

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

Yves I-Bing Cheng, M.D., M.A.

Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

www.meetingwithchrist.com

LET NOT MAN SEPARATE

Matthew 19:1-9

The Pharisees once asked the Lord Jesus this question: *Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all* (Matthew 19:3)? Divorce was an issue which divided the people in Jesus' days. There were two schools of thought. The school of Shammai (conservative) said that a man may not divorce his wife for just any reason, but only for the grave reason of some kind of sexual immorality. The school of Hillel (liberal) said that a man may divorce his wife for almost any reason, e.g., for burning his food.

Today the problem of divorce is just as controversial, at least in societies influenced by Christian teaching. Opinions vary and interpretations differ. There are people who believe that divorce is never allowed by God no matter the cruelty and meanness that may exist. Others say that divorce can be allowed if the rift between a couple cannot be reconciled and causes more damage than good.

Divorce is not permissible

Is it ever right to divorce? In spite of the controversy, Jesus' answer is surprisingly clear: almost never. Let's read Matthew 19:1-9.

Matthew 19:1. And it came about that when Jesus had finished these words, He departed from Galilee, and came into the region of Judea beyond the Jordan;

2 and great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them there.

3 And some Pharisees came to Him, testing Him, and saying, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?"

4 And He answered and said, "Have you not read, that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female,

5 and said, 'For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh '?

6 "Consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate."

7 They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?"

8 He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way.

9 "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."

You see that the whole weight of Jesus' argument here is against divorce. The same teaching is repeated in three other places in Jesus' ministry.

- *Matthew 5:32: But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery.*
- *Luke 16:18: Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery.*
- *Mark 10:11: Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her.*

In all these verses, Jesus says that divorce is not permissible. It is, then, never God's will that there should be a divorce.

Have you ever wondered why the Lord put such emphasis on the forbidding of divorce? Is that not a personal matter to be discussed privately between the husband and the wife? If their characters are incompatible, then maybe divorce is the best decision for both.

'If there is no hope for our marriage, then maybe you should go and live your life and I will live mine. In that way, we don't have to get on each other's nerves anymore. We have tried this marriage together for all these years and we come to the realization that it does not work. It is not that you are such a bad person or that I am a bad person. We just don't fit into each other in terms of our personality. Why don't you go your way in peace and I will do the same. Then everybody will be happy. And maybe we can still be friends, but just not married.'

A marriage that does not work, as you know, becomes a most exhausting relationship. It is like hell on earth. Your home is not your home anymore when you cannot even tolerate the presence of the other person. Who wants to stay in an environment like that? Divorce seems to be the most reasonable thing to do. But Jesus said, 'What God has joined together, let not man separate. Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.' What is the importance of putting such stress on disallowing divorce? What is the spiritual significance of all this?

In order to answer that question, I think it is necessary to go back to the basic meaning of marriage. When asked about divorce, Jesus did not answer it until He had first explained God's intention for marriage by referring to the first book of the Bible (Matthew 19:4-6). It is as though He was saying, 'It is not quite possible to understand God's mind on the issue of divorce until you have come to terms with His mind on the question of marriage.'

So what constitutes marriage? Marriage, in the Bible, is first and foremost a covenant, a binding covenant between a man and woman who consent freely to enter into a permanent union with one another. This union is nourished through their sexuality and perfected in a partnership of mutual love, self-giving and commitment. When both husband and wife enter the covenant of marriage with that understanding, it becomes the most meaningful relationship of which human personality is capable.

Jesus insisted on the fact that God had intended marriage to be a life-long union. He said that there is no ground upon which divorce could be considered, with one exception. The only reason that divorce could be permitted is in the case of immorality, *except for immorality* (v. 9). This expression, 'immorality,' *porneia* in Greek, is also translated by the words, 'sexual immorality, fornication, unchastity, marital unfaithfulness.' For this reason only, divorce could be permitted. Why? Because fornication, *ipso facto*, by that very fact, has annulled the marriage covenant. It is an annulment of the marriage by action. The covenant, which was established in faithfulness, has been destroyed through faithlessness.

