

Let's keep our Bibles open right there at Matthew 19, as we continue making our way through this Gospel together. I've titled our series in Matthew, "The Promise Fulfilled," because throughout this book, Matthew is determined to show us how every promise of God finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. But if I wanted to choose a title for the section of Matthew that we're in right now, I would probably call it, "The Journey to Jerusalem." Because, back in Matthew 16:21 we read how *Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised* (Matthew 16:21).

Jesus knew his mission was to go to Jerusalem, die upon the cross, and rise again. And he was determined to accomplish this purpose for the salvation of his people. So, from Matthew 16 on, he begins to move in that direction, leaving Caesarea Philippi in northern Israel, traveling south into Galilee. And at the beginning of our passage today we read: *Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. And large crowds followed him, and he healed them there* (Matthew 19:1-2).

Jerusalem is in Judea. Which means Jesus is rapidly approaching the end of his journey. He is getting very close to the cross. But before he gets there, he has some valuable lessons to teach his disciples about the nature of life in his kingdom. And in these next weeks, we'll see him speak about family, wealth, grace, service, and worship. Matters that are as relevant today as they were in the 1st century. And this morning, I want you to see what Jesus has to say about family. Particularly, I want you to see what Jesus has to say about marriage, singleness, and children. These are very personal, and sometimes very painful topics. They touch some of the most joyful and sorrowful places of our lives. So, all of us will benefit from hearing what Jesus has to say. Because Jesus is full of truth and he's also full of grace. So, friend, if these are tender topics for you, hang with me, there's always good news when we draw near to Jesus.

To structure our time in this passage, I'm going to make six observations:

- Three about marriage.
- Two about singleness.
- And one about children.

Speaking of children, I'm aware that we have kids in the room, and I want to assure you that I've asked God to help me speak in a way that is faithful to the text and appropriate for our context. We'll start with...

1. Marriage

Jesus's teaching on marriage comes in response to a question from the Pharisees. Look at verse 3: *And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?"* (Matthew 19:3).

In 1st century Israel, the key biblical text on divorce was in Deuteronomy 24. We'll come back to that passage in a moment, but it speaks of a man determining to divorce his wife because of "some indecency in her." That phrase "some indecency" is somewhat vague, and this resulted in various interpretations, which eventually led to the formation of two main perspectives. Those who held the first perspective argued that "some indecency" referred to something very serious, a flagrant offense that brought shame upon the husband and dishonored the Lord. Those who held the second perspective argued that "some indecency" referred to something far more general, basically meaning anything a husband did not like.

For example—and I’m not making this up—there were Rabbis who said a husband could divorce his wife if he didn’t like her cooking or found someone else prettier than her. Therefore, according to this view it was lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause. Many Pharisees held this view. And now these Pharisees want to know, “Jesus, do you agree?” How will Jesus respond? Well, a pastor named John Stott once said, “Whenever anybody asks me a question about divorce, I refuse to answer it until I have first talked about... marriage.”¹ And that’s the approach Jesus takes here. He answers the Pharisees question by reminding them that...

A. Marriage is God’s creation

Verses 4-5: *He answered, “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’?” (Matthew 19:4-5).*

We know that there is widespread confusion about marriage in our day. And we’re learning that there was plenty of confusion about marriage in Jesus’s day as well. But notice how Jesus cuts through the confusion and brings clarity by taking these Pharisees back to God’s Word. That’s always the way to find clarity on any issue: If you want to know the will of God, run to the Word of God!

Jesus quotes from the creation narrative in Genesis 1-2. He reminds them that God created humanity in two complimentary genders: male and female... both made in the image of God with all the value and dignity that implies. Today we’re told that gender is a social construct. But that’s not true. Gender is God’s creation—his very good creation. And marriage is his very good creation too. God designed marriage as the life-long union of one man and one woman. The laws of our land may define marriage differently, but no one has the right to alter the Creator’s design. And marriage—as God has created it—is a tremendous gift.

Jesus quotes Genesis 2:24, which says, “A man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife and the two shall become one flesh.” When a man and a woman get married, they form a new family unit and hold fast to one another. The word translated “hold fast” can be translated “glued” or “welded.” Have you ever superglued your fingers together? You know how strong that bond can be! Or what about welding? I’ve only done it once, but even as a total amateur, I was able to fuse two pieces of steel well enough that I could not break them apart. And this is the biblical language for marriage! But God goes even further. He says the two not only hold fast to one another, they actually become one flesh! That includes physical unity, but also every other form of unity—intellectual, volitional, emotional, and so on.

