

The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 23 February 2025. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced and see the context for yourself. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.

“What God Hath Joined Together”

Matthew 19:1-12

On 4 November 1929, in Kunming, China, a young couple named **John Kuhn** and **Isobel Miller** were united in marriage, and began their lives together as missionaries to the Lisu people of southern China, near the border of Burma and Laos. They had been in love ever since their days at Moody Bible Institute; however, John was accepted as a missionary candidate by the China Inland Mission a couple years before Isobel was accepted. Thus, John went to China a couple years ahead of Isobel, and began his missionary work as a single man, as he waited for his bride-to-be to join him. During those two years, Isobel lived with her father in Vancouver, and served the Lord in every way that she possibly could. In fact, she had to take a month of bedrest before leaving for China, because she had worked herself past the limit of her strength.¹

Now, both John and Isobel loved the Lord; and they were very passionate and driven people, and full of ideas. In their college days, one of the things that had attracted them to each other was the fact that they were both “dreamers.”² For example, one of Isobel’s ideas was the establishment of the “Rainy Season Bible School,” which operated during the rainy season (the “off time” for the farmers in the region). This school produced many pastors and evangelists over the years; and even after the communist revolution in 1950, the school stood against the persecution, and kept going strong. To this day, tens of thousands of Christians in the Lisu region owe their salvation, at least in part, to the labour of the Kuhns.³ Yet, John and Isobel had a problem, which threatened to destroy their work for the Lord: they were both very “strong-willed and stubborn.”⁴ In fact, their self-will and stubbornness nearly destroyed their marriage. For instance, there was a cook that John had hired, whom he liked; but Isobel didn’t like him at all. She considered the cook to be “lazy”; and it seemed, to her, that John was giving the cook more preference than he gave to his own wife. Tensions grew, until they both “exploded.”⁵ Isobel stormed out of the house and walked around aimlessly for hours, in a “boiling...rage.”⁶ John did let the cook go; but when the church leaders in the area wondered why the cook had been let go, he blamed it all on his wife.

This sort of fighting continued for years; and many was the time when Isobel stormed out of the house. However, both of them knew that their anger and stubbornness was grievous to the Lord; and slowly, they submitted to the Master, and allowed Him to change them. It was a painful process; but in time, they had a happy and fruitful marriage. They served the Lord in China until the communist revolution forced them to leave; but they continued to labour among Lisu tribes in Thailand.⁷ Isobel died of cancer in 1957; but shortly before her death, she said this about their marriage: “I feel many modern marriages are wrecked on just sharp shoals as this. A human weakness is pointed out. The correction is resented. Argument grows bitter. Young people are not ready to forgive, not willing to endure. Divorce is too quickly seized upon as the way out. [But] to pray God to awaken the other person, to be patient until he does so—this is God’s way out. And it molds the two opposite natures into one invincible whole.”⁸

Marriage is an incredibly sacred institution, established by God Himself; and its number-one purpose is to be a picture of God’s relationship with His people. It should be entered into with

great care; and its vows should be kept at all costs! This morning, we will see what the Lord Jesus said about marriage *and* singlehood. The title of this message is “**What God Hath Joined Together.**”

Read Matthew 19:1-12.

I. Christ’s confrontation with the Pharisees (19:1-6)

As we’ve studied through **Matthew 13-18**, we’ve seen that there was an increasing trend in Jesus’ ministry. The trend was that both the religious leaders *and* the common people were rejecting Jesus as their Messiah; and therefore, Jesus was now *withdrawing* Himself from them more and more. We also saw that Jesus had stopped declaring that “**The kingdom of heaven is at hand.**” He was no longer commissioning the Apostles to preach this message, either. Why? Because the nation, at large, was rejecting Him as their King; and therefore, the 1,000-year Kingdom was now postponed, and put on hold. (And it is *still* on hold.) Jesus was now focusing on preparing His disciples for His death and resurrection; and all the while, they were moving toward Jerusalem, where Jesus would be crucified. In **verse 1**, we see that Jesus left Galilee, and began to travel southward, on the eastern side of the Jordan River. This means that they were no longer in Israel. (The east side of the river was called the “coasts” of Judaea, since it *bordered* Judaea.) Once again, Jesus had left the land of Israel in order to take his disciples aside, and instruct them privately. Yet, even though Jesus had withdrawn from the crowds, He didn’t *neglect* the crowds. Anyone who was willing to humble himself and come to Christ found grace. Jesus freely healed those with diseases; and He also freely forgave those who came to Him for *spiritual* healing. (By the way, Jesus is still offering salvation “**without money and without price,**” to all who will believe on Him. He will freely and gladly give *you* His gift of salvation, if you will only ask for it, in simple faith!)

