

Matthew: On Earth As It Is In Heaven

Marriage: God's Design and Desire * Matthew 5:31-32

Today in our study of the gospel of Matthew we are going to kick off a miniseries on the topics of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. In this we are going to experience one of the benefits of preaching consecutively through books of the Bible; when you come to difficult subjects you can't avoid them. If it's there in the text, you have to deal with it. And honestly, there may be no more difficult issues to address in our day than marriage, divorce and remarriage. Given that, before we get into the text, let me stress three significant things.

One, I want to stress the magnitude of these issues. Almost all of us are married, have been married, or will be married at some point. At the same time, every single one of us is affected by divorce either directly or indirectly. With around half of all marriages in our country ending in divorce, there is no bigger social issue both inside and outside of the church. Which leads to this point. Healthy marriages result in healthy churches and healthy communities. And the opposite is also true. Unhealthy marriages result in unhealthy churches and unhealthy communities. Listen; if we are going to be a worshipping community on mission, growing strong marriages is imperative. Therefore, this issue is absolutely huge.

The second thing I want to stress is the importance of listening to this entire series. If you happen to miss one of the messages you might very well end up confused and perhaps even distraught because you are missing a piece of the puzzle. What we study today will have a great impact on what we study in the next two weeks and vice versa. These issues, to say the least, are complicated. And this is particularly true with the application of what the Bible says about these issues. As an example, this past Monday night our Elders and Deacons discussed these topics for over an hour and a half and when we were done we had just begun to scratch the surface. So, I want to urge you to listen intently, to study your Bibles diligently, and to think and pray long and hard about these issues in the weeks ahead.

The third thing I want to stress before we begin is the gospel. One of the challenges we face in this series is that marriage, divorce, and remarriage are painful topics for many people. There are lots of people hurting deeply because of marital struggles, bitter divorces, and/or misunderstandings of what the Bible teaches about these things. So, let me say this right from the beginning. Please listen to me closely. This will probably be the most important thing I say in the entire series. I know that this is not a way to keep you coming back, but it is true nonetheless.

The gospel tells us that every marriage, no matter how bad, is redeemable. Even if your marriage is so far gone you don't think there is anyway it can be restored, hear the gospel when it says that there is no marriage that God cannot redeem.

The gospel also tells us that divorce is not the unpardonable sin and can be forgiven. If you are a divorcee, the gospel says you don't have to hang your head and feel like a second-class citizen in the church.

Finally, the gospel tells us that any remarriage, even one entered into un-biblically, can be a marriage that is pleasing to the Lord and a blessing to the married couple.

I can say this because of passages Titus 2:14:

[Jesus Christ] gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. (Titus 2:14, ESV)

The key word in this verse is *all*. Jesus died to redeem us from all our sin and make us into people who are zealous for good works, especially in our marriages. In the most recent James Bond movie, there is a scene in which the villain Silva asks Bond what he specializes in. Bond's one word answer is "resurrection". And while for 007 this is simply a reflection of his egotism, for Jesus it is not, because that is exactly what He specializes in; the resurrection of sinful, hurting, broken people into disciples who are zealous for good works. So, as we go through the next few weeks, it may be painful at times. Some of the things we talk about may not be easy to hear. But that's ok, because the gospel tells us that there is no pain that Jesus cannot heal.

All right, with that said, let's turn to our text, which is Matthew 5:31-32. Follow along as I read:

It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (Matthew 5:31-32, ESV)

Now, a quick reminder that verses 21-48 of Matthew 5 are the antithesis section of the Sermon on the Mount. Six times in these verses Jesus corrects a misunderstanding and misapplication of an Old Testament command. Two weeks ago we looked at verses 33-37 where Jesus addressed integrity. In the days ahead we will see Him do the same with the issues of anger, lust, retaliation, and responding to our enemies. Which leaves

us today and the next two weeks to discuss what Jesus has to say about marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

Now, this is not the only time Jesus addresses these issues in the Gospel of Matthew. In fact, in chapter 19 He repeats what He says in Matthew 5 almost verbatim, and also gives a much more detailed account of His position on these matters. Therefore, I want you to turn with me to chapter 19, which is where we will spend most of our time in this series.

