

Marriage: Possible Objections

MATTHEW 19:3-12

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Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
March 18, 2018



If you were here with us last week, then you know that last Sunday we looked at some words from Jesus concerning marriage in Matthew 19. We learned that the Pharisees tried to test the Lord by putting him in the position of contradicting Moses on the issue of divorce and remarriage. Jesus, though, bypasses the Law of Moses and takes the Pharisees all the way back to the beginning, as he points out that marriage was always intended to involve one man and one woman, joined together for life. In verse 9, Jesus does give one exception, ***“...whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”*** We briefly looked at the rule without the exception ***“...whoever divorces his wife...and marries another woman commits adultery.”*** ***“Adultery”*** is basically “cheating on your spouse.” So, the rule is: If someone divorces his wife and marries another, he is committing adultery with the second woman. The second marriage is described as ***“adultery,”*** and the reason is: God does not recognize the breaking up of that first relationship. So, in a sense, he is still married to the first woman as he goes out and marries the second woman. The second relationship is adulterous. And to be forgiven, he obviously needs to stop committing adultery. He needs to get out of that relationship.

Well, Jesus not only gives us the rule, but he also gives an exception, and the only exception to the rule is when he divorces his wife for ***“immorality,”*** and as we learned, the word refers to “illicit sexual intercourse,” and the word is sometimes translated here as ***“fornication,” “sexual sin,”*** or ***“marital unfaithfulness.”*** So, there is this one exception, but without this exception, the second marriage is described as ***“adultery.”*** The apostles then respond in shock (in verse 10), ***“If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry.”*** In other words, the disciples immediately understand how serious this is. And instead of correcting his disciples, instead of backing off, the Lord actually continues and points out that there are some people who will basically need to ***“make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven.”*** He was saying that there are some who will need to live a celibate life because of a previous divorce, if it was not for the one exception given in verse 9. We learned that this passage 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.

Last week, we noted that this discussion can be rather emotional, and yet we also noted the importance of understanding God’s will on this subject. Above all, we want to please God. And so, in this effort to make sure that we have understood this correctly, I asked for your help. We passed out cards asking for feedback -

basically, “What are some possible objections to our understanding of Matthew 19?” And as I said last week, “objection” might be a little strong; “loophole” might be more like it. But the idea is: What are we missing here? What have we heard through the years that might soften what Jesus says in this passage? What are some possible exceptions to the Lord’s teaching on this issue? As I mentioned, I’ll be speaking on this at the Minnesota Bible Lectures at the end of April, and so I was asking for your help in getting ready for that lesson.

As a result, several of you make some very good comments. We might not be able to cover everything, but I have taken your input and have boiled everything down to basically four ideas, four thoughts for us to consider concerning why the Lord’s words might not apply as we think they do.

I. As we begin, several of you mentioned the idea that **BAPTISM FORGIVES**.

One of our members points out, “I have heard others say that since baptism washes away all sin, any divorce and remarriage that happened before baptism ‘didn’t count.’” And “didn’t count” is in quotes in that statement. Here is another one, “What about the couples who come to Christ after they have been divorced several times? Doesn’t God forgive their sin after baptism? Where does it say in the Bible that they can’t stay married?” Someone else asked, “What if I didn’t know this before I was baptized?” To me, it seems that these three are basically the same issue: Since baptism forgives sins, why can’t someone stay in a second marriage and be forgiven by God at the point of baptism?

We know that baptism does forgive sins. Baptism is powerful. As Jesus said in Mark 16:16, ***“He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved.”*** We think of Saul, a murderer of Christians, who was told by Ananias in Acts 22:16, ***“Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.”*** We think of what Peter said in 1 Peter 3:21, ***“Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”*** Baptism is an incredibly important step in God’s plan of salvation...but is it the only step? I want us to understand that baptism does not stand alone. Among other things, we must hear the good news, we must come to the point of faith in God, we must confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and we must also repent of our sins. To repent is to turn, to have a change of heart concerning sin and to turn away from it.

