**Divorce, marriage and being single**

Text: Deuteronomy 24:1-5

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**Scriptures:** Deuteronomy 24:1-5; 25:5-10; Matthew 19:1-12

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] ‘Behold our God’, 432, 184, 220, 148

**Series:** Deuteronomy (#13)

**Theme:** Marriage is designed by God to be an abiding union between one man and one woman only to be separated by death.

**Proposition:** Those who are divorced, married or single are all invited to come to Christ.

**Introduction**

Have you ever had any difficulties in your relationships with others? Our connections to other people are the most rewarding, satisfying and significant part of life on this earth. They are also, at times, the most painful, complex and difficult aspect of being a human being in a fallen world. Someone has said ‘show me your friends and I’ll show you your future”. Ordinarily, human relationships are closest and also often most complicated within marriages and families. Have you not found it to be so?

It’s not surprising then to find laws in the Old Testament which regulated marriage and family life for the Israelites who were about to enter into the Promised Land of Canaan. The Lord knew that His chosen people would need help in this key area of close relationships if they were to enjoy His blessings. Israel had seen the loose lifestyles in Egypt, and they would come to learn of the unholiness of the Canaanites. If they were guided by the lifestyles of people who did not know the Lord, they would surely go astray and suffer much distress. Therefore the Lord commanded them in Leviticus 18(3) ‘not to walk in the statutes’ of these people groups. He was referring especially to incest (v6-20), child sacrifice (v21), homosexuality (v22) and bestiality (v23)).

The Old Testament ‘Mosaic Laws’ are instructive for us today (Rom 15:4). Some things are **very much the same** now as they were back then, almost 3,500 years ago. Other things were **very different** for Old Testament Israel than they are for us today for example:

* Men, you are not permitted to go to war and take a beautiful woman captive as your wife, as the warriors of Old Testament Israel were (Deut 21:10-14)!
* The provision of inheritance rights to the firstborn son of an unloved wife as against a second, loved wife does not apply to us today (Deut 21:15-17). Men – one wife is the limit!
* The brother of a man who has died is not called to marry his widow if she has not yet born a son (Deut 25:5-10).

We will need to be careful to rightly discern which principles of these Old Testament Laws do still apply to us today and which ones do not. The wise response of Jesus to a Pharisee’s question “*Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause*” (Matt 19:3) will greatly help us as we first recognise that divorce is permitted by God under some circumstances, but is never His desire for us. This brings us to our first point.

1. **Divorce permitted under some circumstances**

Marriage is a God-ordained solemn and binding agreement (a covenant) between one man and one woman who together find completeness, fulfilment and companionship in each other. I had the privilege of saying these words at a recent wedding: ‘*Our Lord Jesus confirmed marriage to be a divine ordinance and an unbreakable bond when he said, “Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.” Husbands and wives are called to be faithful to one another until they are parted by death*’. The Word of God is very clear that marriage is to be a permanent bond between a husband and his wife for as long as they both shall live.

In contrast, divorce is the formal dissolution of the marriage relationship by the civil authorities in recognition that permanent separation has taken place and that the marriage has broken down. In such a case the Church recognizes the State as responsible for issuing a certificate of divorce. Under some circumstances, a married couple may temporarily live apart for a period of time as they work towards being reunited. However, divorce completely dissolves the bonds of matrimony between a husband and his wife so that they become two single people again.

God hates divorce (Mal 2:16) yet we find in our text from Deuteronomy 24:1-5 that He does regulate this permanent separation of a husband and his wife. Jesus explains why this is so "*Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so*” (Matt 19:8). In His wisdom and grace, the Lord governs with His law that which is not good, but which is a direct consequence of the fall of mankind into sin. The divorce regulations were a concession to deal with the result of sin, **not** an expression of the way God ordained life to be in His very good creation. We see this Scriptural principle of regulating that which is not commended elsewhere in Deuteronomy with regard to slavery.

