

Matthew: On Earth As It Is In Heaven

Divorce * Matthew 19:3-10

Please take your Bibles and turn with me to Matthew 19. Today we continue with part two of our three-week miniseries on Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage. This means that our specific topic today is divorce. And I am fairly sure that there are many of you who are quite interested in what I have to say on this issue. Perhaps you are in the process of considering a divorce and so this is especially relevant to you right now. Others may be divorced and have never really considered what the Bible has to say on this matter. And then there are still others who are just really curious to see how I am going to tackle this complicated issue. I know this because of the devious smile on some of your faces, as if to say, "I am glad it's you and not me." Trust me, I feel the love.

Anyways, I considered beginning this message by discussing the devastating impact divorce is having in our culture. But, since I am pretty sure we all realize this is case, I will simply state once again that it is the most significant social issue of our time. There are many statistics that bare this out, but I think we can simply accept the fact that there really is no bigger issue both in our culture at large, and also in the church. If I were to guess, probably 80-90% of our counseling cases here at Harmony have to do with issues related to marriage and divorce, and therefore there really is no more important issue for us to talk about. That said, before we get into our text today I want to briefly address two extremes we need to avoid when we discuss the issue of divorce.

The one extreme is to take divorce too lightly. I think we can affirm from last week that marriage is a big deal to God, which means that divorce is too. We are going to see how big of a deal it is in just a moment. And since marriage and divorce are a big deal to God, they should be a big deal to us as well. Therefore, we need to avoid flippant attitudes towards divorce, and be careful not fall into the trap that many Christians do where they simply accept it and pretend that it doesn't matter to God one way or the other.

On the other hand, we must also avoid the dangers of what I will call traditionalism. By traditionalism I am referring to the view that essentially says, 'we have always taught that divorce is wrong, and so it must always be wrong.' This view unfortunately results in all divorces being viewed the same, and more often than not, in divorcees being treated as second-class citizens in the church. On a personal note, I grew up in the traditionalist camp. And to be honest, it wasn't something that I ever remember being taught about, but it was an issue that the churches I attended had a strong position on. Which is interesting to me. Nevertheless, these churches would have rules about what divorced people could and couldn't do in the church. And while it was never said, it did appear that divorce was treated differently than other sins. It could certainly be forgiven, but once you were divorced it seemed as if it was a black mark that never left you.

Now, I bring this up because it is likely that most of us come from one of these two backgrounds. Either you come from a background where you could change spouses as often or as easily as you change cars, or you come from a background in which all divorces are treated the same. And so the challenge for today is to move beyond our preconceived notions and opinions and submit ourselves to what God's Word has to say because, just like with everything else, ultimately God is the One who has the final say on the matter of divorce. Agreed?

One more thing before we pray and get into Matthew 19, I will ask you once again to listen closely to everything I say, and to recognize in effect this is a two-part message, which Lord willing, I will complete next Sunday. I have to warn you that at the end of the message you may be left with more questions than answers, and so I would ask you to hang in there and give me the benefit of the doubt on some of these matters until next Sunday. Let's pray.

Ok, let's get going by reading Matthew 19:3-10:

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)

All right, let me remind you of what is going on in this passage. The Pharisees come to Jesus in verse 3 and ask Him about the Biblical grounds for divorce. You may remember from last week the prevailing view of the day was that a man could divorce his wife for pretty much any reason. And so in response to the Pharisees question, Jesus states that God created marriage to be one man with one woman for a lifetime. That, in fact, was the main point of last week's message. God's original plan for marriage, a plan that He still wants to be followed today, is for one man to stay married to one woman for a lifetime.

So, last week the focus was on marriage. The focus today is on divorce. And to begin, I'd like to share a passage from Malachi 2 that tells us how passionately God feels about divorce. Last week we discovered how passionate God is about marriage, and today we are going to see how passionate He is about divorce. Take a look with me at Malachi 2:14-16, which says this:

"Take heed then to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth. For I hate divorce," says the Lord, the God of Israel, "and him who covers his garment with wrong," says the Lord of hosts. "So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously." (Malachi 2:15-16, NASB)

So, how does God feel about divorce? In short, He hates it. And there really is no way to downplay this. God hates divorce. He isn't ambivalent to it. He doesn't just dislike it, He hates it.

