

Marriage, Divorce, and Singleness

Matthew 19:1-12

Introduction

Contemporary Issues: Currently, up to 40% of marriages end in divorces and that number increases in subsequent marriages (APA).¹ A child is more likely to be born in a family without married parents. We can talk about broken families, fatherlessness, etc. until we're blue in the face but the question is, what does the Bible have to say about? How does the gospel apply to these issues? How does **Redemption Heights Church** view marriage, singleness, divorce, and families? How do we love and serve the various kinds of people God brings our way? Whether you're married, widowed, divorced, single and satisfied, or single and looking, this passage has something for you. There's a word for all of us (and I pray it is a word of conviction and grace).

Popular Topics: I once heard the Australian Anglican pastor, Philip Jensen, say that a youth pastor has to be an expert on two topics: **sovereignty and sex**. If you don't know why you need to be an expert on sex, then you're not ready to be a youth pastor. 😊 Surprisingly, teaching on sovereignty will also clarify the Bible's teaching on sex (God is sovereign = "Copernican Revolution" of the Christian life; God at the center, not you, and everything only makes sense when he's at the center, including your sex life; I'll give you a moment to recover from the shock that you're not at the center of all things).

The Bible and Culture: Sex and relationships are a big deal in our culture, how do we address it? **Do we need a special sermon series?** "Relationship Goals" or "ShipShape" (if you don't get that, ask one of our 20 somethings). No "Summer of Love" or "Relationship Rehab" sermon series coming. You don't need "Dr. Phil Goes to Church." **You and I need God's word.** Keep marching through Matthew for now, and other sections of Scripture (with pastoral sensitivity and creativity, doing our best to connect the truths of Scripture to the real world struggles and questions we all have). But, by marching through Scripture...

- We trust God knows what we need more than we do. We believe the Word of God gives us what we need. We avoid starting with our opinion then finding a passage of Scripture to justify it. We are protected from over-emphasizing things in Scripture that shouldn't be (e.g., major on the majors and minor on the minors). We are forced to deal with difficult and controversial topics that we'd be tempted to avoid.

We get to marriage, divorce, and singleness. How do we think about such issues? God has called each of us to submit our singleness or our marriages for the advancement of his kingdom.

¹ Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. ² And large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. ³ And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for

¹ The flawed stat purporting that 50% of marriages end in divorce is based on the marriage rate divided by the divorce rate of a given year (rather than corrected for a particular cohort).

any cause?”⁴ He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female,⁵ 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’?⁶ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”⁷ They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?”⁸ He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.⁹ And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”¹⁰ The disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.”¹¹ But he said to them, “Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given.¹² 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.”²

1. The Plan of God in Marriage (vv. 1-6)

New Setting:¹ Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan.² And large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. There is a change in setting as Jesus and the disciples are moving south toward Jerusalem (from Galilee in the North to Judea in the South). He has been prophesying his impending death and resurrection and teaching about the priorities of the KoG.

Familiar Opponents:³ Pharisees came up to him and tested him. Jesus’ “friends” are back. Religious leaders focused on **Torah** and **Tradition**. See OT, not as a story of God’s people and promises but his laws and commands. *Moses* is their central figure (i.e., law-giver). One hand, in their zeal for obedience, close to Jesus (obedience is a good thing) and, other hand, further away (miss the point). It is precisely their proximity to Scripture and their misplaced zeal that puts them at odds with Jesus. Pharisees have missed the point of the Hebrew Bible. They’ve started with the wrong premise and taken that path away from, rather than toward God (e.g., hitting the target you’re aiming for, but aiming for the wrong target).

- **Jesus is a threat to their way of life.** Yes, the Pharisees have strict behavioral regulations but don’t think that following Jesus is somehow easier. Jesus doesn’t water down the demands of obedience, he elevates them because he doesn’t just call us to *do* good deeds but requires our hearts to follow suit (e.g., “forgive your brother from your