In Ancient Near East society, women depended on their marriage relationship for both for security and status. The gracious law of God provided protection for women. Divorce was expressly forbidden by the Lord under certain circumstances: when a man unjustly accused his newly wedded wife of premarital intercourse (Deut 22:13-19); when a man seduced an unmarried girl (Deut 22:28-29).

Deuteronomy 24:1-5 refers to a particular situation where a married man’s wife ‘*finds no favour in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her*’. It is unclear exactly what ‘some indecency’ means. Suggestions by Bible scholars include a ritual impurity, inability to conceive or bear children or sexual immodesty. It is very unlikely that adultery is the meaning of ‘some indecency’ because that sin was punishable by death (22:22).

In the Mosaic law, the man was allowed to write his wife a certificate of divorce and send her out of his house. If she then married another man who then also divorced her, her first husband could not take her again as his wife. The purpose of this law was to discourage casual divorces which could be used as a way to make what was effectively adultery more socially acceptable.

Jesus explained God’s will regarding divorce, saying: “*Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery*." (Matt 19:9). ‘Adultery’ here includes pre-marital promiscuity during engagement (cf. Joseph – Matt 1:18-19). Marital unfaithfulness by either husband or wife is the only Biblical ground for divorce. ‘Unfaithfulness’ includes what the Westminster Confession (24:6) terms ‘wilful desertion’. This ground for divorce is based upon 1 Cor 7:15 “*if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved*”.

Divorce is by no means mandatory where there has been unfaithfulness on the part of a husband, a wife, or both. Reconciliation, if possible, is always to be preferred to divorce, but should never be forced upon either a wife or husband. The desire for true reconciliation must come from the hearts of both parties. Sadly, in some situations a broken marriage relationship humanly cannot be restored. Whilst divorce is always a consequence of sin within a marriage, divorce is not sinful if there are Biblical grounds for the permanent separation of husband and wife.

The answer to the question, “can a divorced man or woman remarry?” is not universally agreed upon. The Roman Catholic church teaches that marriage is a sacrament involving some special grace given at the wedding. Re-marriage is therefore viewed as a form of adultery. Some evangelical churches also teach this. However, based on a number of Scriptures (including Deuteronomy 24:1-3; Ezra 10-11; Matt 5:31-32, 19:8-9 and 1 Cor 7:10-11), Reformed churches believe and teach that a divorced spouse who is innocent of unfaithfulness is at liberty to re-marry if they so wish.

Marriage difficulties, separation and divorce are usually deeply painful for at least one of the couple, resulting in much grief, and often great guilt and regret. Whilst there are some common patterns in marriage breakdowns, each situation is as unique as the individuals in the relationship. The church must faithfully teach that marriage is an enduring bond between one man and one woman for as long as they both shall live. However we must also minister the love, compassion, kindness and grace of Christ to those who have been deeply wounded as a result of the sins of others, and also their own sin.

For many of us we have been hugely hurt as a consequence of our own failures. As a church we are called to be especially gracious towards all those who have turned to Christ in repentance and faith. There is enough of a struggle for many of us to believe in the full forgiveness that we have in Christ without having our human tendency of hanging onto guilt and shame amplified by the judgmental attitudes of others. Divorce is a sad reality in a broken world, whereas marriage is a rich blessing from the Lord, given before the Fall, which brings us to our second point.

1. **Marriage and the blessing of children**

Marriage is an honourable and holy calling (Heb 13:4). God said after He created Adam"*It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him*." (Gen 2:18). Here is some wisdom:“*He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favour from the LORD*” (Prov 18:22).

Marriage is a life-long, exclusive union between one man and one woman (Gen. 2:24, Ex 20:14, Mt 5:27-30, 19:6; Heb13:4). Marriage is only to be between spiritual equals: believers who marry must marry believers (2 Cor 6:14-16, 1Cor 7:39). Christian marriage is to be Christ-centred: He is to be the head of the home and the model and example of love, forbearance and forgiveness (Eph 5:21-33).

