

Matthew 19:1-12
Marriage matters, and divorce dodges

Believe in marriage God's way

Have you ever **stood on the sand** as the waves come in and out, and felt, as a wave recedes back down the beach, the sand being slowly swept away from around and even under your feet?

I think that is precisely what many of us will have seen over the course of our lives with the understanding of **marriage** in this country - probably in all of the Western democracies.

When I was a kid, a couple who were living together as man and wife before marriage would have been quite openly referred to as "living in sin". Nowadays it's the norm, and little phrase sounds old-fashioned and, even worse, religiously judgemental - even if you could argue that theologically, it's totally accurate. And Christian couples approaching marriage, but wanting to uphold that "old" - or we would say "proper" - standard of purity must be finding it increasingly difficult to not give into those powerful temptations.

When I was a kid, you could say "man and wife" without anyone taking offence. Nowadays we have to be wary at times. Personally, I don't think I find it a compromise to say "*husband* and wife", instead of insisting on the older term. But there are certainly some people who choose to be sensitive about which one is used.

And when **David Cameron** tried to redefine both the term "Conservative" *and* the term "marriage" at a stroke, the best part of a decade ago, attempting by government decree to overturn what had been understood in every society since records have been kept, it showed how fast the tide is running and eroding the sand on which we're standing.

On that particular point, I think I still do choose to be picky over my words. The **Oxford English Dictionary**, I just read yesterday, has recently decided to redefine the word "woman". My intention is always to use quote marks, or the word "so-called", in any discussion of - note the quote-marks! - "same-sex marriage". I do not believe it is marriage (with *no* quote marks), and I refuse to speak that lie simply for the sake of political correctness. I think I could still simply use, in that context, the vaguer word "relationship", though I expect that might be labelled "hate speech" before too long, the way things are going.

Not that Jesus is dealing with the "same-sex relationship issue" here in Matthew 19. But the foundational verse that he quotes back at these Pharisees clearly *does* apply in that area, too. That's exactly where you should point people if they ask you what the Bible says on this matter. But today I'm not wanting to say any more about that particular line, but just confine myself to thinking through the question that Jesus was confronted with. And just what that question makes me suspect about the hearts of the people who ask it, too.

What's behind asking these questions?
Are you prepared to accept Jesus' answers? as

Jesus restates, applies and defends God's original purposes in his design of marriage

- **What's behind asking these questions?**

Before just diving in, though, can I just mention something that isn't particularly obvious right back at the start of the chapter, where we're told ...

Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan.

(Matthew 19:1)

The previous few chapters of Matthew's Gospel have dealt with Jesus' teachings and actions while he was at quite some distance from Jerusalem, up north in Galilee, or even out in Gentile territory. What I think Matthew is doing in these verses is showing that, starting now, and through to the end of the whole book, Jesus is now on the way back down to Jerusalem and, eventually, the Cross.

There aren't very clear signposts, the way Matthew writes it, but we're going to see the Pharisees appear more and more often again, and Jesus interactions with them are going to get even more pointed. It is a long home straight, but the pace and the tension will be rising all the way, bit by bit, from now on.

In verse 2, it looks like just more of what we have been used to.

And large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.

(Matthew 19:2)

But look, here come the **first few drops** of the approaching storm. *Pharisees*. And notice how Matthew shows their intent in asking these questions, before giving us the precise words.

And Pharisees came up to him and tested him ...

(Matthew 19:3)

Folks, it's *always* worth stopping and thinking why someone is asking you a difficult question. Do they really want to understand the answer for themselves? Is it really a problem that they are wrestling with, and need some light shed on the matter? Or is the question just a pretext, really? Is there some kind of agenda behind it? Do they maybe just like arguing? Or are they simply trying to score some points at your expense?

The question they put to Jesus is certainly - well, they would have *thought* "certainly" - going to get him into trouble with some of his followers. This is a theological hot potato, and whichever way you answer, it will get you into hot water.

... by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?"

