

The Christian Family in Biblical Perspective
Seven Essentials in the Christian Family
“What About Divorce, Marriage, And Re-Marriage?”
Matthew 19
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May 10, 2009 – Evening Sermon

Our text for this study is found in Matthew 19. In this passage our Lord is fielding a question concerning divorce. That will be the basis for our study. Join with me in a word of prayer before we get started.

Father, thank You so much for these moments, sanctify them as we read through Your Word and as we attempt to garner them together with thoughts that are both faithful to what you teach in this matter of divorce and remarriage. Also sanctify the reading, hearing and teaching of it to that degree and to that purpose that our lives would be led by the Word of God, in the power of the Spirit of Christ, for the glory of our Savior, in whose name I pray, Amen.

Obviously this matter of divorce is an issue in our day. I tell people I don't mean this to be a partisan speech but people always ask me who one of my favorite presidents is. One of my favorite presidents has been Ronald Reagan but I always tell people I have three problems with Ronald Reagan. I won't tell you what two of them are but one of them was his support of a federal initiative called a no-fault divorce. We actually use to exist in this land where you didn't just walk in and out of marriage. In other words you could divorce for any cause at all but if you wanted to you didn't have to establish a fault for divorce. We used to have periods of time where you had to go through a process to determine should the covenant of marriage be broken where you couldn't just walk in and out of it. I believe this no-fault divorce has put us on a downward slide. I think the church has been more affected by the world than affects the world in this matter.

But I am forever the optimist of the transforming power of the Gospel that not only can we reclaim a Gospel Christ centered, Gospel driven family and marriage but we can also begin to live in such a way that we would again affect our society to honor those things which God honors. Marriage is not a Christian institution but it is a creation ordinance which is that which God has established. We have already covered that in the morning series. In the morning series we are drawing out from Ephesians 5:21-6:4 seven essentials from the text concerning marriage, family and how the Christian family is to exist. But in so doing I know that various things crop up from God's Word so I have sequestered Sunday nights so that we could deal with some particular issues on the Sunday nights we have open to do so in this spring and early summer.

The first one I want to deal with that supports our Sunday morning series is this matter of divorce and remarriage. We have already affirmed in our morning series that marriage is a creation institution. God designed it. God made man and woman, male and female, to be joined in the context of marriage and it is in that context that we fulfill His design and our deepest desires of intimacy. There are multiple organizations and institutions in relationships that we can enjoy relationships but none of them allow for the depth and intimacy that God has designed for us in marriage. He has designed us physically, mentally, spiritually, emotionally, psychologically and in every way possible

that man, male and female, would properly image God in the context of a marital relationship.

How is marriage to be instituted? It for one man, one woman, for life. It is to be covenantal. It is a covenant. Love the wife of your covenant the book of Malachi says. It is a covenantal relationship. It is a monogamous relationship – one man, one woman. It is a heterosexual relationship – one man, one woman. It is Adam and Eve united together in the covenant of marriage which sets before us that which God has called us to have and to be and do.

We, of course, are taking it deeper in our study of Christian marriage. The Christian marriage in which two believers, empowered by the Spirit of God, led by the Word of God, out of reverence for Christ, living out submission to one another in the intimacy of marriage are enjoying their intimacy and their unity believing the precepts of God's Word and following the precepts of God's Word, not in the power of the flesh but by the power of the Spirit of God, not out of slavish obedience trying to earn our way to heaven but out of joyful obedience to the One who has purchased us and taken us to heaven. We want not only our life but our marriage and families to be owned by Christ, led by His Word, empowered by His Spirit, for His glory and His honor so that we might enjoy Him and glorify Him in ways that we never could do individually but we were designed to do intimately in the covenant of intimacy, marriage.

Now in so doing we come to this issue of divorce. Divorce is a God given instrument where God allows it, which though it is never commanded except for one exception, it is Biblically regulated by God's commands for the protection of those who have been the victims of patterned covenantal immorality and or abandonment, as well as an instrument of mercy for the violators protecting them from death. Why would I say divorce is not only there as a regulated instrument to protect those who are the victims of patterned immorality or abandonment and therefore it has been designed to protect them but by the way it's also an act of mercy to those who have done it to them? Yes, God has chosen to be merciful in the new covenant by doing this. In a real sense, the whole issue of divorce was already there in the Old Testament and in the New Testament He says covenantal immorality, to have been unfaithful to your husband or wife, gives grounds to the person for divorce. Then that protects them. They are not mandated to divorce them but they are allowed to if it is a measure needed to protect them from that continual unfaithfulness in the marriage itself.

