

Matthew 21-08-08b

We are ready now to resume our study in Matthew chapter 19, a touchy subject, an awkward topic, because there are situations where marriages do not last, and a knee-jerk, reflexive, superficial look at scripture makes an easy occasion for looking askance, or being critical, or otherwise casting some sort of aspersions in those situations. I am aware of many, many of those situations in my near and far periphery, and so to understand what the Word of God has to say about what marriage is, and when they end, and why they end, is pertinent to all of us. And as with so much else in scripture, we're not just looking at this specific issue, this specific circumstance.

It, in a way, is put for larger issues, more universal themes that will apply to everyone, whether you're married or not, whether your marriage ends or not. This is an exemplar, and in the same way that these Pharisees are trying to trip Jesus up and find an occasion for accusation and condemnation, to catch Him in His words and use them against Him, they're picking one issue so that they can try to make a larger statement about Jesus. When Jesus condemned these same Pharisees in Luke chapter 16 for their abuse of marriage and the provision to end marriage under certain circumstances, these men were abusing it, abusing it viciously and in their own interest.

It stood for something more. It's not just if they cleaned up this one area of behavior, they would be model citizens and righteous Israelites. There's a lot more going on.

It's just an example. So keep in mind that regardless of marital status, past, present, or future, we're talking here, Jesus is talking here about a lot more than marriage. And that's why this passage moves forward into what we consider to be a strange and somewhat squeamish area.

And we'll try to get there before we close today. So once again, we know who these men are. We know where they are.

We know why they are accusing Jesus and peradozing Him, testing Him, tempting Him, hoping to get Him to say something that they can use against Him. So is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason? Out of the pool of all reasons, pick one. The law says it's okay.

The man has complete freedom of action. And as you remember, Rabbi Akiba's, you burnt the toast, goodbye. He answered and said to them in verse four, have you not read? How many times does Jesus answer a question with a question? And one of the things that this does in terms of debate and the art of discourse and prevailing in a discussion is their question is designed to put Him on the defensive or to put Him at a disadvantage.

When He replies with a question, He is basically returning the serve very effectively.

Have you not read that He who made them, He who created them at the beginning made them male and female. This goes back to Genesis chapter one.

So these men, what they wanted to do is try to trip Jesus up and make Him look bad based on a reading of Deuteronomy 24. Jesus isn't letting them select the ground. If you've studied warfare in general or the civil war in particular, one of the issues is who picks the battlefield.

Gettysburg, who is attacking uphill and who is defending downhill? If you get the chance to choose the ground to your own advantage, that's a tactical plus. So Jesus doesn't accept their establishing the ground on Deuteronomy 24. He goes back to Genesis one.

You want to talk Deuteronomy 24? Haven't you read Genesis one, Genesis five? Do you not know your scriptures? And if you want to talk about the issue of marriage, why don't you go back not to a side provision that depends on specific circumstances to have any traction. This is only in the case where a man divorces a woman and then she is married by another man. And then that man either divorces or dies.

It's a very specific, limited, narrow case in Deuteronomy 24. He says, if you want to discuss this biblically and establish the divine perspective, why don't you go to the right scripture? And so he takes them back to Genesis chapter one. He who made them at the beginning, made them male and female.

Now this has all kinds of wonderful import for issues then and now. If you want to understand the right way of thinking, the right position to take from a Christian biblical perspective, look at the way God set up the human race. Look at the way God designed the first couple.

He made them male and female. He did not make them, notice, male and male, female and female, nor did he make them male and females. It is rare.

I can't think of a case. There may have been some in some far off land where women had multiple husbands. If you notice polygamy always in imagination benefits the man.

Wouldn't it be great if I had more than one woman? What if I had two or five or whatever? In Mormon land, you don't find one woman with three or four husbands. It's the other way around. In the examples of the Old Testament where you've got multiple wives, can you think of a case? Did Deborah have two or three husbands? Did Ruth or anybody? No.

So he made them male singular and female singular. So the model is one man, one woman, and this is actually not God speaking, but either Moses or Adam, depending on how you read the passage in verse five. For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh.