Now, no matter where Jesus went, His old enemies, the Pharisees, found Him; and they were always looking for ways to destroy Him. Let’s read **verse 3** again, and see what they had up their sleeves. (**Read Matthew 19:3.**) As you can see, the Pharisees were *not* truly desirous to know God’s mind on the matter of divorce. They did *not* ask Jesus this question because they were concerned about glorifying God through their marriages. Instead, they were using the question of divorce as a *weapon* against Jesus—just as the Herodians had done with John the Baptist. John had literally lost his *head* for daring to affirm that King Herod had committed adultery by taking his brother’s wife from him; and now, Jesus was being confronted with a similar question, in regard to divorce. With malicious glee, the Pharisees said, “**Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?**”

Now, what did the Pharisees mean when they said, “**for every cause**”? They meant just what they said! If you were here when we studied about divorce in **Matthew chapter 5**, you’ll remember that there were three basic teachings about divorce in Jesus’ day. On the conservative side of the aisle, **Rabbi Shammai** said that a man could divorce his wife only if she were guilty of “indecent behaviour” (such as adultery). However, **Rabbi Hillel** said that a man could divorce his wife for even the

slightest “offence”—such as burning his meal. Yet, the school of **Akivah** was even farther left. Akivah said that *no* fault was needed in order for a man to divorce his wife. If a man’s wife weren’t as pretty as she once was, he was perfectly free to divorce her, and marry a prettier woman. Sad to say, *this* school of thought seemed to be the prevailing one; and it was the cause of much pain. Families were shattered by the selfish whims of men who didn’t consider themselves to be bound to their wives for life.

Undoubtedly, the Pharisees were hoping that Jesus would *disagree* with Hillel’s super-loose view on divorce, so that His answer would get Him in trouble with King Herod. This shows where their heart really was, doesn’t it? As Jesus put it, these men “strained at a gnat,” yet “swallowed a camel.” Their hypocrisy was amazing! When it came to certain parts of God’s Law, they went far beyond God’s requirements. They would come up with ridiculously stringent laws, all in the name of “clarifying” Moses’ law. (For instance, many of the Pharisees said that it was unlawful to eat an egg that the chicken had laid on the Sabbath day, because that chicken had done “labour” to lay that egg!) Yet, when it came to one of the most serious and profound parts of God’s Law—the institution of marriage—they were willing to accept the *lowest* standard possible. They were looking for any “loophole” out of their vows.

So, what was Jesus’ answer? Let’s read **verses 4-5** again, and see. (**Read verses 4 and 5.**) The Pharisees had asked whether a man should put away his wife for every cause; and in answer to that question, Jesus didn’t take them back to the Law of *Moses*; instead, He took them back to the very beginning of human history. He took them back to the very first marriage, in the Garden of Eden. Why? Because the first marriage in human history *set the pattern* for all marriages to follow. Let’s go back to **Genesis**, and see what Jesus was quoting.

Read Genesis 2:23-24.

In this passage, we find that just after God had joined Adam and Eve together in marriage, Adam uttered the words, ***“This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.”*** Yet, here in **Matthew 19**, Jesus says that *God* spoke these words. Who, then, really said these words—God, or Adam? The answer is, “Both”! God was speaking *through Adam*. Think about it! Adam said that a man should leave his father and mother, and cleave unto his wife; yet, Adam himself had never experienced this. (He didn’t *have* any human parents to leave!) How did Adam know about having children, and about children leaving their parents in order to cling to a spouse? He didn’t. Obviously, *God* was speaking these words *through Adam*. This means that Adam was the first prophet in human history. And what did the first prophet in history prophesy *about*? The institution of **marriage**! This goes to show how important marriage is to God. In *Adam and Eve’s* marriage, God has given us the pattern for all marriages.