So Harry, how is that merciful? Let me ask you a question. What is it that ends a marriage? Here is what the Bible says. God designed marriage and when someone is married who joins them? Is it the preacher? No. Is it the rings? No. At the conclusion of a wedding ceremony I never say "is there any one here who objects this marriage" because there is always some neurotic, particularly in a Presbyterian Church that will stand up and say something so I just avoid that. I never say, "By the laws of the state" although I want to be obedient to the laws of the state but as a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ I say, "You having taken your covenantal vows, covenantal promise, have indicated your commitment with the exchange of these rings, it is my joy to announce that you are man and wife united in the holy bonds of the covenant of marriage, therefore upon the consummation of this union before God I pronounce you man and wife."

It is my humble opinion and by the way historically backed up in our law system that if the two people go through the whole marriage ceremony and they go out in the

back and she says, “I just made a big mistake.” He looks at her and says, “You know what, I think I made a bigger mistake. Look let’s go back up there and turn all this stuff in.” I hope this never happens to me but I would just say go tell your friends and give them your gifts back. Harry, wouldn’t they have to go get a divorce? No, I don’t think they are married yet. Our law historically has said they are not married yet. In fact if they went to the courts and told them what happened then the court would have said, “have you been enjoined in the act of covenantal intimacy?” They answered “no” and then the court would have given an annulment not a divorce. It would be null and void because the covenant was never consummated. It has never been established because it has been recognized that consummation is the declaration of God that they’ve been joined. Let the marriage bed be held in honor among all, fornicators and adulterers God will judge. What we have done in that marriage ceremony is we have set up the covenant of marriage therefore that bed on the night of the marriage in not a bed of adultery or fornication but a marriage bed and that consummates the relationship together. Then they are man and wife but it is God who joins them together.

This is what Jesus says in Matthew 19 – those whom God has joined together let no man put asunder (separate). Separate and divorce are two words that are used continually in an interchangeable way. Let no man separate. In other words, God makes the marriage and only God can separate the marriage. Normally how does God separate a marriage? Let’s look in Romans 7 for a moment here. Here the Apostle Paul is talking about how we are not under law, we’re not tied to the law but we are tied to God’s grace and in doing so he uses an illustration that gives us some insight on marriage. Romans 7:1-3 says, *1 Or do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives? 2 For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. 3 Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.*

So if a woman walks away from her husband and marries another man while he is still living then he says that she is guilty of adultery. If her husband dies then that marriage is over and she is free to marry someone else. What has separated them? God has separated you. How? It is appointed unto man once to die and then the judgment. As that man has died then she is now freed and therefore she is now free to remarry. So God has so established that. What was the penalty for adultery in the Old Testament? It was death. So what would have happened to the marriage if a man had committed adultery? He would die and it’s over but in the New Testament as God has brought the separation of the church from the state He has not given the power of the sword to the church. Sometimes I do wish we had it and we might even institute again capital punishment for adultery. That might have a restraining effect, I’m not sure but it is not given into the hands of the church. It has been given to the hands of the state. The state does not enact capital punishment for adultery. Therefore the church mercifully does not put the adulterer to death but does not make the victim continue in the relationship. In the Old Testament the victim would have been freed because the person would have been put to death. In the New Testament the victim is still protected but now mercy is extended to the violator in that they are not put to death at that point.

So what would be those points of divorce that we need to study? I want to go through some directives and then I will read a couple of verses from Matthew 19. The first thing I want to mention about divorce is that God hates divorce. Why? It is because God did not put divorce and His creation order. Divorce is something that has come about in terms of humanity and exists only because of sin. God allows and regulates divorce and except for this one exception He does not command it. Secondly, God does not command divorce but He does give commandments to regulate divorce when God allows divorce or when God allows the separation. God joins and God separate. While God doesn't mandate divorce He has regulated it at certain points.

Thirdly, divorce while not necessarily a sin can be sinful. That is you can have a sinful divorce. If you have left a husband or a wife apart from a God ordained regulation as to those times that you can do so then that particular act of divorce would be sinful. But anytime there is a divorce even if it is according to Scripture it's because sin is present. That's why God hates divorce. It wouldn't be here without sin, either sinful divorces or biblical divorces because of the sin of a violator and covenant breaker.