With this in mind, we need to go back to Matthew 19:9, and we need to realize what the sin is in that verse. Obviously, separating what God has joined together is one sin (we addressed that last week), but in verse 9, we have the new relationship described by Jesus as ***“adultery.”*** Realizing that repentance comes before baptism in God’s plan, the question is: How do you repent of adultery? Like the woman who was ***“caught in the very act of adultery,”*** Jesus says to her, ***“Go. From now on sin no more.”*** Yes, baptism forgives sins, but not when we continue in those sins. ***“May we continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be!”*** Paul says. Repentance comes before baptism. And if you remember our definition of adultery from our study last week, adultery refers to illicit sexual activity by someone or with someone who is married. So with that in mind, we need to realize that adultery is not a ceremony. Instead, adultery is the ongoing sexual relationship that takes place outside a God-approved marriage.

When we understand what adultery is, we understand that the real issue here is REPENTANCE. Twenty years ago, I remember using an illustration that I thought was rather far-out, something that would never happen, in an attempt to put this in terms we could understand. I asked the question: If two men come to us, men who are married to each other, and if they are asking to be baptized, would God allow them to continue in that marriage? Would baptism in some way sanctify or justify that marriage? Could they stay in that relationship and be pleasing to God? What was once a hypothetical example has now become a very real possibility. How

do we repent of a marriage that God does not recognize? Do we apologize for the CEREMONY and then continue in the relationship, or do we need to get out of that relationship?

Years ago, I met a missionary who had spent a number of years preaching in the nation of Cameroon in West Africa. He told of a time when he was actually in the water with a man about to be baptized, and someone on the bank of the river called out and said, "Did you know that that man has three wives?" Apparently, that is still a common practice in some parts of Cameroon, and the man about to be baptized thought that he could keep his three wives. Let me ask: What would you have done in that situation? Would baptism have sanctified his polygamist marriage? Personally, I would have walked with him out of the water, I would have very lovingly explained what the Bible teaches on marriage, and from that point on, I would probably start bringing this up in my studies with people as they decide whether to obey the gospel.

We understand, then, that yes, God can forgive the sin of adultery (just as he can forgive polygamy, and homosexuality, and all other sins), but as with all sin, forgiveness is conditional not just on baptism, but also on repentance. Repentance requires a change of lifestyle. Baptism without repentance would be somewhat similar to baptism without belief in God. One comes before the other.

Some might say, "But there are no examples of separation being required in the Bible." First of all, we need to realize that there are many examples we do not have in the Bible. We don't have an example of a pornographer giving up his business. We don't have an example of a polygamist giving up his multiple wives. And so our response is: We do not need an example of someone stopping every sin that there is. I've heard people say, "Well, Peter never addressed this on the Day of Pentecost." You might want to turn with me to Acts 2, I'd like to make just a few observations. Remember what happened on the Day of Pentecost? Peter explains that these people have murdered the Son of God, they are **"cut to the heart,"** they respond by interrupting his sermon, **"Brethren, what shall we do?"** Peter responds to their interruption by commanding them to repent and to be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins. We might assume that he immediately baptized 3,000 people. That's not what happened. Instead, Acts 2:40 says, **"And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, 'Be saved from this perverse generation!'"** Only then do we get to verse 41, where the Bible says, **"So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls."** In other words, these people are cut to the heart. They know they had sinned. But before they can be baptized, Peter continues preaching with **"many other words,"** and in particular, his words are warning them to **"be saved from this perverse generation!"** In other words, he tells them to repent, and then he explains what repentance looks like. Exactly what did Peter say? I don't know, but I know he was speaking about some issues that were relevant to that generation, and I know that he used **"many words"** to do it.

