

Marriage

MATTHEW 19:3-12

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In April 2015, a 57-year old woman in Florida went to church at the End Time Sabbath Worship Center as she normally did, and during the announcements, the pastor announced that her husband had married another woman (not her ex-husband, but her husband). The members of the church laughed, and the woman ran out of the service and started doing some research. Several days later, she showed up at the Orange County Sheriff's Office, along with copies of the two marriage licenses - one issued to her and her husband more than 21 years earlier, and the other issued to her husband and the new woman in March of 2015. Remember, this is April of 2015. Apparently, the man married a new woman while he was still married to his first wife, and this wife found out about it as it was announced in church. The man was then arrested on charges of bigamy (being married to two people at the same time), he was released on bail, and went on to file for divorce from his first wife in June (two months AFTER he had married the second woman).

Now, as a minister and as someone who makes announcements, I am obviously wondering: How did the leader of this church not know what was going on here? How did he not know that this man and this woman (both members of his congregation) were married? They had at least one child together, because the article points out that the daughter was also at church that day and heard the announcement about her father getting married. How does that happen? In truth, there are many religious groups who simply do not care. And that policy of not upholding God's will on marriage, of course, leads to some disastrous consequences.

This morning, I would invite you to turn with me to Matthew 19 as we study one of the most comprehensive passages in the New Testament on God's plan for marriage, and in particular, divorce and also remarriage. We have certainly referred to this subject here and there through the years, but the last time we studied this in depth was in April 2009, nearly nine years ago. As I mentioned then, the subject (for many of us) is quite emotional. It would be easy to share statistics. We could look at charts and graphs, and so on. And yet, when most of us think of divorce, we don't see numbers, do we? We see faces. We think of people we know and love. We think of our own families. If you know me, then you know that this subject has affected our family in a very personal way - over and over again, on both sides of the family - people we love - sisters and brothers, aunts and uncles - and we see the effects that those broken relationships have had on their children.

And yet in spite of the pain, the world around us continues to basically ignore the word of God on this very important issue. And we know that this ignorance goes back, literally, for thousands of years. Just a few weeks

ago, we studied that passage from Malachi, where God's own people were divorcing their wives so that they could marry pagan women. In that context, God had to just come out and say it (in Malachi 2:16), **"I hate divorce!"** Those of us who have been touched by it can perhaps understand why God would make such a severe statement.

As we get started this morning, I've asked two of our men to pass out some cards, asking for your input. Some of you know that I'll be speaking on this subject up in Minnesota at the end of April. The lectures are focusing in on the "Hard Sayings of Jesus," and what we are about to look at in Matthew 19 is certainly one of the most difficult things Jesus ever said. It is, indeed, a "hard saying." Not only do we see it as being difficult, but we happen to have the reaction of the disciples to what Jesus said here, and the disciples (as I understand it) basically reacted in shock to what the Lord had said. So, they also, saw this as being a difficult statement - not difficult to understand, but hard or difficult in what it really means in our lives. So, I want us to look at Matthew 19 this morning, and as we study, I would invite you to be thinking of objections. I don't even know if that's the best way to put it (that sounds a little too confrontational), but I want to follow up next week (if we can) by covering some of those thoughts that we have on this passage. And, as always, I would invite you to get in touch using my contact information on the front of the bulletin. But if you have any thoughts as to why what Jesus said here may not apply in the way we think it does, I would love to hear from you. And this doesn't need to be your objection, but it might just be something you have heard or something you have wondered about.

As we begin, I would invite you to turn with me to Matthew 19 (p. 1534), and I would invite you to keep your Bibles open as we study - Matthew 19:3-12,

³ Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?" ⁴ And He answered and said, "Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵ and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? ⁶ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." ⁷ They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?" ⁸ He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. ⁹ And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery." ¹⁰ The disciples said to Him, "If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry." ¹¹ But He said to them, "Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given. ¹² For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this, let him accept it."

As we work through this passage, I would like to divide the lesson into three parts - 1.) The challenge from the Pharisees, 2.) The answer Jesus gives, and then finally, 3.) The disciples' reaction.

I. But as we begin, we notice, first of all, THE QUESTION FROM THE PHARISEES.

And immediately, we find that it is a trick question. We didn't read verses 1-2, but if you look back at the first two verses in this chapter, you'll notice that Jesus comes into this new area, and **"large crowds"** were following him there. It seems, then, that what happens in verse 3 is probably something of a jealous or

threatened response. The Pharisees were upset that Jesus was gaining influence (yet again), and so these men came to Jesus and were **“testing him.”** They were not interested in the truth, but they were interested in embarrassing Jesus publicly; they were interested in forcing Jesus to take a very unpopular position. Chances are, these men already know something of what Jesus had taught on this issue. We know, for example (from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:31-32), that Jesus had already taken a rather unpopular position on marriage and divorce, making a contrast between what they had heard and what he was saying. Knowing this, the Pharisees want Jesus to say it again publicly. They are **“testing”** the Lord, Matthew says.

And as we see in this passage, the Pharisees are actually trying to pit Jesus against Moses. And so the real question is: Jesus, do you agree with Moses? Do you agree with Moses: Is there or is there not a reason for divorce? And I think we see this in the Lord’s response.

But what I want us to realize here at the beginning is that the Pharisees are **“testing”** Jesus. They aren’t really interested in the truth on this issue, but they are trying to trap the Lord into saying something either unpopular or against Moses. Among themselves, they might have debated this with each other for hours on end, but when it comes to Jesus, the Pharisees are united in their hatred and in their jealousy. So, first of all, we have a trick question.

II. **As we go back to our text, we now come to JESUS’ ANSWER.**

A. **And in his answer, he starts by taking the Pharisees back to the beginning, to GOD’S ORIGINAL PLAN FOR MARRIAGE.**

And I want us to notice that the Lord Jesus starts answering their question with what might come across as a rather sarcastic insult! **“Have you not read!”** He’s talking to these religious leaders. He’s speaking to these men with basically what amounts to PhD’s in theology. And the answer starts with a challenge, **“Have you not read?”** Jesus, then, takes them back to the word of God. And the word, of course, is where we need to go for answers on this subject. As God’s people, we need to be reading the actual word for ourselves. And we need to read it with an open mind. We don’t go to the Bible trying to prove what we already believe, but we go to the Bible honestly looking for answers. We do the best we can to bring in everything the word says on the subject, and then we figure out how those passages fit together.

Years ago, as I really got into figuring this out for myself, I found a good number of the relevant passages, and I put them all on one page, and I read that page over and over again. I have included that as a part of a handout this morning. If that is helpful to you, then great. But the point is: Jesus takes them back to the word of God.

So the challenge is, **“Have you not read?”** Of course, these men had read! The problem is: These men were not ACCEPTING what they had read. They were not OBEYING what they had read. And what we notice about the Lord’s answer here is: He doesn’t quote any famous rabbis, he but he teaches with authority (as we learned in today’s scripture reading from Matthew 7). The Lord Jesus takes these men back to the BEGINNING. They want to know about Moses, but Jesus takes them back to creation. He takes them back to the ideal marriage relationship. From the beginning, God’s plan has been for one man and one woman to be joined together for a lifetime.

In the beginning, the only possible combination was one man and one woman. Adam didn’t have a choice between multiple women. In the same way, Eve did not have a choice between multiple men. Of course, Adam couldn’t compare Eve to his mother, either. But I would also point out that polygamy wasn’t an option

in the garden. Homosexuality was not an option in the garden. There were no choices to fall back on in case this first marriage didn't work out. The only potential here is one man and one woman for life.

So, Jesus does not fall into the trap. He does not get bogged down with endless hypotheticals. Anytime we study this issue, we run into countless articles giving every possible scenario, "If A marries B, and then C," and so on. But we have none of that here. He doesn't get pulled into a debate about what various other rabbis have said. He doesn't suggest that they all sit down and take a vote on this issue (as many churches have done). But, Jesus takes them back to the beginning.

B. As we go back to our text, we continue in verse 6, and we now find that Jesus addresses DIVORCE.

And the Lord's conclusion on divorce itself is, ***"What therefore God has joined together let no one separate."*** The Pharisees reply, thinking they have caught Jesus contradicting Moses, "Ah! We've got him now!" So they say, ***"Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?"*** They thought they were nailing this down: Jesus vs. Moses! Jesus has now condemned something that Moses has commanded! But the Lord schools them on the REASON for Moses' words, ***"Because of your hardness of heart, Moses PERMITTED you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way."*** I want us to notice: We are not even to the exception yet. The rule is: One man and one woman together for life - because, what God has joined together is not to be separated. And the separation allowed by Moses was never a part of God's original plan. Divorce under Moses was never COMMANDED (as the Pharisees said); instead, it was only PERMITTED. And even then, it was because of their hardness of heart - the same hardness of heart that these men are showing to Jesus! This distinction between ***"commanded"*** and ***"permitted"*** reminds us of how Satan twisted God's words back in the Garden of Eden. Instead of commanding divorce, the Law of Moses merely permitted it.

