

Matthew 19A

- Today we begin Chapter 19, and the chapter offers a break in the action from what we've been studying over the past month
 - So rather than engage in much review, let's just dive in

[Matt. 19:1](#) When Jesus had finished these words, He departed from Galilee and came into the region of Judea beyond the Jordan;

[Matt. 19:2](#) and large crowds followed Him, and He healed them there.

[Matt. 19:3](#) Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?"

- Right out of the gate Matthew drops us into a discussion of marriage and divorce
 - But before we consider Jesus' teaching on the subject, let's set the scene for this discussion
 - At the end of Chapter 17 and into Chapter 18 Jesus has been in Capernaum, in and around Peter's house
 - Capernaum is the fishing village on the westside of the Sea of Galilee that Jesus made His home for three years of ministry
- Now at the start of Chapter 19, Matthew says Jesus is on the move again, this time going south toward Jericho and crossing the Jordan
 - He eventually reaches a region of Judea east of the Jordan river, an area called Perea in Jesus' day
 - While Jesus is in this area He is followed by large crowds, which is what we see regularly now
 - Furthermore, Jesus heals those who come to Him, though we have no details of those circumstances
- And as a brief aside, we need to remember how exceptional these crowds were for that day
 - Celebrities, as we know them today, didn't exist in that age
 - And generally the rich and powerful were feared, not adored, and therefore people largely avoided them

- So large crowds like this one following a man through the wilderness was truly extraordinary in that day
 - Surely, nothing like it had ever been seen before in Israel, and for that reason alone the Pharisees were deeply concerned
 - When one man can command such adoration, it's the makings of a revolution
 - And revolution would surely get the attention of Rome and likely bring an end to the Pharisee's power sharing arrangement
 - So they opposed Jesus for much more than religious reasons... they were concerned about losing their way of life
- And therefore, while Jesus is near Jerusalem in Perea, the Pharisees come down testing (v.3) Jesus with a question
 - They ask Jesus to render His opinion on the conditions for divorce, asking under what circumstances may divorce be permitted
 - Now why would these men care what Jesus thought about that issue, and for that matter why would the answer be in doubt?
 - Well, as was often the case with rabbis, there were competing opinions on the matter
 - An old joke says if you ask 3 rabbis the same question, how many different opinions will you get? The answer: 10
 - Generally, rabbinical teaching on divorce fell into one of two camps: a conservative view and a liberal view
 - The conservative view taught that the only possible reason to divorce and remarry was for unfaithfulness in marriage
 - The liberal view taught that essentially any offense could be just grounds for divorce and remarriage
 - So when the Pharisees asked Jesus to render His opinion on this issue, they were asking Jesus to pick a side in this debate
 - Notice Matthew says in v.3 that this question was being posed to Jesus as a test
 - Whichever way Jesus answered, He would affirm one group of religious leaders within Israel and likely alienate the other

- But the test *wasn't* forcing Jesus to pick sides among rabbis...
 - The test was whether the Pharisees could get Jesus to upset the Romans
 - Jesus is in Perea, and Perea was one of two regions within Judea under the control of Herod Antipas
 - Herod Antipas was one of Herod the Great's sons who inherited a portion of his father's territory after Herod the Great's death
 - Herod Antipas is best known for his conflict with John the Baptist
 - Back in Matthew 14 we learned how Herod imprisoned and ultimately beheaded John the Baptist
 - John offended Herod by publicly accusing him of entering into an unlawful marriage
 - Herod Antipas' brother was Herod Philip, and Herod Philip's wife was Herodias
 - Herod Antipas took a liking to Herodias and made her his wife, which was an act of adultery
 - John called it what it was, and for that he was put to death
- So now that Jesus has entered into Perea, Herod Antipas' territory, the Pharisees are trying to trap Jesus into making the same mistake
 - Obviously, Jesus isn't worried about Herod, so He proceeds to answer the question according to the standard of Scripture, which is very conservative

[Matt. 19:4](#) And He answered and said, "Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE,

[Matt. 19:5](#) and said, 'FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH'?

