

## The Community of the King.

### A mixed community Matthew 19:1-12

#### Divorce an Issue, then and now, but .....

Look around – all kinds of people.

Men and women

Children and adults

Married and single - widowed, divorced, those never married

And also those who have been divorced and remarried, and those thinking about divorce

Everyone of us knows someone divorced, probably has someone in their family who has been affected by divorce

Divorce, the subject of Jesus' debate with the Pharisees, is a live issue for us

And there are varying views in the Christian community

No divorce – ever

Divorce for some situations – but no remarriage

Divorce in some circumstances, and remarriage permitted in those circumstances

Divorce and remarriage in all circumstances

So what our Lord teaches here is of interest to many, and that's what they focus on – what does our Lord say here about divorce

But I want to step back from that

And instead ask what does this passage say about the community of Jesus and its commitments, for there is a lot more here than Jesus' teaching on divorce and part of His response to the Pharisees is a criticism of their focus on the question of the grounds for divorce

So – that's what we will be thinking about

What does this passage say about the community of Jesus and its commitments, commitments that should be ours if we are to be His people, disciples who do all that He has taught us.

But first let's look at the context for what Jesus is teaching.

#### The all important context vv. 1-3. Deut. 24:1

*Matthew 19: Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. <sup>2</sup> And large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.*

<sup>3</sup> *And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" [ESV]*

<sup>3</sup> *Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" NIV*

*Deuteronomy 24: "If a man marries a woman, but she becomes displeasing to him **because he finds something indecent about her**, he may write her a divorce certificate, hand it to her, and send her away from his house.*

Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem. He has chosen not to travel through Samaria but down the other side of the Jordan river, what was called Perea, a region occupied by the Jews and ruled over by Herod, the same Herod who ruled Galilee, the same Herod who had put John the Baptist in prison for criticising his marriage to Herodias, his brother Philip's wife [Matt. 14:3-4]

So having opinions about what constituted a lawful divorce and remarriage, and making them known, was not without risk.

Knowing this some Pharisees come and ask Jesus

*"Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" [ESV]*

*"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" NIV*

And it says they ask him this 'to test him' – that could be to test his faithfulness to Scripture, to the law, in the face of Herod's threat,

Or more likely, to test His understanding of Scripture in the context of a very active debate amongst the Pharisees of the circumstances under which a man could divorce his wife.

Amongst the Jews it was a man divorcing his wife, the man who could initiate divorce. This wasn't the case with their gentile neighbours, where the wife as well as the man could initiate what we would call divorce.

The ESV 'for any cause' makes it sound like they are asking Jesus about whether divorce itself can ever be right, under any circumstances.

But that was not the issue for them.

Divorce was long practiced and long accepted amongst the Jews for all sorts of reasons.

But relatively recently the understanding of the reasons for divorce had been thrown into turmoil with one school of rabbis, the school of Hillel, saying that a man could divorce his wife for any reason – a kind of no fault divorce. That understanding was opposed by another prominent school of rabbi's, the school of Shammai.

So the NIV translation is better.

*"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" NIV*

The debate is not about whether divorce was lawful, but about the causes of, the reasons for, a lawful divorce

And this debate centred around the interpretation of a phrase in Deut 24: 1, a passage, as you heard, where Moses regulates the practice of divorce to protect a woman from casual divorce and protect the community from defilement

*Deuteronomy 24: "If a man marries a woman, but she becomes displeasing to him **because he finds something indecent about her**, he may write her a divorce certificate, hand it to her, and send her away from his house.*

The phrase in question was 'something indecent', which could be understood as 'a matter of indecency', or any matter of indecency.

The school of Hillel said this gave two grounds – 'any matter' and 'indecency'. So they said this permitted the husband to divorce his wife on the grounds of anything the husband found displeasing in his wife – if she was disobedient, or she burnt his breakfast.

