

Questioning the Permanence of Marriage (Mat.19.1-12)

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Introduction

Matthew 19.1a gives another loosely knit thread in the structure of Matthew's Gospel: "when Jesus had finished these sayings." The writer states himself like this in five places, and they give a rough and ready outline of the book. Each thread in the structure looks back to a great speech: 7.28 looks back to the Sermon on the Mount, 11.1 looks back to the first Great Commission, 13.53 looks back to kingdom parables, 19.1 looks back to relationships in the royal family, and 26.1 looks back to kingdom consummation. The introduction to the book paves the way to the Lord's public ministry (1-4). The conclusion of the book covers the events leading to, and culminating in, His death and resurrection (26-28). Therefore, here is a way to think through the book of Matthew, Introduction, Sermon, Commission, Parables, Relationships, Consummation, and Conclusion. The body of the book has five sections of kingdom teaching: kingdom ethics, work, parables, family, and consummation. In this light, today we enter the last section of the book; in this last section, everything hangs loosely on the hook of kingdom consummation.

Verse one (Mat 19.1b) also indicates that the last period of our Lord's preaching begins on "the other side of the Jordan." He will then leave that area to go to Jerusalem for the last time (19.15; 20.17; 21.1, 10; 24.1, 3; 26.18, 20, 30, 36, 46, 57). This is the beginning of the final journey to Jerusalem. Matthew informs us that, as this journey begins, Jesus healed the crowds (19.2, **And large crowds followed him, and he healed them there**). This is the last mention of large scale healing in the book (though there are some particular instances of healing the blind and the lame, 20.34; 21.14).

According to 19.3a, Pharisees came to Jesus along with the crowds, and they came to **test Him**. They are continuing their faultfinding efforts.

Therefore, we can conclude that the final days of our Lord's public ministry take place in the context of healing and opposition: healing of the crowds and opposition of the religious leaders. Accordingly, Jesus as the one who brings restoration from all the effects of the fall, Jesus as healer, underlies all the themes that surface in chapters 19-25, even when the themes arise from conflict with the Pharisees. All is under the umbrella of kingdom consummation. In chapter 19, this restoration relates to the general themes of marriage, children, and life.

Today, our text is Matthew 19.1-12 where Jesus applies redemptive restoration to marriage against the backdrop of Pharisaic opposition, which leads to this title: "Questioning the Permanence of Marriage."

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" (Mat.19.1-12).

We can outline the passage by three interconnected questions: Is divorce lawful? If not, why did Moses command divorce? Is it therefore better not to marry?

1A. Is divorce lawful?

This way of stating the question is incomplete, to say the least. We need to add “for any cause” (19.3b, **Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?**). We need to do this because there were major differences of opinion on this subject among the Jewish scholars, and the Pharisees wanted to draw Jesus into this theological quicksand; they wanted Him to sink deep into the muck. We have to wonder, somewhat in the dark, as to the meaning of “for any cause” on the lips of the Pharisees. It is safe to say that they are referring to a very loose view of marriage and divorce, the kind that allowed a man to divorce his wife for trifles like breaking a dish, burning a meal, or even for not being as pretty as someone else is. The dispute centered on Deuteronomy 24.1 (**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**). The important thing to note is that the Pharisees are asking Jesus to walk through a minefield with the hope that He will trip a device that will blow up in His face. Alternatively, we might say, they hope He gets close to something they can detonate.

How does Jesus handle this question? In His answer, He does two things: 1) He appeals to Scripture, and 2) He explains God’s original design.

1B. He appeals to Scripture not tradition

A way to navigate through the troubled waters of theological debate is to do what Jesus did: keep the Scriptures in clear view. He answered, **“Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh’?”** (19.4-5). In this answer, He is quoting Genesis 1.27 and 2.24: **27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.** **28 And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth’ (Gen 1.27-28)...** **21 So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh.** **22 And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.** **23 Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.’** **24 Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.** **25 And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed (Gen 2.21-25).**

The accent on Scripture as the final authority comes to expression in a subtle way in how Jesus introduces the quote in 19.5 (**and said**). Who spoke the words quoted in Matthew 19.5 from Genesis 2.24? In Genesis, it is Moses who draws out this inference (“therefore a man shall leave and cleave”) after recording God’s creative action (2.22) and Adam’s “bone of my bones” comment (2.23). Now, what Moses wrote regarding these things, including his conclusion, is Scripture (part of OT writings), and Jesus says that that written record is the speaking of God. The written word of Moses is the very word of God. Therefore, the Scriptures, the very word of God must have primacy and priority in navigating through interpretive traditions.

2B. God’s original design

By focusing on the Genesis account of God’s creative design for marriage, Jesus eludes entrapment and transcends the entire rabbinic dispute when He says, **So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate** (19.6). Jesus tells the Pharisees that divorce means that men unlawfully separate what God joins.

