

## Jesus' Teaching on Divorce Matt. 19:1-12

**Intro.** This morning we come to a passage of Scripture and a subject I'd very much like to skip over. Here Jesus answered a loaded question posed by the Pharisees concerning the matter of marriage, divorce and remarriage. I call it a "*loaded question*" because **v.3** says their question was asked **to test Him**. At a time when there are well over a million divorces in America each year and so many in the church have suffered this pain...it's tempting to find some way to soften the impact of this teaching. I can't think of another biblical subject that arouses more painful thoughts or has resulted in so many different views. All I hope to do this morning is to report to you what Christ has said and what I believe His Word means. We must not allow ourselves to be dissuaded by what the culture says or how well a teaching will be received...our only concern must be to faithfully handle God's truth.

Before we begin, I think it's important to note the connection between **chap.18** and **19**. In the previous chapter, the subject is the confrontation and discipline of a sinning brother or sister. The goal is their repentance, forgiveness and restoration. This call to faithfulness is now followed by two cases of hard-heartedness...the case of unjust divorce (**19:1-12**) and the case of hindering little children (**19:13-15**). As we consider these chapters side by side, we're left to wonder how many divorces might have been averted if the body of Christ had been faithful to the instructions given in **Matt.18**? How might things have turned out if a believer or several believers intervened when their suspicions were aroused? How many couples might have been turned from a destructive course if they'd been open about their struggles? How many might have received help if they turned to the Church instead of a divorce lawyer or unbelieving counselor? David Platt writes, "*Authentic biblical community is intended to provide a nurturing environment for all sorts of conflict in our lives, including marital conflict.*" Our ministry to each other is one reason we urge everyone to belong to a Life Group.

But too often we're afraid to stick our noses into someone else's business. Too often we're afraid to put a friendship in jeopardy by speaking the truth in love. On the other hand, we resist the level of transparency that admits our faults and struggles. But there's a reason the admonitions of **chap.18** precede the admonitions of **chap.19**. Did Jesus know marriage would be difficult? Did He know that staying married would be a challenging thing for sinful, selfish people? Of course He did! When citing the benefits of remaining single, here's what Paul wrote – **I Cor. 7:28b - ...those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this**. So in the body life of the church, **Chap.18** is pre-emptive and redemptive. But now in **chap.19**, Jesus answered the question about the legality of divorce.

Let's PRAY and ask God to help this preacher and to help us all receive His truth this morning.

**1. The Setting – vs. 1, 2 - When Jesus had finished saying these things, He left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. Large crowds followed him, and He healed them there.**

The words, **When Jesus had finished saying these things** mark the end of one section of teaching and the beginning of a new one. Jesus has now left Capernaum in Galilee where most of His ministry has taken place. With His disciples He has traveled south toward Jerusalem and east into the region of Perea. Perea was a region governed by King Herod. And remember, it was Herod who had John the Baptist beheaded because he dared to speak against the divorce and incestuous marriage of Herod to his brother's wife, Herodias. Once again, **v. 2** says Jesus performed miracles of healing and **large crowds** followed Him. Though the power and compassion of Jesus continuously testified to His divine and messianic credentials, the hearts of Israel's religious leaders were hard and unimpressed.

**2. The Question of legality – vs.3-6 - Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."**

The Pharisees were the largest and most influential party in Judaism. They represented Israel's religious establishment. Their minds were made up about Jesus. They saw Him as an imposter and a fraud who must be exposed and eliminated. **(12:14)** Each time they came to Jesus they came with a loaded question designed to put him in conflict with Moses and the Law. This time was no exception. Their question was, **"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"** Is it OK for a man to dump one wife and take up with another.

Among the Jews there were two schools of thought concerning marriage and divorce. According to the more liberal view of Rabbi Hillel, a man was permitted to divorce his wife for almost anything. In other words, he could divorce her if she put too much salt in his soup / if she served him burned bread / if her hair was let down in public / or if he caught her talking to other men. Rabbi Shammai, on the other hand, was more of a hard-liner. He taught that divorce was permissible only if a woman was found guilty of immoral behavior. True to human nature, the Pharisees favored the softer teachings of Rabbi Hillel. His *"for almost anything view"* satisfied their lack of contentment and selfish lusts for other women. According to his teaching, divorce was OK under any circumstances. Though it's hard to conceive and very indicting, the divorce rate among Pharisees was significantly higher than it was for the average Jewish man. So in answering these men, Jesus was about to step on some holy toes. And when He is finished speaking, this Pharisical delegation seemed eager to exit stage left.

