

The Church's Way

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[0 : 00] So you heard the passage read there, and perhaps you think it's quite early in the morning to be talking about marriage and divorce and eunuchs and such things, but here we are.

But I, this is a bit of a guess, but I'm assuming that your average non-believer doesn't think that the Bible has anything fresh or helpful to say about relationships, marriage, divorce, sex, singleness. If you're pushed, I would say that your average non-believer probably thinks that the Bible contains mere just regressive moralism, perhaps.

But our passage today, I think, is just stunning, and so we're going to get into it, and I hope it's helpful to you. So in Matthew 19, 1 to 15, it's probably helpful to have a Bible open.

You can see right from the start of the passage that Jesus says, and when he'd finished these sayings, he went to Galilee. So he's just finished a very large block of teaching, and it's really starting to turn the corner, and he's starting to move towards Jerusalem and the cross.

[1 : 19] And there's still big crowds following him, and he's doing some healings, which is brilliant. But in the middle of that, some Pharisees come up to him and say, is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?

Which seems a little bit random to us, that they would sort of just jump on that topic in the midst of what Jesus is doing. Well, amongst the Pharisees, there was actually a big argument going on about divorce.

There was a big debate. They didn't have a cohesive idea about it. So some Pharisees said that you could divorce for any reason. Other Pharisees said, no, it has to be something very, very serious in order to divorce.

Or, basically, there are no grounds to divorce whatsoever. And so it was a very live debate rung amongst the religious elite of the time. And this particular group is trying to draw Jesus into that debate, hoping that he'll say something controversial that they can kind of jump onto.

So that's why they asked the question, and how does Jesus respond? Well, instead of entering the debate, he brings them back to first principles. He says, look, we're not going to talk about divorce. Let's talk about marriage.

[2 : 31] Marriage. And then he takes us back to the beginning of God's story with his people, back to Genesis. And he talks about how in the beginning there was, there was what?

There was a man and there was a woman. He says this was the archetypal relationship from the beginning of time. A man and a woman.

It wasn't two women. It wasn't two men. And it wasn't a parent and a child. No, God's plan for marriage at the beginning was a man and a woman.

This was the archetypal relationship. And then he keeps going and he says, and these two people, these people will become one flesh. These two people will become one new thing.

And then Jesus says this really, this quite famous line, what therefore God has joined together, let no one separate. Which is the line you say when you're marrying people in the prayer book.

[3 : 35] It's my favorite line in the wedding service. Which is, whom God has joined together, let no man put asunder. Love that line. I love that line because it reminds us that this is something that God is doing.

God is taking two people and making them one flesh. He's making them this indissoluble unit. It's God doing the joining that day.

It's not romantic love. It's not nature joining them. It's God joining them. He's doing this miraculous thing. He makes two people one. Let's keep going. So the Pharisees, remember, are trying to rope Jesus into this kind of divorce technicality, see where he stands.

And Jesus says, no, no, we're going to talk about marriage. And he takes them back to first principles. But the Pharisees are still caught in this kind of technicality zone. They want to talk about it.

And they say, aha, aha, Jesus, aha. Ah, then if that's true what you just said, Jesus, then why did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?

[4 : 43] And they're quoting Deuteronomy here. And in Deuteronomy, Moses says, you can divorce a woman if you find something indecent in her, which was, you know, the big theological debate was what does that actually mean?

And some said it could be anything, and some said it had to be something huge like adultery, etc. So what does Jesus say to all this? He says, yes, I mean, that's there.

But, verse 8, it's there because of the hardness of your hearts. Moses allowed you to divorce your wives. But from the beginning, it was not so. This rule that Moses brought from the Lord, it was the Lord trying to bring some order into a broken situation.

It's an accommodation from first principles. It's subservient to the first principles. It's a concession because of human brokenness. And Jesus, in this whole little story here, he exposes the Pharisees. They're kind of caught up in technicalities, and they're caught up in the rules. And he shows them to have this quite sort of heartless, formal religion.

[6 : 04] And they're arguing over something, and they clearly don't understand first principles. He actually says to them, you fail to understand God's word on this. He's saying to them, you started at Deuteronomy, and talking about this really important relationship.

Trying to work out what you can get away with. Instead of thinking about God's intention for marriage. And before moving on, I think it's helpful to, just to say, what about those who are divorced?

And remarry? When it wasn't an issue of adultery or catastrophic failure or abandonment. What about those who are divorced? And they're the guilty party? So to speak. I know there's a lot of shame around this issue.

And I think it's good to remember, at this point, the story of David and Bathsheba. You know the story well, right? David saw this woman, Bathsheba, and he really fancied her.

