals or the conservatives, whoever he doesn't side with will be alienated.

[6 : 20] And that's what their ultimate goal is. And I've been thinking about this passage quite a bit because I think that this is probably something that we can identify with. You know, we have, from the time that we began as a group of a couple of dozen people in a living room, been a church that has done everything we can to maintain the sense of the mystery and the complexity of the gospel.

And we have done our best to refuse to toe any party line. We've refused to engage in the culture war. I mean, when it comes to the culture wars, we're the draft dodgers, you know.

We don't want to get swept up in a war we don't believe in. And so I think many of us can understand the pressure that we feel now to pick a side. And whichever side I pick, do I side with my Christian friends who want to uphold Scripture and alienate all of my gay and lesbian friends? Do I side with my gay and lesbian friends and alienate the church? What do I do? And they're trying to get Jesus to make the very same decision. Who are you going to side with? Who are you going to pick and who are you going to alienate? And what I want to do is to look at Jesus' response. Because Jesus' response, bad news, it makes everybody angry. It makes everybody angry. And I know that some of you believe one thing and some of you believe another.

[7 : 35] I know some of you are Christians and some of you are not. I will warn you, probably everybody will get a little angry at some point looking at this response. But there's value in it because I believe if we can understand why Jesus responds the way he does, it will help us know a little more what it looks like to follow him here and now.

And so the two things I want to show you are this. First of all, Jesus' response is more conservative than the conservatives. And the second thing we'll see is that it's more liberal than the liberals. So it's at the same time more conservative than the conservatives and more liberal than the liberals.

And somehow it holds together. So let's, before we look at this in more detail, let's pray for God to help us. Lord, we do ask, as we've already asked earlier in the service, as Dan prayed, Lord, as we sang together that your word is a light.

And we pray that it would illuminate an incredibly dark and incredibly confusing and incredibly complex set of circumstances and issues, Lord, that affects us all personally in different ways, Lord. Help us to know what following you means and use your word to instruct us, Lord, toward that end. We pray this in your son's name. Amen. So on the one hand, Jesus' response is more conservative than the conservatives.

[8 : 47] Let me just read what he says. Jesus answers them in verse 4. Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female and said, therefore a man shall leave his father and mother, hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?

So there are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate. What we need to understand is that, as I said a moment ago, the Pharisees are looking for a ruling from Jesus.

They're looking for legislation that they can then take and apply, right? But what Jesus does, and it's very important that we understand this, he goes around that question.

He doesn't even address legislation. He goes behind it, and he goes immediately back to the purpose of marriage. He goes all the way back to the beginning. And that has to be incredibly frustrating for them.

But he goes back to the very beginning, and he quotes from Genesis, and he begins to lay out, this is the original purpose for marriage. And you see a few things. First of all, he says in verses 4 and 5, marriage is established by God.

[9 : 54] It's divinely established, he says. And he refers to the Creator, and he says that marriage is something rooted in creation itself. What he's really saying here is that marriage, as he's talking about it, that's important, marriage is something that we fit into.

It's a design that we submit ourselves to. It's part of the architecture of creation. And what he's saying is that, you know, just like when you renovate a house, you want to talk to the architect. You want to talk to the person who designed it because you want to know, what can I change and what can I change? And you certainly don't want to take out any load-bearing beams because the whole thing will crash down. And this is sort of Jesus' way of saying marriage is a load-bearing beam in creation.

So that's the first thing. It's established by God. The second thing he says in verses 4 and 5 is that marriage is a complementary union. It's interesting. The first thing he says is he made them male and female, therefore a man shall leave his father and mother.

What he's saying is that if you look at the design of human beings, they're designed for union. And it makes sense. You know, they're designed for union, therefore they join together.

[11 : 04] And it makes sense if you look at the larger way in which creation is laid out. You know, beginning in the first few verses of Genesis chapter 1, you see God creating sets of complementary pairs.

You have light and dark. You have sky and sea. You have sea and land. And in every case, God takes chaos and he brings order to it. And he brings order by creating a complementary pair.

