

QUESTIONS ABOUT MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

Matthew 19:3-12

The topic of marriage and divorce is the subject matter of this particular lesson. The study is complicated by the fact that there are difficult expressions and ideas in the passage, and that there are many other passages to correlate, and that this is a constant problem in life that is constantly being debated. There is no chapter in the Bible that is a complete treatise on the subject; rather, there are individual discussions of parts of the topic that came up in certain settings. The student of the Bible should not simply take one passage (that may say what he or she wants to say on the whole subject) and make that the total teaching; there must be correlation with the other passages to harmonize the material. In this passage Jesus sets forth several truths that lie behind all teachings on marriage and divorce, so it is fundamental.

This chapter demonstrates the two essential points to be kept in mind in the development of this and other topics--the ideal and the practical. The ideal is simply what God intended from creation: **one man and one woman united for their whole life to produce a Godly seed.** Anything short of that, for any reason, is a failure to measure up to God's standard, a falling short of the will of God--in other words, a sin.

But there is also the practical--**people do break up their marriages and marry again.** How are we to respond to this and deal with it in the life of the Church? The fact that divorce was permitted in both Testaments, as we shall see, indicates that people failed to live up to the revealed will of God. And the permitting of divorce did not in any way bring with it the approval and blessing of God. Rather, those whose marriages failed had to find spiritual restoration and healing before they could move forward in their walk with God. It would be foolish to enter a second marriage without trying to sort out and deal with what went wrong in the first.

So in this passage we will look at these two aspects, the ideal that God set forth, and the practical that must deal with the problems.

Reading the Text

³ Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"

⁴ "Haven't you ever read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' ⁵ and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and his mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'?" ⁶ So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no man separate."

⁷ “Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”

⁸ Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. ⁹ I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

¹⁰ The disciples said to him, “If this is the situation between a husband and a wife, it is better not to marry.”

¹¹ Jesus replied, “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. ¹² For some are eunuchs because they were born that way. Others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”

Observations on the Text

The section of Matthew that begins with this passage in 19 and ends with the events of the crucifixion is filled with mounting opposition. The ideas of Jesus and his enemies are poles apart, and there is no hope for reconciliation between them, apart from the repentance and conversion of the religious leaders. They are on a collision course, the religious leaders wanting to get rid of Jesus, and Jesus knowing he came to die at their hands. But in his teachings Jesus brought mercy and grace, promise and hope--to those who believed in him and had become members of the messianic people. Those who rejected the Messiah could only look forward to judgment.

There is no miracle in this passage, no mighty work that Jesus did to authenticate his claims. No, he has done that through his word and his works. Now he will teach with authority on themes of the kingdom, showing how very different the kingdom of heaven is compared with earthly realms. This passage is then a teaching passage.

The passage is arranged with three questions, a lead question, a follow-up question, and then an implied question; and the substance of the passage is the teaching of Jesus in response to these questions. First, there is the question by the Pharisees about divorce (v. 3), and Jesus’ answer that God the Creator did not include the dissolution of marriage as a viable option (vv. 4-6). Second, there is the follow-up question about Moses’ permitting people to divorce (v. 7), and Jesus’ answer that divorce was permitted because of sin, and that divorce is a sin (vv. 8, 9). Third, there is the disciples’ cynical observation in a questioning way that it would be better not to marry (v. 10), and Jesus’ answer that a special measure of grace is required for people to abstain from marriage (vv. 11, 12).

The difficulties in this passage are: Jesus’ exception clause on the subject, and the meaning of the word he used (translated “marital unfaithfulness” in the NIV); the equation of divorce with adultery, and the “eunuch sayings” of Jesus.

On the whole, the teaching about the ideal for marriage is not hard to understand--it is the plan of creation. And, as some have observed, if everyone lived right there would be no questions of interpretation about divorce. But there are, and so we must consider the circumstances and the consequences of falling short of God's will.

There are two Old Testament passages referred to in the passage, the first the creation of Adam and Eve, and the second Moses' ruling on divorce. It will be easier to discuss these within the flow of the passage, and so they will be included there and not here. But in studying this passage you would have to go back and study the Old Testament passages being used in order to get the full impact.

The Interpretation of the Text

I. The Divine Plan for Marriage (19:3-6).

The first section of the passage then records Jesus' answer to the Pharisees' question about divorce. There is the question in verse 3, and the answer in verses 4-6.

