

Marriage and the Kingdom

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[0 : 0 0] I can always start by saying a couple of things. Firstly, we actually skipped over this part of Matthew's Gospel because last month we had baptisms scheduled for every Sunday and with baptisms comes lots of visitors and the other passages got straight to the Gospel, like last week was all about God's generosity to us and so on. And the second thing is I could have, I guess, not come back to this and believe me, that would have been easier for me. But we live in a world where there is marriage, divorce and singleness and so we need to hear what God says on the subject.

But I'm also acutely aware that these topics can be painful for many people even in this room. And so it's right that we just pause and pray and if you are visiting us, then this is what you're getting this morning. We try not to skip parts of the Bible just because they're hard. It's all God's Word. So let's just pray for ourselves. Father, we ask this morning that as we think about your Word and these difficult topics for many, that you would help us to hear what it is you are saying and what you are not saying. Help us to be mindful of those who are struggling with issues in their own lives, that we might be loving and gentle.

But Father, we know that you're a good God who's made things for our good and so we pray that you'd also help us to submit to your Word as hard as that may be for some of us. And we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I thought I'd lighten the mood a bit with a couple of quotes for some kids on marriage and love. So on the next slide, we've got Regina, age 10, that says, I'm not rushing into being in love. I'm finding fourth grade hard enough. On the next slide, we've got Gary, age 7, says, it's not just how you look. Look at me. I'm handsome like anything and I haven't got anyone to marry me yet. I'm worried about that one. And then Kenny, age 7, says, it gives me a headache to think about that stuff. I'm just a kid. I don't need that kind of trouble. Now, I guess, as we'll see, there might be some truth, particularly in that last one. But before we get to that, let's have a look at the context. So we're at verse number or sentence number one in your Bibles. Have a look there at verses one to three or sentence one to three. So chapter 19, one to three. When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. Large crowds followed him and he healed them there. And some Pharisees came to test him. They asked dot, dot, dot. So on the next slide is a map of New Testament Israel. And Jesus in chapter 18 was at the top in the place called Capernaum above the Sea of Galilee there. And that was chapter 18. And he was teaching people about his disciples in particular, about what it meant to follow him about sin and forgiveness and doing what we can to make sure that none of his people, none of his little ones, wander from the faith. And now in chapter 19, he moves down the south, down the right-hand side of the Jordan River there and avoids Samaria because often that was the Jewish custom because they weren't strictly full Jews. And then he crosses over to the left-hand side around about Jericho, which is part of the region of Judea. And as he does, as he crosses over, there's large crowds that follow him and he heals them. And it seems the

Pharisees are again jealous of his popularity, so they come to test him. In fact, they've been trying to kill Jesus ever since chapter 12. And so now they come and test Jesus with a question about divorce, hoping to trap him and get him killed. How? Well, perhaps in two ways. First, by getting Herod to kill him. If you just go back for the map for a moment, Ryan, Judea, that area near the Jordan, that was where John the Baptist used to minister. And when Matthew describes it in verse one of our Bibles, he actually describes it in more detail than usual. And so perhaps he's wanting us to remember who else used to minister there, John the Baptist, who himself was beheaded by Herod. Why?

Well, for telling Herod he should not have divorced and remarried his brother's wife. And so maybe the Pharisees think, well, he's in the same region. If we talk about divorce, Jesus will get his own head beheaded, perhaps. Or second, and I think probably more likely, thanks, Ryan, they're hoping to catch Jesus in blasphemy by contradicting God's Old Testament law. The law referred to the law of Moses, the first five books of the Bible. And so in verse three, when they ask, what is lawful? They mean what is right according to God's law, first five books of the Bible. And as we'll see, they quote from the book of Deuteronomy, which was our first reading. And so if they can get Jesus to contradict Deuteronomy, God's law, then they've got him for blasphemy. And they can get him stoned to death or something like that. Either way, we need to remember this context so that we realize that Jesus is not giving us a full and complete answer on the topics of marriage, divorce, and singleness. Rather, he's answering the Pharisees' test and questions and exposing their hearts. So with that in mind, let's look at the first question and Jesus' answer. So point one in your outlines and verse number three in your Bibles. Some Pharisees came to Jesus to test him and they asked, is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason? Now notice here that the question is not about whether you can divorce, they assume you can, that it's no problem. Rather, the question is about can they divorce for any reason? Does God say that? For example, one rabbi used to say, if your wife doesn't cook a meal the way you like, you can divorce her. On the flip side, if the husband doesn't put down the toilet seat correctly, I can divorce him. There are probably a lot more divorces today if that was actually the case. But that's effectively their question, can we divorce for any reason? Jesus doesn't fall into their trap. Instead, he very wisely answers their question with another question. It's kind of like what I do with the kids. Dad, can I have something more to eat? Well, have you cleaned your room?

