

Matthew 19:1-12

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[0 : 0 0] We've just come through Matthew 18, and in Matthew 18, during which he was at Capernaum, it says that he taught them how to achieve high rank in the kingdom of God, which is by being humble, you recall, in verses 1 to 6. He also taught about stumbling blocks in verses 7 to 11, how we should avoid them and also avoid being the one to throw a stumbling block before somebody else.

He taught them about God's obsession with saving the lost in verses 12 to 14. He used this example of a shepherd who would leave 99 sheep on the hillside and go and find the one that was lost, and from that we infer that God's heart for the lost is such that he always pursues them.

He taught them about dealing with sins and offenses and how that should always be motivated by a desire to restore, not a desire to get your own back or a desire to beat someone with a big stick, but should be out of a heart to restore someone. He taught them about forgiveness and the imperative of it and how he used the example of the king who forgave several lifetimes worth of debt and therefore expected his servant to forgive a small amount. And this painted this picture of us of the immense forgiveness of God, and he has forgiven us so much we must forgive one another.

And then it says, when he'd finished saying those things, he went off into Judea. And if you read quickly across the chapter break, you get the impression that this might have been the next day or, you know, the following morning or something like that, but not quite true.

And he goes into Judea. Now, when he was in the Decapolis, Hapurneum is in the Decapolis, there's a lot of Gentiles. So an awful lot of what he was saying, he was saying two Gentiles as well as Jews.

[2 : 0 5] But when he went into Judea, it was all Jewish. And let me see if I can indicate what this journey would have been like. Hold on a moment. What you have, if you can see this, this sort of journey, we're not sure how he did it, but the Galilee is here. And this journey was part of his trip to Jerusalem to eventually be crucified. So he is entering probably the last six months or so of his life.

And he took on foot, by the way, this journey across the Jordan and down into the area of Perea. And from Matthew's gospel, you get the impression that this was the very next thing he did.

There's another map there. You'll get these notes. They'll be online. But again, you get a picture of Capernaum's the top red circle and Perea is that area down at the bottom there. That's about 60 to 80 miles that he's gone on foot. And he's been ministering as he went. And so this is Jesus's period of Judean ministry. And you'll find an account of what we're going to read this morning in Mark chapter 10, as well as in Matthew 19. But you'll find more information in Luke and John as to what he did between the two. So in that sort of 60 miles and over a period of about six months, and this is my estimation having studied it, but I could be wrong about the six months. It could be a bit more, a bit less.

And most people that write about it aren't sure, I have to say, so I feel kind of justified. But Luke and John suggest that there were all these things that took place in the gap.

In Luke 10, you read that he sent out the 70 disciples during this period. He went up to the Feast of Tabernacles and his final departure from Galilee, passing through Samaria, Luke 9, 51 to 56, and John 7, 2 to 10. He healed the 10 lepers during this period, Luke 17, 11 to 19. He went and taught at the Feast of Tabernacles in John 7, 11 to 53.

[4 : 24] So he even dipped in and out of Jerusalem at this time. You have his account of the woman taken in adultery that he spoke to in John 8, the escape of the Savior from the hands of the unbelieving Jews in John 18.

You've got the parable of the Good Samaritan spoken in Luke 10, 28. You've got the incidents at the house of Martha and Mary, the return of the 70 in Luke 10.

You've got the healing of the blind man on the Sabbath. You've got the raising of Lazarus. You've got Jesus at the Festival of Dedication. So all of these things seem to have crowded into this period.

It wasn't just the next day. And Jesus continued a ministry that was full of stuff. And one of the things that ministry did was it alerted the scribes and the Pharisees, the people who hated Jesus, and they followed him everywhere and they gave him grief.

We might call it giving him GBH of the ear roll. He was always beset by people who were trying to trip him up, trying to make him find disfavor.

[5 : 35] And what you have in this chapter is they ask him about divorce. Now, they're in the region of Perea. And Herod Antipas was the king of that area.

And it's the area where John the Baptist had been killed. And John the Baptist was killed because he challenged Herod over his improper relationship because he married his brother's wife, who was also related to him.