A. *Question: Is it lawful to divorce for any and every reason?* This question comes from the Pharisees as a test, and that is no surprise because throughout the book they are seen challenging Jesus. The Pharisees, you may recall, were not what we would call clergy, but were devout religious men who sought to guide the people in obedience to the Law of Moses. They believed in the elements of the historic faith, resurrection, angels, and miracles; and they stressed ritual purity, tithing, and separation. As a result they were very legalistic and therefore hypocritical as well. They were deeply troubled by Jesus at first, but then many of them became hardened against him and sought to destroy him. Not all Pharisees were this way, but apparently those in power were. They were shrewd in their dealings, and fully capable of bringing an innocent sounding question to Jesus that had hidden traps.

Here they raise the age-old question about divorce to test him. They wanted to see how he would answer the question, to see if he would say something that would ruin his reputation before the people by contradicting Moses, or even involve him in the Herod-Herodias affair so that he too might be arrested and taken away from them. They hoped that Jesus would quickly lose favor with the people.

The question is about the legality of divorce in general, but it is worded to reflect current debates: "for any and every reason." The phrase refers to the major debate in Judaism over divorce between the famous teachers Hillel and Shammai, and their disciples. Both these schools permitted divorce, but for different reasons; and both based

their teachings on the same verse of the Bible. Deuteronomy 24:1 ruled that divorce was permissible for “some unseemly thing.” The latter expression in Hebrew is literally “the nakedness of a thing” [*erwat dabar*]. Shammai and his students emphasized the first word, the nakedness, and said the divorce was only for indecency. They did not all agree on what that indecency might be, because the word “nakedness” can be a broad term, or can figuratively refer to many things. It probably referred to any profane and lewd conduct or life style that was ruining the marriage. It would not refer to adultery, for the punishment there was death, not divorce. Shammai also permitted remarriage when the divorce did not correspond to their own rules of conduct.

On the other hand, Hillel and his followers took a more lenient view of the reason for divorce; they focused on the word “thing” and said divorce could be granted for almost anything. They had limits, but they allowed divorce for a number of reasons. And so the question was one that the Pharisees had been debating for some time, to no resolution, and they decided this was a good question to use to test Jesus. The background of their debates explains why they ask “for any and every reason.” There were clearly teachers who permitted divorce for almost any reason.

B. Answer: Divorce is out of harmony with the divine will (vv. 4-6). Jesus’ answer does not line up with the loose interpretation of Hillel or the more strict view of Shammai exactly. But Jesus did restrict divorce to sexual misconduct.

Jesus refers to Scripture to make his case, as did the prophet Malachi before him (Mal. 2:10-16). Jesus quoted Genesis 1:17 to affirm that God made male and female with the implication that they would be joined together, and then he quoted Genesis 2:24 to remind everyone that the two would be one flesh. Genesis explained, “For this reason, a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and the two of them become one flesh.” The word “flesh” in the Old Testament passage does not just mean sexual union, but a union of their lives--their hopes, dreams, ambitions, plans, and sexual activity. They would become one in every sense; and to destroy that ruined more than a sexual union. Thus, in every marriage, the unity of man and woman is a re-enactment of the design of God for creation. Jesus draws the conclusion from this that if God joined the two together, they are one by God’s will. Divorce, then, goes contrary to the design of the creator, and is to be considered the sin of rebellion because it tears apart what God was putting together.

The principles that Jesus laid down here cannot be lost in the endless discussions of situations and circumstances of divorce. First, **marriage is sacred because God ordained the unity of the couple**, the man and the woman, as one flesh. **Second, because marriage is grounded in creation it cannot be defined merely in the terms of the marriage agreement a man and a woman make.** Some might argue that when two get married they make a covenant, and then if the covenant promises are broken the marriage can legitimately be dissolved. It may be dissolved, of course, but if it is it still violates the will of God. What this passage will teach is that we must recognize marriage for what it is--the plan of the creator to unite a man and a woman together as one flesh;

and we therefore must recognize divorce for what it is--either rebellion against or failure to fulfill the will of God, not a violation of the agreement two humans made.

II. The Permission to Divorce (19:7-9)

A. Question: Why then was divorce permitted? (v. 7). The Pharisees then come back with a follow-up question: if divorce is a violation of the will of the creator, then why did Moses permit it? They word it this way: “Why did Moses command that a man give his wife a bill of divorce and send her away?” But a careful reading of Deuteronomy 24:1 shows that Moses did not command them to divorce, but allowed for it for some “indecent thing.” Moses actually ruled that if a man married, and the woman did not find favor in his sight, and he divorced her, and her second husband did the same thing, then she could not return to the first husband. So in the discussion in Deuteronomy, divorce and remarriage are presupposed for the ruling about marrying the first husband again. In other words, divorce and remarriage were allowed, but not commanded. The pious would seek ways to restore the marriage, but if it did not work, then there was permission to divorce.

