

# Sermons on Matthew

## Marriage and Divorce

*Matthew 19:1-15*

*With Study Questions*

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*Matthew 19:1-15*

Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these sayings, *that* He departed from Galilee and came to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. <sup>2</sup> And great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them there. <sup>3</sup> The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for *just any reason*?" <sup>4</sup> And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made *them* at the beginning '*made them male and female,*' <sup>5</sup> and said, '*For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh*' ? <sup>6</sup> So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate." <sup>7</sup> They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?" <sup>8</sup> He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. <sup>9</sup> And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery." <sup>10</sup> His disciples said to Him, "If such is the case of the man with *his wife*, it is better not to marry." <sup>11</sup> But He said to them, "All cannot accept this saying, but only *those* to whom it has been given: <sup>12</sup> For there are eunuchs who were born thus from *their mother's* womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He who is able to accept *it*, let him accept *it.*" <sup>13</sup> Then little children were brought to Him that He might put *His* hands on them and pray, but the disciples rebuked them. <sup>14</sup> But Jesus said, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven." <sup>15</sup> And He laid *His* hands on them and departed from there (Matthew 19:1-15).

Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these sayings, *that* He departed from Galilee and came to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. <sup>2</sup> And great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them there (Matthew 19:1, 2).

## Leaving Home

There is a comfort people have in a home town. After traveling I always enjoy coming home to the comforts of family. Arriving home from China a couple of years ago on my birthday I was met by a big welcome home daddy poster in the window and my wife and children – It doesn't get much better than that. Even when I was single I would enjoy coming back to my home town – certain restaurants, friends and familiar surroundings.

Jesus was fully man. His humanity would yield in Him the same sentiment of being comforted by familiar surroundings. When Jesus departed from Galilee, He departed from home. Galilee is where Jesus spent His youth and conducted His early ministry.

Matthew records this as a sort of farewell to any comforts of home; Luke explains it **“He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51)**. He had announced, and will again announce, His purpose for going to Jerusalem, which was to give His life and be raised on the third day (Matthew 16:21; 20:18).

## Never Too Busy

This adds to the precious nature of His pastoral love and care for the multitudes. I've had two friends who were famous and pretty easily recognized. Wherever we would go people would want to talk with them and get their autograph. One would be very nice and would oblige, though eventually he might seek to avoid being noticed; the other simply told people to beat it.

The magnitude of the mission of Jesus and His increased fame which spread all through Syria (Matthew 4:24) never diminished the value He placed upon the individuals He came to serve. Over and above the ministries that we plan are the ministries which God providentially lays in our laps. We should never be too busy serving God that we cannot serve His people – for the two activities are the same.

**The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for *just any reason*” (Matthew 19:3)?**

## Testing Jesus

By now the ungodly clergy had seen sufficient evidence that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Yet they continue in their meaningless examinations. “**Testing**” *peirazontes* in this context means to obtain information to be used against a person by trying to get them to make a mistake – they were seeking to set a theological trap. Jesus’ answer would reveal their hardened hearts and would also be used as an instructional tool for His own followers.

The Pharisees knew they were in a conundrum when it came to this matter of marriage and divorce. Historical data indicates there was a debate between two groups Jews and both had weaknesses. The Followers of Hillel believed divorce was justified for almost any reason; the followers of Shammai, believed there must be infidelity – but they couldn’t explain the position of Moses on the matter. Since they couldn’t arrive at a sound conclusion, they assumed Jesus couldn’t either.

Although Christians should ever seek to present a sound world view to those around them, it is more important that the ungodly come to realize there is no sophistry or quasi-intellectual trickery that will pass muster when they find the gaze of Christ fixed upon them. Whether on earth or in eternity:

**He catches the wise in their own craftiness, And the counsel of the cunning comes quickly upon them (Job 5:13).**

**And He answered and said to them, “Have you not read that He who made *them* at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’<sup>5</sup> and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’ (Matthew 19:4, 5)?**

### **Have You Not Read?**

There are numerous avenues taken by those who seek to unveil the direction God would have them take in life. There are even people, as in the case before us, who look for answers in the Scriptures yet choose to ignore the obvious because it does not suit their personal yearnings. We think there must be a better answer to our dilemma than the one found in the Bible. This caused Calvin to write:

**...what is sought in opposition to the word of God is not a remedy.**

**“Have you not read?”** is a mild rebuke. Those who seek godliness find their direction in the word of God. And keep in mind that we must let the word of God speak on its own terms. The word of God is the logos not legos; we are not to use it in pieces to build a contraption from our own imagination, no matter how helpful we may think it is.

