



Marriage and Divorce

Sermon – Rod Harding

Deuteronomy 12:1-4

1 Corinthians 7:10-17

Matthew 19:1-15

We live in rapidly changing times! That statement is true, from so many perspectives. Whether we're talking about economic changes as interest rates continue to rise... medical advances, so we don't think twice about new hearts, new shoulders, new knees – I'm waiting for new brains, but it probably won't happen in my lifetime... travel upgrades with new planes, trains, ferries, EVs – and even options for space travel... technology changes, as it is now possible to control all the appliances, switches and locks in your home from either the phone, or the Apple or Google hub – 'Hey Siri!' or 'Hey Google!' And the list could go on.

But perhaps the biggest change we are currently living through and having to adjust to, is the definition of marriage in our society and culture. It may not seem so 'big' to some – it might not have directly affected you yet and, if it hasn't, then you probably haven't had to think about the difference it might make to you and your family, especially the younger generations, now growing up in a world which has dramatically changed on this issue. However, when you are affected, you might have to change your ideas and even your beliefs about how you have always understood marriage.

I'm calling it the 'biggest change' because the other changes already mentioned have been coming for a long time, through long and dedicated development of scientific knowledge, medical understanding, technological advance, engineering capability, artificial intelligence, 3D digital printing, etc. But the concept of the institution and structure of marriage has remained essentially unchanged, quite literally, since Adam and Eve – not just in westernised (and 'civilised') cultures, but possibly in every human culture that has ever existed on the planet. And then suddenly, just a few years ago it all changed!

I read an article in the Herald this week entitled, *'I'm a proud gay man, but World Pride looks a drag'*, written by one of the paper's editors,

explaining that all gays are not necessarily those you see in the Mardi Gras. The article ended with the sentence, *'I'll be feeling proud and aware of my privilege, that I can stay home with my husband, go to bed at 9:30pm, and not have to worry about getting glitter off the sheets in the morning.'* It all made perfect sense to me until that last moment – he wrote, 'stay home with my husband'! It sounded odd to me, because in my world, men have wives, not husbands, so it was somehow wrong – until I thought about it. Now, under the changed definition of marriage, it is entirely possible for men to have husbands and women to have wives – it just sounds odd to me (and maybe to you) when it's said, because I haven't yet become accustomed to the change.

Today we find ourselves in the second sermon of a new series based on chapters 18-22 of Matthew's Gospel, entitled 'Ethics and Encounters' – and the title given to today's passage is 'Domestic Ethics – Love'. 'Love' is certainly visible in the passage before us today, but not so much in the teaching, as in the method of teaching – it is clear from how Jesus responds to the Pharisees that, in spite of their intent to test and trap him, the Pharisees are loved by Jesus. So are the disciples and so are the children – but we really wouldn't have expected Jesus to act in any other way but the way of love, because that is always his way – then and now. The conversation here at the beginning of chapter 19 is not about love, but about marriage and divorce.

When we pay attention to the introduction to the passage, we find that Jesus had left Galilee, the place of last week's conversation with his disciples, and begun a journey that will end in Jerusalem – and he has set off down the eastern bank of the Jordan – *'into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan.'* (v.1). Of course, his popularity was such that *'large crowds followed him, and he healed them there'* (v.2) – and, unremarkably, we note that he was also being followed and watched by the Pharisees (v.3). Unlike last week when all that Jesus said was directed to his disciples, today it is the Pharisees, the opposition, who begin the conversation by deliberately asking him a curly question – they want to trap him into saying something that will give them reason to accuse him of not being true to the scriptures and, therefore, not having qualification or authority to teach. So here we

have Jesus responding to the Jewish religious leaders, his critics and detractors, and being careful as he does to take their questions seriously, to be true to the scriptural record, and leaving them without reason to pursue their accusations of heresy.

‘They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”’ (v.3) Let’s note, as we pass, that they did not have the slightest interest in the topic of their question – they were well-educated in the Old Testament scriptures and the law of Moses – it was their job to judge others in matters of marriage and divorce – they really wanted Jesus to say something contradictory to what they knew was right so they could disagree with him.

Jesus replied by quoting from Genesis 1 and 2, reminding them that these were the scriptures they claimed to know –

“Haven’t you read that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’⁵ 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’?” (v.4-5)

They could not claim ignorance of this, nor that they hadn’t applied it in their own rule book. But Jesus went on to provide his own commentary on these passages –

‘So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.’ (v.6)

He clearly understood (and emphasised for these religious experts) that God always intended that marriage should be permanent – it should be as clear to them as it was to him that divorce *‘for any and every reason’* was not what God considered best for his people.

But this did not satisfy the Pharisees – they were determined to push Jesus further into their trap. If God intended marriage to be permanent,

‘Why then,’ they asked, ‘did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?’ (v.7)

This time, they are making reference to Deuteronomy 24 (which we read earlier), where Moses declares that a man can give his wife a certificate of divorce if she *‘becomes displeasing to him because he*

finds something indecent about her,’ (v.1), or if he *‘dislikes her,’* (v.3) – in other words, *‘any and every reason’*. Again, when you carefully read the context of Moses’ words, you understand that he is actually talking about a particular circumstance of remarriage after divorce – but none-the-less, there is a clear understanding that divorce can and does happen.

(Let me make a side-comment here about gender bias, clearly present in this whole passage. The issue in Matthew 19 is about a *man* divorcing his *wife* –no thought is given to a woman filing for divorce against her husband. It’s not because that can never happen – rather, it’s because the culture of Judaism had been, and still was, completely patriarchal and, in that culture, only men could take this action. We live in a different world today, so although all the references here will address men only, please understand that in our culture, much has been achieved to establish a far greater balance of power and privilege between the genders, and so for us it can work both ways.)