[6 : 47] I don't have to say any more. They know the answer. Notice he also quotes God's Old Testament law. So have a 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. Here Jesus takes them to the book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, and says, haven't you read that? That part of God's Old Testament law? Haven't you read how God designed marriage? That first he made them male and female, Genesis 1. And second, a man will leave his parents and be united to his wife, becoming one flesh, Genesis 2. In fact, the word united here in Genesis is literally cleave together. It's the same word used in the Old Testament for diseases clinging to you. So Michelle could say of me, my wife Michelle could say that I'm like a disease that clings to her. She doesn't though, I don't think. It means glue, they stick together. It's this leaving and cleaving that makes them one, you see. The very act of marriage creates one new unit.

Which is why marriage is used in the Bible as a symbol of what happens when we become a Christian. How by faith God joins us together with Christ and we are one with Christ. And he, God's design in marriage of leaving and cleaving is how he joins every married couple together as one. It's kind of like, I don't know if you've ever had the experience of going to hospital and wearing those wrist bands.

You know, the one on the next slide, I think, is an example one. They're designed so that when you put them on, you cannot get them off. If you've ever tried to get them off, you just can't do it.

And that's what God's designed marriage to be. The very design of leaving and cleaving means you are joined as one. And that's it. And so Jesus concludes in verse 6 in your Bibles by saying, so they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.

You see, the Pharisees assumed that it was no problem to divorce. It was no big deal. They just wanted to know whether you could do it for any reason. But Jesus questions their assumption and says, hang on a second, guys. It is actually a big deal. Divorce is a big issue because it actually tears apart something that God has designed to be joined together. And so no wonder there is so much hurt and pain in divorce. For it is ripping apart something that has been designed to be joined together. Now, of course, we still want to know if divorce is still possible in God's sight. You know, is it actually lawful? And we'll get to that in a moment. But first, I think we see here three principles for marriage from Jesus' answer here. And so what I want to do this morning, we're going to look at these topics, marriage, divorce and singleness in that order, and I'm going to be pulling out some application as we go. I should have said at the start that it will be slightly longer because I don't want to just rush through it because we're dealing with sensitive topics. But here are three things we can learn about marriage. First, that marriage is between a male and a female, Genesis 1.

[10 : 11] Notice how that's what Jesus starts with in verse 4. He created the male and female. And then he adds, verse 5, for this reason, a man will leave his father and be united to his wife. Now, I know this is a very sensitive issue at the moment, and I know some of us struggle with this, whether personally or we know people who struggle with it. What's more, it seems that the world can put forward their view, but as soon as we put forward the Bible's view, then we're shouted down as intolerant, which ironically makes them intolerant. But marriage between a man and a woman is how God designed it to be. It was part of creation that God said was very good before sin came in the world. And so I think we cannot do what other churches do and just cave on this part of God's Word. I think we need to uphold it, but do so lovingly and gently, knowing that it is a real issue for people.

So that's the first thing about marriage, male and female. Second thing we learn here is that marriage forms a new unit. The act of marriage, of leaving parents and cleaving to wife, actually creates one new flesh. And so it means our allegiance now changes from our parents to our spouse.

And, you know, I think at various times, parents need to hear this, whose children get married, and children need to hear this, particularly those from perhaps an Asian or Eastern background.

You need to remember that when you're married, your allegiance moves from your parents to your spouse. For us Westerners in our Western culture, we can't wait to have an excuse to ignore our parents. But often in Eastern cultures, they are more respectful and still struggle with this, honoring their parents when they're married, but it forms a new unit, marriage does. And so your allegiance shifts. That's the second thing. The third thing, and the main thing I think here, is that marriage is meant to be till death do us part. This is his main point to the Pharisees. That's why when I marry people here at this church, I ask them, will you forsaking all others, dot, dot, dot, till death do you part? And they answer not, I do, as in Hollywood movies, because I do is present tense. Of course I do. She looks beautiful. Oh yeah, yeah, I'll forsake all others right now, for sure.

