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Matthew 19:1-12

Divorce, Remarriage, Singleness, and the Gospel

The first No-Fault Divorce law was passed in California, in 1969. Since then, all 50 states have adopted “No Fault Divorce” laws. And since then, as divorce rates have exploded, marriages and the general concept of the nuclear family have fallen apart. The consequences have been disastrous and painful. Marriages have been shattered and people left broken and hurting. Children have felt incredible pain, harboring feelings of resentment, shame, guilt, and confusion - often even tainting their views of marriage, family, and commitment for the rest of their lives. “Divorce culture” being normalized has had painful effects on every area of culture and society - even in the Church.

But divorce is a difficult topic to talk about, isn't it? As soon as the word is said, all kinds of different emotions and memories are flaring up inside all of us, even right now, as I speak. The word, the idea, of “divorce” inevitably brings with it *sorrow, shame, and suspicion*. Every single divorce is the result of sin, to at least some degree - either one of the spouses, or both, are guilty of sins leading up to the divorce. No divorce ends “well.” Every divorce brings with it pain, sorrow, suffering, regret, shame, guilt, and brokenness.

And the hard part is, because of how widespread “no-fault divorce” has become in our modern culture and society, every single one of us has been impacted by the painful reality and effects of divorce, in one way or another. It is an unfortunate reality that I can say, with absolute certainty, that every single one of us here today personally knows some (or probably many people) who have been divorced. Maybe you come from a broken family, and your parents divorced each other while you were growing up. Maybe a family member - such as your uncle, or cousins, your brother or sister, maybe even one of your children - has been divorced. Maybe even *you* have been divorced in your past.

But no matter what your history is with divorce, this is an issue every single one of us will deal with. Someone you know will deal with this, for one reason or another. Issues revolving around divorce will inevitably pop up within our church, at some point down the line. Maybe you even know loved ones dealing with this tragic issue right now.

Therefore, the topics of marriage, divorce, and remarriage are topics that we desperately need to talk about - especially within the church! Yet far too often churches have not talked about or dealt with divorce in the right way. There are dangers on either end of the spectrum: some churches deal with the matter too harshly, treating it like the “unforgivable sin” and refusing to hold out hope, grace, forgiveness, and restoration. But other churches have fallen off on the other side: remaining too silent, refusing to talk about or deal with the actual cases of divorce and failed marriages happening right there in their own congregation, simply ignoring it, speaking of it in hushed tones but never publicly, and ignoring the very real sin and pain in the lives of that family.

So what’s the answer? We definitely must talk about it - we cannot be silent; but we must rightly teach and act upon *what the Bible says about marriage, divorce, and remarriage*. We need to be firmly grounded in a biblical foundation of GOD’s good design for marriage, singleness, and sexuality. We need to know what *God says is good* and what *God says is wrong and sinful* - we need to listen to what the Bible says about divorce, about what is sinful and what is permissible, so that we may obey the Lord and know how to help each other navigate the thorny, painful circumstances of life. And we need to deal with all of the issues by rooting them in the *abundant, infinite mercy and grace of Christ Jesus* that overflows towards us in the midst of our sin, shame, and brokenness - even the brokenness of divorce finds healing, grace, forgiveness, and redemption in the loving arms of our dear savior.

That’s what we need to talk about in our church concerning divorce. And that’s exactly what Jesus talks about in our text today: *Matthew 19:1-12*. Verses 1-3 set up the context for our passage this morning: In verses 1 & 2, we see Jesus and his disciples leaving Galilee (the place where the majority of Matthew has taken place so far), which is in the North of Israel, and head South toward Jerusalem. In verse 3, another group of antagonistic Pharisees approach Jesus and “tested” him by asking a question: “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” It’s possible there asking, “Is there any permissible reason to get a divorce?” But I think the NIV is probably right when it translates this as, “any and *every* cause?” In other words they’re asking: is divorce really a sin? Is it really so bad? Or can anyone who wants to get a divorce, if they think they have cause for it?” Jesus answers *both* of these questions. Jesus doesn’t give an *exhaustive* answer here: he doesn’t cover everything that the Bible has to say about such matters; nor does he

address every pastoral issue regarding divorce and remarriage. But he does give us a *solid foundation* for thinking through these issues.

First, he lays the *positive foundation* of **God's good design for marriage**.

I. God's Good Design for Marriage (19:4-6a)

The Pharisees ask Jesus about divorce in verse 3. In verses 4 and 5, Jesus replies: "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?'" (19:4-5). He's quoting **Gen. 2:24**.

In other words, Jesus doesn't immediately answer the question by pointing to divorce itself, at least not at first. He doesn't start by parsing out what's sin and what's not. He begins answering the question by lifting our eyes up to remember and behold the *positive, gloriously good design of marriage* as a gift of God to all of mankind. Jesus points to the positive foundation of marriage and sexuality laid in the very act of Creation, found in the first two chapters of the entire Bible: Genesis 1 and 2.

In the very beginning, GOD created *all things - everything that exists comes from GOD as the ultimate source*. And God created all things to be *very good*. God gave us Genesis 1 and 2 to tell us this, and he tell us that His purposes in creation - His created design - is *perfectly good*. So, it tells us that God created *humanity* - and he created us, specifically, to be *male and female*. "Gender" isn't a social construct - it's not something we just make up in our heads, or a product of culture, nor is it something that can change, as if it is up for discussion; no, it was *created and ordained by God in Creation itself*. Biological gender and sexuality are *good, GOD-given gifts to humanity* - but they are only to be received on *GOD's terms*, in the way he designed for them to be. There is no human flourishing or thriving outside of GOD's good, created design. After all, if a car is designed to run on gasoline, and you try to pour syrup into it instead, it's not going to work right, is it? And so it is with us - it is *good* for us to know what GOD's good, created design for us is, so that we can *live* by it.

And not only did God create us male and female, but He also created *marriage*. Since God is the Creator, he gets to define marriage for us - *He made it, he knows what it is and what it's for*. And since God is infinitely good, holy, and righteous, we can trust that His gift and

definition of marriage is *good for us, for our children, for our neighbors, and for all of humanity and society.*

As Jesus alludes to here, GOD defines marriage as a lifelong, committed, covenantal union between one man and woman. They are united in all things, leaving their parents to establish one family, one household, *together*. And they are *one flesh* - which has many implications, but no least of which, it means that this union is a *sexual union*. Any sexual outside of marriage, therefore, are sinful because they are outside of GOD's good, created design - meaning they are *bad* for us and others.

It is absolutely essential for us to remember that *God's gifts, designs, and commands are not arbitrary*. They are *good* for us. Nothing good ever comes from distorting and abusing GOD's designs for gender, sexuality, and marriage. Yet *countless* of people, all throughout human history, have experienced life, joy, and flourishing through the biblical institution of marriage and the intimacy and family it brings. And this includes the fact that marriage is meant to be a *lifelong commitment, a covenantal union* - no loopholes, no room for getting out of it, simply *lifelong faithfulness to each other*. Now, this is by no means a *constricting, suffocating jail-sentence*: it is meant to bring each souse the wondrous gift of *security and assurance*; the peace of mind of not having to wonder whether or not their marriage is going to make it. It brings stability to the marriage, and to the children in the home, when it is built on the foundation of a *lifeline, unwavering commitment to each other*. This is GOD's beautiful design for marriage! THis is part of His gift to us! Why would anyone want to destroy that? So let us, unashamedly and joyfully, hold up to one another God's glorious design for marriage: one man united to one woman, as one flesh, in a lifelong, unbroken commitment to each other. I pray that this such a vision will continue to mark our church family, each of our individual families, and be the example we give to our children and the watching world!

But, obviously, we don't live in the Garden of Eden anymore. This side of the Fall, sin, sexual immorality, and divorce are tragic realities we have to deal with. This brings us to point 2...

II. Divorce Always Results from Sin, and Unbiblical Divorce and Remarriage are Adultery (vv.6-9)

Next, in verse 6, Jesus draws out the implications of this in regards to whether or not divorce is to be permitted: “So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” In other words, Jesus is saying: *divorce was not included in GOD’s created design for marriage*. In marriage, we become *one flesh* - God has designed it to be this way. Therefore, we cannot decide any differently. If being “one flesh” is instituted by God, between one man and one wife, in their marital and sexual union with each other, throughout their lifelong commitment to each other - than to get divorced is to try and *sever* that bond, that one flesh union. And to do so is to go against GOD’s good design, His purposes, and His commands. If He has joined a man and wife together, no man or woman has the right to sever it. This is why divorce is sin. Any act that goes against God’s Word, design, or commands is *sinful rebellion*.

But the Pharisees give a counter response in verse 7: “They said to him, ‘Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?’” They are referring to Deuteronomy 24:1-4, but they are missing the point of that text, and actually interpreting it wrongly. There, Moses does not “command” anyone to get a divorce. Deuteronomy 24, as part of the Old Covenant Law, was merely *regulating* divorce, not permitting or condoning it. Jesus explains this in verse 8, when he says Moses did so “because of your hardness of heart.” In other words, Moses recognized that the Law couldn’t change anyone’s heart; because sinful people have hard hearts, it was inevitable that such sinful people would want to get a divorce. THE Law of Moses, in Deut. 24, simply regulated and put parameters around it.