Jesus provided a wise and balanced answer designed to explain the situation and to take the heat out of the argument.

‘Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.’ (v.8)

Yes, it’s true – Moses did say that – but it was always meant to be second-best, it was never meant to be the preferred or ideal for marriage. It was allowed, said Jesus, *‘because your hearts were hard.’* While marriage between a man and woman was clearly designed to be permanent in an ideal world (the garden of Eden, in Genesis 1 and 2), after Genesis 3 (the loss) the world and its inhabitants were no longer ideal. Unfortunately for us all, our human brokenness results in far too many relationships where it has become extraordinarily difficult to continue to live with your spouse, and the only appropriate way forward for both parties is to separate. Please don’t hear me to be recommending or normalising divorce – rather it needs to be seen as the last resort, when all else has failed – but it needs to be able to happen, as an outcome of the grace of God towards his fallen people, because it’s better than having to continue to live in ongoing pain and constant heartbreak.

Jesus was also careful to emphasise that you need a good reason to divorce – it's not just *'for any and every reason'*, as suggested by the Pharisees.

'I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.' (v.9)

This provides a clear boundary around the much more general words of Deuteronomy 24 – finding something indecent about, or dislike of, your wife. It's not that you can't divorce for a serious reason, but if you're just dumping one wife so you're free to marry another, then that is called adultery – and there's another law about that! Divorce is not just an easy-out, but a very serious interruption to God's best for our lives and relationships, so it should never be treated lightly.

At this point in the conversation the Pharisees seem to have been satisfied and can't think of anything to push Jesus further – he has engaged seriously, treated them with respect, quoted their scriptures to support his statements, and they have nothing more to say against him. So, while they fade out of the scene, the disciples, who had been listening attentively, had a further query.

'If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.' (v.10)

It sounds cynical, doesn't it? If marriage is for ever and there's no way out, why would anyone want to commit to that? Perhaps their comment reflects just how normal and easy divorce had become and Jesus' responses to the Pharisees included new restrictions which seemed unfair to them – note, the disciples were men! But the way Jesus dealt with their cynicism provides an interesting insight into an important way of thinking about marriage.

The introduction to his answer suggests that he was now not talking to (or about) everyone – not even to all the disciples.

'Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given.' (v.11)

But, given the point the disciples had raised, there is something in this reply that we should all be considering.

‘There are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others – and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.’ (v.12)

What’s a ‘eunuch’? He’s a man who was either born without properly formed genitals, a man who has had his genitals removed (surgically or by accident), or (the additional category here added by Jesus) a man who chooses to live as if he has no genitals – and in this case, so he is more able to serve the kingdom of heaven. Note again the masculine language – but remember that for us, this consideration can apply equally to both men and women, as it clearly did for Paul, when he wrote about marriage in 1 Corinthians 7.

An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord’s affairs – how he can please the Lord.³³ But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world – how he can please his wife –³⁴ and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord’s affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world – how she can please her husband.’ (vs 32-34)

Jesus’ answer to the disciples raises the bar again – though for most of us it’s already too late for the really big decision because we’re already married – and there is nothing wrong with that! For those of us who are not married, it would seem that before you marry, the most important question you need to give attention to is, ‘how can I most effectively serve Jesus as King – how can my life be most committed to the building up of God’s kingdom?’ And if you’re going to do that best by staying single, should you then decide to not get married and get on with serving the King? Only you can answer that – Jesus said,

‘The one who can accept this should accept it.’ (v.12)

And if you are already married, let me challenge you, as I challenge myself – we all need to ask ourselves (and also ask our spouse) the same question – ‘how can WE most effectively serve Jesus as King – how can our lives and our marriage be most committed to the building up of God’s kingdom?’ Remember the old advertisement for church

attendance – ‘the family that prays together stays together!’ Maybe there’s some truth in the fact that, when both husband and wife are committed to serving Jesus first and together, that commitment will also continually provide direction and purpose to their marriage – and that works for the good of both the marriage and the kingdom!

I can’t leave this passage until we come back to where we started, touching on the very modern issue of same-sex marriage. All the conversation in Matthew 19 is about marriage between a male and a female – it had never in their history been suggested that there could be any alternative definition – and the question of the Pharisees was about divorce, not about same-sex marriage. In the culture of the first century, no-one, including Jesus, gave same-sex marriage even a passing thought. This teaching from Jesus on the subject of marriage is now being used by Christians opposed to the recent changes, who claim that because Jesus does not mention same-sex marriage, he was clearly opposed to it. Today I am not coming down on one side or the other – rather, each one of us has to decide for ourselves what we believe about this contentious social issue – but I strongly believe this passage does not and cannot help us either way, as it is totally silent on the matter. Jesus was not ‘expounding on Godly marriage’ (as if he was running a marriage preparation course) but responding to questions asked, not by those wanting to find and learn the answers, but those seeking to deliberately trap him into saying something he shouldn’t. We need to always tread carefully in reading and understanding the Bible – we need to not just read the words, but to ask the Holy Spirit to open our spiritual eyes, that we might understand the context in which the words were spoken or written, and then apply them to our own context with integrity – especially in the areas of the greatest tension and the hottest debate.

Matthew 19:1-15

19 When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. ² Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.

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?”*

⁴ *“Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’⁵ 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’?”⁶ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”*

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

⁸ *Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.⁹ I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”*

¹⁰ *The disciples said to him, “If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.”*

¹¹ *Jesus replied, “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given.¹² For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”*

¹³ *Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them.*

¹⁴ *Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”¹⁵ When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.*

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