

The Gospel of Marriage

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on March 15, 2020.

Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. And large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” 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 the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” 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. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.” The disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” But he said to them, “Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. 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” (Matthew 19:1–12).¹

Is it possible to read a passage of Scripture, or even study it, and obsess on a particular point and miss the greater point? Is it possible to come to a passage to establish a practical course of action and miss what the passage reveals to us about God? Is it possible to hear one ordinary word read aloud and fixate upon it and miss the special revelation? Is it possible that the one word can distract your mind and miss the nourishment of the preached Word?

That one word is *divorce*, and it is likely that most hearing this sermon today have been directly or indirectly impacted by it. It is even possible that as you heard the Word read that your stomach knotted, your blood pressure rose, and your mind has begun to build a protective wall. This is understandable yet unfortunate.

Whatever your preconceived notion, let me state clearly that this passage is not *ultimately* about divorce. Yet, divorce is a topic in this passage, and yes, this passage does give us some clarity on grounds for divorce. But the primary themes of this passage are actually the grace of God and the gift of marriage (or celibacy). Don’t miss them and miss the point of the passage.

Let’s set the stage: Jesus departs Galilee and returns to Judea where he continues to have a large following. As an outward sign of his identity, authority, and gospel message, he continues to work miracles of healing. As he works, the Pharisees come to him with a question, seeking not to be taught but to entrap.

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

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The question is short but loaded: “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” Is divorce *legal*? The basis of the Pharisees’ question is likely Mosaic case law, specifically, Deuteronomy 24 which states,

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 and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, and if she goes and becomes another man’s wife, and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance (Deut. 24:1–4).

A careful reading of these verses reveals the Pharisee’s presumption rather than Scriptural permission. The intent of the Pharisees, however, is not interpretive precision but entrapment, an attempt to pit the living Word against the inscripturated Word. A fool’s errand, I might add!

How Jesus responds is integral to our understanding of this passage. He does not engage in legal debate about divorce, (He does not take the bait!), instead he answers this essential question: What is marriage?

What is marriage?

Jesus answers this question by taking them back to the beginning, in Genesis: “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 the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh.” This is true marriage, plain and simple.

Let’s consider carefully what Jesus said. As Scripture reveals, who created the institution of marriage? Is marriage the result of social norms handed down by human tradition? Is it merely the result of social engineering? No, God created the institution of marriage and has revealed it to us in his Word.

Second, God created a biological man and a biological woman, literally. It was not their choice as to their defining sex nor their prerogative to manipulate it. God took the man and the woman (not two men or two women) and joined them together in the covenant of marriage, a sacred union by and before God. This *is* the true establishment of marriage.

Third, the covenant of marriage establishes a new family, not an extension of another. Husband and wife leave their respective families physically and emotionally and become one legally and one flesh consummately. Therefore, in this earthly kingdom in which we live, husband and wife are “no longer two but one flesh.” Such was marriage in the Garden of Eden, so shall it be throughout creation.

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Why does Jesus do this? Why does he answer the Pharisees' question by first defining marriage? If we do not know what God-created and God-established marriage looks like, our sinful hearts can lead us off into all kinds of perverted deviations. If we don't understand what marriage is, then we might think a union between a man and a man, or a woman and a woman is marriage. Or, if we don't understand what marriage is, then we might think it is merely a helpful social structure or a burdensome outdated arrangement. Or, if we don't understand what marriage is, then we might think it may be simply terminated based on "irreconcilable differences." God created and established the institution of marriage from the beginning. Therefore, Jesus first *defines* marriage and then responds, "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

But what about the Pharisees' question? Is divorce legal or not? The problem is that it is the wrong question, isn't it? It's like a child asking a parent, "How much can I get away with?" Answer? Wrong question. A better question is: What is divorce?

What is divorce?

If we consider Jesus' definition of marriage and his summation, "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate," then a simple definition of divorce is the reverse: Divorce is man separating what God has joined together. The Pharisees apparently hear the same but are not satisfied, asking, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and send her away?"

The Pharisees are probably referring to Deuteronomy 24, which as we have read, is anything but a "command." But the Pharisees' question is more than flawed; it is searching for license. Twisting the case law to meet their desires, they have interpreted a law intending to protect a woman from being demeaned and mistreated into a license for divorce. Worse, they want God to say something he never said and command that which he hates.