Josephus, the Jewish historian, wrote "At this period I divorced my wife, being displeased at her behaviour"

One later rabbi in the school had famously said if he finds someone else who pleases him more

Aquiba, 2<sup>nd</sup> century, "Even if he found someone else prettier than she, since it says "And it shall be if she find no favour in his eyes" IB p.112

The school of Shammai was stricter in their interpretation of the phrase – it was only a matter of indecency, which they understood to only involve some form of proven sexual immorality.

It was a live debate although the rabbinic courts that were of the school of Hillel, and their concept of ‘no fault divorce’, were, unsurprisingly, gaining popularity amongst the people as the places to go if you wanted to divorce your wife, and both schools recognised the divorces granted in each other’s courts

So how does Jesus respond when asked to buy in to the debate

*“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” NIV*

**Back to the source vv. 3-6 [Genesis 1:27, 2:24]**

*Matthew 19:4 He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female,<sup>5</sup> 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’?<sup>6</sup> So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”*

His basic response is that their whole focus, their acceptance of divorce and pre-occupation with the grounds of divorce, is wrong, and to show them that He takes them back to Genesis and God’s creating of humanity and gift of marriage.

God, Genesis 1:27, has made humanity as male and female from the beginning, complementary to each other

And this was done so that they could fulfil His command to be fruitful and multiply, necessary if they were going to rule the earth as His image, through the one flesh union of marriage.

Neither male nor female, man or woman, was adequate in themselves to discharge God’s commission. It was not good that the man should be alone.

And so God the creator gave humanity marriage – and it is marriage God is talking about in Genesis 2, anticipating later society by saying ‘A man shall leave ...’, for Adam had no father and mother.

At the heart of marriage is, by God’s design, a one flesh union. The very nature of that union, the way it is described as one flesh, tells us that it is designed to be exclusive – two can become one, but not three.

And it is intended to be permanent. It is not designed to be reversible, and our Lord emphasises this

*<sup>6</sup> So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”*

IN creating us the way we are, male and female, and in giving us sexual union in marriage as the means of multiplying – of transmitting the image of God through the union of two who are the image of God – it is God who joins together every husband and wife together in a one flesh union.

And this is something no human should seek to disrupt, or separate. Even the language of separation of what is one communicates the pain of that separation.

And I have used the ESV which says ‘let man not separate’ instead of ‘no one’ because it heightens the contrast.

Joining is the work of God, the Creator. How could a human seek to undo the work of God.

So the first part of Jesus’ response is marriage is designed to be permanent, and people, men and women, are designed for permanent marriages.

Looking for reasons to divorce, to separate a husband and wife, is to set yourself against God.

And what can we learn of Jesus’ community from His answer

Firstly, if we follow the Lord Jesus we are *Committed to God speaking in His word*.

Did you notice our Lord directs them to the written word, the written text of Genesis. 'Have you not read'

*Matthew 19:4 He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 5 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'?"*

And then He says that the words of Genesis 2:24, not put into the mouth of God in the Genesis text, but the words of the human author of Genesis, are spoken by God. "He who created .. made ... and said'. For Jesus, what is written in Genesis is what the living God has said.

[Some English translations translate the 'and said' at the beginning of v. 5 as 'and He also said', making it sound like Matthew is saying Jesus said this – Genesis 1:27, and then Jesus said that – Genesis 2:24. But nowhere else does Matthew interrupt a response like that, and the antecedent of the verb in verse 5 is the Creator, and it undermines the force of Jesus' argument, that it is God who has joined the man and the woman together which depends not just on the design of Creation, but God expressing the reality that they become one flesh.]

To be the community of King Jesus, the Son of God, is to share His commitment to Scripture – which here is our Old Testament, that it is the word of the living God, what God says.

Secondly, to be the community of the King is to be *Committed to the will of the Creator revealed in His creating*. Because Genesis is the word of God we have in it the Maker's understanding of humanity and the relation of men and women as they were designed to be. Here is God's will for humanity.

