

From the Beginning

Matthew 19:1-12

I had the very enjoyable opportunity yesterday to attend the wedding of a young woman whom I knew very well when she was a young child and a teenager. I was her pastor. She loved the Lord then, some 25 years ago, and she loves the Lord still. Her father is an elder in that church I pastored, and they were family friends. It was a delight to witness her marriage yesterday to a young man who shares that same faith.

I mention that not simply to reminisce with you about her family and the several other good friends we enjoyed visiting with yesterday, but rather to use that simple example to demonstrate what is so very wrong with our culture and the society in which we now live. Just to consider the length of my adulthood, just the time we might consider a single generation, say 40 years, the transformation of our society and culture with regard to marriage has been breathtaking—in every wrong way. We no longer know what marriage is, nor marital faithfulness, namely the lifelong bond of faithfulness between one man and one woman. We don't even know what a man is any more, nor a woman. As a culture, it seems we can't even define male and female any longer. Everything has changed. For many years now, I have observed and proclaimed that the path we are on is one in which the whole of the institution of marriage is doomed to near extinction. Marriage as a defined relationship will become unnecessary, irrelevant and simply depreciated and marginalized until it has no functional place in society left at all.

In that context, I will continue to proclaim the word of God. I will proclaim it to you who believe, and I will proclaim it, through you, to the world in which we live. It is necessary to proclaim this word, and for your own edification and encouragement, it is

necessary to be clear and direct. So I'm going to speak about what God has said regarding marriage. Specifically,

I. THE STRAIGHTFORWARD DESIGN OF MARRIAGE.

The context is something of a trick question so typically presented by the Pharisees. They wanted Jesus to say something that would be controversial, that would get him into trouble. They wanted him to pick a side in a debate in order to make him look back, to discredit his authority or diminish his popularity. Still, he went about his miraculous ministry of healing among the large crowds.

v.1-2

v.3, v.7

They tested him. They tempted him. They put him on trial. And the evil nature of that temptation is not hard to recognize when you realize how they phrased the question, twisting it just for their own benefit and purpose. And they twisted the whole of the situation, not simply asking if divorce is ever lawful, but by more deceitfully asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?"

Then they twisted what Moses actually said, for Moses never commanded a divorce. Moses never commanded a man to send his wife away. Yet they asked, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?" Jesus didn't fall for the bait. Instead, he answered their trick question with a declaration of,

He begins with such a powerful rebuke, "Have you not read...?" Isn't that such a damning question for the Pharisees! They were the teachers of the Jews, the leaders. Of course they had read! But they ignored what they read. They became their own authority. They added to what they had read. And Jesus cut

through all of that, “Have you not read...?”

The same question could have been asked this way, “Has God not said...?” You see, for Jesus, the word of God spoken and the word of God written were inseparable. And so they should be for us! When God writes, God speaks! When we read the word of God, we hear God speak to us.

And what is it that they should have read? Jesus goes back to the very beginning of the Bible, the very origin of man, the creation account. He quotes from the book of Genesis, and makes reference not simply to the beginning of the Bible but to the beginning of mankind.

Gen. 1:1 “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”

Gen. 1:27 “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”

In our text this afternoon ,

v.4 “And He answered and said to them, “Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning made them male and female?”

So the question of divorce immediately brings up the broader question of gender. The identity of human beings. The creation of mankind. Now let me say something that would not have been too startling just a generation, but is extremely radical today, in terms of worldview and in terms of a starting point for this whole discussion in our culture at large. The point is this, God made us as human beings, by definition, male and female. He made us distinct as male and female. That is our very identity as human beings, either male or female. And that identity is defined by God at creation!

Jesus is not talking here about something that is limited to Christians. He is not talking about a matter that has a restricted scope related to the church. This is not a matter only for Christians to deliberate upon as Christians, but this is a matter of all humanity. This is a matter which I would put in the category of natural revelation. Even general revelation. God has made man male and female.

Now, I won't be crude or say anything in bad taste, but isn't that obvious? Can't you see that just by looking? You don't need the Bible to realize that God made some of us males and some of us females. We are different, and distinct. That's not simply a Christian doctrine, that is part of our very existence as human beings. This is related to what is so-often called a creation mandate. In other words, we're not talking about something that was first revealed in God's law. We're not talking about something that God told his people of Israel in the Old Testament. We're talking about an issue that belongs to our very existence as men, as human beings. God didn't just make Christians to be male and female. He made everyone that way. From the beginning! From the creation of the world.

And from creation, from man's very existence as a created being living on earth, God designed us to live together in relationships of marriage, male and female.

A. Marriage is a creation ordinance among mankind, established upon our existence as male and female.

These are basic root definitions of what it means to be a human being.

v.5

So before any trick question of divorce is answered, the broader principle is established. God made us in order to be able

to get married. God made us male and female. God established that marriage relationship when he created the world, and no decision by the United States Supreme Court nor any law passed by Congress or by a state legislature can possibly undo what God has done. No ordinance of law, no ruling of any judge, no executive order can cancel the creation mandate of God. We were created by God as male and female. And as male and female, “a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”

That’s it. That’s the end of the story. That’s the truth of God, that’s the design of God. And that will never change. The definition of marriage will never change, even as foolish and sinful human beings continue to think that they have both the right and the ability to do so. This is the unchanging definition of God, “a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” That’s the creation ordinance of marriage. And that relationship of...

B. Marriage establishes a new and permanent family.

New and permanent. New. A man shall leave his father and mother. A man shall determine to leave. He is given the right and the privilege to leave, for the purpose of establishing a new family. He grows up. He becomes a man. And I don’t need to emphasize how much that sort of maturity is lacking today in so many men. Men who refuse to grow up, who refuse to be responsible, who refuse to exercise the maturity necessary not only to take care of themselves but to provide for their own family. Men who will not, cannot leave their father and mother, preferring to live as children long into what used to be called adulthood.

That’s how a new family is established. A new man is born, a new man is established by his maturity to leave his father and mother. Interesting, isn’t it, that we still have the custom of a

woman being given in marriage. It is a biblical custom. A man leaves his father and mother, with the authority to establish his own family. And a woman is given by her father to be married to a man, so that she is never left without protection and provision. That’s how a new family is begun. A father is to give his daughter in marriage to a man who has left his father and mother in order to be the head of his own house.

And God designs that family to be permanent. Jesus can’t be any more clear.

v.6

As a matter of application and practical wisdom to those who are not married, if you are not ready to make that commitment, you are not ready to get married. Leaving your father and mother means entering the commitment of marriage yourself. It means accepting the responsibilities and obligations of that commitment. And the duties of marriage are designed by God to be permanent. It’s the one decision in which God does not allow you to change your mind.

That’s the design of marriage, God’s design. One man, one woman, joined together in every way in the permanent bond of marriage. And God designed it to be good! But what, then about,

II. THE DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES OF DIVORCE.

In other words, because of human sin and failure, divorce has become a reality. Then, and now. So what is the answer to the question of verse 7, “Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?” Jesus’ answer,

v.8

A. Understanding biblical permissions for divorce.

So, first of all, divorce occurs because of sin, because of the

hardness of your heart. If there were no sin, there would be no divorce. There is no such thing as “no-fault” divorce, and I don’t mean that be harsh toward anyone who has been divorced, but rather to state the obvious. If a husband and wife were able to live together in marriage without sin, they would never get divorced! And sadly, of course, not one of us can come close to claiming that sort of sinless existence. So even in the best of marriages that remain intact, the husband and the wife are both sinners!

What the law of Moses accomplishes, however, is a regulation and restriction upon divorce such that the woman remains protected! This is what Moses actually wrote,

Deut. 24:1 “When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, 2 when she has departed from his house, and goes and becomes another man’s wife, 3 if the latter husband detests her and writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her as his wife, 4 then her former husband who divorced her must not take her back to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.”

God is not commanding divorce. Rather he is commanding a man that if he puts away his wife, he must write her a certificate of divorce to grant her protection from him! He can’t come back and claim her whenever he wishes. He cannot take advantage of her in that most abusive of ways. He can not leave her hanging, with no definitive identity. He cannot put her out of his house but then leave her under bondage to him. If he puts her away, he must do so with a certificate of divorce in order to free her! If he puts her

out, he must completely release her from the obligations of the marriage.

God is regulating divorce, so that a man may not take advantage of a woman by simply putting her out of his house. And the application of that principle in terms of alimony and ongoing support is also, I believe, very appropriate. But again, the main point, God regulates divorce in the context of the sinfulness of men. And then Jesus gives further explanation. It is crucial for us in order to gain a proper,

B. Understanding biblical grounds for divorce.

v.9

The basic idea is this. Divorce is not permitted, except for one circumstance, unfaithfulness. Sexual immorality. Adultery.

So there is one ground for divorce. If your spouse commits adultery, divorce is permitted. Not commanded, to be sure. Thankfully, by God’s grace, many marriages are able to survive even adultery, with repentance and forgiveness. But divorce is permitted in this one circumstance. And what that means is that you are free from the obligations of the marriage, free to marry again as well. For as you read verse 9, the exception granting acceptable grounds for a divorce would also grant the freedom to remarry. The phrase “except for sexual immorality” refers to both what comes before and what come after, “whoever divorces his wife” and whoever “marries another.”

Here is how our Westminster Confession Faith expresses it: “In the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce: and, after the divorce, to marry another, as if the offending party were dead.”