## **Defining Marriage**

Jesus then gives a definition of marriage which sets the groundwork for the answer to their question. A couple of observations:

- God created Adam and Eve at the beginning. They were two humans. They were not two invertebrate ingredients floating about in a pool of primordial mucus. In case you're unaware there is theory (only a theory mind you) which suggests that our first parents weren't actually human beings. It is such an influential theory that people have a hard time believing that the first people were actually people. Crazy I know, but we are so easily influenced.
- He made them male and female. The only thing prior to the fall that wasn't good was for man to be alone. Biblical anthropology reveals that there is something incomplete in a single gender. Simply put, a household best suited to produce healthy, happy, balanced and godly offspring is a household comprised of a mom and dad – to have one without the other is to be incomplete or “not good” and this has adverse affects upon the children and society.
- The man leaves his father and mother and (as in some translations) cleaves to his wife. This is not to say that the man (or woman) now has license to ignore or dishonor his parents. It does indicate that the bonds of marriage are more sacred than the bonds of parenthood. We will always be the parents of our children – Jesus is teaching that we should view our union with our spouse as a greater adhesive than that which binds us to our children. The word cleave or “be joined” is *kollethesetai* which means to join fast together or glue. The word is

used to describe dust cleaving to one's feet (Luke 10:11). The imagery crescendos when Jesus teaches that the two become one flesh. It's been written:

**...whoever divorces his wife tears himself in pieces, because such is the force of holy marriage, that the husband and wife become one...<sup>1</sup>**

I might add that that is not all that's torn in pieces when the marriage vows are violated; the shrapnel of infidelity often includes victims of a tender age and we know how our Savior felt about that (Matthew 18:6).

**So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate (Matthew 19:6).**

## **No Mistakes**

I call it rule number one in terms of lies people believe about marriage – that their marriage is a mistake. Jesus makes an interesting statement – **“What God has joined together.”** That's funny, I thought I was the one who met, dated, nervously popped the question, and made the vows. I thought I was the one who joined us together – maybe with the help of the minister.

Marriage is such a holy institution that married people are to view their marital estate as something woven together by God Himself. J. R. R. Tolkien (author of the Lord of the Rings) addressed his son about the matter.

**Nearly all marriages, even happy ones, are mistakes: in the sense that almost certainly (in a more perfect world, or even with a little more care in this very imperfect one) both partners might be found more suitable mates. But the real soul-mate is the one you are actually married to.**

**-- J. R. R. Tolkien, letter to Michael Tolkien, March 1941**

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<sup>1</sup>Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: The Harmony of the Gospels : Calvin's Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System;Calvin's Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

And the idea of tearing asunder that which God has united should be considered a hideous thought and an affront to God Himself.

Of course the ungodly, even with Bibles in their hands, will seek to justify their own profanities. How they anticipated this moment! They will now lay the question before Jesus which, they no doubt thought, would stump Him and reveal His own theological inadequacies.

**They said to Him, “Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away” (Matthew 19:7)?**

### **Stumping Jesus**

Would Jesus dispense with Moses (which by the way, many in the church do) thus revealing His contempt for the word of God? Or would Jesus embrace Moses (at least the way they understood Moses) and betray His own lack of respect for the sanctity of marriage which He had just so profoundly and beautifully elucidated?

Neither!

The author of Hebrews teaches that we do not judge the word of God but rather it judges us.

**For the word of God *is* living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. <sup>13</sup> And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things *are* naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we *must give* account (Hebrews 4:12, 13).**

Notice, by the way, the noun “**word**” in verse 12 is followed by the personal pronoun “**His**” in verse 13. Although the Greek may not be emphatic on this, the personal character of the actions of the word (nothing hidden, accountability, etc.) justifies a personal pronoun. In our current passage (and in eternity) the word will very personal.

The Word will now judge these Pharisees.

**He said to them, “Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so (Matthew 19:8).**

### **Moses’ Certificate**

Jesus clumps the Pharisees in with those who were hard-hearted (*sklerokardian* – where we get our word sclerosis [hardening] and cardiac [heart]).

There are a number of acceptable explanations for the certificate granted by Moses from Deuteronomy 24. It was based upon some uncleanness or indecency found in the woman or in the relationship with the woman:

- It may have been referring, not to marriage at all, but engagement (as with Joseph and Mary) where the woman is found to be pregnant.
- It may have been referring to an incident where it is discovered that the couple is related and an incestuous relationship is to be avoided.
- It could have simply been a document to protect the woman who had been the victim of an ungodly divorce.