Fourthly, God regulates divorce. How does He regulate divorce? Here is this statement from the Westminster confession of Faith concerning divorce. *Although the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments, unduly to put asunder those whom God hath joined together in marriage.* This is saying that man is such a sinner that man will probably try to invent reasons to have a divorce that they ought not to have. Because men and women are sinners they will study, that is they will try to develop arguments for divorces beyond that which the Bible places unduly to put asunder, that is to divorce when God has joined them together. He says that's the corruption of man that we will corrupt the way God has regulated divorce. *Yet nothing but adultery, or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the Church or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage; wherein a public and orderly course of proceeding is to be observed; and the persons concerned in it, not left to their own wills and discretion in their own case.*

So our confession says the only grounds that God has allowed in the church and by the way the writers of the confession are asking the civil magistrate to so order marriage for the well-being of society that is through willful desertion or abandonment or adultery or sexual immorality that can no way be remedied by the church will God allow. This would be the only remedy sought because divorce is not a solution. It is only a protection. Therefore he says unless those things are present is cause sufficient to dissolve the bond of marriage.

So in the distillation of biblical truth they said in the confession that man is so sinful he is going to try to invent arguments for divorce that aren't biblical. Secondly the only biblical grounds that are recognized in Scripture would be immorality or willful desertion. By the way those should not be immediate cause for divorce in fact the civil magistrate and the church ought to get engaged in order to restore and reconcile the marriage. If divorce must be done as divine protection then it must not be done as a matter of private entitlement. It must be done in a public orderly process with clarity that is observed with everything done decently and in order.

What would they be calling upon? Matthew 19:3-6 says **3** *And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?"* **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'? 6 So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." Jesus is telling them there is no law commanding divorce. The law commands unity. God's creation law is a call to unity. That's what God has made - one man, one woman, joined together by God and that they are one. Therefore man is not to put asunder what God has joined together.

He goes on to say in Matthew 19:7-9, *7 They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" 8 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.* In other words why does it have to be there? It is only because of sin therefore God has regulated it when necessary in such sinful cases. Harry, is all divorce sin? No. If divorce in and of itself is sin then you are of necessity declaring that God is a sinner.

We could go to the book of Isaiah were the book of Jeremiah concerning this but I'm going to choose the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah 3:1 says, *If a man divorces his wife and she goes from him and becomes another man's wife, will he return to her? Would not that land be greatly polluted?* Now, having made a point that sometimes a man has had to divorce his wife he doesn't go back to her but notice what he then says. Jeremiah 3:1 continued, *You (My people Israel) have played the whore with many lovers; and would you return to me? declares the LORD.* Now verse 6-8 says, *6 The LORD said to me in the days of King Josiah: "Have you seen what she did, that faithless one, Israel, how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and there played the whore? 7 And I thought, 'After she has done all this she will return to me,' but she did not return, and her treacherous sister Judah saw it. 8 She saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce.*

Why did God divorce Israel, those 10 northern tribes? The divorce wasn't sin. Now it was because of their sin of immorality but the divorce was not a sin. You can sinfully divorce but divorce in and of itself is not necessarily a sin. So here in this passage God divorced Israel therefore divorce cannot be a sin because God has done it. That's just a very clear statement and God certainly does not sin but you can sinfully divorce and if divorce has to be in acted then it has to be biblically regulated and that's what Moses did in Deuteronomy 24.

Now for those professing believers (we don't know if they were Christians or not) in the context of the Pharisees questions in Matthew 19 Jesus says to them in Matthew 19:9, *And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual **immorality**, and marries another, commits adultery.* In our older translations they actually translated the word immorality as adultery. It's not the word for adultery. It is the Hebrew word *pornia* in which we actually get the word pornography from. The word *pornia* includes adultery but it's broader than adultery. For instance, it would include sexual perversion such as homosexual addictions. It would include various types of sexual immorality. Adultery would be one of those things. So Jesus is saying here in this passage that if you divorce your wife unbiblically except for the cause of sexual immorality then you have committed adultery if you marry someone else.

Matthew 19:10-11 says, *10 The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." 11 But he said to them, "Not everyone can*

receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. In other words you don't seek singleness unless God has given you the gift of singleness. You can't just accept that statement. It is better to seek God's grace for a biblical marriage than out of fear of marriage to pursue singleness. That doesn't mean that there aren't people gifted and call to it providentially and by the hand of God from time to time but that it is not something that is necessarily sought out of fear is if someone says, "if I get into a bad marriage I can get out, I can't cross my fingers at the altar and then walk away whenever I want to." Jesus says that you cannot do that and He establishes *pornea* as that biblical regulation where God has allowed the putting asunder or separation. Again, He does not mandate it where he says if your husband or wife commits sexual immorality then you have to divorce them. No, it is a protection for pattern sexual immorality that would then destroy. So God regulates divorce by establishing *pornea*, covenantal sexual immorality of a man or a wife breaking covenant with their spouse.

