

“Family Life”
Matthew 19:1-15
January 20, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

It doesn't take any special insight to notice that family life as envisioned in the Scriptures is under attack today. Biblical norms of human sexuality that have been widely accepted for millennia, both inside and outside the Church, are now being challenged. About a year and a half ago, a statement known as the “Nashville Statement” was published by an evangelical group known as “The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood.” It was a simple statement of affirmations and denials that clarified what the Bible teaches on sexual ethics and gender roles. It was merely a summary of what Christians have believed for centuries. Christian leaders were invited to sign it as a demonstration of their support of this statement, and thousands have done so. Among those are 250 church leaders in the Netherlands. Last week, officials in the Dutch government said that they were investigating these church leaders for possible criminal prosecution, on the grounds that the Netherlands has criminalized discrimination. Christian sexual norms that used to be as widely accepted as gravity are now viewed as possibly criminal.

Not only are biblical sexual ethics under attack today, marriage as a vital institution within society is as well. Even the good news of declining divorce rates becomes bad news when we realize that the decline is due entirely to a decline in the number of marriages. This is reflected in a change of language, with the words “significant other” replacing “husband,” “wife” or “spouse.”

In today's passage, Jesus talks about three aspects of family life. His teaching on this came about when the Pharisees tried to get him into trouble by wading into the divorce controversies of his day. At issue was the interpretation of Deuteronomy 24, where Moses addresses the situation of a man divorcing his wife because **“he has found some indecency in her”** (24:1). One famous rabbi, Shammai, said that this referred to a grave offense such as adultery. Another rabbi, Hillel, said that it could be almost anything a husband found offensive, even including things like burning his food or finding his wife to be less attractive than another woman. The Pharisees who came to test Jesus knew that he would be more aligned with the conservative view, and they were hoping to get him to state his views in such a way that they could accuse him of being unfaithful to Moses. So their real goal was to bring harm to Jesus, not to know God's will in the area of marriage and family living. This is such an important area, though, that Jesus takes the time to instruct all of us about God's will for family life.

I. The Married Life – v. 1-9

Jesus is asked a question about divorce, and he answers it by reference to the clear teaching of the Bible on marriage. At least two important points emerge from this. First, Jesus believed the Old Testament to be authoritative, and so should we. As Christians, we don't get to decide our practices and values in these areas of marriage, family and child-rearing. Jesus is our Lord, and we submit to him in all things as his will is expressed in the Bible. Second, Jesus shows us something here about the appropriate way to interpret the Bible. He uses the clear passages to help interpret the obscure. Deuteronomy 24, where Moses speaks of divorce, is to be interpreted in light of the clear teaching of Genesis 2. A great deal of bad Bible interpretation could be prevented if this principle were faithfully followed.

So Jesus answers a question about divorce by starting with the basics of the Bible's teachings on marriage. That's also a good place for us to start in our day when there is so much confusion and conflicting ideas about sexuality and marriage. In one of my short-term mission trips to Uganda, I was asked to lead a marriage seminar. The missionaries there challenged me to keep it as basic as I could, so that's what I did. My first point is that God designed marriage to be between one man and one woman. Well, that was news to them, because it was a polygamous culture in which a man's status was dependent on the number of wives he had. Point two in my marriage basics teaching was that God intended sexual intimacy to be limited to this one-man, one-woman committed marriage. That was counter-cultural for them as well, since male infidelity was so common as almost to be expected.

It is more than a little shocking to realize that we are at a similar place in our culture. Point 1 for Jesus in this passage is that God created humanity from the beginning as male and female. In other words, it is God's decision that determines gender, not the will of man. Chromosomes cannot be re-engineered. As Christians, we are to respond to those who have a desire to change from their birth gender to a chosen gender with love and compassion, but not with support for an effort that will only bring bondage and suffering.

Jesus' second point is that the marriage union is to be between a man and a woman in a committed relationship. It is the creation order that establishes this. God created a man and a woman, not a man and two women, because he intended monogamous rather than polygamous marriage. God did not create two men or two women because he intended heterosexual marriage rather than homosexual marriage.

