

What do you think about marriage? Your experience with marriage will likely affect your answer. During growing up years, some of us had opportunity to observe our parent's marriage. The health of their marriage likely affects our view. If you're married, the state of your current marriage will affect your opinion. If you're unmarried but have close married friends, their marriage may influence your thoughts. Then there's high profile marriages. They might influence our view of marriage a little.

One of the most challenging arenas in which to attempt marriage is Hollywood. Some marriages in Hollywood make it. But many don't. In fact, some don't last very long at all.

Way back in 1964, singer Ethel Merman and actor Ernest Borgnine got married. Each had been married and divorced multiple times. But they thought they would give it another go. So they got married and went on their honeymoon. 32 days later they were divorced. Ernest claimed his bride got jealous of the attention he received from adoring fans on their honeymoon. But Ethel got her revenge. She wrote her autobiography and devoted an entire chapter to her ex. It consisted of one blank page.

Then there was Zsa Zsa Gabor and Felipe de Alba in the early 1980's. She was an actress and he a Mexican movie star. They got married on a ship off the coast of Mexico. But there was one problem. Zsa Zsa was still married to her 7th husband, Michael O'Hara. So Zsa Zsa and Felipe annulled their marriage the next day.

In 2014 Britney Spears and childhood friend Jason Alexander were in Las Vegas for the weekend. They were partying together when they decided on a whim to go to a wedding chapel and get married. She ditched the traditional wedding gown for a belly baring top, jeans and a baseball cap. But their spontaneous choice didn't turn into marital bliss. Their marriage lasted only 55 hours before it was annulled.

Then there was Kim Kardashian and NBA player Kris Humphries. They had a multi-million dollar wedding which was filmed for a two part wedding special on the Entertainment network. But after 72 days and just 2 weeks after their wedding aired on TV, Kardashian called it quits. She claimed she couldn't keep up with her reality show and maintain a marriage. High profile marriages that begin and end so quickly can also impact our view of marriage.

So what do you think about marriage? Is it something you support and celebrate? Is it something you hope to get into? Is it something you want to stay away from or something that brings up pain? Whatever your marital status

today, marriage can affect us. With so many differing views about marriage, divorce and remarriage out there, it's critical for Christians to know what God says about marriage.

Today, we're going to hear Jesus' teaching about marriage as He answers questions about divorce. Why are we talking about this? We return to the Gospel of Matthew today. We're going to try to finish it around Easter. Last summer, when we last looked at Matthew, Jesus had just completed some teaching on how His disciples must live in their communities of faith. Now He begins his final journey to Jerusalem and the cross. Along the way, He will experience increasing opposition from the Pharisees and other powerful figures threatened by Him. Yet He will continue to teach and minister. Today's passage shows us another of those teaching moments. We're going to see what Jesus says about marriage, divorce and singleness. Then we'll consider how we might respond with God's help and strength to what He reveals to us just before we come to His table.

Matthew 19:1-12 (ESV) (Page 694)

19 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 the two 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."

Jesus finishes teaching on discipleship within the community of faith. Now He and His disciples leave Galilee, that far north region that was Jesus' ministry base. So they begin the journey south towards Jerusalem. They travel south on the east side of the Jordan River or beyond the Jordan. Jerusalem is on the west side of the Jordan. News has spread of His healing ministry in Galilee. So large crowds meet him in this southern region. He heals them.

But then some Pharisees show up. We have seen Matthew point out the increasing hostility of some Pharisees towards Jesus. They seek ways to discredit and even destroy him. This group comes to test Jesus – not to thank Him for

His healing ministry among the people or to encourage Him because He's created a renewed interest in God. They come to test Him; to entrap Him; to find some way to trip Him up and then spread the news that he's failed.

So they ask the question "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" The nature of this question reveals that they asked him about something different than modern divorce. Here it was only the man would make the decision about the divorce because women had little or no rights in that time. He could unilaterally decide to divorce his wife and she had no recourse.

This question was a hot topic in contemporary Judaism at the time. Remember the two primary schools of interpretation of Jewish Law. There was the conservative school of Shammai and the more liberal school of Hillel. Shammai said that a man may not divorce his wife unless he has found impurity in her. This refers to sexual impurity. He may have discovered she was not a virgin on their wedding night or it may refer to some later impurity. But the school of Hillel said you could divorce your wife if she spoiled the dinner or if he found another fairer than she." Pharisees of this school got divorced for these reasons, the most famous being Josephus, the Jewish historian.

