

Marriage and the Kingdom

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[0 : 00] Well, today we come to a passage we skipped over in our series on Matthew's Gospel. Last month we had baptisms scheduled for every Sunday of the month at 10.30 and we even had one scheduled for 9 o'clock last Sunday, though they had to cancel or postpone because of a death in an extended family.

But with baptisms come lots of visitors and so I thought it would be better to skip over this passage and go to the ones that get straight to the Gospel and I guess we could have kept going in Matthew and not come back.

That would have been easier for me. But they're difficult words and I'm acutely aware that these topics can be painful for many people, whether it is because you personally have been hurt by a divorce or know people who are or whether you are single, including those who have been widowed and wish that you weren't single.

But it's exactly for those reasons I think we should not skip over the Word of God when it's hard, but we should at least pray. So let's pray.

Gracious Father, we do thank you that this is your Word to us, that what you say is authoritative for us and for our good.

[1 : 25] And so Father, we pray that you would help us to understand it this day. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I thought I'd lighten the mood a little bit to start with and give you some quotes from some children on love and marriage.

So on the next slide, Regina, age 10, says, I'm not rushing into being love. I'm finding fourth grade hard enough. Next slide, Gary, age 7, says, It's not just how you look, you know.

Look at me. I'm handsome like anything and I haven't got anyone to marry me yet. I'm worried about him. And the third one, Kenny, age 7, says, It gives me a headache to think all about that stuff.

I'm just a kid. I don't need that kind of trouble. Which is similar to what the disciples' reaction was, actually. But anyway. Now, before we come to these topics, it's more than just marriage, actually.

It's three topics in one. Marriage, divorce and singleness. And before we come and see what Jesus has to say on those topics, Matthew gives us some context. So have a look in your Bibles at verse number one.

[2 : 27] And let's see the context there. So verse number one. When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea in the other side of the Jordan.

Large crowds followed him and he healed them there. Some Pharisees came to him to test him and they asked dot, dot, dot. And so it goes. So on the next slide is a map of Israel.

Up in the north where Capernaum is, at the north top of the end of the slide there, that's where chapter 18 took place. That's where Jesus was teaching his disciples about sin, forgiveness and doing what we can to make sure that no one wanders from the faith.

But now he's finished saying those things. And so he traveled down the east side, your right hand side of the Jordan and Miss Samaria, as Jews often did. And then he's crossed back over the Jordan around the place of Jericho in the region of Judea.

And it's at this point that the crowds, large crowds or many crowds literally start to follow him and he heals them. No doubt the Pharisees, jealous of Jesus' popularity, come now to test Jesus.

[3 : 37] In fact, ever since chapter 12 of Matthew's gospel, they've been plotting to kill Jesus. And so they come here to test Jesus with a question about divorce, hoping to trap him and get him killed.

How? Well, perhaps in two ways. First, by getting Jesus killed by Herod. You see, the region of Judea is the exact same location where John the Baptist worked.

And Matthew's description here in verse one is a little bit more detailed than usual. And so perhaps Matthew is trying to remind us that this is where John the Baptist also worked, who was beheaded by Herod.

Why? Well, for having a go at Herod about divorce and marrying his brother's wife. So perhaps the Pharisees are hoping, knowing Jesus' conservative views, that Jesus will get himself beheaded.

Although, secondly, and perhaps more likely, they're hoping to catch Jesus in blasphemy by contradicting God's law. The law referred to the law of Moses, the first five books of the Bible.

[4 : 36] And in verse three, they ask, what is lawful, do you notice? By which they mean, is it right according to God's law? And as we'll see, they're ready to quote from Deuteronomy chapter 24, our first reading of the Old Testament law.

And so they're going to see if perhaps they can catch Jesus in a contradiction, contradicting what God says, and perhaps then get him up on charges of blasphemy and have him stoned to death or something like that.

