

# Matthew 19:3-12

## - Jesus on divorce – an inconvenient truth -

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### Introduction

- ❖ The marriage of man and woman is a godly mystery which must be rediscovered.
- ❖ The teachings of Jesus on marriage and divorce are radical (Mt 5:31-32; Mt 19:3-12). To many, they are an inconvenient godly truth.
  - Jesus taught fundamental equality of man and woman because both have been created in the likeness of God, which is also the likeness of Christ Jesus.
    - His teaching leaves no room for any form of oppression of women, nor for inequality. His words transform cultures whenever people accept him as Saviour and acknowledge his authority over all aspects of life (Mt 28:18-20) and especially the relation between man and woman within the context of marriage.
      - In some cultures, girls are less valued than boys, even leading to the abortion of unborn girls or the abandoning of girls.
      - Even in a world which claims to be modern, there are still cases of trafficking of girls and women in particular, who are exploited in the sex and porn industry, or even serve as slaves in households.
  - The teaching of Jesus doesn't leave room for same-sex marriages. This is a new development in some countries. In the discussion with the Pharisees, he referred to the creation account and the institution of marriage between one man and one woman as a godly institution.
    - It is very important to address these newer developments with the utmost care, wisdom, empathy and love.
  - In the teachings, he points to the godly mystery of marriage in the context of the Kingdom of God.

- The Kingdom of God is governed by:
  - love and faithfulness;
  - grace and forgiveness;
  - prayer and the Spirit of God;
  - faithful obedience to the Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ;
  - wisdom and knowledge.
  
- ❖ The context, form and structure, theological, technical and hermeneutical notes given in this sermon outline overlap with other sermon outlines taken from the Gospel of Matthew. This makes it possible to use this sermon outline as a stand-alone. You can also fit this outline into a series of sermons.

## Context

- ❖ Matthew 19 describes three encounters of Jesus:
  - With the Pharisees about divorce and the reaction of the disciples (19:3-12);
  - With the parents and their little children (19:13-15);
  - With the young rich man about following Jesus and the reaction of the disciples (19:16-30).

## Form and structure

| <b>Discussion with the Pharisees about divorce (verse 3-9)</b> |  |
|--|--|
| <i>Setting:</i>  | Some Pharisees came to him to test him.  |
| <i>Initial question of the Pharisees (verse 3):</i>            | They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"   |
| <i>First reply of Jesus (verse 4-6):</i>                       | "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." |
| <i>Second question of the Pharisees (verse 7):</i>             | "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"   |

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <i>Second reply of Jesus (verse 8-9):</i>             | Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.<br><br>I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."  |
| <b>Discussion with the disciples (verse 10-12)</b>    |   |
| <i>Reaction of his disciples (verse 10)</i>           | The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry."  |
| <i>Reply of Jesus to the disciples (verse 11-12):</i> | Jesus replied, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it." |

❖ The structure of verse 11-12 in more detail reveals the following:

|  |   |
|--|---|
|  | "Not everyone can accept this word, (A)<br><br>but only those to whom it has been given. (B)  |
|  | 1. For there are eunuchs who were born that way,<br>2. and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—<br>3. and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. |
|  | The one who can accept this (A)<br><br>should accept it." (B)   |

## Technical, hermeneutical and historical notes

### Verse 3

❖ To test = "πειράζω": 3. **to attempt to entrap through a process of inquiry, test.** Jesus was treated thus by his opponents, who planned to use their findings against him.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 763).

#### Verse 4-6

- ❖ To divorce = “**ἀπολύω**”: 1. As legal term; 5. **to dissolve a marriage relationship, to divorce one’s wife, or betrothed.**<sup>2</sup>
- ❖ To be united = “**κολληθήσομαι**”: *be joined to his wife.*<sup>3</sup>
- ❖ To join together = “**συζεύγνυμι**”: **to make a pair, join together, pair**, specifically of matrimony.<sup>4</sup>

#### Verse 7-10

- ❖ A certificate of divorce = “**ἀποστάσιον**”: a legal technical term in the sense of relinquishment of property after sale, abandonment, etc. The consequent giving up of one’s claim explains the meaning that the word acquired in Jewish circles: **δοῦναι βιβλίον ἀποστασίου** (Jer 3:8) **notice of divorce give (one’s wife) a certificate of divorce.**<sup>5</sup>
- ❖ Sexual immorality = “**πορνεία**”: (of various kinds of ‘unsanctioned sexual intercourse’) 1. **unlawful sexual intercourse, prostitution, unchastity, fornication**; the sexual unfaithfulness of a married woman. 2. **participation in prohibited degrees of marriage, fornication.**<sup>6</sup>
- ❖ Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and the “certificate of divorce:”
  - Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is an example of casuistic law, a law which is given with respect to certain (cases) situations. Casuistic laws are characterized by “if-then” clauses.

|                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| <i>Situation (1):</i>  | <b>if</b> a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house,  |
| <i>Situation (2a):</i> | <b>and if</b> after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, |
| <i>Situation (2b):</i> | <b>or if</b> he dies,  |
| <i>Rule (3):</i>       | <b>then</b> her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry   |

<sup>2</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 118).