So "is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?" Hillel would say yes. Shammai would say no. What would Jesus say? In His first response, He does not answer their question. He bypasses their focus on divorce and instead goes back to the basics of marriage.

What does Jesus teach about marriage? (19:1-6)

His first phrase must have stung them a little. "Have you not read? You experts in the law, 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?'" Jesus goes right back to the beginning. In Genesis 1:27, we're told God created them male and female. And in Genesis 2:24 we read about leaving father and mother, holding fast to one's wife and becoming one flesh." Jesus elevates marriage to something much higher than a mere human decision made on a whim after a night of partying in Las Vegas.

Jesus teaches that **Marriage is not merely a human decision but a God ordained relationship.** God instituted marriage. God designed his human creatures as male and female to join together in a marriage. God intended this relationship to be permanent, lifelong and consecrated by sexual union. So Jesus lifts the discussion from "the number of legal ways to divorce" to God's sacred creation called marriage. He brings them back to God's will and design not

some technical theological debate. Their ultimate focus should not be on escape clauses from marriage but the holiness of marriage.

But Jesus does not only talk about marriage God ordained. He describes it as God-joined. Verse 6 - "So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let man not separate." Jesus teaches that **God joins two together in marriage. So humans should not separate what God has joined.** It is a serious thing to pry apart what God has joined together. A marital union is in a very deep sense, God's doing. With this in mind, divorce goes against God's structure of humanity. Divorce can be rebellion against God. Now, this may seem severe or harsh. If you or a loved one has gone through a divorce, you might immediately think of exceptions or other factors or other passages of Scripture that go further on this. We will get to that in a few minutes. But for this moment, we need to hear what Jesus, the Son of God has to say about marriage. Marriage is God's ideal. God calls His disciples, male and female, to aim for this if they're called to marriage. In a culture which makes light of marriage, disregards marriage and redefines marriage, we need to see again the sacredness of marriage as God designed it.

Now if these Pharisees were really interested in honestly exploring big questions about marriage and divorce, you'd think they might have stopped there to go away and ponder this. Or you'd think they might have thanked Jesus for bringing them back to the basics and reminding them of God's original design.

But remember their purpose in coming? They came to test Him. They think Jesus walked right into their trap. They likely expected a strict or severe answer like this. They think they've got him because in effect he's saying "no divorce." But Moses did teach about divorce in the law.

They refer to this in verse 7. "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and send her away?" "You just basically said no divorce Jesus. But Moses commands one to give certificates of divorce. So you're willing to go against Moses, the law giver, the founder of Judaism?"

What are they talking about? Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Let's go there and see what it says. It's the 5th book of the Old Testament. It's on page 150 in the pew Bibles.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 (ESV)

24 "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,² and if she goes and becomes another man's wife,³ 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, ⁴ 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.

Now to our modern eyes, this passage looks pretty bad at first glance. It seems like Moses gives permission to men to just divorce their wives. It looks like husbands can just banter women around because they find no favor in her; or some indecency or they hate her or she's defiled. But he gets to do what he wants. No wonder critics of Christianity find fault in the Old Testament.

But's let's step back a moment and think about what might have been going on to bring this law out of Moses. One possibility concerns something called a dowry. The ESV Study Bible describes how this would work. The dowry was the bride's father's marriage present to her. By charging his wife with indecency, some commentators think the husband got to keep the dowry. Now if the woman remarried, she would likely receive a second dowry. If that husband cast her out or died, she might still have her second dowry. If her first husband comes along and remarries her, He gets control over her second dowry.

Other commentators think the first husband had to forfeit his wife's dowry upon divorcing her. So to get it back, he would remarry her after her second divorce to try to gain both her first and second dowry. Either way, it seems the law is designed more to protect the woman and to discourage men from what almost seems like wife swapping. As bad as this first looks, Moses is actually dictating a law that begins to protect the rights of women. Yet the Pharisees bring this up to contradict Jesus first response.

What does Jesus teach about divorce? (19:7-9)

Now comes Jesus' second response where Jesus teaches about divorce. "Because of the hardness of your heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but it was not so from the beginning." So notice the Pharisees in verse 7 state Moses *commands* divorce. Jesus in verse 8 says Moses *allowed* divorce. Those are two very different verbs. A command is something that must definitely be done. An allowance is something that's put in place for the less than ideal situation. Moses did not command divorce. But he allowed it. Why?