Either way, we need to remember this context so that we realize Jesus is not giving a full answer on marriage, divorce, and singleness. Rather, Jesus is dealing with the Pharisees' test, their questions, and exposing their hearts.

So with that in mind, let's have a look at their first question, point one in your outline, and we'll pick it up again at verse three in your Bibles. Some Pharisees came to Jesus to test him.

They asked, is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason? Now, notice the question here is not about divorce, whether it's okay, full stop.

[5 : 45] They assume it's okay. Rather, the question is, can they do it for any reason? For example, if my wife doesn't cook a meal I like, can I divorce her?

And one rabbi actually said that. If my husband doesn't put the toilet seat down, can I divorce him? There'd probably be a lot more divorces if that was the case. But that's effectively their question.

Can we divorce for any reason? Now, Jesus doesn't fall for their trap. He's very clever. He answers their question with another question, which is always a good trick to do. I do it as a parent.

My kids say, can I have something more to eat? And I say, well, have you cleaned your room? No? Well, no. And notice he also quotes from Old Testament law, but from Genesis.

So look at verse four. Haven't you read, he replied, that at the beginning, the creator made them male and female and said, for this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh, he says.

[6 : 46] So Jesus's question is, haven't you read the law yourself? Basically, the book of Genesis. First, God made them male and female, Genesis one. Second, a man will leave his parents and be united to his wife, becoming one flesh.

That's Genesis two. The word united here is, in Genesis, is literally cleave together. And it's the same word that the Old Testament uses for a disease clinging to you.

So my wife, Michelle, could say of me that I'm like a disease that clings to her. She doesn't, thankfully. But that's what it means, stuck together like glue. And it's this leaving and sticking or cleaving that makes them one.

The very act of marriage creates one new unit, one new flesh, which is why marriage is a symbol in the Bible for what happens when we become Christians. By faith, God joins us together with Christ as one with Christ.

And here, God's design in marriage of leaving and cleaving is how he joins every married couple together as one. It's kind of like those hospital bands that you put on your wrist. I've got a slide.

[7 : 57] I'm sure many of you have had the, it's not the pleasure of wearing one, but have worn one. The design that once you clip that band together, you cannot get it apart, can you? They're difficult.

They're really hard to get apart. But that's the design. It's the same in marriage. God's design of leaving and cleaving is meant to join you as one. That's it. And so Jesus concludes in verse 6, if that's the case, from Genesis, You see, the Pharisees assume that divorce is no problem.

It's no big deal. They're just asking about whether they can do it for any reason. But Jesus questions their assumption and says, hang on a second. Look what the Bible says. Look how God has designed it.

It is a big deal. Because it actually tears apart something that God's design has stuck together. And so no wonder there is so much hurt and pain when it happens.

For it tears apart something that has been joined, designed to be joined together. Now, of course, we still want to know that can you, is it still possible in God's sight to tear apart, to divorce?

[9 : 12] And we'll get to that in a moment. But first, it's worth noticing what Jesus says here teaches us about marriage. And there's three important principles for marriage that we can glean from these verses.

It's not the full answer, but there's three things. First, marriage is between a man and a woman, isn't it? Notice Jesus starts with Genesis 1 saying God created a male and female and he links it to Genesis 2, a man will leave and cleave to his wife.

And now I realise this is a very sensitive issue at the moment. I know some struggle with this issue at our church, either personally or with those they know. What's more, it seems that the world can put forward their view, but as soon as we put forward our view or the Bible's view, we are shouted down as intolerant, which ironically makes them intolerant, but that's another story.

But marriage between a man and a woman is how God designed it. It's part of creation, of what God said was very good before sin came into the world. So we must not do what other churches are doing at the moment and cave on God's word, but we must uphold God's word if the issue comes up.

But we must do it lovingly and gently. So that's the first thing, it's between man and woman. Second thing we learn about marriage is it forms a new unit. The act of marriage is leaving parents and cleaving to husband and wife, creating one new flesh.

