

# Marriage, Divorce & Singleness (19:1-12)

So **on the docket for today**: divorce, remarriage, and just for good measure, a bit about *eunuchs*. Good morning everyone. If you haven't had your coffee yet, that passage should wake you right up. If you're new to our church, we've been walking through the book of Matthew for a while now, passage-by-passage. And when you do that, you occasionally come across some difficult passages. Case in point: the past *three* weeks, I've taught on *church discipline*, *forgiveness*, and now, *divorce*. Which means that next Sunday, I'm getting someone else to teach.

But today's passage largely **revolves around this question**: *how should followers of Jesus think about divorce?* And as I ask that, I'm very aware that for many people, church is the *last* place they'd prefer to have that discussion. **Over the years, many churches have been guilty of heaping enormous amounts of shame and condemnation on those who have been through divorces. And then other churches, sometimes in an effort to avoid that mistake, have just chosen not to talk about divorce at all. Which may be an easier solution, but certainly not a better one.** So I hope you'll bear with me today as I seek to avoid either of those two ditches.

I want us to just do our best to **unearth what Jesus** teaches in this passage about marriage, divorce, and then a little about singleness at the end. And as we do that, chances are some of it will be challenging, some of it may be *convicting*, and some of it might even be frustrating. But really, that's what we sign up for *any* time we open up the Scriptures together. We're probably going to be challenged, we're probably going to be convicted, and sometimes, we're going to be frustrated. But I firmly believe that **in what the Spirit has to say to us through these pages, there is life to be found**. So let's pray together, and we'll hop in. *Pray*.

If you've got your bibles, **turn with me** to **Matthew 19**. As I mentioned earlier, we've been walking through the book of Matthew. And in this section of the book, Jesus is talking largely about *relationships*: how we relate to other followers of Jesus within this thing he calls the "kingdom of heaven." That's his focus. So obviously, *marriage* is very important to that conversation. So today, he gets into *that*. Let's dive right in. Start with me in v. 1:

*[1] When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. [2] Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.*

~~These two verses serve as a **brief interlude** to the story. For the past little bit, the focus has largely been on Jesus' *teaching*: his nuanced, sometimes complicated, often~~

~~controversial, teaching. But here, it's almost like Matthew wants to remind us that this is still Jesus. And where Jesus goes, people follow, and people get healed. That stuff is still happening too, even amid the controversy. And with that said, we get right back to the controversy. Verse 3:~~

[3] 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?**"

Now, there are a **couple quick things** you need to know to fully understand this question from the Pharisees. First, the Pharisees existed in a highly **patriarchal** culture. Meaning it was usually to your *advantage* to be a man, and usually to your *disadvantage* to be a woman. That was especially true when it came to marriage and divorce. In general, a husband had the legal ability to terminate his marriage, and a wife didn't. Which is why this question is asked in the specific, *gendered* way that it is: "is it lawful for a *man* to divorce his *wife*?"

You also need to know that there was a **debate raging** in the first century about what constituted *legitimate* grounds for divorce among *God's* people. One camp insisted that the only justified reason was *adultery*: marital unfaithfulness in the relationship. The other camp insisted that there were a *multitude* of legitimate reasons for divorce. **One rabbi in this camp said that if a wife did so much as burn her husband's dinner, he could divorce her over it.<sup>1</sup> You will be surprised to find out he was not, in fact, married. Shocker, I know—he sounds like a real catch.** But there was a lot of back and forth between these two perspectives. And the Pharisees, apparently, **want Jesus to weigh in** on this debate. Or perhaps more accurately, they want to *trap* Jesus into *participating* in the debate, so they can discredit him.

Let's see **how he responds**, v. 4:

[4] "Haven't you **read**," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' [5] 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'? [6] So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what **God has joined together, let no one separate.**"

Jesus starts his response by asking the Pharisees **if they've read the bible** of their day. The reason that's funny is because the Pharisees were self-proclaimed *experts* in the bible. They likely had the first five books of it *memorized*. **So Jesus asking them this**

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<sup>1</sup> From *The Williamson Davidson Talmud*, Gittin 90a. Read it [here](#).

question would be kind of like one of us going up to a tenured philosophy professor at UT and saying, “have you even *heard* of Aristotle?” Pretty insulting thing to say. But then, to make it even *more* insulting, he asks them if they’ve read two passages from essentially *page one* of their bibles. This is one reason the Pharisees did not like Jesus.