Now, we realize that much of what has been written on this passage focuses on the exception (in verse 9), but in that discussion, we cannot miss the rule. The rule is: We (as mere mortals) are not to separate what God has joined together. And disobeying the rule leads to some terrible situations. Just to illustrate, as we move toward the exception in verse 9, I want us to look at verse 9 without the exception. Without the exception, Jesus' conclusion (in verse 9) is, ***"And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife...and marries another woman commits adultery."*** So, not only has the divorce itself violated God's law, but when this man enters into a new relationship, he is committing adultery with this new woman. Why? The reason is: God does not recognize the divorce. And so, in reality, the man is still married to his first wife. We think about that man in Florida who got married when he was already married. In reality, he was actually committing adultery, even though he had a certificate saying that he was married. So, without the exception, the rule is, ***"Whoever divorces his wife...and marries another woman commits adultery."*** ***"Adultery"*** is defined as cheating on a spouse, being sexually unfaithful in a marriage relationship. Jesus calls it ***"adultery,"*** because the man is still joined by God to his first wife. No human judge has the power to separate what God has joined together.

C. This brings us to the exception (in verse 9) - from marriage, to divorce, and now to REMARRIAGE.

According to Jesus, remarriage is allowed only when the first marriage ends because of ***"immorality."*** In my opinion, the translation of this word is one of the greatest weaknesses of the NASB. The word is defined as "illicit sexual intercourse." To translate this word as ***"immorality,"*** then, is too broad, too generic. If you are reading something other than the NASB, you might have the exception given as being ***"sexual sin,"*** or ***"fornication,"*** or ***"marital unfaithfulness."*** All of these would be much closer to the original. But we

understand what the Lord is saying here: A man who divorces his wife and marries another is actually committing adultery, unless he divorces his wife for sexual immorality. What amazes me is: This verse is not extremely difficult to understand. What Jesus says in verse 9 is fairly straightforward. And so when we say that this is a “difficult saying” or a “hard saying,” the difficulty is not in understanding it, the difficulty comes in obeying it. We think of what Mark Twain once said, “It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.”

So, again, God doesn't demand divorce, but he allows it - not because we fall out of love, not because we get in a big argument, not because we disagree over how to raise our children, not because our spouse gets sick, not because we have a financial dispute - but God allows divorce and remarriage only when one partner commits sexual immorality against the other. When that happens, the one who has been sinned against (the one who is innocent of the sexual sin) - this partner has God's permission to divorce the one who is guilty, and the innocent person can then remarry. This, of course, was very different from what was being taught in the First Century, and it is very different from what is being taught all around us today.

As I was preparing today's lesson, I thought back to what God said in Malachi 2, that he hates divorce. And I realized that there is something that God hates even more than divorce. He hates fornication. He hates sexual sin even more than he hates divorce, because he will allow what he hates - only because sexual sin against another person is even worse. Sexual unfaithfulness violates the marriage relationship in a way that other sins do not, and so God, in his mercy, allows what he hates.

III. As we come to the end of this passage, we have the DISCIPLES' REACTION (starting in verse 10).

When they heard what Jesus said here, the disciples said, ***“If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry.”*** They almost seem shocked! I know we can't, but I almost want to insert the word, “Wow!” in there. And based on their reaction, it seems that perhaps the disciples were thinking like the Pharisees were, that divorce and remarriage were allowed - perhaps for many reasons, as long as you got the paperwork filled out correctly. But here, they hear Jesus' words, and they get it. They start to understand the seriousness of the marriage relationship, and they start to understand that there are circumstances where certain people should not be married.

At this point, we might expect Jesus to say something like, “Oh no, you have misunderstood what I said!” And yet, Jesus doesn't say that, does he? Instead, the Lord continues with the difficult statement, that there are situations where some will need to live as eunuchs - that is, based on what Jesus says here, some people are being called on to live a celibate lifestyle. Not all marriage relationships are acceptable to God. If someone gets divorced for a reason other than fornication and then enters into a new marriage, that new relationship is described by Jesus as ***“adultery.”*** And to repent of that sin requires getting out of it, stopping it, or, as Jesus explains in verse 12, it means living as a ***“eunuch.”*** I would compare this to what Jesus said about plucking out our eyes to avoid lust - he wasn't demanding a surgical procedure, but he was demanding that we stop sinning. We think of what he said to the woman caught in the act of adultery (in John 8:11), ***“Go. From now on sin no more.”*** He was saying to her, “Stop doing what you're doing” [paraphrased].

