

Marriage, Divorce, and Jesus the Eunuch
Matthew 19:3-12

Turn to Matthew 19 please. Marriage, Divorce, and Jesus the Eunuch. This teaching of Jesus speaks to every believer that's married and every believer that's not. Something here for everybody. We're looking at ten verses in Matthew 19, and we'll look at these ten verses in two sections, marriage and divorce in vv3-9, and Jesus the eunuch in vv10-12.

(This is the third in our series: "marriage, celibacy, and bodies.")

The Pharisees test Jesus to get him into trouble. They hope to trap him, they hope he will say something they can use against him. In Matthew 19, they remember what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. In that Sermon, Jesus was strict about divorcing your spouse. No divorcing your spouse and remarrying unless your spouse was sexually unfaithful. Moses on the other hand seems wide open about reasons for divorce. Pharisees want strict Jesus to disagree with relaxed Moses. So they ask Jesus, "can a man divorce his wife for any reason?"

"Haven't you read," Jesus replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

This is the most important marriage teaching we have from Jesus. To teach about divorce, Jesus first taught about marriage. The Pharisees' question about divorce told Jesus that they did not know what God said about marriage, so Jesus first explained marriage.

And to teach them about marriage, Jesus went back to the beginning, and he quoted from both creation stories, from Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. Jesus mentions "the beginning" twice in Matthew 19. Jesus did nothing new with marriage, he just emphasized Genesis 1 and 2.

"At the beginning the Creator made them male and female." That's Genesis 1. Why does Jesus quote that male female line? The Pharisees who were testing him assumed that marriage was between a man and woman. But they weren't the only ones listening. There were also Greeks around, and Greeks sometimes had same sex relationships between women and between men.

In the time of Jesus, the capital city of Galilee was Sepphoris. Sepphoris was near Nazareth and Capernaum, and bigger than either of them. It's not mentioned in the Gospels because Jesus never went there, only to the lost sheep of Israel. The Jews knew how the Greeks lived, so Jesus made clear that marriage meant male and female, and that he was getting this from Genesis 1.

And then Jesus quoted the whole marriage sentence from Genesis 2, so we will review that. The marriage sentence has four parts:

(1) For this reason. The marriage sentence ends with: “they become one flesh.” For what reason do they become one? Because they began as one flesh. God made the woman from a piece of the man’s side. So they want to come back together, to go back to the original one.

(2) A man will leave his father and mother, and a woman will leave her father and mother. Every person has a life long duty to serve and honour their parents. Honour your father and your mother, in the ten commandments. That is our first human responsibility. When we marry, our spouse becomes first priority and our parents second.

(3) And be joined to his wife, and she will be joined to her husband. The only reason God mentions parents in the marriage sentence is to make clear what the joining means. Joining means: that shift of life long loyalty.

(4) And they will become one flesh again. They began as one flesh, one body, before God divided them, and now they are one again. And Jesus will add that when they marry, God makes them one. They don’t just make themselves one, God makes them one. “What God has joined” are the words that Jesus uses. In every marriage God joins the two, not just Christian marriage.

Jesus repeats the male and female of Genesis 1, and he repeats the marriage sentence of Genesis 2. The Pharisees wanted to know about divorce for any reason at all. Jesus’s answer was, “since they are no longer two but one flesh, divorce for any reason is preposterous.”

“Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?” The Pharisees were pleased that Jesus answered as they hoped, he fell into their trap. Now they could put him against Moses, who was lenient about divorce.

But it didn’t work. With Jesus, it never worked. *Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives, because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.”*

Jesus always defended Moses. Always. Jesus told them that Moses permitted divorce as a kind of damage control. Israel was so far from living the way God wanted that Moses was just trying to regulate Israel’s poor behavior. The Pharisees did not expect Jesus to defend Moses, but he did.

There are other disturbing marriage rules in the Old Testament. Jesus made clear that Genesis 1 and 2 have always been the marriage ideal. Jesus did not improve Old Testament marriage, he took marriage back to its origin in creation, and that’s where he stayed. And Moses was not the problem, according to Jesus, stubborn Israelites were the problem.