[Matt. 19:6](#) "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate."

- Jesus begins His answer at the place you have to begin in any discussion of marriage: the creation of man and woman
 - The very design of the male and female bodies hint of the union God would later establish and call marriage

- God designed man's body and woman's body to join together physically in a clear and obvious way
- Moreover, they must join together to obey God's command to procreate and fill the earth
- So the design of the human body tells us the Creator intended a man and woman to pair up and form a union called marriage
- Moreover, the way God created man and woman makes clear that He intended the union to be inseparable
 - In the Creation account, God didn't create two people independently and then command them to join together
 - Instead, He created the Man first and then created the Woman from flesh taken out of the Man
- By creating Woman in that way, Adam's marriage to his wife was literally a reuniting of his own flesh
 - That's why Jesus says in v.6 that anytime a husband and wife join together, they are no longer two but one flesh
 - In God's eyes, a husband and wife constitute a *reunion* of flesh, which means that the institution of marriage is inseparable
- In v.6 Jesus says that what God joins in this way "let no man separate"
 - That English translation isn't very helpful because it sounds as if Jesus is pleading with us not to separate
 - A better translation would be "*may* no man separate" because Jesus is expressing the impossibility of separating the two
 - Since God originated the one-flesh relationship by the way He created Man and Woman there is no earthly mechanism to end it
 - Mankind simply does not possess the authority nor the ability to end it, no more than we can cut our own body in half and still live
- Therefore, on the question of divorce, Jesus points back to the Creation to explain that marriage establishes a one-flesh relationship
 - And understanding the Bible's teaching on marriage and divorce requires we distinguish between two aspects of biblical marriage

- First, a marriage is a covenant established between a man and a woman through the exchanging of vows
- Then after the marriage covenant is in place, a “one flesh” relationship is established by a physical union of man and wife
- These two aspects of marriage are distinct and in fact, you can have one without the other
 - It’s possible to have a marriage covenant without a one-flesh relationship
 - And it is also possible to establish a one-flesh relationship without a marriage covenant
- For example, two people who engage in sex before marriage, which the Bible calls fornication, are not establishing a marriage in that encounter
 - Fornication is not marriage because it is not accompanied by marriage vows, so there is no covenant established
 - However, a sexual union outside marriage does result in an immoral, one-flesh relationship, as Paul says

1Cor. 6:15 Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? May it never be!

1Cor. 6:16 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.”

- A man who joins himself with a prostitute (or has a one-night stand) establishes a one-flesh relationship, Paul says
- And because it’s not accompanied by marriage vows, it’s an immoral act and not a substitute for proper marriage
- Likewise, it’s possible to enter into a marriage without establishing a one-flesh relationship
 - There are situations where someone marries a person who is on their death bed or in prison or about to go off to war
 - Then later that person dies before the marriage can be consummated

- In that case, a marriage covenant existed because vows were exchanged, but a one-flesh relationship was never established
- So a typical, biblical marriage involves two things:
 - A marriage covenant is formed by an exchange of vows, and a one-flesh relationship is formed by a physical union made possible by marriage
 - This distinction between the covenant and a one-flesh relationship has important implications when it comes to divorce
 - A marriage covenant may end in a divorce, but a legal divorce proceeding doesn't end a one-flesh relationship
 - As Jesus said, no one may separate what God joins together
 - So when a divorce happens, the marriage covenant is dissolved and it exists no longer, but the one-flesh relationship goes on
 - Virtually all disagreements over divorce in the Church are the result of a failure to distinguish between these two aspects of marriage
 - And in this case it becomes clear that the Pharisees had missed that distinction as well

Matt. 19:7 They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE AND SEND her AWAY?"

