

Matthew 19:1 – 12

^{19:1} When Jesus had finished these words, he departed from Galilee and came into the region of Judea beyond the Jordan; ² and large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. ³ Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing him and asking, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?’ ⁴ And he answered and said, ‘Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined 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 no man separate.’ ⁷ They said to him, ‘Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?’ ⁸ He said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way.’ ⁹ And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.’ ¹⁰ The disciples said to him, ‘If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry.’ ¹¹ But he said to them, ‘Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given. ¹² For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother’s womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this, let him accept it.’

Historical and Cultural Background

- This section (Mt.19:3 – 26:1) has more high intensity conflicts and disputes because of location and timing. Jesus is going to the capital, Jerusalem, knowing he is going to his death. The Jewish leaders are reacting in stronger ways. And Jesus is making especially clear how he is theologically, ethically, socially, and politically different from them. This begins the fifth major teaching section in Matthew’s Gospel
 - When Jesus had finished these words... (Mt.7:28)
 - When Jesus had finished giving instructions... (Mt.11:1)
 - When Jesus had finished these parables... (Mt.13:53)
 - When Jesus had finished these words... (Mt.19:1)
 - When Jesus had finished all these words... (Mt.26:1)
- Divorce in Jewish Law:
 - In Deuteronomy 24:1 – 4, Jewish law considered the case of adultery.
 - Rabbi Hillel (died 10 CE) had a lenient definition of divorce that really favored men. A man could divorce his wife for almost any reason.
 - Rabbi Shammai (circa 50 BCE – 30 CE) had a conservative definition of divorce. Divorce, in his interpretation, can only happen as the result of adultery. Shammai had taken leadership of the Sanhedrin after Hillel died.
 - Wives could also divorce their husbands if the husband was unfaithful, as Jesus affirms that in Mark’s account of this debate (Mark 10:12).¹
- God’s Vision of Marriage from Creation
 - *Monogamy*: In Genesis 1 – 2, God made Adam and Eve to be monogamous.

¹ Deuteronomy 24:1 – 4 is an example of the inclusive male pronoun, where the Hebrew language says ‘he’ to mean ‘he or she’. The Hebrew language is like the Spanish language, where you have gendered nouns and pronouns. For economy of speech, you would just say ‘he’ to mean both genders. When Alexander the Great invaded the Middle East, the influence of Greek Hellenistic culture and its more male biased view caused a corresponding shift in Jewish culture. Dr. Gordon Hugenberger, Theology of the Pentateuch class lecture. David Instone-Brewer, “Bible Scandals: Divorce,” *BeThinking*, 2012; <https://www.bethinking.org/bible/bible-scandals/5-marital-abuse>.

- The Qur'an: A Muslim man can marry four wives, and have concubines.²
- The Mormon Book of Doctrine and Covenants: A Mormon man can marry ten wives.³
- *Marriage Over Family of Origin*: God made each married couple to be equal to their families of origin, which is radical. 'A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife' (Gen.2:25).
 - That differed from the authority structure of traditional cultures, and generational honor and power. Therefore, women could lead in ancient Israelite society, and did.
 - Ancient cultures assumed that a woman would leave her father and mother and be joined to her husband as the lowest ranking member of his family.
 - Children sometimes served families forever, as in ancient Assyria⁴ and Confucian China, Japan, Korea.⁵
- *Wives Have More Rights Than Husbands*: In Exodus 21:10, Jewish law recognized that a wife had more grounds for divorce because she had more rights: to food, shelter, and sexual pleasure.⁶

² 'And if you fear that you cannot act equitably towards orphans, then marry such women as seem good to you, two and three and four; but if you fear that you will not do justice (between them), then (marry) only one or what your right hands possess; this is more proper, that you may not deviate from the right course.' (Qur'an 4:3) 'Successful indeed are the believers...who guard their private parts [refrain from sex] except before their mates [wives] or those whom their right hand possess [concubines]' (Qur'an 23:1, 5 – 6; cf. 33:50,52; 70:29 – 30)

³ 'And if he have ten virgins given unto him by this law, he cannot commit adultery, for they belong to him, and they are given unto him; therefore is he justified. But if one or either of the ten virgins, after she is espoused, shall be with another man, she has committed adultery, and shall be destroyed; for they are given unto him to multiply and replenish the earth, according to my commandment, and to fulfil the promise which was given by my Father before the foundation of the world, and for their exaltation in the eternal worlds, that they may bear the souls of men; for herein is the work of my Father continued, that he may be glorified.' (*Mormon Doctrine and Covenants* 132:62 – 63)

