



The King's Ransom

Matthew 20:28

Text

Matthew 19:1-12

Topic

Jesus puts the brakes on the
Jewish practice of divorce for any reason

Title

"Divorce Thwart"

Introduction

When the grand boys visit, the house gets progressively messier as they bring out various toys.

Zeke, right now, loves Jenga Boom. It's Jenga but there's a platform that you build upon that winds up and counts down towards a catastrophic collapse, spreading the blocks all over the place.

When Gene and Kelly come to pick up the boys, they always say, "Let's *put away* the toys."

They never say to the boys, "Let's *divorce* the toys."

Here in Matthew nineteen, we will see the words "divorce" and "put away." We assume they mean the same thing. They do not.

Have you read in Malachi 2:16 that God hates divorce? The Hebrew text of Malachi 2:16 uses the word *shalach*, which is the Hebrew word that means to *put* or to *send away*. Yet, the modern English translations all insert the word "divorce" in the verse, which is the Hebrew word *keriythuwth*, and the Hebrew word *keriythuwth* is **not** found in the Hebrew text of the prophet Malachi.

It is crucial we understand this distinction. Being put away, and being divorced, are very different things. I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 God's Design For Your Marriage Comes From The Garden, and #2 God's Dynamic For Your Marriage Comes By Grace.

#1 God's Design For Your Marriage Comes From The Garden

(v1-10)

Among the Jews, a wife could be "put away" by her husband without any legal intervention. It was usually an arbitrary action by the husband, not subject to the wife's consent.

When a husband wanted to "put away" his wife, for any reason, no one could hinder him from doing it. If a man got tired of his wife, he could simply send her out of his house. In our society we might say that he had "kicked her out of the house."

The dismissed wife was in a kind of legal limbo. She was technically still a married woman.

As a wife who had been abandoned she would have a very difficult time even surviving if she did not have her original family to go back to. Remarriage to another man was unlikely since the circumstances of her dismissal by her husband put a stigma upon her.

With this background, we're ready for our text.

Mat 19:1 Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these sayings, that He departed from Galilee and came to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan.

Mat 19:2 And great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them there.

Matthew noted that Jesus "healed" the multitudes. How tragic that against a backdrop of alleviating all manner of human pain and suffering, the Pharisees are coming to accuse Jesus, to try to stumble Him. You'd think they'd be embarrassed.

Mat 19:3 The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?"

It might be a good time to read the passage from Deuteronomy that forms the background for their question.

Deu 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 uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house,
Deu 24:2 when she has departed from his house, and goes and becomes another man's wife,

Deu 24:3 if the latter husband detests her and writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her as his wife, Deu 24:4 then her former husband who divorced her must not take her back to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.

J. Carl Laney explains the historical setting, with some cynicism, when he says, "men were [putting away] their wives for a 'weekend fling' and then taking them back again when the dirty laundry had piled up and the house needed cleaning."

I read an article this week about a Japanese woman asking her husband for a divorce because he admitted he doesn't like the movie *Frozen*. It turns out not everybody wants to build a snowman. I say, *let it go*.

Moses addressed this terrible practice of putting away wives. He called for the husband to give the dismissed wife a certificate of divorce. You can read the boilerplate certificate of divorce that was used in Bible times. It's a little too long for me to read it now, but I will say that it is all very positive towards the put away wife, with no mention of any wrong doing on her part.

God demonstrated His concern for the put away wife by requiring her husband to give her a legal bill of divorcement. This would remove any stigma from her and enable her to legally remarry.

This powerfully illustrates that God **does not** hold the offended party to blame, but sets them free. It is a glimpse into the heart of God - an important one to have in our discussion of divorce and remarriage.

Bear in mind, too, that the passage in Deuteronomy is a command regulating remarriage; it isn't really a passage that spells out the grounds for divorce.

While we're here, what about remarriage to a former spouse in our society? I would approach Moses' prohibition as being unique to Israel's tribal society, in much the same way as the regulation that if your brother dies childless, you are required to sleep with his wife so that his lineage will continue.

Deuteronomy does say "because he has found some uncleanness in her... he writes her a certificate of divorcement."

What, exactly, is meant by "uncleanness?" There are at least eight valid, but conflicting, scholarly answers to that question. The popular one is that it must be some sort of sexual sin. But that is unlikely. The Law of Moses already prescribed severe penalties for sexual sin, like stoning to death, *not* divorce.

Besides, the text also says that the second husband writes her a certificate of divorcement simply because "he detests her."

This woman is perfectly free to remarry, and any subsequent marriages are deemed legal - as long as she does not remarry a previous spouse.

Taken as a whole, the passage discourages divorce, prohibiting remarrying a former spouse, but it also establishes the importance of putting away a wife *only* if she is given a certificate of divorce that protects her and frees her to remarry.

The interpretation of "uncleanness" divided the two schools of Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai, famous first-century Jewish scholars.