Pick up with me in verse 3:

And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 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'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" 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. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." (Matthew 19:3-10, ESV)

Let me set the context for you a little bit. As they did on numerous occasions, the Pharisees came to Jesus and asked Him a difficult theological question, hoping to trap Him in His words. This time the issue has to do with divorce, and at the center of their questioning is a passage from Deuteronomy 24:1, which says this:

When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then 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 of his house... (Deuteronomy 24:1, ESV)

In the first century there were two primary views on this passage. The conservative position, from the school of Shammai, taught that the word "indecency" in verse 1 was sexual immorality, and was the only legitimate grounds for divorce.

On the other hand, the liberal position, from the school of Hillel, was that a man could divorce his wife for pretty much any reason. This position took the word "indecency" to mean unpleasing, and some rabbis interpreted this to mean that a man could divorce his wife for something as simple as burning his food or embarrassing him in public. I am not making this up. One prominent rabbi even taught that a man could

divorce his wife if he found someone who was more attractive to him. All that a man had to do was serve his wife with papers and he could be done with her.

Now, you can imagine the most popular view of the day was the liberal position, especially among men. In fact, from their response in verse 10, it appears as if this was the disciple's position, at least to some degree. Even though they had been with Jesus for almost three years and had heard what He said about these matters in Matthew 5, they had been so influenced by their culture that they had adopted the liberal view.

And I think there is a warning for us in this. I think it is safe to say that our culture has a very liberal view regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Essentially today anyone can get married to anyone and then get divorced for any reason, only to remarry anyone they want at any time. That pretty much sums it up, doesn't it? This was exactly what was happening in Jesus' day. And the danger we face in a low-view of marriage culture is that we began to have a low view as well, as apparently the disciples did. However, both in Matthew 5 and 19, Jesus is going to have none of it. In fact, it's fair to say that Jesus' view of marriage, divorce, and remarriage is radical. It was radical in the first century, and it is radical today. So, what exactly is Jesus' view of marriage, divorce, and remarriage? Well, He tells us in verses 4-6:

He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

Marriage: God's Design

In these verses Jesus essentially ignores Deuteronomy 24 and goes all the way back to God's original design for marriage found in Genesis 1-2. And to summarize His teaching, we can say that God's design for marriage is one man and one woman for a lifetime. Did you catch that? God's design for marriage is one man and one woman for a lifetime. Let's take a closer look at verses 4-6 to see how this is the case.

- **God created marriage.**

First, Jesus says that it was God who created marriage. In verse 4 Jesus is referring to Genesis 1:27:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

And then in verse 5 He is directly quoting Genesis 2:24:

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

So, let's put this together. From the very beginning God, not only created man and woman, but He also created marriage. You see marriage is not man's idea. It's not the church's idea. It's not the government's idea. And it's not some wedding planner's idea. It's God's idea, and it was His idea from the very beginning. Genesis 1 & 2 tell us that God created Adam first. And knowing that it was not good for man to be alone, God then created Eve to be Adam's helper, companion, and compliment in every way. But its important to note that God didn't just put Adam and Eve together in some ambiguous relationship. He didn't tell them to just shack up with one another for a while to see if it was going to work. He didn't tell them to make sure they were sexually compatible with one another before they decided to tie the knot. It's clear from Genesis 2:24 it was God who performed the first wedding ceremony and officially put Adam and Eve together as husband and wife. Now, you might say, well how do you know that? Look at what Genesis 2:25 says:

And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

How did Eve become Adam's wife? I mean there weren't any other humans around. The only answer is that God himself was the one who performed the wedding ceremony, and in verse 6 of Matthew 19, Jesus confirms that this is the case:

What therefore God has put together, let not man separate.

Now, the implications of this are massive. This means that marriage is a divine act of God. When a man and a woman make covenantal marriage vows, the church and the courts perform their civil duties, but ultimately it is God whom declares it a marriage. And this is true whether the husband and wife are believers or unbelievers.

