

The Ending of Marriage

Matthew 19:1-12, Part 2

1 August 2021 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Question: What are the Biblical reasons for ending a marriage?

Big Idea: God made marriage to end with death, not divorce.

Introduction

I was driving down the Ipswich Motorway the other day, thinking about this passage and today's sermon.

I'm sure that most of you know that the speed limit is usually 80km/h, but it has variable speed signs.

As I merged on that day, the signs showed 60km/h, which I wasn't exactly pleased about.

While I kept going at 60, all the other cars and trucks were flying past me doing 80.

As they came up behind me and sat on my tail for a few seconds before going around me, I felt myself having to fight the strong urge to speed up.

And it only got worse at the next set of signs where the limit usually increases to 90 and it felt like I was the only one to drop down to the signed 40.

I knew that it would've made my life so, so much easier if I pretended not to see the signs.

I also knew that excuse didn't really stack up.

It occurred to me that this situation's a little bit like divorce.

I think that it's fair to say that divorce is fairly common.

If you take your cue from celebrities, then you should get married and divorced with amazing frequency.

I doubt that there's a person in this room who hasn't been personally affected by divorce in some way, whether that's in your own marriage, a parent, a friend or family member.

The most recent Australian statistics I could find were from 2019.¹

The rate of people getting divorced is going down each year, but so is the rate of people who are getting married.

The old stat that 50% of marriages end in divorce seems to hold true with there being slightly fewer than half the number of divorces than marriages averaged over the last 20 years.

The bar for getting divorced is often fairly low and under Australian law doesn't need anyone to be at fault.

Yet we feel the effects of divorce intensely because it affects everyone.

I read an article from a woman who is divorced herself and has worked with a considerable number of divorced women.

She's said, "Divorce is worse than you think."²

The point of my highway analogy is that we're naïve if we think we're immune from the pull to go at the same high speed as everyone else in society.

Whether we realise it or not, as Christians, we're all tempted to buy into the idea that divorce is common, quick and easy when it's not.

It's getting a bit old now, but we know that the divorce rate amongst Christians who take the Bible seriously and actively live out their faith isn't as high as the rest of the population, but it's still significant.

In times gone past, it was taken for granted that Christians generally wouldn't get divorced.

There's been a big shift in the Christian Church's approach to divorce over the last 100 years.

But why?

It would seem wise to think Biblically about marriage, not just fall into step with our culture giving the cues.

And also thinking about divorce not just when there's a crisis in front of us.

Even though divorce is all around us, it's not something we talk about very often because it's a difficult and sensitive topic that's rightly emotional.

We treat marriage as public, but even though it's common, divorce is private.

It actually feels a little bit intrusive to be talking about it this morning.

But, it's a topic that Jesus addressed and – just like every other area of life – we need to take this area captive to Christ.

Inevitably, what the Bible has to say will speak to your situation or the situation of someone you love.

That's actually a good thing.

At the same time, I realise that it's often not an easy thing.

This's one of those sermons where, as a preacher, I acutely feel the weight of offending, or worse, harming one of God's precious saints.

Dear friend, anything that I say this morning isn't directed to or aimed at you personally, and as far as I can test my own heart, isn't designed to hurt you.

Yet however hard it might be, I'm convinced that just skipping over what God's chosen to speak on doesn't serve us well either.

Today, I'll do my best to share what I understand God to be saying on this important topic.

Outline

Remember that we're addressing divorce because we're continuing our project of working through Matthew's gospel.

Last week, we saw that chapter nineteen begins a new section of the book.

You might remember that there are sections of story and speech.

{DP} This next section of story is all about heading towards the cross.

We looked at what Jesus has to say about the beginning of marriage.

Some Pharisees came to him with a question and Jesus went back to Genesis (the first book of the Bible) to answer it.

From the very beginning, God made human beings male and female.

In marriage, God take ones man and one woman, and joins them together to be one for life.

The maths that's at the foundation of marriage is as easy as $1 + 1 = 1$.

{DP} This week, we're looking at the ending of marriage.

Or, as we know it more commonly, divorce.