Hillel took a very lax view and said that the husband *could* divorce his wife for almost any reason, while Shammai took the stricter view and said Moses was speaking *only* about certain sexual sin.

The Jews were putting away their wives for any reason at all. Jesus first attempted to elevate their thinking by taking them back to the beginning of marriage.

Mat 19:4 And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE,'

Mat 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' ?

Mat 19:6 So then, they are no longer two but one flesh.

Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."

Instead of going back to Deuteronomy, Jesus went back to Genesis. He wanted them, and us, to understand God's design for marriage when He brought Eve to Adam in the Garden of Eden.

Here is a quick but insightful summary of God's design for marriage: It is a divinely appointed physical and spiritual union of one man and one woman that is permanent as long as they both shall live.

Later passages in the Bible **answer** specific questions about marriage and about human sexuality, but the union of Adam and Eve **addresses** those questions by way of God's example.

- Sex is to be between one man and one woman - not two men or two women or multiple spouses.
- It is to be practiced within the context of marriage - not before you are married or with another with whom you are not married.
- Biblical marriage is to be honored, guarded, and protected.

Adam and Eve, in a beautiful Garden, walking with and communing with God, naked but unashamed... That's what God thinks about marriage. He meant it for our good, to bring joy and pleasure to us.

As believers, indwelt by God the Holy Spirit, we ought to focus on God's ideal for us in every area, rather than asking how we can lower our appreciation of His standards but still be walking with Him.

Case in point: You should never need to understand why Moses regulated the putting away of wives with a certificate of divorce. To use a common idiom, *Don't even go there!*

Mat 19:7 They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?"

Mat 19:8 He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.

Both Jewish schools thought of the passage in Deuteronomy as a command to give a certificate of divorce. But Moses gave only one commandment in that passage: The divorced wife could not return to her first husband if she was put away by a subsequent husband.

Moses did not command divorce; he merely regulated it.

Mat 19:9 And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery."

Once again, the word for "divorces" is *put away*. Jesus was referring to the necessity of a certificate of divorcement, giving the offended spouse the right to remarry. Without it, the parties are still bound legally and, so, any subsequent marriages would be adulterous, based on the Genesis account which presents marriage as a permanent earthly union.

Putting away a spouse would be similar to what we call separation; the marriage still exists, so sex with someone other than your spouse, or remarriage, constitutes sexual sin.

Talking about divorce and remarriage causes stress, because just about every one of us has been involved, directly or indirectly, with divorce; and many of those divorces are what we would have to call 'unbiblical,' because they were for reasons other than the one Jesus gives here, and that the Bible gives elsewhere.

Jesus was addressing Jewish practices, but as He did, He established the biblical grounds for a divorce that would allow the innocent, wounded party to dissolve the marriage and be free to remarry.

Those grounds are "sexual immorality." It is the more modern translation of the word fornication.

In Hebrew and in Greek, the word fornication includes incest, sodomy, harlotry, perversion, bestiality, and (really) all sexual sin, both before and after marriage.

I don't mean to be crude, but do you remember the Monica Lewinsky scandal? Then President Clinton, when he gave his deposition in the Paula Jones case, said he had never had "sexual relations" with Monica Lewinsky. He had a rather narrow view of what constitutes sexual relations. It was fornication.

"Adultery" is fornication committed by a married man or woman.

There are those who argue that fornication does not give you grounds for divorce and remarriage. They narrow the word's meaning in various ways, e.g., trying to say it only refers to sexual immorality during the betrothal and therefore before the marriage.

Not true; Jesus specifically gives it as an exception, freeing the innocent, wounded party from the marriage.

At the same time, He wasn't commanding a divorce when there is fornication; only permitting it. Many marriages have survived the sexual immorality of one or both spouses who have repented and been granted forgiveness.

Is it more spiritual to stay together? We tend to think it is; those are the testimonies that seem to be highlighted. But if Jesus gives you a choice - a sincere choice - then what is most spiritual is how He directs **you** in **your** particular situation.

If you ask me, or most evangelical, orthodox Christians, the Bible gives two clear grounds for divorce: sexual immorality, and abandonment by an unbeliever, taught by the apostle Paul in 1Corinthians 7:15.

That's our position, and we're sticking to it.

Having said that, it's not always so cut-and-dried. For example, let's say your spouse is involved in pornography. The word fornication is a translation of *porneia*, from where we get our word pornography. Is it grounds for divorce? And, if it is, how deeply must the offending spouse be involved in it?

What, exactly, constitutes abandonment? What about physical abuse? Or mental, or verbal abuse? Are those abandonments? And, again we must ask, how severe must they become?

Are you really going to tell a woman being abused to endure it because her dirtbag husband won't abandon her and isn't sleeping with another woman?

This is where something I mentioned earlier comes into play. God wants to protect the innocent - not add to their misery. He was concerned about the plight of the wife being unjustly put away, and He stepped in to regulate the hardness of men's hearts so she was set free to remarry. He is no less gracious today, under the new covenant.