To those determined to discredit Jesus, it really didn't matter whether Jesus favored the teaching Hillel or Shammai. They'd already heard what Jesus taught about divorce in the Sermon on the Mount. In **Matt. 5:32** Jesus said, **But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.** So they already knew where Jesus stood. Their interest here was to catch him in some contradiction to Moses or the Law of God. Notice the name Moses appears twice...first in **v.7** and then again in **v.8**. Another possibility was that Herod might hear what Jesus was teaching which in effect, denounced his marriage to Herodias. That might be enough to prompt Herod to deal with Jesus just as he had dealt with John. In that way, the whole matter might be resolved. Jesus would be eliminated and their hands would be clean.

If you were an enemy questioning Jesus, it was frustrating to get a direct answer from Him. He often answered their questions with a question. So Jesus asked these Pharisees point blank, **"Haven't you read?"** *"I mean, you fellows are the keepers of the Torah, the Law of God. You pride yourself in being the Bible experts. You advertize yourselves as the most read / the most studied / the most knowledgeable / the most separated / the men closest to God. I would expect that you know **Genesis 1-3** forward and backward."* And I'm quite certain they did. But there always seems to be a wide gulf between the truth we believe and how we behave. Somehow these religious men didn't connect the dots of God's truth with the issues in their own lives. If we're honest, I think we have to admit that we often have the same difficulty. This why **Jas. 1:22** says don't **merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.** So by directing these clerics back to the earliest chapters of Genesis and the creation account, Jesus appealed to the prototype...the divine plan that predates Moses. From the creation event, Jesus gave four reasons why divorce never was part of God's original plan.

1. Jesus said, “**at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female'**” – In the Hebrew text of **Gen. 1:27**, **male and female** are in the emphatic position which signifies...*one male and one female*. As we said last Sunday, God didn't create a group of females for Adam to choose from like some Bachelor or Bachelorette show. There was no beauty pageant nor were there any “extra's.” Because there was only one man and one woman, there was no possibility of polygamy and divorce was not a viable option. There was only one man and one woman. So according to the original prototype, divorce and remarriage was clearly not part of God's plan.
2. Jesus said, **'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife...'** I wonder how many of us detect a problem here? Who's your daddy, Adam? Since Adam and Eve had no earthly parents, the pattern originally laid down projected into the future. Because Adam and Eve had no earthly parents to leave, the first application of this principle was for their children and their children's children. Are you with me? But the word **united** did apply to their relationship. It's translated **cleave** in the KJV. In the original language the word was often used to represent gluing together. It represented a close and inseparable bond. When applied to marriage, it signifies the total and permanent commitment of man and wife.
3. In marriage, **the two will become one flesh**. As taught later in the NT, in marriage both the man and his wife surrender the authority over their own body. (**I Cor. 7:4**) Once again, I'm telling you what the Bible teaches. In God's sight, a man and his wife become the total possession of each other. If God blesses them with children, their children represent the fusion of two people into one. About the child someone will say, “*Doesn't he look like his father.*” Then someone else will chime in and say, “*I disagree...thankfully, he looks just like his mother.*”

Nowhere does the Bible support the idea that the sex act constitutes marriage. Marriage is based on a covenant made between a man and a woman and witnessed by God. We see this in **Mal. 2:14-16** where the Lord explains why He is angry with His people. **You ask, "Why?" It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. "I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment," says the LORD Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.** Divorce then, involves the breaking of the faith commitment established by the marriage covenant. Just yesterday Peggy and I attended a wedding where the couple reflected this divine principle. They promised to stay together “*till death do us part*”, and not “*till divorce do us part.*” And notice again, it is the Lord who makes a man and his wife one in flesh and spirit. The contemporary idea is that marriage is just a social convention subject to societal evolution. That's not true. Marriage was designed, established and blessed by God. This leads to the fourth reason why divorce was never part of God's original plan.

