

*"Marriage: Walking the Path of Sanctification Together"*

Matthew 19:1-12

September 27, 2020

Life is never better than when marriage is at its best and life is never harder than when marriage is put to the test. Many marriages have died bearing a common epitaph: "I have to do what makes me happy." They got married hoping it would make them happy, and now they hope that divorce will relieve them of the stress and pain they are experiencing so they can be happy once again. It's not wrong to pursue happiness as long as you are pursuing the right kind of happiness. The options are short-term happiness at the cost of long-term disappointment or enduring short-term disappointments for the sake of long-term happiness.

I wish I could interview Bill and Mildred, a couple from the church I grew up in. Bill was a man who prayed as though He was in the presence of the Holy One. He and Mildred shared a deep love for the Scriptures. Both were gentle, soft-spoken and unassuming in their later years. They married young on the heels of the great depression and shared 72 years of marriage.

I wonder how many trials they weathered together in those 72 years. How many times was harsh or insensitive word spoken in those growing years? How many times did they forge ahead in married life only by forbearance, forgiveness, and overlooking an offense? How many times did self need to sacrifice for the other? There's a lot of grace that comes to a couple over 72 years of marriage, and joy like wine has opportunity to mature. Bill and Mildred had the rare opportunity to look back over 72 years with their best friend and celebrate the faithfulness of God and their growth in Jesus together.

Over 72 years (or 20 or 5) there are thousands of opportunities to either love and forgive or to harbor resentment that hardens your heart. As Jesus will remind us today, God's design for marriage is to be a life-long journey of growing in grace.

SETTING THE STAGE (Mt 19:1-3)

Let's take just a moment to take in the landscape of this passage. Vs. 1-12 are largely about marriage in response to the Pharisee's question about divorce. The purpose of the question was to test Jesus, or to trip Him up. But notice chapter 19 opens with an interesting detail in vs. 2: "Large crowds followed [Jesus] and He *healed* them..." The power and authority by which Jesus healed was so noteworthy, that it should have caused the Pharisees to carefully examine just who Jesus is. But in spite of such evidence to divine activity, they come not rejoicing in the good that Jesus is doing, but in order to discredit Him.

Their question as to whether a man could divorce his wife "for any reason at all" (3) was a classic political ploy. There were two schools of thought among the rabbis. The conservatives (Shammai) believed the only thing that could justify divorce was adultery. The liberals (Hillel) advocated divorce for any reason that made the man unhappy with his wife. The Pharisees asked this question in hope of finding some discrepancy between Jesus and Moses. At the very least, they were confident that regardless of how Jesus answered the question, it would earn Him bad press with either the conservatives or the liberals.

But instead of getting tangled up in the divorce controversy, Jesus takes them back to the beginning of creation to restore God's view of marriage.

GETTING TO THE HEART OF JESUS' TEACHING (Mt 19:4-12)

**1. God has a specific intent and design for marriage that has not changed since creation [Mt 19:4-6].**

Let me draw attention to 3 aspects of God's view of marriage:

**a. Marriage is a one-flesh union between one man and one woman (4-5).**

Jesus quotes Gen 1:27 and 2:24 highlighting that marriage was designed for an exclusive male-female relationship as the formation of a new family unit. Male was designed for female; female was designed for male. And when they come together in a one-flesh relationship, there is such a significant bond that takes place that Jesus says, “they are no longer two, but one.”

Jesus goes back to Genesis (“from the beginning”) is to identify a divine, creation-design purpose for marriage. The definition of marriage is not a cultural construct and therefore it is not up for grabs as culture deteriorates. Beloved, to oppose the Bible’s original intent for marriage is to oppose God and blessing marriage was intended to be.

**b. The one-flesh union of marriage is sealed by God’s hand (6a).**

Vs. 6: “What therefore *God has joined together*, let no man separate.” Ultimately, the marriage union is not sealed by the preacher or even by the couple, but by God Himself. When a man and a woman come together in a one-flesh relationship, God considers and declares them to be one—a union bound by God.

