

Jesus' Teaching on Marriage
Matthew 19:1-15
Key Verse: 19:6,14

by Steve Stasinos

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

The past three lessons Jesus taught how we live in the community of the kingdom of heaven. Today Jesus teaches protection for the weak through showing love and concern for women and children. The Pharisees want to test him on divorce. Jesus uses this as an opportunity to teach about marriage. This is relevant to all of us, whether looking forward to marriage, praying for another's marriage, or working on our own. We all have our ideas about marriage, and these are clouded by religious beliefs, cultural upbringing, experiences in our own homes, and what is seen lived out on a daily basis around us. But Jesus takes us back to what the Creator has to say. Let's ask God's help to know his mind and heart in regards to marriage, divorce, singleness and children.

I. What God has joined together, let no one separate (1-12)

Look at verses 1-2. Having completed his Galilean ministry, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem (Lk 9:51; Mt 20:17, 29; Mt 21:1). Jesus taught his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life (16:21). Large crowds were following him, the voice of their shepherd. Although his task was heavy, Jesus was not burdened. He willingly healed them all, welcoming needy little ones and serving them on the way to Jerusalem.

"Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, 'It is lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?' (3)" Enemies were never far from Jesus. This time they wanted to test his practical application of Moses' law to the sensitive issue of divorce. To understand this we have to step back into those

times. Jews greatly honor the Rabbi Hillel, who was responsible for much of the Mishnah and Talmud, Jewish commentaries on the Scriptures. He is credited with the Golden Rule ("That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is explanation; go and learn.") Shammai was another famous Rabbi. He was more strict, and contradicted Hillel on a few points. One area they disagreed on was the practical application of divorce in the OT Scriptures, specifically Moses' writing. Divorce clearly existed in the covenant community of Israel. The question was on what grounds was divorce permitted? Hillel taught that a man could leave his wife for any and every reason, even including burning his dinner. Shammai taught that it had to be a serious offense, such as sexual immorality. Although they died before Jesus began his public ministry (Hillel 10AD, Shammai 30AD), the contest between these two leading Rabbis was of much debate among the religious leaders. They wanted to test Jesus and see which party he was on. Such testing could polarize Jesus' following. This happens today too. Is Jesus Democrat or Republican? Is Jesus pro-life or pro-choice? Is Jesus for or against same-sex couples? What about immigration?

Look at verses 4-5. "'Haven't you 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 mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh"?''" The Pharisees wanted to debate what was lawful, in order to justify or condemn behavior. Jesus goes back to the Bible, to the testimony of God the Creator. To Jesus, it isn't a matter of the legality of divorce but about God the Creator's intention for marriage.

Marriage predates sin, law, and the church. It predates culture, politics, and religion. Marriage was part of the original plan of the Creator God. Of course, people use their liberty to redefine all kinds of things based on their limited understanding, intentionally or unintentionally ignoring God's truth. What do we learn from Genesis Bible study about marriage? There are so many things, but I'll just list four.

First, the Creator made them male and female by design. Surely God understood the differences between the genders which baffle us even today. He made them different to complement one another. According to the Creator, marriage is one man and one woman. God himself is able to work out the differences.

Second, marriage is a new beginning. The husband will leave his father and mother, uniting with his wife to establish a new family. This necessitates commitment, trust, and faithfulness to one another. This is to be a lasting covenant, between a man and his wife, from youth to old age (Mal 2:14b - You have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant).

Third, marriage is a union where two become one. Jesus says this union is "one flesh." As Jesus will teach in a few chapters, there is no marriage at the resurrection. So flesh here can mean life on this earth. This unity brings companionship and support. A husband and wife becoming one flesh raise children together, serve God together, grow in grace and truth together. This unity in the flesh includes sexual pleasure. Sex isn't evil or wrong or bad when enjoyed in the context of marriage. Proverbs 5:15-20 explains the joy we should cultivate and develop in the relationship between husband and wife, unsullied by extramarital sex. This physical union is necessary to accomplish the task of procreation. Genesis 1:28 places this as part of God's original purpose in creating mankind. Sexual union in marriage is also to guard against lust and immorality (1Co 7:9). Abstaining from marriage in an attempt to be spiritual, while living a secret sexually immoral life is not spiritual at all. If we struggle with this, pray about your marriage!

Fourth, God's vision and purpose for marriage. When we read Genesis we find that God had a great vision for Adam and Eve to rule over the whole world. Marriage is not an end in itself, but part of God's grace and providence to mankind for his mission purpose. Through marriage mankind produces godly offspring. He has a portion of his world that he wants each of our families to rule over and subdue. As we love one another, we become the representation of Christ and his Church to a dying world.

Jesus comes to his conclusion in verse 6. Let's read together: "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." Divorce means to separate. But if they are no longer two, you are cutting one flesh into two pieces. Gory. Jesus states clearly: What God has joined together, let no one separate. God's work is to unite for his glory and purpose. Division is the work of Satan. Divorce is unthinkable when we know the mind and heart of God our Creator.

The Pharisees didn't listen to Jesus' words. If they had, they should have thought about why their conclusions didn't match the intention of the Creator. Instead, they sprung the trap, so to speak, and basically accused Jesus of contradicting Moses' commands. They asked, "Why then did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?(7)" Was Moses really commanding people to divorce their wives? Jesus explains that this was a permission for the hard hearts of self-centered men. Basically, women of Moses' day were weak and vulnerable. When a husband didn't like his wife, he could simply dismiss her, without any accountability. Moses put a requirement that a certificate had to be issued first. This was to protect the woman's dignity. Such a woman could then remarry, and a man could marry her without being charged with adultery (Lev 21:7). To say that the law supports or justifies divorce simply because it talks about divorce is the same as saying God supports adultery, murder, theft and slavery because they were given specific commands regarding these kinds of behavior. As Jesus said, "It was not this way from the beginning." God hates divorce. Yet due to the destructive nature of sin, there were some families so grievously damaged that Moses had to permit divorce, for the safety of the wife and children, and the holiness of the community.

In verse 9 we come to Jesus' words on divorce, echoing what he said in the Sermon on the Mount (5:31-32): "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery." By saying divorce and remarriage is adultery, Jesus makes divorce a violation of the Ten Commandments. Yet he states one exception: sexual immorality. In such a case, the marriage has already been defiled. Yet again, this is where divorce is permitted, yet not required or commanded. In all things we remember the power of forgiveness and grace.

This week I came across the story of Mike and Stephanie Goeke. Although raised in a Christian home, Mike struggled with homosexual desires. He suppressed them, and sought God's leading in marriage. He believed if he married a Godly woman he would be cured. He married Stephanie in 1994. But after 18 months, he was tempted due to online chat rooms, and began to live a secret homosexual life. He left a note to his wife, saying he was gay, and wanted a divorce. He expected his family and wife to reject him. Instead Stephanie refused the divorce, saying, "God put us together and I don't know how, but I know He can repair this situation." His

father gave him a book, "You Don't Have to be Gay." He didn't want to read it, but something urged him. Reading the Scriptures referenced in the book, he saw the truth. God loved him as he was, but God would not leave him there. He argued with God, but God's love was indisputable. So he went back to his wife, who welcomed him in. Through involvement in a local church he began to focus on Jesus, not sexual identity. He is now a pastor of spiritual formation in Stonegate Fellowship, and serves with Exodus International. His family is thriving, and they have had three children.

As this story illustrates, we don't live in the garden of Eden. We live in a world broken and torn by sin. Yet God is still joining two in Christ to be one flesh by grace. This is why it is so important to study the Bible to know God and his intention for marriage. When we come to know our Creator and his mind and heart, marriage can be the fulfilling, purpose-filled place of holiness and happiness that God intended. Our marriages can produce good fruit pleasing to God, and be a blessing to the community.

Let's look again at verse 6. "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." Two things for us to struggle with:

No longer two, but one flesh. Before marriage, I was so idealistic, thinking: I'll have a soulmate, united to my every idea, who thinks like me, acts like me, is interested in what I am... But that isn't what Jesus meant, is it? Two becoming one is not easy when I'm stuck on me. Amy is so much different than I am! I'm melodramatic, she is down to earth. She likes forensic shows, I like scifi. We have both had to change a lot this past ten years.

Marriage isn't completed at the wedding ceremony. "Two becoming one" is a process that requires our cooperation. For two to become one is a cross in marriage that requires us to deny ourselves and learn humility. The concepts, "I, me, mine," need to begin to change to, "we, us, and our." Married couples, how are you doing in this process of two becoming one? Some of us are struggling with it, while others have given up, simply each living out their own lives: I do my mission, she

does hers. Others think, "I'm doing all the mission and he's doing all the TV watching!" How can we go from two to "one flesh"?

A few years ago Amy and I attended a Weekend to Remember conference. The host family told us their situation. They were both Christians, and married in the church. But soon after marriage, they realized they really didn't like each other. They couldn't get along in anything! Yet, they both loved God, so they never thought to divorce. Instead, as they prayed separately, they asked God, "Please let one of us die so the other may be free." What an honesty with God! But through praying, eventually with each other, dialogue began to happen. They began to realize the power of God over them. Gradually they came to love each other, and become united in one heart and mind to serve God. Now they travel the country helping other families through marriage conferences.

We should not be satisfied with mediocre marriage. Jesus wants to give us life to the full, and that includes in our marriage. Fortunately, God's word is full of instruction: Ephesians 5 commands us clearly in our families: Husbands, love your wives. Wives, respect your husbands. I used to complain to my wife, "You don't respect me." If I want my wife to respect me, I need to get serious about loving her. If you want your husband to love you, get serious about respecting him. Some other advice: play together and pray together. A few years ago it hit me hard that I wasn't developing a relationship with my wife. I thought I was busy serving God, so it's ok. It is so easy to spiritualize selfishness. I've been trying to change. I want my marriage to please God, as he intends. Two becoming one is not easy!