But the passages he references are specifically from **Genesis chapters 1 and 2.**<sup>2</sup> They are, without a doubt, the **most foundational passages** in the Scriptures for talking about marriage. But before we talk about what those passages say, I want to make sure we see **why Jesus brings them up**. The Pharisees ask him a question about *divorce*, and *he* responds with a theology of *marriage*. Do you see what he’s doing? Jesus is saying **“before we can talk about *divorce*, we have to have a conversation about *marriage*. If you don’t understand what marriage *is* and what it’s *for*, there’s no way you’re going to know what does and doesn’t constitute grounds for *ending* a marriage. We have to start *there*.”** Jesus wants to *reset* the Pharisees on an understanding of what marriage *is* and is *for*.

Now, **I would argue that we**—in the 21st century—could *also* benefit from a reset on what marriage is. If I were to sum up in a word what most people, outside *and inside* the church, think marriage is for, it would be this: **happiness**. A majority of people believe marriage is about *happiness*. Now, maybe that happiness comes in the form of emotional or physical intimacy. Maybe it comes in the form of financial stability that comes from *being* married. Maybe it’s the ability to start a *family*. Maybe it’s just the happiness that comes from not feeling *alone*. Maybe it’s some combination of those things. But the perspective I hear communicated more than any other is that marriage is an arrangement by which we obtain lifelong *happiness* in the form of a spouse.

Now, **I want to be clear here: in no way** am I saying that it’s *wrong* to want happiness out of your marriage. Marriage can, and *should* make you happy at times. Sometimes, *tremendously* happy. But I am saying that it’s wrong to think that that is the purpose of marriage. It is wrong to think that’s *the thing* God created marriage to accomplish. And if you go into marriage thinking that it *is*, I’m telling you that you are setting yourself up to be perpetually frustrated and disappointed. Because marriage *will* make you happy, but that’s not what marriage is *about*. That’s not its purpose. It’s a *by-product*.

So **what is its purpose?** That’s what verses 5 and 6 are about. The big idea there is that marriage is about a “man leaving his father and mother, and being *united* to his wife.” That word “united” there comes from the Greek word meaning “*glue*.” Marriage is when a man leaves his family of origin, at least figuratively, and *adheres* himself to his wife. That

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<sup>2</sup> Specifically, Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:24.

idea is reinforced by the language of “two” becoming “one flesh.” **Marriage is when two separate people come together as one new entity.** And doing that requires a certain level of *commitment*. A certain level of *selflessness*. It requires, on some level, a voluntary loss of some amount of *autonomy*, in order to join your *life* to another human being.

**But the Scriptures teach that when we do that, marriage becomes one particular way that we put on display to each other, and to the world, what God is like.<sup>3</sup>** Marriage is a means by which men and women image God to the world around them. So **the purpose of marriage is so much deeper, and so much more profound, than happiness. The purpose of marriage is the kingdom of God. It's about putting that on display.** So, Jesus says, if marriage is about God bringing people together for *that purpose*, then “what God joins together,” we shouldn't be eager to *separate*. Which *is* an answer to the Pharisees' question...*kind of*. But they have a *retort* for it. Pick it back up with me in v. 7:

[7] **“Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”**

So the Pharisees **think they have Jesus** right where they want him. “If what you're saying is true,” they say, “then why did Moses (in the Old Testament) *command* men to give their wife a certificate of divorce?” They think they've finally exposed Jesus as contradicting the Hebrew Scriptures. *Checkmate, Jesus*. But as is *often* the case with legalistic bible folks, the verse they're citing for their argument doesn't *quite* do what they want it to do. Let me show you. **Look on the screen** with me at the passage in question, **Deuteronomy 24**.

