

The King's Teaching on Marriage and Divorce

Matthew 19:1-15

Key Verse: 19:6

“So, they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

Today we are resuming Matthew's Gospel study in the first week of 2018. It happened that the passage is about marriage and divorce. I don't think it is just by accident, but by providence.

Disney fairy tales always end like this: “They married a dream prince or princess and lived happily ever after.” How realistic is this ending? How many of you have a perfect, fairy tale, happily ever after marriage? Disney fairy tales don't talk about the reality of marriage (real struggles or divorce). In fact, almost 50 percent of all marriages in the United States end in divorce or separation. So many families are dysfunctional. Is this because they married the wrong persons? In our day, many are confused about marriage and family, seeing marriage in terms of personal fulfillment.

In today's passage, Jesus our Savior and King teaches about marriage and divorce. What is the meaning of marriage? From Jesus, we learn about a kingdom-centered view that can radically transform our lives in our families and ministry. In Jesus, marriage is a reflection of the kingdom of God. It is designed to reflect our ultimate love relationship and union with our Lord. My prayer is that God may give us a kingdom vision and restore our marriages and families.

I. Marriage Is a Sacred Covenant Relationship

As Matthew chapter 19 opens, Jesus finished his ministry in Galilee and was going into the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. He was on his way to Jerusalem, where he would be rejected, killed on the cross, and raised from the dead. Large crowds followed him because they saw the signs of the kingdom. Jesus healed them and restored them. In Jesus the Messiah, the kingdom of heaven was advancing.

In Mt 18, Jesus taught about humility and the importance of forgiveness for the citizens of the kingdom. In Mt 19:3, Matthew introduces the topic of divorce. To study this topic, we'll have to keep in mind Jesus' grace of humility and forgiveness. Look at verse 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?’”**

This question was a sneaky test. Divorce was a hot button issue that would quickly become political, polarizing people. When John the Baptist challenged

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Herod Antipas to repent of his adultery and divorce, it cost him his life. Now, when some Pharisees tested Jesus with evil intent, Satan was at work to destroy the work of the Messiah (cf. Mt 4:1, 3).

How did Jesus respond to their question? Look at verses 4-6: **“Haven't you read,' he replied, 'that at the beginning the Creator “made them male and female,” and said, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh”? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”**

Jesus revealed that people began at a false starting point, by asking when divorce is permissible. But led by the Scriptures, Jesus redirected their question by asking, **“Haven't you read?”** When questioned about the issue of divorce, Jesus appealed to the original meaning of marriage in creation. Why? It's because the original purpose of marriage in creation is being fulfilled through Jesus the Messiah. With Jesus, the kingdom of God is coming to redeem our broken relationships including marriage. So, what are some essential aspects of marriage that Jesus fulfills and emphasizes?

1. Marriage is God's design, not man's. Jesus said, **“At the beginning the Creator made them male and female,”** referring to Genesis 1:26-27. God made mankind in his own image. Both male and female were made in the image of God. We have a tendency to think of marriage in terms of our personal happiness, asking how it can fulfill my desire and make me happy. But our marriage is not primarily about us or our own self-fulfillment; rather, it is about God and his image. Most importantly, God's image is love as revealed through Jesus Christ. God is profoundly relational and unselfishly loving. Marriage is to represent this image of God. Jesus wants us to remember that marriage is designed and established by God.

2. Marriage is a covenant relationship in a one-flesh union. In the quote from Genesis 2:24, Jesus said, **“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”** Three verbs describe the covenant character of marriage: to leave, to be united, and to become. **“To leave”** implies a deliberate and permanent departure: A man leaves behind his parents for a spouse; a woman leaves her parents behind for a spouse. They establish a new family and transfer their primary loyalty from their parents to their spouse.

“To be united” (Gen 2:24) means “to cling on, to stick together, to glue together.” This word is often used in a covenant relationship with God (cf. Dt 4:4;

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10:20; 11:22; Jos 22:5; 23:8). To be united implies to be bonded to someone through a binding promise. A man and woman are glued together by a marriage covenant that acts like the most powerful super glue. And God is the one who unites them (Mt 19:6b).

This marriage covenant is expressed in a one-flesh union: **“The two will become one flesh.”** Jesus concludes this in verse 6a, **“So they are no longer two, but one flesh.”** This is the most powerful expression of the marriage union of two people. Usually, one plus one equals two. But in marriage, one plus one equals one. This is nonsense from an arithmetical point of view. But in marriage, they are unified in a mysterious way that belongs to no other human relationship. There is an intimate sharing of a body, soul and spirit in marriage (cf. 1Co 7:4). It is much more than a sexual union. It is about unselfish love that gives itself sacrificially: the husband gives himself to his wife and the wife gives herself to her husband.

