

## Is Divorce Okay?

Matthew 19:1-12

Mark Vroegop

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Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. 2 And large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. 3 And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" 4 He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 5 and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh'? 6 So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." 7 They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" 8 He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. 9 And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."

10 The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." 11 But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. 12 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" (Matt 19:1-12).

One of the reasons that our regular preaching diet at College Park is walking verse by verse through a book of the Bible is that it forces us to deal with difficult and challenging passages and themes. The other way of preaching isn't necessarily bad, but I think it is generally more helpful to walk through a book because you are forced to deal with uncomfortable or hard passages.

Honestly, there are a lot of things I love to speak on, some things that I will speak on, and then there are those subjects that I groan when I see them coming up in the preaching calendar. I groan, not because I don't have anything to say, but because there are certain subjects on which **everyone** has an opinion. I groan because there are certain subjects which illicit **strong emotions**. I groan because there are certain subjects that are deeply **personal**.

Talking about divorce is loaded because it combines everything I just mentioned. Everyone has an opinion; there are often strong emotions; and this is a deeply personal subject. I would suspect that every person who hears this message has been affected in some way by divorce. And while the circumstances that led to the divorce may be incredibly different, every situation was, no doubt, marked by a common denominator: an enormous amount of pain.

So let me say from the outset that I don't want to add the pain to anyone's life, and yet it is important to know what God's word says about this very relevant and deeply personal subject.

## Questions and Clarifications

Divorce was a controversial subject in Jesus's day as it is in ours. The subject was addressed by Jesus out of necessity because the religious rulers were trying to trap him by asking him to take a position on this difficult issue. Jesus, according to verses 1-2, moved closer to Jerusalem ("the region of Judea beyond the Jordan"), and there were still large crowds following him. The Pharisees's questions were undoubtedly an attempt to marginalize Jesus by asking him to give his opinion on such a divisive issue.

Our text presents Jesus with two very challenging questions from the Pharisees and a clarification from the disciples:

- "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" (19:3)
- "Why did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce?" (19:7)
- "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." (19:10)

With each question, Jesus provides further detail regarding how one should view this important and difficult subject. Let's see what he says.

### Question #1: Is it lawful to divorce for any cause?

The Pharisees come to Jesus with the intention of testing or trapping him by asking him to share his views on divorce. The word that is translated as "test" is also translated as "tempt" in other passages in the New Testament (see Mark 1:13, Luke 4:2, and Gal 6:1). This is yet another attempted to peel off followers of Jesus by making him even more controversial. Their question was open-ended: "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" And it was loaded.

Divorce during the time of Christ was based upon an interpretation of Deuteronomy 24 which said, *"When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house..."* The controversy surrounded how one interpreted and applied "finds no favor...because he found some indecency in her."

There were two well-known views, represented by two rabbis or schools of thought. The first view, advocated by Rabbi Hillel, took the phrase "because of some indecency" to mean virtually anything that a man found unsatisfactory. This position allowed for divorce in nearly any case

including if a wife spoiled her husband's dinner or if he found someone else more attractive.<sup>1</sup> The other position, advocated by Rabbi Shammai, was far more restrictive and understood the phrase "because of some indecency" to refer to sexual sin or adultery. This discussion would have been a cultural minefield to navigate since everyone would have an opinion, and Jesus would surely have upset some group of people. It was a nasty trap.

Verses 4-6 record Jesus's answer to this trick question; he made three important points:

### **1) Marriage – the union between a man and a woman – was designed by God**

Jesus began his answer by appealing to creation, taking people back to the original plan and purpose of God. In doing so he used a rabbinic method of argument called "the more original, the weightier."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, he took them back to the beginning, and he appealed to the simple fact that male, femaleness and marriage were God's idea and his plan. Marriage was not a human invention nor is it simply the description of two loving, monogamous human beings. Marriage was God's idea, and in the midst of all the questions about marriage, divorce, remarriage, and now civil unions and same-sex marriage Jesus clearly established something very important: to mess with marriage is to mess with God's plan.

### **2) The one flesh union is sacred and special**

Next Jesus moved from the institutional idea of marriage to what I'll call the metaphysical reality of marriage. He quoted Genesis 2:24 which said, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." That passage indicated that marriage created a new relationship and identity that was separate and unique from the relationship between parents and a child. The tense of the verbs "leave" and "hold fast" indicated strong and decisive action.<sup>3</sup>

But it was the use of the phrase "one flesh" that really stands out, and it was this concept that captures what I mean by a metaphysical reality. Jesus pointed out here that something really special, something divinely designed happens in the union of two people. There is something more than the institution of marriage and something more than sexual activity. "The joining of a man and a woman is so profound that the joining creates a third reality in the world: one-flesh marriage."<sup>4</sup> And this union is both sacred and special. In fact, it is so special that in 1 Corinthians 6:15-20, Paul rebukes people for their loose sexual morals by telling them that sexual activity outside of God's plan (in their case union with temple prostitutes) doesn't fit with this beautiful and powerful reality. The one flesh union is sacred and spiritual.

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<sup>1</sup> Leon Morris, The Gospel According to Matthew, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 480.

