

## **“Come, Follow me!”**

### ***Feeling Trapped***

Passages: 1 Corinthians 7:8-17

Matthew 19:3-12

I don't know about you, but from what I can see, our culture no longer holds marriage in high regard. Indeed, it often sees marriage as a trap; it's an institution that will hold you down and take away your freedom.

Most of the jokes you hear about marriage make this view clear:

- Q. Why is marriage is like a violin?  
A. After all the beautiful music is over, the strings are still attached.
- Marriages are made in heaven. Then again, so are thunder, lightning, tornados and hail.
- Marriage is like a cage; one sees the birds outside desperate to get in, and those inside desperate to get out.
- Love is holding hands in the street. Marriage is holding arguments in the street.
- Man is incomplete until he is married. Then he is finished.

I remember doing a wedding several years ago where the groomsmen painted **HE-LP** on the shoes of the groom. The idea was that, at the end of the service, when he and his new bride knelt down to pray, everyone would know what his heart was really saying! ***“Help!”***

Of course, this negative attitude towards marriage is not only found in jokes. It's often heard as banter amongst the boys. Married men will often say things like:

- Wow, so your wife let you out tonight?
- Did you get permission from 'the missus'?

Where does this negative attitude come from? Well, in a society that endorses '**personal freedom**' as one of life's greatest of ideals, marriage does look like a trap! I can no longer do what I want. I am hamstrung, reigned in, held back; I can no longer selfishly lead my own life.

It's no wonder why the rate of **marriage** is steadily decreasing while the rate of **co-habitation** is increasing. **People don't want to be trapped!** Co-habitation is a non-binding situation, just in case you need to exit. A 2012 article in *the Atlantic Monthly* spelled it out this way:

*Of the various ways in which one can forge a family, cohabitation has become the most common. One reason for this increased interest in cohabitation over marriage may not be the fear of the union itself, so much as a concern for the possibility of its collapse. In other words, it may be the looming prospect of divorce that's driving more people to choose the question "Will you move in with me?" over "Will you marry me?"*

Indeed, even as **co-habitation** is on the increase, so is **divorce**. By co-habiting, people are saying, *"I don't want to be tied down"*. By divorcing, they're also saying, *"I don't want to be tied down!"* Biblical scholar, NT Wright, blames our Western culture: *"The rampant individualism of the last few hundred years in the West (means that my) 'right to happiness' ... overrides all other considerations."*

Of course, the context of Jesus' words in today's passage from Matthew 19 is a far cry from today's situation! In Jesus' day, both **marriage and divorce were under the authority of men**.

- Every marriage was an "arranged" marriage, where the **men** of the families determined all the arrangements – who?, where?, when? and how much?! (Women had no say!)
- Later on, if the marriage became entangled in irreconcilable differences, it was also **the men** who would decide whether there were legitimate grounds for the husband to **divorce** his wife. (Once again, women had no say.)

Nevertheless, despite the huge differences between Jesus' day and ours, there is one thing we share in common: Throughout the ages, **people have always felt trapped in marriage!**

That's why today's story starts off with a group of Pharisees (**all men**) trying to lure Jesus into a debate over the legal interpretation of Deuteronomy 24.

<sup>3</sup> ***Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"***

To understand the Pharisees question, you need to know that *the laws concerning divorce* (laid out in only 2 places in Deuteronomy- chapters 22 & 24) were fairly general and obscure. It was unclear what constituted the legal grounds for divorce. Listen:

***If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house,<sup>2</sup> and she leaves***

***his house and goes and becomes another man's wife, <sup>3</sup>and if the latter husband turns against her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her to be his wife, <sup>4</sup>then her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance.***

The obscure nature of this text split the Pharisees into two camps. One group (the School of Shammai) interpreted the words “displeasing” and “**indecent**” to mean that the wife had to be “**unfaithful**” (ie commit adultery) before the husband could divorce her. The School of Hillel, on the other hand, understood these words more broadly. A woman who burnt her husband's toast (for example) could be divorced because she was “displeasing to him”; the way she dressed or combed her hair could be seen as “*indecent*” and, thus, worthy of divorce.

The basic question was this: How much *power* did men have over their wives? At what point could they rid themselves of a woman who was *trapping* them in a relationship...hindering them from living as they desired?