The reason this is important is that it turns marriage from being man-centered to God-centered. Listen, if you are here today you might wonder if you married the right person. Let me answer that for you. Whether or not you should have married the person you did, the fact that you are married means that person is the right person for you now, because when you said your marriage vows God decreed that you were husband and wife, and that this is to be the case for a lifetime.

- **God created marriage to be between one man and one woman.**

Now, the second thing Jesus says about God's design for marriage is that God created it to be between one man and one woman. Look at verses 4-5 carefully:

Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'.

In the beginning God did not create two men or two women. He did not create one man and two women or one woman and two men. He created one man and one woman and put them together as husband and wife. Today there is a great deal of debate about the meaning of marriage. Well, here in Matthew 19 Jesus settles the debate. He tells us that God created marriage and intended that it be between one man and one woman, end of story.

Now, this should be obvious, but let me give three major implications of this truth.

1. Homosexuality is not God's design.

One, it means that homosexuality is not God's design. Now, I want to say this gently but firmly. The Bible clearly teaches that homosexuality is a sin. Note what Romans 1 says:

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. (Romans 1:26-27, ESV)

Paul says in these verses that homosexuality is unnatural, shameless, and subject to God's judgment. Therefore, as a church committed to faithfully teach and practice God's Word, we can in no way condone or approve of homosexuality or so-called gay marriage, no matter how great the pressure may be to do so.

That said, while we need to clearly teach what God's Word says about homosexuality, we also need to be a church where homosexuals can experience the love of God and hear the good news that Jesus died for them. Just as divorce is not the unpardonable sin, neither is homosexuality. And we need to be a place where people who struggle with this sin can come and not be condemned but rather loved and pointed towards

Jesus. Let me say this. If someone were to ask me if homosexuals were welcome at Harmony Bible Church, my answer would be, yes, they are free to join the rest of us adulterers, fornicators, liars, gluttons, and generally messed up people. And we will minister to them the way we do to everyone else; we will say to them as Jesus said to the woman caught in adultery:

"Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more." John 8:11 (ESV)

What's more, not only will we encourage them to leave their life of sin, but we will come alongside and help them to do so, just as we strive to do with everyone else who is struggling with sin, which is every single one of us.

2. Polygamy is not God's design.

A second implication of one man and one-woman marriage is that polygamy is not God's design. Now, I realize that this is probably not on the radar screen for most, or hopefully any of us, but we need to recognize that this will be an issue in our culture in the days ahead. It might take a while, but once gay marriage is the norm, which it soon will be, polygamy will be soon to follow. And while God permitted polygamy in the Old Testament, this was never His plan, not then, not now, and not ever.

3. Sex outside of marriage is not God's design.

The third and final implication of one man and one-woman marriage is that sex outside of marriage is not God's design.

Take another look 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.

"One flesh" here specifically refers to sexual union. You see, in Genesis 1-2, God not only created marriage, but He also created sex and designed it to be enjoyed only within the bounds of marriage. To be clear, this means that the only people who should be having sex are a man and a woman who are married to one another. And let me say this, while we might think that homosexuality and polygamy are worse sins than adultery or fornication, the Bible tells us that this simply isn't the case. When we sin sexually, regardless of what type of sexual sin it is, we stand guilty before a holy God.

So, marriage was created by God to be between one man and one woman. That leaves us with only one piece of the puzzle to complete. God created marriage to last a lifetime. Take a look at the last sentence of verse 6:

- **God created marriage to last a lifetime.**

What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.

When the Pharisees ask about Biblical grounds for divorce, Jesus responds by saying, "When God puts people together, He wants them to be together for a lifetime."

The emphasis in this verse is on the last phrase. Jesus is literally saying, "Stop tearing your marriages apart." And I honestly don't think there are more needed words for us to hear on the subject of marriage and divorce than these: "Stop tearing your marriages apart."