We also think about the preaching of John the Baptist. You might remember that time in Matthew 3:7-8 when some Pharisees come out to John for baptism and he responds by saying, **"You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"** We might think that we need to just immediately baptize anybody who comes to us wanting to be baptized, but that is not the case (as we see from John). John, in fact, goes on to say, **"Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance."** In Luke's account, the people ask, **"Then what shall we do?"** So, they want to know what repentance looks like for them. And Luke goes on to give some concrete examples. The soldiers were to be content with their wages, and so on. In other words, even John understood that baptism was part of a larger plan and that without repentance, baptism will forgive nothing. Even John, then, refused baptism for those who would not repent.

But back to that claim that there are no examples of separation in the Bible, I would give two examples, starting with a brief reference I made a few weeks ago, to the last two chapters of Ezra. We don't have the time today, but I would encourage you to go back and to re-read Ezra 9-10. As the people return from Babylonian Captivity, Ezra reads the Law of Moses, and the people realize that they had sinned by marrying foreign women. After weeping and trembling and pulling out the hair of his beard, after the people tear their clothing in shame, they all conclude that the only way to please God is to separate from their foreign wives. The scripture specifically says that there were children born into some of those sinful relationships, and yet the people repented of their sin by conducting an investigation and by putting an end to those sinful unions.

This, of course, is the Old Testament, but I should also point out a tragic situation in the New Testament. In Mark 6, you might remember that John the Immerser is preaching to King Herod. John is referring to Herod's relationship with Herodias when he says in Mark 6:18, ***"It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."*** In other words, that marriage was not lawful according to God's Law, because according to God's Law, Herodias was still married to Herod's brother. According to the law of Rome, Herod could do whatever he wanted! Herod was the law of Rome! According to Rome, they were ***"married"*** (the Bible even uses that word). We know, then, that God does not always see eye-to-eye with the government when it comes to marriage and divorce. So, when John tells the king that his marriage is not ***"lawful,"*** what was he telling the king to do? Was he telling him to apologize for the ceremony, or was he telling the king to repent, to remove himself from that sinful relationship? Remember, he said, ***"It is not lawful for you to have"*** her. Let us never forget what happened to John. My understanding is that John lost his life because he refused to compromise on this issue. There are many preachers who have compromised on this teaching, who, on the Day of Judgment, will owe an apology not only to God, not only to those they have misled, but they will also owe an apology to John the Baptist. So, in summary, yes, baptism forgives sin, but forgiveness is conditional not just on baptism, but on repentance as well. If baptism fixes this adulterous second marriage, then why didn't Jesus just say so right here in Matthew 19? Why such a seemingly severe statement about living as a eunuch? Obviously, baptism is easier than living a celibate life. Why make this difficult statement? Because we know that for baptism to forgive, we must also repent.

- II. **Somewhat connected to this, there is a second objection that has come up a time or two, and it's basically this: MY DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE HAPPENED SO LONG AGO - I MARRIED THAT GIRL WHEN I WAS YOUNG AND DIDN'T KNOW ANY BETTER, WE WERE ONLY 18 OR 19 YEARS OLD. BESIDES, I GOT REMARRIED SO LONG AGO THAT I CAN HARDLY EVEN REMEMBER IT. HOW COULD GOD POSSIBLY HOLD ME ACCOUNTABLE FOR THAT?**

Let me propose a hypothetical situation: If I leave my wife and children and marry my neighbor, according to the verse on the wall up here, Jesus classifies that new relationship as ***"adultery."*** How long would I have to live with that woman for my adultery to no longer be a sin? If it's a sin on the first day, wouldn't it still be a sin a week later? Two weeks later? Twenty years later?

Besides, we need to remember what God said in Malachi, in that passage we studied a few weeks ago. In Malachi 2:14, the prophet says that, ***"...the Lord has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant."*** In that passage, God specifically condemns the man who leaves ***"the wife of his youth."*** So we have a specific reminder here: God is extremely upset, even when we break a covenant that we make in our ***"youth."*** Again, time itself does not fix a relationship that is adulterous at the beginning.