I believe the Bible teaches also that there is another aspect of this. There is some discussion in the church concerning this. The writers of the confession used both sexual immorality and willful desertion. Where did they get willful desertion from? The writers of the confession are not necessarily inerrant by any means. We could go to a couple of texts on this but I'm just going to show you one. In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul is answering a series of questions that the church of Corinth had sent him. 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 says, **10** *To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not **separate** from her husband* **11** *(but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.* Paul is simply repeating what Jesus has already said (not I, but the Lord). The word separate used here does not mean I'm going to go off and take a three-year vacation. The word separate is used interchangeably with divorce. He goes on to say that if you do sinfully divorce then you're not to remarry. You must repent and be reconciled to your husband or to your wife. So Paul is speaking to the believers at Corinth who were married and he tells them that God has joined them together. He is saying exactly what Jesus said in Matthew 19. Don't separate.

Is there the exception clause? Yes there is but Paul doesn't repeat it but that stands because Jesus said. If they committed sexual immorality then they can divorce but if you separate from your wife or divorce your wife, or separate from your husband or divorce your husband for any other cause then you would not be allowed to remarry because it's a sinful divorce. You need to repent of it, come back and be reconciled to your spouse. That's the first section of what he's teaching. Here he is speaking to married couples who are both believers.

Now, he goes on to talk to believers who are married to unbelievers and they have this question—"is it okay if I leave them and go find me a Christian husband or wife?" Paul is not talking to covenant believers like Jesus was back in Matthew 19 here in this next passage. Here the Gospel has gone to the most pagan city in all of the world which is Corinth and as it has gone to Corinth something has happened. First there are marriages of covenant involving equally yoked believers and he is telling them about the sanctity of marriage just as Jesus taught. Now he wants to speak to the rest of them. What Paul is saying here is that when Jesus taught on marriage He was speaking concerning covenantal relationships. Now Paul is going to apply it to a particular group of people who have asked me a question. So how do we apply the sanctity of marriage in the

situation of a believer and an unbeliever because you're so concerned that you don't have joy in your home? So they want to know if it's okay if they can divorce their husband or wife because they are not a believer.

He goes on to say in 1 Corinthians 7:12, 13; **12** *To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. 13 If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.* So you are not allowed to divorce simply because they are an unbeliever if that unbeliever consents to live with you. Verse 14 says, **14** *For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.* In other words, you have already been taught of God's covenant promises to your children, they are not converted but they are set aside. They are holy by being born into a home where there is a believer. You already know that. If you will take that principle and apply it, your presence as a believer hasn't saved your husband or wife but it has set them apart. They are being sanctified. They are being impacted. So don't walk away from them. If they leave you then I'll deal with that but you as the believer do not walk away from them.

What if they won't stay? 1 Corinthians 7:15, 16 says, **15** *But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. 16 For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?* So here the believer was wanting to leave their unbelieving spouse and wanted a Christian spouse now that they were Christians but Paul said you were not allowed. God has joined you to them. If they will stay with you then you stay with them and by the way your presence is what God has put there to lead them to saving faith in Christ. So take on the opportunity.

But what if they leave me, the believer? If they leave you then you are no longer enslaved or no longer bound and you are now free. The question of course that's in the context is, are you free to marry? Yes. They have abandoned you. They have willfully deserted you. There is a question that comes up on this where there is disagreement in the body of Christ and much discussion and that is – is this only in the case when an unbeliever leaves? The writers of the Westminster confession would say no. They would say the principle was applied in this case but even if a believer leaves the other person and they haven't renounced their faith but they just left them sinfully then that person is still not bound. That's why they put in place sexual immorality and willful desertion. But in this context what he is doing is addressing it particularly to a particular case that he was asked a question of and he says, "you can't separate yourself." You can't divorce someone who is an unbeliever that you are married to just because they are an unbeliever. No, the sanctity of marriage as Christ so ordained it causes you to stay there and more than that with much hope that you might win them to saving faith in Christ. Just as your presence sets apart your children, your presence will set them apart and bring them to saving faith by God's grace.

What about if they leave us? Then you are free. If they have willfully deserted you then you are free to marry someone else. That's what the question was all about. Am I Biblically divorced if they have abandoned me and the answer is yes. That is what Paul is saying. You are now at peace. You are not enslaved to them because they have abandoned you.

I want to finish up by giving you two encouragements. First of all, divorce is never a solution and honesty demands the full realization while even in necessary cases of divorce because of patterned immorality, willful desertion, there will still be negative consequences. It will show up in the lives of children, in the lives of our testimony and in our own hearts. Never having false guilt or shame in these matters but there are consequences, therefore every effort for Gospel solutions should always be attempted by the church of Jesus Christ. We don't run to divorce because it's a solution. It's only a last resort protection.