There's a lot of issue taken with, well, what is marriage really? When are you married? Are you married when you stand in front of the pastor or a judge or a justice of the peace and say the vows? Are you married when you sign the license? Are you married, you know, people that start dwelling together without the benefit of any ceremony just say, well, we'll decide whether we're married, if we're married, what kind of marriage we have. Society has recognized down through the centuries common law. If you live together and look like a couple, well, as far as the village is concerned, you are a couple.

It's what they call common law marriage. What is God's view? God's view is here is a man, here is a woman and looking ahead to the days when there are parents and there are children, which wasn't the case when Eve was created in, you know, the first part of Genesis, but down the road, a man will leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, be joined to his wife. That word in Hebrew and in Greek means it's the word that means to glue, to glue together, to join.

It was used in Greek medical literature for the, the joining together of the sides of a wound. If you had a sword gash and you stitch that together, you bring those edges together so that it knits and grows together and becomes no longer divided, no longer separated. And that's, you don't want it reopening.

You don't want it coming apart. So it is, it is healed together. It is joined together.

It is glued together. This reason, a man shall leave his father and mother. It doesn't say the woman leaves her father and mother.

It says the man leaves his father and mother and is glued. This is passive. It doesn't say he shall glue himself to his wife.

It says he is joined. He shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, singular. And the two, one plus one is two, shall become one flesh.

Genesis 2, 24, the two shall become one flesh. So we're back to this rather abstract question. When are you married? I am not persuaded that everybody down through history has followed the modern Christian model that, well, you have an official, you gather a group, you exchange vows.

It's a nice tradition, nothing wrong with it. Jewish tradition going back, you could say maybe this derives from Bible times, but there is no record of a wedding ceremony in scripture. You have wedding feasts, you have the bride coming, awaiting the coming of the groom to collector.

You've got the wise and foolish virgins. You have a description and a use of example by the Lord Jesus in, in a couple of parables about a feast that is held for a son who gets married. But you go back to Abraham and Sarah, no description of how they became married.

Isaac and Rebecca, the servant goes and brings Rebecca back and they're just kind of married at that point. She agrees to come, her brother agrees to let her go. Now you go up, Jacob is promised a wife upon the completion of seven years of labor.

And he thinks he's going to get Leah. He works seven more years and, you know, he, he basically earns his wives, plural at that time. So the notion of what exactly creates a marriage, going back to Genesis chapter one and Genesis chapter two, the reality of marriage, the genuineness and the fulfillment of divine design is one thing.

The recognition establishment creation and dissolution of marriages in the human plane is something else. Look at it this way. Suppose somebody whose imagination is only evil all the day.

They're not a believer. They're not interested in the things of God. And they want to take up with some person as a spouse.

Maybe both the man and the woman are completely without God in their life. They want to quote unquote, get married. Is that a marriage in social terms, in legal terms, under our laws? Yes.

We have legal definitions of what a marriage is, what documents it, what establishes it, what happens if it is dissolved legally, who gets what, division of goods, custody of children, and so on. There's a lot of law around that as a social construct. What is God's view of that marriage? Is God concerned about the integrity of it, the reality of it, the unity of it, the dissolution of it? Does it impinge on God's plan and purpose in any way, shape or form? Other than in the general sense that a nation composed of nuclear families tends to be stronger and provide an environment where believers can dwell in freedom and safety, you can make sort of an abstract argument.

But in terms of those specific individuals, if you are in the darkness and not in the light, if you are far from God and not connected to God in any way, it is little different than anything else you do. If the nations beyond Israel were full of thieves, were full of child sacrificers, were full of all kinds of heinous practices, does God track, intervene, judge, care in the operational sense about that? Obviously, God recognizes sin. He knows there's books written of everything everybody does.

But in practical terms, there was Molech worship and child sacrifice in Canaan for centuries before Israel came there. There was abuse of slaves. There was all kinds of incestuous and carnal behavior of every description in Egypt before Israel came there and after Israel left.

In the Bible, you see God being concerned about these practices and these things as they impinge on his people and on his plans and purposes revealed in a particular arena. All kinds of heinous things went on in the entire continents in biblical times. South

America, you've got headhunters all around the world.