(Matthew 19:3)

The key point of contention there is that "for any cause". There were two lines on this, one, to use modern terms, the conservative line and the liberal line, one more restrictive and one very broad. It all hinged on what you made of a possibly ambiguous term in the OT law:

"When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favour in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, ..."

(Deuteronomy 24:1)

So what does "some indecency" mean? What does that include? That's the basic question here that Jesus is being asked to comment on. Does he follow the more restrictive line on this, that says it refers only to something major? Adultery is the obvious one to think of - and Jesus' subsequent words suggests that that is the way he might well be thinking. But, back in the OT law, the punishment for adultery was stoning, not divorce, so "something

indecent” might mean something pretty major but falling short of that.

Or is Jesus going to side with the rabbi who says that it can refer to anything whatsoever, no matter how trivial? Seriously, they were talking about things like the wife just burning the husband’s food. You can see how that line could be popular with not a few

I know that sounds ridiculous, but, you see, that’s how it is with nit-pickers and legalists: no point is too small to fight and legislate over. Back in my teens, they would have been arguing over precisely how short a girl’s skirt could be before it became *too* short. I’m sure they would have fought over how many inches above (or maybe even below) the knee. Instead, of course, of asking for a much less imprecise, but much more Biblical *attitude*, modesty.

So, Jesus, which is it to be? Strict or lax divorce laws?

Jesus’ answer pretty much counters that by saying *Wrong question*. You’re looking in the wrong direction. You’re focusing almost entirely on the negative. Why not think instead of what marriage is *for*, instead of how to end it if it goes wrong? You might still need these rules, for those sad cases, but focusing so much on how to dismantle marriage means that you neglect to focus on building it up and sustaining it.

So Jesus takes these tricky Pharisees back to basics. And with at least a hint that really this should be something that they knew already.

He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ...

(Matthew 19:4)

Just in passing, there’s something obviously relevant there to the current nonsense assertions of there being dozens of genders. And - another “in passing” - the next couple of words say something about our understanding of Scripture generally. Jesus is going to quote something that Moses, the writer of Genesis wrote, and then say that *God* said it. Something about what we call “the inspiration of Scripture” there.

Still, back to the main point here. Two genders. And bad maths. Two into one *will* go.

“... 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.”

(Matthew 19:5-6)

So there are the basics of how things were set up, by God. Remember how it was that with all those “goods” back in Genesis 1 (of which this is just the first) ...

And God saw that the light was good.

(Genesis 1:4)

... there was only one “*not good*”

Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone;”

(Genesis 2:18)

God’s remedy:

“I will make him a helper fit for him.”

(Genesis 2:18)

That's what marriage is about, such that when Eve is fashioned and brought to Adam, he responds (notice the emotion about that “at last”!) ...

Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; ...” Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

(Genesis 2:23-24)

So why is it, then, you Pharisees, Jesus is saying here, that instead of making that kind of thing your focus and your delight, instead you are fussing about the conditions under which this can all be dismantled? Why are you so much more concerned about breaking marriage instead of building it?

Same thing again, really, when Jesus has given them this stupendous answer. They don't seem even to pause to consider the majesty of the statement itself, never mind starting to think through the applications. Instead, it's just back to negativity. *Hey now, there's a law about divorce, so how come?*

Actually, it probably is a fair enough question to address. There is maybe an oddity about that, and it could be seen as an inconsistency. The problem is that this is the *first* question that comes to their mind. And that raises questions to me about where the hearts of these Pharisees really are. Are they really on a quest for knowledge, even? Or are they just wanting to win a theological argument, and score points over this uppity young rabbi Jesus.

They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?”

(Matthew 19:7)

See, isn't the assumption behind that one of answering back at what Jesus says God said. *Oh, that can't be right, because look, Moses, Deuteronomy 24!!* And that is a horrible way to approach Scripture, bashing verses together like enemies, instead of listening to them speak together as the friends they really are.

So folks, let's ask that first question again.

What's behind asking these questions?