The big idea is that **God made marriage to end with death, not divorce.**

We've the regular three points to hang our thoughts on.

- The Rationale to Remain
- The Reality of Hard Hearts
- The Reason for Remarriage

The Rationale to Remain

This group of Pharisees came to Jesus asking a question.

We're told that they didn't come out of interest to learn, but to test him.

They wanted to know if a man could divorce his wife for any and every reason.

The question comes from verse three:

Matthew 19:3 NIV11 ³ 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?"

As far as experts know, there were three main understandings of the legitimate reasons for divorce that were common around the time of Jesus.

{DP} It all hangs on the meaning of 'something indecent' in Deuteronomy 24.

Deuteronomy 24:1 NIV11 ¹ If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house,

The rabbis in Jesus' day debated what 'something indecent' means.

This word is only used one other time in Scripture.

That place is Deuteronomy 23:13, one of my favourite verses in the Bible.

Moses tells the Israelites that they need to carry a shovel when they go outside the camp to do their business otherwise God might walk on it in the camp.

Since God's holy, there can't be anything indecent in the camp.

That's probably not quite what's meant here though! {DP}

The Jewish rabbi Shammai taught that you could get divorced only for marital unfaithfulness.

Another rabbi – Hillel – said that you could get divorced for much less significant things like burning a meal.

Finally, Rabbi Akiba came along who said that you could get divorced when your spouse hadn't even done anything wrong but just because you found someone who was better looking.

Out of those options though, the only one it COULDN'T be is adultery and the reason for that is that two chapters earlier in Deuteronomy 22, Moses says that the consequence for adultery is death and not divorce.³

Jesus doesn't settle on any of those three answers, though.

The Pharisees want to know what legal reasons they have to divorce, but Jesus replies by saying that getting divorced goes against God's will and intention for marriage.

In his masterful response, he quotes from Genesis to explain how God made marriage to be in the beginning.

Then Jesus gives his own commentary in verse six.

In every marriage, God takes one man and one woman and joins them together for life.

It doesn't matter whether they're Christian or not, God joins every marriage together.

Marriage isn't a relationship that's designed to be broken, it's meant to be for life.

Jesus' conclusion then, is that what God's joined together, no man should separate.

Don't violently rip apart what God's yoked together.

Divorce is never a good thing because it subverts what God's done in joining husband and wife.

The reason for not getting divorced is that God's joined husband and wife together.

That's a very different reason to the reasons that many people have for not getting divorced.

Couples stay together for the sake of the kids, that is until the kids have grown up and they go their separate ways.

We've recently seen Bill and Melinda Gates calling it quits for that reason.

Or people stay together for the financial advantages of staying married, even if it's unhappy.

But it's pretty common for a marriage to only last as long as you feel like you're in love.

Marriage isn't always fun or easy and sometimes it's downright painful.

As Christians, we're great at selling the benefits of marriage and we can make it sound like it's always fantastic.

Praise God that many Christian marriages are like that most, if not all the time.

But many marriages are also struggling.

If that's you, then friends, you're not weird or unusual or alone.

There are times when marriage can feel loveless and be filled with fighting.

When bitterness, a lack of appreciation and an absence of passion mean that honestly, you don't really feel like being married.

You find it hard to submit or to lay down your life because it takes super-human strength just to be civil, let alone kind.

And it feels like no one else has ever felt this or could possibly understand.

When you're in that place, when you just want to leave, divorce seems like a really clean, simple and easy option.

It's not an easy path to travel though.

Divorce has a huge emotional cost as it impacts all kinds of relationships.

The word that Jesus uses for 'separate' in verse six means to tear apart.

It's painful when you tear apart the flesh that God's joined together and it leaves lasting scars.

The reason for ending a marriage is actually built on the reason for beginning it.

Jesus started with the meaning of marriage and we need to too.

If I marry my wife only because of the feelings I have for her and the fact that she completes me, then I'll only stay married as long as I've got the feels or I feel like she's helping me to get ahead.

I think a fair definition of marriage that the average person on the street has is that marriage is two people who love each other until they don't anymore.

We stay, we remain only as long as we feel like we're in love and when you don't have the feels, you hit Splitsville.

That's very different from founding your marriage on promises to stick by each other for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health until death do us part because God's joined you together for life.

That's a rationale to stay but sadly those promises have largely been thrown out the window in marriage services.

And the beginning impacts the ending.

The reason for anyone, and especially Christians to stay together, is because we're not going to tear apart what God's joined.

That's the rationale to remain.

We value that God has made an 'us' by joining us together.

So, Jesus says that the idea from the beginning was to remain and then keep those promises.

The Reality of Hard Hearts

Secondly, divorce isn't ideal or required, but it's sometimes necessary because of the reality of hard hearts.

The Pharisees are a bit confused at this point.

Whatever the Pharisees were expecting, it wasn't this.

This isn't how Jesus was meant to answer their question!

In fact, it sounds to them like he's just got it wrong and misunderstood the Scriptures because it sounds to them like Jesus is contradicting what Moses said.

So, they've got a supplementary, a follow-up question in verse seven:

Matthew 19:7 NIV11 ⁷ "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"

Given how many laws there are in the Old Testament and especially how detailed they are, I personally find it surprising that there's really only one place in that Moses talks about divorce.⁴

{DP} And that place is in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. We looked at the first verse before.

There are a lot of disputed details in these verses that make a huge difference to your whole understanding of divorce which we're not going to go into this morning.

It describes the situation where a man marries a woman.

She displeases him because he finds something indecent in her – whatever that indecency is – and so the first husband divorces her.

For people who worked hard at following the letter of the law, it's amazing that the Pharisees came to the conclusion they did.

They understood this to be saying that there's nothing wrong with divorce provided that you follow the right protocol.

They thought that one of the most important things this was saying is that the husband must hand over the piece of paper making the divorce official.

And that's true to a point because it protected the wife by stopping her husband from saying later that he didn't send her away and that it was her fault.⁵

Secondly, they understood this passage as a command, something that you HAVE to do.

But it's not a command at all.

It's what we might call case law where a certain situation is described and then telling you what to do about it.

"If this and that happened, then do this."

There's a massive difference between saying how to protect a wife when her husband divorces her and saying that a husband SHOULD divorce his wife.

Moses wasn't commending or commanding anyone to get divorced at all!

In fact, Jesus says that Moses merely permitted it.

I've really struggled with this, wondering if there's really much difference between commanding something and permitting it.

Yes, I think there is.

Moses was trying to limit the damage.

He didn't encourage it. He didn't condone it.

The point is that Moses allowed divorce only because of people's hard hearts.

Divorce is not the way that God intended marriage to end in the beginning, but it's a reality in our world this side of the fall.

Sometimes, people will be so hard that they'll be resolutely determined to leave a marriage even when they shouldn't.

I've heard this used as almost a good thing because it justifies the reality of divorce.

I've heard people almost flippantly saying that hearts are sinful rather than being grieved that things are only this way because of sin.

Jesus reminds us that wasn't God's intention from the beginning.

By the way, it wasn't Moses' intention either.

Even today, the idea can do the rounds that under certain circumstances, a husband and wife **MUST** get divorced.

It's awfully painful when there's adultery or other sexual immorality, but that's not to say that divorce **HAS** to follow.

Especially this side of the cross where forgiveness isn't just a reality, but one of the ways Jesus' kingdom is manifest in the world.

What does it mean to forgive seventy times seven in marriage?

It means not giving up even when the marriage is shaken to the core.

When there's genuine repentance, genuine forgiveness is possible and the relationship can be restored.

Chapter nineteen follows on from chapter eighteen which was all about forgiveness and that should be the case in marriage too.

Jesus reminds the Pharisees that Moses' concession wasn't part of God's plan for marriage.

Divorce was never God's intention in the very beginning.

Divorce isn't ideal and even though it happens because of hard-heartedness, it's necessary rather than good.

Moses didn't command it but allowed divorce as a means of choosing between bad and worse, but it wasn't that way in the beginning.