Going back to Creation for our understanding of humanity is something our Lord teaches us to do.

That is true for marriage, as we see here.

It is true for the relationship of men and women in the church, as we see Paul doing in 1 Corinthians 11 and 1 Timothy 2. In going to Creation, to the Genesis account, he is only following our Lord's example.

And it is the way for us to approach modern debates about sex and gender. WE go back to Creation where we see sex is binary. God creates male and female – two sexes, no third option. And those two sexes find expression in two genders, man and woman, terms that overlap with husband and wife, complementary and distinct, not points on a fluid spectrum. Two genders in a complementary relation to each other at the foundation of all human families and societies.

That is a bigger discussion, but to go back to Genesis for the Creator's understanding of the way we are made to be and function, is something our Lord teaches us to do.

Thirdly, the community of King Jesus is *Committed to the permanency of marriage, and so to the sustaining of marriages*

This is our starting point. We know there are all kinds of complications brought on by sin but God's intention is that our marriages be exclusive and permanent, and so as a community our goal has to be to foster marriages that are exclusive and permanent amongst those of us who are married.

Starts with accepting that and being committed to that goal for our own marriages

When we have difficulties we don't start by looking for ways out. We make it a priority to overcome, to resolve the difficulty, and to being committed to do what it takes to keep us together – for it is God's will our marriages are permanent. That might mean seeking out help to keep us together. It always means listening to our husband or wife,

not ignoring or dismissing their concerns. And not just listening, but changing. Dealing with that anger, or that laziness, or that tiredness from being overcommitted. Being able to come to a common mind about things, especially finances

We never seek to intrude on another's one flesh relationship, foster an intimacy with someone else's husband or wife, and where we find it developing – we stop

And above all it means fostering in each other that faith in Jesus that can live Jesus' way – the kind of relating described in Ephesians 4

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Where we speak the truth to one another, don't harbour anger, where we speak to each other respectfully in ways that will build each other up, where we are compassionate and forgiving.

The faith in Jesus that can show itself in being committed to the attitude God's word tells us husbands and wives should practice to each other – wives voluntarily ordering their lives to not compete with their husbands, submitting; husbands voluntarily ordering their lives to pursue their wives interests above their own, that is loving their wives as Christ loved the church.

Being the community of King Jesus means being *Committed to the permanency of marriage, and so to the sustaining of marriages*

Now if you think with these commitments I've strayed from the question of divorce – you are not alone.

That is what the Pharisees thought Jesus was doing with his answer, and so they bring him back to the issue by bringing to his attention another part of the Scripture, of Deut 24

#### **Back to the issue vv. 7-9**

*Matthew 19:<sup>7</sup> They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?"*

*So why divorce v. 7*

It's like they're saying – Look Jesus, it's alright for you to say we have our focus wrong and quote Genesis at us, but that is not the whole teaching of Scripture. If it was, why does God command divorce, or a procedure for divorce. They are referring again to Deut 24, the only place in the law that speaks of a certificate of divorce, certificates that in the time of Jesus explicitly said the woman was free to remarry – in fact that freedom was the essence of the divorce.

*Deuteronomy 24: "If a man marries a woman, but she becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, **he may write her a divorce certificate, hand it to her, and send her away from his house.***

*"The essence of a get: Lo you are permitted to any man." M. Git.9.3 [IB p. 119]*

*No to 'no fault' divorce v. 8-9*

*<sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."*

Jesus corrects them. Moses did not command divorce. He was allowing it because of their sin, regulating their practice to prevent worse sin.

And he again points them to what He has just said, that this was never God's intention, from the beginning. His intention was that the one flesh union of a husband and wife be permanent.

And in light of this, of what God intended from the beginning, Jesus answers their question, makes comment on their debate about 'the matter of indecency.'

<sup>9</sup>*And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."*

Only for 'sexual immorality'. Jesus rejects 'no fault' divorce.