**c. No person has the authority to revoke God’s seal upon marriage (6b).**

Again, vs 6: “What therefore God has joined together, *let no man separate*.” The Pharisees were asking how much latitude one could have to divorce without breaking the law. But Jesus makes it clear that they are asking the wrong question. God never intended for marriage to be severed. And even when divorce occurs, a legal separation does not ultimately reverse the God-ordained union between a man and a woman.

This is why Jesus goes on in vs. 9 to say, “*whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.*” Why? Because even though there may be a legal certificate of divorce, a married couple is not only joined legally but have become one flesh—a God ordained union that no legal document can ultimately reverse. *The point of Jesus’ teaching is to restore our understanding of how sacred the bond of marriage is.*

**2. Divorce is not God’s design, but rather the result of man’s hardness of heart [7-8].**

The Pharisees are referring to Deut 24, which they have taken out of context and twisted into a justification for divorce. But Moses does not condone divorce in Deut 24. Rather sets limits on remarriage to minimize the defilement that would take place in a culture that has forsaken the sacredness of marriage.

Jesus clarified that the only reason Moses even permitted divorce, was because of man’s hardness of heart. *Beloved, sin hardens the heart and destroys relationships. **You can either allow sin to harden your heart and kill your marriage, or you can kill your sin.** The point of Mt 19 is not to give up on God’s design for marriage, but to **let God use your marriage to expose the deeper sin in your heart that needs to die.*** When your spouse triggers something in your heart, they are not the enemy. They are a tool in the hand of God to reveal the poisonous cancer of sin that needs to be eradicated.

One of the benefits of the covenant-relationship of marriage, is that it’s a relationship that you don’t run from when it gets uncomfortable. And in not running, you have a greater opportunity to embrace the change that only God can bring about in your heart and character.

### 3. Marriage is worth the journey of sanctification it requires [10-12].

Jesus' view of marriage is so pure that it seemed radical and even risky to the disciples. They reason that if marriage is so permanent, than perhaps it would be better to not marry than to risk a difficult marriage (10).

Jesus' response is both theological and practical: "Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom is has been given." That is, most of us have been made for marriage and need marriage. The only exception is for those to whom God has given the gift of celibacy (singleness).

In vs. 12 Jesus refers to eunuchs as a way of speaking about those for whom marriage is not a suitable option. Some were born with a physical limitation or deformity that would not allow them to fulfill a one-flesh relationship with a spouse. Others were not candidates for marriage because of castration. It was common for kings to castrate some of the men who worked in their royal court (particularly those who served his harem) so as not to risk adulterous relations with the king's many wives. But the final category that Jesus mentions, is those who choose to live a single life, believing it to be God's will for them and being gifted by God to live a fruitful and contented life of singleness.

I believe Jesus' point is this: marriage is good and worth the risk of many trials! In fact, marriage is the first and most foundational blessing that God has given to humanity. *God has made us to desire and pursue marriage so much so that to pursue a life of contented, fruitful singleness apart from marriage requires a special gift from God—the very gift that Jesus Himself possessed!*

Beloved, your marriage, however difficult it may be, is worth the journey of sanctification it requires. When I was in my early 20's, I *wanted* to get married. Now in my late 40's I've come to realize that I *need* to be married.

I need marriage not only because I need a helpmate and not only because I have God-given desires and drives. I need marriage for God to show me the depth of my selfishness through the profound light that marriage sheds on my heart.

Marriage reveals the deeper levels of sin and selfishness that Christ is seeking to rescue us from. And therefore, marriage can become the place where we experience the greatest bounties of grace!

Beloved, if married life seems to be more of a battle than a blessing, you are on the verge of God's redemptive mercy, but you must look inward to examine your own heart. You and your spouse don't need to be rescued from each other as much as you both need to be rescued from self. I'm not denying that your spouse may be very difficult to live with. That you can do little about. What you *can* do, is pursue God's wisdom in becoming the person He wants *you* to be, even though the purifying fire of a trying season of marriage.

