

# The Kingdom, Marriage & Money

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Matthew 19

In Matthew chapter 4, verse 17, Jesus launched his public ministry with this simple proclamation:

*“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”*

This is his message. And it is his mission. The Kingdom of heaven has come near, because Jesus the King has come. And all that follows in Matthew’s gospel unfolds for us the nature of Jesus’ coming kingdom, as we hear the words, and see the actions of Jesus the King.

And what do we see?

We see a kingdom of healing, and wholeness and humility. We see a kingdom where little ones are loved lifted up, where proud oppressors are thrown down. It’s a kingdom of righteousness and purity, where sin is cut out and cast off. It’s a kingdom of mercy and grace, where vengeance is rejected and forgiveness is offered again and again and again.

It’s a kingdom that grows like a seed, that works like yeast; it’s like hidden treasure and precious pearls. It’s a kingdom where the blind see, the lame walk, the hungry are filled. Most of all it’s a kingdom where the great spiritual doctor welcomes sinners to his table and makes them well.

The Kingdom of Heaven has come near! And it is glorious!

But the Kingdom of Heaven is not the only Kingdom in town. In the 4th century, Augustine gives a great description of two different, and utterly opposed, kinds of kingdoms:

*Two kingdoms, [he says] have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; and the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord. For the one seeks glory from men; but the greatest glory of the other is God.*

This is what we see in Matthew's gospel: the heavenly kingdom of Jesus confronts the earthly kingdom of self-interest, self-righteousness and selfishness.

And we see this confrontation and conflict ever-increasing as we come to the beginning of Matthew 19. We're told the Pharisees come to *test* Jesus in verse 3. That is the same word that Matthew used in chapter 4 when the devil *tested* Jesus in the wilderness. From Matthew 19 onwards we are seeing a cosmic clash coming to a head between the kingdom of heaven and all the kingdoms of this world.

This clash will climax when the kingdom of self conspires to kill King Jesus. But of course even this is a victory for the kingdom of heaven as Jesus offers himself as the perfect sacrifice for all the sin and selfishness of world.

This is what we will be thinking from now until Easter, as we work our way, chapter by chapter, through Matthew: The coming Kingdom of Jesus. Let's pray as we turn now to Matthew 19.

[Lord's Prayer]

# The Kingdom & Marriage

In this chapter, the coming Kingdom confronts the ideas of marriage and money. The cosmic rule of Jesus extends to the domestic concerns of everyday life: both our relationships and our resources.

So let's think first about marriage. And I'm sure you noticed this as we read through that the teaching of Jesus cuts against just about everything our culture believes about sex and sexuality.

- You might hear today that gender is a harmful social construct.
  - Jesus says, "In the beginning, the creator made them *male and female*."
- The slogan of our moment is, "Love is love." That marriage is for any two people that love each other.
  - Jesus says, "For this reason a *man* will leave his father and mother and be united with his *wife* and they will become one flesh."
- The world today says that marriage and sex are private, what we do with our bodies is nobody's business but mine..
  - Jesus says that marriages are joined together by God, of great concern to him, and of public concern to the whole community.
- The world today says that you deserve to be happy. And if your marriage is not making you happy then of course you should get a divorce.
  - Jesus says that divorce is a great tragedy, and should be sought only in rare exceptions
- The world today says that sex is a human right. That sex is necessary for a full and satisfying life. That all you need is consent.
  - But Jesus says that outside the covenant of marriage, complete chastity is what God requires.

Phew. It's pretty incendiary stuff. And plenty of people would say that in all of these things the church needs to "get with the times".

But it's obvious in Matthew 19 that Jesus was never teaching a sexuality "of the times". The teaching of Jesus was shocking to his disciples. They hear Jesus' teaching on marriage on marriage and say, "far out, if that's what marriage is all about, then I'm out!"

Jesus' teaching confronts his Jewish disciples, it confronts the super-religious Pharisees, and it is certainly out of step with the ideals of Roman and Greek culture too. Jesus himself said: "not everyone can accept this word." What sounds hard and weird now was hard and weird then, too! From the outset, a Christian view of sex and sexuality has always seemed to come from another time, and another place.

