

Part 34: Kingdom Faithfulness

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There is a story about the once famous actor and comedian W.C. Fields. Fields' was known throughout his life for his particular fondness for fame, women and alcohol. For all intents and purposes he was the last person his friends would have ever thought to be a religious person.

However as the story goes, one friend of Fields', a former LA Times journalist named Gene Fowler, went to go visit the actor in his retirement community. Fowler was shocked when he found Fields sitting in a garden reading a Bible. Confused by such a change of heart the journalists asked what he was up to. Fields turned to him and without breaking his concentration replied: "Looking for loopholes."

We love finding loopholes. Without loopholes we would never sign up for a free week trial of anything. Christian or not, we know loopholes relieve the burden of commitment and make life easier. Today we are going to see Jesus addressing a culture of loophole seekers in the book of Matthew.

We are working through the book of Matthew and Jesus in this book is beginning to shape the values of those who claim to be his disciples. Throughout the book Jesus has been proclaiming the good news about the Kingdom of Heaven. This is the kingdom that we enjoyed in the Garden of Eden before Adam and Eve fell in sin, and it is the Kingdom that those who are born again will enjoy without competition in the New Heavens and the New Earth. But for modern believers we live in this interesting time where God's Kingdom is not the only Kingdom.

Sin has confused our allegiance and complicated our lives. We know the drama of this even if we look at the microcosm of election season. Everyone is vying for your vote and it seems almost impossible to discern which promise is real and which Kingdom is best. But in the gospel of Jesus he not only proclaims the true promise of God, but his miracles, his death and resurrection displays the truthfulness and benefit of it. No kingdom is like the Kingdom of our God.

Because of that, we know that residents of God's kingdom will live differently than those of another kingdom. Last week we saw how distinct our relationships towards our brothers and sisters in faith ought to be. In a world where the prevailing mentality is, "Fool me once, I'm out of here," Jesus calls for us to go towards those who have sinned against us and do the hard work of fighting to restore that relationship.

Jesus showed us how hard decisions and firm words of discipline are often the most loving and other-seeking actions we can do.

And today Jesus is taking this relational distinction and he is pressing it into the most intimate places of our lives: our marriages. The point Jesus is going to make today is that for those who are believers in Christ Jesus, our marriages, and our singleness will forever be distinct from our world. Why? Because behind every single heart, behind every wedding vow, in the shadow of every broken home lies the transformative power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Today Jesus is going to speak to the value of marriage by addressing the issue of divorce. I want to say three quick things before we get rolling in the text today. First: If you have been visiting this church, maybe you have been invited by your co-worker, you have experienced two sermons, one on discipline and the other on divorce. You may be thinking that this is a very odd religion indeed. But over the course of today I hope that you will see this: The gospel is just as beautiful and lovely even in times of immense hardship.

Christianity is not rendered void in the trials of life. It is not a religion for the blindly optimistic, but for the realistic. Jesus and his gospel is not intimidated by the circumstances in your life. There is no sin too deep, no hurt too painful for the gospel to lose its luster. God has given his people a promise in the Bible saying, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." Topics like this that we are going to look at today remind us that God is not far from us even when it seems we are most alone. I pray that the comfort of the gospel you hear today equips you to see and believe in the beautiful message which brings hope to every corner of our life.

Second: Statistics tell us that there is probably not a single person in this room who has not had a personal encounter with divorce. That means someone in your family tree has gone through the process of divorce. Which means one sermon is not sufficient to deal with all the pastoral issues which surround divorce. My goal is not to provide a comprehensive theology of divorce, that wasn't even Jesus goal in this text. In other words my goal is not for you to leave here and think unequivocally that I have given you everything you need to know about divorce and remarriage.

I say this for two reasons: One, there is still much disagreement over the issue of divorce even among believers with whom we share much in common with. And two, the issue of divorce is best worked out personally through the individual and pastoral care of you and the elders. Through the medium of preaching we can only focus on the larger themes and some of those will not include your personal situation.