Where are these Pharisees coming from? - and I don't mean “is it Jerusalem?” What is their agenda? What are their assumptions? Why do they seem so uninterested in the answers that Jesus gives?

I think I see the heart of a legalist there. Someone who refuses to think in terms of the broad principles of things like grace or love, but thinks they have to smash things like that into bite-sized pieces if they're ever going to make it work.

If it's about making a marriage work, they'll ask *So how often do you have to kiss your wife?* Or *how expensive should the engagement ring be?* Not that rings and kisses are totally irrelevant, but a decent marriage is more than just a tick list to be completed, and a grade A-to-C pass obtained.

You can see exactly the same kind of principle operating in church life. “Fellowship”

isn't easy to quantify. "Growth" isn't easy to measure. But you can count people attending, and check up on whether they dress right or read enough of the right kind of books. You can drill them so that they give the right answers to a **catechism** or quote **Bible verses** from memory... but how do you go about determining whether they love the truth ... or even know Jesus?

And I think Jesus hints about this in three particular words of his answer here.

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."

(Matthew 19:8)

They had asked about Moses, but Jesus doesn't answer "him" or "them". Instead he brings it around to *you* and *your* hardness of heart.

So, folks, I do just have to ask ... what's the state of *your* heart like? If you come to Jesus with the kind of attitude of these people here ... what does that say about where your heart is? And if you hear the words of Jesus, and *then* respond in this way, even more ... is your heart harder than it should be?

Because look, it's not just the Pharisees who seem to be suffering from this affliction. It's something of a problem with Jesus' own disciples, too.

- **Are you prepared to accept Jesus' answers?**

This is a pretty big question nowadays. The world has very definitely set itself against some of the stuff you see here. To be a disciple of Jesus nowadays in this country is decidedly more counter-cultural than it has been for a number of decades. I've already flagged up something that is hugely relevant to two of society's biggest questions nowadays, gender and marriage:

"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."

(Matthew 19:4-6)

Jesus says that there are just two genders, and it has always been that way. Jesus says that marriage is between one man and one woman.

Society is pushing back frantically at both of those, as I'm sure you know. And some sections of "the church" - and I'm putting that in quote marks, too, because I'm not really trying to say anything more than just "what people in this country perceive as "the church" ... but from their response I have to say that I have to doubt it's really the case - some sections of "the church" have just totally given way on the point about marriage, already.

They have to reinterpret various bits of the Bible, of course, in order to do that. They want to appear "relevant", but, as far as I can see, they do that by letting public opinion - or what the Media assert is "public opinion" - trump what Jesus says.

My suspicions that those same sections of "the church" will roll over and buy into society's current mad clamour for multiple genders, too.

They will talk about making these concessions for the sake of love. But I would argue that it can't properly be called love to let people believe and base their lives and

relationships upon lies. It is precisely upon matters like this that Paul wrote that short, sharp phrase:

Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ...

(Romans 1:22)

Folks, it's all too easy to rant on about these points here. I am assuming that you are in agreement with me, so I'm just going to say it and move on. But seriously, if you have difficulties about simply accepting what Jesus says on these two points, gender and marriage, we still need to have a church here where people feel they can voice honest doubts.

So if you worry that you're not convinced by the line I'm taking - and you could argue it is quite simplistic - or if you fear that your individual natural inclinations are not as clear-cut as you think this passage implies they should be - then we really do need to make sure that this place is a *safe* space in which you can speak without fear of being jumped on from a great height. Come and speak, ring up or Zoom over for a chat, please.

And then, Jesus makes a statement concerning an issue that society largely considers sorted and has moved on from debating about.

"What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

(Matthew 19:6)

Folks, doesn't this turn so much of our thinking about divorce entirely the other way up? Instead of trying to work out the conditions in which a couple could legitimately divorce - even though we *do* need to have that clear in our minds, too - this shows much more where our hearts should be.