However, I think it is important for us to understand why God hates it. Have you ever thought about this? Why does God hate divorce? He hates divorce because of the sin that leads to it and the sin and consequences that come from it. Every divorce is the result of sin, and every divorce leads to more sin and results in terrible consequences. And this is why God hates it. He hates sin and the terrible consequences it brings not only to His glory but also to the people He created and loves.

Now, while God hates divorce, this does not mean that He hates the process of divorce, nor does it mean that every divorce is sinful. And therefore I think it is helpful to think of divorce in this way. *All divorce is a result of sin, but not every divorce is sinful.* Let me say that again. *All divorce is a result of sin, but not every divorce is sinful.* And I want to take you back to Matthew 19 and then to 1 Corinthians 7 to show you how this is the case. In these two passages we find there are two instances in which divorce is not a sin: sexual immorality and desertion by an unbeliever. Let's take a look at Matthew 19 again:

Pick up in verse 7:

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."

So, after Jesus reminds the Pharisees of God's design for marriage, they respond by asking Him why Moses gave the command to grant a wife a certificate of divorce. In other words, if God truly wanted marriage to be one man and one woman for a lifetime, why did Moses give the command regarding divorce? And you have to follow this closely, but notice that Jesus corrects the Pharisees in verse 8. In verse 7 they say that Moses

commanded divorce, but in verse 8 Jesus says Moses only allowed it, and he allowed it because of their hardness of heart. You see, rightly understood, the passage in Deuteronomy 24 that the Pharisees are referring to was not God's approval of divorce, but rather His regulation of it. In fact, this is a very important point. Nowhere in Scripture does God command us to get divorced. Rather, in His grace, He gives instructions that regulate divorce. Let me explain. God recognizes that divorce is a consequence of sin. He knows that in a fallen world where people have hard hearts, marriages are going to end in divorce. And so in His wisdom, mercy, and grace He gives instructions as to how and when divorce can be carried out in a way that will protect and assist the non-offending party in a divorce. Therefore, every passage on divorce in the Bible has two primary purposes. One, to emphasize God's design for marriage and two, to protect the non-offending party. The problem with the Pharisees, which unfortunately is still a problem today, is they had interpreted God's regulation as approval. Listen carefully here. Matthew 19 and the passage we will look at later, 1 Corinthians 7, are not proof texts for divorce. Rather, we need to see them as affirmation of God's plan for marriage to be between one man and one woman for a lifetime and His gracious protection of the non-offending party in a divorce.

Now back to the text. After clarifying the Pharisees' misunderstanding, Jesus then says this in verse 9:

"And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."

1. Sexual immorality

So, the first instance in which divorce is not a sin is sexual immorality. *Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality.* The Greek word for sexual immorality here is *porneia*, from which we get our word pornography. It is a broad term that includes all illicit sexual activity and in the context of marriage specifically refers to adultery. So, this is pretty simple. If a husband or wife engages in sex outside of marriage, their

spouse has biblical grounds for divorce. The non-offending party has biblical permission to divorce their spouse.

Now, while God gives permission for divorce, we need to make it clear that even in the case of sexual immorality His desire is for repentance and reconciliation. He desires not only for the offending spouse to repent and ask for forgiveness, but also for the offended spouse to forgive and be willing to reconcile. And if you ask where this is in the text, I would point you to the preceding passage at the end of Matthew 18 where Jesus tells the parable of the unforgiving servant. To summarize, your spouse can never sin against you to the degree that you have sinned against God. And therefore if God has forgiven you, you can and should forgive your spouse when they repent of their sin against you.