- The Pharisees challenge Jesus by quoting from the Law in Deuteronomy 24 where Moses gave instructions on divorce

Deut. 24:1 "When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house,

- Moses allowed men to issue a divorce certificate if the man discovered some indecency in his wife
 - The Hebrew word used for indecency is *erwah*, which is literally the word nakedness, implying marital infidelity
 - So the Law allowed a man to divorce his wife if she was unfaithful to him

- The Pharisees pointed Jesus to this provision in the Law to challenge Jesus' claim that no man may separate a husband and wife
 - But Jesus wasn't saying that we can't end a marriage covenant
 - Like a covenant, a marriage covenant can be broken, and according to Deuteronomy 24, it can be ended by divorce
- Jesus was speaking of the one-flesh relationship which results from marriage and that, Jesus says, cannot be ended
 - His point was they were focusing on the wrong aspect of marriage
 - The Pharisees were debating the conditions for ending the marriage covenant
- But Jesus is saying that arguing over how to end a marriage covenant is largely irrelevant after you realize the permanence of the one-flesh relationship
 - So Jesus then reminds them of the true reason God allowed men to end their marriage covenants in Deut. 24

Matt. 19:8 He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way.

Matt. 19:9 "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."

- Jesus says Moses didn't command divorce, rather he permitted it, and there is a big difference between commanding divorce and permitting divorce
 - Nowhere does God command us to divorce, and in fact the entire thrust of Scripture is in the opposite direction
 - We should do everything in our power to avoid divorce
 - And even if there are circumstances in Scripture that allow divorce, that shouldn't be taken as encouragement to divorce
 - Next Jesus says the reason divorce was permitted in the Law was as a response to the sin of husbands who were unforgiving of their wives
 - Jesus calls it a hardness of heart, and He's referring to a sinful practice of men in Israel in that day

- In that day men possessed all the power in marriage while women had no legal rights in marriage
- A woman could not establish a covenant nor end a covenant by herself
- So if a husband wanted to end the marriage, she couldn't stop him
 - A man could send his wife away from his home, leaving her literally homeless and destitute
 - Her only hope for survival would be for some other man to take her in and care for her
- But before another man would take her into his house, that man would need assurance from her first husband that she wasn't still married
 - If she was still married, then no man could take her into his home, otherwise he would be accused of adultery
 - Adultery was punishable by death under the Law, so no self-respecting man would take the risk
- So Jesus is saying that divorce was an accommodation for sin, not a license to sin
 - Had the Law not allowed for divorce, hard-hearted men would still have sent their wives away
 - And without a legal way to remarry, those women would have no possibility of rescue
 - Without a legal document proving she could lawfully marry, the woman would likely to die of starvation or exposure or fall prey to evil men
 - So God made a way for the woman to be saved from abandonment
 - With a divorce certificate, she could find a new husband willing to take her in and care for her
 - That certificate of divorce was God's grace to women who were mistreated by their husbands and without hope otherwise
 - But Jesus tells the Pharisees that provision doesn't mean God endorses divorce or that a divorce is free of consequences

- Moreover, while a divorce ends a marriage and makes possible a new one, it doesn't end the one-flesh relationship
- Which is why in v.9 Jesus says that even after a marriage ends in divorce, any remarriage is an act of adultery
- And now we know why a remarriage after a divorce is adultery...
 - Because divorce ends only one aspect of marriage, not the other
 - Divorce ends the marriage covenant but there is no way to reverse a one-flesh relationship once established
- One-flesh relationships exists until death, Paul says

Rom. 7:2 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.

Rom. 7:3 So then, if while her husband is living she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress though she is joined to another man.

- Paul says the only way to be free to remarry under the law is to wait until the first spouse dies
- Because only when the flesh is gone does the one-flesh relationship dissolve
- Now I'm sure you noticed that in v.9 Jesus inserted an exception, saying "except for immorality"
 - Jesus says there is a situation in which a man and wife can be married and then divorce and then remarriage is still possible after that divorce
 - And that one situation is in the case of immorality, Jesus says
 - The Greek word for immorality is *porneia*, from which we also get words like pornography, and it refers generally to sexual sin
 - Interestingly, this Greek word is never used in the New Testament to refer to adultery
 - Notice in v.9 the words immorality and adultery both appear, and they are different Greek words
 - So the question is what specific situation was Jesus talking about when he said immorality?

