

The Gospel of Matthew: Marriage and Israel's Story

Part One: September 2022

Introduction

Jesus revealed the great dignity of marriage when he was born into a human family. He revealed his glory for the first time at a wedding in the small Galilean town of Cana, and he acted as Israel's long-awaited bridegroom in his interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well. In the next two sections of this study (September and October), we will use the Gospel of Matthew to examine what Jesus said about marriage, how he used marriage to describe his work and mission, and what he said about divorce. Jesus used the wedding feast as a parable for the kingdom of God in his various recounts of Israel's story, and he announced that the long-awaited wedding of God and his people was about to begin. Jesus is the bridegroom; he is Israel's God come to claim his bride. The long-awaited day of the Lord is here!

John the Baptist understood the story of Israel in much the same way that Jesus did. He was convinced that this was the time that Israel's God had chosen to act. We know from his fiery comments to those who came down from Jerusalem to spy on him while he was baptizing in the Jordan River that he fully expected the day of the Lord to arrive, and with it, a terrible judgment on Jerusalem (Luke 3:1–17). John was steeped in the prophetic tradition, and he saw himself as being not unlike Isaiah or Jeremiah. His words about the axe being laid to the root are highly evocative of the language of the Assyrian king in Isaiah 10. Now the “axe in the hand of God” is Rome! John believed that this was the time that God would send his Christ, and he makes the connection to the bridegroom this way:

“You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him. He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice; therefore, this joy of mine is now full. He must increase, but I must decrease.” (John 3:28–30)

When Jesus was asked why both the Pharisees and the disciples of John fasted and his disciples did not, he said:

“Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.” (Mark 2:19–20)

Jesus was deeply in tune with the prophetic tradition. He claimed that now that the Day of the Lord was here, it was no longer time for fasting (see Zechariah 8:18–23). Further, guests at a wedding not only do not fast, but as Jesus demonstrated, they celebrate sometimes with extravagant gifts and lots of wine.

Also, in keeping with the prophets, Jesus understood that marriage was for a lifetime, and like them, he was opposed to divorce (see Malachi 2:10–16). He was critical of the pharisaical approaches to divorce and the profound misunderstanding of the Scriptures on the part of almost

all of the leaders of Israel—not only about marriage, but about all aspects of the kingdom of God, and what it meant to be faithful Israel. The permanence of marriage spoke of the faithfulness of his Father to the covenant, the marriage of the one God to his chosen people. And now with his arrival, the long exile was finally ending. That meant that the old decree of divorce that represented the shame of Israel and her folly of going after false gods was being torn up. The bridegroom was at hand, and it was time for his wedding feast. Tragically, they did not recognize that; they did not know the time of their visitation (Luke 19:44).

Other questions and concerns faced the young church as it tried to find its way in the thoroughly Roman world of the first century of the Common Era. Jesus said nothing about the concerns that would come up later in the young Christian communities about how husbands and wives should relate to each other (see Ephesians 5:21–33, for example), or about codes of behavior for children and slaves in a household (see Ephesians 6:1–9). That is not to say he had no opinion, but it is to say that he is not recorded as having talked about it.

Jesus' clear respect for the dignity and permanence of marriage, his affirmation of its special value as a metaphor for what God was doing in the world, and his deep love for his mother and the other women in his life was revolutionary, and highly subversive of the approach of both the Romans and the Jews.



Pray

God, come to our assistance.

-Lord, make haste to help us.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit

-As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

Reading: Matthew 9:14–15

Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?” ¹⁵ And Jesus said to them, “The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.

Meditation

When our children got married, we had great big parties. We bought expensive clothes, made lots of food, and drank plenty of wine. We invited our friends and relatives from far away. The preparations took months and the festivities lasted for days. It was a lot of work and expense, but it was worth it. The joy of watching our children start a new life with a spouse who loved them was almost beyond description. I could not imagine doing anything other than celebrating with them. Jesus couldn't imagine his disciples fasting while he was there, any more than I could imagine fasting at my children's weddings. But Jesus says something strange. It appears that his wedding is a little different from those of my children. The party began when he was here, but the bridegroom has left for a time. We know that the party will be resumed in great glory and splendor at the end of the present evil age. The party is going on, but not in its full glory. The guests come and go; we suffer and die—but always in the hope of celebrating again with Jesus the bridegroom. In Lent, we fast because we know that we live in a confusing and difficult time. It is a time when it looks like two ages have overlapped. A party begun, but not finished; a groom here, but not here fully.

