

Matthew 19:1-12

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[0:00] Chapter 19, beginning in verse 1. Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan, and large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.

And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause? He answered, 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 his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?

So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate. They said to him, Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?

He said to them, Because of your hardness of heart, Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, Whoever divorces his wife except for sexual immorality and marries another commits adultery.

The disciples said to him, If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry. But he said to them, Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given.

[1:27] For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.

Let the one who is able to receive this receive it. I am going to try to convince you that this is not a passage about divorce.

Certainly the conversation has to do with that topic, but what our Lord has to say about divorce in this passage, he's basically quoting himself.

Verse 9, which is kind of the culmination of the passage, as far as the teaching goes, it's nearly indistinguishable from Matthew 5, verses 31 and 32, where he talked about marriage and divorce and the Sermon on the Mount.

I don't think what Matthew recorded here, or that he recorded this episode, simply to teach us the same lesson again.

[2:43] repeating it for emphasis, something like that. I think if we pay close attention to this text, we will see that the Holy Spirit led Matthew to record something else.

The details that he highlights in this passage aren't about the topic. They're about the people. In this passage, Jesus is interacting with two groups of people, and both of them are messed up in their orientation towards God and towards his word.

First, it's going to be the Pharisees. They're pretty obvious. And second, it's going to be his disciples. And we, friends, we can fall into both of their errors, and it will steal our joy if we do.

Now, I'm sure that's not clear at all to you at this moment. So let's pray, and let's jump in. Fathers, we open your word.

Will you guide us to hear what you have to say through your son? And by your spirit, will you work in our hearts so that we see it and embrace it?

[4:04] We pray that in Christ's name. Amen. Friends, we're going to start with the part we're most likely to miss, verses 1 and 2.

Now, when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea, beyond the Jordan, and large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. Now, in light of the conversation, the two conversations that Christ is about to have with first the Pharisees and

then his disciples, it's easy to think these are just throwaway lines, right?

They're just setting the scene for that. They're just the intro. But these two seemingly inconsequential lines, verses, cloak this whole passage in grace.

For every failing and every shame and suffering that divorce causes, the cross of Jesus Christ is God's answer.

Why would I say that here? Hit the map problem there. What Jesus is doing is he's leaving the Sea of Galilee, and he is headed south along the Jordan River, and he is going to eventually get to Jerusalem.

[5:26] We are on the way right now. He is headed south, verse 1, from the Sea of Galilee to Jerusalem. And verse 2, crowds are following him. And as we're going to see in verse 3, opposition follows him too.

And that opposition will not rest until the road ends at Golgotha, where our Lord will finish the last leg of this journey, bearing a cross for you and for me.

And so every conversation that we see in chapters 19 and 20 is a conversation on the way, right? On the way to the cross. And so in your mind's eye, in these next few weeks, as we are walking through chapters 19 and 20, picture each of these conversations in your mind's eye as Jesus is literally walking with his disciples.

He is looking to the end of the road and sees a cross and a tomb. And as they are walking to the end of the road, someone comes out of the crowd.

They're all on their way to the Passover celebration. Someone comes out of the crowd, draws near to Jesus, and begins a conversation. Today it's the Pharisees. Next week it will be someone else.

[6:46] And Jesus is speaking with people whose sins he will bear on his shoulders and on his cross, even as he walks and talks with them.

In sermons about divorce, often you'll hear the preacher talk about, you know, cite the statistics about divorce and discuss the impacts of divorce on children and lament lax divorce laws and condemn Hollywood for their bad example as if they were listening to me, right?

But verses 1 and 2 show us that Jesus is talking about this on the way to his cross.

So what you might not have heard is that if divorce is part of your story, your history, and you're feeling guilt and shame, look back at verse 1 and ask yourself, where are we going?

We're going to the cross where Jesus made an end of all your guilt and shame. Going to the cross where every crimson stain is washed away.

[8:04] We're going to the cross where we are filled, where we are free of guilt and sin if we are in Christ. Or if divorce has made you feel unloved or unlovable or rejected because it happened to you, not something that you chose.

Divorce has made you feel unloved. The cross is the answer to that too, isn't it? God so loved you that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

We're on the way to the cross. And people, these next two chapters, are coming to speak to Jesus. Who comes to see him first?

Verse 3. The Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause? Just like today, religious people in the first century debated what they thought the Bible permitted and didn't.

How do we interpret these laws? There are various schools of thought about the Old Testament laws about divorce. Some thought that a man could divorce his wife for any reason, even literally, this is an example, ruining a meal.