*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...*

...and then the passage goes on. But we **don't actually have to go any further**, because we've already seen the most important part. The most important part to understanding the passage, *and* the part the Pharisees *missed*. It's actually the *first word in* the passage: **the word “if.”** “*If,*” I would argue, is a massively important word. Let me illustrate what I mean. **Let's imagine I say the following sentence to my son:** “Whit, if you knock down your sister while y'all are playing together, you *must* go and check on her, to make sure she's okay.” Now, is that the same thing as saying that I *really hope* Whit knocks

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<sup>3</sup> On this topic, see also Paul's elaboration on Genesis 2 in Ephesians 5:31-33.

over his sister? Am I expressing a *desire* that he would regularly harm his sister in the course of day-to-day life? *No*. I'm simply *acknowledging* that we live in a world where, unfortunately, he may occasionally knock her over. And I'm insisting that—given that we live in that world—we look for ways to minimize the damage that our actions cause.

Okay, **that's actually not far** from what's going on with this verse from Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy 24 was not written for the purpose of *telling anyone* to divorce their wife. It was written simply to acknowledge that they lived in a world where divorces happen. And *given* that reality, to try *minimize* the *damage* that those divorces have on people—namely the wife who is being divorced. Which is exactly what Jesus means in v. 8:

**[8] Jesus replied, “Moses *permitted* [not commanded, Jesus says. *Permitted. Moses permitted*] you to divorce your wives because your *hearts were hard*. But it was *not* this way from the beginning.**

Jesus says **“Moses didn't *command*** you to do *any* of this. Moses *acknowledged* that you *would* (because of your “hard hearts”), and then gave you instructions on how to minimize the negative *impact* it would have.” *But*, Jesus says, “it was *not* that way from the beginning.” That's not how God designed marriage to work in Genesis 1 and 2. To put that a slightly different way, **divorce is never God's plan A**. And I don't think I really have to tell *anyone* that—especially anyone who has been *through* a divorce, or had someone close to them go through one. I think we're all on the same page there: divorce is never the *optimal* plan for two people.

**Divorce exists because of the brokenness** of the world that we live in. “Somewhere in each relationship that experiences divorce, something has gone wrong that *shouldn't* have.”<sup>4</sup> Divorce exists because of the reality of sin, and the reality that sin can sometimes get really, really ugly—especially in the context of a marriage. And **sometimes, when other options have been *exhausted*, divorce becomes the only remaining way to minimize the damage sin has on the people involved. Divorce is never the best plan, but sometimes it is the only plan left**. And that is precisely why the Scriptures, and Jesus himself, speak so soberly about it.

And with that unpacked, Jesus **gives his direct answer** to the Pharisees' question, v. 9:

**[9] I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”**

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<sup>4</sup> Wilkins, Michael J.. The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew (pp. 643-644). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

So let's **unpack what Jesus says** here. He says that any man who divorces his wife—except in the case of his wife being unfaithful to him—and then remarries, commits adultery when he remarries. Remember: Jesus' *view* on marriage is straight out of Genesis: a man *adhering* himself to his wife, and them becoming one flesh. Which means that any *tearing apart* that bond simply for the purpose of marrying someone else is wrong. And just doing the paperwork to make it official through a divorce doesn't make it *right*. It's still functionally *adultery*, Jesus says. Ending your marriage for frivolous reasons—just because you'd rather be married to someone else—is a sin against God and against your spouse.

Now, **at times, Christians and churches** have taken this one teaching from Jesus, and treated it as if it is an all-encompassing *theology* of divorce and remarriage. As if *this one verse* is all we need to judge the merit of every divorce and every remarriage out there. The *problem* with that, of course, is that this *isn't* the only passage about divorce and remarriage in the bible. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul seems to give at least *one more* reason for divorce,<sup>5</sup> if not multiple reasons. So the way I see it, that leaves us with two options: either Paul contradicts *Jesus* (which creates much *bigger* problems), or Paul and Jesus are each speaking to something *specific* in what they say—things that shape *what* they say and *how* they say it. To me, that option (the second one) makes way more sense.