[7 : 12] He lusted after her. So he had her husband killed so he could be with her. Now that's a marriage. That's not got a great start, has it?

That is a marriage that is knee-deep in sin. But we know that David repented. And God blessed that marriage.

From that marriage came Solomon. And if you keep going down the line, you actually get to Jesus. God put that marriage in the line of Christ.

And that is because God is in the business of redeeming the worst of situations. So we hear this passage today in Christ's hard line about divorce.

And we are reminded that God redeems these situations. So if you're in a situation where you are divorced and you feel shame around this kind of thing, remember the story of David and Bathsheba.

[8 : 17] Consider the cross and run to it. Okay, let's keep moving. Verse 10. So the disciples are overhearing all of this.

And Jesus is saying that, you know, two people become one flesh, etc., etc., etc. And the disciples say, well, marriage sounds too hard.

Like, maybe we just shouldn't get married. It's too full on. So Jesus does some teaching around this. Because they're thinking, look, if marriage is something we can't really escape from, it's just too hard, maybe we shouldn't marry at all.

And Jesus uses this to make a serious point about singleness here. Let me remind you of the passage. This is the eunuchs passage. 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. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.

[9 : 17] So we're talking about three types of eunuchs here. So there are some of the eunuchs that are physiologically the eunuchs. They can't have sex. They can't reproduce. And then others are made eunuchs.

So back in the days, it was common practice for really wealthy families to castrate young boys so that they could serve the family for the rest of their life.

They're not going to go off and get married, and they're not going to cause any trouble for the woman in the household. They're not going to misbehave, and so they could put these men in charge of harems or in charge of looking after the wives, etc.

And lastly, there are self-made eunuchs. And the self-made eunuchs here, it's a metaphor. These are talking about people who choose not to be married for the sake of the kingdom.

So instead of talking about these three types of eunuchs, Jesus here is talking about all single people. Single by choice, single as a result of other people, single as a result of the environment.

[10:28] Okay, what does this all mean? Well, on the heels of a rather demanding vision of marriage, in which the disciples say it's too hard. And marriage, you know, it is hard.

For those of you who are married, marriage is, your selfishness is confronted constantly. And I think actually, ironically, one of the great temptations of marriage is actually to use it as a vehicle for selfishness.

You turn inwards on each other and just onto your kids, and you make your whole life about you and your spouse and your kids, and that's it. It's all just about you. And married people can think that singleness is a lot easier.

Well, look, on the heels of this quite demanding vision of marriage, two people become one flesh, Jesus gives an equally compelling vision of singleness and an equally demanding one.

He says, if you're single, verse 12, he says, if you're single, be single for the sake of the kingdom.

Be single for the sake of the kingdom, whether you're single by choice or not, whether permanently or temporarily, use it for God.

[11:33] Because the temptation for single people is, I'm single, all this freedom, I can do whatever I want. Experiment, just do whatever I want.

And Jesus says, no, use your singleness for the kingdom. Marriage is hard. God uses it to confront our selfishness.

God uses it to help us become more like Christ. God uses it to glorify him, just like singleness. It's another way that we unlearn selfishness.

It's another way of living that demands that, the transformation of our desires. It's another way, it's another situation that God calls us to allegiance to him.

It's another way we glorify God. God. And what's stunning, I think, about this passage is that Jesus dignifies marriage. And he talks about it in very elevated terms, in very lofty terms, two people become one flesh.

[12:39] It's amazing. It's an incredible thing. And then here, when he talks about these eunuchs, and often I think in, you know, sort of our culture, we wrongly talk about singleness in quite negative terms.

And we elevate marriage as the only sort of ultimate end game. But the Bible speaks about it quite differently, doesn't it? The Bible here elevates singleness as well.

Dignifies singleness. So this passage dignifies and elevates marriage, and it dignifies and it elevates singleness. That's a very, very helpful thing to do for us, I think.

So, just a few practical words to finish, perhaps, for folks that are single. The Bible does talk about it here, and in 1 Corinthians 7, I believe, as a gift.

It says it's a gift. It might not feel like a gift to you, but it's a gift. Make the most of it, as long as you have it. Be disciplined and godly. Be aware of your self-centeredness. Keep your eyes on Jesus.

[13:50] Use it to glorify God. And remember, the church is your family. For marriage, for marriages, for married folks, do not make the mistake of thinking singleness is second best.

It is a gift from God. Remember that your family is the whole church. For married people, the family is the whole church, not just your nuclear family.

Keep your eyes on Jesus. Be disciplined and godly, and be aware of your inward-focused tendencies. Amen.