Third: As I speak to the issue of divorce today, I am not speaking on the issue of abuse. Abuse is something which changes the dynamic of the relationship immediately because physical safety is at risk. If you are being physically abused by a spouse, leave here, find a safe place and call the police. Report it to the authorities, make sure you and your family are safe, and then speak to your pastor about how we can help in this hard situation. If you feel you are being emotionally or verbally abused, reach out to an elder or a close friend and begin to ask for help. So as we talk about divorce today, I just want to take the issue of abuse and remove it from the context. Not because it is not important, not because it doesn't happen, but because I don't want to send mixed messages to those who are in immediate physical danger.

With that being said here is what we are going to see today in the book of Matthew. Jesus is going to be asked three questions in this text and these three questions are going to reveal three distinct perspectives on marriage, divorce and singleness. We are going to look at the "Original Pattern of Marriage," "The Present Reality of Marriage," and the "Future Hope of Relationships." In answering these three questions, Jesus is going to provide four affirmations of marriage and divorce.

With that being said let's pick up with **Matthew 19:1-3**.

Perhaps you've heard the phrase, "This is why we can't have nice things." I can think of no better phrase to apply to the Pharisees in this text. Here we have Jesus, with great crowds following him as he moves

south towards Jerusalem. As he is marching to what he himself knows to be his own death, he is healing large amounts of people.

And the Pharisees still aren't happy. They go to this miracle-working, disease-healing, bread-giving man and they bring up a legal dispute hoping to trap Jesus. They say, "Yeah, sure he's healing people. But certainly he can't be that good." And they ask him a question couched in the culture of the day: "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?"

The back drop of this question actually comes from something Moses said to God's people Israel way back in Deuteronomy 24. In Deuteronomy Moses is giving all these laws and regulations so that the people might live in peace and not harm each other. The law was given to do what we have been talking about in our Gospel-Focused Relationship series, to help them glorify God and love other people. The law sought to call for obedience to God and to limit the extent of sin towards others. In this section Moses says this: **Deuteronomy 24:1**.

We will return to Deuteronomy in a bit, but what's important right now is what the Pharisees have done with this verse. It was assumed that divorce was not only allowable, but commanded in some situations. But even amongst the Jewish Rabbi's there was disagreement as to when a divorce was commanded. There was on Rabbi named Shammai who was the more conservative pundit. He looks at Deuteronomy 24 and emphasizes the word "indecent." Meaning if your wife has acted indecent, which he describes as adultery, then you ought to get a divorce.

Of the more liberal interpretation were two options. The first was Rabbi Hillel who looked at this verse and emphasized not "indecent" but the word "some" or "any." If there was anything indecent in the actions of your wife you could divorce her. This included her burning a meal, her going out in public without a veil, or even her mother being offensive to you. The second, and less followed Rabbi, was Rabbi Akiba. He picked up on the phrase "favor in his eyes" and said that if a man finds a woman more attractive he is eligible to pursue divorce.

Three men, three loopholes for marriage. And the Pharisees here approach Jesus looking for their own loophole. Which side of this debate will he affirm, if he affirms one side certainly we can turn the other side against him.

But Jesus is not so duped. What we are going to see is that he is going to answer this challenge by looking all the way back to **The Original Pattern for Marriage**. Look with me how Jesus answers them. **Matthew 19:4-6**.

Now you can imagine how inflammatory this answer would have been to the Pharisees. They come to Jesus couched in the academic argument of Jewish scholars. The lines of been drawn Shammai or Hillel. But Jesus answers them first saying, "Have you not read?"

Of course they've read. All they've done is read. In fact they probably read the writings of both these men exhaustively just to prepare for this attempt at divine entrapment. Jesus in all his wisdom draws a different side, a distinct side. The side that God himself designed in the Garden of Eden.

Jesus not only affirms marriage as divinely designed, but in quoting the Old Testament here shows that we as New Testament believers ought not to abandon the Old Testament. There is a very popular pastor and author who is presently calling the church to "unhitch themselves from the Old Testament." But

what Jesus is showing in this text is that we cannot unhitch ourselves from the Old Testament any more than we can unhitch ourselves from Jesus himself.

Jesus goes all the way back to Genesis two where Adam and Eve participate in the first ever marriage ceremony. Look with me at this ceremony in **Genesis 2:22-25**. This passage is vastly influential in terms of how we understand marriage. There are three people in the Bible who speak to the issue of divorce: Moses, Jesus and Paul. All three of those men who write on a biblical view of divorce begin their understanding of marriage with this text.

