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Matthew 19:10 - 19:12



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg explains in his talk on Matthew 19:10-12 that although the state may grant a divorce, it does not mean that God recognizes it. When Christians choose to follow Jesus' teachings faithfully, they may find themselves at odds with cultural beliefs. Divorce and remarriage may be considered adultery in the eyes of God, even if it is legal and socially acceptable. Not everyone can accept the idea of remaining single as a gift from God, but some are given this gift.

Transcript

Last time we were looking at Matthew 19, the first nine verses, where Jesus is asked by the Pharisees his opinion about divorce and what might constitute proper grounds for divorce. Jesus answers that there are no proper grounds for divorce, although there may be improper ones. That is to say, if a woman commits adultery in the relationship with her husband, that is she violates her covenant to her husband by committing adultery, or of course it would go the other way if a man commits adultery against his wife, in such a case a divorce may be allowed.

But that can't be said to be a valid grounds for divorce because adultery is not a valid behavior. However, valid or not, it happens. And because it happens, there are some who may be regarded as free from the marriage.

But that is not really what Jesus is getting at. Jesus is not here teaching, hey, it's okay to divorce your wives if they committed adultery. That is simply the mentality that stands behind his actual statement, which is to say, it is not permitted to divorce your wife for anything less.

You see, the question that was asked him, and that brought forth these comments from him, was, is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason? And his answer was, no, it is not lawful to divorce your wife for any reason except for one, and that would be if she is sexually immoral. Anything short of that, if you divorce your wife for any other reason than that, and if you remarry, you commit adultery. And the reason for that is that any time a man violates his marriage vows with another woman, or any time a

woman violates her marriage vows with another man, they are committing adultery.

And even if the state says, we recognize this marriage as dissolved, we grant a divorce, you are free to remarry, that does not necessarily mean that God grants that freedom. And I'm speaking to a large audience out there, which includes a great number of divorced people, including myself, by the way. I never have sought a divorce, but my first wife did run away from me, and she divorced me, and committed adultery many times, and frankly, as a result, I regard biblically myself in a position to remarry.

So I did remarry, and I am married today. So obviously, I'm not one of those who would condemn all divorce and remarriage, and that is why I felt myself free to remarry in the particular circumstances. At the same time, don't expect me to be light on the matter, because Jesus is not light on the matter.

I want to take exactly the position he took, and that is this, that if your spouse commits adultery, and if you divorce your spouse on those grounds, then you are free, and the divorce that is granted by the state on those grounds is valid in the sight of God, and as I understand the teaching, you can remarry. However, if you divorced your spouse on any lesser grounds, let's say your spouse never did commit adultery, but you divorced them anyway for some reason, and the state has granted a divorce, what Jesus is pointing out is the state may have granted a divorce, but God has not. God has not granted a divorce in such a case, because you have had no grounds for it in his sight, and therefore, although in the eyes of the state, you are not married anymore, in the eyes of God, you're still married to that first spouse, and therefore, if you marry again in such a circumstance, regardless what the laws of the land say, you see, the laws of the land may say, okay, you are free from your first marriage, you are now legally married to a second person.

Jesus is saying, no, the laws may permit that. In fact, the Jewish law in his day permitted that. He says, but that's not the way God looks at it.

The way God looks at it in such a case is that your second marriage is not a marriage. God does not authorize it. God does not recognize it.

He calls it adultery, because your first marriage is still intact, and by remarrying, you are simply committing adultery against your first wife, who is still your wife, as far as God is concerned. Now, Christians need to often stand strongly against the tide of our culture. Our culture, in the past 30 and 40 years, probably, has taken almost a complete about face on this issue of divorce and remarriage.

Forty years ago or so, there were divorces in the United States, and there were before that as well. But there was still a strong sense that divorce represented a tragic failure, and in many cases, was a sinful thing. Some people got divorces, and they were frowned on by their society.

They were looked down on for this, because it was recognized that they were actually somewhat ashamed for it, because they recognized that failure to keep their vows is a bad thing. In some cases, they found their marriages, in their judgment, intolerable, so they got out anyway, but they knew that this was not really what people are supposed to do, and society knew that too. But there's been a tremendous change in the mood of our culture in the past 40 years, in that now, people enter marriage with the very assumption that if it doesn't work out, they can divorce.

