

# Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage – Matthew 19:1-12

---

## Controversial

Marriage has become quite a controversial subject. So, controversial that I had to send out an email during the week so that people could prepare themselves for today's talk. In many ways, I am happy to do that because it is good to prepare ourselves for difficult subjects, and more importantly, to hear from God's Word. Yes, we have to be careful how we might speak around children, but we also have to be prepared to engage with God's Word, to let God speak to us through his Word, and to let God challenge and change us as we submit to his Word. This is no different today than it was in Jesus' day. The subject of divorce and remarriage was just as controversial and the people of Jesus' day did not always follow God's Word. They would sometimes even use God's Word to promote something different to what God had intended.

## A Trap

The controversial subject we are looking at today is divorce and remarriage. In Australia, the first big change to the marriage act was not *Same Sex Marriage* but *No Fault Divorce*, which happened in 1975. Before that, there had to be a reason for divorce, such as abandonment, abuse, or adultery. Today, you do not need a drastic reason to divorce, you just need both people to agree to divorce. This change has made it much easier for people to divorce and the divorce rates have gone up ever since. In Jesus' day, the controversy around divorce was about how easy or how hard it was for a man to divorce his wife. In Deuteronomy 24, Moses wrote about divorce and said...

**Deuteronomy 24:1** *If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house*

The issue was around words like "displeasing", "indecent", and "dislikes" which are found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Traditionally, the woman would have to have been involved in something seriously shameful or indecent, like adultery or immodesty, to be divorced by her husband. But then people started to put the emphasis on "displeasing" and "dislikes" and there are recorded instances of women being divorced because they spoilt the evening meal, or the man had found someone else he preferred. Divorce had become so much easier with this new understanding and the Pharisees came to Jesus to question him on the controversial issue of divorce.

**Matthew 19:3** *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?"*

It is interesting that the Pharisees were trying to test, possibly even trap, Jesus in this controversy. Jesus had been away for a while, and maybe they had spent that time coming up with a plan to trap him, discredit him, or even execute him. One of the things we can forget is that Jesus had already spoken on this subject in the Sermon on the Mount.

**Matthew 5:31-32** *"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.'<sup>32</sup> But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.*

So, on the subject of divorce, Jesus had already said that divorce is all about adultery. But he had not spoken about all the other reasons why people might divorce their wife. That is why the Pharisees asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" They wanted to have a legal debate. They wanted to know how Jesus would interpret the "any and every reason" part of the divorce law. But Jesus was not a lawyer, and he was not interested in being trapped in a legal debate. So, Jesus did not bother arguing over the law of Moses, he went back to God's intention for marriage.

## Good Intentions

When I was teaching high school scripture, some students would just randomly say that I hated homosexuals. This was nothing more than a ploy to distract the class and bait me into a debate. For a few weeks I simply ignored the statements but then the class started to become vitriolic and say nasty things in order to get my reaction. I told them that I would not be willing to talk about my thoughts on homosexuality until after I had talked about God's view on marriage. We then spent three weeks talking about the biblical view of marriage and the homosexuality issue was no longer an issue. In much the same way, before he talked about divorce, Jesus talked about God's intention for marriage. Understanding God's intention for marriage would help people understand the issue of divorce without having to get into the Mosaic law on divorce.

**Matthew 19:4-6** *"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,'<sup>5</sup> 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'?<sup>6</sup> So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."*

Jesus began by looking at the basic ideas of the One Flesh principle behind marriage. They are to be male and female, from separate families, and independent to each other before coming together in the One Flesh union which is meant to last a lifetime. This is seen in the words, "Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate" or as the older versions say, "let man not separate". The intention of marriage is that it is between two people until they are parted by death. Not by divorce, not by separation, but by death. And did you notice that the man was not to separate what God had joined together? But which man? I've often thought of a third person entering into the relationship who would come along and tear the marriage apart. But the Pharisee's question was "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" and Jesus' answer was, "what God has joined together, let man not separate." The man should not separate from his wife for God has joined them together. The intention of marriage is found in the One Flesh principle. It is the basis for Jesus' understanding of marriage and divorce. For Jesus, God joins the two people together as one for life.

Well, the Pharisees were not happy with Jesus' answer. He went to the intention behind marriage and pointed out that the husband and wife should not separate as they are one flesh, but the Pharisees wanted details about divorce law.

**Matthew 19:7** *"Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"*

If they are not supposed to separate, then why is there a law about divorce? Jesus' answer was that it wasn't designed to be this way. People are not meant to divorce but because people's hearts were hard, and they don't live God's way, then a divorce law was introduced. Divorce can and does happen, but that was never the intention. The intention was for people to enter a One Flesh relationship for life when they get married. Now, before I read you Jesus' explanation of this from Matthew's Gospel, I want to read it to you from Mark and Luke's Gospels. You see, they have the same kind of statements, but they are slightly different.

**Mark 10:11-12** *He [Jesus] answered, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her.<sup>12</sup> And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery."*

This is very similar to Luke's version...

**Luke 16:18** *"Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery."*

The surprising thing about Mark and Luke's versions is that Jesus' main message about marriage, divorce and remarriage is that divorce leads to adultery not that adultery leads to divorce. For Jesus, the One Flesh principle of marriage is that the husband and wife are meant to be united for life. He holds such a high position on this

that he says that if you divorce and marry someone else, you have committed adultery. And so, for Jesus, divorce leads to adultery and the breakdown of the One Flesh principle.

## The Exception

But Matthew's version of the same story is slightly different. It contains what some people call an exception clause.