It was Moses who explained the marriage ceremony in Genesis 2 as a leaving and cleaving of two individuals. Adam and Eve were made, they were joined through sexual union as the seal of their relationship, and that seal untied them together as one flesh.

Jesus picks up on this theme and develops it more when in Matthew 19 he says in verse 6, "So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

Jesus isn't cornered into picking a side because he points out to these men that they are starting at the wrong spot. They say, "Is it ok to get rid of your spouse for any reason at all? From spoiled stew to unfaithfulness?" And Jesus says, "It is never ok. Because that's not what it was designed for."

This is the first affirmation Jesus makes about marriage: **Marriage is an exclusive, life-long covenant**. God made marriage to be good, to be exclusive, and to be life-long. Why? Is it just because God loves good marriages? In a sense, yes. Most sociologists admit that it is better for the economy, better for the couple, and better for the children to have a marriage relationship which is steadfast and solid. It would make sense that God's ideal marriage helps people flourish on every level. But that's not the only reason why.

We have seen how Moses used this text, we have seen how Jesus used this text, now we must consider how Paul uses this text: **Ephesians 5:28-32**. Paul just like Jesus expresses the oneness which happens through sexual union. Husbands ought to love their wives like they would love themselves because you are one. She is part of you, and you are part of her. You belong to one another exclusively. But just as Jesus added more clarification to this text so too does Paul: this marriage relationship of leaving and cleaving is meant to point to Christ and the church.

Why is marriage exclusive and life-long? Because it is meant to represent the exclusive and eternal covenant which Christ has made to his people, the church. I think it's safe to say in a culture where prenuptial agreements are becoming more common, we must start where Jesus starts.

This is the second affirmation Jesus makes about marriage: **God is opposed to divorce**. The early church father John Chrysostom says this: "**If it had been His will that he should put this one away, and bring in another, when He had made one man, He would have formed many women.**" Actually in Malachi 2:16, God says that if a man hates his wife and divorces her he has blood on his hands. To violate such an intimate relationship is to be violent towards your spouse.

We ought not answer the question, or prepare for divorce if we do not have a picture of what marriage was intended to be in the garden, and ultimately in Jesus Christ.

Even though Jesus insulted their academic sensibilities, and successfully juked them back to God's original design, the Pharisees were still grinning with delight at this point. Why? Because Jesus may have side stepped the puddle, but he just fell off the cliff.

Look at what they say next, the second testing: **Matthew 19:7**. Jesus may have sidestepped the Shammai/Hillel debate, but now it seems that Jesus has set himself up in opposition of Moses. The Pharisees are trying to use the word of God in the Old Testament against the Word of God in the flesh.

But this won't work. I won't work for the Pharisees and it won't work today. In our culture it is *en vogue* to try and pit scripture against Christianity. We never need to fear that. Certainly we shouldn't be overly simplistic. But to think that an infinite and perfect God can be trapped and rendered mute by his own word is just silly. You can get trapped in your own words, God can't.

Why do we not need to fear this? Because as this text shows, we have Jesus. Jesus who not only fulfills the law, but is himself the faithful interpretation of the law. Jesus uses this clarifying role to stress another element of relationships: **The Present Reality of Marriage**.

Look with me at **Matthew 19:8-9**. Here is the big picture of what Jesus is saying here: God's ideal plan was and is marriage exclusively for life until death dissolves the marriage covenant. But in this present world sin has brought with it potential dangers to this covenant. Sin wages war against our marriage.

Sin has, as Jesus said here, hardened our hearts against God and against others. Where God's original plan was for humanity married, single or otherwise was to glorify God and love others, sin seeks to provide substitute gods at the expense of others.

It is because of this present state we see third affirmation: **Divorce is always caused by sin**.

Did you notice back in verse 7 that the Pharisees said, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce?" How did Jesus answer? "Because of sin Moses, allowed, or permitted you to divorce your wives."

The culture of divorce in Jesus' time was that if you qualified for either Shammai's or Hillel's standard for divorce you were required to divorce her. They saw Moses's words in Deuteronomy 24 as a command that they could use for their own gain. In the Hebrew grammar of Deuteronomy 24 there is no command given to write or give a certificate of divorce to anyone.