And when people do divorce, no one feels that they should be judgmental about this. The idea is, well, you know, everyone's entitled to a little happiness, and if that marriage isn't making them happy, why shouldn't they be able to go find another one, and have a little happiness before their life is over? Well, this attitude, of course, is totally contrary to Scripture, and when Christians begin to follow Jesus Christ, and say, I'm going to follow His teaching, they will find themselves on many issues, and this is one of them, at odds with the culture. Sometimes radically at odds, because you see, if we are to follow Jesus' teaching faithfully, we are going to have to argue that when the state grants a divorce, it does not mean that God grants a divorce.

Sometimes it may, depending on the grounds, but in other cases it does not. God does not recognize the divorce. And what that also means is that although the state may grant a marriage license to people who have been divorced, there are cases where God does not grant approval to the marriage.

And therefore, in some cases, even calls it adultery. Now, if I am going to be a follower of Jesus in today's culture, do you realize what position that puts me in? It means I'm going to have to look at certain situations where people have divorced without valid grounds, and they've taken new marriages, maybe they even have families and children by these new marriages, and if I'm going to be faithful to what God says, I'm going to have to say a very unpopular thing. I'm going to have to say, this second marriage of yours is adultery.

It is not marriage in God's sight. The children of this marriage are illegitimate. They are the children of adultery.

Now, you can bet I'm not going to be very popular if I tell people that. But then I have to decide whether it's more important for me to be popular in a God-forsaking world, or whether I'm supposed to be faithful to God. I will tell you this one thing.

On the day of judgment, when we stand before God, we will certainly hope that we made the choice to be faithful to God instead of popular with the world. Because the world, in its fashion, is going to pass away rapidly, but those who do the will of God will endure forever. And there will be tremendous shame on the part of those who were supposed to represent God to the world, but who simply went along with the world and trusted the world's judgment instead of God's.

Now, this is not a light matter. Do you understand how heavy this is? I hope you do. It means that although there are people in our society who are legally divorced and legally remarried, in some cases, maybe most, God does not recognize either their divorce or their remarriage.

And they are living in circumstances that God simply gives the proper label to. It's called adultery. And you know what else? The Bible says in 1 Corinthians 6 that no adulterer will inherit the kingdom of God.

Now, isn't it sad how many times people have taken lightly God's standards and gotten themselves in deep, deep, deep trouble? And you know, the Bible says the way of the transgressor is hard. There are many people who divorced their spouses, ran off with someone else, or later took up with someone else. They ignored what God said.

They didn't even care, perhaps, what God said. Or worse yet, maybe they did care what God said, but the church misrepresented to them what God says. And so, the church bears responsibility for misinforming them.

And so, they acted, in some cases, on counsel of the church and did things that Jesus forbids. And now, look at the mess they're in. The mess they're in doesn't mean they're in an unhappy marriage.

They may be very happy right now. But the problem is that they're not in a happy marriage. They're in a happy adultery.

And no matter how happy they may be in adultery, no adulterer is going to inherit the kingdom of God. And therefore, whatever happiness may be in it now, it's not going to be very happy in eternity. Now, I don't hear very many preachers saying these things, but who can refute them from Scripture? Now, mind you, I am not saying that every case of divorce and remarriage is a sin.

It is not. Jesus himself allowed divorce and remarriage when the divorce was on the grounds of the partner's infidelity. That is, sexual immorality.

But on other situations, he said, such remarriage is adultery. Now, this is, the heaviness of this situation was not lost on the disciples who were standing by listening to this conversation. The conversation recorded in Matthew 19 was really between Jesus and the Pharisees.

But after he had finished speaking to the Pharisees, the disciples who had been listening in had their own reaction to his comment. We find their reaction in verse 10. His disciples said to him, if such is the case of a man with his wife, it's better not to marry.

Now, what they're saying is this. They had grown up in a society where at least one of the prevailing camps in their religion, Jewish religion, allowed a man to divorce his wife

anytime he found her hard to love, hard to endure, hard to live with. If she was no longer attractive to him, if her personality was abrasive, if she was a poor cook or poor housekeeper, he could just say, I divorce you three times, and she was out.