**Matthew 19:9** *I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."*

Did you see it? The exception clause is sexual immorality. For many people, this means that if the husband or wife have an affair, then they have broken the One Flesh marriage. Therefore, the person who did not have the affair can issue a divorce certificate and get married to someone else. But I wonder if we are starting to look at what Jesus said in much the same way that the Pharisees in Jesus' day were looking at what Moses said. Are we looking for a way to get what we want, or are we looking at God's intention for marriage and applying it to our lives?

So, why does Matthew include this exception clause in his Gospel when Mark and Luke do not? Well, I have done a lot of thinking about this, and I can see how there is a good basis for saying that adultery breaks the One Flesh relationship and gives you grounds for divorce. But that is rather limiting. What happens if the woman is being abused or abandoned? Is there no exception clause for her? So, why did Matthew include this particular exception clause when the other Gospel writers didn't? Maybe, it has something to do with someone else in Matthew's Gospel who nearly divorced his fiancée and would have been considered right to do so.

**Matthew 1:18-19** *This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.*

Joseph was betrothed to Mary. To break that betrothal meant that he had to have real grounds for divorce. Mary being pregnant when Joseph had not had sex with her was good grounds for divorce and he had every right to go through divorce proceedings. But, you also have to note that during the betrothal period, the couple were not to have sex, they were not married yet, and so they were not in a One Flesh relationship. That means that the divorce of an engaged couple could not be based upon *adultery* but on *sexual immorality* or *misconduct*. Another old fashioned word for it is *fornication*, which is sex before marriage. So, if we go back to Matthew 19:9 we note that Jesus used two different words here. At the end of the verse he used the word *adultery* to describe the man who marries another woman after divorcing his wife. But the word that has been translated as *sexual immorality* (or *marital unfaithfulness* in the older NIV) is actually the word for *fornication* or sex before marriage. And so, the exception that Jesus gave could well be understood as divorce during the betrothal period, before they were married, not after they were married because once the couple is married and they become One Flesh, then the way to describe an extra marital affair is with the word *adultery*. I know it sounds technical, but I think it fits with Jesus' basic way of looking for the intention behind the law of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. It also sets the bar high for marriage, divorce, and remarriage but it does not limit the exception to only adultery. By looking at the exception clause as fornication before marriage, you suddenly are able to open up the issue of finding grounds for divorce for the person who is trapped in an abusive or abandonment situation.

## High View

Jesus clearly does not go down the "any and every reason" path for divorce and the disciples jokingly say...

**Matthew 19:10** *"If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry."*

In other words, if marriage is for life, then it is better not to marry. One person in my Bible Study group said that you might be tempted to give death a helping hand if you were stuck in a marriage you didn't like. But of course, there is another option. The other option is for you both to work really hard at your marriage. It takes total commitment from both the man and the woman to make the marriage work and you have to be willing to put in the effort. Go to marriage counselling, do marriage courses, work at relating to each other, be prepared to show other-person-centred or sacrificial love so that you do what is best for the building up of the relationship rather than what you want to get out of the relationship. Work on strengthening the principles of the One Flesh relationship and the intention behind it, rather than looking for a way out.

## **But What about???**

Now, at this point, I would be expecting some of you to be thinking, "But what about my friend whose husband was a jerk and had affairs with a number of women at the office?" or "What about the person who gets abused? Are you saying that they should just stay and cop it?" or "What about the spouse who just walks out? You can't force them to stay if they don't want to." It's true, there are some marriages that cannot be reconciled. There are times when we ought to save some people from the damage their spouses are inflicting upon them. There are occasions where we have to apply divorce proceedings but that doesn't diminish the One Flesh principle behind marriage. In fact, it demonstrates how severe the damage is when the One Flesh relationship is broken. The breaking of the One Flesh relationship is like trying to pull apart two pieces of paper that have been glued together. You try doing that and see what happens. The prising apart of the One Flesh relationship tears at our very souls and causes the couple, their families and even the community around them great harm. As a church, we ought to be doing everything we can to support people who are feeling the emotional scars of marriage breakdown and divorce. We need to do our best to bring healing to this situation.

## **Reconciliation**

The final point I want to make is that marriage teaches us a lot about repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation and healing. For those who are married, and you take the One Flesh principles seriously, then you will need to be working on reconciliation. You will hurt each other at some point because each of us are sinful. When you sin against your spouse, you need to be willing to repent, to seek forgiveness and restore the relationship. If your spouse has wronged you, then you need to be willing to forgive, to accept your responsibility in the relationship, and also seek reconciliation because without reconciliation the marriage will slowly disintegrate and decay. You see, a marriage is never stagnant, it is always either growing stronger or weaker. People who believe in One Flesh marriage need to work at making their marriage stronger. For those of you who are divorced, I want to acknowledge the pain that you have gone through. Some of you may have faced terrible ordeals which led to your divorce, and you may have done everything you could to try and make it work, but your spouse refused to do the right thing. It seems to me that you will be in need of healing, and you may need to learn how to forgive. If there is anyway of reconciling, even if it's not total reconciliation (especially if either of you have remarried), then you should pursue that though I know that is not always possible. You may also need to learn how to forgive, even if the other person doesn't want to receive forgiveness. That way, you can let go of the hurt to some degree. For those of you who are remarried. You might be worried about feeling judged after this sermon. I hope you don't, that is not the point of my preaching today, but if you feel the need to seek forgiveness from God then go to him. If you need help with that then see me. Then you need to do all you can do to make your new One Flesh relationship work. Lastly, to those of you who have lost your spouse through death, I know that it hurts. All I can say is that you ask God for healing.