**Jesus was speaking specifically** to a type of dismissive, cavalier, and often chauvinist attitude towards marriage. He's speaking to situations where men saw themselves as possessing all the decision-making power in marriage and divorce. A type of posture that made them the sole determiners of whether or not a marriage stayed intact. And so *Jesus*, speaking directly to that posture, says “absolutely not.” **Marriage is not a casual relationship to be entered into lightly and to opt out of when you feel so inclined. It is a lifelong, mutual partnership between two image bearers of God that should only be terminated when other options have been exhausted.** That's Jesus' view of marriage.

So, what would all of this **have to say to us?** Well, I think a few things, depending on the specifics of the situation. **First, the most obvious application: if you are a man (or a woman) here today who just wants a way out of your marriage, because you'd rather be with someone else—not because a legitimate, marriage-ending sort of wrong has occurred—I would advise you to heed Jesus' warning here. Just wanting out of a marriage, according to Jesus, is not a sufficient reason for a divorce. Not being happy or fully satisfied in your marriage is not a sufficient reason for divorce. And more than that,**

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<sup>5</sup> See specifically 1 Corinthians 7:15-16.

Jesus considers it *adultery* for a follower of Jesus to take that approach to their marriage. That is approaching marriage in that way that actually fails to understand what marriage *is* at its core.

Second, if you're here today, and **your spouse has been unfaithful** to *you*—and especially if they show no signs of being genuinely repentant over it, Jesus seems to be saying here that in that scenario, divorce *is* an option. In that instance, your *spouse* is the one breaking the bond of marriage, and a realistic option *is* to end the marriage. Now, notice that *even then*, Jesus doesn't say that you *should* get a divorce when that happens. He simply says it isn't inherently *sinful* to do so. **Let's remember that there is an entire book of the bible—the book of Hosea—where God calls a man to pursue his wife while she is serially unfaithful to him. And God puts it forward as a metaphor for *his* relationship with his *people*, who are also serially unfaithful to God. So let's not *automatically* rule that out.** But if having divorce on the table as an *option* is *helpful* to you, Jesus does seem to allow for that as a possibility.

Third, let's say you're here this morning and **you've been through a divorce** already, but you **didn't want out** of your marriage at all. In fact, you would've much preferred to *stay* married. But your *partner* felt differently. And *because* they felt differently, they either *pursued* a divorce against your wishes, or they left *you* with no option *but* a divorce. They continually *cheated* on you. They *abandoned* you. They told you they didn't *want* to be married anymore. *Or*, they made your marriage such a physically dangerous place to be that you couldn't safely stay *in* it, even though you *wanted* to. If that's the hand you were dealt: I don't think that Jesus' pointed response to the Pharisees here is aimed at you. Jesus does not look at *you*, and call *you* an adulterer. In fact, there are times in the bible when Jesus comes across people who *are* adulterers, and *still* doesn't call them *adulterers*.<sup>6</sup> **Because when people have been chewed up and spit out by others, Jesus doesn't condemn them; he brings hope and he brings healing and he brings restoration.**

Now finally, let's say you were **the partner who pursued a divorce** for less-than-good reasons in the past. Let's say you got a divorce simply because you didn't want to be married to the other person any longer. But then, later on, through a teaching like this or through reading the Scriptures on your own, the Holy Spirit brings to your attention that that was the wrong way to go about it. Let's say you feel convicted and even *grieved* that you went through with that divorce, and you're realizing that according to Jesus in this passage, getting remarried after that would make you guilty of *adultery*.

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<sup>6</sup> See specifically John 4:4-26 and John 8:1-11.