[10:35] And so for those amongst us with an Asian background or a non-Western background, this is important to remember. When you get married or when your children get married, they form a new unit and the allegiance shifts from parents to spouse.

For us in Western cultures, we can't wait to have an excuse to ignore our parents. But in Asian cultures, they're more respectful. But often this forms tension in the family because they haven't understood that the allegiance shifts from parents to spouse.

But that's what it means to form one new unit. Thirdly, we learn that marriage is meant to be till death do us part. This is Jesus' main point here to the Pharisees. That's why when people marry in the Anglican church, I ask them, will you forsake all others, dot, dot, dot, till death do you part?

And they don't say, I do, like in the Hollywood movies because that's the present tense. Yeah, I do now when she's looking beautiful and stuff like that. They say, I will now and till death do us part.

I was talking to someone last week from our church who was saying their 40 years plus years of marriage has not always been easy. and he said to me, if I had asked his wife why they were still together today, she would say, not because I love him, although that's true, not because he remembered to put the toilet seat down, but apparently that's true as well, but because she promised.

[12:12] That's why. She promised it and God designed it to be till death do us part. And so they are happily married now, but they weren't always, yet they kept their promises because they knew God's design.

That's what we need to do if we are married. Now immediately, we want to think about all the exceptions, don't we? Like, what if this and what if that? And the most common one is, what if there is abuse in the marriage?

What then? Can I say, if there is abuse, you get out. But you get out to get help for both you and your spouse.

But we often think of other things like what if this or what if that? And we ignore the fact that this holds true for most of the time. And we also forget that looking for loopholes and exceptions is what the Pharisees did, actually, which brings us to their second question, a point to verse seven.

They say, well, why then, they ask, did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away? Aha!

[13:24] They think, we've got you now, Jesus. We've got Moses on our side now. Why did Moses command us to give a certificate of divorce and send them away?

You're contradicting God's Lord now. They think they've got him. Now, what they're referring to was our first reading from Deuteronomy chapter 24, which was very hard to follow and very hard to stomach, quite frankly.

So, why don't we just turn back there for a moment? I need to say that, I should have said this at the start, but this talk is going to go for a little bit longer than usual, and that's because we're dealing with sensitive issues, and it's not right that we just scoot over them quickly.

So, keep your finger in Matthew 19 and come back to page 199. So, notice here, if a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, now this is not meant to be, as I said, burning the dinner or something like that.

This actually, I think, refers to what Jesus was talking about, sexual immorality, something of that serious nature. And he writes her a certificate of divorce and gives it to her and sends her away from his house.

[14:34] So, that's first line up there, verse 1, she marries and is divorced for man 1, and if she leaves his house and becomes the wife of another man and her second husband dislikes her, writes a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her away from his house, or if he dies, in other words, she's left on her own again, then the first husband who divorced her is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled.

Now, here, does Moses actually command them to give a certificate of divorce? He's not, actually. He's saying, if this happens, if that happens, then, verse 4, that's the command.

You're not to marry the first husband again. And so, what the Pharisees have done is actually taken an obscure law in the Old Testament and twisted it for their own purposes, you see.

But we must also realize that this passage in Deuteronomy does mean that divorce and remarriage was permitted, but it certainly wasn't commanded.

And so, if we come back to Matthew 19, Jesus highlights how the Pharisees have twisted this law to suit their own desires. They would use this law to divorce their wife so they could simply marry another one they desired.

[15:54] You know, the old saying, trade her in for a younger model or whatever. In other words, they were trying to excuse their adultery by simply writing a legal certificate as though that would make it all okay.

But notice what Jesus says in verse 8 and 9. Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. Notice the difference? Moses didn't command, but Moses did permit you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard.

But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife except for sexual immorality and marries another woman commits adultery. Again here, we learn three things about divorce just as we learn three things about marriage.

First, Jesus says divorce was permitted but not commanded. It's a tragic concession but never God's intention.

Divorce is always meant to be a last resort unlike what it's become today in our society. It was because of hard hearts. Hearts that refused to keep promises.