[9:30] Others thought it had to be more stringent than that, a bigger offense. Now, the Pharisees are a conservative religious party in the first century. They've been trying to get Jesus to trip up throughout his whole ministry.

This word test here is an unfriendly one. It's the same one that the devil tested Christ in the desert, in the wilderness, in chapter 4.

What they're doing here, and this is why I don't think this is really about divorce, what they're trying to do is trip him up. They're trying to get him embroiled in a contentious issue and either have him choose sides, one that's probably unpopular or something like that, or what I think probably is they're trying to get him to align with John the Baptist.

If you remember back to chapter 14, John the Baptist was what? Beheaded for criticizing Herod the Tetrarch, the Roman governor, for his divorce and remarriage. And so if they can get him to align with John in some way, they can run to Herod and get him beheaded too.

I think that's where they're going. This is entrapment. They're not really interested in divorce. They're interested in getting their religious rival out of the way. But he refuses to play into their hand.

[10:45] Look at him in verse 4. He answered, 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 his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?

So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate. No.

The Pharisees, they're a pretty conservative religious party, they prided themselves on strictly following God's word. That was their group identity.

In some senses, you could call them fundamentalists. They were famous for taking the scriptures as seriously as possible. And here Jesus says, Have you even read the scriptures?

It's an accusation. Right? You who love your Bible so much, have you even read, and here's the real dig, the first page.

[11:51] Right? This would be like asking like a physicist, Have you even read Newton's Laws of Motion? Right? This would be like asking a cadet, Have you even seen a running light?

Right? This is an accusation. Specifically, an accusation that the people who purport to be experts in the Bible haven't even understood, perhaps refused to understand.

One of the Bible's most basic teachings. He's basically saying, but before we talk about divorce, friends, let's talk about marriage.

Right? That might put to rest some of the questions you have about divorce before they even arise. So in verse 4, he quotes Genesis chapter 1, the first page of the Bible.

And then in verse 5, he quotes Genesis chapter 2, the second page of the Bible. What do they teach? They teach that God's good design for marriage is this, one man and one woman for life.

[12:52] And what happens, does he say, in that relationship? They become one flesh. Obviously, that's a physical reality in the marriage bed, but it goes deeper than that. Right? He says in verse 6 that God has joined them.

There's a spiritual bond that happens in a marriage. Something that God does. He says God has joined the hearts of a man and a woman, and it's not meant to be undone.

So when Pharisees come and ask, can we get divorced for any reason? Then, Jesus gives them a puzzled look and asks, don't you see? We should be reluctant to dissolve a marriage for any reason.

Though it's permissible in tragic circumstances, divorce is not part of the design and certainly not something to find new ways to get at. Right? And that's what they're kind of getting at here.

Right? And so he has taken their accusation and turned it against themselves. Right? They're purporting to be the experts here. They're trying to use the Bible to trip him up.

[13:55] And he just digs it and be like, have you even read the thing? Now, the Pharisees are not happy at all with that answer. Right? He's rejected their attitude on marriage and divorce, and he's accused them of being dunces when it comes to the Bible, the very thing they think they're great at.

So, to show that they've read their Bibles, verse 7, they counter with some more Bible verses. They said to him, Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and send her away? He said to them, Because of your hardness of heart, Moses allowed you to divorce your wives. But from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.

Now, we've already noted here that this teaching, the doctrine that he says here, is virtually a carbon copy of Matthew chapter 5, like down to the words he uses.

Here is where the conversation, though, turns really, and Jesus adds a focus on the people more than the topic. What's new here, what Matthew draws our gaze to, is the people.

[15:18] Look, verse 4, Have you not read? Verse 8, Because of your hardness of heart, in a moment we'll be in verse 12, let the one who is able to receive this, receive it.

Right? They're focusing on divorce, he's focusing on their hearts. Have you not read your hardness of heart, and how they read God's word, the Bible?

Well, how do they read it? They abuse it. Right? How do they abuse it? Let me count the ways.

Right? They twist it.

Right? The passage that they're manipulating, we'll get there in a second here, Deuteronomy chapter 24. This chapter is not about how to get a divorce.

It's about what's permitted, specifically what's not permitted, after a divorce has already happened. Right?

[16:24] It doesn't actually say what a legitimate divorce is. It simply says, if I can paraphrase, men, if you have already divorced your wife, if she marries another man and that ends in divorce, you may not marry her again.

That's what Deuteronomy 24, 1-4 says. It simply prohibits certain behavior after divorce has already happened.

But how do the Pharisees read it? They ask, why did Moses command us to get divorced?