Hard hearts are a major cause of divorce. Moses permitted divorce because of the hardness in people's hearts. Jesus applies this to the Pharisees. Divorce is allowed because of your hard hearts. This doesn't mean that only hard hearted people get divorced. Hard hearted rebellion against God in a community or culture can negatively affect

marriages. When people see celebrities and royals get divorced and remarried multiple times, it can influence others. The presence of sin in a community means some marriages would be seriously defiled and irretrievably damaged. So God allowed divorce in those cases because of hard heartedness in the community.

But hardness of heart within a marriage can also contribute to a divorce. Commentator Michael Wilkins points out several ways hard hearts hurt marriages.

1) A hardened heart resists God's will for the individual and for the marriage. Rather than following God's way to hold fast to wife or husband the person wants their own way and sins against God's way. So this sin begins to break the bond of oneness God intended.

2) A person with a hard heart resists opening himself or herself up to their spouse. If love is commitment to a person, then hate is rejecting the person. For whatever reason whether trivial or complex, it is possible to start hardening one's heart to the one whom the husband or wife used to be so committed. The spiritual, emotional, and relational openness to each other they once enjoyed is cut off. The commitment turns gradually to outright rejection so the unity of the marriage is violated.

3) A hardened heart cannot extend or receive forgiveness. This becomes most tragic, Wilkins says, because with this kind of hardening, a person withdraws into one's own little world. They recreate reality by rationalizing sinful activities and attitudes, casting blame on everyone else, and develop a coating of bitterness that warps all relationships. They refuse to repent and accept God's forgiveness and refuse to extend God's forgiveness to the spouse. Their spouse can never measure up to their expectations which destroys oneness.

4) Another kind of heart hardening comes when one partner in marriage has been continually hurt by the other. Each time the hurt occurs, the hurt one hardens the heart toward the spouse so they won't be hurt again.

God weeps over these relationships. But because hard heartedness could destroy everyone in a family, divorce was permitted. Yet hard hearts don't have to stay that way. Jesus taught in Matthew 18 the prescription for hard hearts – Humility, purity, accountability, discipline, repentance, reconciliation, and restoration.

Jesus then adds His verdict on divorce in verse 9. **Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.** Jesus says no to divorce except for sexual immorality. Notice, He doesn't say, except for adultery. Adultery is included. But sexual immorality is broader – it includes any form of sexual sin. This

violates the one flesh principle. Divorce is permitted in such a case. But not required. It is possible for marriages to recover from immorality by God's great grace, power and the willingness of both partners to cooperate with what God is doing.

Jesus warns that if a divorce is obtained for any reason other than sexual immorality, then a second marriage begins with adultery. He speaks against what the Pharisees implied with their first question – “is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause.” Jesus says no to the many trivial reasons that were used so frequently in the first century. If a man divorced his wife because she spoiled a meal and then remarried another woman, the second marriage of a person begins with adultery. But once a second marriage has occurred, it would be further sin to break it up. The second marriage should not be thought of as continually living in adultery for the man and woman were now married to another and not anyone else. If someone divorces because of the sexual immorality of their partner, then a remarriage to another does not constitute adultery.

But you might be wondering about other very serious problems in a marriage. What about abuse; drug addiction; alcoholism or abandonment? First Corinthians 7 speaks to the abandonment question and states if the spouse is an unbeliever and leaves, then the believing spouse is no longer bound. Abuse, drug addiction and alcoholism constitute very serious threats to a marriage and the children. In Malachi 2 God speaks about hating divorce and hating a man who covers himself with violence. To express oneself with violence in the home towards a spouse is a fundamental breach of everything marriage is supposed to be. These are not trivial reasons that Jesus speaks against here. They require serious counsel and life change if there is any hope for reconciliation.

So Jesus lays out His teaching on divorce. The Pharisees have failed in their quest to trap him. Apparently they leave. The disciples have been listening to this. They come up with to me an incredible statement in verse 10. “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” Why on earth would they say that? It is true most of the disciples were young and single. We know Peter wasn't because Jesus had healed his mother in law earlier. But still, why would they say this? Were they also somewhat affected by the common practice of divorcing wives for any reason? Was their view of marriage so weak that they deemed it too hard to commit without the escape clause of liberal divorce laws?

What does Jesus teach about singleness? (19:10-12)

Whatever their motivation, Jesus refutes their statement in verse 11. “Not everyone can receive this saying – It is better not to marry – but only to those whom it is given.” So God gives some people the gift of being able to say “It is better not to marry.” In that culture, marriage was by far, the dominant relationship among adults. To be single and celibate was rare and considered strange. But in the kingdom of heaven, there was a place for single people.