III. Some have asked: DOESN'T PAUL GIVE ANOTHER WAY OUT IN 1 CORINTHIANS 7?

We don't have time to go too deep into 1 Corinthians 7 this morning. Hopefully we will have a chance to study this passage in greater detail at some point in the future, but I would invite you to turn with me at least briefly to 1 Corinthians 7, and I want us to notice 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 (p. 1789). In that passage, Paul says, ***"But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife."*** Just a few brief observations here: First of all, as I understand it, Paul doesn't use the normal word for "divorce" in this passage. Instead, he refers (literally) to the husband ***"leaving"*** (at the end of verse 11), that the husband should not ***"leave his wife."*** And when we look at these two verses, we understand that Paul is actually speaking of something closer to the modern-day equivalent of a separation. The command is: Married people should not leave each other, but if they do leave, if they do separate, they have two choices: Either 1.) ***"remain unmarried,"*** or 2.) ***"be reconciled"*** (or come back together). So, if they separate, they need to either stay single or get back together at some point. We cannot miss this: In this passage, Paul specifically condemns remarriage.

I want to share an opinion here, and that is: We (as a culture) are too quick to overlook the possibility of a temporary separation. I hope this observation makes sense to you. I've been walking people through these passages for more than 25 years now, and many times people think they only have two options: 1.) Stay in this miserable relationship (miserable due to financial issues, or drug abuse, or even emotional or physical abuse, or any number of other terrible things), or 2.) Get divorced for a reason that is not allowed by God. There is another option, and that is: A temporary separation. Get out of the terrible situation, but as Paul says here: Either stay single or work through those issues with the goal of eventually getting back together.

Beyond this, I have included a good article in the handout that addresses 1 Corinthians 7 in a more comprehensive way than we have time to do this morning. I've also included a recent article from *Gospel Advocate* on the question of whether someone can divorce a wife who has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. There are some who are suggesting this, and this article addresses that issue. Ultimately, though, Paul in no way overrules Jesus' teaching here.

IV. As we come to the end of our time together, I would mention that many people simply say, "MATTHEW 19:9 JUST DOESN'T APPLY TO ME."

And there are at least two main ideas that come into play here. Some will say that since this passage is in the New Testament, that it only applies to Christians. Since it is in the "New Covenant," those who are not yet under the New Covenant are not restricted by this passage, and so, "This verse doesn't apply to me." Some have suggested that you can be married a hundred times, but when you come to know the Lord, you "love the one you're with," and that divorce and remarriage is not a sin at all until you are a Christian. The other main idea is that this passage actually belongs in the Old Testament. As some of you know, we had a man who was a member of the church here a number of years ago who taught that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John actually belong in the Old Testament. You know that white page between Malachi and Matthew? He said that it really needs to be in Acts 2. So, in his view, everything in the four gospel accounts actually belongs in the Old Testament. And so, the gospel accounts do not apply to us today. All that we are governed by in the church can be found in Acts 2 through the end of the Bible.

Obviously, there are all kinds of problems with this theory. One is: When you get rid of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, you get rid of a lot of pretty important stuff, don't you? You not only get rid of Matthew 19:9 (which

was his goal all along), but you also get rid of the Golden Rule (in Matthew 7:12), you get rid of the entire Sermon on the Mount, you get rid of all of the miracles, you get rid of all of the parables, you get rid of the entire life of Jesus.

What we need to realize is: Yes, those words Jesus spoke in the four gospel accounts were spoken before the cross; however, those words were not written down until well into the Christian age. The book of Matthew, for example, was most likely written in the mid-60's AD, more than 30 years into the Christian Age. So that means that Matthew was writing words that didn't really apply to those who read them for the first time? Does that mean that he wrote words that don't really apply to us today? That makes no sense.