Jesus quickly corrects this error: divorce is not a command of God, nor a gift from him. Divorce is a concession given because of the hardness of the human heart. It is not God's design from the beginning. This is not to say that everyone who is divorced is guilty of sin, nor is divorce the unpardonable sin. What Jesus is saying is that divorce is not the result of God's design but the sinfulness of man.

Because marriage is God's design, not divorce, it serves as the standard for determining whether divorce is permissible. So strong is the covenant of marriage that it continues despite the sinful whims of the heart or the legal actions of man. Therefore, as Jesus explains, with the exception of sexual immorality, divorce and remarriage is breaking the seventh commandment. In addition to sexual immorality, Scripture reveals other cases where divorce may occur, such as abandonment and abuse, but the point here is not building a case for divorce but *the standard of marriage*.

This is why Jesus says that no-exception divorce and remarriage is committing adultery. Why? Because the covenant established is by and before God, consummated in union, and broken only by another sexual union. The point is not the specific sin, which is presumed in all references to

divorce in Scripture, but to the continuing and unbroken covenant of marriage. This should not lead us to presume that divorce is inevitable in all cases of infidelity nor should it lead us to become cynical about marriage in general. Rather, let's back up to the beginning of this passage and ask this question: Why did God create marriage?

If divorce happens, why did God create marriage?

Of course, the short answer to this question is that God created marriage before the Fall and divorce is a sinful result of the Fall. This in fact is what the disciples deduce: "If such is the case...it is better not to marry." The disciples are not promoting sexual immorality but are simply deducing that celibacy may be a better option than marriage.

Interestingly, Jesus does not disagree, explaining that just as God has given to some the gift of marriage, so also he has given to others the gift of celibacy. The point is, whether from birth, life, or choice, celibacy is a gift from God for the sake of his kingdom purposes. To use this gift results in a singular heavenly focus, but not everyone receives this gift. But those who do receive it should use it.

How then are we to understand marriage? To put it bluntly, if divorce can happen, why should two sinners get married? There are actually several reasons why a man and woman should marry. One reason is companionship. In the Garden, God said, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (Gen. 2:18). God did not create a dog or another man but a woman, the perfect fit.

A second reason is procreation (which includes the enjoyment of it and protection in it). God commanded the man and woman, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (Gen. 1:28), a command consistently repeated. In fact, when the Prophet Malachi confronts the adultery of Judah, he asks, "And what was the one God seeking [in the faithful marriages of his covenant people]?" Answer? "Godly offspring" (Mal. 2:15). As God designed it, procreation is to be within marriage and from it flows the blessing of a heritage of the Lord.

But there is a *greater* reason for a man and a woman to marry. Addressing husbands and wives, Paul writes,

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh" (Eph. 5:22–31).

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This is timeless truth for every married couple, but did you notice how he weaves the example of Christ and the church into his instruction? He's not only giving us practical advice; he's teaching us that marriage is a testimony. What is the testimony?

Why did God create marriage? Why does he sustain marriage? Why does he give the gift of marriage? Listen closely to what marriage preaches: Who is the head of the church? "Christ is the head of the church." Who is the body of Christ? The church is "his body." Who is the Savior of the church? Christ is "himself its Savior." Who submits to Christ? "the church submits to Christ." Who loved the church? "Christ loved the church." Who gave himself for the church? Christ "gave himself up for her." What is Christ doing for his church? He is cleansing and sanctifying her "by the washing of water with the word." Why is Christ doing this? "so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish." Therefore, Christ nourishes and cherishes the church.

Paul sums it up this way: "The mystery [of marriage] is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:32). Why did God create marriage? Why does he sustain it? Why is marriage important? Why should we protect it? Because marriage is telling...of Christ and the church. And that is why Jesus does not answer the Pharisees directly on the question about divorce, isn't it? It's also why the point of this passage is not about divorce. The point is that the gift of marriage preaches the gospel and therefore should not be dismissed flippantly.

Is divorce a reality in this fallen world? Sadly, it is, and many have scars from it. But divorce is not the *ultimate* story; the gospel is. And even amidst the painful repercussions of divorce, we can rejoice in the gospel of marriage, because it points us to Christ, who will never leave us or forsake us and who loves us with an eternal, unchanging love.