If that's you—and especially if you feel a great deal of shame or guilt over it—I would just **remind you** of the message at the very core of our faith: **the gospel**. There's a passage in 1 Corinthians<sup>7</sup> where Paul is *reminding* a church of the gospel. And in doing so, he gives a very long list of people who *will not inherit* the kingdom of God. And included in that list are “the sexually immoral” and “adulterers.” But after giving that list he says to the Corinthians, he turns to them and says “...and such *were* some of *you*.” Past tense. “*But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified* in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

In other words: **even if you did the thing** in regards to divorce that Jesus **specifically says not to do, that does not put you beyond the washing, saving, justifying work of the cross and resurrection**. *Listen*: divorce isn't the unpardonable sin. I *get* that sometimes the Church has treated it like it *is*, but it's not. A divorce—even an ill-advised and poorly motivated one—does not put you beyond the redemptive work of Jesus. So the hope for *all* of us—married, single, divorcées, divorcers, and anyone else—is the man hanging on a cross, who says your sin is done, paid for, and forgiven. *Period*. So when we feel shame, *that's* where we go; *that's* what we cling to. Such *were* some of us—but we've been washed, justified and sanctified by Jesus.

So **that's my attempt** to speak to a number of different scenarios with truth from the Scriptures. Now, even with all of *that*: I'm fully aware that I likely haven't answered every single question regarding marriage, divorce and remarriage. *Especially* if that's part of your story, or someone in your LifeGroup, it's possible that in what I've said, I might have even raised *more* questions on the topic. That's understandable. So here's what we're going to do. This week, we're going to put out a **podcast** where we go into a little more detail on everything the bible teaches on those topics, and even try to speak to some specific situations and questions that this passage doesn't really go into. So if that's something that would be helpful for you, be looking for it on our website and any of our podcast platforms. Should be up first thing tomorrow morning.

But **for the last bit of our time** *this* morning, I want to keep moving and finish out this passage. Because *after* Jesus unpacks all of that regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage, the **disciples have some thoughts**. Take a look with me in v. 10:

**[10] The disciples said to him, “If *this* is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better *not* to marry.”**

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<sup>7</sup> This refers to 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.



So the disciples hear Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce and **respond a little incredulously**. "Uh...if that's how divorce and remarriage works, Jesus, then I'd rather stay single. If I can't divorce my wife for any reason I want, I don't want to get married!" **Oops—they said the quiet part out loud**. The disciples, apparently, have a bit of an aversion to *commitment*. They're ready to avoid marriage altogether if marriage means being potentially stuck in a relationship they don't like.

But **before we cast too much judgment** on the disciples for that attitude, let's look in the mirror for a second. **Any amount of research will tell you that marriage rates in the U.S. are currently at an all time low, and are forecasted to continue dropping indefinitely**. People are *resisting* getting married until much later in life, opting for things like cohabitation instead. And more and more, are choosing not to get married at *all*.<sup>8</sup> And if you just do a broad survey of the reasons people *give* for not *pursuing* marriage, guess what's at the very top of the list: an aversion to *commitment*. People don't want to be *stuck* in a marriage they don't *like*, so they'd rather just not enter *into* one in the first place. We have largely responded in line with the *disciples'* sentiment: 'if this is the case with marriage, it's better not to marry.'

So **what is Jesus' take** on this response from the disciples? Look with me back in v. 11:

*[11] Jesus replied, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. In other words, 'you're right, disciples: some people shouldn't get married. But not for the reason you're thinking. Not simply to avoid commitment.' For a different reason. Jesus is about to give us a better reason. But he has to do it in a roundabout way. Verse 12: [12] 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."*

So here's what's happening. The disciples were first century Jewish men, which meant they didn't really have a *category* in their minds for deliberate, chosen, life-long singleness. Virtually every man of marrying age in their society was married. **Except, that is, for eunuchs**. *Eunuchs*, if you're unfamiliar, were essentially male bodyguards to royal women. If a king had a wife (or more often, *multiple wives*), he would appoint men to protect her. But to ensure that those men could be *trusted* around his *wife*, the king would have them *castrated*. As bizarre as that sounds to us, it was actually a very common practice back in the day. That's what a *eunuch* was. So Jesus uses this *existing* category of a *eunuch*, to teach his disciples about deliberate, chosen *singleness*.

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<sup>8</sup> [This article](#) does a good job summarizing much of the data.