Matthew 19:8 NIV11 ⁸ Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.

Some people need to hear this a little differently though.

While forgiveness is important, hard-heartedness sometimes means that the right thing to do is to separate rather than to immediately forgive.

In most people's minds there are two positions, either married or divorced, but there's a middle ground... separation.

Even our divorce laws recognise that separation is needed before divorce.

Separating isn't the same as divorce though and it can be just as much a pathway to restoration as to divorce.

Divorce is final and is done with the with the purpose of marrying again, but separation is temporary and can be really helpful in giving a couple the time and space needed to work things out.

In cases of domestic violence, victims often generally stay far longer than they should.

Victims feel like separating would be giving up or that they'd be doing something wrong if they separate.

Someone in that situation needs to hear that it's not their hardness of heart that's the problem. It's their spouse's.

And staying isn't the only way of fighting for your marriage.

Separating doesn't mean that you're giving up on the marriage if you're still committed to working towards restoration as the goal.

Don't mishear what I think is Jesus' intent.

If you're in danger, then get out of the situation and create some space for the process of repentance, healing and restoration to occur.

And get the police involved because God has given the government the responsibility for punishing the wrongdoing that's occurred.

While we strive for the ideal of keeping marriages together, we still need to recognise that hard, determined hearts need to be managed to keep people safe.

And ultimately, we need God to take that heart of stone and turn it to a soft heart of flesh.

The Pharisees were wrong in thinking that Moses commanded divorce.

Divorce isn't the ideal, it's not the purpose of marriage to be separated.

Unlike the Pharisees who just wanted to know how they could divorce, Jesus says that divorce isn't the goal.

Jesus tells us that Moses did allow divorce for the purpose of protecting a wife from a hard-hearted husband, but it wasn't that way in the beginning.

The Reason for Remarriage

The final point is that although Jesus might allow divorce, the circumstances for remarriage are limited.

Sadly, people who are divorced often feel lonely, looked down on or like they don't fit in, especially in Christian circles.

Often it's not intentional, but it would help those who are divorced if married and other single people were sensitive to that feeling.

I imagine that it can feel like you don't quite fit in and others have told me that at times it feels like you're walking around with 'failure' stencilled on you.

Although divorce is common, divorced people are relatively rare because many of them tend to get married.

The Bible gives a very clear reason why a Christian who's been married could get remarried.

And that's because their spouse dies.

Romans 7 tells us that death end the marriage and breaks the one flesh union between husband and wife.

So someone who's spouse dies is free to remarry, although there's more to be said about that next week.

But are there any other circumstances in which a Christian could get remarried?

{DP} Jesus puts limits on the circumstance for remarriage in verse nine.

Out of all the verses in this section, this's probably the one that attracts the most attention.

{DP} And that's because it's got the "exception clause" in it.

Matthew 19:9 NIV11 ⁹I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."

But it often attracts attention for the wrong reasons.

{DP} I think that it's actually helpful to read the sentence WITHOUT the exception, even though that's the part that we might be interested in.

The reason for doing this is that an exception is exactly that – an exception.

An exception's the thing that doesn't follow the rule or the case that's different from the general statement.

We want to make sure that we don't miss the forest for the trees, the general principle because of the exception.

So, let's think about what the general rule is.

The general rule is that if a man divorces his wife and marries another woman, he's sinning by committing adultery.

"I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery."

It would be adultery because he's violating the one-flesh, covenant relationship that they share.

In other words, Jesus is answering the Pharisees by saying that it's absolutely sin to divorce your wife for any and every reason and then marry someone else.

We need to both lovingly and firmly be clear that this is adultery and it is sin.

It's not okay to divorce someone because you don't like the way they look and then marry someone else.

If you get out of your marriage just because you're sick of being married and then marry someone else later, that'd be sin.

A marriage shouldn't even end just because you don't have that spark anymore or you've lost that loving feeling and then get married because you find it with someone else.

This isn't some obscure teaching in the New Testament.

The same thing is repeated almost word for word in two more places, in both Mark and Luke's gospels.