God calls some to singleness for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus shows this in verse 12. He uses the term eunuch which first referred to a court official who had been sterilized because of his close proximity to the royal harem or princesses. Jesus applies this term more broadly and says – There are eunuchs who have been so from birth. Some are unable to have children. Some are made so by others – like the court eunuchs. Then there are eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven. This does not mean that they physically did something to themselves. But they accepted the call to singleness for the purpose of the kingdom of heaven. Sometimes we need to recognize the possible call to singleness on someone’s life instead of trying to match make for them. Maybe God has called you to singleness for the purposes of His kingdom. That is a high a holy calling. You would follow in the footsteps of people like Jesus and Paul who lived the single life to the glory of God.

How might we respond to this?

Now we started today by asking what you thought of marriage. Now we know what God thinks about marriage. God is holy. God is merciful. God is powerful. God gives His people power to carry out His Word.

All of us need to recognize that lifelong marriage until death is God’s ideal. God designed marriage this way from the beginning. It is very serious to break up a marriage and cause hurt for many more than the two who divorce. We must also recognize that Jesus gives grounds for divorce in the case of sexual immorality. Divorce is not required but is permitted along with some other very serious breaches of marital vows. I detail this further in a previous message on Matthew 5:31-32 on March 1, 2015. If you would like a copy of that, please contact the church office or me.

To those who are happily married, thank God for His gift. Continue to cherish and work at this holy relationship God has given you. Marriage is a God project. God has joined it together. This was part of God’s design and God’s plan. If you’re marriage is going well, it’s likely because you’re putting work into it and depending on God’s strength for it. Keep at it and never leave God out of the strength you need to keep going

To those in a struggling marriage – where both parties want to make it work – remember God has joined you together. First come to God and if there is anything you personally need to repent from, do it. Then together seek help and support. One way you can do that in our church fellowship is through Rodney and Catharine Dietzmann who are certified marriage mentors with the organization NAME Canada. They can walk with couples to establish healthy patterns and connections to God so you can center your relationship on Him. Or you must seek out counsel or talk to one of the pastors. Recognize God is for you and wants to empower you to stay together. If you know you're in a struggling marriage and you're doing nothing about it – STOP. Get on your horse and get at your marriage.

To those in a struggling marriage – only one partner wants to work at it. Pray. Continually turn to God for hope and help. Ask other people to pray. Get support. Don't try to do it alone. Seek counsel. Call one of us or someone else you trust.

To those separated- If there is any shred of hope – grab it. If you don't believe it's possible to experience restoration after what has happened, there are people sitting in this room right now who have experienced it because of Christ. We can connect you to some who can help.

To those divorced. I can't even begin to imagine what you have been through. Know that God loves you and cares for you. Maybe there's some hardness in your heart that you need God to work on. Acknowledge that. Then if you need healing, seek out support to heal. By the Lord's strength and power, live a Christ-like life with respect to your ex; any children; any step children. Receive the Lord's forgiveness.

To children of divorced parents; especially teenagers or young adults, I also cannot imagine what you have been through. If you have not processed this or are struggling to deal with it, will you let me know? Ask others to pray and support you. Ask Christ for wisdom on how to relate to your parents. Learn from what you have seen and felt and know the pain of divorce. By God's strength, don't repeat those patterns. Recognize that if you marry, it is a sacred relationship, ordained by God to permanent and lifelong. Use what Christ has taught you and how He has sustained you to encourage others.

To young people or those unmarried. Don't mess around with sex outside of marriage. That is reserved for the sacred marriage relationship. If you mess around with this, then you bring baggage and messes into future relationships. Reserve that for your spouse. Ask the Lord for His help to remain pure until marriage.

If you have already had sex outside of marriage; Repent; Stop; By God's strength, reserve this for your marriage.

Don't think you have to get married to be fulfilled. God can use single people greatly in His kingdom. So seek Him and find your fulfillment in Him. He will lead you to where He wants you to go.

If you don't know Christ, now would be a great time to turn to Him. The greatest resource for any marital recovery or marital deepening is Jesus Christ in your life. He died to pay for our sins so we could be saved from them. When we trust in Him, we are reconciled with God. We can begin the journey of reconciliation with others.

Whatever way God has spoken to your heart today, now is the time to respond to Him. You can do that through our celebration of the Lord's Supper now.