Now, let's explore why Jesus used this tearing apart terminology. To do so we need to go back to verse 5. God's design is for a man to leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife. Some of you may remember that in the old King James Version the words hold fast are translated "cleave". Marriage includes leaving and cleaving - leaving parents and cleaving to your spouse. The word cleave has the meaning of being stuck together as with glue. I have to admit that there is something mystical to this, but when a man and woman are joined together as husband and wife, God glues them together in a way that defies description. This, by the way is why divorce is so painful, even when justified and even when the marriage is extremely bad. When God joins two people as husband and wife they become one flesh, and therefore when they divorce there is an unnatural tearing of that one flesh in two. As John Calvin wrote:

He who divorces his wife tears from himself half of himself.

You see there is a different math to marriage. Normally, one plus one equals two. However, God says in marriage one plus one equals one. And therefore there is no way to divorce without making fractions.

To help us understand how strongly God feels about this, let me quote from the Living Bible's paraphrase of Malachi 2:14-16:

The Lord has seen your treachery in divorcing your wives who have been faithful to you through the years, the companions you promised to care for and keep. You were united to

your wife by the Lord. In God's wise plan, when you married, the two of you became one person in his sight. Therefore guard your passions. Keep faith with the wife of your youth.

Let me say this. There are many reasons that people give for getting divorced. And some of them are legitimate, as we will see in the weeks ahead. But let me tell you one reason that is clearly not legitimate. Some people say, "God told me to get a divorce." I think from what we see in Matthew 19 and Malachi 2, we can affirm God never says these words. While God permits divorce in certain circumstances, it is never His plan nor His desire. And that's because He designed marriage to be one man and one woman for a lifetime.

Now, you might be thinking that this means it is wrong to get divorced. But as I said just a moment ago, and as we are going to see next week, there are legitimate, Biblical reasons for divorce. However, before we talk about what God permits, we need to stress that divorce should be the last possible option, because God's design is for marriage to last for a lifetime. And honestly, we have lost this emphasis in the church and we need desperately need to regain it.

At this point you might be asking why marriage is such a big deal, and in particular why God cares so much about people staying married for a lifetime. And while Jesus doesn't specifically answer this in Matthew 19, the rest of the Bible has quite a bit to say on this point. And so for the rest of the message I would like to talk about God's Desire for our marriages. What exactly is the point? Why did He create marriage in the first place? Well, there are two primary answers to this question. God's desire for marriage is His glory and our joy. Let's talk about each of these.

Marriage: God's Desire

1. God created marriage for his glory.

Take your Bibles and turn with me to Ephesians 5, where we find the most significant passage on marriage in the New Testament. Paul is going to show us in the passage that God's primary desire for our marriage is to display His glory. Pick up with me in verse 22:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the

word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. (Ephesians 5:22-32, ESV)

Now, there is a lot that we could talk about here, but the main point of the passage is that God has designed marriage to be an illustration of the relationship between Jesus Christ and His bride, the church. In fact, look at verse 32 again. After seemingly focusing on marriage for 10 verses, Paul says what he is really talking about is the relationship between Christ and the church.

And we absolutely have to get this. God created every marriage, yes, every marriage, for the purpose of displaying to the world how His Son lovingly gave Himself up for His bride, the church, and how the church is called to respectfully submit and follow Christ's leadership.

You see your marriage is so much bigger than you and your spouse. Your marriage is meant to be a testimony to the most important truth in the world. The truth that God sent His only Son to this earth to die so that all who believe might become part of His church and receive eternal life. God desires your marriage to represent what Jesus Christ has done for you.

And this is the reason that God feels so strongly about marriages staying together. Do you realize that when we divorce we give a false picture to the world about the relationship that Christ has with His church? You see Christ will never, ever, ever divorce His bride. And aren't you thankful for that? That no matter how often we sin against Him, no matter how many times we commit spiritual adultery, no matter how many times we prostitute ourselves to the gods of this world, Christ will never divorce those who are truly His. And because of this, when we divorce our spouses we are saying something about Christ that isn't true.