Back in 2015, when the referendum debate was raging, I received an email from a woman who wanted to challenge me on our stand against same-sex “marriage.” She accused me, and other pastors here in Ireland, of taking Jesus’ words from **Matthew 19** out of context. She pointed out that when Jesus made this statement, He was addressing the question of *divorce*, not homosexuality; and therefore, she accused us of “disrespecting” Jesus Christ, by taking His words out of context. What was my answer to her? My answer was, “We are no more taking *Jesus’* statement out of context, by applying it to the matter of sodomy, than Jesus was taking *Adam’s* statement out of context, by applying it to divorce! Remember, *there was no such thing as divorce* when Adam made this statement about the permanence of marriage; yet, Jesus used Adam’s words to address the matter of divorce. Jesus took Adam’s statement about marriage, and from it, concluded that *marriage is supposed to be for life*.

You see, **Genesis 2:23-24** is God’s model of *marriage*; and in this one concise statement, many corruptions of marriage are struck down. Adam’s statement is, in fact, a *law*. In this statement, God defines what marriage *is*: therefore, anything *outside* the perimeters of God’s model is condemned. God’s model of marriage strikes down both fornication (intimacy before marriage) and adultery (intimacy with someone other than your spouse *after* marriage). It also condemns homosexuality and lesbianism, since marriage is between a *man* and a *woman*. It also strikes down polygamy, since marriage is for *one* man, and *one* woman. (It also strikes down a host of other perversions which are too disgusting to mention.) But that’s not all. God’s model also leaves no room for divorce, since God said that a man shall “**cleave**” unto his wife. This means that marriage is permanent. That word “**cleave**” (from the word *davaq*) means to “cling to.” It has the idea of “holding onto something for dear life,” with a “death grip.” It means that you stick to your wife (or husband) with the tenacity of industrial-strength glue!

Brethren, marriage is the first institution that God ever established; and it is the foundational building block of every society. God ordained the home to guard and pass on His truths to future generations. He created marriage to produce a “**godly seed**”—children that know, love, and serve Him. He also created marriage to be a reflection of His relationship with His people. Marriage pictures God’s covenant relationship with Israel—with God as the husband, and Israel as His wife. In the church today, marriage pictures Christ as the Bridegroom, and the saints in each local church as His bride. In eternity, *all* the saints of *all* ages will be pictured as God’s “bride.” Do you see why marriage is so precious to God, and why it is not His will for the bond to be broken? God says that *no man* is to “**put asunder**” this union. Let’s see what God’s *heart* is concerning divorce.

Read Malachi 2:10-16.

Probably no other passage of Scripture expresses God's heart about marriage more passionately than this passage does. God is the one who created us with emotions; and our emotions are a reflection of *His* emotions (except that *His* emotions are absolutely perfect, whereas ours are not, since we are sinners). Clearly, God is showing great emotion here; and His emotional reaction to divorce is that He hates it. He doesn't hate *people* who have been divorced; but He does hate *divorce*. Divorce grieves Him to His heart, because it breaks the picture of His relationship with us. It also causes great hurt and pain to the souls that He has created; and it hardens the hearts of children (who He intended to be a "**godly seed**"), and causes them to be bitter against their parents, and against Him. The LORD is pleading with the men of Israel not to deal "**treacherously**" with their wives, by putting them away. If God use such strong language, then we had better do all in our power to take hold of the horns of the altar, and pray for our marriages. We must exercise great patience with our spouses, and forgive them for their wrongs against us (even when their wrongs seem unforgiveable). We must search our own hearts, and repent of our *own* selfishness and stubbornness, which may be hurting the relationship. We must communicate with our spouses through the darkest of times, and work through problems; and, at all costs, *keep* the vows that we have made!

II. Christ's clarification about divorce (19:7-9)

Under the Old Testament Law, there were certain things that God *permitted*, because of the broken, fallen condition of mankind. However, the fact that God "permitted" a thing didn't mean that it had His real smile of approval. Take **polygamy** for example. By the time Israel arrived at Mount Sinai, and received the Law, they were already a polygamous society. In fact, the patriarchs Abraham and Jacob *both* took more than one wife, without seeking God's approval. They set this example, and their descendants followed: and because polygamy was well-entrenched in Israel by the time they arrived at Sinai, God gave them laws to *regulate and restrict* polygamous marriages. However, the fact that polygamy was permitted doesn't mean that this was what God desired. Polygamous marriages caused great strife, and emotional pain and suffering, in every example that we find in the Old Testament. That is why, in the New Testament, God *raised* the standard. In **1 Timothy 3**, God commanded that a pastor be "**the husband of one wife.**" (And if this be God's standard for a pastor, it is the standard for *all* believers!) The reality, though, is that God wasn't setting a *new* standard: He was bringing the standard back to what it was in the beginning—*one* man, and *one* woman.

