

## “WHAT GOD HAS JOINED TOGETHER” MATTHEW 19:1-12

Immediately after the death of legendary talk-show host Larry King last week, tributes came pouring in from those who knew him socially and professionally and those who had been guests on his show. Those tributes shared a common theme. They lauded his remarkable ability to remain cool, calm, and conciliatory during conversations with even the most controversial and contentious people. Somehow, he never seemed to get ruffled or combative, no matter how awkward the subject or how difficult the guest.

So, after hearing all these accolades about Larry King’s winsome ways with people, I was surprised when it was reported, as a sidenote, that he had been married eight times.

I have no idea why Larry King was unsuccessful in his marriages (nor is it any of my business), but when I heard this it struck me that it is entirely possible to be extremely skilled and proficient in one’s professional relationships, and not so much in one’s personal relationships—marriage being the most personal relationship of all. But it is not difficult to understand why. A marriage relationship is so personal and so intimate that it is impossible to conceal one’s flaws and faults and failures and foibles. Those who enter into it are inevitably exposed for who they really are, and that can produce lots of tension and turbulence. Which is why there is more conflict in a marriage relationship than any other.

It is no surprise, then, that immediately after addressing the subjects of humility, constructive conflict resolution, forgiveness, and reconciliation, Matthew inserts into his Gospel narrative a conversation Jesus had with Pharisees about the subject of marriage and divorce. Indeed, marriage is the relationship that requires more humility, more constructive conflict resolution, more forgiveness, and more reconciliation than any other relationship.

Let’s look at that conversation, which begins in chapter 19, **verses 1-2**. *Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, He went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. <sup>2</sup> And large crowds followed Him, and He healed them there.*

Jesus has now completed His Galilean ministry, and is on His way to Jerusalem where, as He predicted, He would suffer, be killed, and on the third day be raised (16:21). But His entrance into Judea was not a withdrawal from public ministry. We are told that Jesus was accompanied by large crowds, who apparently followed Him from Galilee or points along the way. He also continued His ministry of healing.

As Jesus was on the standard route to Jerusalem, just east of the Jordan River, **verse 3**. *<sup>3</sup> And Pharisees came up to Him and tested Him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?”*

The Pharisees came to Jesus with a question, but Matthew, who was there, tells us that they were *not* sincerely interested in His answer. They were *testing* Jesus, posing a question they hoped would stir up controversy. That is because this subject of divorce and what was considered to be legal grounds for divorce, was a theological minefield in Jesus’ day. And the Pharisees figured that no matter how Jesus answered this question it would antagonize at least some in His audience who had a different view.

The Pharisee’s question was not whether a man had a right to divorce His wife. All Jews believed that a man had this right, because Moses made this provision in the first few verses of Deuteronomy 24. The controversy centered around a single word in that passage. Moses permitted a man to divorce his wife if he found some *indecency* in her. The question is, what does “indecency” mean? Moses did not specifically define what it meant, so the rabbinical schools interpreted it in vastly different ways.

The strict school of Shammai understood “indecency” to mean adultery, so they taught that adultery was the only justifiable ground for divorce. The more lenient school of Hillel, however, interpreted “indecency” as anything the husband did not like. They taught, for example, that if a wife

burned her husband's dinner, it was grounds for divorce. They even interpreted the words "if she finds no favor in his eyes" to mean that if he found someone prettier, he could divorce her.

Thus, the question, "*Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?*" **Verses 4-5.** <sup>4</sup>*[Jesus] answered, "Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female,* <sup>5</sup>*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'?*

The Pharisees wanted Him to take sides on a controversial issue so that He could alienate some of His audience, but Jesus did not take the bait. However, He *did* respond to their question in a manner that revealed God's view on this subject, while at the same time revealing the fallacies of their theological reasoning.

Instead of directly answering their question about what reasons are permissible for divorce, He appealed to God's original intention for marriage, which is revealed in the creation narrative—Genesis 1-2—a passage with which the Pharisees would have been very familiar, and which they would have considered to be "weightier" than what Moses subsequently said at a considerably later date.

Jesus begins His response with the words, "Have you not read..." which is a polite way of saying, "C'mon. You guys should know better than to base your understanding of the permanence of marriage on Deuteronomy 24. You should be focusing on Genesis 1-2, which ought to shape not only your view of marriage, but divorce."

Jesus quotes two verses in that Genesis account, the first of which is 1:27, "...*He who created them from the beginning made them male and female.*" One of the things Jesus is pointing out is that God could have created the human race in a variety of ways. He could have created one man and many women. But He created Adam and Eve—one man and one woman—because He intended that marriage be monogamous and be for life.

The second passage Jesus quotes is Genesis 2:24, which speaks of a man leaving his parents and "holding fast" to his wife. In the ancient world (and even in some cultures today), relationships in the nuclear family were considered to be *the* strongest of all. Thus, leaving one's parents and siblings and transferring one's ultimate allegiance to someone else, even a spouse, was considered unnatural. But here, in the creation ordinance, God declares that the marriage relationship surpasses all other human relationships, including immediate family members. And that is because a husband and wife become something called "one flesh."