So this was somewhat incestuous and certainly sinful. He married her and he dumped his wife in order to marry her. So there was a, if you like, an improper divorce and an improper marriage that followed that divorce.

And it was one that caused the king to get so mad when he was challenged over it that he put John to death. So the Pharisees show up and say, Jesus, what do you think about divorce?

And they want him to do what John the Baptist did. They want him to compromise his view on divorce. In addition, there were these two households, if you like, these two rabbinic houses of Hillel and Shammai.

[6 : 51] These two were somewhat in opposition to each other on various doctrinal points. Now, I can't remember which one is which. So if I get this wrong, I apologize.

But I believe it was Hillel that portrayed the idea that a man should be able to divorce his wife for any reason. Shammai said you should only be able to divorce your wife for sexual immorality.

And that was a division between rabbis. Now, I might have them the wrong way around. So feel free to check that. But I think that's the right way around. So the point is that when you ask Jesus, should a man be able to divorce his wife?

What you're doing is you're setting him a trap. You're setting him a trap that could get him in disfavor with the king. And you're setting him a trap that would set these houses against one another.

And whichever answer he gives, he's going to fall out of favor with one school of rabbis or the other. Divorce and marriage. So the power in marriage was in the hands of men.

[7 : 59] Now, certainly back when the Torah was written, it was men that made a marriage and it was men that made a divorce. That's the way it went.

Latterly, actually in Jesus' day, if we read Mark 10, not going to bother to turn there, but there is a reference there to if a woman divorces her husband. So clearly the goalposts had shifted by the time Jesus' day came along.

But the tradition was that everything, all the power was in the hands of the man. So whether a marriage existed or not depended on the man choosing a wife. And if a divorce came about, it was the man that initiated the divorce in almost all cases.

And because the household of Hillel, I don't know what you call it, the school, the rabbinical school of Hillel said, a man should be able to divorce for any reason.

Women could be divorced for burning the tea, for speaking to a man. Or just because the husband had seen someone more attractive and thought he would go elsewhere.

[9 : 09] He could just say, I divorce you. And that was it. She was divorced. And the House of Hillel supported that view.

And so this group that were asking him, should a man be able to divorce his wife for any reason, had probably already done it, or at least some of them would have already done it.

They would have reached a point where they saw someone they fancied more than their wife and said, I divorce you. I'm going to be with this. So nightmare scenario for Jesus, really.

But as always, Jesus knocks it out of the park. He doesn't compromise in the slightest. He refers straight away to Genesis and he says, have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female?

And he said, for this reason, a man should leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two should become one flesh. So we've said he's in a trap.

[10 : 14] Why is he in a trap? If we turn to Deuteronomy 24, and just verses 1 to 4, what you have is something that Moses wrote when he came to talk about divorce.

And it says, When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house.

And she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man's wife. And if the latter husband turns against her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies, who took her to be his wife, then her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled.

For that is an abomination before the Lord. And you shall not bring sin on the land which the Lord your God has given you as an inheritance. The rabbis have got this in mind when you have this.

Go back to Matthew 19. The Pharisees have got this in mind as part of the trap. What they're saying, effectively, the scheme is like this.

[11 : 39] We'll ask him what he thinks about divorce. And if he says you should never divorce, we'll say, Oh, but Moses said. And if they say, yes, you can divorce, they'll invoke, is it Malachi 2 verse 16 that says God hates divorce.

So on the face of it, Jesus is in this predicament where he's got to decide which side of this saddle he's going to sit. And of course, whichever answer he gives, as we've already said, is going to offend one or other school of rabbis.

And so it's going to weaken his position in the eyes of the Pharisees. It's going to make him a source of hatred even more than he already is. And what he says, I find this amazing.

But first of all, let's just understand something from history. Because if, as I suspect, it's not clear in script, just so you could say I'm making this up. But given their response, I think some of these people, some of these Pharisees had already divorced their wives for less than good reasons and had gone off with other women.

And so they were living this wrong married life, wrong in terms of God's ideals for marriage. And so the idea of the certificate of divorce given by Moses was vitally important for the woman.

[12 : 56] Because the man had so much power that if the man said, I divorce you, I don't like what you cooked last night. She had to be given a certificate.

