

## Prayer

All praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ, for You give us hope of new life in the midst of our suffering; You have travelled our paths, and You have endured the worst the world can offer. So from the immeasurable wealth of Your experience and love, Lord Jesus, speak words of compassion and reassurance to us that will lift our hearts and give us a new and certain hope for the future both in this life and the next. AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Land

*Land is amazingly complex, and the geography of all our countries is fascinating. Pray to give the Lord thanks for what He has given us, that we might use it well and for His glory.*

### On-going prayers

- Pray for all those caught up in the scandals which feed the press
- Give thanks for personal prayers which have been answered
- Pray for those affected by extremes of weather in different ways

## Meditation

Can you see beyond what happens now?  
Can you see what God will do with all of your life?

They say a measure of intelligence is found  
In how much one can see beyond the present,  
To understand the cost of what we do right now;  
And give up short term gain for a greater benefit ahead.

If so, God's people demonstrate this giftedness;  
For in Christ, they glimpse beyond the present troubles  
To view the good that lies ahead of us, tantalising,  
And beckoning us to taste the future Glory of our Lord.

Some doubt this can be so; but it is a spiritual intelligence  
God places graciously within, both for now and for eternity.

## Bible Study - Matthew 19:10-12

<sup>10</sup> His disciples said to him, 'If that is how things are between husband and wife, it is better not to marry.' <sup>11</sup> But he replied, 'Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. <sup>12</sup> There are some, certainly, who do not marry either because that is their nature from birth, or because of the influence and actions of others; and then there are others who do not marry because they have chosen to be single for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Those who are able to accept this teaching should live accordingly.'

### Review

Matthew 19:1-15 is centred upon Jesus' teaching about marriage. In the past two days we have studied Jesus' affirmation of the highest goal of marriage, the unity of one man and one woman (see 19:6, Gen 1:27:2:24). However, although Jesus upheld this and warned

of the consequences of taking divorce too lightly, he left open the possibility of God's redeeming love and care for those who find themselves, for whatever reason, with a broken marriage. Jesus' teaching always allows the sinner to repent and be healed, and there is nothing in Matthew 19 to change this. The disciples however could not see past Jesus' powerful insistence that divorce was akin to adultery; they found this all very hard (19:10) and this is where our passage takes up the theme.

Jesus picked up the disciples concern about remaining single (19:12). Jesus reply to them about this has been debated for years, causing great controversy; but I do believe this to be straightforward. In this passage, Jesus completed His teaching on marriage and singleness, and hinted strongly at how a disciple could be fulfilled in either state. There are many today who, like the disciples, say; 'If that is how things are between husband and wife, it is better not to marry' (19:10). The main difference between then and now is that the alternative for the disciples was voluntary celibacy, and the alternative today is to 'live in sin'. In the light of this we should remember that the Gospel always condemns sin, but also stands ready to offer salvation for those who repent.

**Celibacy, marriage and Eunuchs!** The word of Jesus 'not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given' (v11), are initially unclear. Was He talking about the unity of marriage, or everything in the previous verses about divorce including the suggestion that it was better not to marry (19:10)? Over the years, those who support the idea that celibacy is a higher calling than marriage have used this verse (together with verse 12) to argue that Jesus was indeed blessing the practice of celibacy. This is not a good conclusion. Jesus had just explained that the union of a man and woman reflected the very image of God (19:3-9), and it seems extraordinary that He should now say that singleness was somehow 'more sacred' than the very image of the Father!

You may be used to translations of scripture that talk about 'eunuchs' where I have translated 'those who do not marry' (19:12). In Jesus' day the term 'eunuch' was derogatory. In the pagan Roman world of the day, male servants were castrated to keep them subservient and impotent, and thereby unable to take sexual advantage of any women in a wealthy household. The whole idea was anathema to the Jews, and the word was used as a form of abuse towards any who did not marry (marriage was expected of every man in Jewish society). The word implied impotence, inadequacy and possibly an accusation of homosexuality. It is highly likely that Jesus' enemies swore at Him by calling Him a 'eunuch', probably because He was not married.

**Marriage and being single** Our passage says that some people remain single either because of how they developed naturally from birth or because others have made them so (19:12). In the ancient world as today, some do not marry by personal preference; but the common practice of castration separates the ancients from ourselves. However, in our day, people are strongly influenced by the 'permissive society' to reject normal male / female relationships and accept homosexual attractions and other deviations. Our text is not specifically about homosexuality, but it is about issues related to singleness; it readily accepts that some choose to be single in order to serve God's Kingdom and the prime example of this is Jesus Himself, but this is a special gift of God and scripture avoids any generalisations about it. Such was Jesus reply to anyone who accused him of being a 'eunuch' in His own day, and also to those who would wish to scandalously suggest today (as some have) that He was a homosexual.

The final part of verse 12 contain words that echo those at the end of verse 11; 'those who are able to accept this should live accordingly'. This emphasises that whatever path we follow, of marriage or singleness, we accept our state of life as a gift of God. There is no competition between marriage and singleness, and neither can one be described as more 'holy' than the other. Any such suggestion flies in the face of scripture itself (see 1 Cor 12:6f.). Each are to be received as a gift of God and lived as a gift.

**Today** We live in times when many people regard marriage as a matter of personal choice and convenience, to the point that bearing of children is also regarded as a matter of choice and convenience. Medical practice and social trends allow people to make their choices with increasing freedom; 'if this marriage doesn't work, perhaps the next one will', or, 'we'll have children when we choose so to do and our finances allow for it'. We could go on. How much better the ways of the Kingdom of God, in which however man and woman meet or fall in love, marriage is a gift from God, and children are His choice and creation within the womb of a woman through the expression of love? How much better if we accept singleness as a gift of God for the work of the Kingdom; not as a prior requirement for priesthood within the church, but as a distinct and special calling to be honoured as much as we honour a woman who bears a child or a man who protects His family?

Let us lay aside the selfish extravagance with which we have interpreted scripture and made hard and fast rules about marriage and singleness that deny the gifting of God and the mercy of His love. Jesus' teachings in Matthew's Gospel about marriage and children are all about openness, the fulfilling gifts of God, and acceptance in the Kingdom of God through Jesus.

## Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Have you thought of your own state, married or single, as a 'gift of God'? What are the benefits of this teaching?
2. Are there any advantages to being single if you feel called to service in the Kingdom of God? What are the advantages of being married?
3. Share in your group the examples of those who are married or single which inspire you.

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*I have always been concerned that the traditional churches and also new churches set rules about marriage which are very strict and thereby make the whole issue of personal relationships, singleness and marriage like a mountain which is very hard to climb for most. The reaction is obvious; many prefer to go their own way quietly. In many western countries, figures for marriage are declining, and it is not uncommon to find Christian couples 'living in sin'. They just cannot cope with the church's rules nor equate them with their own circumstances and needs. Trying to get the churches to change is impossible. Only the Holy Spirit can convince the people of God that something needs to be done about this.*

### Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Pray for all who find themselves caught up in the dilemmas which I have hinted at in this study? In particular, pray for young people who have not been taught well about God's blessings within marriage and also singleness.*
- *Befriend a young couple at church and seek to share with them their experience of marriage, so that they have a means to talk about what happens to them within the fellowship of the church.*

## Final Prayer

Jesus, please do Your work within my life, a work of peace and love and care which removes the tension, strife and worry from my soul. Transform me according to Your