3. Marriage is a covenant relationship intended to be permanent and unbreakable. Marriage is not intended to be eternal beyond this life, but is a lifetime commitment. Jesus pronounced this in verse 6b, saying, **“Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”** The marriage covenant is sacred. It is a God-witnessed, irrevocable relationship between a man and a woman who willingly promise to live by its terms. This means that marriage is a one-way street with no U-turns. There is no turning back. The Bible often uses the imagery of marriage to describe God's everlasting love to his people. For example, God says in Hosea 2:19, **“I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion”** (cf. Ez 16:8; Mal 2:14-16). The marriage relationship should reflect this covenant of God that is faithful and permanent. It is a representation of Christ's love relationship to his church (Eph 4:22-33; Rev 21:2). So, the meaning of marriage is much deeper than mere social convention. Jesus declared, **“Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.”**

All that the Bible teaches about marriage is in direct opposition to today's dominant view of marriage. Tim Keller (in his book *The Meaning of Marriage*) calls it “Me-marriage,” which sees marriage as a way to reach personal life goals. Both men and women all look for a marriage partner who will fulfill their emotional, sexual, and spiritual desires. People want too much out of marriage, putting a crushing burden of expectations on their spouses. But the reality is that in marriage, two flawed people come together.

In the beginning of my marriage, I believed I married an angel or a saint, who was considerate of others and devoted to the Lord. God gave me the Christian

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name Augustine from St. Augustine. My wife received the name Monica from St. Monica who prayed patiently and sacrificially for her troublemaker son Augustine. I thought that I was much better than a troublemaker, but it turns out I was wrong. It didn't take me long to see the reality of how selfish and stubborn I was. My wife wasn't an angel either. In the beginning, we argued and hurt each other often. But finally, by God's grace, we could come to a sober realization: I'm a sinner and you are a sinner too. We are both flawed and imperfect. So what? Even when we are imperfect, God's love never fails. So, we agreed: "Let's have mercy on each other." After that, I began to experience Christ's profound love and mercy in my family. (In my Christ-centered marriage, a big change happened in me. For example, before my marriage, I was self-conscious of my curly hair. But because my wife really liked it, I loved it too. Since she said I'm handsome, I believe I'm handsome, even though you may see it differently). This is a foretaste of the kingdom. I am grateful to God for his transforming love, from the bottom of my heart. Praise Jesus!

II. Divorce and the Gospel

When Jesus taught that divorce is absolutely wrong, the Pharisees asked in verse 7, "Why then did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" During this time, divorce was a largely divided topic among people. In the Rabbinic interpretation of Dt 24:1, the school of Shammai saw divorce as morally acceptable only in cases of adultery. Yet, the school of Hillel interpreted it more liberally: a woman could be divorced even if she spoiled a dish for her husband or if she failed to measure up to the beauty of a rival. Influenced by the liberal interpretation, the society took divorce lightly.

What was Jesus' answer? Look at verse 8. **"Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning."** Here, Jesus corrected the Pharisees' misinterpretation. Moses permitted divorce, but did not command it. Jesus pointed out their real problem, which was their hardened hearts. In other words, the real problem is our self-centered and unrepentant hearts. The intention of OT laws was to protect abandoned women who were victims of divorce in a patriarchal society. But in the beginning of creation, divorce was no option at all. In verse 9, Jesus said, **"I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."** There are controversial issues related to this verse, regarding how to understand the exception clause of "sexual immorality" (Greek: *porneia*). But if we pay undue attention to this, we'll ask the same legalistic questions of the Pharisees: when

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divorce is permissible. Then, we'll miss Jesus' point that God is deeply saddened by divorce.

We live in a culture in which divorce and remarriage are prevalent. Divorce wounds people deeply. According to a survey, the top three reasons for divorce are lack of commitment, excessive arguments, and infidelity. The basis of all of these is our sin, which causes broken relationships and disfigures the image of God in marriage. So, many young people are skeptical about true love and afraid of commitment. The truth is that people are powerless to change themselves. But Jesus can recreate us to be his kingdom people. Now, Jesus expects that our **“righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law”** (Mt 5:20). How is this possible? It is possible because of the grace of Jesus. He remains faithful even when we are unfaithful. Even when we have lived like adulterous brides and left God, he doesn't give up on us, but pursues us and brings us back by the blood of Jesus. If you struggle with your marriage, you should never ask how you can get out of the commitments you made. If you have wounds of divorce, I believe that Jesus is your compassionate healer. All of us have King Jesus who offers his grace of forgiveness and strength. When we put him at the center of our marriage, we can live out our marriage vows. May his grace and his Spirit transform our hearts and marriages. Amen.

III. Singleness for the Sake of the Kingdom

How did the disciples respond to Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce? Look at verse 10. **“If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.”** The disciples lived in a society where divorces were practiced liberally. But Jesus destroys the popular grounds for divorce. Now, the question arises: What if I marry the wrong person? Should I suffer a lifelong unhappy marriage? Wouldn't it be better not to marry at all than to risk such a demanding commitment?