In fact the purpose of Deuteronomy 24 was to protect the divorced woman from further harm or abandonment. In Jesus' culture women were becoming increasingly allowed to divorce from their husbands. It was Herodias wanting to divorce her husband and marry her uncle which John the Baptist opposed and ended up being beheaded for [Matt 14]. But back in Moses' time the culture was far more patriarchal: the woman was in no position to divorce her husband.

So what happened was men would divorce their wives at the drop of a hat without a moments notice. And further, the reason why the Bible stresses such care for widows and for orphans is that a woman who was once married and now is not had almost no social standing in her society. So men were getting drunk, finding something trivial, sending their wives away, and bringing much harm not only to the sanctity of marriage, but the woman and society itself.

So when Moses obligated the certificate of divorce it was to do two things to protect the wife: 1. It provided a period of waiting so that the man would have to sober up, go to the Levites and have the document written up. It was a blessing of bureaucracy that they may have time to realize this was not a good idea. 2. It legally dissolved the marriage so that the former husband could not, in spite, claim her if she were going to be married to another.

So Jesus is saying, Moses never commanded divorce, and you shouldn't assume you must divorce your spouse even if sin is involved. Neither Moses, nor Jesus, nor Paul prescribe divorce. But in certain circumstances, for the protection and the limitation of sin, divorce is permitted. This is the fourth affirmation: **Divorce is not always sinful.**

Because God designed marriage to be life-long and exclusive, because God opposes divorce, because all divorce is caused by sin, divorce is never good, and yet divorce is not always sinful. And Jesus here gives us one circumstance: adultery. In 1 Corinthians Paul will add another that we will not look at today [abandonment, or spouse no longer consenting to live with the other]. But here Jesus says, unless there has been marital unfaithfulness, you should not even be in a position to consider divorce. The grammar of this text actually plays against the Pharisees again. The assumption in the Jewish divorce culture was that it was always the woman who was the offending party, but the grammar of verse 9 says that if you divorce your wife for anything other than sexual immorality, then it is you who are the guilty party.

So in short, here is the frame work that we believe Moses, Jesus, and Paul to be putting up regarding divorce which is not sinful. If you are the victim of unfaithfulness, you are free to divorce and remarry. If you are the victim of your spouse no longer consenting to live with you, meaning that through violence or them physically refusing to live with you, then you are free to divorce and remarry.

That appears to be the only grounds the Bible gives for credible divorce and remarriage. And again Jesus is being very clear here, he is permitting divorce, but he is not prescribing it. You are free to do it. No pastor will refuse you this right. But in calling us to consider the original design and the present state, Jesus also wants you to think seriously on your freedom.

Adultery violates and destroys the seal of intimacy which was the basis of your marriage. It dissolves the covenant. But does that mean that if you are a victim of adultery you must divorce? No.

Why? Because of the role Jesus himself would play in his marriage to us. Not only is marriage intended to be life-long, not only do we see clearly the threat of sin, but in Jesus we see the way in which he loves us despite our sin. In our lack of faith we violated God's covenant of faithfulness and we abandoned our part in the relationship.

Look at how God speaks to his people in **Jeremiah 3:8, Isaiah 50:1**. We had every grounds to be divorced and God had every grounds to find another. But he chose to be faithful to us through Jesus Christ. Christ would keep the covenant of faithfulness for us so that we might not be separated from God, but bought by Christ's perfect commitment.

Brothers and sisters, you may have grounds for divorce, and it may be that some of you without sinning pursue divorce for one of the two reasons Christ gives us. But for believers our marriages ought to be distinct in their longsuffering because Jesus was longsuffering for us.

I know that there are members in this room here today whose marriages have been hurt by infidelity. But I also know that their marriages are stronger today, and their experience of love is greater today because they looked to Christ and decided to love each other even amidst sin.

In the same way our text last week encouraged us to lean into sin and not simply cut ties with the sinner, we need to be willing to do the same thing with our spouses even when the potential hurt is vast. One pastor described a man who was trying to find any loophole he could for a biblical grounds for divorce. In reflecting on this man's attitude the pastor said, that in his marriage, "he wanted to win an argument, not carry a cross."

But this is exactly what we looked at in the Gospel-Focused Relationship series. A call to love is always a call to costly love. To forgiving love. To restorative love. This doesn't mean that all marriages will be free from divorce due to sin, but it does mean our fight for the marriage covenant ought to be distinctly aggressive in contrast to our world.

These are the only two places where divorce and remarriage is not sinful. To those who have pursued divorce for an unbiblical reason or caused divorce due to your adultery. I want to first remind you that this is not the unforgiveable sin.

You are not outside the bounds of Jesus' restoration. Because Jesus was the faithful spouse there is hope for fickle and unfaithful spouses.

If you are a believer this means two things. First, repent and ask God for forgiveness. Then seek out the person you have sinned against and ask for forgiveness. We often need help doing this well, so if this is you come talk to an elder, but make it a priority to pursue reconciliation. Use it as an opportunity to perhaps proclaim the gospel in living color to the person you have sinned against.

This reconciliation doesn't mean that the person will accept you back, nor are they required to. This reconciliation doesn't mean that you even have to go back to that relationship, nor are you required to. But this is what Jesus is saying here: if you have sinfully pursued or sinfully caused a divorce, you ought not to get married again. It would be to commit adultery.

If you have already been remarried, ask God for forgiveness, but don't commit more sin by divorcing that new spouse in order to reconcile past sin. Live as you are with grace and repentance.

This might seem like a hard truth, and maybe even to those who have sinned in this area it might seem like a death sentence, or an unbearable weight to consider a life of singleness ahead of you. But this is where we see the concluding hope which Jesus gives us: **The Future Hope of Relationships.**

Look at how the disciples respond to this: **Matthew 19:10**. You can see how broken the culture was when the disciples are so shocked by Jesus words that they say, "Man if divorce is this rare and hard, then maybe we shouldn't even get married."

And look at how Jesus answers them: **Matthew 19:11-15**.

Jesus uses the example of eunuchs here. Eunuchs are those who are marked off apart from marriage because they have either been born, or have been made emasculated and unable to have sexual union. Jesus says there are three kinds of eunuchs, those who have been born with some biological

brokenness, those who through their jobs, like working in a king's harem have been made eunuchs. And then there are those who live as eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven.

These are not people who have actually emasculated themselves. But it is those who for the sake of glorifying God and loving others have chosen to abstain from marriage. Why would they chose to do this? Because the Kingdom of God is worth it. Because God has chosen some men and women to live as single people so that they might accomplish distinct things for God's kingdom in the context of singleness. Jesus says this is not for everyone.

But I think contextually Jesus is also making the point that there are some who through their own sin in the area of divorce might live as though they are single for the glory of God's Kingdom. They refuse to believe that the solution to their sin is more sin.

Instead they choose to trust that a life lived in obedience to the Kingdom of Heaven is a life which grants them much joy.

We may, at this point not find the loophole we want. And we may become disheartened. We may have trouble receiving such a hard truth from Jesus. But that's why Matthew included the last story. Every experience we have may say, "I need a divorce, I need to be remarried, or I need to be married for the first time." But we are not God, we are children. We do not have anything to offer him, it is he who has everything to offer us.

It is no sugar coating to say that this passage is hard for us to apply. This passage forces us to look back at God's design and look into our own sin with a sober challenge to fight for God's ideals. But here we see the hope which God holds out for us. The beginning of this text showed Jesus' vast healings, and the end of this text shows Jesus' rich blessing to those who come to him with nothing.

Why would we resist the words of such a savior? Why would we doubt his goodness and look for loopholes hoping that they will satisfy us when Jesus the faithful groom has proved his faithfulness to us in that while we were yet sinners he died for us.

We often want the loophole of the golden marriage escape clause, or we want the loophole to justify a new relationship even though it may be sinful. But John Calvin reminds us of God's goodness in this trial: **"What is sought in opposition to the word of God is not a remedy...We know on the contrary, that none of those who walk in [God's] ways are ever left destitute of the assistance of the Spirit."**

This text calls us to do that hard work of trusting Jesus in lonely places. There is no loophole in scripture which spares believers the life of costly obedience, but there is a cross beam which spares us the punishment of our sin and grants to us the goodness of the King himself. He is faithful to us, and he is calling us to be faithful to him and to others for his glory and for our good.