And that certificate would show why she was divorced. And it would enable her as a properly divorced woman to go and marry someone else, which was vital in that culture because an unmarried woman on her own would likely become destitute.

But she could say, you know, he didn't like the way I cooked. Here's my certificate to prove it. But the other thing is when she went into that first marriage, she took with her a dowry.

And so all the money of that dowry had to be kept for her in case the husband died so that she could remarry and things like that. So it was something that was set aside.

And in order to claim back that dowry, she had to show that she had been legitimately so-called divorced. She would then get her dowry money back and could go and get on with her life.

[13 : 59] So it was an act of mercy to the woman. It was a tool to protect women in this mad situation where men would just divorce on a whim.

I've had enough of you. I fancy her. Bye. And just sent her away. The certificate of divorce protected her. It was nothing to do with giving men permission to divorce for spurious or reasons that had no real substance.

It wasn't to give men carte blanche to divorce. It was to give women protection. So knowing this, when they turn to Jesus and say, should a man be able to divorce for any reason?

He immediately invokes the original plan that God had for marriage, which is man plus woman for life. No. No. No. A man shall leave his father and mother and cleave unto his husband.

No. It doesn't say that. It says a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave unto his wife. And the two shall become one flesh.

[15 : 17] So God, Jesus hits them with the absolute best scenario. And we've read from Malachi that God hates divorce.

And hopefully we can begin to understand why his hatred of divorce was so forceful. Whilst also remembering that it was not the unforgivable sin.

And also remembering that there are legitimate reasons for divorce. Whilst God hates it, people who preach that anybody that gets divorced is going to hell are completely misguided.

It's not scriptural. Anybody that preaches that a divorcee cannot remarry under any circumstances is also at odds with scripture. And I'm not going to go off on one about all that this morning, because that's another whole hour or two study on the subject of marriage.

But for the purposes of this morning, what we need to understand is Jesus was saying, No, you shouldn't divorce because God made the male and female and designed them to be bonded for life.

[16 : 22] So he uses Genesis 1 verse 27 and Genesis 5 verse 2, where God says he created the male and female. And then he goes to Genesis 2 verse 24 and says, For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two should become one flesh.

In Hebrew, the word is echad. And the word echad means oneness. And one of the reasons that I believe that the true importance of marriage was not understood is not now understood in our culture either.

is this whole concept of echad, oneness, means that as a man, when I married Sharon, I was no longer just me.

To remain in God's view of marriage, I could not any longer say, well, that's for her and this is for me. Because God says you are echad.

Now, we've reached a situation in our society where you don't even have to try. Oh, it's okay, get married, you can always divorce later. We don't enter marriage with this idea of once I am married to this person, I am no longer just me.

[17 : 40] Turn to 1 Corinthians 6. 1 Corinthians 6 verses 15 to 20. You have here a passage of scripture that talks about how you should respond with your body sexually in the situation of prostitution.

And Paul says this, What he's saying in this context is, when you go with a prostitute, you're not you anymore, you are you plus one.

You're an integral part of someone else. And in marriage, you become an integral part of someone else. Now, this is something that should speak to us of the Godhead itself, because the Godhead is more than one person, but is one.

We have one God, three persons. How does that work? I haven't a clue. But it does work because God said it works, that the three are actually one, yet there are still three.

And in a marriage, there are supposed to be two, but they're one. And they remain two. But you think of them as one. And one is not able to be separated from the other spiritually.

[19 : 13] When we join ourselves in a consummated covenant of marriage, it means that in some mysterious and wonderful way, we inhabit one another. In a similar way to the way Christ inhabits us when we're born again, we're no longer just us, but we're an integral part of someone else.

Just as when we are inhabited by Christ, we are a new creation, because he inhabits us, and we're no longer just us. We are us plus Christ.

And in John 17, you won't find it in the notes because it's only just occurred to me. In John 17, that high priestly prayer, Jesus says, I want them to be one father, just as you are in me and I am in you.

So it's a mysterious concept, but nevertheless, you can understand why Jesus values it so much.