- The most common teaching in the church is that sexual unfaithfulness (adultery) is grounds for divorce and remarriage
- Personally, I don't agree with that interpretation
- Because if engaging in an extramarital affair ends a one-flesh relationship, then we *can* separate what God joined together
- But Jesus said no man can separate that union
- So when Jesus says except for immorality, I believe He was speaking of a very specific situation
 - In Jesus' day it was normal to establish a marriage covenant first
 - And then a period of time would pass before the one-flesh relationship was established
 - The first step of establishing the marriage covenant was called a betrothal
 - A betrothal wasn't merely an engagement, like we do today...it established a marriage covenant
 - Vows were taken, a dowry was paid, and a covenant was established
 - At that point a true marriage existed even though the couple had not yet consummated the marriage or even met!
 - Then weeks, months and maybe even years would pass while the groom was preparing a home for his bride
 - During this time the man and his wife remained apart waiting for the day they could be together
 - During that time, they were legally husband and wife but they had not yet become one-flesh
 - Now if during this time one of them was unfaithful and committed sexual immorality (i.e., fornication), it was grounds for divorce
 - If the marriage ended on that basis, it still required a divorce since a marriage covenant existed
 - But because a one-flesh relationship had never been established, a new marriage was still a possibility for the betrayed spouse

- This was exactly the situation that Joseph assumed he was facing when Mary turned up pregnant
 - Joseph had been betrothed to Mary, and he assumed Mary had been unfaithful to him during that betrothal period
 - So Matthew 1:19 says Joseph being a righteous man decided to divorce her secretly to spare her humiliation
- I believe this is the exception Jesus is offering here...an exception for those who are married but have yet to establish a one-flesh relationship
 - Under those circumstances, if sexual immorality takes place, then a divorce is permissible
 - And because a one-flesh relationship has not yet been established, then remarriage is also permissible
 - I believe that's why Jesus uses the Greek word for immorality rather than the word for adultery in v.9
 - Because He was speaking of sexual sin prior to a one-flesh relationship, which is fornication or *porneia*
 - Adultery is the Bible's term for sexual sin after a one-flesh marriage relationship already exists
 - So if we find ourselves in a situation where a marriage covenant exists without a one-flesh relationship, then and only then are we eligible to divorce and remarry should sexual sin take place
 - For all other cases when one-flesh exists, then Jesus' standard rule would apply...there is no remarriage after divorce
 - Paul reaffirms this truth in 1 Corinthians 7

1Cor. 7:10 But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband

1Cor. 7:11 (but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.

- Paul says the best option is to stay married, but if you divorce, then the next best option is to reconcile with your spouse
 - If you cannot reconcile, the only remaining option is to not remarry again...and there is no fourth option

- Paul also emphasizes that this instruction is from the Lord, which is Paul's way of saying he's quoting Jesus' instructions
- So to summarize Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce, the biblical rule is that divorce is not permissible except for sexual immorality
 - If divorce happens before a one-flesh relationship has been established, then remarriage is permissible
 - If divorce happens after a one-flesh relationship has been established, remarriage is not permissible
 - And should we choose to remarry after a one-flesh relationship has been established, we commit adultery
- You might ask me what about situations involving divorce and remarriage for reasons other than sexual immorality?
 - What about an abusive marriage where there is unending strife or even physical conflict in the marriage?
 - What if children are in danger, what if reconciliation is simply not possible?
 - What if my ex-spouse has already remarried?
 - I don't have answers for every situation we might imagine
 - Under some circumstances, especially when a spouse or child is in physical danger, it may be best for a couple to separate
 - Or in the worst of cases, a legal divorce may be the best response to a bad situation, which was the case with Deut 24
 - But even then, remarriage is not possible because the one-flesh relationship persists until death
- If you're feeling a little shocked by this standard, then you're not alone...look at the disciples' response to Jesus' teaching

Matt. 19:10 The disciples said to Him, "If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry."

