

Title: This matter of marriage
Text: Matthew 19.1-12
Theme: What Jesus says about marriage
Series: Matthew #94
Prop Stmtnt: Jesus responds to questions about divorce with an emphasis upon the sacredness of the one-flesh relationship of marriage.

I once heard the story of a seminary homiletics professor who was instructing his class of aspiring preachers to use witty sermon titles. He told them to come up with a title that was so compelling and urgent that if it were posted on your church's sign, that it would cause a busload of people who were traveling by that Sunday to stop and come in. So, one of his students turned in a sermon entitled, "There's a bomb on your bus!" There are certain topics that I do not have to work at in order to get your attention. Marriage and divorce is one of them. And this is a subject matter that affects most of you personally. I do not have to convince you of its importance. But, while Jesus addresses the topic of divorce in this text, he actually gives more attention to the issue of marriage.

Read Text:

Living alone is lonely. Those of you who are widowed speak of how the loneliness feels suffocating. There seems to be no escape. But, living alone is preferred by most over living in a bad marriage. A good marriage is an incredible joy, an incredible gift and not very common. It takes work. It demands investment. It demands sacrifice. And it always demands work, investment and sacrifice. And yet, we usually don't feel like working, investing and sacrificing. Your spouse is probably not the person of your dreams. And your spouse's spouse is probably not the person of their dreams either. This means that your marriage is not going to ever be your Savior. What do you do when you realize that? We want to get to a place where we are past all of that effort in marriage, as if working, investing and sacrificing is a phase that we go through, like paying your dues. And then, after that, your marriage is like a self-driving car that just takes you where you want to go and you do not have to pay attention to it.

A man in the church who has been married for well over 50 years recently told me that it would have been so easy at so many points to just call a lawyer and call it quits. But, they didn't and he is so glad, so very glad. On the other hand, a couple that I knew of, had been married for well over 50 years and she finally had enough and divorced him. It is a cruel reminder that marriage is tough no matter how long you have been married. If you are going to have a good marriage, you have to work, invest and sacrifice, because a good marriage is not automatic, but it is worth it. It is worth your work, your investment and your sacrifice. Marriage is not more difficult now than it used to be. It has always been a challenge. The very thing that we long for is so difficult to attain. Most of us face this.

Thematic Setting

Now, before we start hiking through this text, let's stop for a second on the side of the road and look back over the terrain that we have just covered. Matthew 18 is a pivotal

chapter in this book. There are 3 main themes that Jesus focuses on, that, if all of us consistently took these to heart, the issue of divorce (at least among believers) would basically be a non-issue. Those 3 issues are: Humility, Caring for and restoring the vulnerable and Forgiveness. Think of how each of these speaks so powerfully to marriage. When I humble myself as it relates to marriage then I am believing and reminding myself that I am the biggest threat to my marriage. I am the biggest problem in my marriage. I am in need of change. Apart from the grace of God I will blow up my marriage. I cannot trust myself. I need God. Husbands, the biggest threat to your marriage is not your wife, it is you. That is how you need to think. Moms, the biggest challenge that you have in your home is not your kids. Your kids do not cause your anger. Your kids reveal the anger that is already there. You get angry because you want to be God, and always get your way, but your kids fail to worship you along with the rest of the world.

The second issue that Jesus focuses on in chapter 18 is caring for and restoring those who are vulnerable and hurting. Sadly, it is the rule that people exploit their positions of authority in order to serve themselves. Jesus is so amazingly different. And he calls us to use our positions of authority to serve those who are under our care. Husbands or wives who live with a heavy hand and critical spirit crush those who are under their care. There is hardly anything that is more draining and more exhausting than to live with the feeling that no matter what you do, you will never measure up. Your good is not enough. Your effort does not count. So, if every card in your hand is going to get trumped, why bother to play? If you do that to those around you and you will crush them.

The third issue that Jesus addresses is forgiveness. Humility reminds me that I need to be forgiven. Humility reminds me that my need of forgiveness before God is infinitely greater than the need of forgiveness that others have who have wronged me. Caring for those who are vulnerable gives me a heart that is ready to forgive, longs to forgive and rejoices when given the opportunity to forgive. So, beloved, you can see, that if you and your spouse, or the other members of your family are consistently marinating your family in these three ingredients, then divorce is basically a non-issue.