4. There is a sense in which every marriage is made in heaven. As one guy said, “*Marriage is made in heaven...just like thunder and lightening.*” Because marriage was made in heaven and each marriage is witnessed and sealed by God Himself, we have no right to annul or redefine it. **v. 6 says, Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.**

And God's regulations for marriage are not just for Christians. Marriage was instituted by God for the good of the human race. It doesn't matter if the ceremony happened under a Jewish chuppah or on a sunny beach / whether it was entered into by two mature adults or two love-sick 17 year olds...it happens under God. God is the unseen official who joins a man and a woman together.

So once again, Jesus said, what God has joined together, human beings must **not separate**. *Chorizo*, the Greek word translated **separate** always carries the idea of divorce, not a temporary separation. Since marriage is always a work of God, those who divorce are acting against His will.

So in these verses Jesus led the Pharisees back to God's original plan for marriage. He gave them four reasons why divorce was not part of God's creative design. But as we all know, it takes real effort for two selfish and imperfect people to live together. For marriage to last and be built on a solid foundation, the common denominator included at every stage must be the Lord. But divorce happens. Even mention of the "d" word is a painful reminder to so many of us. Now remember, the Pharisees hoped to catch Jesus teaching something contrary to Moses and the Law. Their next question proceeded along these lines.

**3. The Question about Moses' command – vs. 7-9 - "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."**

The clock allows me only enough time to mention the significance and reason for the command the Pharisees referred to. The command is found in **Deut. 24:1-4**. The Law Moses gave didn't authorize or mandate divorce, it merely sought to regulate what men were doing with a view to protecting the abandoned woman. The law was given to prevent frivolous divorces...but particularly the sin of divorcing a woman and returning to her after a second marriage failed. In other words, if a man divorced his wife and remarried, he was not permitted to wife number one. The command of Moses didn't encourage or authorize divorce...it merely regulated what was happening.

In Jesus' reply, He put his finger on the root cause of divorce. Divorce happens because the heart of one or both parties in a marriage is hard and insensitive to God. **Hardness of heart** refers to a prolonged condition...a condition from which one or both parties refuse to repent. Experience verifies this. Spiritual neglect often precedes a relational breakdown. What Moses commanded was actually a concession to regulate divorce and cause partners in marriage to think carefully before filing. D.A. Carson wrote, "*Divorce is never to be thought of as a morally neutral option, but as evidence of sin, of hardness of heart.*" This was something the Pharisees did not want to hear.

**But**, Jesus added, **it was not this way from the beginning**. Once again, God's original plan didn't include divorce. God designed marriage to be life-lasting and dissolved only by death. (**Rom. 7:1-3**) Since this is the way God planned marriage, anything that deviates from His plan is sin. Because those joined by God are permanently united in his sight, divorce inevitably leads to adultery. **I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.**" Adultery translates the Greek word *moichea*. It's a word that always refers to marital unfaithfulness or extramarital sex. It refers to sexual relations between a married person and some-one who is not their marriage partner. The way Jesus worded his response puts the onus on men who divorce their wives. In Jewish society, men were typically the ones guilty of unfaithfulness...the ones who initiated divorce. But when Mark wrote to a Gentile audience where women often divorced their husbands, he remembered that Jesus taught that either party could be guilty. **Mk. 10:11, 12** says, "**Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.**" Whether the divorce is precipitated by the man or the woman, the result of remarriage is the same. It leads to more sin...it leads to adultery.

But here in **v.9** Jesus seems to provide a legal exception which permits divorce without the stigma or guilt that accompanies divorce. **I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness...** This phrase, **except for marital unfaithfulness** is commonly referred to as the *“exceptive clause.”* Many regard it as sort of a *“get out of jail free”* card where marriage is the jail. Regarding the meaning of this clause, the interpretation of pastors / teachers / and scholars of every stripe fly in different directions like streamers shot from a party popper. At least four ideas have been suggested to explain what is meant by the phrase **“except for marital unfaithfulness.”** The Greek word is *porneia* from which we get the word, pornography. *Porneia* is a more general term than *moichea* or adultery. It encompasses every form of illicit sexual activity as defined and warned against by God’s Law. Since godly men hold different views, I will simply list the views and urge you to be persuaded in your own mind which one is correct.