B. Answer: Divorce is evidence of sin (vv. 8, 9). Matthew’s account of this interchange differs slightly from the way that Mark reports it (10:2-9). Matthew is more interested in the ideas that are being offered than in who said what first. Both Matthew and Mark present the clear teaching of Jesus that divorce did not reflect the true plan of creation but the hardness of the human heart. Moses permitted divorce because it is preferred over sinful indecency. The fact that a divorce was granted did not specify that the one divorcing the guilty partner was committing a sin, but rather that it was evidence that sin had already taken place and was destroying the marriage. Divorce was not, and is not, a God-ordained, morally neutral option; it is evidence of sin and of hardness of heart (refusal to obey).

But what is the “indecent thing” that is the reason for dissolving a marriage? We already noted that it would not be adultery, for the normal punishment for adultery was death (Deut. 22:22). Adultery was the destruction of a marriage--in other words, it usually involved sexual intercourse with someone married to someone else. Whether they actually put adulterers to death is beside the point--the law would not legislate a different punishment here for it. Here divorce is the permitted action for the indecent thing. In Deuteronomy the “nakedness of a thing” would have referred to any lewd, immoral behavior that made a mockery of the marriage. For such things divorce was allowed--but not commanded.

Jesus summarizes the law with an exception clause: “except for marital unfaithfulness” (NIV). The word that he uses is Greek *porneia*. It is usually translated “fornication.” The term was used for all kinds of lewd and immoral acts, such as prostitution, homosexuality, public indecency, and the like. So Jesus is making the ruling in Moses more specific; he agrees with Moses that divorce is permitted because of the hardness of heart, but he affirms that it may only be granted on the grounds of sexual sins (*porneia* seems to refer to sexual sins persisted in, that is, the guilty party has chosen a

perverse form of conduct or life-style and is not concerned about preserving the sanctity of the marriage). If sexual unity in marriage was the plan of the creator, then sexual promiscuity is not in harmony with it. It may not necessitate divorce (depending on the way the couple can work it out), but permission for divorce under such circumstances was in harmony with the will of the creator to make sure that the marriages were pure. Divorce was the lesser of the two problems.

Thus, Jesus is very clear here: there is no divorce permitted if the grounds for that divorce are extended beyond what the law allowed, divorce based on sexual violation of the marriage. In summary, then, Jesus and Moses permitted divorce if one party (or both) were involved in immoral, indecent conduct that made a mockery out of the marriage. In such cases if there was no chance of repentance and change, divorce was permitted. It would still be a failure to fulfill the will of God, and so the divorced person, even if considered the innocent party, would have to own that failure before finding a new start with God's blessing.

This is why Jesus explains that the repercussions are severe: anyone who divorces his wife for any illegitimate reason and marries another commits adultery. In other words, the legitimate grounds for divorce would dissolve the marriage because the indecency had already occurred. But if the divorce is for other reasons, then the sexual union in the remarriage is the indecency that destroys God's plan for marriage.

III. The Issue of Celibacy (19:10-12)

A. Observation: It would be better not to marry (v. 10). The response of the disciples and Jesus' further teachings are also difficult to explain in this passage. Jesus has come close to the teaching of Shammai, but restricted the ruling to who may remarry legitimately. The disciples simply respond to these strictures by observing that it would be better not to get married at all. Their words indicate that they--and many people like them--thought that marriage would be more appealing if it were easier to dissolve than this. In this observation they have focused on the strictures, and failed to understand what Jesus said about creation.

B. Answer: Celibacy is not for everyone (19:11, 12). Jesus responds to the disciples' cynical comment by saying that not everyone can accept this word (i.e., the idea that it is better not to marry), except those to whom it has been given. Not everyone can abstain from marriage, but some do. He refers in general to those eunuchs who were born that way, or who were castrated (court officials who would be too close to the royal harem).

Then there are those who make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of God. Jesus is not promoting castration, not by any means (mutilation of the body was totally against Jewish law); but he was speaking of the renunciation of marriage for a higher purpose--the kingdom of God. In other words, sexual fulfillment in marriage is not the only option for life (some folks in the church might think that a single person is not fulfilling the will of God, and that is naive and simplistic). Jesus and Paul later (1 Cor.

