

Week 32
May 3, 2009

Marriage and the Kingdom Way *Matthew 19:1-12*

The divorce question

Always trying to trap Jesus, the Pharisees ask Jesus a controversial question. “What about divorce? Is it lawful for any and every reason?”

Jesus reiterates the truth about marriage revealed from the beginning. “Haven’t you read? At the beginning, God made them male and female. God designed it all so that a man would leave his mother and bond with his wife. Two become one. Two in flesh become one in flesh.”

As for divorce, Jesus says, “Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”

There are a host of other scriptures that reinforce this fundamental notion. *1 Corinthians 6:16-17* suggests that we are basically *marrying* anyone that we have sex with, even a prostitute. Two are becoming one flesh. So all of the scripture counsels us to reserve sex for the one that we intend to have this oneness with as a spiritual and physical bond. *Hebrews 13:4* says that “Marriage should be honored by all and the marriage bed kept pure (of adultery).” *Malachi 2:16* says that “God hates divorce” and the way we break faith and break covenant is tied internally to larger and greater matters of vows and covenants, like our promises to stay true to God.

What about Moses?

Yes, the Old Testament written by Moses and informed by God makes certain concessions. People can and do divorce. Why? Because we’re weak and broken. Like all of God’s laws, his mandates about staying true to covenant accomplish two things. First, they show us God’s first and best will for our lives – *love and loyalty!* Second, they prove how feeble we are and how badly we need an intervention.

In *Matthew 5* (The Sermon on the Mount), Jesus is dealing with the internalization of the law. “I’m not after mere outward subservience,” Jesus suggests time and time again, “but a deep devotion to God’s values.” In that context, even Jesus allows for the fact that sexual unfaithfulness shatters the covenant in ways that are almost irreparable. Divorce is justified in those cases, Jesus suggests, because oneness has already been badly compromised.

But the guiding principle is this: when we divorce without cause, our ensuing marriages are a kind of adultery.

Let me pause and grant some perspective. Again, people are weak and marriage is tough. Things happen and ideals crumble in the hands of our humanity. Jesus is not intending to shame the divorced or to invalidate the fresh covenants of those who’ve sought new beginnings. If Jesus were here today he would extend grace and mercy to every one of us; and then he’d turn around and say, “Now, this time, this day, do it God’s way.” Or as I said last week, “I’m not trying to shame you. I am trying to change you. Don’t wallow in shame; but now is the time to stop the madness! Keep your covenants!”

The disciples' conclusion

“Wow. If marriage is so tough and the vows are so serious, it's better not to get married at all.”

Apparently, the Corinthian church arrived at the same conclusion decades later. We see evidence in the text (*1 Corinthians 7:1*) that they have asked Paul about marriage with the same rhetorical exclamation: “It is good for a man not to marry.”

Jesus responds

Jesus and Paul respond in similar ways. Some people can stay unmarried. Some are born sexually unable or sexually disinterested. Some people in that day were forced to be asexual because they were made *eunuchs* (slaves who were castrated). Others might willfully choose a life of celibacy in order to prioritize the kingdom of heaven and its related pursuits. Paul does this.

Jesus concludes with a strong statement: “The one who can accept this should accept this.” Paul lands in a similar place. “I wish that all men were like me.” (*1 Corinthians 7:7*) He writes in *1 Corinthians 7* about the troubles that come with marriage and the natural division of affection and attention that marriage brings. He likes the idea that some people can be wholly devoted to kingdom work without the distraction of family. There's urgency to the work, and there's a crisis in that age of persecution, that causes Paul to say that “he who does not marry does even better than the one who does.”

Paul makes it clear that his words are not a restriction. Those who are burning with passion or lack the ability to stay celibate should certainly get married. But the kingdom is a huge priority, not to be unthinkingly subjugated by other relationships, and marriage is a huge commitment not to be entered into lightly.

Corresponding Questions

Someone is bound to ask, “What about that ability to be celibate. Is it a gift? Even a spiritual gift?”

1 Corinthians 7:7 would indicate that it is. “I wish that all men were as I am,” writes Paul. “But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.” The insinuation is clear: Paul believes that his ability to stay unmarried is a spiritual gift given by God so that he can be wholly committed to his work.

Another will ask if Paul's attitude about marriage, and even Jesus' words, contribute to the celibacy in the priesthood of Catholicism and any other sect. Yes, those verses are fundamental to that practice. Some will tell us that the Roman Catholic Church regulated celibacy in order to lay claim to properties and restrict the flow of inheritances to offspring. While there might be shades of truth to that shady accusation, a priest generally chooses celibacy as an act of undivided devotion to the pastoral work.

Do I agree with this? Obviously not. I am married with three children and I've never believed that I have a gift toward celibacy. I disagree with the notion of restricting any pastoral candidate from marriage. It's not biblical in that neither Jesus nor Paul is restrictive. And it's not practical. Able and highly committed people are excluded from using their gifts and answering their callings whenever those artificial constraints are imposed. And, frankly, I do fear that the requirement of celibacy is an open invitation for

people with aberrant sexual tendencies to find a playground for their destructive impulses. No, I don't think that celibacy should be required to hold pastoral roles. But neither do I think that we should belittle those who choose, like Jesus and Paul, to abstain from sex and marriage in order to pour out their undivided passions into the work of God's kingdom.

So what if I don't have the gift of celibacy or the inclination to sacrifice my sexuality for the sake of the kingdom? The answer is simple: find the right person, get married and love each other well for as long as you both shall live. And don't neglect or deprive each other. Keep your marriage strong.

What about after we both shall live? What about marriage in heaven? Jesus answers that in *Matthew 22:30*. "At the resurrection, people will neither marry nor be given in marriage."

So I won't be with my spouse in heaven? How can that be?

Jesus didn't say that. I'm guessing that we'll be far closer to our spouses in heaven than we were on earth. In a new perfected and glorious state of being, we'll have entirely new capacities for loving and being loved. It seems nonsensical to think that our current relationships would be lessened in any way.

The truth for all time is that marriage has been intended as a model representing the love-relationship between Jesus and his bride, the Church. *Ephesians 5* instructs us in the art of mutual respect and submission in marriage even while it tells us that marriage is itself a living parable. Marriage asks us to lay down our lives for each other and it reminds us that Jesus has laid down his life as a loving overture toward his bride - us. The loyalty of the marriage covenant is intended to be an evidence of God's loyal love and grace toward us "in sickness and in health, for better for worse"

But what if I've already disrupted and demeaned all of that? What if I've been careless and thoughtless and faithless?

Again, God's grace is for you to accept as a gift. You can be forgiven and your failures replaced with hope and new beginnings.

Now, live into that hope. Take hold of that for which you've been taken hold of. Stop the madness and let's devote ourselves to loving a lot and loving well the woman and the man that God has given us to love. Let's prove that God's ways are the best ways and enjoy that reality all of our days.

And if we aren't married, enjoy that undivided, undistracted freedom to serve God's purposes and promote God's kingdom.