Thus, the question “Is divorce lawful?” becomes “Is divorce lawful for any of the reasons put forth in the rabbinic tradition?” The answer is no. Divorce is not lawful in the loose terms of the tradition. Actually, divorce is not a divine law. Permanence is the Creator’s design for marriage as Genesis clearly teaches. In short, divorce is unlawful. This is bold teaching that catches the ear, stimulates debate, and calls for careful discernment (as in the next question).

2A. If divorce is not a divine law, then why did Moses command divorce?

If divorce is unlawful and, therefore, the tradition furnishes no basis for divorce (strict or loose), then, in that light, the Pharisees ask, “Why did Moses *command* divorce?” They persist in trying to bring Jesus into the debate by a more precise question: **They said to him, “Why then did Moses**

command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" (19.7). This question shows that the Pharisees had the debate over Deuteronomy in mind from the start (**he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs**, 24.1). Apparently, they finally caught Jesus on one of the horns of the dilemma with which they want to gouge Him. The problem must be something like this: "you say there is no basis for divorce per your understanding of what Moses wrote in Genesis, but your claim contradicts what Moses wrote in Deuteronomy."

However, Jesus is ready with a reply that has two parts: He explains the old wineskin of promise and then clarifies the new wineskin of fulfillment regarding the permanence of marriage and the place of divorce (19.8-9).

1B. The old wineskin of promise (19.8)

Jesus forthrightly explains the permanence of marriage and the unlawfulness of divorce in relation to the certificate of divorce in Deuteronomy 24. He says, **Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so** (19.8). It is important to take note of the substitution of "allowed" (v. 8) for "command" (v. 7). In other words, God through Moses allowed divorce because of the sinful hearts of the Israelites, but He did not command divorce. From the beginning, God commanded the permanence of marriage. Another way to gain perspective on this point is to think about the origin of divorce. In the OT, there is no account of its origin. More importantly, nowhere in the OT does God mandate or command divorce. The Lord designed marriage from the beginning as a covenant of companionship for life: **What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate** (19.6). Because of hard and sinful hearts, people separate what God says we ought not to separate.

In Deuteronomy 24, God did not command divorce. Instead, He regulated something that arose due to human sin. He regulated it to protect wives who were divorced and to prevent excessive abuse. Therefore, the nature of marriage as it comes from the hand of the Creator gives the answer to the question regarding the slough of exceptions that contemporary tradition offered to the permanence of marriage. Again, we can say that Jesus transcended the rabbinic debate; He did so by explaining the old wineskin structure regarding the permanence of marriage and the place of divorce in the time of OT promise.

2B. The new wineskin of fulfillment (19.9)

To appreciate the new wineskin regarding divorce, we have to think outside the box of the Pharisaic tradition. We must remember the critical point that in OT law when immorality violates the exclusive intimacy of marital companionship for life, then the penalty is death. Clearly, unquestionably, and forcefully, this penalty testified to the sacredness of the marriage covenant that you must not violate as long as you live. In the age of anticipation, if you violate marital intimacy, then you die. Both the strict view (divorce for immorality) and the loose view (divorce for any cause) in the rabbinic tradition had it wrong. Both views misinterpreted Deuteronomy 24.

In contrast to rabbinic misuse, Jesus corrects bad interpretation of the old covenant. At the same time, He does something additional; He gives divine authorization to divorce for the first time. He authorized a single basis for divorce, sexual sin on the part of a married person: **And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery** (19.9).

There are different views on this verse even though the basis for divorce seems intuitively clear. A way to try to bring out the clarity is to think about the exception as a conditional in a "when...then" pattern: when there is no basis of sexual immorality, then divorce and remarriage involve adultery. We can reverse the sentence to this logical equivalent: when it is not the case that divorce and remarriage involve adultery, the basis is sexual immorality. The shortest way to state this is as follows: when there is no immorality, then there is no legitimate divorce, so, when there is legitimate divorce, then there is immorality. Thus, sexual immorality is the only exception to the permanence of marriage that Jesus authorizes for the age of the new covenant.

Moreover, legitimate divorce obviously means that the person has the right to remarry without committing adultery (there is a conjunction of divorce and remarriage).

Thus, over against rabbinic misinterpretation, Jesus tightens the basis for divorce (“away with all the looseness and lame reasons for divorce”); in place of them, Jesus puts one basis: marital unfaithfulness). At the same time, Jesus relaxed the death penalty for marital unfaithfulness. In the new order of things, the power of the sword is in the hands of the state and not the church, but the state does not have authorization to put adulterers to death.

3A. Is it therefore better not to marry?

It is evident that a fundamental looseness abounded in Israel regarding divorce. The disciples find the tightened basis for divorce to be quite narrow and risky, so they make the following comment: **If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry** (19.10). In other words, potentially, a person might have to put up with many unwanted qualities that fall short of sexual immorality. Then, he has to learn how to deal with them life-long; there is no easy way out of the marriage. The sentiment of the disciples is to this effect: it is likely that marriage means being stuck with a very undesirable partner for life, so single status is better.

