

Great Adventure—Matthew Chapter 19 Notes

The key to understanding Matthew's discussion of marriage is the phrase in verse 1, "region of Judea beyond the Jordan." Matthew often guides you to a place where something important has happened in the past, so that he can bring up a topic related to that place or event. In this case, Judea beyond the Jordan is the last place where John the Baptist was before his arrest for criticizing Herod, who had asked his brother to divorce his wife so that Herod could marry her for himself. Matthew takes us to this place to bring up the topic of marriage and divorce.

The Pharisees ask Jesus whether it is lawful to divorce one's wife for any reason. They are trying to lure Jesus into the same trap that John fell into. There was a debate in the first century between the positions of the rabbinic schools of Hillel and Shammai regarding marriage and divorce. Hillel took the conservative position that divorce and remarriage was only allowable on account of adultery, citing Dt. 24:1, allowing divorce for any "unclean thing," including adultery. The liberal side, led by rabbi Shammai, taught that divorce was allowed for any reason.

Jesus refuses to side with either group, or to attack Herod, but instead gives the true teaching on marriage and divorce. And he does this not only where John had spoken out against Herod, but also in the very place where Moses had promulgated laws on divorce in Deuteronomy. Jesus tells the Pharisees that Moses had allowed for divorce due to the "hardness of your hearts," but he goes on to say that "from the beginning, it was not so," because God had defined marriage in Genesis 2:24 as the unbreakable union of husband and wife. In so doing, Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for exalting the teaching of Moses about divorce over the fundamental divine truth about marriage.

Moses never commanded or permitted divorce in the sense of saying that it was right. He had simply regulated divorce as a temporary measure because it was already happening, and even worse, wives were being killed so that their husbands could remarry. Divorce was a custom that a new generation of Israelites picked up after they left Egypt and lost track of what their forefathers had believed concerning marriage. Jesus does not affirm the teaching of Moses in this regard, but instead takes the Pharisees back to God's original law that marriage is an indissoluble union.

Jesus' teaching on marriage is difficult, and it has led unfortunately to some Catholics falling away from the Church when one marriage has fallen apart and they are told that they cannot marry again in the Church without an annulment of the first marriage. The bond that unites a married couple is created by God and can only be dissolved by the death of one of the spouses. Marriage is a covenant relationship, like that between God and the Church. You don't leave a covenant relationship until one of the parties dies.

The big question that has divided many Protestants from Catholics is the interpretation of Mt. 19:9 "Whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery." Is Jesus providing an exception clause in this verse? In the years since the Reformation, more and more Protestant denominations had said "Yes," but in the last 20 years some of the greatest Protestant theologians have come to adopt the Catholic view. The disciples respond to Jesus' teaching by saying,

“If this is so, it is better not to marry,” i.e., better not to rush into marriage without thinking through the weightiness of marriage.

What did Jesus mean in verse 9 when he qualified the teaching on divorce? There have been three answers suggested down through the years:

- A. The Patristic view (according to the Church Fathers): divorce may be permitted in a case of serious sexual sin, like adultery, but remarriage is still forbidden. St. Paul teaches in 1 Cor. 7:10-11 that separated couples have two options: be reconciled to one another or remain single.
- B. The Levitical law view: This interprets “unchastity” (in Greek, “porneia”) as meaning an invalid marriage in which the parties are too closely related. See Lv. 18:6-18. Ending this relationship would not be considered divorce but rather annulment.
- C. The “no comment” view: When Jesus responds to the Pharisees, he treats their question about divorce as irrelevant and makes no comment on it, restating instead the law from Genesis on marriage.

The view of the Church (the Patristic view) is that it is permissible to divorce a spouse for adultery, but neither spouse may remarry until one of them dies. This is because there is a covenant relationship between them, and that covenant lasts until one of the parties dies.

Some people bristle at this teaching and say that it is stiff and hard, but the Church teaches this because marriage is so special and so holy, and in modern times we have lost sight of just how special a sacrament this is. It’s not a promise, a contract or a living arrangement. It points to the relationship between God and the Church. When we tamper with the marriage relationship or treat it lightly, we are tampering with the relation between God and the Church. Protestant denominations have relaxed this greatly, to the point of allowing repeated marriages.

What about annulments? What are they? An annulment is not a divorce. Rather, it is a conclusion that there never was a sacramental bond between the parties to a marriage due to fraud or some kind of substantial defect in the consents exchanged at the time of marriage, e.g., a “shotgun wedding,” lack of understanding of what a sacrament is and what the couple is getting themselves into, or lack of knowledge about important things from the past that have a bearing on the validity of the marriage in question. An annulment is the conclusion of a competent church tribunal regarding the validity of a marriage, based on the evidence presented. The tribunal is not infallible, but its decision is binding on the parties.

