

## PROTECT YOUR COMMUNITY PRESENCE

May 6: Don't Let Divorce Trip You Up: Matthew 19:1-12

The enemies of Jesus asked him this question because it is difficult and complex. It is hard to summarize. It involves many different scenarios that cannot be dealt with in a brief statement.

Jesus does not avoid the topic. He makes a statement that is significant and binding for us as his disciples. So we will seek to be faithful to the Lord Jesus as we deal with marriage and divorce.

Divorce has been a big issue for a long time. Moses had to deal with it, and his comments were bantered about by generations of teachers including those of Jesus' day. What exactly did Moses mean? What is marriage anyway? Should some people forego marriage so they can give their lives to God more fully? What happens to you when you divorce? Does Jesus prohibit remarriage?

This is another test for Jesus. His enemies are seeking to trip him by asking him perplexing and difficult questions. Everybody wants the sound bite that summarizes the entire issue in ten seconds.

**I. Your Sexuality Is From Above: Acknowledge It:** *In the image of God he created him; male and female he created them* (Genesis 1:27).

A. It involves the image of God in humans

1. Do not understand your sexuality from below as if it is simply a part of your animal nature. While you share sexuality with other creatures on this planet, that is not the whole picture for you nor is it the most significant dimension of your sexuality.

2. Being male and female is in part a commentary on the "image of God." I am not suggesting that God is the androgenous being, both male and female. I am suggesting that the image of God is implied in our sexuality, our ability to relate and connect one to another. Sexuality is not, as Sigmund Freud thought, the answer to everything. But it is an answer to many things.

B. Understand your sexuality from ABOVE, as the impartation of the Creator God, and as the expression of his own image upon you. In other words, your sexuality is an essential dimension of the image of God in you. It gives us the power to PRO-CREATE, joining God in fruitfulness and multiplying according to his instructions: "Be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). It also gives us the opportunity to RELATE to one another in an intimacy that both creates the next generation of humans and creates between us a bond of common life and purpose.

C. The practice of Homosexuality is a denial of God's gift of gender and confusion about the purpose of God—his heart for us. Biology is destiny in many ways. Your biology expresses God's will and purpose for you. Your gender is inextricably woven into who you are.

**II. Your Marriage Is Also from Above: Embrace It:** *At the beginning the Creator made them male and female* (v4).

A. Marriage is related to creation itself. Marriage goes all the way back to the beginning of the human race. In the Creation, God made them male and female.

B. Marriage was initiated by God in the Garden of Eden. Things were "very good" at that time, but it was "not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him" (Genesis 2:18). This is God intervening on our behalf, giving us one another. God made the woman and "brought her to the man" (Genesis 2:22).

C. Marriage is unique Among Human Contracts. It involves making a promise for a lifetime: "till death do us part." We make this public promise "in the presence of God and of these witnesses." It is a legal bond which can only be broken at the courthouse.

D. Celibacy is good. Jesus said some people "make themselves eunuchs" for the Kingdom. I understand from this phrase that some people choose a celibate life for Jesus' sake. I do not think this is endorsing a celibate clergy, obviously. But I have known single people, and so have you, who were lifesavers for children and adults. You know that a celibate life has significant time, resources and energy to pour into the work of the Kingdom of God.

E. Marriage is also good. While it is costly in that it directs your attention to the needs of a single person, it is also very rewarding because it provides loving companionship for life's journey.

**III. Divorce Is from Below: Avoid It:** *but it was not this way from the beginning* (Matthew 19:8b)

A. God joins man and woman together. Their sexuality is from above and their marriage, their unity, is from above.

B. Divorce is not part of God's heart or perfect plan. It is not part of God's ideal for you. This is why divorce is so problematic. It does not feel like God's solution to our problem. It feels like failure, and it is.

C. Divorce is separation where there should have been unity: "What God joined together, let man not separate" (Mt. 19:6).

1. Divorce is the contractual expression of a broken relationship, a relationship where love did not prevail and the perfect will of God was frustrated.

2. Divorce should be recognized for what it is: the failure of two people to live in love and harmony.

D. Divorce is evidence of a hard heart: *Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard* (Mt. 19:8).

1. Divorce is evidence of a heart problem. In this instance Jesus is saying that these men who are in control of their relationships with women suffer from hard hearts.

2. A hard heart is a heart that is insensitive, unkind, unyielding, unforgiving, unmerciful, and unloving. That is what a hard heart is. And it is very hard to live with another human being when your heart is hard. Divorce does not come from the heart.

E. Divorce often involves the breaking of the Seventh Commandment: "You shall not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14).

1. Adultery is sexual sin. Sexual sin—the use of another human being strictly for your own pleasure—turns people into things and treats them as flesh instead of soul and spirit.

2. Adultery is more than that. It is unfaithfulness to the central human covenant that allows us to live together in unity and build families and communities. And that unfaithfulness involves both persons in the sexual act—the one in the marriage commits adultery and the one who disrespects the covenant also commits adultery. "So they are no longer two, but one" (v6a) means that all persons in the community must respect the covenant into which these two persons have entered.

3. Serial marriages for convenience, "for any reason," are simply another form of adultery—unfaithfulness to the covenant of marriage. Jesus is saying that marriage means nothing to these people who come in and go out for no reason at all.

4. Does this mean that remarriage involves perpetual adultery? No, that is not what it means. It cannot mean that for two reasons. First, the adultery is not so much in the sexual act as in the violation of the covenant. To make this a perpetual sin is to create a new category of sin—the single sin for which there is not absolution. It makes remarriage unforgiveable. That violates our doctrine of forgiveness.

**IV. True Wisdom Is from Above: Employ It:** *But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. 18 Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness* (James 3:17-18).

A. Everybody needs wisdom in regard to this issue of divorce. Jesus held the line against divorce in a very strong way even as he included an exception about unfaithfulness. The Apostle Paul does the same even as he includes another exception—desertion. In divorce we are dealing not only with God's ideal but also with human failure.

B. The wisdom we need in our own hearts, our families, and our church is the wisdom that comes from above. This wisdom emphasizes peace. It minimizes selfish ambition and envy. It is full of mercy and good fruit. This wisdom is pure in that it does not disguise hidden agendas or our own insecurities and fears.

C. Divorce can trip you up not only when it happens to you but when it happens to those you love—people in your family or your dear friends. Divorce brings a deep disappointment. It is a disturbing loss to everyone in that circle of relationships. Its implications are long-lasting. It is the end of an era, the death of a covenant. It is unsettling. It makes the ground shake under our feet. It makes us reach for something to hold on to.

The something we must reach for when divorce shakes us is God himself. No substitute will do. If you or someone you love is going through divorce, don't walk but run to the God who made you and loves you still. Never doubt his kindness and forgiveness even in this era of your life.

D. Many people stay in marriages that are tough and difficult, sometimes even abusive. They do so for a variety of reasons. Some of those reasons are about fear and low self-worth. Others are noble reasons. They involve self-sacrifice and forgiveness.

E. People have hard hearts. There is nothing Moses could do about this but recognize it and accommodate this truth in the law which ruled the Hebrew community. Jesus also knew this hardness of heart. But he wanted us to get back to the heart of God in all matters including marriage and divorce.

F. Do not forget either the heart of God or the hardness of heart in humans. You will need both of these truths as you deal with the realities of messy human relationships.

Conclusion: