

Christian Families (2) – Marriage (Kisumu Conference 2010) – Matthew 19:1-12

What is a marriage that pleases God? We have seen that marriage is very important in the Bible. It is at the beginning of Genesis, and at the end of Revelation. Moses, the prophets, the apostles and Jesus all spoke about it. Do we take God's word seriously here? We will concentrate on just one passage, Matthew 19:1-12.

The Question Jesus Was Asked (v1-3)

The Pharisees asked Jesus a question about divorce. When was divorce allowed? What reasons were there? The Pharisees were often asking Jesus questions (e.g. Mark 2:16,18,24, 7:5, 8:11). This was not because they honoured him as a teacher. They often asked because they were trying to trap him. We don't completely know why they asked him this question. We know that it was a question they were confused about; different Pharisees gave different answers. Perhaps if they were trying to trap him. If Jesus made divorce too hard, then he might become unpopular or some would accuse him of contradicting Moses (Deuteronomy 24:1-4); if he made it too easy, then they could accuse him of not honouring marriage or of not bringing the purifying that the Messiah should bring. How would you have answered their question?

Jesus' Answer: First Part (v4-6)

Jesus told the Pharisees to read their Bibles! The answer to questions about marriage does not come from asking the wazees, or professional counsellors, or the “expert” on TV. We should not ask our clan, tribe or culture. Marriage is God's gift, and God has told us all we need to know about it in the Scriptures. Where do you go with your questions (Isaiah 8:20)?

Jesus went back to the beginning – to Genesis 2. He took us back to the original, and to the maker's plan. This is how to know about marriage. If you want to use a DVD player, you will need to read the maker's instruction book. And you must use it to play DVDs – if you try to make it cook ugali, or make a phone call, you will be disappointed; it will not really work. We need to know God's design for marriage, if we are going to have marriages that please him.

The first teaching is that marriage is from God – it was something that the Creator did (v4), and in a marriage it is God who joins together (v6). We are not free to make our own way. We must honour marriage, God's way. Marriage must be what God says, and nothing else. Sexual activity was given by God only to be used within marriage; nowhere else.

So, what was the first marriage like? Genesis 2:24-25 tells us that in marriage, one man joins with one woman. They leave behind their parents as the most important people in their lives, and they join together in a new, shared life. The verses clearly teach that a man's wife must come before his clan, and before his parents. He must place her best interests first whenever there is a conflict of interest. Many marriages go badly because people disobey this teaching. But the Bible says that it is husband and wife – not father and son, or mother and daughter – who are “one flesh”.

Coming together, the husband and wife should then have one, shared life. They should give themselves fully to each other. The primary reason why God gave marriage was not for children or for sex, but for companionship (friendship) – he said that it was “not good” for Adam to be alone. To solve Adam's alone-ness, he did not make a work-colleague, a concubine or a servant girl, but a wife. Is your wife your best friend? Do you share more with her than with anyone else? Do you take time to know her, listening to her, sharing with her, guiding her and nurturing her, and enjoying being with her? That is God's plan. In a fallen world, it can be hard work; but are we aiming for this goal or have we settled for something less?

Divorce is a serious sin because it is fighting against God's action (v6). For Adam, he would have been putting away his own rib! For the same reason, homosexuality and polygamy are also seriously wrong. 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6 tell us that a polygamist is forbidden to be a church leader. Big failures

like this in the area of marriage mean that if we are serious about obeying God, then the first thing to do is to step down because we are disqualified.

Jesus' Answer: Second Part (v7-9)

The Pharisees then asked why Moses had “commanded” divorce. In fact the passage they were speaking about (Deuteronomy 24:1-4) did not command divorce, or even approve of it. Rather, it recognised that in a sinful, fallen world, divorces sometimes happen. When they do happen the woman needs to be protected from harm that may come to her. The law in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 discouraged men from sending their wives away too quickly, and it gave those wives certain rights to prevent them from suffering too much afterwards.

Jesus says that this law was written because of the people's hard hearts. It was not because God was happy with divorce. Divorce was never part of God's original plan. The only time when divorce is allowed is when there has been sexual unfaithfulness (adultery) – Paul adds one more exception, when an unbeliever refuses to live with a believer because of their Christian faith (1 Corinthians 7:15). Here we see Jesus acting as the true Messiah; he came to purify and cleanse marriage, restoring it to its original purity.

Do any of us have the same spirit as the Pharisees? Do we use the Bible just as a list of verses to justify our own hard hearts? Do we find that the Bible teaches that a husband has authority, and we use this as an excuse to be mean, hard tyrants in our families? And if we are questioned, we blame the Bible instead of blaming ourselves?

Christ is the bridegroom of his people (Ephesians 5:25ff, John 1:27-30). He will never divorce his wife, the church, or add a second wife. Instead, he will be faithful to us, feeding and cherishing us until we come to perfection, as his own body. This is how a husband should treat his wife. The good news is that even though our marriages often fall far short of Christ's standards, he shed his blood to take away our sin. In the way of repentance, there is mercy and renewal. However far you have fallen, the way back begins with turning again to the “heavenly husband” who will never turn you away.

The Disciples' Response (v10-12)

The disciples said, that if Jesus' teaching was true, it would be “better not to marry”. What a shocking response! We might feel some sympathy for the wives of men who could say this. But the disciples said this even after being with Jesus for three years. Is it unlikely that there are others amongst us who will say the same things in their hearts? God had said that it was “not good” for Adam to be single, without his wife. Now the disciples said that because God's way was so hard, it was “better” to be without a wife, directly contradicting God's words. Are we grieved that the ideas about marriage in our country also directly contradict God's words? Or do we secretly like to be the “big men” who treat their wives as inferior to friends and clan instead of treating them as “one flesh” with us?

Jesus replied to say that singleness was not for most people. There were only some who should remain single. Some must remain single because either by birth or by violence, they have become eunuchs. Others are given a special gift by God to remain single for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Paul also speaks about this in 1 Corinthians 7 (e.g. verses 7, 32-34). It is a gift given by God to enable someone to be free from the responsibilities and difficulties that marriage brings. This is an honourable calling, and we should not despise it if God gives someone this gift. But those who do not have such a gift will only cause themselves temptation and trouble if they neglect God's provision of marriage. For most people, marriage is God's plan. There is no encouragement in this verse for people who want to remain single because they dislike responsibility and they want to live an undisciplined life.

Culture is often wrong about marriage. We cannot dismiss the above teaching as just part of the preacher's culture. Matthew 19:1-12 tells us what Jesus – and God, in the beginning – command about marriage. We must not ignore it, even if culture will resist the needed reforms. It is our duty to reform culture using the Word of God. And reform must begin in our own hearts and homes.