<sup>3</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 556).

<sup>4</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 954).

<sup>5</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 120).

<sup>6</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 854).

|                |   |
|----------------|---|
|                | her again after she has been defiled.   |
| <i>Reason:</i> | That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD. Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance. |

- The existence of the “certificate of divorce” is presupposed in this law concerning a man who wants to remarry the same woman after she has been the wife of someone else. This “certificate” is not commanded by Moses.
  - Probably, the “certificate of divorce” was instituted for the protection of women to declare that a woman was not sent away because of any case of adultery. In the case of adultery, she could be sentenced to death – and the marriage would be dissolved.

#### Verse 11-12

❖ Eunuch = “**εὐνοῦχος**”:

- **1. a castrated male person, eunuch** (Mt 19:12b). Eunuchs served, especially in the orient, as keepers of a harem (Esth 2:14) and not infrequently rose to high positions in the state: the eunuch, who was an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (Ac 8:26-40).
- **2. a human male who, without a physical operation, is by nature incapable of begetting children, impotent male** (Mt 19:12a).
- **3. a human male who abstains from marriage, without being impotent, a celibate.**<sup>7</sup>

#### Historical note

- ❖ Commentators often refer to a discussion among two Jewish schools of thought: The **House of Hillel** and the **House of Shammai**. The House of Shammai held that a man can only divorce his wife for a serious transgression, but the House of Hillel allowed divorce for even lesser offenses.<sup>8</sup>
  - This information is relevant for the study of Jewish thought, but less for the understanding of this passage, because of the following reasons:
    - The Pharisees (Mt 19:3) are presented as one small group, not representing one of two different schools of thought. Elsewhere the Gospel explicitly mentions two differing theologies concerning the resurrection (Mt 22:23-33).
    - These Pharisees were not interested in Jesus’ opinion concerning the two ethical positions, but to test Jesus.

<sup>7</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p.409).

<sup>8</sup> Bruce, F.F. (1983, p. 57).

## Hermeneutical notes

- ❖ Matthew 19:3-10 is very interesting with regard to the point of view of hermeneutical theory.
  - The Pharisees said: “Why then, **did** Moses **command** that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?” In Deuteronomy 24:1-4 there is no such a command found. This part of the law on divorce presupposes the existence and use of the “certificate of divorce.”

The Pharisees draw the conclusion by implication that Moses had commanded to give this certificate and thereby made divorce possible on other grounds than adultery (seventh commandment).
  - Jesus: “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard.” Deuteronomy 24:1-4 forbids the misuse of the “certificate of divorce.” This “certificate of divorce” was not meant to make divorce possible, but to regulate an existing practice of divorce because of the “hardness of heart.”

**Jesus gives priority to the creation account** above the law of Moses. He came to preach the Kingdom of God, and this means the restoration of the rule of God, as it was from the beginning.

The apostle Paul wrote: “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, **created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness**” (Eph 4:22-24).

## **Exposition**

### Verse 3-6

- ❖ **“Some Pharisees came to him to test him.”** A small group of Pharisees tried to trap Jesus on utterances against the Law and the Prophets. This would give them ammunition for their accusations against him. Their motives are wrong. They didn’t look for a scholarly debate about important questions concerning the application of the law of God.
  - **“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”** This was not a theoretical question. It happened in daily life. We don’t know how often, and probably there were more Jewish people like Joseph the husband of Mary, who honoured marriage as an institution created by God (Mt 1:19). The Samaritan woman who Jesus met at the well and who knew the law of Moses as well, had been married to five husbands and was at that moment living together with a man who was not her husband (Jn 4:18).
  - What could Jesus have answered?
    - “Yes”? This would make the marital status a legal arrangement for men only. He could enter into a marriage or dissolve a marriage. This creates a fundamental inequality in the relationship between man and woman (see

below). In the end, there was no legal protection for women. The woman is, in this case, the property of her husband.