I have been in the ministry a long time and I only know of two times in my life that I ever recommended it. In this case, the Apostle Paul does it so in 1 Corinthians 7:15; *But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so.* You don't stop that divorce for God has called you to peace. If that person has willfully deserted and walked away from you then you are commanded to understand that God has separated the marriage through their sinful act. But it is never a solution. Therefore what we ought to always do is seek with all of our hearts the Gospel remedies because where sin abounds grace can much more abound.

Here are a few thoughts on remarriage. The question on remarriage is really resolved in terms of the divorce – is it a Biblical divorce or not? That answers the question of remarriage. What if it's not a Biblical divorce prior to conversion? Then that's where the wisdom, guidance and leadership of elders need to come into the process of how things have gone. What if I sinfully divorced and came to repentance and I went back and my spouse had remarried which they were free to do because I had deserted them? All of that requires pastoral thought but the basic rule of thumb is this – the answer to remarriage is to deal with the issue of divorce. Was it Biblical or not? Was it regulated by God's Word or sinful?

This last week I finished a series of two weeks of programs called “conversations” that we do for the radio. We interviewed for two weeks a lady in the PCA whose husband was a PCA pastor with patterned adultery and who abandoned her and the children. We talked about her remarriage and that yes she was free to remarry but she explained to me why she never did. Do I think she is free to remarry? Yes but it was amazing to hear the wisdom she shared. She said, “My children were looking to see if Jesus was going to be enough and I decided as much as I wanted to remarry I wanted my children to see that He will be a father to you, the fatherless and a husband to me, the husbandless. I know I would be free to marry and I don't think I would be less than spiritual. Secondly, my children were in an unbelievable moment of fragility and if I had sought remarriage I believe my attention would have been brought away from them toward someone else at a time they needed all of my attention.” I want to tell you I dropped the microphone in the recording studio to be confronted with such wonderful, spiritual maturity.

I don't know where you would come out in that decision but don't automatically say, “this marriage failed so now what do I need to have my life meaningful is another one.” Is remarriage possible in such cases where you have been sinfully divorced and you are Biblically divorced? Yes but is remarriage automatically the next step in what God has for you.

That brings me to the last pastoral thought of encouragement. It is here that we need to learn how to minister to people. When people have sinfully divorced how do we

reach out to them? As much as I want to do away with unbiblical, sinful divorces we can't treat it like it's the unpardonable sin. We have to learn how to hold the line Biblically but minister to people graciously. When people have been divorced or deserted or have had to divorce because they were the victims of patterned sexual immorality, you have to get some grace courage to step into that persons life to minister to them because they are now alone.

If their husband or wife had died what would you have done? We would have said, "Oh bless their heart" because we are good Christian southerners. The next thing we would have done is gotten meals for them and visited them. Then we would have included them but if they're alone because their husband or wife walked away we are almost afraid to reach out to them. We are hurting for them. You are not affirming divorce by reaching out to them and by the way its not a germ that you might catch in your family if you reach out to them. I say this not out of any need as a pastor to discipline this congregation but I say it out of reaffirming what I normally see in your life. I just want us to take it to another level. As readily as I watch us reach into people with crisis and death, this also we need to reach into.

I'll never forget what the lady said on the radio program. She said, "Harry, believe me it was worse than if he had died. I praise God that my children and I had not played drive-by church and we were engaged in the body of Christ and they surrounded us and loved us. So all four of my children, now 12 years later love Jesus and they are not angry with him." I believe the Lord did that to His people by reaching out. May God guide us and direct us as we continue to try to minister in these areas and be guided by His Word, not out of fear, drawing lines where we shouldn't, nor out of conforming to the world, being afraid to say what the Bible teaches us on it, but being faithful to God's Word and speaking the truth in love and grace. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we have been able to spend together. Thank You for this Lord's Day in Your Word. Thank You for the opportunity to walk through Your Word and help us to be faithful to it. God, please allow us to prepare our sons and daughters and the singles whom You've called to be married, for those marriages that You would so ordain. May we set Godly examples in our marriages and in our families. Father, where sin has brought its corruption may we bring Gospel solutions and if divorce ever is needed as a protection may we bring Gospel ministry to reach the violator with a call to repentance to reach the victim with the love and grace and truth that's found in Jesus. God I thank You for these people. I thank You for those who are so moved to know what the Bible teaches on this that they would even take the time to be here tonight and work their way through it. Continue to guide them, guide our pastors and our elders and our deacons, guide this congregation. May we be a repository of truth out of love to Christ. In Jesus Name, Amen.