And so we ought to entertain the possibility that our culture, maybe just maybe, is incredibly sexual confused. Perhaps Jesus is the one who speaks sexual sanity in order to liberate us from confusion that we might live as God has created us to be.

Now that doesn't make the teaching of Jesus any less hard. It doesn't make it less weird. But that would make it good.

And so today I want to draw our attention to three aspects of Jesus teaching which are hard and weird and *good*.

**Firstly, the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 19 restrains male sexual dominance.**

I think this is the revolutionary heart of Jesus' teaching. For if you were a first century Roman man there really were no limits on your sexual life. It's telling that there was no Latin word for a "male virgin" – that was a complete category error. Men were expected express their sexual desires. And women and slaves and even children were expected to gratify them.

The Old Testament of course, held men to a much higher standard. Jesus does, after all, refer back to the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible. But even in Israel, men had claimed for themselves much more sexual liberty – and very much at the expense of women.

This is what the Pharisees had done with the command of Moses from Deuteronomy. Moses had given *permission* for divorce, and the law-abiding Pharisees had taken it and run with it. Notice the question they ask: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"

*Any and every reason.* That's pretty broad! Jewish men had latched onto this law and received it as license to ditch their wives on a whim. As the Pharisees say, they could just give the woman a certificate and *send her away*. And in that culture, that would have been devastating for that woman. These religious men were using a good law from God as a cloak for their own wickedness. They could be just as sexually free as a Roman man, and they could claim it as righteousness.

But Jesus calls this what it is: a perverse failure to live according to God's will. That's why he takes them back to the beginning, and the creation of marriage in Genesis 1 and 2 – and the joining together of a man and woman as *one flesh*.

When Jesus speaks of *one flesh*, he is describing two things. There is a union of bodies in sex. AND there is also a union of lives in marriage. And those two things can't be torn apart. The one flesh **act** of sex belongs in the one flesh **relationship** of marriage.

This teaching ought to be the death of "casual sex", and of careless divorce. For the young men among us: Jesus means that unless you are willing to commit your whole life to someone you have no right to their body. To the married men among us, Jesus means that your wife does not exist to satisfy *your* desires. Together with your wife God intends for you to serve each other and to serve the people around you.

Of course, the same applies to women as well but Jesus' teaching is meant to curtail *male* sexual behaviour in particular. The evolutionary biologist Joseph Heinrich puts it very evocatively: "Jesus' teaching, by establishing the institution of monogamous marriage, reached down and grabbed men by the testicles."

Jesus says men can't use women to satisfy their own desires and discard them when no longer required. He calls men instead to self-control, faithfulness, commitment and service. And if you're not up for that, then sex is not for you.

This is what Jesus teaches: Faithfulness within marriage. Chastity outside of it. Some might call this a very narrow view of sex. I would call it *exalted*. For according to Jesus, sex is a sacred thing, a gift given by God to bind a man and woman together, so that they might love each other faithfully, and serve together fruitfully. It is a holy fire. Handled rightly it can radiate a beautiful warmth and light. Used carelessly it can be incredibly destructive.

And so the second thing we need to say is that **Jesus recognises the reality of sin.** Jesus proclaims the ideal of Genesis 1-2, but he is not blind to the fall of Genesis 3. Jesus knows about the hardness of human hearts – our stubborn resistance to God’s good commands. But he also reckons with the fact that the whole world is scarred by the reality of human sin. God created us male and female but in this broken world some are born as eunuchs. Some are made eunuchs by the sin of others. Paradise this is not.

This is what Moses’ command was always aiming at. The allowance for divorce was a gracious concession from God that sin can sometimes ruin a marriage beyond repair. This is no trivial thing. It is a tragedy. “It was not so in the beginning,” Jesus says. But he does allow for divorce in the case of sexual immorality.

For understood rightly, sex is a good gift which binds a husband and wife together. But, used wrongly, sex becomes a sledge-hammer which breaks a marriage apart. That sin severs the one flesh union.