Their answer is, I will. I will now until death do us part. I was talking with someone last week from our congregation, actually, saying that their 40 plus years of marriage hasn't always been easy.

[12 : 48] And if I was to ask their wife why they were still married, she wouldn't say because I love him or because he's always remembered to put the toilet seat down or whatever. She would say because I promised. Because I promised. Because there have been times when it hasn't been happily married, it's been a struggle, and yet they know God's design for marriage, and that's what they promise, till death do us part. And it's also why I think it's great to celebrate anniversary.

We had someone tell me this morning that next week is their 60th wedding anniversary. 60 years. I know for some of us, the blokes particularly, we think, oh my goodness. But it's actually a great sign, particularly in this day and age. They've kept their promises.

They've adhered to God's design. It's worth celebrating. Now, immediately we now think of all the exceptions to this. Like, well, what if this, and what if that?

And the classic exception is, what if there is abuse in the marriage? Can I say on that, if there is abuse, you need to get out straight away, not in order to divorce, but in order to get help for both you and them. You don't stay. Some churches, unfortunately, have used this to confine people in an abusive relationship.

God's not for that either. Get out for help, to get help, but not to divorce. The thing with the what ifs, though, is that we ignore the fact that this still holds true for most of the time. The what ifs are the minority exceptions.

[14 : 28] We also forget that looking for exceptions and loopholes is actually what the Pharisees did, which brings us to their second question, point two, verse seven. And they're not happy with Jesus' answer. And then so they say, why then, they asked, did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?

Now, at this point, I suspect they think they've nailed Jesus. You've got Jesus who's saying, presenting marriage is permanent, and they go, aha, but in the Old Testament law, Moses commanded us to give a certificate of divorce.

And now what they're referring to here is our first reading from Deuteronomy. Now, it's a bit confusing. So let me summarize it with the next slide. So on the next slide, what it was actually saying was if, I haven't got the words if in there, if she marries man one and gets divorced, and there's something indecent in Deuteronomy, is actually something serious like sexual immorality.

So it's similar to what Jesus is saying here. And if she marries man two and gets divorced or becomes a widow, then here's the command, not allowed to marry man one again for some reason.

I haven't quite worked out what that reason is. But the point is that Moses never commanded to give a certificate of divorce. He just said, if this happens, if this happens, then don't remarry man one again.

[16 : 00] Having said that, though, it does seem that God does permit divorce. So if we come back to chapter 19 of Matthew's gospel here, look at how Jesus responds.

And notice how he changes the word from command. Verse 8, Jesus replied, Moses permitted 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, which is the same as something indecent in Deuteronomy or literally shameful, and marries another woman commits adultery.

And here, I think, again, we learn a few things about divorce. At first, Jesus says divorce was permitted, not commanded.

Divorce is a tragic concession, but never the created intention. Divorce was a last resort because of hard hearts, he said. And so God does permit divorce, but as I said, as a concession, never the intention.

[17 : 09] Whereas what the Pharisees were doing, they were going, look, I've fed up with my current marriage, I've seen someone else I want to hook up with, so what I'll do is I'll just write a certificate of divorce, make it all legal, and it'll be fine.

But they were really twisting God's law to excuse their adulterous hearts. So Jesus says, yes, divorce was permitted as a concession, but never the intention.

The intention, verse 8, is from the beginning, divorce was not so. It's till death do us part. Second, in verse 9, Jesus does give us an example of hard hearts where divorce is permitted.

And that example is sexual immorality. As I said, something similar to the shameful or indecent in Deuteronomy. So Jesus does not contradict God's law at this point.

So does that mean then that if someone is sexually unfaithful in the marriage, that you have to divorce them? Well, no, you can still forgive and seek reconciliation.

[18 : 15] It's enormously hard work. It takes a long time. And for some, it's just not possible. And so in that case, divorce happens. Or does this mean then that sexual immorality is the only legitimate reason for divorce?