Because it's a direct reflection of the Trinity, and it's a direct reflection of what he's trying to take to people. And in the covenant of marriage, he's trying to amalgamate them in an inseparable and permanent way.

[20 : 22] If you think of it as well, marriage provides us with this parallel of the Trinity, because at the moment of consummation and conception, you have three in one and one in three.

You have one conceived, the two are joined and have become one flesh, and the third is conceived, so you have three in one and one in three. So it's another reason why Jesus is exercised about this is it's supposed to reflect supernatural divine oneness.

Years ago, I felt like God gave me a kind of parallel with this with nuclear explosions. When you get a nuclear explosion, you split the atom and all hell is let loose.

And it creates a reaction that goes on and on and on and does inestimable damage. And God put that together, and we weren't supposed to separate it.

And so many of us live, and I know there are people here who've had to deal with divorce. And we would love to pray with anybody who's in that situation, because you can have lasting damage.

[21 : 36] And it wasn't God's best plan for you. And so you could well have spiritual and emotional nuclear explosions going on that carry on for years and years and years and cling to you, perhaps a slightly separate matter.

So coming back to Matthew, and I find this fascinating, because their very response to him, he says, As we predicted, they said to him, he says, no, the biblical standard is marriage is one man, one woman for life.

Done. You should never divorce. Verse 7, they say, why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away? And his response was, because of the hardness of your heart.

In other words, his response was, because you're sinners. You're not kind, you're not compassionate, you're not loving, you're not gentle. You've got hard hearts.

And the certificate of the divorce was actually to give the woman a safe way out of the marriage more than the man. But he all but accuses them, doesn't he?

[22 : 50] When he says, Moses said that because you're a load of sinners. Moses said that because you're hard-hearted. So because of the hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives.

But from the beginning, it has not been this way. So you've got Adam, and you've got Eve. And he can't run off with anyone because there's no one else on the earth. And she can't run off with anyone because there's no one else on the earth.

So from the beginning, faithfulness was a given. And it only became a problem as more and more people came onto the earth. And then he says, whoever divorces his wife except for immorality and marries another woman commits adultery.

Now, what's interesting, having already deduced that probably some of these people who are trying to trap Jesus have already broken their marriage vows. They then say, verse 10, the disciples said to him, if the relationship of a man with his wife is like this, it's better not to marry.

Think about that. What they've said, he's just said, you've got the certificate of divorce because of the hardness of your hearts. And what they're saying is, if I've got to stick to my marriage vows, marriage isn't worth doing.

[24 : 01] How hard-hearted is that? So they're demonstrating, immediately after his comment, they're demonstrating that they are hard-hearted about marriage.

And Jesus goes on to say, not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given. So the idea of it being better not to marry, there's a whole other teaching we could do on singleness.

And I haven't got time to cover both of them this morning. But men who would say that they are called to singleness will not feel under sexual pressure.

And it puts me in mind of 1 Corinthians 7. We want to quickly turn there. And verse 9. So 1 Corinthians 7 is about the marriage relationship and teaches us a lot about marriage.

But in verse 9, we'll start with verse 8. But I say to the unmarried and to the widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I.

[25 : 03] In other words, if they remain single. But if they do not have self-control, let them married. For it is better to marry than to burn. With passion is added in italics, but it's better to marry than to burn.

So marriage is the norm, but it's not essential. And there's nothing wrong with being single. But what this passage, what Jesus states in this passage shows compassion for all.

There are some who have been made eunuchs, either because they were born that way or because they were made that way by men. In other words, a lot of people used to castrate eunuchs and use them as slaves.

And they castrated them so they didn't have to watch them with regard to the women. Crazy way of living. But there we go. But he talks about those. And then he talks about those who have decided to be eunuchs.

I'm going to be celibate for the kingdom of God. And God will spare those men sexual pressure. And I guess the same applies to women. But the norm is marriage.

[26 : 10] Jesus gave this teaching whilst he was under the old covenant. The new covenant had not yet begun. And so the penalty for adultery is death.

And you read that in Leviticus 20 in verse 10. The penalty for adultery is death. And what he has just said to these guys is, if you fall into this category, you're committing adultery.