Mark also makes clear that this doesn't just apply to husbands, but wives as well.

Mark was writing to a gentile audience where women were able to divorce their husbands and he says that it applies equally to wives as it does to husbands.

{DP} But, of course, Matthew tells us that there's an exception to that general rule.

And that exception is on the basis of sexual immorality.

Don't just assume that the exception is adultery because that's not quite what our English Bibles or the Greek says.

The Greek uses the word *porneia*, which's the where we get our English word pornography – sexually immoral pictures – from.

What's the sexual immorality that Jesus excludes?

Some people have said that it's incest.

Basically, that there were marriage relationships that were allowed in the ancient world that weren't allowed in Judaism.

Knowing what we do about relationships at the time – including the fact that in 1 Corinthians 6 the church was tolerating relationships that even pagans wouldn't – I don't find that very convincing.

Another possibility is that it could mean adultery and nothing else.

This view is sometimes call the Erasmian view which says that you're NOT committing adultery if you get remarried after getting a divorce for sexual immorality.

This's by far the majority view amongst churches Western churches today, although it wasn't that way for most of history.

It's a view that's consistent with the teaching of the Westminster Confession of Faith.

Sexual immorality is a very broad and general word that can mean adultery, but can also mean a whole bunch of other kinds of sexual relationships outside of marriage.

{DP} If he simply means adultery, why didn't Matthew record Jesus as using the word adultery as he does at the end of the verse?

It's a different word, a specific word, that's used at the end of the sentence to describe adultery.

It could be stylistic variation, but he does EXACTLY the same thing in Matthew 5.

{DP} And in Matthew 15:19, Jesus lists a number of evil things that come out of a person's heart and he lists sexual immorality and adultery separately, rather than as being the same.⁶

It's possible, but I can't find a convincing reason for limiting a broad term like sexual immorality just to adultery.

I've also heard people who hold to this view go on to say that in reality, sooner or later there's an almost always an adulterous relationship.

In other words the exception is the rule in practice.

I have it on good authority that some churches even go as far as to say that a lustful look (picking up on Matthew 5, which I think abuses both texts) is grounds for divorce.

Many people also seem to make the assumption that divorce somehow breaks the one-flesh bond, but I can't see anywhere in the Bible that says that.

That view also makes the mistake of reducing marriage down to just two people sharing that physical connection.

Marriage is more than the physical union of husband and wife.

The relationship with a prostitute in 1 Corinthians 6 isn't a marriage that makes the true marriage null and void.

I think that the best understanding for Matthew using the term sexual immorality here is that Jesus meant sexual immorality.

Specifically, fornication or a relationship between two people who aren't yet married.

I told you earlier that Jesus' words about the sinfulness of getting remarried after an illegitimate divorce are recorded by Luke and Mark.

But neither Luke nor Mark have Matthew's exception clause that he includes in BOTH chapter 5 and chapter 19.

Why is that?

Well, Matthew 5 and Matthew 19 aren't the only divorce passages in Matthew.

Divorce is actually mentioned in the very first chapter!

Joseph – who's described as a 'righteous man' plans to divorce his fiancée because he found out she was pregnant and Joseph wasn't the father.

Turns out that she's pregnant with the Saviour of the world after a miraculous conception rather than because she's sinned.

So an angel tells Joseph to marry her.

Matthew 1:18–19 NIV11 ¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

Matthew's writing mainly for people with a Jewish background who would've understood about Jewish betrothal, something that wouldn't make sense to Mark and Luke's gentile readers.

Joseph and Mary were only 'pledged to be married,' yet Joseph planned to divorce.

A Jewish engagement was a formal agreement that could only be broken off by divorce.

They weren't fully and properly married and Joseph thought he was being faithful to the law for divorcing Mary for what he assumed to be sexual immorality.

I think this is the best explanation for why Matthew feels the need to be really clear that only exception to getting remarried being wrong is if a betrothal got broken off due to sexual immorality before the marriage was fully completed, but NOT adultery afterward.

Luke and Mark don't say anything about Joseph's dilemma but anyone reading Matthew's gospel might be left scratching their heads otherwise.