I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

This divorce teaching of Jesus is much like his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5. Here, Jesus has in mind a husband who plans to leave his wife and marry another woman. If he just leaves his wife and takes up with the other woman, it is adultery. But by how they read Moses, if the husband divorces his wife and marries the other, then it is fine. No, says Jesus, the plan was adulterous from the start, and getting a divorce does not change that.

In Matthew 5, Jesus seems to have in mind a wife who wants to leave her husband and marry another man. By how the Jews understand Moses, if she can convince her husband to divorce her, then she is free to marry the man she wants. No, says Jesus, the plan was adulterous from the start, it is still adultery.

I know that in those days only husbands could initiate divorce, not wives. But a woman, if she could persuade her husband that divorcing her was in his best interests, she would be able to arrange that. That's what Jesus pictures in Matthew 5.

Jesus does not separate divorce from remarriage. He does put a high priority on staying together. The one exception he allows is sexual unfaithfulness. If your spouse has been sexually unfaithful, and once is enough, then Jesus gives the innocent spouse the right to divorce. He does not tell them they should divorce, but they are free to do so. Sexual unfaithfulness itself breaks the marriage covenant.

I will not go farther into reasons for divorce than what I've said here. But let's go back to a line of Jesus that I skipped over: "what God has joined, let no one separate." Don't separate what God joined, says Jesus. Jesus does not say we *cannot* separate the couple, he says we *should not* separate them.

It does happen. I myself am divorced and remarried. I lived with my first wife for four years, we had no children, and then she moved out. I lived alone for four years, during that time we were divorced, and then I married Marilyn. Marilyn and I have been together 30 some years.

Divorce is painful, and a great disappointment to our Lord. In the kingdom it is not to happen. It means failure to live in the Lord's ways. After the divorce I despaired. I said to the Lord, "am I any good to you at all?" And he said, "serve me where you can." So I have, and he's been kind and generous to me. And now we will move to the second half of our text:

Jesus the Eunuch – Matthew 19:10 – 12

The disciples said to him, "If it is like this between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry." Jesus replied, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are eunuchs make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it."

Better Not to Marry

The disciples said to him, "If it is like this between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry." Jesus replied, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given... The one who can accept this should accept it."

In the time of Jesus, a few Jewish scholars might have debated strict versus relaxed reasons for divorce, but in real life there was no debate: divorce among Jews was easy and common, because of how they understood Moses. The disciples had never heard anyone as strict as Jesus. They assumed, as did their wives, that if one of them was displeased, they would divorce and marry another.

The disciples were discouraged by what Jesus had said. “If this is how it is, Jesus, it’s not even worth marrying, it’s better not to marry at all!” The Lord’s next line was another big surprise for the disciples: he agreed that it was better not to marry!

“Not everyone can accept what you’ve just said,” says Jesus, “that it is better not to marry, but only those to whom it has been given. Those who can accept it should accept it.” When the disciples said, “then it is better not to marry,” did they really mean that? We can’t say. But Jesus took the line to be sober truth. He treated their words as right and important.

“Not everyone can avoid marriage,” says Jesus, “but if you can see yourself living this way, you should.” And we will let that stand, just as Jesus said it. I’ve been told, “Ed, that’s easy for you to say, you’re married.” Well, I am married. Jesus was single, you could say, “Jesus just says this because he’s not married.” Somebody’s got to say it, and he did. Paul said it too, and we’ll get to that in a later session.

Three Kinds of Eunuchs

For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and eunuchs who make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven.

A eunuch was a man who had been castrated. At some point in his life, probably when he was a boy, his testicles had been cut off. Jews rarely did this, but Gentiles did for a variety of reasons. “Eunuch” was a shame word. It was humiliating, derogatory. It meant “sexually damaged,” “defective.” Male-female marriage relations were not possible for them.

Jesus describes three kinds of eunuchs: *For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and eunuchs who make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven.*

We are not supposed to use words like “damaged” or “defective” of anyone, especially “sexually damaged.” But “eunuch” meant that, Jesus knew it, and Jesus paraded it. Jesus used that insulting word five times in these three short lines, including two about himself. Five times in three short lines. If we clean up Jesus, we will miss what he is saying: he puts himself among the sexually damaged and defective people.

