

The Celibate Life

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Last week we looked at Jesus’s teaching, in the Gospel of Mark, on marriage and divorce; and, this morning we’re going to look at a parallel account in the Gospel of Matthew. In his account, Matthew includes a little more teaching on the subject from Jesus—which isn’t in the Gospels of Mark, Luke, or John. And, it’s significant. It changes how we think about marriage and singleness. It confronts our normal way of thinking about these things. It challenges our expectations and values.

Let’s read Matthew’s account with a special emphasis on the last three verses. That’s where this additional and important lesson is recorded for us.

Matthew 19:3-12

³ Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”

⁴ “Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ ⁵ 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’? ⁶ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

⁷ “Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”

⁸ Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. ⁹ I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

¹⁰ The disciples said to him, “If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.”

¹¹ Jesus replied, “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. ¹² 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.”

Maybe there’s no stranger and more foreign subject in the Bible than this one. Jesus, in response to his disciples, waxes poetic about eunuchs. We might fairly ask: What do eunuchs have to do with marriage or divorce? And then, we might conclude that this passage has nothing to teach us today. But, that conclusion would be wrong. Jesus has a lot to teach us about how God calls and values us—how God sees things and, therefore, how we also should see things.

In order to learn these lessons, we’ll follow the logic of the last three verses. There we see: (1st) **The disciples object** to Jesus’s teaching on marriage and divorce and (2nd) **Jesus corrects** their misunderstandings with his little lesson about eunuchs and the kingdom of God. Let’s look at each of these movements in turn.

1. **The disciples object (v. 10).**

Last week, I pointed out that we know this lesson about marriage and divorce is a hard lesson because Jesus’s disciples seek-out clarification behind closed doors. Mark explicitly tells us that the twelve waited until they were alone with Jesus to ask for clarification (Mark 10:10). They were apparently too proud or too embarrassed to ask their questions in public. So, they nod their heads and let Jesus do the talking until it’s time for messianic office-hours.

Matthew, however, points out that they don’t just have questions for their Lord but objections also. They find Jesus’s teaching about marriage so difficult to swallow that they’re ready to do-away with the whole thing. They’re ready to trash marriage. Matthew records their objection.

The disciples said to him, “If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry” (v. 10).

In short, the disciples are complaining that such a one flesh union for a lifetime is too much work—that it’s not worth it. Too much sacrifice! Too much forgiveness! Too much of one person! You can imagine the details.

Let’s, however, stop and consider their objection for a moment. What does it tell us about them? What does it reveal about their view of marriage and divorce?

Well, their objection reveals that the disciples have completely missed Jesus's point. It shows us that they have more in common with the Pharisees whom Jesus rebukes than with Jesus himself. They see marriage as something primarily for their benefit. They don't see it as something primarily for God's glory.

And friends, this is our default too. We regularly lapse into selfish thinking when it comes to our marriage or our money or our time. You name it and we think about it, quite naturally, in me-centered ways.

Consequently, I love that Matthew (one of those twelve misguided disciples) records this objection for us, because it reminds us that we're related to the "enemy." It reminds us that it's *not* us and them. We are all recovering and relapsing pharisees. We're all in need of correction to our natural, sinful inclinations. We're all in need of salvation from ourselves—from our innate self-worship.

When the church has kept this in mind, during the last couple of millennia, it's been at its best—humble, sacrificial, generous, creative, gracious, and loving. It's been Christlike. When, however, it's forgotten this truth, it's been at its worst—arrogant, greedy, boring, and bullish. May God forgive us!

I appreciate how J. D. Greear puts it. He states the matter with blunt beauty.

The Holy Spirit did not go into such detail about the Pharisees...just so we could understand a group unique to the first century. Pharisaism is a poisonous weed.... [It] is every bit the threat...today that it was then.¹

We saw it last week in the religious leaders who were trying to trick Jesus. We see it this week in the twelve disciples as they bring their objection before Jesus and scoff at the one flesh union God created in marriage. And, we see it quite often in ourselves if we're paying attention. Friends, keep an eye on it in your own lives. Beware of the pharisee within you.

Well, Jesus comes to the rescue. He won't let this objection be the last word.

2. Jesus corrects (vv. 11-12).

He does it, however, in what seems to us an odd way. Look at his response.

¹ J. D. Greear in the forward to *Humble Orthodoxy: Holding God High Without Putting Others Down*, IX.

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 (vv. 11-12).

Let's begin with a little background on eunuchs—something I never imagined I'd ever give in a sermon. In Jesus's day, there were really just two types of eunuchs: manmade and natural. The former were typically castrated to serve in royal offices (usually as those in charge of the royal household and in close contact with the wives of the king). The latter were simply those who were born without the natural capacity to reproduce. In either case, sexual relations and marriage were both off the table. And, in Judaism, marriage was considered a duty.²

However, in response to the disciples' objection, Jesus creates a third category of eunuch—namely, someone who gives-up marriage in order to serve the kingdom of God. This is something brand new. This is a completely different way of thinking. When the disciples hyperbolically object that it's therefore better not to get married, Jesus catches them off guard by saying: “Yes, in some cases, it is.”