There's lots of profound implicit statements all over the place here, which we should note. Just notice that when Jesus says this, he is claiming that a marriage that is entered into by "a **register office wedding**" is just as much a marriage as one done **in church**. It is just as much *God* joining them together. And unbelievers who are married are *just* as married-by-God as believers.

But Jesus doesn't say that divorce *can't* happen. You can't say that because God joins a couple, then they remain "married in God's sight" no matter what happens subsequently. Jesus doesn't say you *cannot* separate, but that you *should not* separate.

And that means that I think we should see our nation's speedily moving towards "no-fault divorce" as yet another disastrously bad choice. Those cards that you can get nowadays to send to someone to *celebrate* their divorce are abominable.

I'm not saying that there aren't marriages that turn bad, and that divorce isn't a real relief in such cases. Just as some people die, and we call it "a happy release". But we know that every death is a tragedy, the closure of a life. And don't Jesus' words

"What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

(Matthew 19:6)

... show that we should regard every *divorce* in the same light, as tragedy, the closure of a marriage.

The question is whether we are willing to accept Jesus' words, or will we drown them out by saying that our feelings - because we're a special case, we always like to think - or

the herd-of-lemmings mentality of our society are more significant?

And even if society - and the individual unbelievers around us - will go their own way, will we be faithful to what Jesus says, even if it's personally hard on us?

Yes, there will be cases when, as far as I can see, a believer can divorce or be divorced without sinning. Divorce always *involves* sin, though: there is either a sin of sufficient degree that will legitimate a divorce, or, if there isn't, the divorce is going to be a sin.

I don't have time to go into the complexities of v9 right now:

"And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."

(Matthew 19:9)

But I will challenge you, under this same title, *are you prepared to accept Jesus' answers?* ... if you contemplating divorce ... or if you have been through a divorce ... or if you are considering remarriage *following* a divorce ... or if you *have been* remarried following a divorce ...

... do you acknowledge Jesus Christ as your Lord?

So that what he says, *goes*.

So that you will consider yourself subject to what he has said, in these pages of Scripture.

So that what you do in the future will be in response to what *he* says, and you will not let it be overruled by your own desires or just what is thought acceptable in our society today?

So that what he calls sin, you will call sin, and repent of it?

And so that what you have confessed and repented of, and he has therefore forgiven you, you will count yourself forgiven too?

Actually, I can see where the disciples are coming from here. They instinctively sense that the words of the marriage service are right: this

is not by any to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly; but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God

If divorce is not to be as easy as the rabbis of their day said it should be, then ...

The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry."

(Matthew 19:10)

If there is no ***Get Out Of Jail Free*** card in the pack, they don't want to play Monopoly!

And I think that Jesus concludes here by saying that *Well, yes, that is a legitimate option, too*. Although not just everyone will see it this way!

But he said to them, “Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given.”

(Matthew 19:11)

But marriage *isn't* an obligation on everyone - although in Jewish society in those days, some thought it pretty much was. Yes, there are some people who can't for various reasons marry, some voluntary, and some by choice:

“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 19:12)

And it could well be that some of the disciples hearing Jesus say those words did in time follow such a path themselves.

But if you think that Jesus is calling his disciples to a strenuous path ... and that's a fair comment, yes: to swim against the tide of how most of the people you'll meet in this country see things, yes, that's not comfortable.

To reject that the scenarios depicted in just about every TV drama as normal and healthy *are* actually good and wholesome, that is hard work.

To know that your kids are being subjected to all this godless, worldly propaganda from every kind of screen, perhaps even as part of a school curriculum, and very likely from some of their closest friends ... that is really scarily difficult to handle.

But remember that Jesus does not call you to walk where he will not walk ... *has not* walked ... himself.

So Jesus says these perhaps rather stern words about the realities of marriage and divorce as he starts down south along the road that will take him to Jerusalem, and the cross. Where he will give everything out of love. To redeem *his* bride.

So that when he and they (*we!*) are united in resurrection, no man ...

... neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able ...

(Romans 8:38-39)

to put asunder.

Believe in marriage God's way