[17:02] Hearts that refused to love the other person and put them first. And so God does permit divorce but only as a tragic concession. Never as his created intention.

The intention rather from verse 8 from the beginning from Genesis this was not so. Divorce was not so. Rather it was meant to be one flesh till death do us part.

So that's the first thing we need to realize. God does actually permit divorce. And he gives us an example of a situation where he might permit it. That's the second thing we learn. Here's an example of a hard heart and that example is sexual immorality similar to the something indecent from Deuteronomy.

Jesus does not contradict God's law therefore he is saying that in some situations divorce is permitted. And in one such case is sexual immorality.

Now is this the only legitimate reason for divorce? Well actually no. The Bible gives another one in 1 Corinthians 7. It's just that this is the reason Deuteronomy alludes to about something indecent sexual immorality.

[18:15] This is the passage that the Pharisees were quoting from to test Jesus. Remember the context. So this is what Jesus responds to here. We need to remember that context. It's not a full answer.

But third, divorce does not mean you can never remarry. Some Christians take verse 9 to mean that once divorced you can never remarry again. We've already seen two exceptions to that.

One from Jesus and one from Paul in 1 Corinthians 7. And in the Jewish mindset divorce and remarriage went together especially in those days when women were dependent on men for livelihoods.

And even in Deuteronomy we saw that the woman who remarried the second husband that was not the issue. It was going back to the first one again. Rather what Jesus is condemning here is where people deliberately divorce in order to marry someone else just because they don't like the situation they're in.

There are other situations where something bad has happened to them if someone commits adultery there's other reasons where divorce is permitted but what Jesus is condemning is the Pharisee's practice where they would say I've had enough I like the look of her I'm going to divorce write a certificate and it'll be all okay they say ah this marriage is too hard so I'm getting out and looking for someone else or often I'm sure you've heard this before I've fallen out of love with you which means they don't understand what love is about it's about the other person or you know I've found someone else I click with and so I'm getting out and marrying them you see he's condemning divorcing with the intention of going to marry someone else either soon or later and that's what the pharisees were doing and they were trying to excuse their adulterous hearts by misusing god's law in deuteronomy giving a certificate of divorce as though that made it all okay but jesus actually calls it what it is it's adultery pharisees a friend of mine whom i grew up with who was my best man at my wedding sadly did this he had a hard marriage and it was hard and no longer wanted to keep trying it was hard but it was not impossible and he just didn't want to keep trying and that's partly because he started forming an emotional attachment to another woman who worked with us and then he tried to justify it with this passage saying that his wife had been emotionally immoral and unfaithful so now he could divorce her when really he just wanted to divorce her so that he could marry another and to this day our friendship is sadly not what it used to be you see divorce is a tragic concession never

[21:10] God's intention so those who have suffered divorce can I say I'm very sorry for you you've had to go through heartache I'm sure but can I also say that in Christ there is always forgiveness and fresh starts and for those who have not been divorced here we must not be quick to judge since there are reasons in which it is permitted instead we must love and support those who have been so tragically ripped apart and we must all see marriage as something that requires work and effort and encourage one another who are married pray for those who are married that they will remain so and keep their promises till death do us part in other way to have a high view of marriage and not even entertain the idea of divorce as far as we can help it for the disciples however this high view of marriage is too much have a look at what they say point three verse ten the disciples said to him if this is the situation between a husband and wife well it's better not to marry they say and now when the disciples say this that you're better off being single than marrying they are really saying something because in those days singleness was not viewed as a valid way of life

Jesus was an exception but our world is the same is it not people in society may be unmarried but they're still always searching for partners aren't they and if you said to people look I'm choosing to remain single they'd look at you funny wouldn't they we need to remember here that singles are not just those who have never been married but they also include those who have been widowed or divorced and to remain single widowed or divorced and not married is often seen as and so we try and set them up with others don't we now if the person gives you permission to do that then fair enough but the point is even in churches we think singleness is not a valid way to live but look at how Jesus responds in verse 11 Jesus replied not everyone can accept this word but only those to whom it has been given for there are eunuchs who are born that way and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven the one who can accept this should accept this