Charles Spurgeon wrote of his marriage to his wife Susannah: “*Happy woman and happy man! If Heaven be found on earth, we have it! At the last, we two will become so blended, so engrafted on one stem, that our old age will present a lovely attachment, a common sympathy, by which its infirmities are greatly alleviated, and its burdens are transformed into fresh bonds of love”.*

One of the purposes of marriage is the bearing and raising of children. God said to Adam and Eve "*Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth*” (Gen 1:28). Overall human fertility globally is decreasing at about 1% per year. This is likely due to a combination of lifestyle (including obesity, alcohol and drug use) and environmental factors such as pollution. There is a silent grief which married couples experience when they experience difficulty in having children or are not blessed in this way. The Word of God reveals that children are a blessing from the Lord (Ps 127:3).

This abiding truth is reflected in Deuteronomy 25:5-10 which lays out a very specific law for what is called ‘levirate marriage’. The word ‘levirate’ comes from the Latin word ‘levir’ which means “husband’s brother or brother-in-law”. In order to preserve a family line and an inheritance, the brother of a man who has died leaving a widow but no sons was encouraged to marry the widow so that a male heir could be born. Levirate marriage has been practiced over much of human history in many societies with a strong clan structure. We see examples of this practice in Old Testament history: negatively with Onan and Tamar, where Onan was unwilling to perform this duty (Gen 38:8-11); and positively with Boaz and Ruth where Boaz married Ruth to perpetuate the line of Elimelech (Ruth 3:1-4).

Deuteronomy 25:5-10 reveals the Mosaic law for levirate marriage. A man who was not willing to take responsibility for his deceased brother’s wife by marrying her was to be publicly shamed in front of the elders. The widow was to pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face (Deut 25:9). A deceased man’s brother might refuse this duty out of a desire for personal gain; perhaps thinking that if he married the woman, and she bore him a son, then this heir would inherit his brother’s property. However, in the absence of such a child, the brother might inherit the property for himself (Num 27:9).

Jesus responded to a hypothetical question from the Sadducees about resurrection in which they used the example of a series of levirate marriages in which seven brothers progressively died having married the same woman (Matt 22:23-28 & Mark 12:18-23 & Luke 20:27-33). He explained that after the general resurrection men and women ‘*neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven’* (Matt 22:30).

Notice that Jesus did not speak against the practice of levirate marriage when He had opportunity to do so. However, we do not live in a time and place where people die regularly from what are now relatively minor infections or accidents. We do not live in a society where families are highly dependent on sons to provide financial support and also to continue the line of inheritance so that productive land can be retained. We are not governed by the civil laws of Old Testament Israel. This practice of levirate marriage is far removed from our own culture today, what lessons can we learn from this in light of the person and work of Christ?

We are called to look out not only for our own interests, but also the interests of others (Phil 2:4). This is the mind of Christ (Phil 2:5). God cares about the vulnerable. A widow with no sons would lack of protecting and providing family member in her older age. Unmarried men can be wise to consider marrying a widow in some circumstances, especially a younger widow who has not been blessed with children through her previous marriage.

Even though we live in a culture in which widows are provided for materially to some degree through the welfare state, being a widow (or widower) is often lonely and difficult. Not only is there the ongoing grief of the loss of a loved one, but there is also often a loss of connection with some in the church who may choose to mainly fellowship with other people who are married. James wisely writes that ‘religion that is pure and undefiled before God’ is to visit ‘widows in their affliction’ (James 1:27). Caring for widows leads to the broader topic of singleness, the subject of our last point.