Similarly, divorce was something that God temporarily *permitted* in Old Testament Israel; but the fact that He permitted it doesn't mean that He approved of it. Let's look again at the reason why God permitted divorce in the first place. (**Read Matthew 19:7-9 again.**) According to Jesus, the only instance in which divorce was permitted was in the case in which "**fornication**" (immorality) was committed. Yet, even in this case, it was only because of the hardness of the people's hearts that God permitted it. God did not really smile on divorce, even in this one narrow instance; and the fact

that it didn't have His smile upon it should make us pause. This is a matter of utmost importance; and we need to understand God's mind about it. We must seek to know exactly what this "exception clause" means. What *does* God mean when says that divorce and remarriage are forbidden "***except for fornication***"?

To understand this, you need to understand marriage in the Hebrew culture. In Hebrew culture, marriage began with the "betrothal" period. When a man and woman were "betrothed" to be married, they were *really, legally* married. (It was *not* like our modern, Gentile "engagements," because in engagement, you are *not* legally married.) However, there was one big difference between betrothal and full marriage: during betrothal, the man and wife were *not living together*. They were married on paper; but they did not have a physical union. For about a year or so after the betrothal, the groom prepared for his bride to live with him, by building a house and preparing household items; and the bride prepared herself, too. Then, when the man's father gave the word, he went to get his bride. Vows were made, and a feast was held; and from that point, they were physically united.

But what happened if someone were unfaithful to his or her spouse during the betrothal period? There were three options. The first option was that the innocent spouse could charge his (or her) spouse with adultery; and the adulterer and adulteress were both put to death by stoning. (We read about this in **Deuteronomy 22:13-24**.) The second option was divorce.

Read Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

In this passage, we see that God *permitted* divorce if the wife were found to be guilty of "***uncleanness***" (meaning "nakedness," or "immorality"). (If it were the other way around, the wife could not technically divorce her husband; but she *could* demand that the husband divorce *her*. In this sense, a *wife* could "put away" her husband, as well.) However, if the guilty wife were divorced by her husband, and then remarried to another man, and then were put away by *that* husband for the cause of uncleanness, she could not go back to her original husband *if* she had already been ***defiled***" (in other words, after she had been physically united with the second husband). This shows that *physical intimacy* was the line of demarcation. Once that line was crossed, there was no going back. Divorce *was* permitted during betrothal, when there was no physical intimacy; but not after consummation. What this means is that there *was* no "exception clause" for those who had sealed a marriage with the physical union. (That is why the exception clause was not mentioned at all in **Mark 10**, or in **Luke 16**. The "exception" was so narrow, that in God's eyes, it was practically nil.)

Yet, was there no other option? Yes, there was. The third option was **forgiveness and reconciliation**. *This* has always been God's real desire for couples who are

struggling; and He has proven it in a powerful way. You see, as a nation, Israel has been like an unfaithful wife; yet, even though God has had to go through a long, painful period of “separation” from His adulterous wife, He has not utterly cast her off. He has *bought back* His unfaithful wife with His blood; and when Israel’s heart turns to Him one day, He *will* be reunited with her! This is why God commanded the prophet Hosea to marry a woman who he *knew* would cheat on him! God let Hosea go through the pain of seeing Gomer leave him for another man, and then end up being sold by her new lover into the slave market; and God allowed all this just so that Hosea could *buy his wife back!* After Hosea bought Gomer back from the slave market, they had to go through a painful period of detention and abstinence, during which time Hosea tried to win back her heart; but in the end, they were reunited. This living illustration not only shows God’s undying love for Israel, but it also shows that in a marriage relationship, God wants a struggling husband and wife to do everything possible to *restore* the relationship (even if the other party really *does* bear the greater blame). God is a God of undying faithfulness; and He wants us to follow His example.

Read Hosea 3:1-5.

Folks, we live in a fallen world; and many believers have, through ignorance, fallen short of God’s model of marriage. What is to be done, then? First of all, **if you are divorced, but not re-married**, do not seek to re-marry. Stay faithful to your vows at all costs, and do everything in your power to be reconciled to your spouse. What if you are **already divorced and remarried**? Then ask for God’s forgiveness and cleansing (if you have not done so already); rest in the assurance of God’s forgiveness; and remain faithful to your new spouse for as long as you live. And what if **you have never been married**? If so, then purpose in your heart that you will *never* divorce your future spouse! Do not allow “divorce” to be an option in your mind. Make absolutely sure that the person you marry is saved, and loves the Lord supremely; and make sure that your future spouse is *also* resolved in his (or heart) that marriage is for *life*.