Let me make this as clear as I can. If you engage in sex outside of marriage, you are committing adultery and God calls you to repent. First to Him and then to your spouse. This repentance should include doing everything you need to do to make things right, especially a re-commitment to uphold your marriage vows from this time forward.

On the other hand, if your spouse is the one who commits adultery, you do have Biblical grounds for divorce, and it is not a sin for you to do so. However, divorce should be the last option, and you should pursue this option only after you give your spouse the opportunity to repent and make every attempt at reconciliation. I think Ephesians 4:32 is especially relevant here:

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. (Ephesians 4:32, ESV)

2. Desertion by an unbeliever

So, the first instance in which divorce is not a sin is sexual immorality. The second instance is desertion by an unbeliever, which we find in 1 Corinthians 7. Please turn there with me, as we are going to look at this text

very carefully. While you are turning, let me tell you that the context of 1 Corinthians is much like our context today. In the city of Corinth in the first century there was a great deal of sexual immorality, divorce, and remarriage occurring, including among believers. And so look at what Paul has to say to the church about these matters in verse 10:

To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife. To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? (1 Corinthians 7:10-16, ESV)

- **Christians should not divorce, but if they do they should remain unmarried or be reconciled to one another.**

In these verses Paul gives three regulations regarding divorce. First, in verse 10-11 he says that Christians should not divorce, but if they do they should remain unmarried or be reconciled to one another. Now, you will note in verse 10 that Paul says it was actually the Lord who gave this command. By Lord he is referring to Jesus and His teaching on divorce in the Gospels. Now, we have to remember that as we saw in Matthew 19, Jesus did give one exception to this command – sexual immorality. But let's not allow that to diminish the primary point. Believers should not get divorced, and if they do they should stay unmarried or be reconciled to one another. Let me be a little more pointed. Divorce between believers for reasons other than sexual immorality is a sin, and if they remarry someone else they commit

adultery. To reinforce this, let me remind you of what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount:

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 5:32, ESV)

Once again in a passage that regulates divorce, the emphasis is staying married, not on getting divorced.

- **Christians should not divorce an unbelieving spouse who desires to remain married.**

The second regulation Paul gives in this passage is that a Christian should not divorce an unbelieving spouse who desires to remain married. Look again at verses 12-13:

To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. 13 If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.

In these verses Paul is tackling an issue that Jesus never addressed – marriage between a believer and an unbeliever. That is why Paul says that this command was coming from himself and not from the Lord. Apparently this was a significant issue in the church at Corinth where you had one member of a marriage who had come to the Lord but the other had not. What exactly is a believer to do in such an instance? Well, Paul makes it clear that if the unbelieving spouse desires to stay married, the believing spouse should not pursue divorce. And he gives a very specific reason in verse 14 and 16. A believing spouse has a sanctifying effect on the entire family. Now, this does not mean that God saves a man's wife and children when he gets saved, but rather that a believing husband or wife has a spiritual influence on their family and God wants them to stay in the

marriage so they can be a testimony in their home. I think verse 16 is especially relevant:

For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

In other words, hang in there because God very well may be in the process of using you to bring your husband or wife to the Lord. And I hope that this is an encouragement to the men and women here today who are married to unbelievers. I am sure that you face challenges the rest of us do not understand. I am sure that for some of you every Sunday morning is a struggle because you come to church alone. I am sure that trying to instill Biblical values in your children on your own is incredibly hard. But just remember, you aren't alone. God is with you and wants to use you to minister not only to your husband and children, but also to a lost and dying world that is watching very closely.

- **Christians are free to divorce an unbelieving spouse who desires to leave the marriage.**

Ok, the third instruction Paul gives in this passage is that Christians are free to divorce an unbelieving spouse who desires to leave the marriage. Look closely at verse 15:

But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.

Very simply, this means that if you are married to an unbeliever and they no longer want to be married to you, you are free to divorce them. A key phrase in this verse that we will come back to next week is the middle sentence of verse 15. *In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved*, which means they are free from their marriage vows.