Actually, he had to give her a writing of divorcement under the Jewish law. Before that, in more ancient cultures, they just had to say, I divorce you three times. But the thing is, a man could divorce his wife as soon as he found marriage to her inconvenient or unpleasant.

Now, with that as a cultural norm, one might think, well, marriage is, you know, maybe I'll give that a try. I'm not married now. Maybe I'd find more happiness in marriage than I am as a single person.

I could try that out. And if it's not a happier situation, I can get out of it and get back or seek a different situation that would be more happy. You see, people who are obsessed with their own happiness will find the disciples' comment resonating very well in their own minds.

Because the disciples are saying, wait a minute, if I get married and I can't divorce my wife unless she commits adultery, and the likelihood of her doing that is not very great, that means I'm stuck with her, even if she ends up being somewhat unpleasant. Even if I find myself in a situation I don't like. If that's the case, they said, it's better not to marry in the first place.

Now, of course, the underlying philosophy behind the disciples' statement is very much like that of our modern culture. Namely, if I'm not happy, I don't want to be in a situation. That is, I don't want to move into a situation where I might not be happy and can't get out.

Now, you see, Christianity calls us to an entirely different kind of motivation. The motivation of the Christian, at least as it's described in Scripture and which is represented by Jesus himself, is that I am no longer living to please myself. I'm living to please God.

My happiness is not the top priority. God's happiness with me is the top priority. Now, does this mean that as a Christian I'm not going to be happy? No, as a matter of fact, this attitude actually is much more likely to guarantee that I am happy.

Because if I'm obsessed with finding happiness, I will find it very elusive. And because I will, by stages, adapt to the situation that once made me happy, and it'll become ordinary and boring to me. And I will look for new thrills.

I will look for something new and innovative to stimulate the experience of bliss that I had earlier in a certain situation, a marriage or something else. And therefore, as I'm continually pursuing a state of happiness and bliss, I am always having to move to new

situations. As the old situations cease to amuse me, or cease to excite me.

And so the person who's always seeking his own happiness is the person who is less likely really to ever be very happy, or at least to be consistently happy. Christianity calls me to stop the pursuit of my own happiness and exchange it for a pursuit of holiness. And to seek to be a person who is making God happy.

If I am making God happy, and if that's really what I want, then I will be happy so long as I am making Him happy. You may not understand this concept. A person who lives to make someone else happy these days is likely to be labeled as mentally ill, or codependent, or something like that.

This is a new and ridiculous label that is applied to people who are simply virtuous people. You see, throughout history, before we got these psycho-bablistic labels for behavior, a person who put his own happiness aside to make others happy was considered unselfish, was considered to be a virtuous person, was considered to be one who was capable of sacrificing one thing in order to reach a higher ideal. These things have always, and rightly, been considered to be virtuous behavior.

But in a society where my own happiness, my own self-esteem, and my own self-actualization and fulfillment are made the highest goals, which is a society perverted and totally confused, then virtue becomes vice. And that which is good is called evil. Well, let it be called evil if they wish to call it evil, but I will still go with the good.

It is still virtuous for a person to say, I will not seek my happiness, I will seek to please God. And when someone has really made that transition in their thinking, and said, listen, I don't have an intrinsic right to be happy, but God does, and therefore it makes more sense for me to seek to make Him happy than for me to demand that I be happy. And once I have ceased to make my own happiness an issue, then it's amazing how happy I can be.

Because I'm no longer making this mad and endless and unsatisfying pursuit of happiness my life's pursuit. If I'm pursuing holiness, which is that which pleases God in me, then I'm not going to be asking questions like the disciples. See, the disciples said, if I can never leave my wife, even if I become unhappy with her, then it's better for me never to marry.

Well, that would be true if your happiness is all that matters. But the Christian is called to be motivated somewhat differently. I should be asking this question, not, if I'm unhappy in the marriage, can I get out of it? The question is, whether I'm happy or not in the marriage, what would make God happy? What would please Him for me to do in it? If I am asked by God to stay in a situation which is no longer pleasing to me to be in, but it pleases Him that I be faithful.

It pleases Him that I keep my vows. It pleases me that I make sacrifices and endure hardship in order to do what is right. If that pleases God, then, well, so be it.

If it pleases my King, then it pleases me. It's what I choose. Now, if that is true, then staying in a marriage, even that is not a very happy one or a very satisfying one, can be a happy situation.

In that the person staying in it knows that what they are doing is pleasing to their King, whom they love, and whose pleasure is all they really desire. So that any marriage can become a happy marriage. I mentioned earlier that my first marriage, well, it was not a happy marriage.

My first wife was an adulteress, repeatedly, and she eventually left me and divorced me. But in the years that she was committing adultery and still living with me, it was not a happy time. I can guarantee you that.

I mean, I knew she was committing adultery. She was not that secretive, and she certainly wasn't showing any kind of kindness or love toward me in those years, although she lived with me. And it was an unhappy marriage, if there ever was one.

However, my own view was, and this I need to clarify, I knew that according to Scripture I had grounds for divorce. But I still, as I prayed about the situation, I judged that God would be more pleased for me to stay in the marriage. Now, it was not a marriage that brought any pleasure to me, but I derived great satisfaction in pleasing God in the matter.

And it was left in God's hands, not mine, to decide whether the marriage would continue. And, as it turned out, of course the marriage did not continue. My wife left and divorced me and married someone else eventually.

But, and then so did I. But the point is, marriage is not for my happiness any more than life itself is for my happiness. To the Christian, life itself is to please God. Paul said, for me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

And to live, well, marriage is part of my living if I'm married. Now, the disciples weren't quite at that place yet. They were still thinking in terms of personal happiness as the goal of life.

And they said, therefore, it must be good not to marry if a man who is married is stuck in the manner that Jesus says, with a wife who may not always make him happy. Now, Jesus, interestingly, agreed with them at a certain level. When they said it's good for a man not to marry, he said, well, not everyone can receive this.

Matthew 19, 11, But he said to them, All cannot accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given. 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. Now, the statement of the disciples that it's good for a man not to marry, Jesus did not dispute that. It might, in fact, be good in some cases for a man not to marry.

There are indeed those who are eunuchs, which means someone who is celibate. Of course, literally, a eunuch is a person who has been castrated. But I think in this case, Jesus uses the term figuratively of one who lives like a eunuch, one who does not necessarily castrate himself, but who lives a celibate life, as if he's not there for his sexual gratification.

He's there to please God only. And some make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of God. Jesus indicates that's a good thing.

He says, if you can do that, fine. If you can accept it, accept it. But he said not everyone can.

He said, some have been given this gift, and some have not been given this gift. That's what he says. Not all can receive this saying, that it's good for a man not to marry.

It's true in some cases, but not for everybody. Only those to whom it has been given. The apostle Paul picks up on this idea that some people are given a gift of celibacy.

And he mentions it in 1 Corinthians 7. He says, for I wish that all men were even as myself. He means single. But he says, but each one has his own gift from God, one in this manner and another in that.

In other words, he says, I believe there is an advantage in being unmarried. An unmarried man, Paul goes on to say, can serve the Lord without the kind of distractions that come with marital obligations and responsibilities. And that's a positive thing.

Paul himself had chosen that life. Or as he put it, he had that gift. He says, I would think it would be good for anyone to do that.

However, he says, not everyone has that gift from God. He says, one man has this gift, and one has another gift. What he means is, some men have the gift of being celibate, which must mean that they can live an unmarried and undistracted life because of a special grace that God has given them.

But other men have a different gift, and that is the gift of being married. God gives them a wife and children. There are different gifts.

One man has this gift, one has another. Jesus mentioned that here. To say that it's better for a man not to marry is something that not everyone can be expected to accept, only

those to whom it has been given.

But those who do accept it, and those to whom it has been given, can be unmarried for the glory of God and can live with much less responsibilities and distractions than a married person. And can give himself wholly to the service of God. Which is, of course, what God intends him to do if that person has received such a gift of celibacy.

We'll continue our study of the life of Christ next time.