This leads to the second point: What God has joined together, let no one separate. This is the confidence we have in the commitment we make in marriage: Not what we have done, but what God has done. Many people hope that they will stay together because they are in love. But human love is fickle. Eros is so intense, yet it has no staying power. Without God's love, Eros is empty. People will define marriage their own way: contract marriage, open marriage, gay marriage. Laws and society will support them. But none of those will ever have this fact: What God has joined together. What a confidence we can have! What if you don't think you have that in your marriage? Repent and come to God. He is always willing to come in and have a relationship where two can become one flesh by his miraculous power. This is the grace of our God.

This coming October Amy and I will have been married 10 years. This is nothing but the grace of God to us. We were both terrible sinners, three states apart. How could a heavy metal sinner in the Chicago suburbs and a workaholic, love-starved girl in Toledo come to get married? I had been living immorally when I first came to Bible study. God helped me to leave that lifestyle as part of repenting and growing as a disciple. But I never felt I should marry, since I was too sinful. When people asked me, "Don't you want to marry?" I said, "I didn't come here to marry, but to study the Bible." As I grew as a shepherd, God brought several young women to our fellowship. I made many mistakes trying to help them. Dr. Henry Park told me I needed a suitable helper. I began to pray, repenting my fatalism and pride, and seeking God's will. I found clear prayer topics for my future wife. One day after work I was late to the Friday meeting. At that time, Amy Fritz from Toledo was sharing her life testimony. All my prayer topics were answered in her testimony. I fell on my face before God, literally, realizing his mighty power and hand. Dr. Henry Park and Dr. Paul Hong prayed for us. Amy had been praying about marriage too, and had her own prayer topics. I shared my life testimony with her, and God answered her prayer topics too. In this way we realized God himself was joining us together. What a mystery! Over the past 10 years there have been some hard times. We struggled with burnout and depression. Sometimes we couldn't communicate, and we hurt each other a lot. We changed in good and bad ways. But through it all one thing has been clear, and is the foundation of our confidence in our marriage: What God has joined together, let no one separate. Believing this has helped us always find reconciliation, forgiveness and grace. God has helped us to serve him, taking care of a fellowship and family, and grow to be one. On our own, married life is impossible. But with God, all things are possible.

God is full of mercy and grace. Some of us have sinned against God and his purpose of marriage. We are thinking according to our human feelings, our desires, and the clever whispering of this world. This is time to go back to the Bible, repent, and accept God's purpose for my current marriage, or my future marriage.

Look at verses 10-12. "The disciples said to him, 'If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.'" The disciples seem to overreact. They are very post modern, afraid of commitment. What if the person changes after marriage? What if we have "irreconcilable differences"? Jesus explains that single life is not sin. Paul, the great apostle, actually preferred single life. What matters is accepting God's direction based on his word. By faith in God and his good purpose for my life, I choose to marry, or I choose to be single, living in chastity for the

kingdom of God. This is a personal decision that each of us makes, putting our lives in the hands of our loving and merciful Creator. While this world has many things to say, let's accept God's word to us today.

II. Let the little children come to me (13-15)

Look at verse 13a. "Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them." It cannot be a coincidence that Matthew places this account after Jesus' teaching on marriage, divorce and singleness. Children are a fruit of Godly marriage. God said in Malachi 2:15 that he united husband and wife in the context of the marriage covenant because he was looking for Godly offspring. These parents wanted godly offspring. They brought their little children, toddlers and infants, to Jesus to place his hands on them and pray for them. There were many things they could do for their children, but they brought their little children to Jesus. Do you have a prayer topic and key verse for your child? Are you bringing them to Jesus daily, or just raising them to be a success?

The disciples were not amused. What were these parents doing with those little kids? The disciples saw this as totally ridiculous. These little babies couldn't possibly understand what their parents were doing, and what spiritual meaning of Jesus' teaching. Even the disciples had a hard time understanding! The little ones were just slobbering on everything, making noise and running around. When Bartholomew tried to pick one up, the child ran to mom, crying in terror! What a nuisance! So the disciples rebuked them: Get this mess out of here! Jesus has no time for this nonsense! Like the disciples, we too have a tendency to take ourselves too seriously, and ignore little children. But Jesus was not burdened. "Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these (14).'" Jesus had many important things to do. But here he put them aside in order to take just a few minutes with these little children. Jesus reminds them of his teaching to them: Unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (18:3). Then he blessed the children and went on. While we are engaged in ministry, let's not neglect to bring our children to Jesus, no matter what their age. Our Creator is looking for Godly offspring. If Jesus could make time for little children, surely we can make time to bring them to him. Thank God for our CBF and BBF teachers. Let's work together with them, supporting in prayer, so together we may bring all our children to Jesus. May all our children be godly offspring.

In this passage we thought about the meaning of marriage. When we come to know God our Creator's mind and heart through studying his word, our view of marriage will change. If you are not married, keep praying to God to find and do his will. Married couples, let's grow as one to carry out God's purpose for our families. It will not be easy, but we can be confident knowing that God has joined us together. Let's pray for our nation's children to come to Jesus, through godly families.