² ¹ Καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς τοὺς λόγους τούτους, μετῆρην ἀπὸ τῆς Γαλιλαίας καὶ ἦλθεν εἰς τὰ ὄρια τῆς Ἰουδαίας πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου. ² καὶ ἠκολούθησαν αὐτῷ ὄχλοι πολλοί, καὶ ἐθεράπευσεν αὐτοὺς ἐκεῖ. ³ Καὶ προσῆλθον αὐτῷ Φαρισαῖοι πειράζοντες αὐτὸν καὶ λέγοντες, Εἰ ἔξεστιν ἀνθρώπῳ ἀπολύσαι τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ κατὰ πᾶσαν αἰτίαν; ⁴ ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν, Οὐκ ἀνέγνωτε ὅτι ὁ κτίσας ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς ἄρσεν καὶ θήλυ ἐποίησεν αὐτούς; ⁵ καὶ εἶπεν, Ἔνεκα τούτου καταλείψει ἄνθρωπος τὸν πατέρα καὶ τὴν μητέρα καὶ κολληθήσεται τῇ γυναικὶ αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἔσονται οἱ δύο εἰς σὰρκα μίαν. ⁶ ὥστε οὐκέτι εἰσὶν δύο ἀλλὰ σὰρξ μία. ὁ οὖν ὁ θεὸς συνέζευξεν ἄνθρωπος μὴ χωριζέτω. ⁷ λέγουσιν αὐτῷ, Τί οὖν Μωϋσῆς ἐνετείλατο δοῦναι βιβλίον ἀποστασίου καὶ ἀπολύσαι [αὐτήν]; ⁸ λέγει αὐτοῖς ὅτι Μωϋσῆς πρὸς τὴν σκληροκαρδίαν ὑμῶν ἐπέτρεψεν ὑμῖν ἀπολύσαι τὰς γυναῖκας ὑμῶν, ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς δὲ οὐ γέγονεν οὕτως. ⁹ λέγω δὲ ὑμῖν ὅτι ὃς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ καὶ γαμήσῃ ἄλλην μοιχάται. ¹⁰ λέγουσιν αὐτῷ οἱ μαθηταὶ [αὐτοῦ], Εἰ οὕτως ἐστὶν ἡ αἰτία τοῦ ἀνθρώπου μετὰ τῆς γυναικός, οὐ συμφέρει γαμῆσαι. ¹¹ ὁ δὲ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς, Οὐ πάντες χωροῦσιν τὸν λόγον [τοῦτον] ἀλλ’ οἷς δέδοται. ¹² εἰσὶν γὰρ εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς ἐγεννήθησαν οὕτως, καὶ εἰσὶν εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες εὐνουχίσθησαν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων, καὶ εἰσὶν εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες εὐνούχισαν ἑαυτοὺς διὰ τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν. ὁ δυνάμενος χωρεῖν χωρεῖτω.

heart”). Jesus doesn’t aim just for behavior but for radical reorientation of our affections (e.g., hate = murder; lust = adultery). **The KoG is based on radical gospel values.**

- A Pharisaic outlook might seem strict to us but, in reality, it is the easier path. **It is much easier to behave than to love.** It is easier to avoid breaking the rules than loving God and neighbor. With time and a few tricks, many of us can learn to control our behavior (“**control**” is the key word). The Pharisees have learned how to manage God rather than submit to him (e.g., making God work for them!). Many of us are good little Pharisees, learning how to manage our behavior while leaving our hearts untouched.

Wrong Question: “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause? The Pharisees were (surprisingly) lax in their view of divorce. There were competing Rabbinic opinions as to what should allow a man (in particular) to divorce his wife.

- You can tell by the question the Pharisees are off to a terrible start (like walking into pre-marital counseling and asking when you’re allowed to get a divorce). If you’re looking for a way out, you’ll eventually find it. Gospel marriage never *looks* for a way out. Might be a time when divorce is necessary and wise, but it is never the *preferred* path.
- Jesus has already discussed marriage and divorce (Matt 5:31-32) and the Pharisees find his path unfeasible (e.g., divorce only for adultery not for any ‘ole dissatisfaction).

Go to the Source: ⁴ He answered, “Have you not read Serious put down (question the expertise of the “so-called” experts). The Scriptures (it seems) clearly answer their question. He takes us to the source (not just in proof-texting) but in the logic and sequence of God’s commands.