- “No”? In that case, the ensuing question will be “Why then did Moses write about a certificate of divorce?”
- “It depends on the case and situation.” This was the subject of the discussion among the Pharisees.

❖ The Lord Jesus took another route: **“Haven’t you read?”** Try to imagine the reaction of the Pharisees. They were probably reading and studying the Scriptures daily. This is a firm rebuke. **“Haven’t you read?”**

Jesus didn’t start with the practice of divorce and the questions of law, but with creation. And he changed the perspective completely. This is godly wisdom!

| Pharisees’ question:  | Jesus’ reply:   |
|---|---|
| 1. Male / female ><br>fundamental inequality: Is it lawful for a man                            | 1. Male / female ><br>fundamental equality: “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female’” |
| 2. Dissolving unity ><br>“That a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?” | 2. Creating unity ><br>“Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”                       |
| 3. By man (husband) ><br>“that a man give... and send her away”                                 | 3. By God ><br>“what God has joined together”   |
| 4. Starting from Moses ><br>“Why then did Moses command.”                                       | 4. Starting from Creation ><br>“That at the beginning the Creator ‘made.’”                                  |

- The perspective is completely God’s, and not the perspective of a man.

❖ Jesus replied “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female’ and said ‘for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’”

- The first reference is to Genesis 1:27, the second to Genesis 2:24. In the original context Genesis 2:24 looks like a later comment added to the story of Genesis 2:18-25. Jesus equates this later comment of the writer of Genesis with the word spoken by God himself: **the Creator said**. By doing so, Jesus made clear that the marriage is not an institution governed by societal laws which can be changed, but a fundamental institution created by God.

- He doesn’t limit this to the initial encounter between the first man and woman, but to every marriage in the context of the Kingdom of God.

- ❖ It is important to learn that Jesus taught a fundamental equality of man and woman. Both are created in the likeness of God. This doesn't mean that there are no differences in responsibilities (Eph 5:21-33).
  - The apostle Paul referred in his first letter to the Corinthians to this fundamental equality of man and woman: "The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. **The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife**" (1 Cor 7:3-4).
    - The different responsibilities are governed by mutual love (Eph 5:21), by the Spirit of God (Eph 5:18) to the glory of God (1 Cor 11:7-12) and by being a new creation in Christ Jesus (Eph 4:24).
- ❖ Only God can dissolve a marriage:
  - when one of the spouses dies (Rom 7:1-3);
  - by passing judgement in the case of adultery or any other sexual immorality.<sup>9</sup>

#### Verse 7-9

- ❖ The Pharisees couldn't disagree with this answer of Jesus. The test has failed thus far. Their second question is not a test, but more an inquiry. "Why then?"
  - For further information about the "certificate of divorce" see below.
- ❖ Again Jesus corrected their reading of the Scriptures. They asked: "Why then did Moses **command**?" Jesus answered: "Moses **permitted**." And the reason is: "**Because your hearts were hard.**"
  - It is interesting to see that Jesus didn't point to the sinfulness or hardness of heart of men in general, but he said: "**your hearts.**" These are the hearts of the Pharisees who were at that moment speaking with Jesus and the hearts of their generation.<sup>10</sup> He is confronting them with their own position and their primary question.
  - And of course, this is applicable to the hearts of all men (and women) who don't treat their wives (or husbands) with the respect and love which God requires.
  - "**But it was not this way from the beginning.**" When the introductory words of the Gospel of John are taken into account, it is clear that Jesus is not explaining the Word of God and how to read and apply it. He has come to fulfil the Law and the Prophets (Mt 5:17) and:

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<sup>9</sup> Leviticus 20:10-20 gives different kinds of examples, but these can only be used with the utmost pastoral care!

<sup>10</sup> This is an example of actualisation of the law.

- “In the beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God.  
He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made;  
without him nothing was made that has been made” (Jn 1:1-3).

- In Christ male and female have been created in the likeness of God!
- In proclaiming the Kingdom of God, Jesus restored the original purpose of God.

❖ And with his godly authority, he asserts: “**I tell you**

- **that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery”** (compare Mt 5:31-32; Sermon on the Mount).
- The cases of sexual immorality were not covered by “any and every reason.” The “certificate of divorce” could not be applied to these situations, although in practice it sometimes happened that this certificate was given to a woman in case of sexual immorality.

| Reason for divorce   | Consequence  | After remarriage   |
|--|--|--|
| Any reason except sexual immorality > “certificate of divorce” | The original marriage has <b>not</b> been unbound.<br>Man cannot separate, what God has joined together. | Adultery > “judgement” > The original marriage has been unbound. |
| Sexual immorality > “judgement”                                | The original marriage has been unbound. <sup>11</sup>  |  |

- The result is in both cases the same. The “certificate of divorce” cannot serve as a bypass of the seventh commandment: “You shall not commit adultery” (Ex 20:14).

