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**Title: All About Marriage**

**Scripture: Matthew 19:1-10**

**Topic: Marriage as a covenant**

**Series: Knowing Jesus through Matthew**

**Occasion:**

## **All About Marriage**

**Matthew 19:1-10**

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Our church has just hosted a thousand children on our campus for Vacation Bible School. I walked around and thrilled at the adults who were giving their week, many of them taking a week of vacation from their jobs, to make VBS possible. Why does our church care about children and their families so much? Because our Owner does.

Last week Jesus affirmed children as our model for being great in the kingdom of heaven. This week he addresses their parents, as he talks about marriage. Our conversation relates to those who are married, those who care about those who are married, and those who may one day be married. That's just about all of us.

### **The permanence of marriage**

Here's the setting. The Pharisees "came to test" Jesus (v. 3a), as he proceeds ever nearer to the cross. Here is their latest question: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" (v. 3b). If he disagrees with this popular assumption, he'll lose supporters and his movement will be hurt.

But Jesus never put popularity before principle.

He reminded his questioners of Genesis 1:27: "...at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female.'" Then he quoted Genesis 2:24: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Matthew 19:5). "Leave" is the Greek for "leave behind" or abandon; "united" is the Greek word for being "glued."

He then commented: "So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate" (Mt 19:6). "Joined together" is the word for being "yoked together," as with two horses which now pull together as one. "Separate" means to "hold apart," to "take them away from each other."

Once the aircraft assembly plant has fixed the two wings of the airplane together, why would you want to separate them? If a surgeon united two dysfunctional sides of your heart, so that the organ now beats as one, who would want to tear it apart again?

Jesus' answer is a clear statement for the permanence of marriage. In God's view, those who are married have entered into a perpetual, unconditional "covenant," one they have no right to break.

Proverbs 2:17 speaks of a person "who has left the partner of her youth and ignored the covenant she made before God." "Covenant" is a word which means an unconditional relationship. Previously you were in a contract, which could be ended at any time by either party.

Now you are in a covenant "before God," meaning that your covenant was made by him. He owns the patent, as the inventor of marriage and your marriage. Only Microsoft can legally alter its Windows software. Only Ford can redesign the Ford Mustang. Only God can change or break your covenant with your spouse. The choice is not yours to make any longer.

Thus Hebrews 13:4 instructs us: "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral."

### **Questions about marriage**

Now let's consider two questions. First, why would God so decree that marriage is to be permanent? If the One who loves us so much that he would send his Son to die for our sins says that the marriage covenant is to be binding and perpetual, it must be for our good. How is this for our good? Why must you see marriage as God does, if your marriage is to be all God created it to be?

Because commitment is essential to the health of any relationship, indeed any activity of significance.

It's commitment that gets you through school, work, athletics, music, or any other challenging activity. I once took up classical guitar on my own, but quit within a month because I had made no commitment to it. But I stayed with the trumpet all through college because I was committed to playing in the band. I tried skiing once, only to discover that my knees were not made for the sport when I couldn't stop and skied over the instructor. I played tennis all through junior high, high school, and college, because I was committed to the sport.

When Janet and I were first married and I was attending Southwestern Seminary, we had so little money that when the power steering went out on my Mustang, costing \$30 to repair, I cut the belt off the unit and drove the car manually. Our dining table was an inlaid checkerboard table her grandfather had made. It was missing some checkers, so we covered it with a tablecloth. When friends came over, I learned to put my water glass in the missing checkers, so it leaned sideways and impressed everyone (but Janet). But we stayed in seminary, and in our marriage, and in fact celebrated our 25th anniversary last week, because we had made a commitment.

As we'll see in a moment, if you're in a relationship where there is no binding commitment, there will be little health and happiness. At least, not for long.

A second question: are there biblical conditions when this permanent relationship can be ended? That's the Pharisees' second question, one Jesus answers clearly: "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery" (v. 9). "Marital unfaithfulness" means adultery, sexual relations between a person and someone not his or her spouse. Such an act breaks the marriage union, rendering it null and void. Adultery is permissible grounds for divorce, because the adultery has already ended the marriage relationship.

Abandonment is a second biblical condition: "If the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace" (1 Corinthians 7:15). If a believer is married to a non-Christian, and the unbeliever deserts the marriage, the believer is innocent.

Abandonment by a believer must be considered as well. What if your spouse is a Christian but refuses to stay in your marriage? What if you want to work, to seek help

and restoration, but he or she will not? This person has misused the freedom of will given by God. The Bible forbids this divorce, but the laws of our land do not. And the Bible clearly teaches that we are not responsible for the sins of others, but only our own. If your spouse abandoned you, despite your best efforts, the fault is not yours.