⁴ Ancient Assyria: 'And if my daughter K. dies, then A. my adopted son shall under no circumstances leave my house, because he has to care for my gods and my dead ancestors.' K.R. Veenhof, 'Old Assyrian and Anatolian Evidence', Marten Stol and Sven Vleeming, editors, *The Care of the Elderly in the Ancient Near East* (Leiden, The Netherlands, 1998), p.133. Beyond Assyria, in the Ancient Near East generally, 'The head of household or paterfamilias, whether the father (the eldest male) or the eldest son, had complete charge of the household's property, represented the household in court, and was responsible for maintaining its prosperity and credibility within the community...marriages served not only to produce children and a new generation to inherit property, but they also established social ties, economic connections and a network of association that was designed to benefit both parties [families].' Victor H. Matthews, 'Marriage and Family in the Ancient Near East', Ken M. Campbell, editor, *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003) p.2 and 7.

⁵ 'The Master said, 'Observe what a man has in mind to do when his father is living, and then observe what he does when his father is dead. If, for three years, he makes no changes to his father's ways, he can be said to be a good son.'" Confucius, *Analects* I, 11. 'Meng Yi Tzu asked about being filial. The Master answered, 'Never fail to comply.'" Confucius, *Analects* II, 5. 'In serving his parents, a filial son reveres them in daily life; he makes them happy while he nourishes them; he takes anxious care of them in sickness; he shows great sorrow over their death; and he sacrifices to them with solemnity.' Confucius, *Classic of Filial Piety*, discussed by Charlotte Ikels, *Filial piety: Practice and Discourse in Contemporary East Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cfu/cair/cair10.htm>.

⁶ Rabbi Dr. Warren Goldstein, *Defending the Human Spirit: Jewish Law's Vision for a Moral Society* (New York: Feldham, 2006), p.168 – 190. Abuse was also considered; see *Mishnah Ketuvot* 7.4 – 5. David Instone-Brewer, "Bible Scandals: Divorce," *BeThinking*, 2012; <https://www.bethinking.org/bible/bible-scandals/5-marital-abuse> writes, "Examples that we have recorded in Jewish law codes of the first two centuries include the case of a woman who was ordered by her husband never to visit her parents and another where the wife was forced to pour all the household waste water onto the manure heap instead of using the normal drain (think of the smelly splatter!). The courts agreed that these were cases of abuse, and the women had the right to a divorce. Of course they heard many thousands of other cases, but these two were recorded as a benchmark so that in cases of the same or worse abuse, other judges would know that the victims had the right to a divorce."

- In fact, before English and American law recognized marital rape as a problem and legal category, Jewish law did so '*from time immemorial*.'⁷
- Talmud: 'A man is forbidden to compel his wife to have intercourse with him.' (*Talmud Eirubin* 100b)
- Rabbinical opinion: 'According to Jewish law, sexual satisfaction is primarily the husband's duty and the wife's right. Married women need legal protection to ensure that their husbands treat them sensitively in the potentially volatile area of sexual relations. Men do not need to be protected; they need to be restrained and educated to think of their wives and not to view them as their sex objects.'⁸

⁷ Rabbi Dr. Warren Goldstein, *Defending the Human Spirit: Jewish Law's Vision for a Moral Society* (New York: Feldham, 2006), p.168; italics mine.

⁸ Rabbi Dr. Warren Goldstein, p.190.