Now the thing is, for the most part in our culture, we don't have a formal betrothal like in Judaism that requires a divorce.

So I believe that the exception that Matthew and Matthew alone records isn't really relevant to us.

In other words, I believe that the death of your spouse is the only valid reason for being able to remarry.

The consequence of this is that I personally couldn't counsel someone who's divorced to get remarried or remarry someone to another spouse, regardless of whether they're "at fault" or not.

I've got to admit that this view makes me pretty uncomfortable and makes life pastorally much more difficult, but if that's what I'm convinced Scripture is saying, that's what I've got to run with.

I also realise that this might also sound really off-the-dial crazy to you because it's so different to what many of you have heard before.

So before you think I'm completely off my tree, I think it's worth noting that both John Piper and Phillip Jensen (amongst others) fall in roughly the same place.

This is a really, really difficult topic and every time I come back to it I realise just how tough it is.

This's a topic that I readily admit that I could very well be wrong about.

If you're someone hearing this who's been remarried or your thinking of someone who you care about who's been remarried after divorce, let me say a word to you because I realise that this might really shake you up.

The first thing to say that we love you and we welcome you in our church.

Next, is that I would encourage you to search the Scriptures and be convinced in your own mind whether what you've done is sin or not.

Then get some wise counsel because everyone's circumstances are different and it's not always black and white.

But let me stress that if you are convinced that getting remarried after divorce is sin, I firmly believe that it's a sin that God will forgive.

You need to repent before God and experience the healing balm of his forgiveness which is available to you.

And finally, my general advice would be that if you find yourself in this position then I don't think it brings God any more honour to tear a second marriage relationship apart.

I think one of my biggest reservations about this view is that it honestly seems so graceless.

It feels like Jesus is effectively saying that marriage is something you only get one shot at, that there are no second chances.

And that makes me feel a little uncomfortable, a little anti-gospel, if I'm honest.

But as I've been thinking about that this week, it struck me that I think that's actually because I buy into the culture's assumption that God's ungracious to not let a divorced person remarry.

A large part of that discomfort is built on the belief that our only hope of happiness is to be in a marriage relationship and if that's not available to us, then there's no hope and no life worth living.

Which's rubbish and why we need next week's talk on singleness.

But even at this point, notice in verse ten that even the disciples thought that this teaching was hard and radical.

I understand Jesus to be saying that there's only one reason for remarriage and that's the death of your spouse.

Conclusion

Understanding the beginning of marriage helps us to answer our questions about the end of marriage.

Jesus took us back to the beginning, showing that God created marriage to be between one man and one woman for life.

That means that marriage was intended to end with the death of your spouse and not divorce.

As a consequence, Jesus allows for remarriage before the marriage is consummated, but not after.

God cares about marriage.

It was his idea and he's the one that joins spouses together, so let's not tear that apart.

¹ <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/marriages-and-divorces-australia/latest-release>

² <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/dont-get-divorce/>

³ Deuteronomy 22:22

⁴ Deuteronomy 22:19, 29; Leviticus 21:7, 14

⁵ Under Jewish law and culture, a wife had no means of divorcing and would have a hard life if she was divorced.

⁶ Adultery is only used three times in Matthew's gospel. Matthew 5, 15 & 19.

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Big Question: What are the Biblical reasons for ending a marriage?

Big Idea: God made marriage to end with death, not divorce.

Discussion Questions

1. Respond to the comment, “Christians are better at talking about marriage than divorce.”
2. Why does divorce seem like such an attractive option?
3. How does Jesus reason for staying married compare with commonly held views today (and in the past)?
4. Did Moses command that a man give a certificate of divorce and send her away” as the Pharisees claimed?
5. Why did Moses permit divorce if, as Jesus says, it wasn’t that way in the beginning?
6. What is the main conclusion that Jesus draws in verse nine?
7. Compare Matthew 19:1-12 with Mark 10:1-12 and Luke 16:18. Why do you think they’re different?
8. What are some reasons that Christians today might be uncomfortable with Jesus not permitting remarriage?