And so what he's saying without actually saying it is, you are worthy of the death penalty. Oh, the man's got to live like that. It's best not to get married. Well, yes. But no, it's better to get married and honor your vows.

And there are lots of warnings. And I'll leave it for you to get from the notes because I'm going to run out of time otherwise. There are lots of warnings about adultery in the New Testament, as well as in the book of Proverbs, where clearly they stopped using the death penalty as a penalty for adultery.

What they used instead seems to be public shame and casting people out of fellowship and things like that. They stopped killing people when they found them in adultery.

[27 : 24] What's also interesting is in the Old Testament days, when they found people in adultery, they would often kill the woman and let the man off. But according to scripture, both male and female should die.

So their response belies their own hearts, their self-centeredness. Courtesy of Sven in the first instance and Linda in the second instance, because Sven wasn't here to bring this to us.

There's a nuance of Hebrew language that kind of shows us just how, God as amalgamated marriage into something that goes beyond our immediate understanding.

If you take the Hebrew word for man, it's the word ish, and it's made up of the letters Aleph, Yud and Shin. And you can see the Hebrew word, which you must read from right to left, not left to right.

So that one word at the end read the other way. So it's Aleph, Yud and Shin. That's the letter that means the man. A woman in Hebrew is Isha.

[28 : 31] And it's made up of Aleph, Shin and Hay. And once again, you've got the Hebrew letters up there to show you. So you've got these three letters that represent a man and three letters that represent a woman.

What you then find, and Linda didn't know where Sven got this from, but in the passage that you sent me is a reference to the Talmud.

So this is a Talmudic appreciation of Jewish language. The letter Yud, out of Aleph, Yud and Shin, the letter Yud is what expresses maleness.

And the letter Hay expresses femaleness. So if you take those letters aside, what you're left with in both cases for male and female is the Aleph and the Shin.

So both male and female take out the letters that refer to maleness and femaleness. You're left with Aleph and Shin, which reads as Esh.

[29 : 39] And Esh means fire. If you think that fire in scripture always represents judgment, and if you then put those two together, so if you put Aleph and Shin together and you put, you've got Aleph and Shin for the man and Aleph and Shin for the woman, and you put them together, you've got double Aleph and Shin.

So effectively, you've got fire times two. Now this, to me, and to whoever wrote this, who was much more fluent in Hebrew than I'll ever be, it speaks of, if you put male and female together without marriage, you get fire, you get judgment.

The Yud and the Hay together, which we took out earlier, didn't we? We took out the Yud for the man and the Hay for the... If you put those together, there are no vowels in Hebrew, you get the word Yah, which is the word for God.

It's one of the holy names of God. So when you join men and women together properly, in marriage, and of course marriage is much more than a sexual union. Marriage is a covenant, and marriage is a joining of God.

When we go into the wedding service, we say, what God has joined together, let not man separate. Marriage is appreciated as these two people present themselves to God, and he puts them together.

[31 : 04] And when he puts them together, they become Yah, in terms of their linguistic nature. Have I lost anybody, or is everybody with me? So when you put the maleness and the femaleness together in marriage, you get the holy name of God.

If you simply have the male or the female together without marriage, you have judgment. And I just thought, wow, thank you, Sven. And Sven's been dead four years, and we're still learning from him.

Bless him. You've only put his references. When you join them in marriage, he brings the yud to the marriage, she brings the hay to the marriage, so you finish up with Yah.

You finish up with something that completely expresses God. I thought that was precious, and I'm going to finish there and quit when I'm winning. Father, thank you so much that you gave us marriage, and you even dealt with the way we mess marriage up.

And I thank you that eternally we are going to be married to the bridegroom himself, who is Christ Jesus. But Lord, please protect marriages in our church, and please let us not be people who compromise on the subject.

[32 : 27] We realize that there are people whose lives have already been messed up by divorces, and that you have provided a compassionate way through for those people.

Father, I just ask that because the subject is so knotty, that you bring us wisdom when we deal with people who are struggling with prior relationships, several marriages, maybe feeling guilty.

Father, that we help them to unravel things that seem so complex sometimes, and that from it we can bring Holy Spirit goodness.

In Jesus' name, amen.