Questions

1. What are our culture's (or multiple cultures') attitudes towards sex and marriage?
2. From what you can tell from the passage, what was the first century Jewish debate about divorce about?
 - a. They are genuinely confused about textual interpretation
 - b. They're wondering how to "weigh" Deuteronomy 24:1 – 4 for men compared to women
3. Why does Jesus go back to Genesis 1 and 2?
 - a. To show God's original vision for marriage, before sin entered the picture. It's His 'creation order.' What is God's vision for marriage?
 - i. Monogamous: 'two become one'
 - ii. Heterosexual: 'male and female'
 - iii. Binding: 'God has joined together, let no man separate'
 - b. To show God's vision and authority from Scripture, history, and life.
 - i. Who 'said' the phrase from Genesis 2, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife?' Not just Moses. The same person who 'made them male and female' in Genesis 1, that is, God!!
 - ii. Jesus believed the teaching of Genesis on marriage was absolutely authoritative on these points.
 - c. To bear God's likeness.
 - i. God is a life-bearing union of Father and Son in one Spirit of love.
 - ii. He made Adam and Eve to be a life-bearing union of husband and wife in one spirit of love, in partnership with Him.
 - iii. So every human marriage is meant to at least look like that to remind us of the story we live in. Even if an elderly man and woman get married.
4. How does Jesus show what impact the fall had?
 - a. 'Hardness of heart' set into people. Sin affects personal integrity, relationships, and therefore divorce. That's where Deuteronomy 24 comes in.
 - i. The Mosaic law regulated divorce even though it ultimately disapproved of divorce. In the same way, U.S. tax law requires that you pay taxes on things that you embezzle or steal. It doesn't mean it is encouraging embezzling or stealing. But it recognizes the fact that people do undesirable things and need to be taxed on them, too.
 - ii. It takes a vibrant relationship with God and 'softness of heart' to make marriage work.
 - b. To show us that he is bringing us back to the very challenging pre-sin condition. Jesus is removing 'hardness of heart.'
 - i. Notice that he taught about heart transformation in Mt.5 – 7.
 - ii. Jesus identified the heart as the source of human evil in Mt.15:18 – 20.
 - iii. And the source of unforgiveness in Mt.18:35.
 - iv. The disciples find this vision of marriage difficult and off-handedly affirm singleness (v.10); Jesus agrees with their affirmation of singleness for some (v.11 – 12).
 - c. What about all the instances of polygamy in the Bible?
 - i. It comes from the fall into corruption and sin. There are two categories in the Bible:
 - ii. In the first category are men who married more than one woman and were radically criticized for it.
 1. Men like Lamech in Genesis 4 had two wives, and the story is criticizing him for it. The family of Cain the murderer of Abel was the first to start that pattern in Genesis 4:16 – 25, and because the originator is the murderer Cain, it is clearly understood to be wrong and an extension of the abuse of power.
 2. Kings like David and Solomon were told by Deuteronomy 17:17 not to multiply wives – for lust or for diplomatic reasons, turning marriage into a relationship of power.
 - iii. The second category is when one wife is barren and the husband takes a second wife for the purpose of childbearing.
 1. The only person who really falls into this category is Elkanah in 1 Samuel 1. There was a very high value on having children, more than we totally understand in the West today. The husband could not divorce his first wife, because that would often leave her in poverty and alone.

2. Abraham and Sarah decided to have Abraham father a child through Hagar their maidservant as a surrogate mother, but that was Sarah's idea, she got it from the culture around her since it was commonplace, and it was not approved by God.
 3. Jacob married both Leah and Rachel but he was tricked into doing that by their father Laban. So you can't blame Jacob, and he honored the first marriage to Leah once he was in it.
 4. Thus, the Bible really is against polygamy. When it happened, it was generally for very limited circumstances or shown to be inappropriate.
5. What does Jesus say about singleness?
 - a. He uses the word 'eunuch.' Why?
 - b. A eunuch is a man who cannot have sex because he's been castrated or made impotent somehow.
 - c. Notice that Jesus recognizes that biological defects do happen. How do we see that? When Jesus says that some are born that way.
 - d. What is a eunuch for the kingdom, then? Someone like Jesus himself! Not just single, but abstaining from sex, too.
 6. How is Jesus' view of marriage and singleness in community inspiring and/or frightening?
 - a. Individually yes, it is challenging for any number of reasons.
 - b. Communally, it is also challenging because we tend to make the nuclear family 'the thing' and assume that once people get married they're set for life. Jesus calls us to be a community made up of married and single people in real, emotionally sustaining friendships.
 7. Notice that, in this section (Mt.19 – 25), Jesus is defining what is distinctive about himself and his followers. He will talk about how he's different with regards to sex (Mt.19:1 – 12), money (Mt.19:13 – 31), and power (Mt.20). So we need to become better about defining what is distinctive about Jesus' teaching, in public, with non-Christians. How can we do that? Note: When addressing the issue of gay marriage, I would say the following things:
 - a. Politically, when we are talking about public policy for all society, if some people have 'hardness of heart' and don't believe in Jesus, then can they live up to and into the same vision Jesus has? No.
 - b. So should there be a freedom of religious conscience element? Seems like it.
 - i. The exact definition of marriage is something that is determined by one's religious tradition, and whether 'hardness of heart' is affecting them. Therefore it's a First Amendment issue.
 - ii. We should use the category of 'civil union' for everyone. We should be able to discuss and disagree about the definition of 'marriage' in the public realm. In other words, we should be political pluralists. We shouldn't impose just one view.⁹
 - c. In fact, Jesus' treatment of marriage requires that Christians not legislate it, for only those with 'softness of heart' because of faith in Jesus can live this out.
 - d. But morally, for the church, I still believe in God's vision for marriage and relationships. Why? Because God has a vision for how we relate to each other, in every relationship, including marriage.
 8. It's not just that 'the Bible tells me so.' I'm not saying that I just turn off my mind. The issue is that when I look at the Bible fairly, it doesn't appear to be written just by people, especially men. Look at the evidence when we compare the Bible to Islam and Mormonism and other ancient cultures.
 - a. On monogamy, what do you think of how Genesis 1 – 2 compares with Muslim and Mormon teachings on monogamy?
 - i. Islam and Mormonism definitely show signs of being invented by men, and being for men.
 - ii. Note that some scholars have wondered if significant parts of Genesis were written by women!
 - b. On marriage over family of origin, what do you think about how Genesis 1 – 2 compares other ancient cultures, or even traditional cultures today?