- If we are going to be a **Jesus-people** then we have to be a **Bible-people**. Jesus explains the plan and purpose of marriage not from cultural assumptions or personal opinions but God’s clear design as revealed in Scripture.
- He doesn’t just proof-text (e.g., There’s a lot you can make the Bible say when you rip a passage kicking and screaming from its context; “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” -or- “Mark, the perfect man” -or- “I have more knowledge than all my teachers”). Jesus understands and applies the Bible according to its inner logic. **Lots of people quote the Bible** (including Satan). But, using the Bible to confirm what you already believe is not the same as submitting yourself to God’s intended meaning according to the way the Bible is structured.

God’s Good Design: that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵ 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.’ ⁶ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” God designed things to be a certain way. Before the fall, **before sin messed everything up**, God had a good design.

- So Jesus quotes Gen 1:27 and 2:4, *before* the fall, to show God’s design. Marriage predates the fall, sin’s corruption of humanity, the law, culture, politics, and even the church? It goes back to the very first couple, placed in God’s garden paradise. They were given to each other as part of his plan to steward creation, care for one another, and reflect his glory.

Jesus' point is profound: He is appealing to a more ancient practice. He is appealing to God's created purpose. The Pharisees are starting with the law, Jesus is going back to creation.

- We see later, in Paul's writings, that Christian marriage is meant to reflect the mysteries of the gospel. Jesus "begins the process of reversing the curse of God on all of creation [Christian marriages] should increasingly reflect God's original [purpose]" (Blomberg).

What is the Meaning of Marriage?: What was God's original design in marriage?

1. **Male and Female:** (both equally bearing the image of God) made them male and female. He did not make an undifferentiated, androgynous humanity (two genders in God's perfect creation; they are not the same)
2. **Made One:** (oneness, not sameness) they are no longer two but one flesh. Man and woman were destined for each other, to compliment each other. In their union they become one flesh (to harm one, harms the other; to separate is like an amputation).
3. **United by God:** What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate. If marriage is a *human institution* then it can be set aside for the smallest of reasons, but if it is *God's plan* then it must be honored. Only *he* has the right to dissolve a marriage.
4. **Covenant Picture:** 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife. As the story of Scripture unfolds we find that the human relationship between a husband and wife is a picture of the spiritual relationship between God and his people. By the time the NT comes around we understand that Christian marriage finds its ultimate meaning as a "representation of the covenant-keeping love between Christ and his church" (Piper). E.g., the church is the "bride of Christ. "The reason God is so serious about our marriage covenants with each other is because he is so serious about his marriage covenant with us," his church (Platt). God does not say that marriages *cannot* be broken, but rather that they *should not* be broken. Marriage is not an indissoluble, mystical union; it is a covenant that ought not be violated, even though it tragically can be violated.

What Marriage is Not: We have to be careful, though, because *God* is ultimate, not marriage (cf. Matt 22:30).

1. Marriage is fulfilling but it does not exist for personal fulfillment (e.g., marriage is for God's glory and your spouse's good). Don't get in this for yourself (e.g., Phil 2).
2. Marriage is part of God's good plan but it is not the root of your identity (e.g., your ultimate identity is found in God, not your relationship status; this can help you avoid idolizing marriage).
3. Marriage requires love but is not subject to your changing feelings. The reason we make vows, promises, and commitments is so that when we don't want to stay dedicated to a decision, we will stay dedicated anyway. Paul tells us to "walk in love" (Eph 5). Marriage is not about falling in love. Falling is accidental. Marriage is about walking in love. Walking is deliberate.

Elevate Marriage: Jesus is rejecting the Pharisees' devaluing of marriage. He is not saying everyone should be married or that you're somehow less if you're not married (we'll get to that;

Jesus is not married btw) but is reminding us that marriage is good and that his followers should value and esteem it.

- Our church is better when her married members have gospel-proclaiming, God-honoring marriages. Our children do better when their parents have gospel-proclaiming, God-honoring marriages.

If you're married or pursuing marriage, don't settle for mediocre or self-centered marriages. Fight for the gospel to shine through in your love for your spouse. Fight for a marriage that, when someone looks at it, they see (in some imperfect but true way) a reflection of Christ's love.

- Because Jesus elevates marriage we have to reject a casual view of divorce.