But what it wasn’t was license to divorce your wife (per their original question) **“for just any reason.”** Men were divorcing their wives on a whim, then seeking to justify it because of a provision found in the Old Testament which only existed because of the sinfulness of man. Jesus taught that **“from the beginning it was not so.”**

Our goal should be to imitate Adam and Eve in their un-fallen unity. It should not be our goal, as in the present case, to utilize and twist provisions found in Scripture to justify our own licentious desires.

Jesus would now speak to them in terms they could understand.

**And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery(Matthew 19:9).**



## **An Immoral Audience**

There is very little doubt that the audience of religious leaders was comprised of people falling into the above category. These religious leaders who, as Luke records, **“trust in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others...” (Luke 18:9)** were now face to face with an accusation of blatant sexual immorality.

## **Justifiable Divorce**

Time doesn't allow a fully orbed presentation of justifiable divorce and re-marriage. Needless to say this becomes a very tricky business which, if handled improperly, yields mass sexual immorality which leads to the crumbling destruction of homes, churches and cultures. At this juncture I appeal to chapter 24, paragraph 6 of the Westminster Confession which I believe to be a sound biblical treatment of the subject.

**Although the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments unduly to put asunder those whom God hath joined together in marriage: yet, 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: (Matt. 19:8-9, 1 Cor. 7:15, Matt. 19:6) wherein, a public and orderly course of proceeding is to be observed; and the persons concerned in it not left to their own wills and discretion in their own case. (Deut. 24:1-4)<sup>2</sup>**

It is important to recognize that these matters are to be properly adjudicated by both the civil magistrate and the church. People are not generally thinking clearly in these matters and God has graciously delivered us from our own subjective conclusions.

**His disciples said to Him, “If such is the case of the man with *his* wife, it is better not to marry.”<sup>11</sup> But He said to them, “All cannot accept this**

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<sup>2</sup>*The Westminster confession of faith.* 1996 (Chapter XXIV, 6). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

saying, but only *those* to whom it has been given: <sup>12</sup> For there are eunuchs who were born thus from *their* mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He who is able to accept *it*, let him accept *it*" (Matthew 19:10-12).

### **Better Not To Marry – For Heaven's Sake**

We learn from Mark 10:10 that Jesus was speaking in a house with His disciples, no longer to the Pharisees. Their unusual response ("it is better not to marry") may be a result of the influence of their ungodly culture or it may be due to the nature of the ministry.

Paul taught later that "**It is good for them**" to remain unmarried for the sake of the work of Christ (1 Corinthians 7:9-24). Either way, it would appear that Jesus is teaching a level of acceptability to remain unmarried for the kingdom of heaven's sake.

**Then little children were brought to Him that He might put *His* hands on them and pray, but the disciples rebuked them. <sup>14</sup> But Jesus said, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven." <sup>15</sup> And He laid *His* hands on them and departed from there (Matthew 19:13-15).**

Once again we see great care taken by the evangelist to record the concern Jesus had for what would be considered the least or most humble in the kingdom of heaven<sup>3</sup>.

### **Conclusion**

We fall exceedingly short of understanding the depth of God's word if we view a passage like this as simple instructions on marriage or when divorce is allowed. Marriage is an institution created by God for the express purpose of revealing His love for us. We see the same biblical reference used by the Apostle Paul:

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<sup>3</sup> This would include infants (Luke 18:15)

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

There is an inviolable unity between Christ and His bride; it is secure from destruction. As sure as the Son pleased the Father those who trust in the Son find favor in the eyes of the Father for the two have become one. In His High Priestly Prayer of intercession Jesus makes us privy to the great unveiling of God’s love for us and our unity with Him. Jesus prays,

**And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: <sup>23</sup> I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me (John 17:22, 23).**

May Christians – may the church – ever take comfort in the faithfulness of its Groom who committed Himself to love her, sanctify her, cleanse her and present her to Himself without spot or wrinkle.

## Questions for Study

1. Why do you think Matthew records Jesus leaving Galilee (page 3)?
2. What do we learn about tending to the small things when we observe how Jesus conducts His ministry (page 3)?
3. Why were the Pharisees testing Jesus (page 4)?
4. Is Bible study important? Explain (pages 4, 5)?
5. Discuss Jesus’ definition of marriage. Why does He bring in leaving the mother and father (pages 5, 6)?
6. Are some marriages mistake? Explain (pages 6, 7).

7. How does the word God judge us (pages 7, 8)?
8. Are all divorces justifiable according to Moses (pages 8, 9)?
9. What does marriage reveal to us about our relationship with God (page 11)?