Matt. 19:11 But He said to them, "Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given.

Matt. 19:12 "For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are also

eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this, let him accept it.”

- The disciples hear Jesus’ teaching, and they realize that Jesus not only rejected the liberal view of divorce, He took the conservative view a step farther
 - So they respond that if this is truly God’s expectation for a relationship between a wife and husband, then it’s better to remain single
 - If it’s true we only get one marriage per life and the potential for picking the wrong person is so high, better not to pick at all
 - Better to live alone than risk getting hitched to someone who makes your life miserable, especially if we can’t separate
 - But Jesus strongly disagrees with that suggestion saying only a few could accept or live by that standard
 - Jesus says there are three groups who will not enter into one-flesh relationships (i.e., eunuchs euphemistically)
 - Some are born unable to enter into a one-flesh relationship due to physical or mental limitations
 - Others are prevented from entering into a one-flesh relationship because they are made eunuchs in service to a king, etc.
 - And thirdly, some may choose not to marry because of the Kingdom, meaning they have a spiritual gift of singleness
 - For that last group, the Lord has gifted them to be content with never experiencing a one-flesh relationship
 - And it is a gift because it’s not the natural state of our hearts
 - By that gift, the Lord frees a person’s heart to remain 100% devoted to serving Him without the distraction of marriage
 - But apart from these examples, most people will have a strong natural desire for the affections and comforts of marriage
 - And if that’s you, you should seek marriage because avoiding marriage will only lead to more trouble in your life
 - Go marry and once married hold on to that marriage with all your strength until death do you part, trusting God to work in it

- Now as we reach this point in the teaching, I'm fully aware that not everyone will agree with my interpretation of Jesus' teaching, especially of His exception
 - You may hold to the more common interpretation that Jesus' exception was speaking of marital infidelity, adultery during marriage
 - And I acknowledge the possibility that you may be right
 - Perhaps Jesus *was* teaching that any sexual unfaithfulness breaks the one-flesh relationship and permits remarriage
 - And because my interpretation of this Scripture may be incorrect, then as a pastor I must tread lightly in this area
 - Because if I am wrong about this text, I could direct people incorrectly in matters of divorce and remarriage
 - That would have serious repercussions...I might stand in the way of a God-ordained marriage
 - So when there is a reasonable possibility for differences of interpretation of Scripture (as here), we give grace for other views
 - In the case of Matthew 19:9, there is certainly room for disagreement
 - So if someone believes Matthew 19:9 allows for divorce and remarriage in cases of infidelity, we accept your view
 - Agreement with my view is not a requirement at VBVF for fellowship or service or leadership in the church
- Finally, I want to say a word about how we respond to the issue of divorce and remarriage in the lives of our brothers and sisters in the body
 - Sometimes, we have a tendency to treat divorce differently in some respects
 - We may be quick to remember God is against divorce yet we quickly forget God is equally against every form of sin
 - And if we're not careful, we can treat one kind of error differently than others
 - But it's no coincidence that Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce comes immediately after His teaching on forgiveness in the church

- We all need forgiveness more than we even know, and none of us have unforgivable sins
 - Moreover, we can't single out one kind of mistake and hold it above others in the body
 - Nor can we become judges of everyone else's sin while we overlook our own
- Mistakes in marriage are no different than mistakes in any other area of life...they are forgiven by the blood of Jesus
 - No one carries a stigma here, no one will be defined by their past mistakes, because no one is beyond the grace of God
 - If you are married today, honor God by remaining faithful to that marriage regardless of your past
 - If you are not yet married, then consider Jesus' instructions carefully and take that step with sober appreciation for what Jesus expects