III. Christ’s commendation of singlehood...for some (19:10-12)

(Read Matthew 19:10-12.) After hearing Jesus’ command about marriage, the disciples were stunned—and fearful! If they had detected any “loophole” in Jesus’ statement, they wouldn’t have reacted in this way. They now realised that marriage is not “easy come, easy go,” as many of the rabbis said: it is for *life*. And so, in light of this fact, they concluded that is better for a single man not to marry at all, so that he wouldn’t end up trapped in an unhappy marriage! However, this was *not* the conclusion that Jesus wanted them to come to. Yes, marriage is incredibly sacred, and not to be entered into lightly; yet, choosing to remain single for life is not a light decision, either. Not all men can remain single, and chaste. In fact, *very few* man are

able to do it. That's why Jesus said, "**Not all men can receive this saying.**" God has put in men a powerful desire for companionship with a woman; but this need must be met *only* within the boundary of marriage. That is why God highly recommends marriage, and commands married couples *not* to defraud each other of their intimacy needs. That is also why He *requires pastors* to be married, so that they will be less likely to fall into temptation.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:1-9.

Read 1 Timothy 3:1-7.

Contrary to what the Catholic Church teaches, a bishop is *required* to be married (or, at least, to have had the experience of marriage, if he be a widower). In **Matthew 8:14**, the Bible says that Peter had a wife; and in **1 Corinthians 9:5**, Paul says that the Apostles had the right to be supported by the churches, so that their wives could travel with them. The Apostles were married men; and the bond of marriage protected them from temptation. Yet, God *does* ordain some men to be single, so that they can accomplish special tasks for sake of the Kingdom. As Jesus says, there are some eunuchs who are eunuchs "**from their mother's womb.**" In other words, there are some men to whom God gives a special grace to remain single. This doesn't make them "odd": it simply means that God has some special job for them to do, which the responsibilities of marriage would detract from. **Daniel** is a good example. After he was taken away captive by the Babylonians, King Nebuchadnezzar made Daniel a eunuch for life, so that he could serve him without distraction. (He was made a "**eunuch of men.**") I don't know if Daniel had the drive for marriage that other men have; but if he did have that drive, God gave him the grace to subdue the desire, so that he could accomplish the unique tasks that God had for him. It was that way with **Paul**, too. Paul *was* married earlier in life; but for most of his ministry, he was a widower; and God gave him the grace he needed to remain single. Because of the persecution that Christians were undergoing, Paul recommended that single men remain unmarried, *if* they could handle it; but if not, he recommended that they marry, so that they would not "**burn**" with lust, and sin against God.

Young people, there is nothing wrong with being single for life, *if* it be God's will. We know that in the future, God will raise up an army of 144,000 single, Jewish men to preach the Gospel throughout the world, during the seven horrible years of the Tribulation; and He will give them the grace to remain pure.

Read Revelation 7:1-8 and 14:1-5.

Though the 144,000 won't be saved until after the Rapture, God will enable them to remain sexually pure long before their salvation, so that when the Tribulation begins,

and they receive Christ as Saviour, they will be an army of single, undistracted “Apostle Pauls,” ready to take the Gospel throughout the world! *This* is what God wants of all of us, brethren—whether we be single, or married. God wants people who are ready to serve Him with all their hearts, with singleness of mind. Whatever your marital state may be, let *God* be your “All in All,” and serve Him with all your heart!

Conclusion: We live in a world that despises God’s laws of marriage; but we who are saved are called to raise God’s standard of marriage high! Christian, be faithful to your vows. Cling to your spouse like crazy glue; and if you be unmarried, wait patiently for the right one that God has for you. If you have never been saved, I urge you to place your faith in Christ. Having a wife or husband is fulfilling; but even marriage cannot meet our greatest need. Christ is the only One who can truly be our “All in All,” and fill that emptiness in our hearts. Believe on Jesus today, and He will give you eternal life, and eternal joy!

¹ “Isobel Miller Kuhn,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isobel_Miller_Kuhn.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Robert Morgan, *Preacher’s Sourcebook of Creative Sermon Illustrations* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2007), p. 538.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isobel_Miller_Kuhn.

⁸ *Ibid.*