The reaction of the disciples brings up this question: “Is it therefore better not to marry in the first place?” The answer that Jesus gives is “no, it is not better to avoid marriage, marriage is a good thing.” He no doubt alludes to what God also said in the beginning, “it is not good for man to be alone” (Gen 2.18). For balance, Jesus then explains that there are exceptional cases where single status (remaining unmarried) is necessary and good. Note His words of reply: **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** (19.11-12). The single status is not for everyone (not every one can receive the saying, “it is better not to marry”). Who can receive this saying, and who therefore ought to receive it happily in submission to the will of God? Eunuchs are able to receive this saying. Literally, this refers to people who have no sexual ability because of a birth defect or because of castration so they can be slaves and serve women in royal courts. Figuratively speaking, Jesus speaks of eunuchs who are such out of devotion and service in God’s kingdom. This was the case, for example, for John the Baptist, Jesus, and the Apostle Paul. They were **those to whom it is given** (v. 11).

Applications

1) The authority of Scripture

We must keep Scripture in clear view in order to navigate through the troubled waters of theological debate. Granted, the church must interpret God’s word and that means that the church must develop an interpretive tradition. However, we must navigate our way through the waters of tradition by the constant reminder that tradition is *not* authoritative, it does not bind the conscience, and it is not our primary resource. Scripture is the final authority.

In a practical sense, that means that no matter how much we respect a tradition, like the reformed tradition, we must give Scripture primacy and priority. It means that we cannot do what is all too easy to do, namely, we lose sight of the Scriptures. Instead, we must always test and evaluate our tradition, the reformed tradition, by Scripture. Finally, we must do this with an open Bible on the table in careful study. We must have the goal of living by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God, rather than our own opinions. Thus, our discipleship must include frank dialogue in the church family and with the pastor. Following the example of Christ our teacher, we must willingly engage one another with counter-questions and questions, thrust and counter-thrust.

We are to read the Scriptures not just books about the Scriptures or books about biblical themes. Of course, Jesus is saying, with a touch of irony, that we need to be good students of the Scriptures that we read. In other words, we are to gain understanding (wrestle for understanding;

work at it prayerfully). He asks this question of you here today: have you not read God's word wrestling with it for understanding and application to your life? To do this, you must follow the lines of inference that Jesus draws to guide you. He is not only the one to whom you must look for the forgiveness of your sins. He is also the one to whom you must look for understanding. You must go down the path of His direction for your service in His kingdom; part of that direction is here in His teaching on marriage and divorce. Here we need "the usen kind of religion, not the got to meetin kind."

2) The opportunity of single status

Jesus teaches that marriage is the norm and singleness is the exception; both are good, both are God-given. It is not good for you to be alone (unmarried), unless God gives single status to you for service in His kingdom. Then being alone (unmarried) is a great kingdom good. From the book of Corinthians (1 Cor 7), we know that single status may be a temporary status that may change over time. Therefore, if you are unmarried, and while this is the case, you should use your time for special devotion to the Lord. Whatever your daily work may be (at home or on the job), you ought to go to work noting the title over the front door: the temple of Christ. Then, you do all in your power to pursue excellence in your vocation (your calling) for the glory of God. Moreover, you take the extra time you have without a spouse and devote it to spreading the word of the kingdom to glory of Christ your king. That means you must guard your time, redeem the time, and make the most of it under your present structure of single status.

3) The permanence of marriage

Jesus gives us a beautiful picture of God's design for marriage, namely, that husband and wife have an intimacy in which they hold so tightly to one another that they literally become one flesh. The sexual-physical union (its exposure, its intimate knowing of one another) represents the essence of marriage. At its core, marriage is an experience of husband and wife coming to know each other intimately in all things by a mutual self-revealing, sharing, and communication. Moreover, this is an exclusive intimacy. Therefore, sexual unfaithfulness of whatever kind (incest, homosexuality, prostitution, molestation, and adultery, etc) breaks this sacred bond at the core that represents the marriage bond in its entirety. Unfaithfulness shatters the very foundation of marriage and takes the axe to its deepest root. This is why sexual immorality ended the marriage in the OT. Notably, it did so by means of the death penalty. Now, in the new covenant, sexual immorality is the only legitimate basis for divorce (immorality does not make divorce necessary, but it does make it legitimate according to Christ the new covenant lawgiver).

Bottom line: say, you make a covenant of companionship for life and, after a while, you find many undesirable qualities in your spouse (this is actually the norm). This tells you one thing: you have work to do; you must work at building a better and better marriage. You have to commit your marriage into the hands of God seeking His guidance (cf. Sergeant York says to Gracie, "you don't expect much of a husband." To which she replies, "I just want a husband to love me, and I reckon the good Lord will take care of the rest."). In the Lord, the rest means that you must compromise, forgive, yield, communicate, ground all in Holy Scripture, submit yourself to Christ as your king, and seek to glorify God by fulfilling your marriage vows until death separates the two of you.

May we fall down before the majesty of our great God and His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. May God the Holy Spirit grant us insight into His word as our final authority. May He enable us to use our single status or our married status to the honor and glory of Christ our King, amen.