<sup>2</sup> Morris, 481.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Brunner, Matthew, A Commentary, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 253.

We live in a culture that would want to convince us otherwise and tell us that there are no real consequences to violations of this one-flesh, marriage union. Whether it is immoral behavior before or during marriage, the prevailing mentality is that sexual promiscuity is normal and relatively harmless. But that couldn't be further from the truth. God has designed both marriage and physical intimacy in marriage to create a powerful third reality – a one-flesh union – that speaks to the very essence of what the triune God is like. Sexual activity involves a very important part of who you are: physical union brings metaphysical communion.<sup>5</sup> In other words, you give a deeply personal part of yourself in this union, and the only safe place to do so is in Christ-centered marriage. Immorality may seem appealing at first, but you leave a part of your soul behind. Immorality may seem like the norm in our culture, but it is not the norm in God's plan. The breakup of a marriage or the pain of sexual sin creates an unnatural and extremely painful tearing of a union that God has put together. Jesus said all of this to cut through the human tendency to downplay marriage and underestimate the real power of the one-flesh union. The one flesh union is sacred and special.

### **3) Marriage is designed to be permanent**

Jesus said all of this so that he can make one point very clear: God intends for marriage to be permanent. Jesus even repeated the one flesh statement and added a warning: *"So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."* (Matt 19:6-7) In other words marriage creates a new reality, a special reality, a permanent reality. God designed life to be this way, and human beings should tremble at the thought of messing around with God's plan. There is more at stake here and more in play here than what we see or think. Jesus is addressing the culturally cavalier attitude about sexual sin and divorce. The problem is not divorce; the problem is not fully appreciating or respecting the power of this union that God calls one flesh.

That is where Jesus left his answer to their first question. He appealed all the way back to the Garden of Eden, emphasizing the powerful and permanent relationship of the one-flesh union in marriage. He really didn't answer their question. And he did so with a purpose. He wanted to push his readers back to the more foundational issues of what is really at stake here because it can become too easy to accept certain things because they are so culturally common. Jesus takes us back to what God's original design and purpose is all about because if we are not careful we'll spend more time talking about the possible reasons for a divorce rather than thinking about the beauty of what God intended this one-flesh union to be. He highlighted the beauty, mystery, and permanence of the "one-flesh" marriage union. However, the Pharisees are less than satisfied. They press him again.

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<sup>5</sup> Bruner, 253.

## **Question #2: Why did Moses command us to give a certificate of divorce?**

Obviously Jesus's answer did not answer the loaded question from the Pharisees so they asked him directly about the relevance of Deuteronomy 24:1 in which Moses gave instructions about how to handle matters related to divorce. Here's what the entire passage says:

*When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, 2 and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, 3 and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, 4 then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the Lord. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance (Deut 24:1-4).*

Jesus answers this question in verses 8-9 with two key points:

### **1) Divorce regulates injustice from hardened hearts**

This is a very important point which stems from why Deuteronomy 24 was written. The reason for the case law given by Moses was to prevent injustice from happening, particularly against women. It seems that it was not that uncommon for a man to decide that he no longer wanted his wife around, and therefore he could merely "send her away." However if he did so, she would not be eligible for marriage because legally she was his wife. Additionally, there would be a great amount of suspicion about her. Without being married she was destined to a very difficult if not impossible life. So the purpose of divorce (and this is very important to keep in mind) was to be sure that the sinful actions of a hard-hearted spouse (usually a husband) didn't create a great injustice. Divorce, therefore, was designed to regulate something created by the sinful actions of others. Therefore, not all divorce is sinful, but every divorce happens because of sin. That is why God can both hate divorce (Malachi 2:15-16), allow it as a regulation, and even use it to rebuke the nation of Israel (Isaiah 50:1).

So the real problem is not divorce; the real problem is a hard heart. Divorce was an attempt to deal with the great injustice of a person who could care less about the effect their actions upon someone who they supposedly loved and to whom they used to be committed. Divorce, while undesirable, prevents the greater injustice of people making marriage covenants, treating each other with contempt, and creating new relationships without dealing with the former relationship. No one wins in a divorce; it is not God's original design; and yet it is allowed because of hard hearts. Divorce is a moral guardrail against a greater injustice caused by hard hearts. Divorce is not the problem; hard hearts are the problem.

## 2) Divorce and remarriage are allowed in the case sexual sin

Jesus took the discussion deeper, addressing the issue of sexual immorality as an appropriate basis for divorce and remarriage. He uses the Greek word *pornei* which is not the normal word that is used for adultery. *Porneia* has a wide range of mean to include various forms of sexual sin which is why the ESV renders it as "sexual immorality." Therefore, he clearly came down on the side of Rabbi Shammai with two major qualifications: 1) this is not the way God wanted it to be, and 2) this is only because of the hardness of your hearts.