Born Eunuchs

It is not so unusual for people to be born with genital birth defects. The ancient world knew about this, as did Jesus. Jesus widens out the word “eunuch” here, it means more than a castrated man. Birth defects include both men and women: people who are born in such a way that male-female marriage is not possible.

If people can be born with bodies that cannot be in male female marriage relations, they can be born with minds that cannot be in marriage relations. *Anyone* born so that male-female marriage relations are not possible. Born eunuchs.

Eunuchs Made Eunuchs by Others

This would include eunuchs in the literal sense, men whose testicles have been removed. But in the first and third kind of eunuch, Jesus goes past the normal literal sense, so we should do that here as well. Any person who has been damaged by others or handled by others in a way that makes male-female marriage impossible. Eunuchs made eunuchs by others.

Kingdom Eunuchs

And then there are people like Jesus and Paul, eunuchs who make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom, people who walk away from marriage for the sake of God's kingdom. They don't damage their bodies, their bodies are fine, but they decide that for the sake of the kingdom it's better if they don't marry.

It's quite possible that someone called Jesus a eunuch, to insult him. They called him a drunk and a glutton, and they said he cast out demons by the prince of demons. Jesus was not married and not interested in getting married, which was weird. He may have been called a eunuch.

Picture someone calling Jesus a eunuch, because he's not married and not interested. Jesus thinks about this insult. He wonders, "how can I use that for good?" And Jesus plans what he says here, and then he waits for a chance. The disciples were startled by how strictly Jesus spoke about marriage, and they said, "then it is better not to marry."

And Jesus says to himself, "now's my chance to teach about all of us who cannot marry." Using the word "eunuch," Jesus draws a circle around all the people like him who will never be in a man-woman marriage.

Eunuch was a derogatory word. It ignored all the ways that eunuchs were just like everyone else, and shamed them for the way they were different. Jesus did not try to improve the world's view or language. He rather placed himself firmly inside that insulted circle.

Jesus hates the shame put on eunuch people. He had sympathy for them. He could not change their place in the world. But he could join them, and use that word of himself as well. He draws one circle around them all, and puts himself inside the circle. There are eunuchs who are straight and eunuchs who are not, and in these lines Jesus gathers both to himself.

Let's pull this together – he's talking about not being married. He uses a shaming word five times, and our Lord uses it to label himself, and in that way he brings in all the others for whom marriage is impossible. We need to treat everyone in that circle with respect, because the Lord showed solidarity with them.

Jesus differs from our society in that for Jesus, male-female marriage is the only marriage there is. He's made that clear. We still need to see his sympathy for *all* those who can't do that, for whatever reason. Let's be careful how we think and act to eunuch people, because Jesus is there.

Is Celibacy a Choice?

Yes and no. At the start of this conversation it is a choice: *“If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.” “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given... The one who can accept this should accept it.”* Not marrying is a choice for some.

Then Jesus describes three kinds of eunuch people, and for eunuchs there is no choice. Something outside the eunuch’s control has taken away the possibility of a man-woman marriage. So sometimes celibacy is a choice, and sometimes not.

There are Many Celibates in the Church, Eunuchs or Not

We are all called to this at times. Some believers would rather be married but it does not work out. Often enough married men and women live celibate lives. A local doctor told me that among his patients were many couples who would never have sexual intimacy again, for all kinds of reasons. Married couples live for long periods of time without sexual intimacy, again for many reasons. It is common. Celibacy cuts a wide swath among God’s people, and always has.

To conclude, the most important thing we’ve seen today about marriage is that for Jesus, marriage goes back to the beginning, back to creation in Genesis. And there are two ways to live in the kingdom: married, based on Genesis 1-2, and celibate, remembering that some people have no choice. Jesus made himself one of them. Let’s stay with Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, with scars in your hands and your feet, thank you for teaching us. Thank you for appointing apostles to remember these things and write them down to pass them on. Thank you that we, here, in a different land and different time, different society and different language, still have your words right in front of us, to read and to ponder, and so that we can find our way. You have not left us without your voice. O Lord, may we be wise builders, those who hear your words and do them. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May God himself, the God of peace, make you holy through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. Amen. Go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord.