

Jesus Teaches About Marriage
Matthew 19:1-6
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Matthew 19 begins a new section of Matthew, as seen by the words “*When Jesus had finished these words.*” We see this phrase repeated five times in this Gospel (Matthew 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 26:1). This forms a structural construction that transitions the reader to the next section of the narrative account. These words also mark the end of one of the five major discourses in this Gospel.

Jesus will continue to train His disciples in chapters 19-20 before entering Jerusalem as the King of the Jews in His triumphal entry (Matthew 21:1-17). This entry only would increase the opposition to Jesus by the scribes and Pharisees, whom He will denounce in Matthew 23. The final lengthy teaching we will see is the Olivet Discourse, which concludes this section of Matthew, just prior to His arrest.

The continuation of ministry (19:1-2)

The words that Jesus had finished were the words of the parable of the unmerciful slave (18:23-35). These words concluded the teaching of Jesus about the importance of receiving the true followers of Jesus and not causing them to stumble in their faith as they seek after the Lord. This also concluded His lengthy ministry in Galilee.

His departure from Galilee began His travel to Jerusalem (cf. Matthew 21:10), where He would be crucified. He had earlier told them of this journey, and its purpose, “*From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day*” (Matthew 16:21).

His route to Jerusalem was apparently not a direct one, for He “*came into the region of Judea beyond the Jordan.*” Beyond the Jordan, or the east side of the Jordan River, was known as Perea, meaning “beyond” and spoke of from the perspective of the residents of Jerusalem.

It was a well traveled route that allowed the Jews to avoid passing through Samaria. There would be many Jews seeking to travel this route on their way to the Passover. Since Jesus was headed to Jerusalem, and since the Passover was approaching, “*large crowds followed Him.*” Jesus continued His healing ministry with these crowds in this region of Judea.

The critique of marriage by the Pharisees (19:3)

The Pharisees continued to be very concerned about Jesus, and once again sought to trap Him with a question designed to put Him at odds with His followers and with the crowds (cf. Matthew 12:2; 15:1; 16:1; 22:15, 34-35). If He could be publicly discredited, His support would diminish, leaving Him more vulnerable and less influential. This was part of their ongoing plan to put Him to death (Matthew 12:14).

Their question was well planned to put Him at odds with the rabbinical teaching, with the Law of Moses, and with the desires of the populace. To ask *“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all,”* the Pharisees represented their own perspective. They were known for allowing men to divorce their wives for any reason, and this was their practice also. The question was phrased as such because women were not permitted divorce their husbands.

While the Pharisees followed the teaching of Rabbi Hillel, that a man could divorce his wife for practically any reason, real or not, there was a dissenting viewpoint. The Rabbi Shammai school of thought held to a more limited view of divorce, that it must be for some gross indecency. This indecency would be other than adultery, which was punishable by stoning (thus eliminating the need for a divorce – Leviticus 20:10).

Since Jesus had taught against divorce in the Matthew 5:31-32, *“It was said, ‘WHOEVER SENDS HIS WIFE AWAY, LET HIM GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE’; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery,”* it is likely that these Pharisees knew His perspective. This then was designed to expose His belief and this could be used against Him.

The Pharisees knew that the land beyond the Jordan was under the authority of Herod Antipas, who had earlier imprisoned and beheaded John the Baptist for his condemnation of Herod’s unlawful marriage to Herodias. Herodias was married to Herod Philip, but Herod Antipas seduced her and when opposed by John the Baptist, Herod Antipas executed him (Matthew 14:3-12).

This outcome was the sort that could achieve the objective of the Pharisees without anyone considering them directly involved in Jesus’ death. The Pharisees were reluctant to seize Jesus because they *“feared the people, because they considered Him to be a prophet”* (Matthew 21:46; cf. Matthew 14:5). This tactic might lead Jesus to also publicly condemn Herod’s adultery.

The creation of mankind by God (19:4)

Jesus' answer to the Pharisees' question about divorce was to establish an understanding of marriage. Marriage was instituted by God, not by man. It went back to the beginning of creation. Without a strong understanding of marriage, we will become open to divorce for any reason at all. This strong understanding of marriage comes from the word of God.

Jesus begins by citing the creation account of Genesis, *“God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them”* (Genesis 1:27). In citing Genesis 1:27, Jesus included an introduction, *“have you not read”* which established that they ought to know this

Matthew 19:4 is an important verse to support the divine creation of man as literally recorded in the biblical account of Genesis 1-2. When Jesus said *“He who created them from the beginning made them male and female,”* He was affirming the reality of an actual Adam and Eve as real people (cf. Romans 5:14; 1 Corinthians 15:22, 45; 1 Timothy 2:13-14).

Furthermore, this statement also supports the view that God created man at the beginning of creation. The first words of Genesis are *“In the beginning,”* connecting Jesus' use of the word “beginning” to the start of creation by God. This would be contrary to the modern view that man developed over time, billions of years after the earth was formed.

The words *“made them male and female”* are of particular significance during a time when there is much debate about gender identity. Increasingly, our society has made a distinction between biological sex and gender identity, concluding that a person's gender is not necessarily the sex they were assigned at birth based upon biological characteristics. This gender is determined by the individual, and is a social construct based upon how one views themselves.

Jesus stated that people were created by God as male and female. From the context, there is an understanding that one is either male, evidenced by the word “man” in verse 5, or female, which is the wife in verse 5. Because this is stated as the basis for why no man should separate what God has joined in marriage, this statement of Jesus is not limited to the historical creation of Adam and Eve.

Therefore, since God created people either male or female, the essence of our gender was established by God, not by our perspective. Since it was established by God, it is fixed by Him at our creation.

If there is no dichotomy between our biological sex and our gender identity, how can the experience of so many people who view themselves differently than their biological sex be explained?

One difficulty of mankind is that we have truth but will ignore this truth, and *“suppress the truth in unrighteousness”* (Romans 1:18). If we do not act on the truth that we know, we become deluded. *“But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves”* (James 1:22). People who do not recognize the reality of their observable biological sex suffer from one aspect of such delusion.

This may not apply to the rare cases of intersex people. The case of people who are born a mix of X and Y chromosomes, that do not fit the XX chromosome structure for females and the XY chromosome structure for males, is a product of the fall of man (Genesis 3). Each one of us has aspects of our human body that have been affected by our sin nature and the physical manifestation of this differs among people.

The fall of man has not only caused our body to be affected but has resulted in difficulties in our thinking as well. This extends to all things that have been revealed to us by God, but we do not see, including gender dysphoria. Each one of us has misperceptions of reality that must be overcome through faith in the revelation of God.

How should we interact with those who are confused about their gender? First, we must recognize that our society is viewing sex and gender as different more and more. Nevertheless, we have a responsibility to *“honor all people”* (1 Peter 2:17), and therefore must not be rude or disrespectful. All men are made in the image of God and Jesus viewed the confused multitudes with compassion. *“Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd”* (Matthew 9:36).

When we encounter people who are transgendered, who are confused and view themselves as a gender different from the biological sex they were born with, we can be respectful and honor them. If they would prefer to be called by a certain name, or by a certain pronoun, there is nothing wrong with accommodating their wishes.

Some have argued that to call a transgendered person by the pronoun that does not correspond to their biology is lying. However, lying includes an attempt to deceive. Using a preferred pronoun is not attempting to deceive.

It is important to recognize that language changes. The term “gender” is now being used differently than in the past and pronouns now reference gender. If we do not adjust to the language, communication may become more difficult. For example, we refer to the Mormon Church, even though we know that Mormonism is not a church. We even call our own building a “church” even though according to the Bible, “church” is not a building but are the people who are following Jesus. So as we can see, language changes and we are not deceiving anyone by using words that have come to have a different meaning in context.

In such a social climate, we must evaluate whether our priority is to be a social activist for change or to be a spiritual ambassador for the gospel. We can see from experience that societal change is difficult and often temporary. Spiritual change is possible only with God, but when He uses us in His work of drawing people to Himself, we can be confident that salvation is eternal. By recognizing the true need of all men in redemption in Christ, we will become focused upon faith in Christ as we serve others, rather than simple behavioral change that does not deliver anyone to eternal life.

The creation of marriage by God (19:5)

Jesus then quoted Genesis 2:24 in His answer to the Pharisees, *“For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.”* Therefore, the reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife is because God created man as male and female. This is evidence that the institution of marriage was established by God in the beginning of creation.

Because marriage is God’s creation, and not man’s invention, we are bound by God’s definition of marriage. Clearly, the concept of marriage in the Bible is between one man and one woman. The man is male and the wife is female.

Once again, our society has accepted a confused understanding of marriage. In recent times, it has become common practice for two men or two women to be married, both socially and legally. No longer is the term “marriage” limited to one man and one woman.

How should we respond as we encounter various people whom the society considers to be married? At issue is the understanding of marriage. Unsurprisingly, our world does not accept the biblical concept of marriage. Even though from God’s perspective, two people of the same sex cannot be married, this does not alter the fact that our world considers them to actually be married.

As seen with the earlier example of the Mormon church or church buildings, we adopt our society's language to communicate. People of the same sex can be married according to the laws of our country, and we can acknowledge this fact while still understanding what a true biblical marriage is. Presently, there is a distinction between people who are married in a biblical sense and people who are married in a legal sense. We will see this in the next passage regarding people who have remarried but without biblical grounds for divorce.

The constancy of marriage by man (19:6)

The salient point of Jesus' teaching about marriage is that it occurs when God joins people together. If God has joined people together, man must not separate them. The word for "separate" is translated "leave" in 1 Corinthians 7:10, which is speaking in the context of divorce. This then answers the Pharisees' question, for it is not lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason.

Indeed, Jesus was stricter than any rabbinical perspective on marriage. The Jews viewed adultery as more the sin of taking the wife of another, rather than infidelity of the husband to the wife. Jesus oriented marriage from the basis of God's creation, where the man and woman become one flesh. Marriage was intended by God to be permanent, until one of the spouses has passed away. *"For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband"* (Romans 7:2).

Sexual union does not create a marriage, as marriage is beyond fornication. Sexual union may create a "one flesh condition, *"Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a prostitute is one body with her? For He says, 'THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH'"* (1 Corinthians 6:16), but it does not equal a marriage.

Jesus confirmed that God's intended plan for marriage includes *"for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife."* So the essence of marriage is not only the union of husband and wife but also the leaving of father and mother. A biblical marriage must include both of these concepts.

How God joins a man to his wife varies according to culture. Each society has formed a means of publicly recognizing the initiation of marriage. God uses these customs to bring about His union of marriage. A husband and wife have been joined as one flesh regardless of whether they had a religious, civil union, or some other form of societal recognition.

Conclusion

Jesus answered the Pharisees' question about whether a man could divorce his wife for any reason at all by focusing on the original intent of God in creation. He did not give them a simple answer that could be used against Him but rather first addressed the subject of marriage.

Jesus taught that marriage was established by God in the beginning of creation. This is seen in the creation of one male and one female. As such, God determined what marriage should be, one man and one woman, and only one mate for each one.

By describing the two becoming one flesh, and no longer two, Jesus referenced Genesis 2:24 to teach the uniqueness of marriage. It is the one lifelong relationship that exists. Even children leave their parents, but a man should not leave his wife. This basic commitment that a man and a woman make in marriage includes leaving one's mother and father to become one flesh.

While marriage has become increasingly viewed as optional and re-defined, there remains the will of God. We exist in a fallen world, corrupt in many ways, but we must maintain faithfulness to the word of God. We can allow others to depart from the revealed will of God but we must not become deluded ourselves. *"And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect"* (Romans 12:2).

With regard to recognizing that our society increasingly accepts a difference between gender and biological sex, we are morally responsible to honor all people (1 Peter 2:17). This includes those who are confused about being male or female. If we do not love people who we can see, how can we love God who we cannot see (1 John 4:20). *"Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved"* (1 Corinthians 10:31-33). We must follow Paul's example and prioritize the profit of the many, so that they may be saved.

What God has joined together, let no man separate. In the next class we will look at biblical exceptions to this precept and why they exist.