I hear Jesus says in verse 11 that while singleness is not for everyone there are those for whom it is given in other words it is real and valid way to live and then he goes to talk about eunuchs I had someone ask me last week what a eunuch was but I'm assuming you all know I don't need to go into that good they represent the single person and in verse 11 Jesus talks about the word of singleness given to some and then in verse 12 he starts with the word for or because and he explains how what situations this word of singleness is given to people he says some are born that way whether because of physical birth defect or no desire to marry and so on others are made that way whether it was the literal practice of incarceration or by divorce or death of a spouse or by God simply not providing anyone for them and then there are those who choose to literally make themselves a unique for the sake of the kingdom in other words choose to stay single for the sake of the kingdom

John Stott was a single man for 90 years and he said looking back with the benefit of hindsight I now know why I was single I could never have travelled or written as extensively as I have done if I had had the responsibilities of a wife and family at home one of our own former vicars here is similar is he not they chose to remain single for the sake of the kingdom but notice how verse 12 ends by saying the one who can accept this word about singleness should accept it again it's a real and valid way to live I'll talk about those who can't accept it in a moment but for the moment it's a real and valid way to live and that's the first thing we need to learn about singleness that is a real option both Jesus and Paul were single in fact Paul said it's better not to marry and it's a valid way to live because our identity and self worth does not depend on our marital status we need to remember that it passed away late last year not old in his forties he left behind a wife and four kids and at the funeral his wife said a number of things that really struck me but one of them was this she said

Dan was my soul mate my lover the father of our children and my best friend but he was not my identity that job is Christ Dan could never meet all my needs only God can do that it's pretty amazing isn't it and although she was and is devastated by her husband's death she knows that her self-worth and identity are not wrapped up in being married to him and so now as a single mum she still has worth and value as a single mum because her identity and self-worth are in Christ it's a valid way to live second we as a church therefore need to treat though they're chosen a valid way to live as equal members of the church family so for one single person I know in our church she's often included in another family's life such that the kids in that family call her auntie she's become like an honorary auntie to them she's become part of the family and they don't treat her as though she's lacking something in life by being single third there may be some who are single but unlike

[27:18] John Stott and Paul Barker cannot accept the word of singleness given to them and so if verse 12 means if you can accept it you should then I take the flip side is also true that if you cannot accept it then you are free to look to marry a person of the opposite gender even give your friends permission to set you up if you like of course the difficulty comes when you do look but to no avail what then well I rang Peter Adam this week who has been single for a long time because I wanted those who are struggling to hear some advice from someone in the same situation and it's advice which is good for all of us to hear because I'm sure we all know people who struggle with singleness and so let me have five very quick points which I've paraphrased with his permission one don't romanticize marriage it will not solve all our problems and satisfy all our needs just ask those who are married second it's okay to complain to God at three or third you can stop praying about a partner or a spouse and ask others to pray for you so that you stop stewing on it and get consumed by it instead it takes the pressure off and helps you to focus on trusting

God and finding contentment in Christ at four both marriage and singleness bring opportunities to serve God they're just different five like in all areas of life we have to learn that we don't always get what we want and instead must trust the goodness of God and keep pleasing him and that last bit of advice is one we can all hear isn't it well let me finish with another quote from a child so on the slide Christian and and and so let's pray that we might continue to love one another and trust God no matter what our marital status is let's pray our gracious father we do thank you for your word to us this morning and although it's been a longer talk it deals with real life issues that are close to our hearts and so father we pray that whether we are married divorced singled widowed whatever our marital status is we pray that you would help us to love and support one another that we would remind one another and ourselves of the truths that we've seen from your word this morning and that no matter our marital status that we would keep trusting in you we ask these things in

Jesus name Amen