1. **Singleness and the blessing of special service**

When the disciples heard Jesus teaching about marriage and divorce, they said “*If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry*” (Matt 19:10). Singleness certainly does have the advantage of being able to serve the Lord with a particular focus - ‘*for the sake of the kingdom of heaven*’ - as Jesus says in Matt 19:12

All of us have known singleness – not being married - in the past. Some are in this state today. Some of us will know singleness again in the future. Adam was single for a time before God created Eve. Jesus never married. He teaches us by example that it is perfectly possible to be single, celibate, commendable and a human being at the same time! The Apostle Paul also never married (1 Cor 7:7). He viewed his single celibate lifestyle as a “gift from God” which enabled him able to serve the Lord more effectively.

In Jewish society it was very unusual to remain unmarried. That may be why the topic of singleness is not directly addressed in the Mosaic Law. However, being a single celibate adult with no plans for marriage is Biblical. The call to singleness is often not easy (but then neither is marriage!), Jesus said of those who choose singleness in order to serve the Lord in this state: *“Let the one who is able to receive this receive it*" (Matthew 19:12b)

26-year-old Christian author Rachel Thomson has written: *“Thus, the position I find myself in is one of watching my friends face into futures that are taking shape, with comforting lines and seemingly predictable challenges, while my own future still looks like an open horizon at sea. Often, I feel like a capable captain aboard my little ship, but other times I sit down very small and swallow a lump in my throat as I face out at that big, big world. The waves lapping at my boat are the only sound”.* Rachael is saying that singleness can be very lonely. How can we who are married better minister to those who are single within our congregation, incorporating them more into our fellowship through the week?

There are two groups of reasons why adults are single: by choice or by circumstance. Let’s briefly consider these each in turn.

1. Firstly, singleness by choice – the vocation of sexually abstinent singleness offers fewer distractions from serving God (Matt 19:11-12, 1 Cor 7:32b-35). If God wants you to be single, He will also provide the spiritual gifts to make it possible (not necessarily easy){1 Cor 7:7-8}. The call to singleness can only be determined (as with other calls) by understanding God’s Word on the matter (personal study, preaching and teaching), by persistent prayer, mature reflection and seeking of godly counsel. Singleness may be a current calling, but there can be no certainty that it will be a future calling. Choosing to remain single may be appropriate during times of persecution (1 Cor 7:26-28).
2. Secondly, singleness by circumstance (Mat 19:12). Some are born ‘eunuchs’ from their mother’s womb – all are in this situation until marriageable age. Some are born with physical conditions, which whilst they do not prevent marriage, may mean that having their own children is not possible. Some struggle with same-sex attraction and are not drawn to the opposite sex. Some are made ‘eunuchs’ – change is forced upon them e.g. those widowed, suffering loss of their husband or wife, those divorced by a husband/wife. Some are ‘eunuchs’ because of accident/disfigurement or prolonged chronic illness. These circumstances do not prevent marriage, but they may result in singleness at the present time. Some have not found a partner for life.

There are some reasons **not** to choose singleness, including:

* Danger of Sexual temptation (1 Cor 7:9). Physical intimacy in marriage is a blessing from the Lord
* Danger of lack of accountability. Singles are often alone, apart from supervision by another adult. There is a need to actively cultivate close trusting friendships in the church.
* Danger of self-centeredness. It is easy to become set in your own ways/habits, you may forget/fail to learn how to accommodate others. There can be a desire for extended adolescence – laziness, excessive dependence. There can be the temptation to selfishness. Being active in serving others helps.
* Danger of loneliness. This can lead to depression which can make service to the Lord impossible. It is wise to accept invitations to be with others. Aim to initiate friendships.
* Danger of not trusting the Lord. Fear of commitment, permanence, or responsibility, not wanting to go through the trials of growth in sanctification which come with marriage.
* Danger of envy. Attending weddings, baptisms – wishing it were you, begrudging others in the church who have less time than you do to serve due to family commitments.

Brothers and sisters in the Lord, our relationship with Christ is more important than our marital state; divorced, married or single. First and foremost, whatever your situation in life, seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness (Matt 6:33).

Here the open invitation of Christ to all who will listen and respond: *“Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matt 11:28-30).* AMEN.