They're reading it as if the word of God says, yes, you should get divorced. Here's why, here's how. In other words, they're reading their own sinful desires into the text of scripture, bending God's word to their evil and wicked will.

Who does that honor? Certainly not the king who gave his word. And so the Pharisees are taking scripture and they are twisting it to turn a permission into a command, to use it to serve their own evil desires.

[17:37] They're not concerned with how to honor God and how to walk with him. They're concerned with what they can get away with. And what's more, they're taking scripture and using it as a means to trip Jesus up, right?

They aren't reverencing God's word. They're using it as a weapon. Specifically, they're using it probably for political ends.

They're asking a Jewish rabbi about divorce in the shadow of Herod the Tetrarch and John the Baptist is like asking an American rabbi today about world leaders and collusion.

You can't help but see this is a political stunt. All these things, twisting scripture, using it to serve your own desires, using it to excuse sin, pushing the boundaries of what's permitted, using it to trip up rivals, to get them embroiled!

in politics, in all these things, is that how we ought to approach God's word. And I ask that not to point a finger at the Pharisees and say, look how bad they were, but to ask us, do we do the same?

[18:56] Certainly they're opposed to God and condemned for it, but we need to look at this passage and ask, how do we, how do I, read the scriptures? Do we twist the scriptures to our liking too?

Do I go to the Bible to see just how much sin I can get away with? Where's the line before that I can tiptoe up to just enough? Do I use it in ways it wasn't intended?

Do I twist it to my own ends? Do I use it to justify my own sin? It might just be that we find in this text a mirror.

And that's because, as the English reformer Thomas Cranmer said, what the heart loves, the will chooses and the mind justifies.

And throughout history, we've seen not only enemies of Christ, like the Pharisees, do that, but Christians too. Holding on to love for sin in our hearts, because of that, using the mind to twist even the Bible to authorize what the Bible condemns.

[20:16] things. One of the most famous examples of this comes from the many Christians in the United States who hijacked the Bible to support the American slave trade.

Because their hearts, as Cranmer would say, because their hearts loved the economic advantages of slavery, and because the surrounding culture kind of supported it for them, in their minds, they

justified the slave trade, even twisting the Bible to do it.

They ignored the fact that here is what the Bible has to say about the American slave trade. Jesus would have said, Exodus chapter 21, have you not read, Exodus 21, whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, and that, friends, sounds a lot like the American slave trade, shall be put to death.

But, Christian slave owners and many prominent theologians, and I'll just pause here and say, even some of our theological heroes, like I've quoted Jonathan Edwards to you in sermons, because he was a master theologian.

We know that he owned at least two slaves. many Christian slave owners pointed to other verses that talked about slavery being permitted in Israel.

[21:53] Now, what they conveniently, and I think sinfully, ignored, is that what the Bible did permit and called slavery was a form of indentured service that lasted, at most, seven years, and could not be compelled upon someone else.

In other words, to suit their own desires, they twisted the scriptures in support of a horrifying sin. Sin for which the Bible pronounces the death sentence.

Now, if you want to learn more about that relationship between American slavery and what the Bible calls slavery, I'll point you to the sermon that we preached in Ephesians chapter six.

You can go on the Shoreline website, find that, talk more about it. This isn't a sermon about divorce, so it's certainly not a sermon about slavery. This whole idea here, right, should give us great pause. What terrible sin might we, just like the Pharisees, just like those American Christians who supported slavery, what might we be justifying?

[23:05] Using scripture, it's truly sin. I sometimes wonder, when I stand before the throne of Christ, when I stand before the throne of Christ, when he completes his work of sanctification in me and perfects my soul, will I look back on today?

And will I see giant overlooked sin in my life? Will I have used scripture scripture to justify something awful?

Will I have ignored what it has to say so that I can go living comfortably in my own evil desires? I hope not. I pray not. But friends, let's have the humility to recognize that we might be doing just that. Maybe all of us together are blind because we live in a culture, and we've bought into its prevailing notions, or maybe privately, secretly, on our own, we walk in darkness because we love it.

Friends, let us not fall into the sin of the Pharisees. Divorce wasn't their problem. Twisting God's word to suit their evil ends was. That's the easy-to-see error in this passage.

[24:32] It's another one that's a little more subtle. It's not the Pharisees who hold it. It's Christ's own disciples. We see it in verse 10.

The disciples said to him, if such is the case of a man with his wife, they're referring to his teaching in verse 9, if such is the case with a man and his wife, it is better not to marry.

But he said to them, not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.

But the one who is able to receive this, receive it. eunuchs is not a word we use that often anymore, someone who's unable to participate in a sexual union, those, he says here, who were that from birth, probably means a birth defect.