Of course, the opposite is also true. When we persevere in the ups and downs of marriage, we are giving the world a great picture of how God does the same with us. When a husband lovingly leads his wife, even when she refuses to follow, he is giving a wonderful illustration of how God lovingly leads the church. And when a wife humbly respects and submits to her husband, even when he is a terrible husband, she is giving a wonderful illustration of how the church is called to submit to and follow the Lord.

You see friends, the bottom line is, marriage is not about us. We want to make it about us, but it's not. It's about something much greater than us. It's about nothing less than God himself. Gary Thomas states it well in his book *Sacred Marriage*:

*The key question is this: Will we approach marriage from a God-centered view or a man-centered view? In a man-centered view, we will maintain our marriage as long as our earthly comforts, desires, and expectations are met. In a God-centered view, we preserve our marriage because it brings glory to God and points a sinful world to a reconciling Creator.*¹

So get this. The reason marriage is such a big deal to God is that He desires for it to point to Himself. Marriage is meant to point to God Himself. And there is nothing more important than that.

2. God created marriage for our joy.

At the same time, however, while we can say that marriage is not about us, we can say that God did create marriage for us. Another way to say this is that God created marriage for our joy.

Once again we see this from the very beginning when God created Eve because he knew that it was not good for man to be alone. God created marriage for man's good. And even though the fall corrupted marriage, there are numerous Scriptures in the Bible that show even in a fallen world marriage can still provide us with joy. For example:

He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord. (Proverbs 18:22, ESV)

Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love. (Proverbs 5:18-19, ESV)

And of course we have the Song of Solomon, an entire book dedicated to describing the incredible joy that marriage can bring.

Of course, even as I say these things I realize there are many who aren't currently and maybe never really have experienced joy in their marriage. And therefore I would like

¹ Thomas, Gary (2000). *Sacred Marriage*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House.

to share with you another way that marriage brings joy, a way that many people never consider.

However, to understand this, we have to recognize what ultimately makes us joyful, as well as what prevents us from experiencing this joy. Very simply, joy comes from being like Jesus. The more we are like Him, the more joyful we will be, and the less we are like Him, the less joyful we will be.

And the way marriage plays into this is that it provides us with the best possible environment for recognizing just how much we aren't like Jesus. Let me explain what I mean, although I think you will understand quite readily.

Marriage has a unique way of displaying just how sinful and self-centered we really are. In fact, I think the only thing that comes close is being a parent. But we can talk about that another time. Anyways, marriage has a great way of showing us things about ourselves that we didn't recognize before we were married. Do you know what I mean? Marriage is a great pressure cooker that brings out both the best and the worst in us.

Marriage shows us how impatient we are. It shows us how fearful we are. It shows us how controlling and manipulative we are. And the list can go on and on, but ultimately marriage teaches us how self-centered we are. Now, I am not saying we always recognize this, but when we do, the result is being pointed to our need for Jesus. Our eyes are opened to the fact that we need Him more than we ever thought we did. Let me tell you, this has been the case for me. I hate to admit it, but before I was married I thought I had it all together. I thought that I was a pretty good guy. But it only took about a week and half into my marriage to realize I wasn't nearly as good as I thought I was. I began to say things I had never even thought before. And I began to think things I had never thought before. And I hurt my wife in ways that I never thought I would. And though I have grown over the years, I unfortunately have to admit that this is still often the case and I find myself repeatedly going to the Lord and asking for His forgiveness, mercy and help. And that is the whole point. What God is trying to do in my marriage is point me to my need for Him, because when I see my need and ask for His help, I receive the joy of seeing Him work in my life to make me more like His Son and make my marriage a better reflection of His relationship with the church.

And so here is the thing I want to leave you with today; our natural instinct is that when our marriage gets tough, we want to get going. We want to move on and try something else. We think we will be much happier if we can just be free. And some of

you are at the point today. I get that. I really do. But I would beg you to consider the fact that God has another plan. God wants something different than divorce. He wants to use your marriage to make you more like Jesus, which in the end will be the very best thing for you. Yes, it will be hard. Yes, it will be painful. Yes, you will need help. But it will be worth it. Both for the joy of bringing glory to Jesus Christ and the blessing of becoming more like Him.

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