Jay Adams says, “The marriage union is the closest, most intimate of all human relationship. Two people begin to think, act, feel as one.” And here’s one more stunning reality: this one flesh union is formed by God himself. Look at verse 6. Jesus says of a husband and a wife, *So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate*” (Matthew 19:6). Who created this union? Was it the couple with their commitment? The pastor with his pronouncement? The state with its certificate? Yes, but the couple, the pastor, and the state are not the ultimate basis for any marriage. God himself creates the union. And we must not break apart what God has brought together. But we know it happens. The question is why? And next, I want you to

¹ Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, 382.

see that...

B. Divorce comes from sin's corruption

The Pharisees asked about permission for divorce. Jesus spoke about the permanence of marriage. But they are not satisfied with his response. Verse 7: *They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?"* (Matthew 19:7).

Here's their argument: "Sure Jesus, God created marriage. But you know, Moses—who gave us God's law—commanded that a husband give his wife a certificate in divorce proceedings..." They are almost making it sound as if God commanded divorce. But they are misquoting the biblical text. They're referring to Deuteronomy 24, which *describes* how husbands write certificates of divorce, but it does not *command* them to do so. We don't read descriptions of murder or theft in the Old Testament and conclude that God commanded us to kill each other and steal from each other! No, God was not commanding divorce in Deuteronomy 24. He was regulating it. Explaining ways to mitigate harm and maintain justice in a fallen world.

Which is why Jesus responds the way he does in verse 8: *He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so"* (Matthew 19:8). In the beginning, marriage was permanent. But sin entered the world, and corrupted everything, including human hearts and human relationships. And one of the effects is divorce. So, it's important for us to understand that every divorce comes from sin's corruption. But it's also important for us to understand that not everyone who pursues a divorce is sinning. Jesus makes that clear in verse 9: *And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery*" (Matthew 19:9).

Before we consider the exception, notice the rule. Jesus says, *whoever divorces his wife... and marries another, commits adultery*. Why is it adultery? Because the one-flesh union of a marriage is not untimely formed by the couple, it's formed by God. To break away from the union God has formed and to enter another is adultery. This also explains Jesus's exception. He says, *whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery*.

Here is a case where Jesus says divorce is permissible, and therefore not sinful. If your companion violates the covenant—by sinfully involving another party—that covenant violation becomes grounds for a divorce. This does not necessitate divorce, but it does mean that a divorce under these circumstances would not be a sin. For example, this is why the Bible can speak of Joseph as a *just man*... though he intended to divorce Mary when he thought (incorrectly!) she had engaged in an immoral relationship. There is obviously so much more we could say on this topic, but this is Jesus's clear teaching in Matthew 19: Marriage is God's creation and divorce comes from sin's corruption.

So, husbands, wives, do everything you can to protect and strengthen your marriage. Hold fast to one another, love and cherish one another, do not damage what God has made. But what if you do? Well, before we move on, let me make one brief, but important observation for the many here today who have experienced the way sin harms marriage. I want you to know that...

C. Jesus heals what sin harms

Go back to the beginning of our passage today. Verses 1-2: *Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. And large crowds followed him, and he healed them there* (Matthew 19:1-2).

Throughout Matthew, we have seen that Jesus approaches sinners and sufferers with a compassionate heart and a healing hand. He does not back away from us because of our failures and flaws, he draws near to us with his grace to cleanse us and power to change us. So, maybe you're in a marriage that is crumbling and you're trying to hold it together. Maybe everything already fell apart and you're trying to pick up the pieces. Maybe you're watching as your parents struggle or separate. If this heartache has come into your life, you need to know that there is no hurt that Jesus cannot heal, there is no wound that Jesus cannot bind up, there is no failure he cannot forgive.

Take your situation to him and ask for his mercy and for his strength. Jesus heals what sin harms. That healing might mean Jesus binds up and restores what has been broken now. Or it might mean Jesus binds up your broken heart and carries you through the pain and the sorrow until the day when he restores all things forever. Follow him—like these crowds—and he will care for you.

Next, let's talk about...

2. Singleness

Look at verse 10: *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).

Apparently, the disciples shared their culture's more relaxed view on divorce, and Jesus's high view of marriage was a little much for them to handle. But Jesus has said what he needed to say on marriage, so he doesn't revisit that topic. Instead, he picks up on their comment about not marrying and teaches them something about the single life. At first, this might sound very strange. But listen to verses 11-12: *But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. 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 19:11-12).

What is he talking about? Well, again, aware that there are kids in the room, let me put it like this: in the first century, eunuchs were men who would not get married—they were celibate, which is really Jesus's focus here. And Jesus says there are three kinds of celibacy:

- those who are born in such a way that necessitates celibacy,
- those who are made that way by others,
- and those who choose that way for the sake of the kingdom.

And with the first two cases in mind, Jesus is saying that...

A. For some, singleness is a trial to endure

Jesus is aware that there are men and women who do not choose their singleness. Factors outside of their control keep them from marriage, and leave them with unfulfilling longings in this life. That's a trial. Perhaps that's a trial you're enduring. If it is, there are

three things I'd like to say to you.

First, it is ok to lament the loneliness you feel, to bring that to the Lord, and to share that with others. Back in Genesis 2, before sin entered the world, there was only one thing God saw in his creation that was not good. He said, "It is not good that the man should be alone." If you long for the companionship of marriage, and feel that your singleness is not good, it is ok to acknowledge that pain.

Second, your singleness does not diminish your value among God's people. It's good that we do all we can to bolster marriages and support families in the church. But I know that can leave singles feeling a bit out of place at times...even less-than in some sense. But listen, you do not need to be married to live a full and faithful Christian life. If marriage was a requirement for complete engagement in Christian community and ministry, that would exclude Paul and Jesus—just to name two! Your singleness does not diminish your value among God's people.

And third, the trial of your singleness is temporary. It might be temporary in this life. You never know who you might meet! So, if you long to be married do all you can to prepare for marriage (fostering the kind of Christ-like character that will serve a spouse well). Singleness may be a temporary trial in this life. But even if it's not, it will end in the life to come. When we go to be with our Lord, all our trials will end, and all our longings will be fulfilled. Eagerly anticipate that day! But Jesus does not say for all, singleness is a trial to endure. He also says...

B. For some, singleness is a gift to embrace

Remember, Jesus also mentions those who choose celibacy for the sake of the kingdom. And I want you to notice how he describes this...

Look at verses 11-12 again: *But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given... 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 19:11-12).

Jesus says this choice, this willful singleness, is not for everyone. It is for those to whom it is given. And those whom God calls to this kind of single life will receive it as a gift. Again, not everyone will receive it that way.

Kristen wanted curtains for her Christmas gift this year. If you gave me curtains for Christmas, I would have a hard time getting very excited. But to her, that's a great gift. And there are those who God enables to receive singleness as a gift. They willfully set apart a unique proportion of their lives, which would have gone to marriage and family, and invest that time and energy into Christ's kingdom. And maybe that's you!

You have received singleness as a gift, and you are stewarding that gift for the sake of his kingdom. That's wonderful! Just don't let it puff you up. There have been various times and various traditions throughout church history in which celibacy is viewed as a higher spiritual achievement. But that is not the Bible's view. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:7, speaking of those who are married and those who are single: *each has his own gift from God.*

In these last moments, I want you to notice what Jesus has to say at the end of our passage about...

3. Children

Look at verses 13-15: *Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven." And he laid his hands on them and went away* (Matthew 19:13-15).

The disciples aren't looking so great in this passage. They're flabbergasted at Jesus's high view of marriage. They're rebuking people for bringing their kids close to Jesus. Praise God for his patience and his grace towards imperfect disciples, like these guys, and like us. But Jesus doesn't want the kids kept away. He wants them close.

Kids, we are so glad you're a part of our church, and we want to do all we can to help you trust and follow Christ. And grownups, we could talk about the way we seek to do this in Sunday school, Awana, great ministries like our Orchard Kids Week this past week, and so on. But since we've been talking about the family, let me offer a special encouragement to parents: Moms and dads, you have a unique responsibility to bring your kids to Christ. To tell them about Jesus, to pray for them to trust in Jesus, and to teach them how to follow Jesus. And I know—as a fellow parent trying to figure this out—that it's not easy or straightforward, but we must persist in this, and trust that the Lord will use our imperfect efforts.

One story years ago, several members of our pastoral team attended a conference on evangelism. There were about 8,000 people there and one of the conference organizers wanted to know how we all came to faith. We were sitting down, and he said, "Stand up if you came to Christ through 1-on-1 personal evangelism." You could see some people standing up here and there. Then he said, "Stand up if you came to Christ at an evangelistic event/rally." A few more stood. Then he said, "Stand up if you came to Christ at a church service." A few more stood, probably several hundred standing now. But then he said, "Stand up if you came to Christ in your home." Thousands stood.

Parents, telling them about Jesus and encouraging them to believe in Jesus—do all you can to bring your kids to Jesus. You have a remarkable opportunity.

Conclusion

We've heard what Jesus has to say here about the family: Marriage is God's creation, divorce comes through sin's corruption, but Jesus heals what sin harms. For some, singleness is a trial to endure. For others, singleness is a gift to embrace. And we want to do all we can to bring children to Jesus.

These are very personal, and sometimes very painful topics. They touch some of the most joyful and sorrowful places of our lives. So, remember, Jesus is full of truth and he's also full of grace. Let's ask for his grace now.