Cultural Setting

In order to get a sense of how the Jewish culture viewed the issue of divorce, you really do not need to look too far beyond the questions that the Pharisees asked Jesus. Look at v. 3. *“Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?”* Ladies! How does the wording of this question strike you? Does this not sound like men who not only rule, but who rule in such a way that women essentially have no rights, no say and no recourse. In other words, the woman is always wrong. The reason it sounds like that is because it was, for the most just like that. Let me explain.

Different Jewish rabbis had different opinions on what constituted legitimate grounds for a divorce. There were basically two main views based on the teachings of two rabbis; Shammai and Hillel. Each rabbi had his followers. Shammai and Hillel differed on the meaning of “some indecency” – Deut 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...” (Moses goes on to warn that she cannot be remarried to the man who divorced her, if she becomes the wife of someone else). The law of Moses concerning divorce was given to protect the woman from being treated like a piece of property to be bought and sold at will. The rabbi Shammai seemed to have understood this and taught that the only grounds by which a man could divorce his wife were if she were found to be immoral. Shammai therefore, interpreted “*some indecency*” as referring to sexual purity. The rabbi Hillel took a more lenient view. He interpreted “*some indecency*” as being just about anything you wanted. If you did not like her cooking or if you found a prettier woman, then your wife was “indecent.” Shammai’s view had initially been the prevailing view but by the time of Christ’s ministry, Hillel’s view had become more popular and as a result, women were indeed treated like property to be bought and sold at the whim of the man. The woman was constantly vulnerable to being accused of “some indecency” and sent packing.

If the issue were not so serious, it would be laughable to see how Christians like us are consistently accused of having churches that are nothing more than “he-man, women-haters clubs.” (If your childhood did not include the Little Rascals, then you need to go back and repeat it.) Let me give you a couple of examples. 1) We are unapologetically pro-life. We believe that life is created by God and is therefore sacred. We believe that every person is made in the image of God and that life begins at conception. Therefore, the deliberate killing of an unborn child is murder. However, because we are pro-life and therefore opposed to a position that promotes the murder of pre-born children, we are accused of being anti-woman. If a woman is pregnant, then, the argument goes; it is her body to do with whatever she wants. This distorted view has led to abortion. In the name of women’s rights, abortion on demand is the law of our land. The way this has played out is that men have the freedom to be promiscuous with whomever they want and if a woman gets pregnant then she is expected to get an abortion. So much for all that freedom talk. The way this has played out in China when they had their one-child per family policy was that unborn girls were aborted at such a high rate (gendercide) that it resulted in an entire generation of mostly men. The Economist magazine just released a study on this issue in both China and India and has shown that sex-selective abortion (gendercide) has resulted in 109 million girls being aborted. Not exactly what you would call women’s rights is it? And since there are not enough women for the men to marry, girls are shipped in from N. Korea, Thailand, Cambodia and other regions to be bought, sold and rented. Again, so much for women’s rights. What makes someone think that he can buy a woman and discard her when he is done with her? It is not Jesus. That sinful thinking comes from the sinful notion that I am a god who can live however I want and use people for my own gratification without consequences. If Christianity is nothing more than a bunch of he-man, women-haters, then why has Christianity been so attractive to women ever since it began? Why has the church consistently had more women than men in it? Students, ask your professors that question when they malign Christianity with a dishonest treatment of the facts. The real story is that the gospel rightfully understood and proclaimed creates a culture of protection, love, encouragement, life, and hope for those who are vulnerable to those who would otherwise abuse them. It is true that there have been egregious occasions where abusers have used the structures of the church to prey upon others and abuse them. But, that is not what Jesus is about. And what we saw

from chapter 18 is that anyone who has attempted to exploit the church for that reason would be better to have a millstone hung around his neck and thrown into the sea.

The truth is Jesus established a way of living that was radically counter-cultural. It still is! As we will see, he fundamentally rejected the notion that women could be treated as pieces of property to be bought and sold at the whimsical notions of a husband.

Immediate Setting (1-2)

Jesus is moving closer toward Jerusalem. While he visited Jerusalem for some of the Passovers and festivals, the majority of his ministry was in the Galilee region. But now, he is coming to Jerusalem in order to die. The hostility against him is increasing and the intensity continues to build. Keep in mind that evil and darkness is growing in anticipation of this conflict breaking out into the open. Meanwhile, Jesus continues to care for those who are broken and fragile. Large crowds followed him and he healed them. It is so easy to overlook these little statements of Matthew. But these are not throwaway lines or filler words. Large crowds create momentum, movements and even riots. The Pharisees are bound to stop this, if at all possible.