If the Protestant view on marriage and divorce were correct, i.e., that Jesus meant that divorce and remarriage is allowed in cases of adultery, then the disciples would never have responded as they did in verse 10. If husband and wife can simply discard their marriage and try again with different partners because one of them has sinned, the disciples would not have said “it is better not to marry” in response to Jesus’ teaching.

Because a marriage is a sacrament that we experience on a daily basis, it provides for a channel of grace to come into our lives. A sacrament is a direct encounter with Christ. What a beautiful thing, to receive

grace from God on a daily basis in marriage! A good and solid marriage is a conduit for God's grace coming into your life. It is one way that God molds us and shapes us. It should be the goal of every husband and wife to make each other saints, to assure that they reach heaven.

Marriage goes beyond being a representation of the relation between Christ and the Church. According to St. Paul in Ephesians 5, spouses' total gift of themselves to each other in marriage is a participation in the life of the Trinity: the love of the Father for the Son and of the Son for the Father and their love for the Holy Spirit. Marriage is God's idea; he is the author of marriage. But there are always problems and difficulties in marriage, and it is more likely that marriages today will end through divorce rather than through the death of one of the spouses. Statistically, we must acknowledge that it is more likely than not that a marriage will fail, unless we proactively do something to prevent that.

The key to marriage is dying to yourself, living for the other person and giving yourself to the other person. Individualism is the death of a covenant. Who are we listening to today? Are we listening to God when it comes to marriage and divorce, or are we listening to the pop gurus on television? Do we know more about what the Church teaches about the covenant of marriage than Dr. Phil? Or Oprah? Or Barbara DeAngelis, the self-proclaimed "Love Doctor," who has made millions on the subject, "Making Love Work." The majority of people are listening to her and buying and reading her books, but she is on her fifth marriage and her doctoral credentials are from a diploma mill that was giving away doctorates and has been shut down by the state of California.

In Genesis, God says that "for that reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and cling to his wife, and the two of them become one body." Marriage is a sacrament where we die to ourselves and we give ourselves to each other. The love between a husband and wife is not a symbol, it's a participation in the love of Christ. This means that when you participate in the sacrament, you participate and communicate the grace of God with one another. In the act of marriage, sexual intercourse, you renew the covenant that you have taken to love one another and give one another all that you have and you declare that you are open to each other and you are open to life.

The joy of sex is meant to be the joy of loving as God loves. It is a foretaste of the joys of heaven: complete communion with God. When sex is taken outside of marriage, it is a lie. It is a theological lie, and it's a lie that the body is telling, because the body is saying that it is reserved for a covenant ceremony where I will give myself completely and when sex is taken outside of marriage, the body lies and we begin to disintegrate after that. Marriage is a commitment, it is a complete giving.

Genesis 2:24: "For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother and cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh." There are a few words in this passage that will help you to diagnose problems in your own marriage. "Leave ...cleave...and ...become one:" problems in marriage are usually due to a problem with one of these words. "Leave" involves a departure from the old way of life, leaving mother and father and starting a new life together. The problem may be in leaving mother or father, or it may be in leaving the past behind to begin a new relationship. The problem may be in leaving one's own past behind, or it may be in leaving one's spouse's past behind. Forgiveness comes in here: we have to let go of their past and cleave to one another.

The idea of cleaving to one another means to stick or be glued to one another. It has the idea of hotly pursuing one another. Are you still pursuing one another as hotly as when you were courting?

And then we are asked to become one, and this affects every area of one's life: thinking, possessions, time, feelings, finances, joy, suffering, hopes, fears, successes, failures, dreams. All of it becomes one.

What we are asked to do in marriage, leave, cleave and become one, is nothing less than what Jesus asks us to do with him. Leave the things of this world, cleave to him, and become one with him. And get this: he did it to you and he did it for you. He left the comforts of heaven, he's cleaving to you and he's becoming one with you. What he's asking us to do in our marriage, he has done already.

Four kinds of love, all necessary for a strong marriage:

A. Storge: means "I like you." If you're going to have a happy marriage, you've got to like each other. Liking the person you marry is very important if your marriage is going to last. Loving without liking can lead to contempt.

B. Eros: "I want you;" passion and romance. Necessary, but there's got to be more than this. Real covenant love is hard work. Less than one tenth of one percent of a marriage is spent on any kind of direct sex, so if your marriage is based only on this, it's built on faulty ground.

C. Phileo: "You are my friend." In the Bible, "friendship" is a covenant term. In a survey hundreds of couples were asked why their marriage was a success and the top two answers were "My spouse is my best friend" and "I like my spouse as a person."

D. Agape: "I love you unconditionally." This is the word describing God's love for us.

We need all four kinds of love for a strong marriage.

Love comes after marriage. We need not necessarily marry the one we love, but we must love the one we marry. Love is not built on feelings. Love is a verb: I love you. I give myself to you. This is the covenant relationship, and this is the relationship that will change the world.