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<sup>11</sup> The laws of the Old Testament prescribed that one who committed “sexual immorality” should be put to death. This meant the unbinding of the marriage.

### Verse 10-12

- ❖ The disciples were astonished or perhaps even desperate after this reply Jesus made to this test of the Pharisees: “If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.”
  - This means that the disciples also accepted the “certificate of divorce” as a kind of escape route from an unhappy marriage.
- ❖ The answer Jesus gave to this outcry of the disciples has not that much to do with the position of a eunuch. Instead, he is confronting the disciples with the consequences of their thoughts. “It is better not to marry” means that you want to stay single as a bachelor for the rest of your life. Note that the apostle Peter was married (Mt 8:14).
  - If you don’t marry, then you must accept the life of a eunuch. Jesus mentions three groups of eunuchs.

The first group is born like that. They are sexually handicapped. They cannot enter into a marriage.

The second group has been castrated by others, a practice which existed in Middle-Eastern and North African regions (Acts 8:26-40). They were not allowed to enter into a sexual relationship because of their position of trust in the presence of (influential) women.

The third group lived as eunuchs by choice, accepting the consequences of this position and living up to these consequences: by self-control and self-restraint. The apostle Paul is an example of this group. His undivided interest was the Kingdom of God.

    - The apostle Paul wrote several years later to the Corinthians: “Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, **for it is better to marry than to burn with passion**” (1 Cor 7:8-9).
  - The implicit question Jesus is asking: “do you really want the alternative of living like a eunuch to getting married?” This position is only reserved for those to whom God has given the ability self-control of sexual desires for the sake of his Kingdom.” And, if God has given someone this ability of self-control, he (she) should accept it.

### **Application**

- ❖ Remark (1) – This sermon outline is not about how you can sustain a healthy and happy marriage. Some thoughts:
  - by mutual love and faithfulness;
  - by grace and forgiveness;
  - by prayer and the Spirit of God;
  - by faithful obedience to the Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ;
  - by Wisdom and knowledge;

- by the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23).

❖ Remark (2) – Addressing questions concerning same-sex marriages and relations must be done with love, wisdom, sensitivity, empathy.

❖ It is important to stress and teach:

- The wisdom of Christ when he answers the question of the Pharisees.
- His perspective is completely God’s perspective and not man’s.
  - He starts with the creation of man and woman.
  - He shows that marriage is an institution created by God and not by society.
  - He teaches the fundamental equality of man and woman.

| Pharisees’ question:  | Jesus’ reply:  |
|---|--|
| 1. Male / female ><br>fundamental inequality: Is it lawful for a man                            | 1. Male / female ><br>fundamental equality: “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female.’” |
| 2. Dissolving unity ><br>“That a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?” | 2. Creating unity ><br>“Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”                        |
| 3. By man (husband) ><br>“that a man give... and send her away”                                 | 3. By God ><br>“what God has joined together”  |
| 4. Starting from Moses ><br>“Why then did Moses command.”                                       | 4. Starting from Creation ><br>“That at the beginning the Creator ‘made.’”                                   |

- Jesus is unmasking the hardness of heart as the source of many marital problems.

❖ Pastoral advice:

- In the case of a divorce, pastoral care and wisdom are needed. In some cases, a divorce might be necessary for the protection of one of the spouses and, if there are, the children.
  - A brief look at the Ten Commandments, especially at those four which protect the society, the sixth till the ninth commandment, is important for a sound and wise application of the seventh commandment:

| Number | Commandment (Ex 20:13-16) | Function            |
|--------|---------------------------|---------------------|
| 6      | “You shall not murder.”   | Protection of life. |

|   |   |                                       |
|---|---|---------------------------------------|
| 7 | "You shall not commit adultery."                            | Protection of marriage and sexuality. |
| 8 | "You shall not steal."                                      | Protection of property.               |
| 9 | "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor." | Protection of law and justice.        |

- The protection of life precedes the protection of marriage and sexuality. When the life of a spouse and children is endangered within the context of marriage by violence, abuse of power, or sexual abuse, the sixth commandment has priority and the victims must be protected against violence and abuse.

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