The Pharisees have already reached a verdict about Jesus. Now, they are simply looking for evidence that they can exploit to support their opinions. They are not asking these questions because they want to engage in a meaningful dialogue with Christ. They are seeking to trap him in his words. In the past, whenever I have studied the issue of divorce and remarriage, I have generally assumed that these Pharisees had been debating the two main views of this amongst themselves and were now asking Jesus what his views were. But, I am not so sure that was really the case. It certainly was not their primary motivation. These guys were on a mission to get Jesus. They wanted him destroyed. So, I think it is fair to assume that these guys were looking for something that they could use to pit him against Herod and exploit that angle in an effort to get Jesus killed. After all, it happened to John the Baptist, right? So, yes, this was an issue that the Pharisees discussed. It would be an issue that the local synagogues dealt with. But, I think that these Pharisees were only using it as an excuse to try to trap Jesus. So, they ask their first question. *“Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?”* and Jesus does not take their bait. Instead he addresses the question behind their question. This probably took the conversation in a direction the Pharisees did not anticipate, because their second question was just bad. Why did Moses command a man to get a divorce? Moses never commanded anyone to get a divorce. He did lay out the process that one had to follow so that the woman would be protected, but to say that Moses commanded people to get a divorce is being dishonest with the text.

This text is marked by three responses of Jesus. He is asked a question by the Pharisees and he responds. That is point #1. He is asked a second question by the Pharisees and he responds. That is point #2. Then, the disciples react to what Jesus says and Jesus in turn responds to them. That is point #3. In each case Jesus is responding to the issue behind the question or reaction. And that is so important to keep in mind. Jesus addresses the issue of marriage and divorce, but he is not giving a seminar on it. In other words, he is

answering questions but he is not asked every question there is on it. What he does is give us some very important footings that have to be foundational for our views of marriage and have to govern our discussions about divorce. So, the Pharisees are trying to trap and trick Jesus and they ask him if it is lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause? Jesus' response is informative, defining and challenging. Jesus makes it extremely clear that...

I. Marriage really matters! vs. 3-6

These guys are talking about marriage as if it were a fast-food wrapper. Use it for what you want then throw it away when you are done. For them, the important issue was whether you had filed the paperwork correctly and followed the proper legal steps. Jesus looks at it differently. In fact, his opening statement is a major rebuke. "Have you not read?" Don't miss this now. What is Jesus doing? He is pointing out a very important truth: There is only one way to properly interpret the Scriptures and the while the Pharisees had their own interpretation, their interpretation was wrong and Jesus was calling them out on it. Do not hide behind the excuse of "well, there are a lot of different views about that" as opportunities to do whatever you want because you will not be able to use that when you give an account to God for your decisions. Just because there are different views does not mean that they are right views. Let's look at what is clear.

A. God created marriage.

From the beginning marriage was planned, designed, created, instituted and set into motion by the Creator. This elevates the issue to an extremely high level. If you are going to mess with this, you are messing with what God has done. Your view of marriage is a reflection of your view of God. To speak the truth about this does not make me a hater. To not speak the truth about this, would make me a coward and would be unloving. Because God created marriage...

B. God defines marriage.

God made them male and female. The definition of marriage is not open for debate. Our culture, even our Supreme Court may attempt to redefine marriage and put laws on the books that expand society's definition of marriage to something else. But, man's legal definitions can never supersede God's definitions. It is like the story of the two ships that appeared to be on a collision course one night in a fog and the captain of the one ship kept ordering the other ship to change course, only to be informed that the other ship was not really a ship, but was a lighthouse. Man's courts and opinions may rule against God and order God to change course, but the Lighthouse is not in danger, the ship is. Marriage is defined by God as one man and one woman. This is underscored by Jesus.

C. God describes marriage.

Jesus now repeats the language that God used at the end of the creation week to describe marriage and says, "*Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.*" Then Jesus goes back and underscores

this point so that his audience does not miss it. *“They are no longer two but one flesh.”* Jesus is describing marriage as being a bond (hold fast) between two people that is so tight that you cannot tell where one ends and the other begins and anything that would seek to break this bond or weaken this bond would be like taking a knife and cutting off your arm or leg. Cutting up a marriage is like an amputation. God’s plan from the beginning was for people to be wrapped securely, intimately, purely, lovingly, joyfully, exclusively in a one woman-one-man-one-flesh relationship. This is not done to put people into bondage, but to provide freedom, warmth, and acceptance. Marriage is a gift from God so that you can get a taste of heaven where you know perfectly and are known perfectly. Therefore...