The GOOD NEWS is that God did not just give in to our hardness of heart. He sent His Son to bring the kingdom of God—to restore God's rightful order and design. He came to conquer our hardness of heart that leads us to abandon our covenant relationships (or to live selfishly within them).

#### TAKING THE WORD TO LIFE

##### a. To those who are married (or considering marriage)

Take ownership of God's vision for your marriage. You may not be considering divorce, but you may be nursing a hardness of heart toward your spouse. We all have some degree of hard-heartedness that cripples our relationships. Pray for God to help you see it and overcome it. Learn and relearn how to love, sacrificially as unto the Lord, just as He has loved us beyond what we deserve.

Let God use the conflicts and irritants of marriage to show you the remaining sediment of self and sin in your heart so that He can do His purifying, sanctifying work of increasing your joy by making you more like Christ.

b. **Those considering divorce**

Let me just give you three reasons to eliminate the divorce option:

- i. **Divorce is not God's will for you.** It's not uncommon to hear a believer who is contemplating divorce say, "I have prayed about it and God has given me peace." That "peace" is not from God. You don't need to pray about whether it is right or wrong. You need to pray for the power and grace to be faithful to God in your marriage. Don't act like the Israelites in Ezek 18 who said, "*the way of the Lord is not right*" when God is pleading with you to turn from your hardness of heart; to repent and discover the power of the gospel that reconciles you to God and each other.
- ii. **Beware of hardness in your heart.** "Divorce stems from hardness of heart and can lead to greater hardness of heart."<sup>1</sup> I understand how you can get to the point of just wanting relief from the stress of marriage. Yet there is a remarkable danger of removing the pressure that God may be using to reveal your need for transforming grace. Don't presume upon God's forgiveness while your heart is resisting God's will. Of course, just staying married doesn't automatically take care of your heart either. You need godly council from the scriptures to help you deal with the deeper heart issues.

Paul David Tripp: "We forget that God's *primary* goal is not changing our situations and relationships so that we can be happy, but changing us *through* our situations and relationships so that we will be holy."<sup>2</sup>

The reason the Bible does not present divorce as the solution to marriage problems is because it doesn't solve the problems that lead to divorce. "Divorce changes relationships, situations, and locations, but it doesn't change the heart."<sup>3</sup>

iii. **God can give you the necessary grace to walk the road of sanctification in your marriage.**

It's possible for you to find your identity and solace in Christ in such a way that you can live faithfully unto the Lord and love your spouse regardless of how they seem not to love you. I am not suggesting that you should stay in an abusive setting—marital abuse requires radical intervention. What I am saying is that a hard marriage doesn't have to end in divorce; In fact, it may be the very means by which God purifies you and makes you holy for your joy.

c. **Those already divorced**

I know that life can be complicated and very messy. And though your life has been marked by the pain of divorce I want to offer you some tremendous hope that the Bible points us to.

The reason marriage is so sacred and significant; the reason that God puts such high value on upholding His original intent and purpose for marriage is because He designed it to be a picture of an even greater reality. Marriage is meant to portray that God Himself is a covenant-keeping God. His Son is the perfect groom for His bride the church. He always loves her; always forgives her; never forsakes or abandons her; never abuses her; is always

<sup>1</sup> Garland, 380.

<sup>2</sup> Paul David Tripp. *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*. Pg. 241.

<sup>3</sup> Paul David Tripp. *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*. Pg. 242.

patient and caring, protecting her; and He never, never, never breaks His covenant with her.<sup>4</sup> The incredible news of the gospel is that though we may fail in our earthly commitments, God never fails in His covenant toward us.

Prayer: Lee Smith

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<sup>4</sup> John Piper, in his June 24, 2007 sermon on Mark 10:1-12 at [www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org)