This morning, then, we have looked at a difficult teaching - not difficult to understand, but difficult to live out. It is a “hard saying.” It's hard, because divorce is so widespread. It's hard because remarriage after an unscriptural divorce is so widespread. It's hard, because we might have members of our own families in this situation. It's hard, because it's so personal. It's also hard, because many religious people have avoided this passage and this teaching for so long. I think of a study we had in Janesville with a young family who moved up

from Texas. I think it might have been a second marriage for her and the third for him. We opened the Bible, and he read this passage out loud at the kitchen table. They got it. In fact, I remember what he said, word for word. He said, "Wow! This is so much more than just being a member of your church. This is a salvation issue." We wept together. And before we left that night, he said that he had never even seen this passage, even though they were married by a so-called gospel preacher in Abilene, Texas. It's hard, then, because so many people have no idea that this is even in the Bible. Somebody who should have known better signed on the line for that marriage, without even addressing this passage. Unfortunately, like the Rich Young Ruler, this man decided not to repent and to walk away grieving.

Conclusion:

As we close, I want to make three very brief, but practical applications. So what? What does this passage mean for us?

1. **First of all, it means that for those who are not yet married, THE TIME TO GET A DIVORCE IS RIGHT NOW.**

And what I mean by that is: If you are not married right at this moment, make sure you understand God's law before getting married, and make a decision to go into marriage with eyes wide open. Otherwise, don't go down that road. Marriage is good, but there is no dishonor at all in being single. In fact, as Jesus points out here, there are times when living a celibate life is actually required. As someone has said, "If there was ever an area where prevention was the best cure, this is it." In other words, if you don't understand God's plan for marriage or if you aren't sure whether either you or your future partner are qualified to get married (based on this passage), then do not get married. If you or your future partner have been divorced for a reason other than sexual immorality, or if either of you are the guilty party in a divorce for that reason, do not get married. The time to get a divorce is now, before you are married.

2. **Secondly, THOSE OF US WHO ARE MARRIED NEED TO STAY MARRIED.**

This, of course, assuming that we aren't living in a marriage described by Jesus as "*adultery*" (if that's the case, we need to get out of that relationship). But assuming we are in a God-approved marriage, we need to stay married. We need to be treating each other just as we ourselves would like to be treated (Matthew 7:12). Husbands, we need to love our wives just as we love ourselves and just as Jesus loves the church (Ephesians 5:25). Wives, love your husbands and submit to them just as the church is subject to Christ (Ephesians 5:22). If we're having trouble, go to the elders for encouragement, talk to an older Christian couple. Do not commit sexual sin against your partner. But above all, stay married.

3. **And then finally, as the article in today's bulletin points out, WE NEED TO KEEP ON TEACHING WHAT JESUS SAID IN THIS PASSAGE - WITH LOVE AND RESPECT, AND YET WITHOUT COMPROMISE.**

It is a difficult passage, but it is a message we need to hear. It's a message we need to teach. It's hard to teach this. As a preacher, I dread this. It's difficult, because we love the people we're teaching. I appreciate what Dan Mayfield said about this (comparing this to Jesus and the Rich Young Ruler) - he said, "The people who hear the gospel and walk away sad are not just nameless faces. They are our moms, brothers, best friends, co-workers, spouses, and new acquaintances. Because God gave us the capacity to love and care for souls, the feelings of love and compassion, fear and dread, are going to intertwine themselves in the conversation." But,

he says, "God's word goes out and accomplishes its purpose, separating the honest and closed hearts." I would agree with that.

This morning, then, we have studied a difficult passage, and we have made some practical applications of it. We close by giving everyone here the opportunity to obey the gospel. The gospel is the good news that Jesus came to this earth to live a perfect life and to die for our sins. He was buried and was then raised up on the third day. We accept his offer of salvation by turning away from sin. For some, that is a far more drastic step than it is for others. In some cases, as we have learned this morning, it might involve getting out of a relationship, even something we might describe as a marriage, even something a judge would describe as a marriage, even something the State of Wisconsin or Dane County might describe as a marriage. For some, repentance will involve living a celibate life. As we turn from sin, we commit ourselves to Jesus in baptism - a burial in water for the forgiveness of sins. If you have something we need to pray about together, let us know. But if you are ready to obey the gospel, you can also let us know right now, as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com