Those who have been made eunuchs by men means castration. It was more common in the ancient world. And then he says, and I think figuratively, those who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom, he's talking about self-mutilation, please don't do that.

[25:52] But I think what he's saying here is those who forego marriage and the sexual union on account of the kingdom of heaven. And I think that can happen for a bunch of reasons.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7 that those who are not married can give more time to Christ's ministry. Or it could be with respect to verse 9. If you don't believe you could enter marriage and then not get divorced, you probably shouldn't.

And so for the sake of the sake of not risking grave sin, maybe it's better not to enter into marriage. So that's actually a really weighty principle, isn't it?

Right? It's better to forsake great pleasure than to enjoy sin or to risk sin against God. You know, we think of that as kind of a trifling thing, but Jesus thinks this is a good trade.

Now that's what's said here. We're not going to hear in this passage, but let's look at what's going on. What's going on in the life of the disciples. Right?

[27:01] So they are not like the Pharisees. They're not twisting the scriptures. They're not saying, well, let's get around this somehow. What they're saying is like, okay, Jesus, we get what you're saying, and we don't like it.

Right? They dislike God's word. That's their problem. That's their error. They understand that verse 9 is a significant restriction on their freedom.

So when Jesus has denied that freedom to them, they're unhappy about it. The Puritan Matthew Poole put it this way, surely they should have said, if this is the case, then both husbands and wives ought to learn to deny themselves, to comply with each other, to silence their brutish passions, that being the same flesh, they might also have one in the same spirit.

Instead, they say, if that's the case, yeah, marriage is not for me. Like the Pharisees, the issue isn't really a problem with their minds.

It's an issue with their hearts. They understand the command, and they won't twist it, they resent it. And let me ask you, does God's law, in your own judgment, stand in the way of your happiness?

[28:35] Do you obey his word because you want to, because reluctantly you have to? God's goal isn't simply to get us to understand his commands and begrudgingly submit to them.

His aim is that we would delight in them. Psalm 119, I find my delight in your commandments, which I love.

Right? The verse is just one example. God doesn't want to watch porn. This applies to every command that our Lord has given. God also doesn't want you to watch porn.

In your heart, do you embrace that purity? Or do you wish it was permitted? Is that command spoiling your fun?

God doesn't want you to lie. Do you delight in truth? Or do you wish you could bend it? Because getting ahead is more important to you than the goodness of an upright spirit.

[29:44] God wants you to honor your father and your mother. Is that beautiful in your eyes? Or is it an imposition? In your heart, friends, is God's law good?

Or is it a hindrance? Is it a kill joy? The righteous man, Psalm 1, his delight is in the law of the Lord. And friends, God's law isn't arbitrary. They're not just rules he made up because it seemed good to him. It's a reflection of his character. And since the triune God is the most beautiful thing in all of existence, those reflections of his character are likewise beautiful.

And so when we look at the Bible, we aren't just looking for, what does this say I have to do? We need to look and ask, what's so great about marriage that God wants us to run from divorce?

What's so beautiful about honesty, fidelity, and truth that God wants us to run from lies? What's so great about gentleness that God commands it?

[31:03] What is so beautiful about generosity that God wants that from us? At every point of obedience, every command of Scripture, what is beautiful about this?

Because God made it and he is good. So where is the goodness in it? Psalm 112, blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in his commandments.

Because, friends, I don't want you, and Christ doesn't want you to be languishing with the disciples in verse 10 with your head down, understanding God's word, but wishing it weren't so.

I want you to have a holy delight in God's law and his commands and his desires for you. It's not enough to just know God's word.

It's not enough to just obey his word. Jesus wants you to love God's law. How on earth are we going to do that, though?

[32:13] If you think you have it in you to do that, well, you don't. Okay? You just don't.

But Jesus tells us how to get this affection for God's laws. Verse 11. He said to them, not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given.

And then the end of verse 12. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it. To delight in God's law, friends, is something that is given to you.

It is something you receive. And who gives it? You can't work it up yourself. I can't hand it to you.

No person can accept the person of God the Holy Spirit.

Do you want to engage with the living God? Do you want to experience his work? Do you want to feel his touch and know his heart and sense God the Spirit move?

[33:42] Ask him to give you delight and joy in his word. Ask him to give you eyes to see the beauty of his commands. Ask him to enliven your heart to rejoice in his law.

I think a lot of Christians ask and expect the Holy Spirit to do a lot of things that he never promised. But he did promise to do this.

And he delights to do it. And you will find an intimacy with the living God in that. Because what could be more near than finding his hand at work on your heart?