I won't go into all the reasons, for in one sense, we don't need to know any reasons since it is the clear teaching of Jesus. But to state the obvious briefly, sexual immorality is an act that cuts at the very essence of the marriage covenant. It betrays the very essence of the marriage itself, for as we read earlier, "they shall become one flesh." Thus, when that bond is broken by unfaithfulness, divorce is permitted. That's the sad result of the sin of man, and Jesus is careful to identify the proper application of the law of God given through Moses. So it wasn't a trick question for him at all!

At this point, let me add one additional helpful point regarding another set of circumstances. Technically, there is just one biblical ground for divorce, adultery. But what about the situation in which many Christians find themselves, namely when they wish to remain married but their husband or wife leaves them. Are they bound to the marriage under those circumstances? Are they free to divorce? Are they free to remarry? Obviously, those are very practical questions.

Paul addresses that situation with much clarity in 1 Corinthians 7. The question arose because there were some Christians, newly converted Christians in Corinth, who came to believe that because their spouse did not share their faith, they should separate and divorce. I'll take that question in the best possible sense, that they were sincere in the desire to serve the Lord, believing that because they had become a Christian they should serve the Lord without the hindrance of an unbelieving spouse. Paul's answer is "No." Here are his words.

1 Cor. 7:10-11 But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife.

12 But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him

not divorce her. 13 And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him. 14 For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy. 15 But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace. 16 For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife? 17 But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk."

So in the face of a desertion, in the reality of the situation that an unbeliever has deserted the marriage, the believing spouse is free. Free from the marriage that no longer exists because of the action of desertion. "If the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace."

Again, our Confession of Faith, "Nothing but adultery, or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the church, or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage."

Yet, those exceptions do not invalidate the basic principle of marriage, "A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." One man, one woman, joined together as long as they both shall live.

Such an obligation prompted another interesting question among his disciples, namely whether or not it was wise to marry at all. After all, we might say, with such a high level of commitment required, perhaps it best not to marry at all. Better to avoid the commitment than to enter marriage and fail.

v.10

III. THE WISDOM OF MARRIAGE

Jesus seems to acknowledge the high demands of the commitment of marriage,

v.11 “All cannot accept this saying...”

He identifies some situations specifically.

A. For some, it is better not to marry.

v.12

Some have birth defects, rendering them unable to fulfill the marital relationship. And some were castrated, presumably involuntarily, as often happened in those days. The third group is more relevant for our thoughts tonight. “There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake.” So figuratively speaking, there are those who have made themselves eunuchs. That would refer to a willful determination not to marry, and to remain celibate.

The best and most praiseworthy example of that would not be the Roman Catholic monks who foolishly take a vow of chastity, but rather those whom Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians who choose not to marry because of some particularly trying or stressful circumstances.

1 Cor. 7:26 “I suppose therefore that this is good because of the present distress—that it is good for a man to remain as he is: 27 Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be loosed. Are you loosed from a wife? Do not seek a wife. 28 But even if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. Nevertheless such will have trouble in the flesh, but I would spare you. 29 But this I say, brethren, the time is short, so that from now on even those who have wives should be as though they had none, 30 those who weep as though they did not weep, those who rejoice as though they did not rejoice, those who

buy as though they did not possess, 31 and those who use this world as not misusing it. For the form of this world is passing away.”

So there are circumstances in which it is preferable to remain unmarried, but the general principle is still to be found in,

B. The ordinary blessings of marriage.

Heb. 13:4 “Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled.”

Thus, despite the obstacles involved in the commitments of marriage, Jesus offers hope in the sovereign grace of God at work in his people.

v.11

In other words, the grace has been given to some! Ordinarily, marriage is the normal course of our lives. Marriage is to be held in honor among all. So,

v.12 “He who is able to accept it, let him accept it.”

A quick application first for you who are not married, wanting to get married someday, that you preserve the honor of the marriage relationship by your own purity. And when you realize how God has designed marriage, realize that all the enjoyment and benefits of that relationship come when you enter marriage in a way that would please and honor the Lord.

And to you who are married, live out the commitment that you have made, seeking to be faithful to God in every way. Realize that God designed the marriage relationship from the beginning of creation. When God made man, he made us male and female. And he made us to be joined together as one, husband and wife, in a relationship that he uses to represent the very relationship

between Jesus and his church.

Eph. 5:31 “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” 32 This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church.”

So don't waver, don't diminish or neglect what God has said about marriage, no matter what our society does. No matter what our culture does. No matter what laws are past. And no matter what the consequences might be. Instead, if you are married, exalt the Lord your God as you honor that relationship and live out the commitments of God's design of a life-long marriage between one man and one woman. For that has been God's design from the beginning, and so it will always be.