**As I said earlier, in every age, people have felt *trapped* in their marriages.** And although (thankfully) **women** now have an equal say in what they want from marriage; and although (thankfully) **both men and women** have equal rights when it comes to calling for a divorce; the fact is that **the only legal way to get out of the *trap of marriage* is through divorce!** But, of course, **divorce** requires the exercise of a certain degree of **power**. (And this power was exclusively in the hands of men.)

And here's the connection with the passage we studied last week. (Indeed, it is no coincidence that today's passage on divorce directly follows last week's passage on forgiveness and reconciliation.) God's preference is, obviously, for reconciliation! And so, instead of using your *power* to divorce your spouse, *reconciliation requires that the offended person* (the person with the power to forgive or not to forgive) make every effort to set the relationship straight. It requires a relinquishment of power and an attitude of submission; it demands that the offended person *move humbly towards the other, in a genuine attempt to settle their differences.*

That's why, when Jesus is asked which school of interpretation He endorses, He refuses to answer directly. Instead, He points out two problems in the way the Pharisees have read the text of Deuteronomy 24.

**First**, Jesus makes it clear that Deuteronomy 24 must not be read in isolation, but within the larger context of God's original intentions for marriage.

***<sup>4</sup> "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,'<sup>a</sup> <sup>5</sup> and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh' ? <sup>6</sup> So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."***

Jesus, of course, is quoting from Genesis 2. And His point is simple: Rather than arguing the details about when a man...the one with the power... can (or cannot) divorce his wife, if you go back to God's original intention for marriage, you'll see that God never included the idea of divorce! Why not? Because God's intentions have always been for ***"The two to become one!"*** And so, ***instead of trying to find a way out of your marriage, why not look for a new way in? Why not use your power to renew, revive and fix your marriage? ("What God has joined together, let no one separate.")***

What that means is that *the person with the power*...the person feeling trapped and looking to get out of the marriage...**must let go of their power!** They must humble themselves and, instead of devising schemes and inventing stories, they must come to the table to work things out! As we saw last week, reconciliation is not only the desire of God; it is the nature of God!

**Second**, Jesus makes it clear that these verses about divorce (from Deuteronomy 24) were never intended as a *guide to divorce*, but were given to stop the powerbrokers (men) from abusing their power. These laws were put in place to defend vulnerable women from being *wrongfully divorced* and *disposed of* by their *hard-hearted* husbands...men who, in their position of power, could easily refuse to try and work things out!

Listen again to verses 7 and 8.

***<sup>7</sup> "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" <sup>8</sup> Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning."***

Whereas Jesus' opponents assumed that *whatever the law addressed, it permitted*, Jesus responds by saying that, *what the law addressed was a*

*concession* to men's **hard hearts**. In other words, divorce was only allowed to limit the damage of *hard-hearted* marriages, where the man blatantly **refused** to admit the issues of conflict; **refused** to seek help; **refused** to listen to advice; **refused** to talk things through; **refused** to find a solution to the problems in his marriage!

Now, it is interesting to note that, at the end of this conversation, Jesus obviously leans more favourably to the *School of Shammai's* interpretation of Deuteronomy 24. Remember, they interpreted the words "*displeasing*" and "*indecent*" to mean "*unfaithful*" (ie adultery). And that's what Jesus eventually concludes:

<sup>9</sup> ***I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.***"

And you can see why He took this line of thought! In a culture where the men had all the power and women were extremely vulnerable, by interpreting the words "**displeasing**" and "**indecent**" to mean "**unfaithful**" (ie adultery), Jesus was *restricting* the man's power. By limiting the grounds for divorce, Jesus was forcing men to find ways to resolve their differences with their wives. Reconciliation becomes the focus-- Get help, seek advice, go to a counsellor, talk it through...!

Furthermore, Jesus was also endorsing a stronger legal position for women, one from which women could publicly defend themselves against their accusing husbands. Adultery is a far cry from burning the toast! And even in cases where there was a divorce, it gave women a limited guarantee to some sort of a fresh start... in a new marriage.

Of course, God's ideal is clearly that we should *avoid* divorce. Indeed, far more than that, **God desires that we tirelessly seek reconciliation and 'oneness'**, in this, the most intimate of all of life's relationships.

You are probably aware that Kim and I recently did a one-day marriage retreat in New York City. We needed it! We still need it! That's because, like every marriage, our marriage constantly needs work! If you don't work at marriage, always moving towards each other to work through the little niggling issues, **you will find start feeling trapped**...and you'll be looking for reasons...any reason... to get out!

The Marriage Retreat was entitled, "***Your marriage as a sign and a wonder***". The thinking behind the title goes like this: As Christians, if you're married, then you need to do three things:

1. **Make marriage your ambition.** You are called by God and “sent” to your spouse to convince him/her that he/she is loved and loveable. As you make what is important to your spouse important to you, you build a foundation of shared respect.
2. **Pray for Passion.** Marriage is meant to flow out of the passion found within the Trinity. Diversity of the sexes is designed to bring attraction. Christian marriage is meant to be lived in an aura of sexual chemistry and mutual respect.
3. **Become a Sign and a Wonder.** The ‘*profound mystery*’ of every Christian marriage (Ephesians 5:32) is the incredible potential it has to reflect *Christ and His bride* to the world. It is a *sacrament*, making visible that which is invisible. For example:
  - a. Christ and His bride are seen wherever there is forgiveness and a movement of vulnerability towards each other.
  - b. Christ and His bride are seen whenever both parties die to themselves in order to live more fully for the other.
  - c. Christ and His bride are seen whenever children find security in assurance that their parents love each other.
  - d. Christ and His bride are seen whenever marital love leads to openness, generosity and hospitality towards others.

The point is that marital love can help set the tone of love in the church. Superficial marriages = superficial church community.

Of course, the spiritual reality, here, is that, for a Christian marriage to become a sacrament, Jesus needs to be present in the midst of it. It is His *invisible* presence that transforms both husband and wife to become a *visible* reflection of Christ and His bride!

**Of course, if all this sounds too difficult, there is another option!**

*<sup>10</sup> The disciples said to him, “If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.” <sup>11</sup> Jesus replied, “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. <sup>12</sup> For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”*

Now, Jesus' remark about celibacy would have certainly seized the attention of His Jewish listeners! After all, mainstream Jewish society regarded marriage and childbearing as solemn responsibilities. Indeed, any man who deliberately stayed single would have met all sorts of ridicule and scorn. But Jesus, in fact, seems to be advocating celibacy... as Paul does in 1 Corinthians 7.

Why? Once again, it's all about power...and the relinquishment of that power for the sake of the Kingdom! (Indeed, not only is this the context of the immediate passage, but it's the context of the entire chapter, even as Jesus makes His way to Jerusalem to give up His own power as God... for the sake of this fallen world!)

And so, by referring here to eunuchs...to men who (either by choice or by situation) have lost their 'balls' or 'male power' ...Jesus is reminding *His disciples* that **“the way of the Kingdom is the way of powerlessness”**.

As Jewish men, they were falsely taught to believe that God had given men some sort of *exclusive power* over women; but they were wrong. And although they may have believed that God has given men an *exclusive power* to choose their bride, and then divorce her whenever they felt like it, they were wrong.

In fact, **the only thing that men have been given power over is their own body**. So, for the sake of the kingdom, control it and use it for serving others!

**Give up your power. It's not about 'rights' but about 'calling'.**

There's one thing more we need to say about eunuchs. I believe that Jesus didn't raise the issue of *eunuchs* merely as a platform to speak to **the married men**. He raised this issue to speak to **those who were single as well**.

Remember, Jesus' main theme is “feeling trapped”. And although a eunuch will never feel **trapped in a marriage**, he will certainly feel **trapped in his singleness!**

The application is clear: Many single people today feel *trapped* in their singleness; unable to find someone to share their life with. I know many single people who would love to be married... but they just haven't met the right person.

And so, the same point that Jesus made for His married disciples, He now makes for those who were single! You can't force your will on others; you can't make someone love you; you don't have the power to determine the events of life; you can't predict nor control the way your life turns out! Yes, you may feel **trapped**...but the only way forward is to *accept your powerlessness* (as Jesus

accepted His) handing it over to the God who created you...and get on with life! Singleness has so many wonderful blessings and wonderful opportunities!

Or as Paul makes so clear in 1 Corinthians 7, **it's not about 'rights' but about His 'calling'**. In his monologue about getting married or staying single, he concludes by saying, ***"<sup>17</sup> Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches."***

How do we conclude today's message? Perhaps the best way is by praying the greatest prayer of powerlessness ever given to the human race—The Lord's Prayer. Let's pray it together.

*Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial  
and deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours  
now and for ever.  
Amen*