And Jesus makes clear this was not to condone divorce and remarriage morally: he continues in verses 8, “but from the beginning it was not so.” While the Law of Moses regulated divorce, it did not make it right or good. Jesus points out that to defy God’s created design is still *sin*; therefore, divorce and remarriage are sin. No, the Law of Moses could not change anyone’s heart. But we are not under the Mosaic Law or the Old Covenant - we are under the New Covenant, and if we are believers united to Christ by grace through faith, then we have new hearts! We have the Law of Christ written on our hearts. Therefore, sinful divorce are not permitted in the Church, Christ’s New Covenant people.

Jesus continues in verse 9: “And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.” He once again reminds us that the standard of marriage is Creation itself, where God designed and defined it. Therefore, we can draw this conclusion: When two people are married, God “puts them together” so that they are *one flesh*. A legal certificate of divorce doesn’t change that. This is why, in verse 9, Jesus says that to divorce your spouse and then get remarried is to commit *adultery* - implying that you are still married, in a sense; still “one flesh” with your first spouse; then, when the remarriage occurs, it is actually adultery.

After making it very clear that divorce and remarriage are sinful and adulterous, Jesus then goes on to qualify that it is *not always* sinful to get divorced or be remarried; hear the exception clause in the middle of verse 9 again: “whoever divorces his wife, *except for sexual immorality*.” In other words, Jesus is saying that it is *is* permissible for someone to divorce their spouse *if that spouse has committed adultery*. Now, after laying the clear foundation of marriage in Creation and God’s design for a man and wife to be inseparable, why would Jesus include this exception? Well I think the logic of it is clear: divorce is permissible in such a scenario because *the marriage bond has already been broken by the other spouse’s adultery*. If a man leaves his wife and marries another woman, he is committing adultery, because even though he is legally divorced, he is still “one flesh” with his first wife; therefore, he breaks their covenantal union with one another when he gets remarried - thus committing adultery. But, from that point on, I think the Bible still treats that second marriage as a real marriage. The first marriage has been broken; the second marriage, though born in sin, continues on as a real marriage.

Therefore, if a man cheats on his wife, committing adultery, he has *broken* their marital union; he’s broken the marriage covenant he vowed to keep. Therefore, the wife is free to get a divorce because the marriage has already been broken; the divorce just recognizes that. And she is free to remarry without sin, and it is not considered adultery, for the exact same reason.

So, we see that divorce *always* comes about because of sin; and yet, it is not always sinful to get divorced. Adultery is always involved in a divorce: it’s either the *result* of a sinful divorce, or it is the *just cause* of a biblically allowed divorce. Now, I want to make a couple of pastoral comments:

First, I want to point that the Bible recognizes one other grounds for divorce: in 1 Cor. 7, Paul recognizes that if a believer is married to a non-Christian, and that non-Christian leaves and divorces the Christian spouse, then that spouse is allowed to let the non-believer go - that Christian man or woman is not in sin, since they aren't responsible for it, and they are free to remarry a believer. I don't have time to explain that passage further, I just wanted to point out the only two biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage for believers.

Secondly, just because adultery breaks the marital covenant and makes divorce *permissible*, it does not make it *required*. That is to say, in such a case, GOd does not *command* us to be divorced; there is opportunity for incredible grace, reconciliation, and redemption.

So, **for example**, let's say two Christians are married. Tragically, many years into their marriage, the man has an affair with another woman - he commits adultery and cheats on his wife. Now, lets play out two different scenarios:

In **scenario 1**, the man falls under conviction, confesses this to his wife, repents, and seeks pastoral counseling and strives to mend the broken marriage. IN such a case, the wife is free to divorce when she finds out - but when her husband is truly repentant, then imagine what an incredible picture of the grace of the gospel it is if she forgives him, stays married, and works with him towards seeing their marriage mended and healed! No, it is not an easy process; no, it does not mean there aren't any consequences for the sins involved; no, it does not mean that the woman will not bear much pain, sorrow, and even some scars that will have to heal and be worked through. But when both people are believers, and there is true repentance and true forgiveness, then it can become a beautiful picture of grace and redemption!

But now, let's look at **scenario 2**: the man doesn't fall under conviction for his sin, but is instead caught in the act. He apologizes out of shame and guilt, but doesn't seem truly repentant. Trust has been completely broken, and the wife is pretty sure he is still committing adultery behind her back - or will, as soon as he gets the chance. In such a case, the believing wife is free to seek a divorce and it is probably the wisest course of action. And if that were to happen in our church, then we, as her church family, should not let her feel any shame or guilt for that; she is the wronged one, the one who has been sinned against, and needs the support of the church.