2. The Destructive Nature of Divorce (vv. 7-9)

Command or Permission: Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" This is where the Pharisees show how they've completed twisted obedience to Christ. How, by making the law of Moses **the point** their whole lives are misdirected (it impacts everything). Their discussing the provision of Deuteronomy 24 that allows for divorce (Deut 24:1-4).

- [Jesus] said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. What the Pharisees saw as a command, the Bible teaches as an unfortunate necessity in some circumstances. Divorce is never commanded or instituted in Scripture, rather it is allowed because of sin. When God gives his people permission for divorce, it is not a reflection of his ideal for them; it is a reflection of the hardness of the human heart; it is a sad commentary on the effects of sin on God's beautiful design.
- Even though he will allow divorce in certain circumstances, God will never require divorce, even in the case of marital unfaithfulness.

Sin: Is Jesus contradicting Moses? No, he's showing how Moses fits into God's economy of salvation (e.g., Sailhamer, Galatians, Abraham obedient to the law before the law). There are laws in the Old Testament that are not expressions of God's desire for all time, but expressions of how best to deal with the consequences of sin in a particular place and time.

- What about divorce, single parents, widows or widowers? In every instance, it is not God's perfect design, even if it fits into his ultimate plan. Being a widow means that someone died (death is a result of the fall; there will be no death in heaven).
- Much of the Christian life is broken and beautiful (e.g., adoption and loss; beauty and brokenness). If we fail to love divorced people we fail to offer grace; if we celebrate divorce we undermine covenant marriage.

Every divorce involves a loss, a brokenness, a promise failed and a hope unrealized. Even when divorce is necessary (in the case of abuse) or wise (in the case of abandonment), it is still a result of someone's sin. "For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence" (Mal 2:16). Divorce is a rupture, a break. The devil "comes only to steal and kill and destroy" (Jn 10:10).

- Sometimes divorce is necessary but it is never good. Sometimes it is wise but it is never desirable.

Layers of Context: And it becomes harder to uphold marriage and fight divorce in society that sees lifelong, covenant fidelity as unrealistic, that sees marriage as a convenience rather than a promise (some celebrate divorce rather than mourn it).

A Note About Adultery: And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.” Here we see that the sin of adultery is specifically mentioned as making divorce permissible because adultery is a violation of God’s plan for marriage (cf. Heb 13:4). It breaks what he has built. It takes rather than gives. It is “‘anti-gospel’ because Jesus never cheats on his bride [the church]. He never forsakes, abandons, or abuses her. He always loves.” But, adulter also doesn’t have to be a death-sentence to a marriage because, like Jesus, we can choose to forgive, and reconcile. “He always takes back [his people] when they wander” (Piper). The gospel is the only remedy that cures what it diagnoses.

Divorce: Divorce is and will always be a reality as long as sinful people inhabit a broken world. Which means, if our church is reaching real people in the real world then we’ll have to deal it..

- (1) **We want divorce to be rare among believers.** It harms couples, it harms children, it weakens communities, and it obscures a vision of the gospel (false statistic saying divorce is as common or *more* common among believers; data shows “nominal” Christians divorce at the same rate as non-Christians; however, a couple “actively involved in their church” are 35% less likely to divorce; those who call themselves Christians but do not actively engage in the faith are 20% more likely than the general population to get divorced). We don’t want marriages to merely exist. We want our marriages to live up to their God-designed purpose. We don’t need more marriages, we need more healthy, spirit-filled, missional marriages.
- (2) **We recognize the reality of divorce.** In our fallen world, sometimes divorce is the right course of action. Divorce is sometimes necessary even if it is never good. When a believer is pursuing divorce, after a painful period of prayer, whether because of abandonment, adultery, abuse, or the like, the church has a responsibility to walk alongside. We recognize that biblically permissible divorce is a sad end to a painful season not a quick fix to a trivial problem.
- (3) **We extend gospel grace to those who’ve been divorced.** If you’ve walked through divorce for less than godly reasons, God’s grace is sufficient. Maybe you were divorced before you were a believer or maybe in sinful immaturity you called it quits rather than pushing through. We are unwilling to celebrate your sin but we also refuse to condemn you. Your past sin is neither a cause for celebration nor shame.
 - If you’re contemplating divorce, don’t just do it because you know God will forgive you (Rom 6). But if you’ve been divorced, don’t live in shame because there is “no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8). The same God that created marriage for his glory can redeem a marriage wrecked by adultery. The same gospel that calls us to redemption can redeem a life marred by divorce.