Affecting what you even like and desire and rejoice in. There's nothing more intimate than that. As he reshapes our desires.

So what do we do? When we come to a command in scripture that we don't like, that feels like an imposition, that feels like it's killing the thing we want, don't ignore it.

[34:55] And don't try to wiggle out from under it and explain it away like the Pharisees. recognize that like the disciples, we need to delight in God's commands and yet we don't. And go to God in prayer and ask him, verse 12, to make us receptive to the beauty of his law.

Ask him, verse 11, to give us the spiritual sight to accept and delight in his law. And then under the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, we need to take a long look at the law until we can say with the Apostle Paul, in Romans 7, I delight in the law of God, in my inner being.

So friends, let's dive into commands that we aren't excited about and read it and consider it and come to grips to it and contemplate it and keep praying until we taste and see its goodness.

mess. And as we dive in to the hard commands of scriptures, the ones that seem to be a burden and a restraint on us, it's actually by diving into them that we will see, by pressing into the difficulty that we will find the beauty.

Let's just think about this one in front of us, the case of divorce, right? this radical commitment to marriage, verse 9, is the very beauty, right?

[36:26] The part that rubs us the wrong way is itself the beautiful part, right? Don't you want someone that committed to you? Don't you want that for your friends?

Don't you want that for your children? The very thing that turns us away, the radical commitment to our spouse that limits our freedom, when we take it seriously, that's actually the beauty that Christ wants for us to rejoice in.

It's by pressing into the hard things that we find their great beauty. It's by pressing into them. He also gives us another method.

If you look at his process in this passage, what does he do in verses 4 through 6? He took that idea of marriage and specifically breaking the marriage, and he compared it to God's intention for marriage, right?

He goes, from the beginning, it was like this. And basically, he's asking, what was God's heart for marriage from the outset? that? Because God's beautiful, his intentions for marriage and for every other command in Scripture are likewise beautiful and good and pure and to be delighted in.

[37:53] All right. So God might express his heart for a particular topic, whatever the command that's rubbing you the wrong way, he might express his heart for it anywhere in the Bible, but especially look like Jesus did at its institution, right?

At the beginning of something. In this case, Jesus went back to the institution of marriage and we saw from that his heart for marriage. Oftentimes, in particular, the prophets, especially in their rebukes, will tell people God's heart for something.

You're abusing this thing. That's not like what God intended for it. And they'll tell us what God intended for it. sometimes we'll see it in the life of Christ and sometimes if we trace that theme all the way to the end of the Bible, we'll see it in the new heavens and the new earth.

We'll see how the Lord plans to conclude a biblical idea, a topic, a theme, and in that we will see his heart for it. And so to conclude today, let me show you what driving this all the way to the end might look like.

This idea of marriage might look like to see its beauty. God is concerned about marriage because he created it, because he cares about his people who enter into it, because he cares about Christians' testimony before a watching world, and most of all, because he is preparing for a wedding.

[39:23] Throughout the old and new covenants, the Lord has called his people his bride. History is about the heavenly groom preparing this bride for himself for that day.

Ezekiel chapter 16, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness. I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord God, and you became mine.

He's saying that to his people. We see at the conclusion of the book of Revelation, Revelation 19, the angel said, write this, blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb. And then the church is revealed and described like a bride. Those of you who have attended a wedding that I have officiated, you have heard me make a faux pas.

In the middle of a wedding sermon, I will invite the whole gathering to a different wedding. The marriage supper of the Lamb.

[40:38] I'll say something like, God loves weddings. The Bible begins and ends with two different weddings. And that last wedding, this one we were just talking about here in chapter 19, is something special.

That wedding has for its groom our Lord Jesus Christ and for its bride, his church. And what's so amazing is the way his love works. Right?

I'm going to give us a fictitious bride I'm going to give us a fictitious bride and groom, Jack and Jill. Jack and Jill, their love has brought them to make this commitment and then that commitment fuels their love. Well, this groom, Jesus Christ, reversed it and made his commitment at the cross long before the wedding day.

And just like a marriage, he took on his beloved's debts. Your sin and shame. And just like a marriage, he made those debts his own.

He bore the cost of it. And so we can stand in life because he went to the cross and paid for your sin with his death. And now, friends, Jack and Jill have invited you to their wedding today.

[41:42] But even more, they invite you to that wedding banquet. This wedding today is a prelude. It's an echo reverberating back from that wedding into today when the Lord Jesus will take his people to himself.

This wedding is a sign inviting you to the wedding feast of the Lamb. Will you be at the best wedding of them all?

Friends, let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.