This is not an exception.

Sexual immorality, which is a broad term that covers any sexual activity outside the marriage of a man and a woman, all those sexual activities listed in Leviticus 18, has already broken the one flesh union, separated what God has joined together. Here the divorce recognises the destruction already done by the immoral party.

And where there is divorce for sexual immorality the subsequent remarriage is not adulterous, for the divorce is not what is breaking the union. That has already happened.

The purpose of divorce has always been to allow the divorced person to remarry, and that was the case for divorces in the Old Testament. Deuteronomy is regulating remarriage.

So where the divorce is allowed, remarriage is allowed.

But there are divorces which seek to separate what God has joined together – which is not within their power, e.g. divorces because the husband is displeased with his wife, and remarriages after these divorces is adulterous. The legal process does not protect from sin.

In these cases it is sin, and it leads to more sin – for God's intention is that marriages be permanent.

The logic of Jesus' response is clear, and so is His rejection of 'no fault' divorce.

But Jesus is here only addressing one circumstance – where the husband is taking the initiative to divorce his wife.

It is not a complete, comprehensive discussion of divorce. It establishes the fundamental principle and applies it to the question being debated by the Pharisees, but there are other circumstances.

*Not the only circumstance [1 Cor. 7:10-16]*

For example, the Lord Jesus was never asked by someone who had been divorced against their will whether they could remarry. What about the unwillingly divorced, the wife who had been sent away for spoiling the breakfast, and whose divorce certificate contained an explicit permission to remarry. Would God allow that or just Jesus' teaching mean she should not remarry. Thankfully we don't need to guess for Paul addresses the believer who has been unwillingly divorced in 1 Corinthians 7

*1 Corinthians 7: <sup>12</sup>But I (not the Lord) say to the rest: If any brother has an unbelieving wife and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. <sup>13</sup>Also, if any woman has an unbelieving husband and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce her husband. <sup>14</sup>For the unbelieving husband is made holy by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy by the husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is they are holy. <sup>15</sup>But if the unbeliever leaves, let him leave. A brother or a sister is not bound in such cases. God has called you to live in peace.*

The context is slightly different. Corinth was a Roman colony, and so women as well as men could initiate divorce. And divorce was, in those societies, 'no fault' – where there was no 'mutual consent in favour of continuing the marriage' [keener DNTB p.6, IB p. 190] there was sufficient grounds for divorce. The divorce was enacted by the act of either leaving the home or the husband sending the wife away from the home, that is by unilateral separation.

Paul makes it clear that the believer is not to initiate the divorce vv. 12-14, a reminder that marriage is a creation institution, not a church one.

But what is the believer to do if the unbeliever leaves, that is they are unwillingly divorced v. 15?

What does Paul say they should do? He says they are not bound, that is they are free, the language of ancient divorce certificates. They are no longer bound in marriage and so free to remarry whoever they wish, although later in the chapter Paul will encourage them to think carefully about whether that is wise and insist it can only be to a believer.

Again there is no inconsistency, for the departing spouse has broken the one flesh bond by their departure, their unilateral divorcing of their partner.

Are there other circumstances that destroy the one flesh union that are not addressed by these references to sexual immorality and desertion, but which would mean remarriage after divorce was acceptable.

*The effectively abandoned Ex. 21:10-11 [Eph. 5:28-29] – other causes not in dispute*

*Exodus 21:*<sup>10</sup> *If he takes an additional wife, he must not reduce the food, clothing, or marital rights of the first wife.*

<sup>11</sup> *And if he does not do these three things for her, she may leave free of charge, without any payment.*

Many point out that the Lord Jesus was responding to what was in dispute between the pharisaic schools, and not on the position they shared in common.

And what they shared in common was an agreement that the teaching of the law in Exodus 21 that protected the rights of what we might think of as a lesser wife, a woman purchased by a man to be either his wife or a wife for one of his sons. They are not exactly the same as a concubine in the gentile world, nor do they have the same status as a wife.