Whether you're divorced, widowed, single, or married, I sincerely hope you'll find at Redemption Heights a faith family that is loving and supportive, ready and able to walk with you through any trial. Eager to stand in the gap with you and witness God redeem that which sin has broken.

- Pray with and for your to find a Christ-honoring spouse.
- But that's not where the story ends, marriage isn't the be-all and end-all of following Christ.

3. The Gift of Singleness (vv. 10-12)

Gospel Marriage is Hard: ¹⁰ The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." Discipleship is hard. The Disciples feel that Jesus' standard is too exacting. In their minds, it would be better not to get married. Marriage isn't worth the risk (if you can't call mulligan when things don't go the way you like). They only want to get married if they can get out of it when things get hard.

- This is our instinctive reaction to many things that God calls us to. Do you think God's command to love, forgive, or obey is too hard? Obeying God is worth the cost and is for our good (e.g., lifelong monogamous marriage has been proven to correlate to greater degrees of satisfaction and happiness by secular social scientists).

What's the Alternative?: ¹¹ But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. ¹² 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. The disciples, in their ignorance, accidentally said something profound (e.g., a broken clock is right twice a day). It is a hard saying, and not everyone is able to receive it, but **singleness and celibacy is actually an option** and *possibly* a good option. In that day and age, even more than ours, marriage was assumed and expected. If you were single, there was something wrong with you (I promise that is not the case with the singles in our church family).

- To underscore just how radical this calling is, Jesus uses the term "eunuch" (if you don't know what that is, I could get the flannelgraph out; as a youth pastor this is when I'd tell kids to ask their parents, also circumcision; you can just ask Ben). But the idea of being a "eunuch" for the kingdom is the idea of choosing to live a celibate life.³ This seems crazy to deny your feelings or preferences or wants for the KoG. Following Jesus is always radical (e.g., "deny yourself").

Some are unmarried because of their circumstances but **some have been called to singleness for the kingdom of God.**

Gift of Singleness: 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.

- "Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. I wish that all were as I myself am (i.e., single). But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. But

³ *Contra* incel.

if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion” (1 Cor 7:6-9)

Paul is saying that many people are single for many reasons *but some* are called to singleness for *God’s kingdom*. And we should never despise God’s gifts. Trust God’s plan for your life is not a burden but a gift.

- There are things that single folks can do, that those with a family can’t (or can’t as easily) and still maintain their obligations (e.g., missionary in hard places).
- I know that churches often seem to focus on families and kids and ignore the many who are single (I hope sometimes it helps to have both a married and a single pastor). But, hear my heart, “there is a beautiful dignity and special worth and Christ-exalting potential in your singleness” (Piper).

It is foolish to get married when God calls you to singleness or stay single when he calls to marriage. This isn’t to say that being single is easy. Almost everything God calls us to that is really worth doing is difficult. But in that difficulty is the beauty of obedience.

Conclusion

Are you willing to submit your singleness or your marriage to God, giving him complete control, and leveraging it for the kingdom?

Selfishly Married or Single:⁴ We want to delight in the goodness of marriage and singleness. We want to recognize the unique opportunities and challenges of both.

- There is a way to be **selfishly single** (e.g., afraid to commit; living for yourself; unwilling to give of yourself for someone else) and a way to be **selfishly married** (e.g., personal gain, fulfilling your desires, afraid to be alone, idolizing marriage). *You can also get **selfishly divorced**.

We want to value marriage and singleness without idolizing either.

Leveraging Your Life for the Gospel: What would it look like to maximize your marriage or your singleness for the gospel? Our church is healthier with gospel-shaped marriages and gospel-focused singles.

- Do you have a gospel marriage? Are you looking for a gospel marriage (or merely someone to make you happy)? Have you surrendered your marriage to Jesus?
- Singles, are you leveraging your time, relationships, and skills for the kingdom of God or for yourself? Are you using this season to check items off your bucket list or invest in spreading the gospel?

⁴ Keller