You've got people doing just grotesque things. There's no indication that God intervened, that God incorporated any part of that by way of judgment or plans and purposes. It's pretty much left to itself.

God turns them over to Romans chapter one. Those who suppress the truth of God in unrighteousness, God lets them basically wallow in their own mire and drown in their own evil. It has its own built in deleterious consequences.

And God takes largely a hands off approach historically to these things. God takes an interest when it impinges on his people. So when we talk about marriage and divorce, we're talking about as a first point of limitation here, people who claim or have relationship with God.

That's why Jesus goes back to Genesis. God, if you want to know what God thinks and what God did and what God designed, it's one man, one woman who are united in a way that is far stronger and closer than any other familial bond. The man leaves his father and leaves his mother, you know, fathers and sons and inheritance and taking over the family business, taking over the flocks and herds.

Isaac coming behind Abraham, Jacob coming behind Isaac with the blessing and the inheritance and so on is really important in Israel. But God's design is the strongest, closest and most permanent bond should be between a man and a woman. Now, that's God's design from the beginning.

Jesus says, have you not read that he who made them at the beginning set it up this way? Adam had one wife, everybody on the earth is descended from that pair. And as children and grandchildren, great grandchildren begin to populate the earth, the unions are to be similar. One man, one woman, they are unified.

Now, I have mentioned the word unified, united and joined several times because if you remember the content of Matthew chapter 18, what was the emphasis on the immediately preceding red ink? If your hand offends, you cut it off. If your eye offends, you pluck it out. Foot offends, you cut it off.

If you cause one of these little ones to stray, to be the lost sheep that has to go be rescued, be better for you to have a millstone around your neck and cast into the depths of the sea. And it is a strong teaching about the importance of unity, right? Jesus does not say here, a man who divorces his wife, better if a millstone were cast around his neck and he were put in the bottom of the sea, does he? But do you see a similarity in emphasis? Are there times when we cause division? Are there times when we fail and scare the 100th sheep away from the 99? Are there times when we are caused to stumble and we have to separate from our hand or our eye or our foot? Are there times

when that is necessary? Yes or no? Yes, there are. And Jesus comprehends that in his teaching.

And he says, it is better for you to enter into life, looking ahead to the future, having severed a very close personal relationship. If that relationship is causing you to stumble, better to enter into life than maintain that relationship. And the produce of your life is in the city dump of Ghana.

Emphasis on unity. We spent weeks in Matthew chapter 18, looking at how important it is to forgive the closing parable of the unforgiving servant is forgive and be united. Don't be unforgiving and be divided.

This is a continuation of that theme. This is about unity and division, just like the preceding section. Now, in the beginning, did God make Adam? And when he woke up and looked around in the garden, here was an extra foot.

Here was an extra hand. Adam was going around naming the animals. And then he got angry and he had to cut off his hand or pluck out his eye.

Is it God's design that hands be severed, that foot be cut off, that eyes be plucked out? Is that God's design from the beginning? Aren't we supposed to have two eyes, two hands, two feet? Isn't that God's perfect design? Why would Jesus say, if your hand offends you, cut it off? There are times when in the interest of life and in the interest of ultimate benefit, you have to sever that which was not ideally to be severed. God's not in favor of having us be born with eyes and then having us have to pluck them out. But there are times when it is necessary to spiritual life, to opportunity and service in the eternal future, enter into life, minus that relationship, the eye, the hand and the foot.

Who wants to do that? But if you have to choose between an earthly association and a spiritual objective, there are times when the earthly association has to be cut off. Jesus talked about if there's a sin between brothers, go and approach, try to heal the breach, try to be rejoined, try to gain your brother. But if it doesn't work, then there is a separation like there is between heathens, tax collectors and God-fearing Jews.

There is a distance that is maintained. You are not united, you are not in on intimate terms with heathens and tax collectors because why? Because of God, because of spiritual identity, nothing intrinsically wrong. There's not intrinsically less value.

If somebody chooses to be a tax collector, they're suddenly lesser. But there is an issue, a spiritual issue that creates a separation. Don't forget the context, the eye, the hand, the foot.

Although the design is not that these things get chopped off or plucked out, there are times when it is necessary. We move right into chapter 19. Remember in the original text, there's no chapter divisions.

This is just the next thing. Jesus goes across the Jordan, which is in itself a divider. He goes from Capernaum and crosses the line over into Perea, where there is this active hostility from the Pharisees.

That's where he is when he says this. And notice in verse 5, are not children and parents supposed to be united in a common goal and purpose and children obey your parents and the Lord for this is right. But you go back to the law, honor your father and mother that your days may be long in the land, which the God gives you.

It's the first commandment with promise. Honor your father and mother and your days will be long in the land. But when you meet your wife, you leave your father and mother and glue yourself to her.

Now her interests come. Doesn't mean you dishonor your father and mother, but there is a greater distance between you, the man and his parents than there is between the man and his wife. If he has to choose, he goes with the wife every time.

Right. And notice there is now a distance that wasn't there before. He has to leave father and mother in the interest of the wife, because this is a divine design.

It is a spiritual priority. It is a command of God. A man shall leave.

Just like in Ecclesiastes, there is a time to unite and there is a time to divide. There is a season for everything under heaven. Stay with me now.

For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, glued to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. The corporeal union of a man and a wife is symbolic of that being glued together. There is a physical manifestation of this spiritual truth.

This is true for people who have a spiritual life and are looking to God to understand life, its design and its purpose. We're not talking about anybody else except people who care about God and the things of God and want to please God. Based on what God has said, I am going to place a high priority on my wife as a man.

It is symbolized in the union, which eventually produces children. Children are a blessing from the Lord and the fruit of the womb is his reward. Now, that's a physical manifestation of a physical union, but when marriage is done right between God-fearing believers, there is blessing of all sorts.

The children is a symbol, but you don't have to have children to have a blessed marriage. There is all kinds of fruit, there is all kinds of benefit that extends to the husband and wife and to those in their immediate periphery. In the same way that divorce here is just symbolic of greater spiritual truths, children are symbolic of a greater spiritual truth.

The two becoming one flesh is natural and produces children, but it is used here to symbolize greater truths, to reflect greater realities. So then, verse six, they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let not man separate.

Notice the wonderful way, anytime you're looking at what Jesus says, it is just so beautiful, beautiful in the way it is expressed, beautiful in the way it condenses so much truth into a few simple words. He says, so then they are no longer two, but one flesh, what God has joined together. Now has God joined together unbelievers in their marriages or unions or shack-ups or whatever it is? Does God have any part in that? These wayward, self-interested, largely faithless, godless, carping, conniving, self-righteous Pharisees, did God unite them to anybody when they married their wife? If they split from a wife and married another one because she was better looking or the first one burnt the toast, was there any union that God created involved there? Does it matter in the forward progress of the plan of God, if you could name these Parian Pharisees and get a short biography on their marital history, does it make any difference? The only marriages we are looking at here are the ones that God has joined together.

Notice the pastor didn't join him, the rabbi didn't join him, the judge didn't join him, justice of the peace didn't join him, a piece of paper didn't join them, exchange vows didn't join them. What is a genuine marriage? Jesus defines it right here, a genuine marriage is what God joins together. If God glues a thing, it is well and truly glued.

If God saves us, we are well and truly saved. We can't save ourselves, we can't save each other, we can't by our own efforts justify ourselves, vindicate ourselves, achieve forgiveness and cleansing and regeneration ourselves. We can't do that, only God can do these things in the spiritual realm.

Only God can apply the work of Christ on our behalf when we express faith, only God can send us the Holy Spirit, only God can forgive us our sins when we confess them, only God can cleanse us from all unrighteousness, and only God can unite believers in a marriage, only God. If you are godless, you don't have a marriage from God's point of view. So unite, divide, shack up, split, fornicate, adulterate in the realm of unbelievers, it is irrelevant to believers.

For believers, there's only one marriage that counts, and this is the one that God glues together. If God has glued your marriage together, man should not separate it. Now, this is not just talking about marriage, I emphasize this again and again.