⁹ For more resources on "civil unions for all," see the resources at <https://www.anastasiscenter.org/sex-civil-unions-for-all>.

- i. Mako's story: This is common in Japanese culture until recently. When my mom married my dad, she was upset because my dad's mom, her mother-in-law, treated her like a slave. Those are her words. It shows that in marriage, a woman leaves her father and mother and joins her husband *as the lowest ranking member of his family*.
 - c. So who wrote the Bible?
 - i. I can't just ignore the evidence that there's a good God who stands behind it and in it.
 - ii. That's not the only reason I think the Bible is remarkable. The Bible has strong evidence that it wasn't just written by men.
- 9. This is hard for us to hear because we live after the European Enlightenment the sexual revolution of the 1960's and 70's.
 - a. Especially because of romanticism, we believe something close to 'I feel therefore I am,' and that all relationships are optional social contracts. In this view, we can discard people when they become burdensome.
 - b. In much of Western philosophy, since relationships are social constructs, you can change them as you will.
 - c. This is where both Genesis and secular history flatly disagree. In Genesis, monogamous, heterosexual, lifelong marriage precedes the individual, for it existed in the mind of God before He even brought humanity into being. We have been created to fit into God's ideal for human marriage, not to alter it, or to reverse the order of being and place 'the individual' first. The 'creation order' comes before 'the individual.'
 - d. STATE: God has a vision for relationships from the creation. Relationships are not just 'social constructs' as they are in our culture generally. In future sections, we'll look at other aspects of relationships and God's vision for that: with economics, power and honor, etc. Jesus is restoring us to God's original vision for relationships.
- 10. After all, who does Jesus say spoke the words, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh' in v.5?
 - a. When you read Genesis 2, there is a narrator who says that. We are not told by Genesis 2 who said it.
 - b. Jewish and Christian tradition says that Moses said it, or at least compiled and organized it into the whole Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible.
 - c. Notice who Jesus says spoke in v.4 and 5? '**He who created them** from the beginning made them male and female, and **said**, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? Jesus says **God said it**. Back then, so Adam and Eve could remember it, and so Moses could write and/or organize it. But God said the Scripture. This is evidence of Jesus' interpretation of the divine inspiration of Scripture.
- 11. Break up into pairs, and pray for each other regarding:
 - a. Ways you're inspired and/or frightened about Jesus' view of marriage, singleness, and community.
 - b. Ways we can be more articulate and courageous about discussing Jesus' view of marriage in public.

Conflict and Controversy in Matthew 19 – 25

19:1 – 12	19:13 – 30	20:1 – 16	20:17 – 28	21:1 – 9	21:10 – 46	22:1ff.
Region of Judea beyond the Jordan (19:1)			About to go up to Jerusalem (20:17)	Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives (21:1)	Jerusalem (21:10)	Jerusalem
Jesus debates marriage with the Pharisees	Jesus calls the young man to give up all his wealth to the poor	Jesus tells the parable of the laborers' payment	Jesus tells James and John they may not sit at his right and left hand	Jesus gets donkeys to ride into Jerusalem	Jesus debates with the leaders	Jesus debates with the leaders
Jesus establishes sex and marriage from God's creation ideal, not the Mosaic commands	Jesus establishes universal giving, breaks from the Mosaic land arrangement	Length of time with Jesus is not a privilege	Disciples must serve, not seek power		Jesus argues about the role of the Temple	Jesus debates about the Law