And what he does is he creates in those complementary pairs the possibility for life to exist and to flourish. And this sort of climaxes with the creation of the male and the female.

And in their union, you see the possibility for life and flourishing. So what we see is that the essence of marriage as Jesus is talking about it is not actually love.

It's a sexually complementary union. That's the essence of marriage. And Paul tells us that the complementarity of marriage, you know, Paul in Ephesians 5 says that it's this complementarity that reflects the relationship between Jesus and his church.

[12 : 09] And then thirdly, he says in verse 6 that marriage is a lifelong covenant. He says, you know, what we say in the liturgy, what God has joined together, let not man separate. So they want Jesus to make a ruling and instead he takes them back and reminds them of the purpose of marriage.

He says, here's God's ideal. It's a divinely established complementary union that is a lifelong covenant. That's God's ideal. And what we need to understand is that what Jesus is saying, what he's laying out here, is way more conservative than the Shammai party.

Way more conservative. And you have to imagine everybody balking at this answer. And we know from his disciples' reaction that everybody hears him and thinks, that's not possible.

And so they say, well, if this is the case, Jesus, then why did Moses allow divorce? And here's what Jesus says, and this is fascinating. He says in verse 8, because of your hardness of heart, Moses allowed divorce.

Do you see what he's doing here? This is fascinating. It's very important. What Jesus is doing is he's turning the conversation around. They want legislation, and Jesus is reframing the conversation, and he's saying, why do you think legislation is even necessary?

[13 : 26] Why is legislation even necessary? And he's turning the focus away from the legislative to the much deeper level of the heart.

And he's saying, the very fact that you're asking me this, the very fact that there's even a debate, is because your hearts are hard. All human hearts are hard. It's his way of saying there's something much more fundamental at stake here than marriage, and that is the hardness of human hearts toward God.

The word is actually the unyielding nature of hearts. Hearts that don't yield. Hearts that don't follow. Hearts that resist. Hearts that don't exist. So this, I think, applies in a lot of ways.

Before we move on, I just want to highlight a couple. For all of us here who are lamenting the Supreme Court decision and thinking we have now significantly departed from God's will in our country.

A lot of people saying that. What this tells us is this, is that regardless of what rulings come out of the Supreme Court, the relationship between God's ideal for marriage and any civil legislation regarding marriage, that there's always been a separation.

[14:43] You know, sometimes maybe they overlap and sometimes they don't. But they've always been two completely, utterly distinct things. And this is the thing that Jesus is trying to highlight here. Marriage isn't defined by how we legislate it.

There's a reality of marriage that has always existed. And then there are all of the different ways that different governments throughout history have handled and legislated marriage. But they're two separate things.

Sometimes more overlap, sometimes less. And then for all the people who are celebrating this decision, this shows us that the very fact that we need legislation, the very fact that we even ask these questions at all, shows us how far all human hearts, regardless of sexuality, regardless of whether you're married or single, the fact that every single human heart is hard.

And Jesus is saying that is the much more fundamental issue. That's the thing that you need to be asking about. Why is my heart hard? That should be cause for grief. So first, we see that Jesus out-conservatives the conservatives.

Okay? And everybody balks. And then as we go on, we see that he does the opposite. On the other hand, Jesus' response is more liberal than the liberals. A little bit after this, the disciples, when they have Jesus alone, they sort of come up to him and they say, Well, if what you're saying is true, then maybe it's better if we don't get married.

[16:03] And we have to understand that when they say this, they're being cynical. You know, it's their way of saying, what you just said, Jesus, is so completely unrealistic. You know?

And they're saying, well, maybe it's better if we don't get married. But that's cynical, and we know it's cynical because they lived in a society where to not be married as an adult was utterly unthinkable. It wasn't even an option. You know, they lived in a society where nobody dreamed of not marrying if they could possibly help it.

What we need to understand is the liberals, the Hillel Party, yeah, they had a very liberal view of marriage. You can easily enter into it. You can easily break out of it for any number of reasons. Well, if you were a man. But no, even the most liberal liberal would never have dreamed of just doing away with the idea of marriage altogether.

Because the primary concern, if you were an adult in this culture, was your children and your legacy. Will my name continue? Will my land pass on?

Will my legacy go on? It was all about ensuring and protecting your legacy. And if you didn't have a legacy, it was a death sentence. To be an adult in this culture and to be unmarried was a death sentence.

[17:17] Much like huge parts of the conservative evangelical church. The prospect of being an unmarried adult felt like a death sentence. And look what Jesus says.

He says, essentially, they're being cynical, maybe a little sarcastic, and Jesus takes them literally. And he says, you're right. And you can imagine, what? And then he goes on to talk about eunuchs. And a lot of people look at this and they're like, is this a complete non sequitur? But look what he says. We have to understand why he goes and he starts talking about eunuchs. We have to understand what that means.

Eunuch was kind of a broad umbrella catch-all term. And it was a word used to refer to people who, for any number of reasons, would remain unmarried as adults.

To men who would remain unmarried as adults. And what's interesting about this is he talks about different categories of people and different reasons why they would not be married as adults.

[18:16] Some have been physically castrated. Right? Some have been physically castrated. And a lot of times they were, you would castrate somebody and you would put them, and eunuch literally meant the keeper or the protector of the couch.

In other words, they would be put in charge of protecting the harem. Because you could be reasonably sure that they weren't going to fool around with anybody in the harem. If you had castrated them. And that was important because you needed to make sure that all of the, you know, birthright and child and lineage, that that was all, you know, clear.

And so you didn't want anybody messing around with the harem. Right? So that's one kind of eunuch. But then he talks about those who are eunuchs from their mother's womb. And this has been massively debated. I've done an enormous amount of research on this.

I'm reasonably convinced that this is an umbrella term that refers to a whole range of different kinds of men. Including people who are biologically sexually equipped in every way.

They have not been castrated. They're not deformed. And yet their primary attraction is not to women. And then Jesus lastly talks about there's a kind of person who's a eunuch who have given up voluntarily family and kids and all of that for the sake of the kingdom of God.

[19:27] This would include people like Jesus. And people like Paul. And he says that what he's doing here when he talks about this, he's essentially saying in a culture where marriage is everything.

In a culture where family is everything. Your salvation was your family if you were a Jew. Salvation was based on family line. Family lineage. That's how salvation happened.

Was being part of the right part of the family. He's saying in a culture where family is everything. Where the focus is entirely on the family. He's saying there's a whole category of people who for various reasons are not called to marriage.

In other words, he's saying in God's community, unlike the world at the time, marriage and singleness are distinct, complementary, equally viable vocations. And the reason he's saying this and what he's pointing us to is that he's saying there's something bigger, there's something more beautiful, there's something more eternal at hand than marriage and family.

It's the kingdom of God. And he's saying you have to look past this and you have to recognize that the kingdom of God is at hand. And there are people who are voluntarily giving up what they could have for the sake of the kingdom of God.

[20:39] It's worth that much. It's the pearl of great price. It's the treasure that when a man finds it, he buries it and sells all that he has so he can buy the field in order to possess it. It's that valuable.

It's that valuable. Jesus came into a culture where family was everything. And with him comes the kingdom of God.

And through his death and resurrection, he establishes a community, which is the church. And that church looks forward to the day when the kingdom of God is, as we say, fully consummated.

The Pharisees at one point asked Jesus, well, what will happen to marriage in that day? And he says, oh, there won't be marriage. No, marriage won't be necessary. Because it won't be like today where unless you're a part of a nuclear family, you're nothing.

In that day, all of humanity will be one great, beautiful family. Marriage will no longer be necessary. And what the early church understood, what these Christians began to understand, is that the church is called to inhabit that space between.

[21:43] And what the early church began to recognize, is that the bond they had in Jesus Christ, was deeper, even than blood. That the church, in the church you see a family, where the bonds are deeper and stronger, even than blood, even than DNA.

And the early church understood this, that they were meant to be a preview of this kingdom family.

The church was called to be a kingdom family for those without families. One of the things you realize very quickly when you look at the early church is, they had a huge impact on the larger Greco-Roman world, not because they won the culture war, right?

It was because of their radical love. It was because they became a haven, they became a family for the marginalized, for the orphan, and the widow, and the slave, and the eunuch.

This is why, you know, that beautiful story in Acts chapter 8, when the Ethiopian eunuch is riding along, and he's interested in who Jesus is, and he's come all of the way, traveled this enormous distance, probably wanting to go to the temple to worship this God he had heard so much about.

Well, what would have happened to him when he got to the temple? They would have said, you're not allowed to come in, because castrated men were not allowed in the temple. So he would have traveled all that way for nothing.

[23 : 09] And then he's riding back, and he's reading through the scriptures, and he's trying to figure out, this God who I know I'm called to, this God who is wooing me to himself, who I went to worship, why am I not allowed in?

And you realize where he's reading in Isaiah, about the suffering servant, comes just before Isaiah chapter 56. And that's the place where God says, let not the eunuch say I am a dry tree.

In other words, let not the eunuch, let not the person who, for whatever reason, does not get married, cannot have children, cannot have that legacy that was salvation for so many people. Let not that person say, my legacy is cut off. Instead, if that person trusts me, I will give them a legacy, I will give them an inheritance, a thousand times greater than anything they could imagine on this earth.

And you imagine that man reading that, and then going back and seeing all of this is possible because of this suffering servant, and so when Philip shows up, he says, who is this person? I have to know who this is.

[24 : 10] And Philip says, it's Jesus. It's Jesus. Because of Jesus, that promise is possible. What's he talking about? The kingdom of God.

That's what the kingdom means. There are many people who, regardless of the Supreme Court ruling, will still never be married or have kids.

You know, there are many straight men and women who, for whatever reason, will never marry. There are people who have lost their spouses. There are people who have been divorced and will not get remarried.

I think of the conversation that I had not too long ago with a gay man in his late 40s. And he said, you know, for me, gay marriage is completely irrelevant.

And I said, why? And he said, well, look at me. I'm in my late 40s. I'm overweight. He says, I'm not 22-year-old, well-built, attractive.

[25 : 14] There's virtually no chance that anyone would ever want to marry a person like me. And my question is this. If the church cannot become a family for a person like that, then what the heck are we doing?

You know, what are we doing? We're wasting our time. So I want to leave you with five takeaways. Maybe five things to think about, discuss.

First of all, I think this is showing us this, that we need to focus on the big picture, right? The problem is much bigger. It's much worse than we think.

It's not marriage legislation. It's the fact that we all have hard hearts. That's the biggest problem.

Our hope is much greater than we dared hope.

It's not marriage legislation. It's the kingdom of God. It's the kingdom family that Jesus is establishing here and now. Because Jesus Christ has come to melt hard hearts with his love.

[26 : 20] That's the only way we can have soft hearts is if they're melted by his love. You know, the law breaks hearts. It crushes them. But love and grace melts hearts.

No matter how much we make and break our marriage covenants, which we do and we will, God never breaks the covenant he made with us.

And Jesus Christ is proof of that. So that's the first thing. We need to focus on the big picture. The second thing is this. We need to become church. We need to become a kingdom family.

I do not believe we are that. We need to become that and we need to be that. And that means we need to majorly change how we think about community. How we prioritize community. How we open our homes and our lives.

We need to become less busy. We need to create margins in our lives to welcome and embrace the people who God sends our way. People who need families.

[27 : 21] I think of Julie Rogers, a friend of ours, who is gay but has chosen out of her faith a life of celibacy. And I think of a conversation where she said, you know, I can live without sex.

I can survive without sex. I don't know if everybody can say that. She says that. I can live without sex, but I cannot live without intimacy. And I think that's true of every single one of us.

