

Prayer

Forgive me for rushing, dear Lord, for there is too much to do and I can never get everything done. Bless me by Your Spirit, Lord God, who is able to strengthen me for what lies ahead, show me what is right and what is wrong, and guide me through all life's complexities. Your support and presence is the most amazing blessing; how could I ever succeed without You? Thank You, Lord God: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Land

Praise God for the beauty and magnificence of the land and the world in which we live. Each of us sees it differently, so all our praises are immensely valuable to our Lord!

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for personal prayers which have been answered
- Pray for those affected by extremes of weather in different ways
- Pray for the worsening situation for poor people in Zimbabwe

Meditation

We are called to show the compassion of Christ;

To open ones heart to dirty and squalid men and women who live on the streets;
To recognise the humanity of all who have been poorly treated in our world today.
To contribute every penny beyond one's means to help the poor of this world.

To persist in loving all those who openly declare that they hate God and Christians;
To stand firm in the midst of the oppression of the Church, whatever the cost;
To love one's brother and sister in Christ without any hint of prejudice whatever.

To give one's soul to what is right within the workplace and in every walk of life;
To offer love and affection to all who have given up hope, for whatever reason;
To provide every means of support possible to those who have been oppressed.

So let us do this, openly, in the name of our Lord.

Bible Study - Matthew 19:7-9

⁷ Then they said to Him, 'Why then did Moses command us to dismiss a woman by presenting a certificate of divorce?' ⁸ He said to them, 'Moses allowed you to divorce your wives because you were so hard-hearted, but it was not like this in the beginning. ⁹ What I say to you is this; whoever divorces his wife and marries another, except because of unfaithfulness, commits adultery.'

Review

After Jesus pronouncement about marriage in the previous passage, he returned to the subject of divorce, according to the question asked of Him by the Pharisees (19:3). Divorce is a difficult issue for many Christians today, because the values of Christian marriage are not always upheld within society and many are uncertain about how to handle the social expectations of both marriage and divorce. They look to these words of Jesus to try and find some moral guidance, and it is hard to unravel. Firstly, we must remember that Jesus

was not trying to deal with our problems when He spoke to the Pharisees. However, in speaking as He did, he laid down the principles by which we can discover God's will for us, even today.

Jesus' rebuke When Jesus spoke directly about the absolute importance of marriage (19:6) this was exactly what the Pharisees hoped He would say, for it both confirmed their worst suspicions about Him, and also allowed them to deliver what they thought would be their 'killer' blow; by asking 'why then did Moses command us to dismiss a woman by presenting a certificate of divorce?' (19:7) As far as they were concerned, the Law of Moses allowed divorce, and this was foundational to their faith. However, the Pharisees had still not understood Jesus' method of scriptural interpretation, one which He had used many times and in most of His disputes with Pharisees. It was the 'prophetic' method by which He went behind the apparent 'Mosaic Law' to identify the principles upon which the law was founded.

Jesus' prophetic critique of the Pharisees was devastating. He said that if they had read Deuteronomy 24 properly, they would have discovered that the issuing of a divorce notice was merely acknowledged by Moses as something that was necessary to avoid social disharmony, and the only command that Moses gave in that text was that a man should not re-marry someone he had previously divorced because he didn't 'like' her! (Deut. 24:1-4). Jesus swiftly observed their ignorance. They claimed the issuing of a divorce notice to be a 'command' of Moses (19:7), yet Jesus correctly observed that it was an merely an 'allowance' (19:8); a minor detail of Deuteronomy which was of no great significance compared to the fundamental origins of marriage described in the pre-fall state of humanity as written in Genesis itself. This is what Jesus meant by saying 'but it was not like this in the beginning' (19:8).

Jesus' advice Verse 9 of Matthew 19 contains Jesus' confirmation that divorce, except on the grounds of unfaithfulness, causes a person to commit adultery. However, this is not a 'command', and we cannot read it as if it is something to be obeyed or disobeyed with a choice of consequences. It is Jesus' statement of the facts of the matter at the conclusion of His contentious dispute with the Pharisees, and in the course of this He affirms the same teaching he gave in the Sermon on the Mount. Please note that if you read this verse carefully alongside Matthew 5:32 you will discover that the language of the two is remarkably similar except that the earlier text is concerned about the adultery of the woman, and the later text (19:9) is concerned about the adultery of the man. One would expect scripture to be even-handed in the matter!

What Jesus does in this saying is to point out the seriousness of dealing casually with the marriage relationship. The background of His own day gave a certain nuance to the argument, but the end result is stunningly relevant to our own times in which sex and marriage are treated as playthings on the path of personal progress and satisfaction. Jesus' words would not have been popular with the crowds of His day, which contained men who felt they had the right to have sex with a woman and decide whether they 'liked' her before committing to marriage, and also to write a bill of divorce if later they were displeased. They are also highly threatening to the desires and wants of people today who reject the idea that God's purpose for marriage is an exclusive spiritual, physical and sexual union which reflects His image.

Conclusions I do not find in this passage any narrow legalism on Jesus' part concerning the problems of marriage. Personally, I think it would appal Him to discover that church people used these texts today to condemn those whose marriages have tragically ended for whatever reason. Nowhere in the Gospel does Jesus present such high ideals that they leave no room to offer pastoral help to the afflicted, or salvation to the sinner; and Jesus Himself had just finished teaching about forgiveness by way of illustrating the extraordinary

qualities of God's power to forgive the sinner (Matt 18:21-35). Those who say that the issue of marriage and the unity of man and woman is different because it reflects the unbreakable image of God, as in the first two chapters of Genesis, miss the point. We all live in a broken and fallen world in which that image in us is less than it should be. Jesus does not give rules and regulations about overcoming sin in any walk of life because sin will not be overcome by legalism; it will only be overcome by Jesus Himself on the Cross, and that is where He is heading.

As we observed in the opening verses of our text, Jesus was now travelling to Jerusalem, and the opinion of the crowds was no longer of interest to Him. At this stage, He was far more concerned that His disciples should understand what He said and remember it.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Is the matter of marriage and divorce a big issue in your church? Should it be?
2. Discuss in your group the conditions under which divorce might be something your church could minister to and deal with.
3. Look carefully at the reference in Deuteronomy 24:1f. and check that you understand this. Discuss its implications within your group.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

It has been my privilege to minister to many people who have been deeply damaged and hurt by the breakup of their marriage. They have been helped to know that because they live in a fallen world, Jesus Himself is able to help them, rather than condemn them. They have also been helped to know that their past experiences can be forgiven, and through repentance, even adultery, because God's constant desire is to come afresh into people's lives, even after the trauma of marriage breakdown. What Jesus says here does not condemn those who have suffered such traumas.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *If there are those you know within your church fellowship who are having difficulty with their marriage, or are going through divorce, then pray for them. Make sure that you do not presume upon what may or may not be happening in people's lives; pray as the Spirit leads.*
- *Is there any teaching given to young people within your church about marriage and divorce, or about sexual matters? Discuss this with the teachers and leaders of your young people, if relevant.*

Final Prayer

You are patient with us, Jesus, far more than we deserve. We are impatient and always wanting more, but You know what is right for us, and You give us all we need when we need it. Help us be satisfied with what we have, especially what we have from You, so that our energies can be spent serving Your purposes and not our wants, through Your name, Lord Jesus: AMEN