The apostle Paul in his letter to the church in Corinth says that the same thing happens when one spouse completely abandons another. The one flesh union is torn apart. I think that the same could be said about persistent and unrepentant abuse. Such abuse denies and destroys the union which God so desires.

Let me say this very clearly: if you are here today and you are in an abusive marriage, this teaching of Jesus does not require you to remain in a place that is unsafe or dangerous. And especially if your spouse is using a passage like this to tell you that you cannot leave, then they are standing with the Pharisees and not with Jesus. To take the good words of Jesus and twist them to your own selfish purposes is *exactly* what Jesus is standing against here.

And at St Mark's we always want to find ourselves on the same side as Jesus. And so if you take that step to speak to any of the pastors or overseers we will not dismiss you or take what you say lightly. We will take you very seriously.

Now, taking such a step doesn't mean divorce is inevitable. Jesus recognises the reality of sin, but he is not resigned to it. The fact that the Kingdom has come means that there is the possibility of repentance and restoration and reconciliation for even the most broken relationship. But that can't happen unless sin is called what it is, confronted full in the face, and carried to Jesus the King.

Jesus recognises the reality of sin.

**Then thirdly, Jesus relativises the place of marriage.** For when Jesus used the language of becoming a Eunuch, he was not just being provocative. I think he is deliberately calling to mind Old Testament prophecy. In particular the words of Isaiah 56 from verse 4:

*This is what the LORD says:  
To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,  
Who choose what pleases me  
And hold fast to my covenant –  
To them I will give within my temple and its walls  
A memorial and a name  
Better than sons and daughters  
I will give them an everlasting name  
That will endure forever.*

In the beginning, God said to Adam and Eve, "Be fruitful and multiply." This is how God's good rule would spread. Men and women would come together in one flesh union to fill the earth and subdue it.

But with the coming of Jesus' kingdom there is a principle of fruitfulness that is not sexual but spiritual.

With Jesus there is the possibility of family which is not bound by biology but is governed by the gospel.

Marriage is not everything. Marriage was always given as a picture of the greater reality of the sacrificial love of Jesus for his people. And now that greater reality has come! There is in the kingdom of Heaven an intimacy and a satisfaction which far surpasses even the happiest human marriage. And that intimate union is freely offered to all who come to Jesus and trust in him.

And so whether you are married or not. Whether you feel like singleness has been thrust upon, or that it is something you have chosen for yourself – Jesus promises that true fullness, and true fruitfulness, is found in faithfully following him.

To our world today, that seems very hard and weird. But to those who know the love of Jesus, we know that it is very good indeed. That's the kingdom and marriage.

# The Kingdom & Money

Now, in the second half of the chapter we see the coming kingdom in confrontation with money. And you'll be glad to know we'll cover this much more briefly – because of course money is not something we tend to think about selfishly. HAHA.

I remember when I would go to church with my parents as a kid and my Dad would say he felt sorry for the poor bloke who had to give the money announcement every month. I mean you have to do it but it's all a bit awkward and embarrassing.

Our culture has the same opinion about the activity in our bank accounts as we do about the activity in our bedrooms. It's nobody's business but my own. I think that's the assumption of the young man who comes to Jesus and falls at his feet. I think he is sincere in his seeking of eternal life. I also think he genuinely believes that he has kept the commandments of God. He just doesn't think his money matters all that much to God. But Jesus brings the man's money right into the equation.

*"If you want to be perfect," Jesus says, "go sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."*

In this statement, Jesus shows how the man's attitude to his money reveals what he is lacking. And he's lacking two things:

Firstly, the man is lacking **a positive love of his neighbour.**

For Jesus' command, you can see, is not just *get rid of all your stuff*. It's sell your possessions and give to the poor. Jesus is calling the man to extend the horizons of his obedience.

The man may not have murdered, but has he really improved the life of those around him? He may not steal, but is he really generous? He may honour his Father and Mother but has he really loved his neighbours who are in the greatest need? God's commands were always driving towards this fuller and deeper expression. Not just refraining from certain acts but actively seeking the well-being of everyone around you. This kind of love is expansive – and it's often expensive. It's a love that this man lacks.