But they had rights protected by the law of God, rights to material provision and conjugal rights – to love and to children. Where these were not honoured v. 11 she was free to leave the relationship. The rabbis argued from the lesser to the greater, that if these things were true for a concubine it would also be true for full status wife. And while wives could not initiate divorce, the rabbis allowed wives to go to court to get the court to compel the neglectful husband to divorce them. It was not a frequent procedure, but one that was allowed [IB 99 ff].

The Lord Jesus does not comment on this.

*Ephesians 5:*<sup>28</sup> *In the same way, husbands are to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.* <sup>29</sup> ***For no one ever hates his own flesh but provides and cares for it, just as Christ does for the church,***

But we should note that it is these things – provision and care, to nourish and cherish, that Paul says should be the expression of a husband's love for his wife.

Where these things are not present the husband has also broken the one flesh union by repudiating its substance, care for and love of his wife.

This is why neglect and cruelty are seen as grounds for a divorce that, recognising that the other party has already broken the one flesh relationship, allows remarriage.

So – God's clear will is that marriages should be permanent. He has created them to be a one flesh union. And Jesus' people are a community committed to the permanence of marriages.

But some things break that one flesh union

Sexual immorality, desertion – or unilateral divorce, and – informed by Scripture – neglect and cruelty.

In these cases divorce is permitted. It recognises what is, even if, in the case of an adulterous spouse, a couple may still be living under the same roof, have an appearance of marriage. And where divorce is permitted, then remarriage is not adulterous.

Divorce is permitted, not commanded, and someone may repent and seek reconciliation.

But the breakdown of trust is profound, and while we must forgive the repentant full reconciliation, the resumption of intimacy which is based on trust may not be immediate, if ever. It may depend on the demonstration of repentance. And it will need help.

But that is not the end of it. We live in a messy world and our lives can be messy

What about someone who wrongly divorces their wife or husband, and marries another, and somewhere in that or after that is brought under conviction of sin and turns to the Lord Jesus. What should they do? Should they reckon their marriage is adulterous and leave it? Even seek to be reconciled to their wrongly divorced partner?

This is where we have to remind ourselves that the Lord Jesus is not giving us a rule book that describes how to behave in every conceivable situation.

[the rabbis did say that the marriages of those improperly divorced, even if the divorce was only procedurally incorrect, were adulterous and should be left, and that children born in them were illegitimate. They insisted on separation.]

### *The community of the forgiven much*

And it is also where we remember that the community of those committed to the permanency of marriage is also the community of the greatly forgiven.

There is forgiveness for adultery, as there is forgiveness for all our sins. There was forgiveness for David the adulterer and murderer. "People will be forgiven, said our Lord, for all sins and whatever blasphemies they utter" except blasphemy against the Spirit.

And we are forgiven by grace, not by our capacity to put things right – which may not be possible now, if it ever was.

We have to hold on to that forgiveness, and then think about how our Lord wants us to obey him now, in our current circumstances, not what we think he would have wanted back then.

IF you want to talk about your particular circumstances, come and talk

But if you have repented and trusted the Lord Jesus, you are forgiven, graciously, freely, fully.

But the standard Jesus sets for sinful people living together, a permanent, exclusive, union – if you think about it, is very high. Things go wrong, marriages come under strain from events that can be overwhelming, people change – and very few things are as miserable as a miserable marriage.

You can't get away from a miserable marriage, and to feel unloved in your own home – its like an ache in your bones

And think about Jesus' first hearers. Their marriages were arranged, and in Galilee a bride to be and her intended were never meant to be alone together before the wedding. It is not like they had an opportunity to work out if they even liked each other's company – and now Jesus was saying however it worked out

You landed with someone you couldn't get on with – that was it. Married permanently.