Of course this doesn't mean that divorce or remarriage **have** to happen. Jesus's teaching here identifies a legitimate path, but we have to always keep two truths in our minds when it comes to this "exception clause." First, we ought to always hope for the possibility of forgiveness and restoration. A repentant person can be forgiven and reconciliation can be a beautiful thing, even when it involves something as heinous and painful as sexual sin. Secondly, we should recognize that sexual sin, while able to be forgiven, is extremely serious. Proverbs 5:32-33 says, "He who commits adultery lacks sense; he who does it destroys himself. Wounds and dishonor will he get, and his disgrace will not be wiped away." Forgiveness is possible, but you can never fully restore what was lost. Our culture would say that it is just sex, but the Bible says that there is something more here. Sexual immorality creates a tearing of the one-flesh union; it is a deep wound to the marriage, it breaks the marriage covenant, and it would give the innocent spouse grounds to legally end a marriage that has already been broken by sexual sin. Again let me say that his doesn't have to happen, but it could. So I would argue that while divorce is bad, sexual sin is far worse, and a part of me wonders if we really see the one flesh union like we should. Further, I wonder if the scales have tipped too far in regards to our negative view of divorce such that we view divorce as worse than sexual sin. It seems to me that divorce merely recognizes and brings to legal conclusion what sexual sin has created.

That opens up another challenging question. Is sexual sin the only justifiable reason for divorce or remarriage? Now it is important to note here that the issue is not just divorce. The issue is divorce and remarriage. In both Matthew 5 and 19, it is remarriage that creates the additional sin issue: "And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." Therefore it is my view that sexual immorality is the one area that clearly allows for both divorce and remarriage. There might be other scenarios (e.g., abuse) where divorce may be reluctantly allowed but it would seem that remarriage is not. For instance, Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:10 says this:

*10 To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband  
11 (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband  
should not divorce his wife.*

Later on in 1 Corinthians 7:15 Paul addresses what should happen when an unbeliever leaves the marriage: "But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother

or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.” Therefore, it is my view that the believer would be free after a divorce to remarry. However, they could only marry “in the Lord.” (1 Cor. 7:39).

I realize that this is a lot of material to digest, so let me summarize it for you:

- God intended marriage to be a permanent, one-flesh relationship between a man and a woman
- Forgiveness and restoration of a marriage should be the ultimate goal
- Divorce was instituted to regulate the hard-hearted, unjust treatment of spouses, particularly women
- Divorce and remarriage should be seen as two distinct issues
- Sexual immorality and abandonment by an unbeliever would be grounds for divorce and remarriage
- Divorce for other significant injustices (e.g., abuse) may be allowed but it seems that person is to remain unmarried.

If we have handled this passage right, then this thought should cross your mind: “Wow, if divorce and remarriage are that limited, then one should really think carefully about getting married.” If we never think that, then I’m not sure we have the teaching of Jesus right because that was the very response of his disciples. They were shocked and alarmed.

### **Question #3 – Is it better to not marry?**

The disciples said to Jesus, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” Based upon Jesus’s teaching they could foresee that there would be some marriages that would be very unhappy even potentially miserable, but there would be no easy way to find another partner. A world of limited divorce and remarriage would, in their view, create a great deal of caution in getting married. Jesus had elevated marriage and restricted divorce and remarriage such that they wondered if singleness was better.

Jesus responds with a statement that affirms the value of singleness. He, like Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:6-8, identifies singleness as something very positive although not necessarily more spiritual than marriage. Notice how Jesus connects singleness to the idea of a special gifting from God:

“Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. 12 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” (Matt 19:11-12).

Jesus doesn't say that it is better not to marry, but he does affirm the value of singleness in a world that is riddled with ruined marriages. It seems that Jesus wants his followers to think very clear carefully about the nature and the permanence of marriage. And he wants them to realize that singleness would be far better than a life-long bad marriage. Jesus clearly wants to make the point that the one flesh union and commitment in marriage are sacred.

### **Implications of this Passage**

This particular scripture is in the Bible for a reason, and I would like to close by some pastoral thoughts to four groups of people:

**To singles** – I want you to realize that your present status in life is not second best or plan B, despite how well-meaning friends or relatives treat you. Singleness can be a season with great opportunity. Better to remain single for life than to enter into a bad, sin-filled marriage. You don't have to marry, and if you do, choose very carefully.

**To the married** – I want you to really consider the sacred, one-flesh bond that marriage is. I want you to work with all your God-given might to preserve, grow, and protect your relationship with your spouse. I want you to tremble at possibility of hard-heartedness setting in as you treat your spouse as your enemy.

**To the marriage breakers** – I can only imagine that there are some here who in various ways are destroying their own marriages, the marriages of someone else, or the future marriage of a single person. And with all the authority that I have as a minister of the gospel, I want you to know that you are destroying something that God holds dear, and you will be held accountable in this life and the next.

**To the divorced** – I want you to know that you are not second-class citizens of the kingdom. I am sorry for the countless ways that you have treated like that. Divorce is painful because it acknowledges the breakdown and tearing of an important relationship in your life, and I know that if you could, you would change the circumstances that brought about the end of your marriage. I also want you to know that there is hope for you. Hope in figuring out how God wants to glorify himself through your life even as a divorced person.

Is divorce okay? Now that's tricky question – in Jesus's day and ours. Talking about this subject should make all of us grieve over the effects of sin on our world, and it should remind us how much we need the presence of Jesus in our lives, our churches, and especially our marriages.

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