This marriage relationship is to be marked by commitment. It is to take precedence even over one's commitment to the family of origin. A man (or woman) shall leave father and mother and "hold fast" to his wife. That word, sometimes translated "cleave," comes from a root for glue. It is only in this

context of commitment that sexual intimacy is to occur. The reason is that God has designed the sexual act to create “one flesh.” It is a deeply uniting act. The apostle Paul argues against sexual promiscuity on these grounds (1 Cor. 6). The hookup culture is profoundly harmful because of the power God has put within the sexual act, power to join two individuals at a deep level. The problem comes when this is done promiscuously and indiscriminately. Like a band-aid that sticks well the first time but loses its ability to adhere over repeated applications, promiscuous sex results in a loss of ability to join deeply with another.

Jesus’ concluding application is found in the well-known words of verse 6: **“What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”** The word “joined” means literally to be yoked together. It is a metaphor of two draft animals yoked together to pull a load. Marriage is designed of God to bring together a man and a woman to work side-by-side in accomplishing the work God has set out for them. Just as two animals yoked together can pull a heavier load than one animal all alone, a husband and wife, when they are pulling as a team, are able to accomplish a great deal. This doesn’t mean that each loses his or her personality or identity. On the contrary, marriage is intended by God to support and encourage the full development of each person.

This brings up an important question. The text says that God joins a husband and wife together. Are all marriages divinely joined, even the ones where any objective observer would notice some significant incompatibilities? I would say “Yes” to that question in general, with some exceptions. It is often in the incompatibilities of a husband and wife that God’s blessings are most in evidence. God intends these differences to strengthen their effectiveness as a couple, as they bring different giftedness to their tasks. Of course, these differences also become a source of irritation and even suffering. But that too is of God, intended by him to be a means of sanctification in the lives of both husband and wife. Wendy and I are very different in many ways, and some of these differences have brought about some significant conflicts. For example, Wendy sees things with the eyes of an artist, while I see them with the eyes of an engineer. And neither of us are very good at speaking the language of the other about these things. So when Wendy has a home-improvement project in mind for me, I will ask her engineer-type questions that are vital to know to complete the project. She will not be able to answer those questions, and if I press too hard, she will either walk away or fall on the floor and cry. So I have learned just to ask her to draw a picture or find a picture, and she is very good at that.

There is an underlying assumption here that needs to be mentioned. Between chapters 15 and 20, Jesus says three times that he will suffer and die in Jerusalem. He also makes it clear that part of what it means to follow Jesus is to be willing to suffer with him. This passage on family life is put right in the

middle of these suffering passages, and I don't think that is accidental. Jesus tells his disciples that they must take up a cross and follow him, and part of the suffering of the cross for all who are married can be found inside the marriage. There is no marriage without some suffering.

I have mentioned before that my first job as a pastor was as a single's pastor in Philadelphia. The most common question I would receive from people was, "Brad, I am lonely and want to be married. Why hasn't God given me a spouse?" Then my next job was as a church planter in a church with very few singles and many younger couples. The most common question I received then was, "Brad, how can I change or get rid of my spouse?" In both cases, there was an expectation of a suffering-free life, the very opposite of what Jesus says we should expect as his disciples.

The Pharisees think they have now successfully trapped Jesus into denying Moses. So they point out the conflict between what Jesus has just said and what Moses said in Deuteronomy 24 when he allowed divorce for "some indecency." Jesus then makes it clear that he doesn't deny Moses, but adds that this provision for divorce was due to hardness of heart. Jesus says that God's preferred will is for the permanence of marriage. But because we live in a broken world, some marriages will end in divorce. So God's permissive will at times allows for divorce. Jesus then proceeds to state when divorce is permitted. **"Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."** In the case of sexual unfaithfulness, Jesus says, God permits divorce. Paul adds another case for divorce: desertion or abandonment (1 Cor. 7). Divorce is permitted in these cases, but not required. There are not always clear lines even in these two situations of sexual immorality and abandonment. For example, abuse can rise to the level of abandonment of a marriage. I would counsel any Christian seeking a divorce on one of these two grounds to seek the wisdom of other mature Christians.