But now for a third pastoral comment: what about if you're feeling conviction and guilt right now because of the sin of adultery, divorce, or remarriage you committed sometime in the past - maybe even far distant past? What do you do then? If that applies for you or a loved one

this morning, I want us all to be reminded that *the grace of Christ is sufficient for such things!* Divorce is not the unforgivable sin. THE blood of Christ was shed for this, too, just like all of our other sins. If you're convicted this morning, simply repent, confess your guilt to the Lord, and receive forgiveness by resting in the finished work of Christ, who died on the cross to deal with even that divorce or that adulterous affair that you now regret. Repentance doesn't mean leaving your current spouse - no, now you are legitimately married - but repentance means you rest in Christ's grace for what lies behind, trusting his grace covers over all of your sinful past (just like it does for all of us who are believers!) and it means you press on in faithfulness and holiness with the way things are *now*. Simply repent by turning to the glorious grace of Christ Jesus, resting in His grace by faith; his grace is more than enough to forgive and redeem whatever lies in our pasts; praise GOD for such grace!

Finally, we come to our last point...

III. **Both Marriage and Singleness are Gifts to be Received for the Sake of the Kingdom of Christ (19:10-12)**

When the reality of what Christ has said about marriage, divorce, and remarriage dawns on the disciples, they respond in an incredibly cynical way, in verse 10: "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." IN other words, if divorce is not an option, they think it would be better to not get married at all. If this is anyone's heart, then they really shouldn't get married to begin with; this reveals a heart problem. Marriage is to be received with joy, as God's gift, not something that you agree to *until you no longer like it*.

Nevertheless, Jesus responds in a way that might surprise us: "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.'" (19:11-12).

Now, Jesus *isn't* saying that the disciples' cynical response is right and marriage should be avoided by all, as if it has somehow become a bad thing. Jesus's defense of marriage in vv.4-6 said the exact opposite: GOD created marriage as a good gift to us. So what is he saying here? Jesus now tells us that, just as *marriage* was created as GOD's good gift to humanity, so *singleness* is also GOD's gift to others, this side of the cross. He gives us three categories of

“eunuchs” here: first, those who are “born” eunuchs, which simply means that, for whatever reason, marriage is biologically not an option for them. Second, there are “eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men.” Now, a eunuch was someone, such as a pagan priest or a male court servant who attended to ladies, who was emasculated (in order to, for example, be more trustworthy around them women he served). Jesus is not condoning such a practice, simply pointing out that such people are single for life. And he draws on this as a metaphor, in the third category: “there are eunuchs who have *made themselves* eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.” These are *Christians* who are called to *singleness*. They are able to receive the saying that it is better not to get married, so that they can take full advantage of their singleness *for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven*. This is exactly what Jesus himself modeled in his life, and exactly what Paul lived out after him. Church history is full of the examples of godly men and women who had the gift of singleness; many of them desired marriage, and yet were able to endure singleness through contentment in Christ; and being single, being without the responsibility of a home, a spouse, or children, they *invested their lives*, self-sacrificially, for the mission of the Church.

And so, this is a reminder that marriage should not be seen as what every Christian ought to do; nor should singleness be viewed as somehow “less than,” or “second-class,” or “plan B.” I think the biblical point is for us to view *both as gifts from God*. Different gifts, but both gifts from the Lord to be used for the Kingdom.

Singleness can be received as a calling to live out the selfless, sacrificial mission of the gospel, limiting Christ himself! And marriage, after all, is a picture of the gospel as well. As Paul tells us in *Eph. 5:22-33*, the ultimate purpose of God’s design for marriage is to be a picture of *the gospel* - a visible picture of Christ and the Church; that Christ lived a perfect life, died on the cross to pay the penalty for God’s wrath against the sins of His people, His Bride, and was raised on the third day to redeem us from death itself, to declare us righteous, and secure eternal life for us, His people, His Church, His Bride - to save all who turn and believe in the good news of the grace of Jesus Christ!

The gospel is a love story, a marriage; and all of history is heading towards the day when Christ will bring His Bride - the Church - home to live in his castle forever. And the glorious good news for us is that *that include you!* No matter how stained with sin you may be, the blood of Christ can wash you white as snow; simply cry out to the Lord, repent from your sins, believe

and him, and be saved! And then, come and let us know so that you can make your faith public in baptism and join the church, CHrist's Bride.

If you have any questions about this gospel, or if you're interested in baptism or church membership, I would love to speak with you. You can come now, or find me after the service.

Let us pray.