Quiet reflection: Reflect on one or two ideas that came to mind in the reading or the meditation. Share one idea with your spouse.

Prayers and Intentions: As if talking to a friend, tell the Lord what and who are on your mind.

Lord's Prayer: Conclude your intentions by praying the Lord's Prayer together.

Blessing: May the Lord bless us, protect us from all evil, and bring us to everlasting life. Amen.

Unity Prayer: God, make our hearts one. Amen.

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Reading: Matthew 5:31–32

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’³² But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

Meditation

No series on texts from Matthew would be complete without at least a brief comment from the famous Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is acting like a new Moses who brings the law of God to the people. But in a remarkable retelling of the story of Israel, Jesus is promulgating the law on his own authority: “It was said,, but **I say.**” Here he makes clear his thinking about divorce. He is aware of the well-known debate between the two dominant pharisaic schools—that of Hillel and that of Shammai —about the interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1. The Shammaites took a strict interpretation, allowing divorce only in cases of sexual immorality, whereas the Hillelites were much more liberal. Jesus said that they both missed the point. Jesus was opposed to divorce. Actually, he probably hated it. He would have been opposed on two levels. First, as a metaphor, divorce would have signaled going into Exile on account of sin. It would have been a sign of either the people’s rejection of their God or his abandonment of them on account of their faithlessness. Jesus is announcing the END of Exile, and divorce is the wrong message. With his coming, the long-awaited Day of the Lord has begun, and with it, divorce should end. In him, sin, the cause of exile and divorce, can be defeated. Further, divorce was a sign of lack of faithfulness to the covenant; Jesus is calling for a return to covenant faithfulness in all aspects of human life. (See Malachi 2:8–16.)

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Reading: Matthew 19:1–6

When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan.² Large crowds followed him, and he cured them there.³ **Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?”**⁴ He answered, “Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’⁵ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’?⁶ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

Meditation

Jesus is faced with a highly political problem. One false step could have very serious consequences. Everyone knows that Herod Antipas has divorced his wife and married his brother's wife. The question is designed to put Jesus in a difficult spot. If he speaks against divorce, he is criticizing the king; see where that got John the Baptist. If he claims that Herod's behavior was acceptable, he becomes a collaborator with Herod's agenda and approves Herod's sin. They quote Torah to set Jesus up for a fall. But Jesus gives a truly revolutionary answer. He asks them what else it says in Torah, in the Law.

Herod may have been within the law, but Jesus goes on to say that Moses permitted divorce because of their hardness of heart. So, Herod has a hard heart. What God intended from the beginning was that a man and a woman would give themselves to each other and in doing so would become one flesh. This human action, according to Jesus, was also God's action. What God has joined together, no one should separate. It would seem that Herod has violated God's original intention. The implications of Jesus' answer were dangerous. Herod, in Jesus' opinion, is committing adultery. That inference by Jesus could easily have cost him his life right there.

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Meditation

The test was not only a political landmine; divorce posed a theological problem as well. The Pharisees, who could be compared to today's press, or social media mobs, were looking for ways to make Jesus look bad. A false step would be used against him to undermine his credibility. What is hanging in the balance here is whether Jesus would contradict Moses, who had allowed divorce (see Deuteronomy 24:1). How did Jesus navigate these dangerous waters? He appealed to the same Torah that the Pharisees were citing. Jesus, better than any other person, knew the will of his Father regarding marriage. It was his Father's intention, from the beginning, that a man and a woman would become one new being. It was a union that was intended to be fruitful, i.e., produce children. It was intended to be a union in which the two would be faithful to each other for a lifetime. It was to be a fitting icon for the spousal love of God for his people. It was how God created us. It was what he intended.

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Meditation

The sacraments of our churches are the privileged moments in which God continues to disclose who he is and his love for us. The sacraments are the visible and ordinary things that humankind uses to live: water, bread, oil, promises. They are joined to gestures and then to God’s word (“I baptize you. . . .”: “This is my body. . . .”). They continue to make present the healing and saving action of God in unique ways. These actions are God’s way of making the invisible—his love and his healing action—visible and tangible.