The original design of marriage

So in answer to the Pharisees' question regarding divorce, Jesus went back to the book of Genesis and quoted two passages. He said this.

Matthew 19:4. And He answered and said, "Have you not read, that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female. This is taken from Genesis 1:27 where we read, And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Matthew 19:5. And said, 'For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh '? These are the words of Moses in Genesis 2:24.

Let's first talk about Genesis 1:27. We read that God created man in His image and in that process, male and female came into being. The fact that God created two distinct persons as male and female, rather than just one man, is part of our being in the image of God. Now listen to this. The creation of man as male and female also reflects, to some degree, the plurality of the persons within the Trinity. Why do I say that? Look at the previous verse, Genesis 1:26. There we see the first indication of a plurality of persons within God.

*Genesis 1:26. Then God said, "Let **us** make man in **our** image, according to **our** likeness; and let them rule ...*

Notice the plurals 'us' and 'our.' 'Let us make man in our image... our likeness.' But what does the plurality of persons in the Godhead have to do with the creation of man as male and female? This is what I see. Our creation as male and female represents something about the Trinity, something about the interpersonal unity of the Trinity. Here is the analogy. Just as there is fellowship and sharing of glory among the members of the Trinity, so God made Adam and Eve in such a way that they would share love and giving of honor to one another in their interpersonal relationship. In other words, the union between husband and wife pictures to a certain extent, i.e., at the human level, the relationship between the three persons in the Godhead.

Now let's turn to Genesis 2:24, *...a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife...* The apostle Paul quotes this verse in Ephesians 5, in the well-known passage on marital relationship. Ephesians 5:21-33 describes in some detail the relationship between the husband and the wife. Most Christians will say that Paul, in Ephesians 5, used the marriage union to illustrate the relationship between Christ and His church. And I certainly agree with that. But I believe there is more to it than that. When we look at it from another angle, I think it is possible to see marriage as a model for the life within the church. If we remove the sexual aspect of marriage, we can say that marriage is a representation of the way we are to conduct ourselves in relation to one another in the church of Christ.

So here is my point. Marriage was meant not only to reflect the relationship among the members of the Trinity, it was meant not only to picture Christ's relationship to us as bride and groom, but marriage was meant also to be a representation of the spiritual relationship that we ought to have with one another in the context of the church. Put simply, the marriage relationship portrays the spiritual relationship between the members of the church.

Ephesians 5

Let's substantiate this view of marriage from the Scriptures. We will take Ephesians 5 and read from v. 21 to v. 33.

Ephesians 5:21. And be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.

22 Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord.

23 For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body.

24 But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her;

26 that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,

27 that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless.

Notice that in this passage about marital relationship, Paul is moving in and out of the subject all the time. One moment, he speaks about marriage, the next moment he talks about the church. He moves from one to the other, and then back to the other. For Paul, you see, marriage is meant to portray the spiritual reality of what the relation of Christ is to His church, and what the church should have in its relationship internally, i.e., one to another.

Ephesians 5:28. So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself;

29 for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church,

30 because we are members of His body.

31 For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh.

32 This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.

33 Nevertheless let each individual among you also love his own wife even as himself; and let the wife see to it that she respects her husband.

I would like to draw three points from here, from Ephesians 5, to show you how our relationship with one another in the church is to be modeled on the marriage relationship as God had intended.

One body

First, you are probably familiar with the concept of the husband and the wife becoming 'one flesh' or 'one body.' Paul refers to that notion in v. 31 which, as we mentioned, is a quotation of Genesis 2:24. *For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one **flesh**.*

The word 'flesh' in Hebrew, *basar*, literally means 'body'. Husband and wife are to become one body, one physical unit.

You see, marriage is much more than just two people agreeing to live together and to be loyal to one another. In marriage, the couple 'submits themselves one to the other in the fear of Christ,' as is written in Ephesians 5:21, i.e., they give themselves up to the other as they live day by day in the fear of God. They set out to nourish and cherish the other, even as Christ nourishes and cherishes the church (Ephesians 5:29). They work to become part of each other. They seek to become part of each other's flesh, each other's bone (Ephesians 5:30). The meshing together is then the result of a divine intervention. God takes such deliberate purpose and attitude, and moulds it into the flesh of the other so much so that the two actually become as one body.