Abuse is a third area we must discuss. Physical, emotional, verbal, and substance abuse are epidemic in marriages today. While the Bible nowhere addresses abuse specifically with regard to divorce, the epidemic of abuse today requires us to consider this connection. Biblical counselors recommend that an abused person separate from the spouse immediately. Get yourself and your children to safety. Seek intensive counseling. But consider divorce only as the lesser of two evils, in order to protect the abused, and only if there are no other options.

As I understand Scripture, these are the conditions under which divorce is permissible biblically: adultery, abandonment, and abuse.

Note that the Bible does not prescribe divorce even in these painful circumstances, but only permits it. Our Father can help any heart which is willing to be healed. I have seen adultery, abandonment, and abuse in the same marriage, and watched God do a miracle of healing and restoration. It's never too late for his help.

And if you've been divorced, through biblical or non-biblical circumstances, know that you are still loved unconditionally by your Father. He has wonderful plans to prosper and not to harm you, to give you hope and a future (Jeremiah 29:11). None of us is every beyond his grace.

### **The necessity of marriage**

The disciples respond to Jesus' answer with astonishment: "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry" (v. 10). Our culture clearly agrees. We have considered the permanence of marriage. Now we must discuss its necessity.

According to the 2000 census, there are 9.7 million American men and women living together outside of marriage. The number of unmarried couples living together increased 72 percent in the decade of the 90's. Only one quarter of American households are composed of married adults and their children. The conventional wisdom is that you should "try before you buy," as though you're purchasing a car and need to test-drive it first. What's wrong with such logic? Let's discuss two questions.

First, what does God's word say about sexual activity outside of marriage?

Jesus was clear: "From within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean'" (Mark 7:21-23).

Paul agreed: "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality, that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God" (1 Thessalonians 4:3-5).

This is why, "since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband" (1 Corinthians 7:2-3).

Scripture clearly teaches that all sexual relationships outside of marriage are wrong. That's true if you're dating, or engaged, or living together. He intends a man and a woman to live in the permanent covenant of marriage.

Second, how does cohabitation affect those who choose it? Our Creator knows his creation. He knows how we live best, most fully, most happily. And research has proven his word, not our culture, right on this subject.

Marriages in which the couple lived together first are 46 percent more likely to divorce than those who did not.

Annual rates of depression are more than three times higher among cohabiting couples than those who are married. Those who cohabit are much more likely to be unhappy in marriage, and much more likely to think about divorce.

Women in cohabiting relationships are more than twice as likely to suffer physical and sexual abuse as those who are married. In fact, they are nine times more likely to be killed by their partner than by their husband.

And children in cohabiting homes have significantly higher behavior problems and lower academic performance.

So God intends marriage to be a permanent covenant between a man and a woman. He blesses and encourages sexual relations within that union. In brief, this is his word on our subject.

## **Conclusion**

Where does this conversation find you today? If you're not yet married, save yourself sexually until you are. If you've already crossed that line, step back to God's word and will, and stay within his plan and purity. If you'll ask, he'll give you the strength to keep yourself pure for the person he intends to give you.

If you're married, stay within that covenant. Give yourself unconditionally to it. If adultery, abandonment, or abuse has attacked your home, seek help from God's word and people now. And start with yourself. Charles Shedd was right: "Marriage is not so much finding the right person as it is being the right person." Remember that your Father can heal any home and heart which is willing to be healed. There is always hope.

Ruth Harms Calkin sums up well, in her poem simply titled "Marriage":

*It's rough. It's tough. It's work  
Anybody who says it isn't  
Has never been married.*

*Marriage means . . .  
Grappling, aching, struggling.  
It means putting up  
With personality weaknesses  
Accepting criticism  
And giving each other freedom to fail.*

*It means sharing deep feelings  
About fear and rejection.*

*It means turning self-pity into laughter  
And taking a walk to gain control.*

*Marriage means . . .  
Gentleness and joy  
Toughness and fortitude  
Fairness and forgiveness  
And a walloping amount of sacrifice.*

*Marriage means . . .  
Learning when to say nothing  
When to keep talking  
When to push a little  
When to back off.*

*Marriage means . . .  
You are the other part of me  
I am the other part of you.  
We'll work through  
With never a thought of walking out.*

*Marriage means . . .  
Two imperfect mates  
Building permanently  
Giving totally  
In partnership with a perfect God.*

He's ready to do his part. Are you?