D. God warns about endangering a marriage.

“What therefore God has joined together let not man separate.” This separation has the idea of mutilation, tearing, shredding, ripping, dismembering or amputating. Endangering a marriage is a violent act. Anything that you do to contribute to the weakening of your marriage is an act of violence against that which God has joined. Marriage affects us so deeply because the stakes are so high. They are high because God is the one who not only created it, defines and describes it, but he is involved in it. God is not a passive spectator in your marriage. He cares deeply about how you treat your wife. He cares deeply about what you are doing to either strengthen your marriage or weaken your marriage. When you live in isolation from one another, when you threaten one another, when you humiliate one another, when you hide from one another, when you take what is to be only for your spouse and you share that with someone else you are ripping the flesh of your marriage; your own body. Sinning against your marriage is an act of violence against your own being. Therefore,

II. Divorce is very serious. vs. 7-9

The Pharisees then challenge Jesus by saying in essence, if marriage is as important as you say, then why does Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and send her away? In other words, there is a provision for divorce in the Old Testament law. Since God gave the law, that must mean that God has approved of divorce. Jesus responds. You missed the point. Divorce was not part of the creation mandate. Divorce was only given as a means to help manage the collateral damage of sin. If a woman was sent away without a certificate of divorce, then she was “damaged goods” and in the Old Testament world, her chance of survival outside of prostitution was minimal. The certificate of divorce was an act of kindness to protect the women while at the same time demonstrating the seriousness of faithfulness in marriage. The Pharisees of course miss this, and try to hide behind the fact that if they have the paperwork in order then they can get in and out of relationships with relative ease. These are the men who pride themselves on keeping all aspects of the law. They had to be stunned, and rightfully so, when Jesus says, if you divorce your wife for any reason, other than sexual immorality and you marry someone else, you have committed adultery. Remember the story of the Pharisees who caught the woman in an act of adultery, brought her to Jesus and demanded that she

be stoned? Jesus has just put the scarlet letter on these men and could have called the crowd to pick up stones.

Divorce is very serious. But Jesus says that sexual immorality can break up a marriage. The word that is translated sexual immorality is the word porneia from which we get our English word, pornography. Porneia is a general word for all sorts of sexual misconduct and is not limited to adultery. That means that sexual immorality is so toxic, so dangerous, and so destructive that it can rip apart what God has put together. Guard your heart. Guard your eyes. Guard your mind. Guard what you read, what you think about, and what you view. Guard what you say to people to whom you are not married. Some of you are in danger of crossing over that line of fascination, intrigue, and flirting to giving away that which is not yours to someone else. When you indulge yourself in fantasy and search for another relationship, you are playing with a fire that will not warm you, it will scorch you and burn you deeply. While these words of Jesus are strong with warning, the warning has been dipped in love. Listen to the one who died for you. When you get in too deep, your heart will deceive you and you will rationalize almost everything that you once held dear. Do not rationalize your sin. Do not give sin excuses. Damn those idols, for they want to damn you.

III. Marriage is not for everyone. vs. 10-12

The disciples obviously thought about marriage the way the Pharisees did. When Jesus spoke of the importance of staying in one marriage faithfully to the end, the disciples thought that this was basically impossible. Who wants to be trapped in that for the rest of their lives? Their conclusion was that it was better to not get married then. Jesus says, that celibacy is an option for some. When Jesus said that not everyone can receive this saying, he is referring back to what the disciples just said about it being better not to marry. Not everyone can receive this. In other words, while some people are eunuchs and therefore celibate, not by choice, some are celibate by choice and that is fine. However, that is not the case with all. Those who marry need to marry and live in marriage as God has established it. Those who do not marry and chose not to marry are not in any way shape or form second-class people. Nor is there “something wrong with them.” Some, like the apostle Paul, choose singleness for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.

So, when the disciples say, probably in exaggeration for effect, that “it is better not to marry!” Jesus agrees that in some cases, this is true. If a pioneer type missionary wants to try to establish a beachhead for the gospel in a hostile area, we can certainly understand why he may consider singleness and therefore celibacy as part of his calling. In the end, Jesus does not elevate the status of single people over those who are married and neither does he elevate the status of married people over those who are single.