- Some feel Jesus used *porneia* as a synonym for adultery. Therefore, adultery committed by either party is the exception that becomes legal grounds for divorce.
- Others define *porneia* as a sexual offense that could only occur during the betrothal (or engagement) period. This was the case with Joseph when he found that Mary was pregnant before their marriage was consummated. He then had a legal right to divorce her.
- Still others believe *porneia*, is used here in a very narrow sense where it refers to an incestuous and illegitimate marriage forbidden by God’s Law. It was a marriage between near relatives. A marriage that was entered illegally was justifiable grounds for divorce. This was Herod’s sin when he married his brother’s wife and had John beheaded for pointing it out.
- Finally, *porneia* is also believed to refer to any and every form of persistent deviant sexual behavior including adultery. This is the view most widely held today. Unfortunately, in practice, some who want out of a marriage have taken this to mean, *“All I have to do is catch him looking at pornography or looking at some other woman and Jesus says I can legally divorce him.”* Years ago I actually had a lady come to me and tell me that. When I asked her if she was sure her husband was guilty of adultery, she said, *“Well, no. But Jesus said anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart...so Yes, I’m sure he’s guilty!”* Can you see how ridiculous things can become when a married person wants out of a marriage more than they want to honor God and stay in? In Christ, even when adultery occurs, there can be forgiveness and restoration.

Regardless of how we view the exceptive clause, Jesus clearly affirmed the permanence of marriage. From the creation event and from the whole tenor of God’s law, we know that covenants are made to be kept not broken. The Pharisees came to Jesus asking on what grounds they could legally divorce. But Jesus responded by telling them why they should stay married. Unlike our culture where divorce is rampant and available for a simple statement declaring *“irreconcilable differences,”* Jesus held up a *“no divorce”* standard. It’s obvious the disciples who heard His teaching understood Him this way. This is proved by their reaction.

**4. The reaction of the disciples – vs.10-12** The disciples said to him, **“If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.”** Jesus replied, **“Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”**

The Pharisees have now slithered off and the disciples were left alone with Jesus to discuss this further. They reasoned this way...*“We know how hard it is for two imperfect people to get along. If marriage is binding and the only way out is the exceptive clause, then it’s better to remain single.”*

They got the point. They understood Christ's teaching. They knew their own hearts. What they didn't yet understand was the power of the Gospel that makes bad men good. They didn't yet comprehend the potential of Christ entering and transforming a person's life from the inside out. They admitted they didn't have what it takes to stay married to the same woman for life. The better option seemed to be singleness.

But remember what we discovered last Sunday? The Creator God said, "**It is not good for man to be alone.**" So God created a partner for Adam and established the covenant of marriage. When writing to singles, Paul wrote, **But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. - I Cor. 7:9** So marriage is the norm. It's the single God-ordained relationship provided for sexual expression. But as Jesus taught in **vs.11, 12**, singleness isn't for everybody. While marriage is a gift, so is singleness. He then cites three examples of individuals who could legitimately forgo marriage.

Much more could be said on this subject. As I said at the start, if I had the liberty to pick and choose what to preach, this morning I'd skip over **Matt. 19:1-12**. At the end of his commentary on this chapter, David Platt has suggested a biblical response for those who may be struggling in marriage / for those who may be contemplating divorce / and for those for whom divorce has already occurred. I've reproduced this on the back of our sermon notes.

The Good News is that Christ's death on the cross was sufficient to pay the penalty all of our sin deserved. We tend to categorize sin, but God doesn't see sin that way. Every sin is offensive to Him and He knows all about us. Yet Jesus died to forgive us / to cleanse us / and to make us righteous in His sight. Have you trusted Him to make you clean? What Jesus offers is a fresh start. **II Cor. 5:17 - Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!**

May God help us to honestly embrace what Jesus taught and respond in the way that honors Him.