### **A dose of realism and a shocking alternative vv. 10-12**

*Matthew 19: <sup>10</sup> The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." <sup>11</sup> But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. <sup>12</sup> For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it."*

So the disciples make a realistic observation about his ruling out of 'no fault' divorce.

It is not so much a cynical observation. It is more like an argument against Jesus' position in a society where all were expected to be married, with a few exceptions like wilderness prophets or temporary abstinence to follow a rabbi, and where having children was a sacred duty.

But Jesus responds by saying that marriage is not a duty for all. v. 12

Do you notice the repetition of the word eunuch? Five times, as in the original.

Now that was shocking language, for Jews rejected and detested self mutilation.

But eunuchs were the only category of people, the recognisable group, who were free from the obligation of marriage

There is recognition that there are some born with no or ambiguous genitalia, then as now, what we might characterise as intersex conditions.

And there was recognition that amongst the pagans there was the cruel practice of castrating young boys so that they could fulfill certain roles in the courts of kings, like guarding the harem.

But Jesus introduces a third category – 'those who make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven.'

That is, those who abstain from marriage for the sake of obedience to God

Jesus is not talking about self mutilation, but voluntary abstinence, self denial.

And the kingdom is not a thing, it is God's sovereign authority, His rule.

The Lord is telling His disciples that we should not take it for granted that it is God's will everyone be married

For some obedience to Jesus is abstaining from marriage, either for a time or permanently, and this is not less honourable than being married.

It is not for everyone – it is voluntary - *Let the one who is able to receive this receive it."*

But it is a real option for some. In fact, as we know, St Paul thought that staying single could make you more useful in the service of Jesus, more able to be single-mindedly devoted to the Lord [1 Cor. 7:7, 32-35]

So as well as being a community committed to the permanency of marriages and the sustaining of our marriages, the community of the King is *a community committed to honourable singleness*, to single lives lived in obedience to the Lord Jesus.

We need to recognise that.

Chaste singleness is a real, live option for disciples of Jesus

And just as we honour and support marriages we should support those who are living single lives in obedience to Jesus

And that includes many in our congregation. Some because they are honouring our Lord's command that they should only marry believers, and they have not yet the right believer yet

Some because they are widowed or divorced

Some because there is some work the Lord has called them to which makes it wise for them to remain single for now so they can devote themselves to that work

Some because the circumstances of their lives – employment or accommodation instability – makes it unwise to take on the commitment of marriage

There are many ways in which people are committed to being single as a follower of the Lord Jesus

And together we need to support them

We should not leave single people just to mix with single people, as if their singleness excludes them from the lives of the rest of us.

The initiative really is with the married.

So, which single people are routinely part of your life?

Are you including them in – holidays, family festivities, thinking of what will make them at ease.

Are you conscious of what they might find difficult – like having to isolate, or being sick, when they are on their own. Do they feel free to ring you up for a hand when they are in need?

the community of the King is *a community committed to honourable singleness*

Could we do better at supporting our single brothers and sisters?

And don't answer that question without talking to a single person, and if you have no one to ask – you probably have your answer.

### **Challenging Commitments**

The community of the King

*Committed to God speaking in His word*

*Committed to the will of the Creator revealed in His creating.*

*Committed to the permanency of marriage, and so to the sustaining of marriages*

*committed to honourable singleness*

They are challenging commitments, where we live in a world that is in rebellion to God, and we are always needing to put to death sin in ourselves

But it is a good community to belong to, made up of all different kinds of people

Men and women, married and single, divorced and widowed

A community where our Creator has revealed His will for our lives, and we know His will is good

And we engage with these commitments as the people of the King

Those forgiven by Jesus

Who know and are sustained by His love for His people, His bride, the love that is faithful and steadfast

Who have been given His Spirit that moves us to love His will

And who live with the great hope of sharing in the marriage feast of the Lamb

Let us show we are Jesus' people – a people who can encourage each other to honour our Saviour in whatever state or stage of life we are in