Look again at **verse 5.** *Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'?* This concept of "one flesh" is the very essence of marriage, and actually defines what a marriage relationship is. It is so significant that, for emphasis, Jesus restates this profound reality in verse 6. **Verse 6a.** <sup>6</sup>*So they are no longer two but one flesh.* And then He adds something more to the meaning of "one flesh" than is in the original statement in Genesis by saying, **verse 6b,** *What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."*

Jesus is asserting that when a man and a woman get married God does something to them and for them that only *He* can do. He joins them together. He welds their two separate and independent identities to create a brand-new singular identity, so that the man becomes an extension of his wife, and the woman becomes an extension of her husband.

And Jesus is careful to emphasize that it is God who is the Welder. Oh, He allows individuals to choose their spouses. But after the decision is made and they get married, *He* himself joins them. And Jesus says that this divine work is so significant and so sacred that no one has the right or the permission to unjoin themselves. In other words, people can decide to get married, but because of what God does to and for them when they get married, they cannot decide to get unmarried. If they do, they are destroying what God has created.

Those like the followers of Hillel and Shammai who were caught up in the Deuteronomy dispute had lost sight of this central truth. Marriage is not a casual arrangement or a legal contract that is subject to the whims and desires of headstrong males. It is a sacred and binding union made by God Himself that must be treated with utmost respect and even reverence.

Of course, the Pharisees, who were only interested in trapping Jesus and not in being instructed by Him on the subject of marriage, try to bring Him back to their original argument about the interpretation of Deuteronomy 24. **Verse 7,** <sup>7</sup> *They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?"*

What Jesus said seemed suspiciously to them like He was evading Moses' specific statement about divorce in Deuteronomy, so, they pounced on Him. But in their haste, or perhaps in their angst, they misstated Moses' words, declaring that he *commanded* divorce, which was inaccurate. But that misstatement may have revealed what the Pharisees really thought about the Deuteronomy law. They assumed that a husband's decision to dissolve a marriage was sanctioned by God, as long as he followed proper protocol. That protocol involved presenting the "indecent" wife with a *certificate of divorce*, a document that gave the woman the right to remarry (The essential formula in the bill of divorce literally said, "Lo, thou art free to marry any man"). Provided it was properly drawn up, witnessed, and served in a legal manner, that was all that was required.

Look at **verse 8.** <sup>8</sup> *[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.*

Jesus does not let them off the hook with their careless use of the word "command," but He does concede that Moses *allowed* divorce. But He hastens to add that Moses *allowed* it "because of your hardness of heart." I find it interesting that Jesus does not say, because of "their" hardness of heart, referring to the husbands of Moses' day. He says, "...because of **your hardness of heart** Moses allow **you to divorce your wives,**" which is another way of saying that Moses, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, anticipated that their hearts (and lots of other husbands' hearts) could become hard. Hardness of heart toward whom or what? Hardness of heart toward their wives.

In a patriarchal society such as Israel was, if a husband wanted to get rid of his wife, he could throw her out of the house and force her to live on the street until she was destitute. And because she was still legally married to him, she could not remarry and be cared and provided for by another man. She was stuck. She was socially doomed because women did not have any legal rights or recourse when it came to marriage. They were at the mercy of their husbands.

Moses was mindful of the hardships that repudiated wives might experience, so he made this provision for divorce in order to give those wives a measure of protection from being exploited by hard-hearted husbands. This "certificate of divorce," then, was a document intended for the wife's benefit. That certificate legally released her from her husband's control and allowed her to remarry if she wished.

Jesus is reminding the Pharisees that Moses' allowance for divorce in Deuteronomy 24 was a concession made because of husbands' hard hearts. It was never intended to be a legal back door that gave husbands the opportunity to escape their marriage if they got tired of their wives or couldn't get along with them. And Jesus once again calls the Pharisees attention to God's original intent for marriage when He reiterates, *from the beginning it was not so*. When a man and woman get married, God welds them together to become "one flesh," making it a sacred, indissoluble union.

Thus, Jesus continues, **verse 9,** <sup>9</sup> *And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."*

My version translates the Greek conjunction as "And" but it would be better translated, "But." "But I say to you..." This is the same Greek construction that Jesus has used many times in Matthew when He said, "You have heard that it was said, *but I say to you...*" The conjunction has what grammarians call, an "adversative force," which means that Jesus is about to say something that either contradicts or corrects something that is erroneous or inaccurate. By doing so, Jesus establishes Himself as the ultimate lawgiver, greater than Moses. So, here in verse 9 Jesus is giving His own verdict on this subject of divorce and remarriage, which is authoritative and binding.

He says that a husband who divorces his wife and marries another woman *commits adultery* because that second marriage violates the creation ordinance in which a man and a woman are joined together by God to become "one flesh." That original "one flesh" relationship, consummated by their sexual union, is sacred and, therefore, indissoluble. So, a displeased husband or wife cannot

decide to undo what God. His original work of welding a husband and wife together is a permanent bond.

Jesus is saying that this practice of presenting an unwanted wife with a certificate of divorce and thinking that when it is delivered that is the end of the marriage, is a completely distorted view of marriage. That's because marriage is not a human institution that can be dissolved by a man's choice. It is a divine institution in which God permanently joins a man and a woman and makes them "one flesh." And what God has joined together man cannot separate, because to separate "one flesh" is to mutilate an identity.

So, Jesus says that if a man divorces his wife and marries another woman, he commits adultery. Why? Because having sex with someone other than one's first wife is a betrayal and a denigration of that original "one flesh" union that God made.

There is an exception, however. Jesus says, *whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.* The word translated "sexual immorality" can refer to a broad range of sexual sin. But here, because it is in the context of marriage, it must refer to adultery. When a married person commits adultery, he/she becomes "one flesh" with that other person, which is a betrayal of the original, sacred "one flesh" relationship. It severely damages that one flesh relationship, and in some cases the damage is irreparable. Thus, Jesus allows for divorce and, I believe, remarriage, for the spouse who has been the victim of an adulterous mate.

The question naturally arises, is adultery the *only* valid grounds for divorce? There is much debate about this, as you know. Let me say that there are a number of things that ought to caution us against being overly dogmatic in our view about this. I believe it is important to take into consideration the specific question (and the motive behind the question) that was posed to Jesus by the Pharisees. Jesus was answering a specific question in a specific historical context; He was not comprehensively addressing all the relevant questions about divorce and remarriage.

In other words, the Pharisee's question and Jesus' answer to the question has a context, and we need to take that context into consideration when forming our views of divorce and remarriage. For example, since only men could divorce their wives in the ancient world, the problem of wife beating would not even be contemplated, since a man would scarcely divorce a woman for this reason (Blomberg, NAC).

What we can say for sure is that Jesus is adamant about the permanent nature of the marriage relationship. In a society where a marriage could be dissolved any time a husband chose to write out a few lines containing the necessary formula, sign it before witnesses, and hand it to his wife, Jesus is saying that this is no way to treat a divine ordinance (Morris).

As you know by now from our study of Matthew, the Pharisees prided themselves on their careful attention to the minute details of God's law, and their fastidious precision in following the letter of the law. However, their legalism often led them to misunderstand and misinterpret God's original intent. That was certainly the case with the subject of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Technically, the law allowed divorce, and the Pharisees went to great lengths to determine the precise legalities of this provision.

But Jesus confronts their legalistic endeavors as misguided and invites them to reflect on what God's original statements about marriage actually mean. When a man and a woman get married God joins them together and makes them one flesh, making it a sacred and dissoluble union. The fact that divorce was allowed in Deuteronomy 24 did not mean that God sanctions divorce. Rather, it was to be seen as a desperate last resort. Every effort must be made to save a marriage.

Once again, as we have seen over and over in the last few weeks, it is God's will that there be peace and harmony in all relationships, and He wants us to do whatever it takes to secure and maintain that peace and harmony. The most sacred and the most intimate of all human relationships is marriage, and therefore, we must do everything we can to preserve it.

The good news for followers of Jesus is that the very God who joined you and your spouse to become one flesh is the One who invites us to avail ourselves of a love—His love—that enables us to love our spouses even when they hurt us and fail us and disappoint us over and over. And so,

for the follower of Jesus who can access this love and who has the Holy Spirit living in him/her to express that love, we never have to feel trapped in a marriage, or feel like we have to simply endure a “loveless” marriage. God enables us to genuinely love even the people who repeatedly rub us the wrong way, even people who do not reciprocate our love, even people who may never change.

That is the power of God’s love. And that is good news for every Christian marriage.

## **What God Has Joined Together** **Matthew 19:1-12**

**Main Idea:** *When a man and woman get married, God joins them together to become “one flesh,” making it a sacred, indissoluble union*

Jesus enters Judea followed by large crowds (1-2)

The Pharisees confront Jesus (3-9)

They test Him with a question about divorce (3)

The lawfulness of divorce

“For any cause”

He challenges them with a statement about marriage (4-6)

The first marriage is a prototype for all marriages

The meaning of “one flesh”

The act of God in welding a man and woman

Which makes it sacred

Which makes it indissoluble

They appeal to Moses’ allowances for divorce (7)

He explains Moses’ rationale, and God’s original intent (8-9)

Your hard hearts

The profound sacredness of the “one flesh” union

What sexual immorality does to “one flesh”

What remarriage does to “one flesh”

The Disciples confront Jesus (10-12)

They express bewilderment with Jesus’ teaching (10)

He concedes that not everyone can “receive” this teaching  
(11-12)

“Only those to whom it is given”

The reference to eunuchs

Application