

- *If you are married, then ask the Lord to protect your marriage and bless every part of the relationship you have with your spouse.*

Final Prayer

Dear Lord and Father; You understand things which are a mystery to us, and when we place ourselves freely in Your hands, You are able to reveal to us the truths of Your grace, the truths about Your plans for the world, and the truth which sets people free! Liberate the world by means of Your Gospel, we pray: AMEN

Prayer

Let our voices speak out in praise of Your Name, Holy Lord and God Almighty! Make praise so natural to our being that it comes from our lips in all the words we speak, that it gleams within our eyes and in the light upon our faces, and that it speaks out loud through all the work we do. Lord God, bless us with an unending spirit of praise which never ceases because we love You! AMEN.

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Land

For centuries, men and women have lived on the land in a sustainable way; but increasingly, this is not true today. Pray that people and governments will respect the land.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for those affected by extremes of weather in different ways*
- *Pray for the worsening situation for poor people in Zimbabwe*
- *Give thanks to God for the fellowship of the church*

Meditation

The heart is not defeated
When it rests in the freedom of our Lord,
And the truth of eternal peace has been installed within.

The mind is not dismayed
When it is satisfied by an explanation
Of God's eternal revelation of Himself to all humanity.

The spirit is not downcast
When it is constantly renewed, refreshed,
By the liberating touch of the wondrous Holy Spirit.

The body is never useless
When it is committed to its loving Lord
To do the glorious things for which it has been made.

The soul is never conquered
When it is secured in Christ's salvation
And redeemed to take its place in God's amazing world!

Bible Study - Matthew 19:1-6

¹ *When Jesus had finished these sayings, He left Galilee and went to the region of Judea on the other side of the Jordan.* ² *Large crowds followed Him, and He cured them there.*

³ *Some Pharisees came forward in order to test Him, and asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause whatsoever?'* ⁴ *He answered, 'Have you not read that at the beginning, the Creator "made them male and female?"'* ⁵ *and added, "This is why a man must leave his father and mother and be united*

with his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. ⁶ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

Review

The subject of marriage goes to the heart of any society; and for this reason, whatever Jesus says about it is of the greatest importance, and it goes to the heart of our understanding of the identity of a man and a woman. However, there is no doubt that in today's world, marriage is an institution that is being questioned. People often treat marriage far more lightly today than in previous generations, and many regard it as an option, or certainly a temporary contract, rather than a permanent one. Immediately after this brief passage, and in direct response to the question of the Pharisees (19:3), Jesus talks about divorce; and we will read and study what Jesus has to say about this tomorrow. We will ask whether we can apply Jesus teaching about divorce, as well as marriage, to our world today. The pastoral situations we face when trying to help people who are married or divorced are complex and often difficult to discern, but they must be faced, for the good of the church as a whole, and especially for the many people who have been deeply hurt by the modern experience of marriage in a secular society.

Which way did Jesus travel south? Before we look at this, we must be aware that the first two verses of chapter 19 deal with a change that took place in Jesus' ministry. Ever since His confrontation of the Pharisees in chapter twelve, Jesus had made changes to His ministry and begun to talk to the disciples about His death and resurrection (16:21, 17:22,23). Also, He said He would speak to the crowds in parables (13:34) but concentrate upon teaching the disciples about the Kingdom and matters of faith (14:22ff) and also the Church (ch18). Most of this took place in the region of Galilee, though Jesus sometimes wandered some distance north (15:21, 16:13). Now, however, Jesus changed direction very significantly to the south, a journey that would take Him eventually to Jerusalem.

This passage tells us that Jesus travelled to 'the region of Judea on the other side of the Jordan.' This is a strange phrase given that the traditional tribal lands of Judah all lay to the west of the Dead Sea and did not reach up to the river Jordan, let alone its Eastern side (which is what is meant by saying 'the other side' – v1). The best way to understand this is to remember that the Samaritans lived on western side of the Jordan, and therefore Jewish people did not travel through it. Jesus therefore followed convention by travelling to Judea on 'the other side' of the Jordan, to the East, where there were significant settlements of the Judean population in Jesus' day even though it was not the traditional 'land of Judah'.

The Pharisees' question When the Pharisees approached Jesus, it was to serve Him with a trick question (19:3). It is possible that the Pharisees were aware of what Jesus had said earlier in the Sermon on the Mount (5:32) and they realised that if Jesus continued to teach a hard line about divorce by forbidding it, then they could accuse Him of contravening the laws of Moses (Deut 24:1-4 – which allows divorce). This would make Him very unpopular amongst the male population, who generally took advantage of Moses' apparent acceptance of divorce, and divorced their wives as they pleased. The Pharisees question however, invited Him into this same trap; and it is important to remember that this same issue had been the downfall of John the Baptist, whose condemnation of Herod Antipas' divorce led eventually to his own death (14:1-12).

Jesus' response Jesus responded to the challenge by not shirking the question and applying the same logic He always used for all questions about scripture. He appealed to those passages of the Law which laid down the principles upon which everything else was based. He knew that the Pharisees wanted Him to defend His position against the 'Law of Moses' (Deuteronomy 24), but He appealed firstly to the two passages of Genesis which

talk of God's intended purpose for man and woman, before sin entered the world through the 'fall':

'So God created people His image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them.' (Gen 1:27)

'Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.' (Gen 2:24)

Jesus took these two incredibly important passages of scripture and drew from them the logical conclusion that when a man and a woman are joined together in the spiritual, physical, and sexual unity of marriage, they become 'one flesh', made by God to reflect His image as a male and female unity. Such a unity is a profound mystery of the grace of God, which is His perfect will for a man and a woman; it cannot be broken. Therefore, in answer to the Pharisees, Jesus 'trumped' one scripture with another.

Jesus' command Jesus then gave one of the very few commands given throughout His teaching. It is not about divorce or about marriage itself, but a command not to attempt to undo the work that God does between a man and a woman; He said: 'what God has joined, let no-one separate'. This command therefore forbids people to engage in fornication and allow themselves to be drawn into all the social and private means of temptation that cause deviation from the unity of marriage.

We will follow Jesus' teaching further tomorrow, but this command from Jesus is very important, and we cannot let it just pass us by. Jesus was not married, but He knew God's will for men and women, and the strength of His words about marriage have been a central feature of Christian marriage services for generations. Lifelong committed marriage remains the purpose of God for most men and women, and the church cannot part from such teaching, whatever pastoral care and help it extends to those who find themselves in trouble with their marriage.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Is Jesus' teaching about marriage easy to understand, or is it difficult? Why do people find marriage hard today?
2. In what ways do you believe you reflect the image of God as a man or a woman, or as a couple (if married)?
3. Discuss what you think Genesis 1:27 means, and how it can be applied.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The unity of a man and a woman in marriage is a complex thing, and by following the various passages about it, including what is found in Genesis 2 and 3, I am of the opinion that the spiritual unity of a man and a woman is expressed in their sexual and physical relationship. This, of course, is expressed differently for all couples, and we have little right to pry into such private matters. However, this also leads me to the conclusion that loose sexual practice and experience before marriage can and often does compromise the full spiritual and physical union of later marriage. Some divorce occurs because of this. It is not commonly recognised or talked about today, but it is very important.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *If you are not married, pray and ask the Lord to help you understand His purpose for you as someone not married; and if you long for a husband or wife, then pray and ask the Lord to make you complete in marriage.*