What is Jesus doing here? Well, I think he's doing at least two things.

a. Jesus is teaching us about God's calling.

Being married, as we saw last week, is a calling. We're supposed to serve God in our marriages. So, we don't dissolve them when our wife prepares a terrible meal. We don't seek a divorce whenever our husband forgets our birthday. We don't look for a way out for any and every reason—as some people were doing in Jesus's day (and continue to do in our own day).

No! Marriage is for God. It's for his praise and his honor. He calls you to it.

But then, Jesus (to his disciples' exaggerated objection) says that being single is also a calling. He says, “there are those who choose to live like eunuchs” for God. In short, there are those who choose not to marry and not to indulge sexual desires in order to serve the Lord in a different fashion. Notice that I said a different fashion. It's different. It's not better and it's not worse. This is very important to remember

² D. A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew*, 419.

because we have often made one calling better or worse than the other. (I'll say more about that in just a moment.)

Look friends, Jesus is clearly challenging the disciples with their own words. Is singleness better than marriage? Well, that depends on the Lord's calling for you. It's not for everyone—"but only [for] those to whom it has been given" (v. 11).

So, the first thing Jesus teaches us here is that the Lord calls some to marriage, and (to the disciples' surprise!) the Lord calls some of us to singleness. God calls us to serve him in all things. And, his calling upon us isn't uniform or one-size-fits-all. For some, it will mean being a father or mother—a husband or wife. Yet, for others, it will mean being a spiritual father or mother and a faithful companion and friend within our church and community.

There's also, however, a second lesson in all this stuff about eunuchs.

b. Jesus is teaching us about God's values.

As I briefly mentioned earlier, marriage was seen as a duty in ancient Israel. A good Israelite boy was expected to get married. A good Israelite girl was expected to get married. This was the "right" thing to do. It was considered a disappointment for one to not fulfill his or her duty in this way. It was highly valued in Jesus's day! It was certainly the norm.

One scholar explains the Hebrew valuing of marriage in this way.

With the Hebrews married life was the normal life. Any exception called for apology and explanation. "Any Jew who has not a wife is no man" (Talmud). [Marriage] was regarded as awaiting everyone on reaching maturity.³

So, this was the social-air which Jesus and his disciples breathed. Marriage was good. Singleness was bad. End of story!

Now, if we're being honest, the social-air we breathe today isn't that different. We make an idol of romance. We worship the idea of finding that one special person who will complete us. Our advertisements and our entertainment and our politics all utilize this romantic idolatry for their purposes. And, sadly the church is complicit. The church has played right along *despite* Jesus's teaching in today's text.

³ George B. Eager, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*: "Marriage", 1996-1997.

Just consider how we often speak to young people in the church?

- “When you grow up and get married and have children....”
- “Oh, how’s college? Are you dating anyone yet?”
- Shoot, even singles groups are often construed as a way to meet someone.

Where’s our theology of singleness? Where’s our implicit and explicit valuing of those called by God to serve him without being married? If we ignore this calling, we ignore Jesus’s clear teaching in this passage. And, we do a disservice to all those whom God calls to serve him in this way.

I know numerous believers both men and women—who may be called by God to singleness—but don’t even have a biblical category for it. They feel odd in church because they aren’t meeting the cultural expectations, because they haven’t found that godly man or woman yet. They feel like there’s no real community in the church for them. This is a tremendous shame on the church.

- Would Jesus or John the Baptist feel welcome in western church culture?
- Would the apostle Paul feel at home in it?
- Would a single mom or a lifelong bachelor feel welcome?

Friends, Jesus is blowing up contemporary values both in his day and our day through his teaching about non-marriage here. He’s telling us that we need to reform. He’s telling us we need to operate by God’s values, not human values. He is saying that marriage is a calling which is valuable to God and that singleness is also a calling which is *equally* valuable to God.

Whenever I talk to my children about their future, I try to speak to them *openly* about it. I try *not* to assume an outcome. I want them to know that God loves them and calls them to live for his glory—no matter if they get married or they stay single. I want them to value things as the Lord values things. And, whether they get married or stay single, I want them to both anticipate and work for the ultimate wedding day when Christ returns—since, as Vaughn Roberts explains:

...no Christian is single forever.... [Because] Jesus [is] the bridegroom who will...return to take his bride, the church, to be with him [forever]. On that

*day all pain will disappear, including the pain of a difficult marriage or singleness. God will wipe away every tear...and a great shout will be heard: "Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready."*⁴

⁴ Vaughn Roberts, "4 Things God Says to Singles"—read his full article [here](#).