Now, I know that this can get a little confusing, so let me take a minute to clarify what we have seen so far. God created marriage to be one man and

one woman for a lifetime. Therefore, when a divorce occurs it is a result of sin. However, while every divorce is the result of sin, not every divorce is sinful. And there are two instances in which this is the case: one, sexual immorality and two, desertion by an unbeliever.

Of course, this means that divorce for any other reason is sin. It means that being unhappy in your marriage is not biblical grounds for divorce. It means that incompatibility is not biblical grounds for divorce. It means that not being in love is not biblical grounds for divorce. It means not getting along is not biblical grounds for divorce. And as I said last week, it means believing you married the wrong person is not biblical grounds for divorce. Remember, the person you are married to *is* the right person for you now.

And let me just say, this might be the only place you will hear this. You certainly won't hear it from Oprah, Dr. Phil, the View, or, to be honest, many well-known pastors and TV preachers. But that is what the Word of God says. Marriage is to be between one man and one woman for a lifetime, and the only time where divorce should even be considered is in the instance of sexual immorality or desertion by an unbeliever.

Now, I can imagine there are many questions swirling about in your minds right now. You undoubtedly have questions about issues such as physical abuse, pornography addiction, and emotional affairs, just to name a few. I know that if we were to do a Q & A session at this point things would get really interesting, because here is where it gets tough. While what the Bible says about divorce is clear, actually applying it to individual marriages is extremely difficult. I took comfort this week from R.C. Sproul who said that understanding the principles of marriage and divorce is relatively easy, but applying them to real-life situations often takes the wisdom of Solomon. This is a man who has over 50 years of pastoral experience and yet does not think that he has seen two divorce cases in his ministry that were exactly the same.¹ I can affirm in my experience that this is certainly the case. And so for this reason I believe it is unwise in a public format to go into great

¹ Sproul, R.C. 2013. Pg. 562. *Matthew; St. Andrew's Expository Commentary*, Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway.

detail, but I do think it will be helpful to specifically address the issue of what constitutes desertion by an unbeliever.

And here is the big question: are we required to strictly interpret 1 Corinthians 7 to refer to an unbeliever who physically leaves a marriage? My answer is I don't think so. I think it is possible to desert your marriage vows and to still be physically present. This would certainly be the case in instances of physical abuse and failure to provide financially for the family, among others. In fact, I think it's possible for an unbelieving husband or wife to want to stay married, for a variety of reasons, but clearly desert the marriage vows they have made.

Furthermore, I believe it is also possible for a professed believer to abandon his marriage vows in a way that shows he or she is not truly a believer at all. The truth of the matter is that in the church we have many unbelievers masquerading as believers. We are going to see Jesus making this point on a number of occasions as we continue to study Matthew. And as I said earlier, these are complex issues, but this is one of the reasons for why Jesus gave us what we know as the church discipline process in Matthew 18. If a professed believer sins grievously and repeatedly against their spouse and fails to repent, the church has the responsibility to remove that person from the church, upon which point they should be treated as an unbeliever. In this case, should the person continue to abandon their marriage vows, the spouse may have the freedom to divorce them.

Let me point out that this is another reason why membership in a local church is so important. The complexity of marriage, divorce, and remarriage issues are so great that believers need a godly group of Elders they can turn to in order to determine if they have legitimate grounds for divorce. We need to recognize that with an issue God treats so seriously we need to be very careful how we proceed. Therefore the wisest course of action is to access the means God has given to help us discern His will in these matters. I will once again point you to Hebrews 13:17:

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. (Hebrews 13:17, ESV)

Church leaders are God's gift to you; they exist to care for your soul by helping you in every way they can to follow God's plan for your life. I am not exaggerating when I say here at Harmony we beg you to allow us to do so, particularly as it relates to your marriages.

Now, I realize that you might want me to go into more detail and give specific examples, but because I am quite sure it would do more harm than good, I am going to decline to do so. What I will do is encourage you to talk with any of our Elders, including myself, and we will be happy to attempt to address your specific situation.