II. The Single Life – v. 10-12

When the disciples hear Jesus' strong emphasis on the permanency of marriage and the lack of an escape clause, they conclude that marriage is just too risky a proposition, and it would be better not to marry. I would imagine their opinions on this were somewhat colored by the fact that arranged marriages were common in this day, and they imagine a situation of finding themselves in an intolerable marriage. Jesus responds to their statement with a summary of the single life. When he speaks of eunuchs, he is speaking of more than simply those who have been physically emasculated.

Jesus mentions three categories of those who are single. There are first of all those who have been eunuchs from birth. This speaks of those who have something they were born with that prevents marriage. I think those with

same-sex desires are included in this category. It could also be those born with a physical handicap that prevents marriage. Second are those who have been made eunuchs by men. It is not their choice to remain single, but if no willing marriage partner can be found, then the singleness will occur. Third are those who choose the single life for the sake of the kingdom.

I want to make two quick points before moving on. First, Jesus honors both the single life and married life. Some churches honor one over the other, but Jesus honors both. Second, there is suffering in both the calling to be married and the calling to be single. We will be required to trust the Lord for the suffering we are called to endure because of our estate.

III. The Parenting Life – v. 13-15

When children were brought to Jesus, the disciples rebuked them. The culture of Jesus' day had different views than our own culture on the value of various ages. While our culture values children and marginalizes the elderly, New Testament culture did the opposite. One Rabbi of this era is quoted as saying, "Morning sleep, mid-day wine, chattering with children, and tarrying in places where men of the common people assemble, destroy a man." His disciples were thinking that Jesus is too important a person to spend his time with those who can add nothing to his movement. But Jesus didn't value people for what they could give to him. He came to serve, and his time was spent in serving especially the little and unimportant of the world. He adds that it is just such people to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs.

Jesus teaches us here how we ought to value children. He did so with three elements, and it strikes me that these three are a good summary for Christian parenting. The three are time, touching and prayer. First was time. Jesus took the time to be with the children, even though his time was growing short. Spending our precious time with others is a concrete way to show love. Second, Jesus touched them. Children need appropriate and loving physical touch, as well as emotional touch, from the significant adults in their life. Third, Jesus prayed for them. This is how Jesus blessed children and how we ought to as well.

CONCLUSION:

It's interesting that Matthew places this entire section of Jesus' teaching on family life in the context of healing. Verse 2 of our chapter reports how Jesus healed the large crowds that followed him. He is speaking, of course, about physical healings in that verse. But he also intends a connection with healing relationships as we follow Jesus in our family life. Jesus brings healing everywhere as we follow him.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Matthew 19:1-15

1. It is clear that Christian sexual ethics are encountering more and more opposition in our culture. Though orthodox Christian sexual ethics are not yet criminalized in America (as they possibly are in the Netherlands—see the opening sermon illustration), they are at the very least being marginalized. What would you say are the two or three most important things Christians can do to support the biblical ethic of sexual purity, defined as sexual intimacy being limited to a committed marriage between a man and a woman?
2. What would you say if a friend approached you and said that he or she was considering identifying with a gender other than their birth gender?
3. Verse 5 has been summarized as “Leave and cleave.” What do you think is involved in both of those? If you are married, are there areas in your marriage where there is a need to improve your leaving or your cleaving?
4. One of the foundational statements in the Bible about marriage is the statement that “the two shall become one flesh.” This speaks of deep unity and intimacy. Why is such unity and intimacy so elusive in a marriage? What have you found helpful in promoting that kind of unity and intimacy in a marriage?
5. In verse 6, Jesus offers this classic summary: “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” Are all marriages divinely joined? Why or why not?
6. Jesus allows for (not requires) divorce on the grounds of “sexual immorality” (v. 9) and Paul adds abandonment as a proper justification for divorce (1 Cor. 7). The Church has sometimes erred in making divorce too easy and at other times by making it too hard. How can we be more faithful to the Scriptures in not making it either too easy or too hard?
7. Singles sometimes feel marginalized by the Church. How would Jesus’ teaching here help address that?
8. Jesus loves children through time, touch and prayer. What practical ways can we follow him in this, either with our own children or those of others?