One conservative but insightful commentator put it this way:

In summary, what are the biblical grounds for divorce? The answer is sexual immorality and abandonment. Are there additional grounds for divorce beyond these two? Possibly. Is divorce ever to be treated lightly or employed as the first recourse? Absolutely not.

Within the framework of the two biblical grounds revealed for divorce, we need to struggle with each situation and its unique details, holding to the sanctity of marriage as it was originally modeled, but extending grace to innocents who are the victims of sin.

#2 God's Dynamic For Your Marriage Comes By Grace

(v11-12)

The disciples were freaked. Suddenly marriage was a whole lot more serious than their culture had taught them. They had a knee jerk reaction.

Mat 19:10 His disciples said to Him, "If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry."

If a husband can't put away his wife for frivolous reasons, they thought "it is better not to marry."

Instead of following Jesus into the Garden of Eden, and renewing their appreciation of marriage, they were concerned about getting out of a so-called bad marriage.

They were looking at marriage the way a lot of people do - including Christians. They were looking at it selfishly - from the perspective of how it might not always be a benefit to them, but could sometimes involve self-sacrifice. They thought of it as something to be endured, rather than enjoyed.

I'd add this, too. They weren't thinking of marriage in terms of submitting to God to bring Him glory. They weren't thinking of it as a ministry *to* Him, *for* Him.

Jesus addressed their consternation by being practical:

Mat 19:11 But He said to them, "All cannot accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given:

Mat 19:12 For there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it."

A textbook eunuch is typically a man who has been castrated, usually early enough in his life for this change to have hormonal consequences.

Jesus made His point by describing three types of eunuchs::

1. Some men are eunuchs because they were born that way.
2. Others are so because they were castrated by men; oriental rulers often subjected the harem attendants to surgery to make them eunuchs.
3. Jesus also had in mind those who have made themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven's sake. These men could be married, and they have no physical impairment. Yet in

dedication to the King and His kingdom, they willingly forego marriage in order to give themselves to the cause of Christ without distraction. As Paul wrote later, "He who is unmarried cares for the things of the Lord - how he may please the Lord" (1Corinthians 7:32). Their celibacy is not physical but a matter of voluntary abstinence.

Jesus reminded them that the ability to remain single and therefore celibate was not the general rule; only those to whom special grace was given could forego marriage.

Let me say something about people being "born that way." It's a pretty broad statement by Jesus, and therefore can include any number of things.

For example today we hear a lot about people who have same sex attraction "being born that way." I'm not sure where the scientific community is right now, or I should say, the scientific evidence, for same sex attraction. It's usually quite conflicting.

But even if a person **is** "born that way," it is no excuse they must act upon drives and impulses that Scripture determines to be sinful.

Nick Roen is a Master of Divinity student at Bethlehem College & Seminary. He has a burden to help the church think through issues regarding sexuality, singleness, and celibacy. He's burdened because he is a Christian with same sex attraction.

He wrote the following:

Same sex attraction is the result of a broken creation, and in that sense it is “sinful” or “dishonorable” [as we are told in Romans 1:26]. It is an effect of the fall.

However, experiencing same sex attraction is not the same as sinning. Rather, same sex attractions should be treated like any temptation to sin. They should be fought with blood-earnestness in a way that recognizes the deceitfulness of the heart and the finitude of the mind.

When I do this - when I fight temptation, turn to Jesus, trust his promises, and rely on his Spirit - God is pleased. He is not mainly displeased because I need to fight, but pleased because I am fighting.

This is good news for all of us who experience all manner of temptations! May this fact lead us, no matter our particular groaning, to rest in Jesus more deeply, fight temptation more fiercely, and look forward to the day when our fight of faith will result in “praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1Peter 1:7).

Roen suggests that sanctified singleness is the solution we must proclaim:

If we are going to ask those who struggle with same sex attraction to reject their longings for as long as the Lord wills, then we must have a strong theology of singleness that does not present it as simply a transitional stage on the way to marriage. It seems that in many churches, marriage is assumed for everyone, and when it doesn't happen for certain people, they are left wondering if the church is a place where they can truly belong.

"He who is able to accept it, let him accept it." You "accept" a gift; so, here, Jesus was indicating that to remain celibate, whether by choice or not, you must accept God's grace.

You're going to need His grace in marriage just as much. You can be assured it is available to you; but you must avail yourself of it.

Marriage is not about you. It is about God. It is about pleasing God by submitting to one another and stepping in to the roles He has established - the roles of husband and wife, with their corresponding duties and delights.

Maybe you are mulling over something that was read, or said, and have questions about your own unique situation. We would love to pray with you, to talk with you - in order to determine the direction God has for you.

Whatever direction it is, The Lord has grace for you to walk with Him according to His will so your life can be a testimony to His glory.