And he lacks **a positive love of God**. Notice in his list that Jesus leaves out the commands that relate to God: You shall not have any gods before me. You shall not make an idol. You shall not use my name in vain. But that's the real question that Jesus now raises. Does this man really love God in this way? Or has his money subtly taken God's place? When push comes to shove, does he really want eternal life, or is he satisfied with all his stuff?

Earlier in Matthew's gospel, in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made this emphatic statement:

*No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.*

That's exactly what we see as this man walks away from Jesus in sadness. He needs to choose between God and money, tragically he chooses to serve money as his master. He gives up the glorious treasure of life in the kingdom of heaven, in order to hold onto all of his earthly possessions. His love of self has led in the end to a contempt of God and a denial of Jesus, just as Augustine observed. And so what does this man lack? It turns out, he lacks *everything*.

See money can do for us many things. It can make our lives easier, it can open up possibilities. With money we can purchase solutions to our problems, and some measure of security for the future. But, Jesus shows us here that money cannot buy us entry into his kingdom. In fact, money is an obstacle which blocks us from coming to receive his grace. I haven't tested what Jesus says here, but fitting a camel through the eye of a needle sounds pretty hard.

All of this seems to be especially applicable to people like us, in our time and place. We must ask ourselves whether we use our money for purely selfish ends or whether we use what God has given us to serve the people around us in positive and proactive love?

Do we use our money to honour God, and for the sake of his kingdom? Or do we use our stuff to build our own little kingdoms of self?

Has our money and our possessions subtly taken pride of place in our hearts? Are we so used to buying whatever we want whenever we want that we think we could buy our way into Jesus' kingdom? Are we serving God or money? Do we love Jesus or money? And if Jesus asked us to take what we had and give it all to the poor would we joyfully follow him, or sadly walk away from him?

These are searching questions. It's no wonder that the disciples were shocked – again. They were *greatly astonished* (verse 25). Like his teaching on marriage, Jesus' teaching on money is extreme. *Who could ever live this way? We might wonder. Like the disciples we might ask, who could ever be saved?*

Jesus' answer is pretty brutal: "With man this is impossible." Jesus offers not even a glimmer of human hope in this teaching.

# The Glory of the King

He does, however, offer us something so much better. The hope that God can give to us what we can never earn or deserve for ourselves.

*“With man this is impossible,” Jesus says, “but with God all things are possible.”*

We cannot live this way, but Jesus can. And he has. We cannot save ourselves, but Jesus can. And he has. And you can actually see even in this chapter that Jesus fulfils everything that he demands, so that he might rescue us from everything that we lack.

For Jesus is the true faithful husband. Even though his people turned away from him and spurned his love. Though Israel had become an adulterous nation, Jesus did not abandon his bride. He did not cast her aside, but he laid down his life for. Jesus did not use his power and strength for himself – as Ephesians 5 says:

*Christ **loved** the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.*

Not only that, Jesus is the true eunuch for the kingdom. Peter Leithart puts it like this:

*“As [Jesus] moves toward the cross, He becomes the eunuch for the kingdom, as he gives up everything that the ancient world counted as manhood for the sake of establishing his kingdom. He turns the other cheek instead of retaliating. He loves his enemies. He submits himself to torture and humiliating mockery. He is silent when he is charged in court. He gives himself*

*voluntarily over to a shameful death on the cross. He gives up all the comforts and glories of family life, does not marry, does not have children, does not enjoy the comforts of a home, because he is pursuing the kingdom of his Father....*

And in this Jesus is fruitful! Immediately after speaking of Eunuchs, Jesus is surrounded by children! He takes them in his arms and he blesses them. And Jesus' family continues to grow, even today, as people from every nation hear the gospel and respond in repentance in faith.

Jesus is the true rich young ruler. He is the King of the Kingdom who takes all that he has and generously gives it to poor sinners like you and me. Jesus, "though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich." (2 Corinthians 8:9)

This is what makes the impossibility of salvation possible. It's also what makes it possible to faithfully serve in marriage, to seek the kingdom in all things, and use what we have for the sake of the poor. The glory of the coming Kingdom is precisely in the glory of King Jesus. And when we know him, we really do lack nothing.