In our discussions on this issue, we asked: If non-Christians are not subject to the Law of Christ as laid out in the four gospel accounts, then exactly what are they guilty of? We talk about "repentance," so the question is: Repent of what? His answer was that non-Christians today are actually guilty of violating the "moral law of God, as embodied in the Ten Commandments." And we had a huge discussion on that issue: Are non-Christians today guilty of violating the Ten Commandments? I remember asking, "The guy across the street here, is he guilty of not keeping the Sabbath? Is he going to hell because he doesn't keep the Sabbath?" He never had an answer to that question, because that is a ridiculous position. In reality, the Law of Moses was only given to the Jewish people. This bizarre theory was concocted in order to get rid of Matthew 19:9. Somebody showed us an email after the fact that admitted as much. He just wouldn't admit it publicly at the time. But his mission all along was to make Matthew 19:9 disappear.

The answer to this objection is actually quite simple. We really only need to go back and actually read the verse. To whom does this verse apply? Jesus answers that, doesn't he? There is a key word in verse 9, the word **"whoever."** In Matthew 19:9, Jesus applies this to **"whoever."** That's everybody! I am a **"whoever."** Everybody in this room is a **"whoever."** Our non-Christian friends and family are all **"whoevers."** Whoever chooses to get married is covered by verse 9. In fact, just a few chapters later, after his death and resurrection, Jesus would command his disciples to take this message to **"all the nations...teaching them to observe all that I commanded you"** (Matthew 28:19-20). In reality, this passage on marriage continues to be universal in its application - just like the rest of what Jesus said in Matthew (the Beatitudes, the Golden Rule, and so on).

Conclusion:

This morning, we have looked at probably four of the most common ways that people have used to try to get around what Jesus said in Matthew 19. I am thankful for your help on this, and I would welcome your comments going forward. It is a difficult passage, but as we learned last week, the difficulty is not so much in understanding it. This verse is rather straightforward. But, like many passages, the difficulty comes in obeying it.

As we close today, I want us to realize that repentance is probably the most difficult step in God's plan of salvation, and repentance will obviously be more difficult for some than others. Someone addicted to drugs or alcohol, for example, faces a difficult and ongoing struggle. Those who struggle with same-sex attraction may also have a difficult time pushing back against those feelings. And in the same way, two people who love each other who are in an adulterous relationship also face a huge decision, but we know that God's way is always best. We also know that adultery can be forgiven. We think of today's scripture reading from 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, where Paul asked the question, **"Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the**

kingdom of God. Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.” There were some people in the church in Corinth who had been fornicators, they had been adulterers, they had been thieves and drunkards, and so on, but they were washed. They repented of those sins, they turned away from those sins, and those sins were washed away in baptism.

For years, some friends of ours have done mission work in Brazil. On our very first visit to the Goodlettsville congregation, they were being sent out as missionaries. And through the years, they have discovered that it is extremely common for couples in Brazil to live together without being married. And over the past 25 years we have received regular reports with pictures, showing the difference that Jesus makes in these people’s lives. The picture here is of Chico and Claudia who studied the Bible for eight months and decided to obey the gospel. They realized, though, that to be right with God, they needed to get married. They knew that baptism would not fix what they now understood to be living in sin with each other. So, they went to the courthouse and got married. They were then immediately immersed in water for the forgiveness of their sins and were added by God to his family, the church. This happens over and over again - a Bible study, followed by a wedding at the courthouse, followed by a baptism.

This morning, we are also looking for people with honest hearts who are willing to do whatever is necessary to turn from sin and to obey the gospel. Jesus died for our sins, he was buried, and he was raised up from the dead. We do what he did by allowing ourselves to die to sin, we are then buried briefly in water, and we are brought up to live a new life. For some, that is a far more drastic process than it is for others. In some cases, as we have learned from Matthew 19, it might involve getting out of a relationship, even something we might describe as a marriage. For some, repentance will involve living a celibate life. For some, like Chico and Claudia, repentance might involve getting married. But 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