This brings us to the mystery of marriage. Marriage is the most basic, most common voluntary association among mankind. It is as ordinary and as wonderful as water or bread or wine. The human sign-mystery is expressed in the words, “I will.” The sign expresses will and consent. This, along with the physical union, makes the marriage. Physical union alone does not make the human contract—but in the power of the Holy Spirit, when joined with the words, this human union, this human contract becomes a revelation of how Christ is joined to the Church. It is our action, and it is God’s action at the same time.

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Reading: Matthew 19:7-12

They said to him, “Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?” ⁸ **He said to them, “It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.** ⁹ And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.” ¹⁰ His disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” ¹¹ But he said to them, “Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given.” ¹² For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.”

Meditation

Herod and the Pharisees have missed the point completely. There is a whole new way of living human life on offer in Jesus and his kingdom. Divorce is not part of that new way of living human life. It was a concession to human hard-heartedness. Now there is a cure for that, and it is possible for marriage to once again reflect the Creator’s intention: a lifetime union of one man and one woman whose covenant with each other reflects the covenant between God and his people. The joining of a man and a woman creates a new entity, which Jesus, using the words of Genesis, describes as “one flesh.” Moreover, the free action of the husband and wife giving themselves to one another is seen by Jesus as an act of God as well: “what God has joined together.” However we understand the exemption, it is clear that Jesus thought that divorce, like sin and death, is a bad idea. Of course, the cure requires that each of us be transformed by the grace we received in baptism and the ongoing action of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It will certainly require work, often heroic effort, to develop the character that is necessary for marriage to work. It is also true that even though Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection has inaugurated the new age, the old age of sin and death has not come to an end. In the deeply conflicting reality of this overlap of ages, the Christian community has to be ready to support and care for those whose marriages have failed and who are in need of our tender care and compassion. On the other hand, the Christian community should say with Jesus that Moses permitted divorce because of their hardness of heart, and we have a cure for that.

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Reading: Matthew 22:1–14

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ² “**The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.** ³ He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴ Again he sent other slaves, saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited: “Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.”’ ⁵ But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶ while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. ⁷ The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. ⁸ Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹ Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ ¹⁰ Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. ¹¹ “But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹² and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. ¹³ Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ ¹⁴ For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Meditation

The prophets often spoke of the Day of the Lord as if it were a great banquet and the time when Yahweh would take his bride and renew their covenant of love. This time it would be unbreakable. Yahweh would cure her in-curable wound, would restore her virginity, and would himself be her husband. When that happened all of creation would be restored, the dead would be raised to life, Israel's enemies would be defeated, the nations would stream to Jerusalem, and God would dwell with his people forever. Remarkably and unmistakably, Jesus claims to be the bridegroom and the wedding feast is at hand! With his arrival the wedding feast has begun. The meals he eats with the poor and outcast are instances of the messianic banquet. However, the guests either are not ready or are unwilling to come in. The announcement and its subsequent rejection now function as an indictment, a judgment against the very people who should be rejoicing.

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Meditation

The invitations had gone out well in advance and the guests had responded that they would be coming. The food had been prepared and everything had been made ready. The king sent word that it was time for the guests to come to the wedding of his son. They refused to come. The insult to a human king is hard to fathom, but what an insult it is to God, the Creator of the universe, their Lord who had rescued them from slavery in Egypt, given them a land and made them his very own people! The “save the date,” or at least the promise of the wedding feast, had gone out through the prophets. Now the divine bridegroom has arrived, and the invited guests (the Jews in Jerusalem) have refused to come. The king was enraged. In a thinly veiled threat, he proclaimed the destruction of Jerusalem that came to pass in AD 70, when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. The invitation then indeed went out to the whole world, to us!

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Meditation

It is tempting to feel sorry for this poor fellow who is kicked out, rather harshly, for not being dressed appropriately. After all, he was summoned to the wedding quite unexpectedly, and right off the street. Scholars debate whether or not wedding garments were supplied by the host, in this case, the king. If they were, the guest is certainly guilty of gross disrespect for not donning the garment. But that, it seems to me, is to miss the point. When we are invited to the wedding of the King’s son, in this case the wedding of the divine bridegroom, we are expected to change. We are expected to behave differently. We are expected to put on righteousness, justice, peace, and love (see Revelation 19:7-8). Although the invitation goes out to everyone and all are welcome, everyone must dress appropriately.

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