

Marriage & Divorce

Matthew 19:1-15

Jesus has been in the northern region of Galilee since chapter four. He was born in Bethlehem of Judea, but under threat of murder, His parents fled to Egypt and stayed there until Herod's death, fulfilling word of the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called My Son" (Matt. 2:14-15; Hos. 11:1). Matthew shows us that Jesus is the new Israel. He is baptized, sojourns in the wilderness, and ministers in Galilee away from the violence of Herod. Peter Leithart points out that Jesus has been like Elijah and Elisha in the northern part of the divided kingdom (cf. 17:3), and now like Joshua begins His conquest of the promised land with multitudes around Him (v. 2). Like Jeremiah who announced God's divorce of Israel (Jer. 3:6-10), Jesus will warn His people about the coming judgment. The question that kicks it off is whether you can divorce your wife for any reason (v. 3). Despite the adulterers asking the question and the confused disciples, Jesus gives us a vision for marriage that overcomes the world.

At the Beginning

There were two rabbinical schools of thought about divorce, the dominant one being that a man could divorce his wife for any reason (v. 3). Notice the Pharisees only speak of a man divorcing a woman, but biblical law affords a woman the right to divorce her husband for cause (Ex. 21:10-11; 1 Cor. 7:15). Rather than talk first about divorce, Jesus takes them back to the garden of Eden: "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' 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'? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate" (vv. 4-6; Gen. 1:27, 2:24). The reason why a man and woman will get married is because they are created, we might say oriented, that way. Man and woman are literally made for each other, and you know which kind of person you were made for by your biology—male or female. Before God fashions Eve, He says, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him" (v. 18). When He brings Eve to Adam, Adam speaks the first words of any human recorded in Scripture, praising His wife for what she is (Gen. 2:23). The one-flesh union refers to sexual union (cf. 1 Cor. 6:16), and when it is bound in covenant (e.g. "I will never leave nor forsake you") the result is a marriage which God has joined. To tear apart what He has joined is to break that covenant, the one made before God and the other witnesses. He made man and woman and still joins us (Gen. 2:24), and the entire thing is a picture of the marriage between Christ and His bride, the church (Eph. 5:25-33). Your marriage is not foundationally about you, the things you have in common, convenience, shared hobbies, a comfortable retirement, or even children. These things can come and go away or never happen at all. Marriage is about glorifying God by picturing the relationship between Jesus and the church. When we get this straight, there is not a greater blessing, and earthly purposes follow: helpful companionship, children, civilization, and so on. When we try to make marriage about something other than what it was designed for, as the Pharisees did, it doesn't work.

Hardness of Heart

"They said to Him, 'Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?'" Moses did give instructions on how to handle divorce, but as N.T. Wright points out, this is as different from recommending it as telling someone what to do in case of an accident is different than encouraging them to have one in the first place. Moses permitted divorce because sin—hardness of heart—resulted

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in grounds for it (Deut. 24:1-4). God required an objective “uncleanness” and a certificate to be issued in order to prevent and penalize unjustified divorce. So Jesus upholds the Mosaic law by saying “whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery” (v. 9). By far the main reason for biblically justified divorce is adultery, and the Pharisees ignored it when convenient because they were adulterers (Jn. 8:7-9). Jesus uses hyperbole in saying this is the only grounds for divorce, and exactly right—thus says the Lord. But abandonment is the other biblical grounds (Ex. 21:10-11; 1 Cor. 7:15). Hard-hearted people will “study arguments” in order to justify ungodly divorce, but Jesus says it’s adultery to divorce without grounds and adultery to marry someone who divorced someone else without grounds (v. 9). It’s a good time to remember that Jesus didn’t come to condemn but rather to comfort the repentant. He does condemn false teachers who commit and condone treachery within the marriage covenant that God established.

Let the Little Children Come

The apostles obtusely conclude from this that it is better not to marry (v. 11). They think it’s so difficult to thrive in marriage that they’d rather forgo the blessing altogether. Jesus responds that only those who have been given God’s grace can understand “this saying”—that is, the way marriage was created and blessed by God. Choosing celibacy because of a low view of marriage is not good a good option. Some eunuchs (“castrated man”) are born that way, others have been castrated by men (cf. Esth. 4:4), and some make themselves “eunuchs” for the kingdom of heaven, the way Paul encouraged people to remain single because of the present distress (1 Cor. 7:8, 26). These are hard circumstances and godly sacrifices. If you are doing missionary work in a hostile land it might be advantageous to not be married. Jesus had no wife or children, knew His mission was to die, and therefore made Himself a “eunuch” for the kingdom of God. In the old covenant, physical eunuchs were excluded from the priesthood and the assembly (Dt. 23:1; Lev. 21:20), but in the new they are told: “For thus says the Lord: ‘To the eunuchs who keep My Sabbaths, and choose what pleases Me, and hold fast My covenant, even to them I will give in My house and within My walls a place and a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off’” (Is. 52:4-5). Christ calls all of us—single, married, divorced, widowed—to Himself but gives these folks a place and an everlasting name in His house. Jesus dies naked and alone on the cross in order to become the Husband of the church and the Father of all the faithful. People bring their little kids to Jesus so He can bless and pray for them, but the disciples rebuke them (v. 13). They think He’s too important. Kids are messy, needy, challenging, expensive, exhaustive and *of the kingdom of heaven* (v. 14). He already told the disciples to imitate the faith of children, but this lesson is hard for them to learn (18:2-5). It’s hard for us too. We need to have confidence in Christ that our children will overcome the world and thus *teach them to do so*. It’s not because they are ours, but because they are His. He is not too important for them, so how could we be? This might seem unrelated to marriage, but it’s directly connected. “And why [does He make them] one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth” (Mal. 2:15).