But Jesus said, **“Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given”** (11). **“This word”** refers to the statement: **“it is better not to marry.”** Jesus said in verse 12 that what they said applies only to eunuchs. Eunuchs don't have parts working for marriage. They are born deformed, or made so by humans in ancient times to serve in a royal court. These two groups of celibate men were known to the disciples. But Jesus mentions a third group in verse 12b: **“There are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”** These are people who choose to refrain from marriage “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.” Historically, a metaphor of eunuchs was offensive to Jewish society

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because they were not allowed into “the assembly of the Lord” (cf. Dt 23:1). Moreover, it was taught that everyone should marry for the sake of family and society. But by using such a shameful metaphor, Jesus teaches about the supreme value of the kingdom of God that surpasses all human value. Is Jesus saying that singleness is holier than marriage? No. Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God has the highest value, (not self-fulfillment nor social recognition). Some receive a call to celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of God. It is a beautiful thing when it is gladly followed through. The apostle Paul is a good example of this.

Now, singleness is not plan B for our Christian lives. We should not build our hope on marriage or family. To marry or not to marry is not the ultimate question. It's all about the kingdom of God whether we are married or not married. What can truly satisfy our souls? Can marriage fill the void in our souls? No. Even the best marriage cannot do this. Only God's perfect love can fulfill the deep desire of our souls. When we develop a fulfilling love relationship with Jesus our Savior, our lives—married or single—are truly fulfilling.

IV. Children and the Kingdom

Look at verse 13. **“Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them.”** Children were second-class citizens in ancient society. But how did Jesus respond? In verse 14, Jesus said, **“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”** Jesus rebuked his disciples. They did not want their teacher interrupted by such low-status people like children. They didn't understand what Jesus' kingdom is really about--caring for the little ones. If we follow the wrong concept of the kingdom, we'll see children as interruption to our mission. But Jesus welcomed the little children and blessed them. It is parent's responsibility to bring their children to Jesus and not hinder them because of our commitment to mission. The kingdom of God belongs to those who come to Jesus with humility and trust.

V. Marriage and Family for the Sake of the Kingdom

In our times, the devil makes his most strategic attack on family (adultery, divorce, same-sex marriage). But Christ's church is a countercultural kingdom movement that displays the power and beauty of the gospel. A church in which marriages and families are healthy and strong, can most effectively advance the kingdom of God. But because of busy work and ministry, we have a tendency to take our spouses for granted and to become demanding at home. This also affects our family dynamics. When parents argue with each other, children suffer a lot. They feel true happiness when their parents love each other. This requires us to

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rearrange our value system. We have to recover a kingdom-centered view of marriage and family. When we stress the importance of family, we are not saying that we should be family-focused. Family is not the ultimate goal, but a pointer to the kingdom of heaven. A healthy community is neither family-focused, nor ministry-centered, but kingdom-centered and Jesus-focused. Then, ministry and family will naturally follow. How can we be such a church? We must reorient our vision away from self-centeredness and toward a kingdom vision (cf. Mt 6:33). When we put Jesus at the center of our lives, the beauty of the kingdom of God will be displayed through us.

What does a kingdom-centered view of marriage mean to us practically? M. Luther declared that marriage is “a school for character.” People dream of meeting the right person to marry, assuming that marriage is primarily for personal fulfillment. But an ethics professor said, “We always marry the wrong person” (S. Hauerwas). There is no perfectly right person because of our self-centeredness. Our self-centeredness is “the great sin” that blinds us and makes us hurt each other (C.S. Lewis), devastating the holy sanctuary of family. Wives are hurt by their husbands’ self-centeredness, while husbands are hurt by their wives’ self-centeredness. The more intimate the relationship, the deeper the wounds. Now what is the point of marriage if we hurt each other? Marriage exists for you to work on your self-centeredness, not for your self-fulfillment. If both spouses are willing to get the “self” out of the center, marriage can be taken to a new level of love and fulfillment beyond what we could have ever imagined. How can we do this? By simply trusting Jesus like little children. Children are different from the Pharisees who were proud, legalistic and stubborn. They are quick to trust, forgive, and reconcile. What we need is to trust Jesus’ sacrificial love and forgiveness. As we, like little children, trust in his grace, we’ll experience the kingdom of God (Mt 19:14).

So, in view of the kingdom, let’s examine our hearts. Does your marriage reflect the covenant love of our humble Savior who died in our place? Is your family ruled by the risen King who gives life? Is your singleness ruled by a love relationship with your Savior? May we come to Jesus and trust in his sacrificial love! I believe that when we love God with all our heart, soul, and strength, we can love and forgive each other as Jesus loves and forgives us. May God bring our families healing and strength in our Lord Jesus to display the image of God! Amen.