Conclusion:

- 1) There is a concerted effort to shame and intimidate churches into accepting and even promoting LGBT and its associative out-workings.

For years, I have thought that this will be an issue that some will seek to use against us. Your membership in this church may cost you your job. Do not assume that you have 1st amendment rights anymore. Your right to believe as you want, is now being interpreted as you only have the right to believe what we want. But, while the cultural ground has shifted, we will not change. We will not give an inch on this issue and we will not be intimidated into changing nor will we be silenced. In fact, we need to accept the words of Christ at face value. The world does not like the real Jesus, and the world does not like the real church. Get over it. Our goal is not to get the world to like us and approve us. It does not matter how many wells we dig in 3rd world countries or how many soup kitchens we set up, the world will throw us under the bus because we believe that sin is evil and that faith alone in Christ alone is our only hope. So, while the world really hates us, do not forget that the world really needs us.

2) The aggressive agenda against the church is a thin veneer that covers the sad and lonely lives underneath.

Why is there this huge effort to shove the LGBT agenda into everyone's face? The reason is, it is not working on a personal level. Let me explain. Let's say that your 12-year old daughter does not have a smart phone and she thinks that you ought to be arrested for child abuse and neglect because she is the only person in the entire world who does not have one and if she gets one, then all of life's problems will instantly be solved. All of her feelings of inadequacy and being left out will instantly be taken care of. If you are lonely, afraid, insecure and struggling with feelings of inadequacy, getting a smart phone will not fix that. If you get a smart phone, you will now be lonely, afraid, insecure and struggling with feelings of inadequacy, but with a larger monthly bill. The solution is deeper than a phone. But, the consequences of getting a smart phone are not that big. However, if you believe that you struggle with feelings of loneliness, misunderstanding, fear, insecurity and inadequacy because you think that you were born with the wrong gender and you go through a gender transition process, what happens when you discover that you are still lonely, misunderstood, fearful, insecure and inadequate? Not only has your extreme effort not fixed you, but it has really complicated matters. The suicide rate of people who have transitioned goes up a staggering 1,900%. Instead of helping people find themselves, the results are so severe, that John Hopkins University Medical Center that once led this effort now refuses to offer this service. Do you see my point? We live in the midst of broken and hurting people. Some of these people wrongfully think that the solution to their brokenness is getting a sex change, or being gay, or prescription drugs, or buying stuff on Amazon, or having an affair, or getting a new spouse, or _____. None of those things satisfy. We know what does because we are broken and needy people. We face loneliness, misunderstanding, insecurity and feelings of inadequacy all of the time. The only difference for us is that we have a Savior. We have a Redeemer. We have an Advocate. We have the adequacy of Christ. And with that comes the rock-solid promise that one day we will be with him. I want every person who struggles with materialism, same-sex attraction, drug and alcohol abuse, homosexuality, anger, pride, cutting, pornography, and the fear of man to find their hope in Christ. That is why this entire issue is not primarily a moral or cultural battle that is going to be won or lost in the media or

the Supreme Court. This is a personal issue that is going to be won in one life at a time that comes to Jesus and grows in Jesus and rests in Jesus.

3) In order to be the kind of church (people) who can help others, we must be a people who are passionate about pursuing faithful marriages.

Some of you are in a marriage that feels like I did last Monday. You are running a marathon with a 20 mph headwind, right in your face. By mile 12 I lost all feeling in my hands and I had 14 miles to go. By mile 23 my hamstrings were getting so tight from the cold that I could no longer get a stride. I had to stop, not to quit, but to stretch. Stopping felt good. It did. But when I did, in order to stretch, immediately fellow runners said, "come on man, keep going, we're getting close." The crowds were a bit more intense. "You are not quitting. You have not come all the way to Boston to stop now. Not here. Oh no, not on our watch." And on and on. It was like they were taking it personal. So, yea, stopping felt good in the moment, but the long-term discouragement of quitting would have been so much greater than the temporary relief of quitting, whereas, the long-term feeling of finishing was infinitely better than the short term relief of stopping. Beloved, we are finishers. We are finishers by God's grace. And we will cheer one another on, and will each other to the end, knowing that it creates a culture of encouragement and faithfulness and trust where other lonely, broken people, just like us can join our race because they have found Christ.