In many places, the human body is used by Paul as an illustration of the corporate life of Christians. He says that Christians are many, yet they are one body in Christ. For example, we read in Romans 12:5, *So we, who are many, are **one body** in Christ, and individually members one of another.* Just as our physical body is composed of many parts working harmoniously together, so the church is

made up of many believers who are united together and connected with Christ. Or, we can say, just as husband and wife are one body, all believers form one body. They constitute one society, which is the church.

From that perspective, you see how the vital bond which unites the life of believers together is reflected in the marital union.

As yourself

Let's consider the second point. In Ephesians 5:33, Paul writes, *Nevertheless let each individual among you also love his own wife even as himself.* Notice the words 'as himself.' How can you love another person as yourself? Paul explained two verses earlier that husband and wife are one flesh, one body (v. 31). You are united to her in such a way that you have become one body with her. If you two are one body, then in loving her, you are loving yourself, since she is part of your body. That's how you can love your wife as yourself.

Remember the royal law? *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* Here again we find the expression 'as yourself,' 'love your neighbor as yourself.' And I think we can draw a parallel with the instruction to love one's wife as oneself.

In the NT, the term 'neighbor' (*plesios*) can refer to any fellow man as Jesus made clear in the Parable of the Good Samaritan when He answered the question 'Who is my neighbor?' (Luke 10:25-37).

It can also refer to someone of the same faith, a fellow Christian. In fact, the command to love is alluded to in several passages that deal primarily with relationship within the Christian community. For example, Paul told the Christians in Rome, *Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to his edification* (Rom 15:2). 'Let us live for the good of our brothers and sisters so that they might be built up in the faith.' Love for neighbor also implies not being judgmental (James 4:12) and speaking the truth to one another (Ephesians 4:25). This verse in Ephesians 4:25 is quite interesting. We read, *Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body.* For argument against falsehood, Paul appeals to the relationship that Christians have with one another. They belong together as members of the one body, and so they must be completely honest with one another.

When I see my Christian neighbour as being one body with me, then I see how I can love that neighbor as myself. It is based on the same pattern of relationship that God had intended to take place between husband and wife.

As Christ loved

The third point we notice about the husband and wife relationship is that we are told that the wife is to be subject to the husband, and the husband is to love the wife. Now this, remarkably, is exactly the type of relationship which defines the relationship between the members of the church.

Look at Ephesians 5:21-22. *Be subject to one another in the fear of Christ. Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord.* The duty of submission is found everywhere in the Scriptures. In the writings of Paul, the verb 'to submit' appears 24x. Here it is applied to personal relationships in the church and more specifically to the relationship of wife to husband. The wife is to be subject to her husband.

But Paul has also a word to the husband. He says that the husband is to love his wife. How? *As Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.* As Christ gave Himself to suffer on the cross to

save the church. So what is the duty of the husband towards his wife? It is to love her to the extent of laying down his life for her.

Now observe this. That statement is exactly the same command given to Christians in relation to one another. In 1John 3:16, we read, *By this we know love, because He (Jesus) laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.*

We are to love one another even to the extent of laying down our lives for one another. In other words, what a husband would do for his wife is precisely what a Christian should do for a fellow Christian. This is how we are meant to relate to one another. Isn't that amazing? Here again we see how the marriage relationship portrays the spiritual relationship between the members of the church.

In conclusion, let's go back to our initial question. What is the problem with divorce? What is so spiritual about not divorcing somebody? The Pharisees' mistake was to regard divorce simply as a legal issue rather than a spiritual one. The problem with divorce is that it ruins what marriage is supposed to represent spiritually. And what does marriage represent at the spiritual level? Marriage is a profound and permanent relationship created by God in order to reflect three types of relationship:

- it is a representation of the interpersonal unity among the members of the Trinity
- it is a representation of the relationship between Christ and His church
- it is a representation of the union of believers in the fellowship of the church

And it is this last point that I sought to emphasize in this lesson. I explained to you how the relation between husband and wife is meant to be a sort of microcosm of the larger picture of church relationships.