Application

All that said, I'd like to finish the message today with two points of application. One has to do with repentance, and the other has to do with discipleship.

1. Repentance

Regarding repentance let me speak directly to those of you who have come to realize they are guilty of sinfully divorcing. Perhaps you have known this for some time and are feeling the conviction of the Spirit afresh today, or perhaps you are realizing this for the very first time. What would God have you to do about it? Well, the answer is very simple. God wants you to throw yourself upon His mercy. He wants you to admit that you have sinned. He wants you to repent and ask Him for forgiveness. Make no mistake. The sin of divorce is serious. God does not take it lightly. He makes that clear in Malachi 2. But He also makes it clear that when we ask for forgiveness, He will always grant it. 1 John 1:9:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9, ESV)

And so maybe you are carrying around the burden of a sinful divorce. Maybe you have even added to this by sinfully remarrying and committing adultery. If so, you need to realize that if you repent God will be faithful to forgive you and wipe your slate clean. And He will do so based upon what Christ did on the cross 2,000 years ago. Jesus died on that cross for all of our sin, including the sin of divorce. And so if this is you, I would urge you to repent today, and experience the blessings that come from being made right with God.

Let me also say a word to the church as a whole on this matter. Truly repentant divorced people should be treated as truly repentant people. When God forgives someone, Jeremiah 31:34 tells us that He remembers their sins no more. And in the church we shouldn't have a better memory than God. If He remembers their sins no more, neither should we. There are to be no second-class citizens in the church.

2. Discipleship

The second application point has to do with discipleship. And I believe this to be absolutely huge. We have been talking a lot in recent days about the fact that God has called us to be disciples and to make disciples. And we need to understand the relationship between discipleship and marriage. Let me walk you through how discipleship and marriage are connected from beginning to end. It begins before marriage. Actually, it begins long before marriage. The church needs to be a place where young people can be discipled in regards to what to look for in a spouse and what it means to be a good spouse themselves. Young men need to learn how to be godly husbands and young women how to be godly wives. Way too many young people enter marriage completely clueless about how God has designed marriage to work. And my friends, this is a discipleship problem. Now, ideally much of this training would come from parents who have been discipled in the church themselves. But here is the problem. At the very heart of many marital struggles is a failure by both the church and the home to equip young people make the right decisions about whom they date and marry. The old saying an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of

cure is no truer than in marriage. I mean, just think how much heartache we could save young people, not to mention their families and the church as a whole if we did a better job of discipling our children, all the way from elementary through college and even beyond. And this is yet another reason we must prioritize discipleship here at Harmony Bible Church.

But you know what? Once a couple gets married the discipleship process isn't over. Too often we do a few sessions of pre-marital counseling, tell the couple that they are good to go, and then expect that they will live happily ever after. Let me tell you, that only happens in fairy tales. Anyone want to argue with that? And so we also need to be a church that comes alongside young couples and helps them grow as husband and wife. We need to be a church that provides a Biblical support structure to married couples of all ages in order to help them make it through the ups and downs that every marriage experiences. And I am glad to say that this is where we are headed and that Pastor Don Helton is going to help tremendously when he gets here in just a few weeks.

Now, let me make this personal for everyone here today. I can honestly say that in my 40 years of being a part of the church, I know of very few instances where both spouses were being discipled and the marriage fell apart. Yes, it does happen. But it is rare. On the other hand, in almost every marriage that falls apart there is at best a surface connection to the church by one or both spouses. Listen, Harmony can be the best discipling church in the world. But it will only have an impact on your life and marriage to the degree that you engage and pursue it with us. I just have to warn you, simply coming once a week or every other week isn't going to do it. What you need is to get connected with other believers and develop relationships where you can fulfill Hebrews 10:24:

*And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.
(Hebrews 10:24, ESV)*

And there is nowhere that this is more needed than in the context of marriage. And so I want to urge you, whether you are single, married,

divorced, remarried, or widowed to get connected here at Harmony and join us on our mission to be disciples of Jesus Christ, especially in our marriages and families.

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