He says some eunuchs were “made that way by others” (i.e. that very *unfortunate* scenario we just described), some eunuchs were “born that way,” *and*—this part is his point—**there are those who choose to *live like* eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom.** Translation: **there are people who will choose life-long, celibate, singleness for the purpose of displaying and furthering the kingdom of God.** People who will opt to go without marriage and sexual intimacy for *God’s* purposes. Jesus creates a category in the disciples’ minds for God-honoring, God-glorifying, deliberate *singleness*.

So **notice the contrast** between *Jesus’* attitude towards marriage and singleness, and the *world’s* attitudes towards those two things. Some in *our world* would say that everyone should be *married*, because *marriage* is the best way to be *happy*. And then *others* in our world would say *don’t* get married, because then you’re tied down and trapped in a relationship that you may or may not like. Our world says “be *married* so you can be *happy*,” or “be *single* so you can be *free*.” But **Jesus** says those are **extremely shallow reasons** for marriage *and* for singleness. In Jesus’ view, marriage *and* singleness are *both* honorable ways to live for the kingdom of God.

For a follower of Jesus, *marriage* means choosing to go without total *freedom* and *autonomy* for the purpose of the kingdom. And *singleness* means choosing to go without marital and sexual *intimacy* for the purpose of the kingdom. **There are ways that a *married* person can put God on display that a *single* person can’t, and there are ways that a *single* person can put God on display that a *married* person can’t.**<sup>9</sup> So the kingdom of God *needs both*. Jesus sees both marriage *and* singleness as ways of displaying the kingdom the world around you. So Jesus corrects the “marriage as happiness” narrative, *and* the “singleness as freedom” narrative, in one fell swoop. And resets everyone on *kingdom* purposes.

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So that’s our passage. Now, I don’t know **how all of this hits you** today. I can tell you **where it hits me**. It convicts me, as a married person, about how much of my frustration in *my* marriage is because I’m looking *to* marriage to provide me with *happiness*. Rather than seeing it as a means to put God on display. When I grow *angry* or *resentful* at Ana, I think I need to ask myself: am I angry because she’s legitimately doing something wrong, worthy of anger? Or am I angry primarily because her actions are making me less than optimally happy? And in those moments I need to *remember*: the purpose of marriage isn’t my *happiness*; the purpose of marriage is to hold fast to my wife, and put on display to the world what God is like. Through the successes and the failures. Through the joys and the frustrations: *that* is the purpose of marriage.

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<sup>9</sup> We did a teaching last year on singleness where we unpacked all of this further. You can [find it here](#).

If you're **single and want to be married**, I think it's worth asking yourself: *why* do I want to be married? Do I want to be married because it's an opportunity to put God on display *through* marriage? Or do I primarily want to be married because I think it will deliver me more *happiness* than I currently have? If it's the latter, I would just ask you if you might be setting yourself up for frustration by thinking that's what marriage is. Maybe there's an opportunity there to let the Spirit of God mold and shape your view of marriage so that you're not looking to it only for something it actually wasn't designed for. And maybe that even helps you understand what marriage is at its core *before* entering into it.

If you're **single and don't want to be married**, still for you, the question is *why*? Is it because that's how you feel like you can best put God on display to the world? Or is it just because you desire *autonomy* above all else? Is it because you can't imagine *yielding* aspects of your life to another person? Is it possible that by having an *aversion* to marriage, you're actually missing out on a *sanctifying* work God wants to do in you. Maybe there's room *there* for the Spirit to work.

And then finally, if your **story has been at all impacted by divorce or remarriage**: I hope you hear Jesus' heart in everything he has said on the topic. He's not intending to condemn, he's not intending to shame—he's intending to protect and instruct. He's trying to lead us into a deeper understanding of what marriage *is*, and what it's *for*. And that's what's best for all of us, regardless of our marital status.

So finally, **for all of us**: I hope we get that our acceptance before God does not come from a perfect *understanding* or attitude *towards* singleness, marriage, divorce, or remarriage; our standing with God comes from knowing and following Jesus. And allowing him to wash, sanctify, and justify all of us. Allowing him to cleanse us of anything that isn't like *him*. And lead us into who he designed us to be. And we know his grace will be enough to sustain us through any season, any difficulty, any hardship, and any frustrations that we have in the meantime.

With that said, let's pray.