7:7-9) commended celibacy for the sake of the kingdom--not as a means to achieve the kingdom, but because of the claims and interests of the kingdom. If people were able to devote full time to the kingdom of God, they had the gift of celibacy; if they could not do that, it was better to marry than to burn with passion. So not everyone could accept the position that it was better not to marry. Moreover, neither Jesus nor Paul see celibacy as a more holy condition than marriage, nor as a condition for the clergy; it was a special calling for some who were to serve different purposes in the kingdom than others, purposes that did not include sexual gratification in marriage. If someone has been given the gift and calling of celibacy, then it should be accepted and the work of the kingdom should dominate the life.

Concluding Observations

There are many other passages in the New Testament on the issue of divorce, and these would have to be studied and then correlated with this passage to develop a full teaching on the subject. But in this passage we can certainly see the basic issues that can never be set aside.

1. Marriage was ordained by God in creation; it was the union of one man and one woman, known as one flesh, to produce a godly seed (as Malachi explains it). God put them together. No one could say, even in an unhappy marriage, that God did not put them together. That is simply a dodge for the real issue of what marriage and the marriage union is all about. What God has joined together no one must separate.

2. Divorce and remarriage were permitted in Israel by the law, and that exception to the preservation of marriage was also accepted by Jesus. Marital infidelity, probably lewd and immoral behavior, and sexual activity that ruined the marriage anyway, was the grounds for divorce. But the divorce was not a God-ordained, morally neutral act; it was the destruction of the plan of God, a rebellion against the will of God, and a failure to measure up to the divine standard. It was the lesser of two evils. Divorce may be necessary at times, but it is still considered a violation of God's will, and therefore is wrong. Of course, a related topic is what marriage involves, and how many marriages have already gone through a psychological divorce. But that is another issue that needs to be addressed elsewhere.

3. If anyone divorces for illegitimate reasons, and marries someone else, then that new sexual union is the immoral act that dissolves the first marriage, i.e., it is committing adultery. Elsewhere the text goes so far as to say that if a man divorces his wife and she marries again, he has caused her to commit adultery. In other words, divorce was permitted for sexual violation of the marriage (originally it did not refer to adultery because that had a death penalty, but today adultery would certainly be considered a sexual violation of the marriage); no other grounds were legitimate. To end a marriage and remarry then was the violation.

4. The natural response to the strict ruling for marriage focuses on the difficulty of implementing it in a culture that allows divorce for any and every reason. The believer

should not fall into that trap, but should keep in mind the divine will of the creator in establishing what the marriage was all about. Believers are to live above the curse, the world, and sin, and try to live life as God intended it.

5. Celibacy is a gift. This is celibacy, not singleness (some, even in the clergy, remain single but do not remain celibate--they are just avoiding the responsibility and formality of marriage). Those who are given this gift then may remain single and devote all their energy to the kingdom of God. But they are not intrinsically more holy than those who marry and raise a family for the glory of God.

One would have to add that the Bible makes it clear that all sins can be forgiven, even the lewd, immoral acts referred to here. There must be confession, and repentance (which involves a change) of there is to be reconciliation with God. And divorce should also be included in things that need to be confessed, because divorce is the violation of God's will. Even an innocent party in a divorce, although not the one who is the cause necessarily, needs to acknowledge participation in a failed marriage if there is going to be a spiritual healing and going forth with God to better things. It is just good therapy to own such things, deals with them, find healing, and start a new life with God's blessings. A person who has been stigmatized by divorce need not live as a guilty sinner throughout life, even though the churches often make them feel that way. Everyone in the Church has been forgiven and has found a new life by God's grace. And while the Church must communicate forgiveness for all who truly confess, the Church must also teach that the standard of God for marriage is high. It is a balance that the Church has to have in all areas: it must proclaim the truth of God's plan, but when people fail it must proclaim forgiveness and reconciliation. After all, the Church is all about putting people's lives back together.

So then, (1) the Church must teach those who are about to marry all about the divine plan of marriage and its sanctity; (2) if there is a moral violation in the marriage and the couple want to keep the marriage together, they should do all they can to reconcile and heal their marriage; (3) if one party does not want to preserve the sanctity of the marriage, but remains set in improper conduct, then divorce is permitted; (4) anyone who divorces must acknowledge that this too is part of failing to live up to the revealed will of God; (5) any who confess this failure and seek help in getting through it (the guilty of course must repent and change), will be able to go on with their lives in the service of God; (6) but any who divorce for illegitimate reasons and remarry are guilty of adultery because they have destroyed God's institution of marriage by their sexual misconduct.

These are hard sayings today because the culture is so careless about marriage. And many marry thinking that if it does not work out they can always divorce. The Church must hold the line on marriage; and it also must proclaim that for failure there is forgiveness and reconciliation and healing. And that proclamation we all need to hear again and again.