And I remember she said sort of to the church, I need you. I need you to be my family. I'm not going to survive without you. She doesn't need a lesson in morality.

She's pretty grounded. She doesn't need conversion therapy. I think we need to repent of that. I think it's a heresy. She needs a family.

She needs a family. So we need to become a kingdom family. The third thing, we need to live into the tension. Okay? We need to embrace the reality of tension.

[28 : 24] We have to love God, his ideal, his word, his truth. And we need to love our neighbors as ourselves. Jesus says these are the two great commandments. You ever realize how much at odds they are with one another?

Some people love the idea of loving God. Some people love the idea of loving their neighbors. But to do both? That's tension. Tension. It's hard. If you're not struggling over this, you should be.

If you don't feel torn apart by this, you should be. Those of us who are wrestling with this, who are struggling, who feel torn to pieces, I think you're on the right track.

Tension is a prerequisite to being a Christian. Okay? Think about what we believe. What do we believe? A God who is three and yet one sent his son, who is both human and divine, to establish a community of people who are sinners and saints who occupy a place in history we call the already but not yet.

If you cannot handle tension, you need to find another religion. You're going to have a really hard time with this one. So, fourthly, we need to embrace the opportunity before us.

[29 : 33] We are not here by accident. God did not drop the ball. Okay? I think we have before us an opportunity to be a new kind of Christian in our culture.

Maybe we can finally move beyond the God versus gay debate. Maybe we can finally move beyond this kind of culture war. And maybe we have an opportunity to forge an entirely new way of being a Christian.

A new role that we can occupy in society. So, let's see this for the opportunity that it is. Let's stop complaining about persecution.

Whatever we face, whatever we will face, it is nothing compared to what the gay and lesbian community has dealt with for centuries. Stop complaining about persecution.

Let's joyfully say goodbye to our societal privilege and say good riddance. You know, when it comes to the church, privilege is most of the time poisonous.

[30 : 37] The gospel community has a natural habitat. The natural habitat of the gospel community is the place of greatest weakness because that is the place where the power of the gospel is the strongest.

And then lastly, I think we need to remember this, that love does win. By love, I don't think we mean our romantic ideals of love.

We mean the inexplicable, radical, sacrificial love of Jesus Christ. You know, yesterday, in all the fray, Nicholas Kristof published this beautiful little piece about a doctor named Tom Katana who is in the Nuba Mountains.

And the U.S. and other governments have largely abandoned the people in the Nuba Mountains, about half a million of them. Their own government bombs them every day.

Every day. And Dr. Katana is the only doctor remaining there to serve half a million people. Half a million people. His hospital has been bombed 11 times.

[31 : 51] He gets malaria at least once a year. He works without water, he works without electricity, and he relies on mostly Civil War era treatments.

Because he has no supplies. Because nobody supports him. And the question that the article kind of asks is, why would any sane, rational person leave the possibility of a wife, leave the possibility of kids and a legacy, and go halfway around the world to love and to serve and to give his life for people he doesn't even know?

Why would anybody do that? And the answer is, because that's exactly how Jesus Christ loves us. Who left the glory of heaven, the privilege of being the Son of God, and came down here, and plunged into our suffering, and gave himself for us, all the while we were spitting on him and hating him.

And he did it anyway. But it's that kind of love that will have the final say in this world. It is that kind of love that offers us a hope, regardless of what you think politically, regardless of where you stand. That is the source of hope that cannot be matched. So what does it mean for us to follow Jesus in this moment? I think it means what it always means.

[33 : 05] That we love. If they hate us, we love. If we lose our tax-exempt status, we love.

If we lose our jobs, we love. If we lose credibility, we love. If we lose everything, we love. We love because he first loved us.

That's what we do. Let's pray. Father, even as we recognize this call, we realize our insufficiency for it.

Lord, may your grace enable us. May you make possible what is impossible for human beings. May you make possible in yourself.

We pray this not only for our good, but for the good of every man, woman, and child in this city and in this world. People whom you love more than we can possibly even imagine.

[34 : 13] We pray this in your son's name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.