Well, no. Paul gives us another one in 1 Corinthians 7. It's just that this is the reason that Deuteronomy alludes to the passage the Pharisees quoted from.

And so this is what Jesus responds to. We've got to remember the context. It's not his full answer. Third, divorce does not mean you can never remarry again.

Some Christians take verse 9 to mean that once divorced, that's it. But there are already two exceptions, one from Jesus here and another one from Paul in 1 Corinthians 7. And in the Jewish mindset, divorce and remarriage were actually one thing, especially in those days when women were dependent on men for income.

And even in Deuteronomy, we saw that the woman could remarry a second husband. That wasn't the issue. So divorce does not mean you can never marry again.

[19 : 25] Rather, what Jesus is condemning here is where people deliberately divorce to find someone else because they've just had enough of their current marriage.

And that's often how the world works, isn't it? People say, oh, this marriage is too hard. I'm getting out and looking for someone else. Or a classic one is, I've fallen out of love with you, which means they don't really understand that love is about the other person, not them.

Or I found someone else I click with, so I'm getting out of this marriage and I'm going to look for someone else or that person. It's divorcing with the intention of marrying someone else.

And that's what the Pharisees were doing. They didn't like their wife anymore, wanted a younger model or whatever it was. So they would divorce in order to remarry another. And they tried to excuse their adulterous hearts by just misusing God's law and giving a certificate of divorce as though that made it all okay.

But Jesus calls it out for what it is. He says it's adultery. A friend of mine whom I grew up with sadly did this. He says it's adultery.

[20 : 34] We were very good friends and he had a hard marriage. Nothing serious, but it was hard. It was hard work. And so he no longer wanted to keep trying.

And then he started forming an emotional attachment to another woman who was at our work. And then he tried to justify it with this passage saying that his wife had been emotionally immoral.

And so now he could divorce her. When really all he wanted to do was divorce so that he could marry this other woman. And to this day, our friendship is sadly not what it used to be.

You see, that though is adultery, says Jesus. And so here we've learned that divorce is a tragic concession. It can be permitted in certain circumstances according to God.

But it was never God's intention for marriage. And so those who have suffered divorce, can I say I'm very sorry for you. That you've had to go through such heartache.

[21 : 37] But please remember that there's always forgiveness and peace and comfort in Christ. And for those of us who have not been divorced, 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 tragically been ripped apart. And we must all see marriage as something that requires work and encourage marriages, whether we're married or not.

Pray for those who are married. Celebrate those anniversaries. Keep our promises if we are married till death do us part, even if it is hard work. As far as it depends on us, we just stick by our promises.

We'd have a high view of marriage. For the disciples, this view was too high. And so it brings us to point three, verse 10. The disciples said to him, look, Jesus, if this is a situation between a husband and wife, then it's better not to marry, they say.

The disciples, they hear Jesus's view, high view of marriage and said, look, that's too hard. You're better off remaining single, which was saying a lot because in those days, singleness was not viewed as a valid way of life.

[22 : 48] Jesus was an exception. And again, our world is the same, is it not? People in our society may not be married, but they're always searching for partners. They always like to update their status on Facebook and so on.

I mean, if you said to someone, I'm choosing to remain single, do you think they'd look at you with a funny look or accept it? That would be funny. Oh, OK.

But we need to remember here that singles, it is a valid way of life. And it refers to not just those who have never been married, but also to those who have been widowed. They're single. And to those who have been divorced.

They're still single. And to remain in that state is not odd, even though society thinks it is. And in fact, can I say, even at church, we can give that impression that it's odd.

We can try and set them up with others because we don't want to see them. It's not right. You know, how can you be in that situation? Can I do say, I need to say that if they give you permission to set them up, then yeah, fair enough.

[23 : 50] Go for it. But the point is, even in churches, we think singleness is not a valid way of life. But look at how Jesus responds in verse 11. Jesus replied, not everyone can accept this, but only those to whom it has been given.

In other words, it has been given to some. It is a valid way of life. And then he says, 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 it. Here Jesus says that while singleness is not for everyone, there are those to whom it is given. In other words, it is a real and valid option for life.

And then he goes to talk about eunuchs. Someone asked me what a eunuch was, but I'm assuming everyone knows. I don't need to explain it. No. Okay. It's a male who's had their private parts removed.

Okay. Moving on. In other words, here, they kind of represent the classic single person because they would never get married. So in verse 11, Jesus talks about a word of singleness given to some.

[24 : 56] Then in verse 12, he starts with because or for and explains how this word of singleness is given. He says, for some, they are born that way. Whether it's through physical birth defect or no desire to marry or whatever.

For others, they are made that way, whether it was the literal practice of incarceration or by the fact that they've been divorced or widowed or by the fact that God has simply not provided a spouse for them.

And there are those who choose for themselves to stay single. Literally, who choose to make themselves a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom, it says.

John Stott, who was a great Christian man in the UK, who many of you will have heard of, had been single for 90 years. And he said, looking back with the benefit of hindsight, I think I know why I was single.

I could never have traveled or written as extensively as I have done if I had the responsibilities of a wife and family at home. In fact, one of our former vicars here at HGD is single.

[25 : 59] That they chose to remain single for the sake of the kingdom. But notice also how Jesus ends in verse 12. He says, the one who can accept this word about singleness should accept it.

In other words, it is a valid way to live, though you may not be able to accept it. And so the first thing we learn about singleness, we've talked about marriage, we've talked about divorce.

Here we are about singleness. The first thing we learn is that it is a valid option. Both Jesus and the Apostle Paul were single. In fact, Paul says it's better not to marry. It's a valid way to live because our identity and self-worth does not depend on our marital status.

Do you hear that? Our identity and self-worth does not depend on our marital status. It depends on Christ. Let me illustrate.

I mentioned earlier this year of a minister who I went to uni with. He was a minister out at SAIL. His name was Dan. And he passed away late last year. He was a young guy who left behind a wife and four kids.

[27 : 04] And at the funeral, I was so struck by what his wife said. She said a few things. But this is one of them. She said, Dan was my soulmate, 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 phenomenal at her own husband's funeral. And although she was and is devastated by her husband's death, she knows that her self-worth and identity don't depend on being married.

She can still have worth as a single mum, you see. Because our identity and worth are wrapped up in Christ. In other words, it's a real and valid way to live.

Second, where's a church therefore need to treat people who are single as though it's a valid way to live, as equal members of the church family? For one single person I know at our church, at our congregation actually, she's often included in another family's life.

[28 : 08] Such that the kids of that family actually call her auntie. She's like an honorary auntie. And they don't treat her as though she is lacking something in life by being single. Third, there may be some who are single, but unlike John Stott or Paul Barker, cannot accept the word of singleness given to them, the state in which they find themselves.

And so I take it if you cannot, then the flip side of verse 12 is that you are free to marry another 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 find no one. What then? Well, I rang Peter Adam, who many of you know has been a minister in Melbourne for many years and has been single for many years.

And I asked for his thoughts because I wanted to give you some advice from a single person who is in your shoes or in the shoes of a single person that you know. So this is not just me talking hypothetically.

This is Peter Adam talking from experience. And he gave five quick points, which I've paraphrased with his permission. First, he says, don't romanticize marriage.

[29 : 23] It will not solve all our problems and satisfy all our needs. Just ask those who are married. Second, it's OK to complain to God. Third, you can stop praying about a partner and ask others to pray for you instead, which means you don't keep stewing on it and get consumed by it.

It takes the pressure off you and helps you to focus trusting in Christ and finding contentment in him. Four, both marriage and singleness bring opportunities to serve God.

They're just different. And five, like other areas of our lives, we have to learn we don't always get what we want, which is true for all of us, isn't it? And instead, we must trust the goodness of God and keep pleasing him.

Well, let me finish with a quote from another kid. So on the screen, Kristen, age 10, says, No one really decides before they grow up who they're going to marry. God decides it all the way before and you find out later who you're stuck with.

Or not stuck with. So let's pray that we might continue to love one another and trust God, no matter what situation we find ourselves in.

[30 : 37] Let's pray. Gracious Father, we know that this has been a longer talk today, but it touches on issues that are really sensitive to us, so many of us.

Father, we thank you for your word to us. We do pray that you would help us to take these principles, to seek to live them out, to love one another, and to keep trusting in you no matter the situation we find ourselves in.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.