Look at Matthew chapter 18, the unity of faith and the bond of peace, the Holy Spirit glues us together as a body, the body of Christ. God does that. God unites Jews and Greeks, males and females, bond and free.

That's why there is none of these things. There is nothing that divides in a healthy church because God has united it. God has brought individuals together in a local church, which itself represents the larger universal body of Christ.

We are a representation in the same way that a marriage is a representation of God-created unity represented in two people. A church is a God-created unity of an assembly called for a purpose, trying to avoid division, disunity, the kind of things that Paul has to talk to the Corinthians about for chapters. Don't divide what God has joined together.

Whatever it may be, it's not just marriage that's being spoken of here, but marriage is the example. Marriage was the test. And how casual can we be about dissolving our marriages? These Pharisees say.

And Jesus says, well, the only ones I'm going to talk about are Genesis one marriages. God created Adam. God created Eve.

God brought them together and made them one flesh. That's marriage. And what God has joined together, man should not separate.

And believers who love the Lord, who are seeking to be faithful and obedient, who recognize the presence and the power of God in their lives, if they are married, they will receive the grace and the divine ability to work out their problems. Divorce is not an option for believers who came together with that as their primary interest before God, who recognize that their marriage occurred at the point that they looked at each other and said, you are my wife, you are my husband. We before God are thankful for each other.

We want to spend our lives together and seek to honor God as a couple. And God joins those two people together, have all the ceremonies you want, have the wedding feasts, send out the cards, do whatever you want. But there is a point at which there is a recognition and a covenant that passes between a man and a woman in the eyes of God before God, looking to God for his joining together of that commitment.

That's marriage. When and how it occurs, probably no two are the same, but that's what makes the marriage. And that is a marriage.

Any other kind of marriage and a marriage where maybe it begins that way, but over the course of time, somebody takes a hard left turn and goes completely north and therefore the marriage goes north and becomes a sham and a shambles. And it becomes something where I cannot make progress toward life. There is a time when you have to pluck out an eye, you have to cut off a hand, you have to chop off a foot, knowing that it maims you, knowing that it forever changes you.

But the reason you're doing it is to enter into life in the same way that believers ought to enter into marriage with their eyes on God and recognizing his creation of that union in

the same way that Adam and Eve were united. A believer who decides to dissolve a union has to be doing it for the right reasons. What was the Pharisees question? Can you use any reason? Jesus, by quoting these scriptures, goes past Deuteronomy to Genesis and says, you look at the nature of that marriage.

What is its purpose? It is to reflect divine action and divine glory. And if the marriage can no longer do that because one of the parties has gone in a twisted direction and it is irreconcilable. Jesus spent half a chapter in Matthew 18 talking about the effort that needs to go into reconciliation and the healing of a division.

But if it will not be healed, if you cannot unite with the objective of the glory of God and future life in his presence and in his service, then it's heathen and tax collector time. It is hand chopping time. It's eye plucking time.

The Bible never prohibits divorce. It prohibits the abuse of the provision for divorce. What does Jesus say? Verse seven, they said to him, why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce and to put her away? He said to them, Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts permitted you to divorce your wives.

Hardness of your hearts permitted you to divorce. Why is there a provision for divorce in the realm of marriage? Because we are a fallen race. We are fallen individuals.

And there are times when our fallenness and the hardness of our hearts. What is a hard heart? How many times did Moses go to Pharaoh and say, thus says the Lord, let my people go. Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not let them go.

He dissembled, he rationalized, he would briefly say that he would, and then he would change his mind. He tried to let them, well, just go one or two days and then come back. He hardened his heart and hardness of heart is intractable rejection of the divine plan.

When you find yourself yoked together with someone who has an intractable rejection of God's plan and purpose, and you are trying to pursue it and you are trying to enter into life. This is when you go to Corinthians and read what Paul says, we don't really have time to go there. You know what Paul says, be not unequally yoked together with the faithless.

If you are trying to plow a straight furrow, you're trying to walk the narrow path through the straight gate that leads to life. And you are yoked with an ox that keeps turning away and dragging you off the path. You've got to cut that yoke for your own self-preservation.

That's what Jesus talked about. That's why we spent so much time in Matthew 18. Divorce is provided because hardness of heart exists.

And if you find yourself, your hand has hardness of heart, your foot has hardness of

heart, your eye has hardness of heart, and you cannot progress because of this unity, Jesus says, divide it. Now this has ramifications when you get to verses 11 and 12, talking about eunuchs. And we'll pick this study up next week, but think about it now.

If marriage here is an example of the kind of unity that God expects among all of his people and the desire for that unity and the effort put into trying to preserve, maintain, or restore that unity is such an emphasis, but it is symbolic. Marriage is used for larger issues of looking to God and seeking to please God and trying to be a part of a couple or a group that has that as a common goal. And in the unfortunate case where there are those in the group, or there are those in the marriage who have no such interest and have no such dedication, may have professed it at one time, but it was hollow, it turned out to be a sham.

God provides for hardness of heart. God provides for division. Jesus described it after three tries in Matthew 18.

Jesus described it in chopping off body parts. Jesus describes it here. Moses enshrined divorce in the law referred to it because there is such a thing as hardness of heart.

And God's not going to let that person be the millstone that drags you to the bottom of the sea. So now think about the eunuch in the time between now and next Sunday. What is it to be a eunuch? What is it to look back at the two becoming one flesh and then considering the eunuch and the three different categories of eunuchs? Fascinating study.

We'll look at it next time. But in closing, divorce is not a deal breaker. And even if we mess it up, how many times have we messed up all kinds of other things? And we look at it, we say, well, that was a mistake.

The way I dealt with my mistake was another mistake. All of us have a history littered with corpses of mistakes. But the Bible says, learn, grow, let God pick us up and stand us on our feet in the present and move us forward.

So regardless of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of anything that we have ever done, forgetting those things which are behind, I press toward the mark of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Paul didn't say, well, you know, there's certain things that you're not allowed to forget. There are certain things that God's not going to forget.

There are certain things that, well, that's just a deal breaker and you're forever maimed and you're going to be dragging one foot in the stump of an arm because you had to cut something off. We can enter into life after that kind of separation, whether it was legit, illegit. Think about one of these Perian Pharisees.

If they had suddenly come to conviction and recognized that what Jesus said was true and said, I have been carried along by a bad way of thinking, I've been espousing a point of view that just really is not from Scripture. This man has explained it. I see it.

I recognize it. I have made a string of mistakes here. But now that I've heard this teaching from this man, I'm going to change.

I'm going to abandon that life. I'm going to abandon that way of thinking. I'm going to try to get on this narrow road and go through this straight gate, regardless of what I've done in the past.

Do you think God would honor that Pharisee? Do you think God would bless that man who hears the word of God, takes it in, learns from it, and says, I'm heading for life and things are going to be different? Forgetting those things which are behind may have been legit, may have been illegit, may have been good, may have been bad, may have remedied something awful, may have been a tragic misstep and a crime. It doesn't matter. Look at what the word says, understand what marriage is supposed to be, what unity in the body of Christ is supposed to be.

We ask forgiveness where it is needed. We have change of mind where it is needed, and we move forward. God always sets our feet on the rock and gives us the opportunity to walk.

If we're alive, God has a plan for our life. It's just that simple. Don't let the drag and the corpse-y smelling episodes of the past distract from the opportunity in the present and the opportunity in the future to make the most of what God has designed to enter into life.

Forgetting those things which are behind, press toward the mark. That's what we do. Well, this next section coming up in verses 9, 10, 11, and 12 is going to be really fascinating, and that's where we'll pick up next time.

Father, thank you for the truth of your word. Thank you for the divine power that comes into our souls through it and in the hands of the Holy Spirit, enables us to see clearly who we are, where we are, and where we can be, what we can do through that grace. We pray that our unity, whether it is in our marriage, whether it is in our church family, whether it is in our physical families and extended families, those believers that we rub elbows with, will be enhanced as we study these truths and see the priority that you place on our being an ever-growing reflection of your glory and the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We pray it in his name. Amen.