

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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THOSE TO WHOM IT HAS BEEN GIVEN

Matthew 19:10-12

In OT times, the possibility of remaining single was not a recognized option. Marriage was instituted by God and therefore it was regarded in the Jewish society as a religious duty and part of the normal life. The propagation of the family was another major reason to get married. Thus marriage was almost universal, and celibacy was considered abnormal.

In the NT, we find a somewhat different attitude toward the state of celibacy. Jesus' teaching on that subject is recorded in Matthew 19:10-12. Let's look at this passage. We will read from v. 9.

Matthew 19:9. "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."

10 The disciples said to Him, "If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry."

11 But He said to them, "Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given."

12 "For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this, let him accept it."

No escape

After hearing from Jesus that marriage cannot be dissolved except on the grounds of adultery, the disciples said, *If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry.*

Their thinking was probably this. 'If the woman that I married turns out to be a pain in the neck, how am I ever going to get rid of her? I can't imagine myself living with a person like that for the rest of my life!'

Of course, they did not think of what the wife might have to endure because of her husband. At that moment, they were only thinking of themselves and they were concerned about being in an unhappy marriage from which they could not escape. 'My wife is an unbearable person but she doesn't do things like adultery. How am I going to survive if I cannot divorce her?' The very thought of being stuck with such a person led them to feel that it may be safer not to get married at all.

It is not clear whether this sentence was made in the presence of the Pharisees. But we can be sure that they would have rejoiced at the disciples' comment. These Pharisees, remember, were trying to test Jesus (v. 3). And here is a situation that seems to put Jesus in hot water. If Jesus agreed with His

disciples, He would be contradicting the OT teaching concerning the blessedness of marriage (Genesis 2:18). On the other, if He did not endorse their conclusion, He would have to revise his teaching on divorce and adopt a less radical position.

Eunuchs

Jesus was a master at dealing with apparent dilemmas. Here we get the impression that He had to either agree or disagree with His disciples. But He did neither. He said, *Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given.* Then He went on to list three categories of men who do not get married, three types of eunuchs. Eunuchs, as you know, are males whose reproductive organs are defective or absent. The three categories are as follows.

Firstly, there are people who are born eunuchs. They don't get married by reason of birth defect.

Secondly, there are people who are made eunuchs, i.e., they have been castrated.

And thirdly, there are people who are eunuchs in the spiritual sense. They remain single in order to devote themselves more fully to the work of the kingdom of God.

Eunuchs were often found in the quarters of royal households where they were used domestically and politically. They could be bodyguards, domestics, palace officials, statemen or even military generals. Kings liked to use eunuchs because they were not a threat to their wives and their daughters, and they could expect single-hearted loyalty from them since there were no family ties to distract them.

The Bible has strong words about eunuchs. In Deuteronomy 23:1, we are told that eunuchs could not enter the assembly of God's people. *He whose testicles are crushed or whose male member is cut off shall not enter the assembly of the Lord.* In other words, eunuchs were excluded from public worship. So strong was the rejection of this idea of castration that Leviticus 22:24 tells us that an animal whose reproductive organ is damaged or, for some reason, removed could not be offered as a sacrifice to God. It would not be accepted. *Any animal which has its testicles bruised or crushed or torn or cut, you shall not offer to the Lord or sacrifice within your land.*

It has been given

I would like to draw your attention to Jesus' declaration in v. 11. He said, *But only those to whom it has been given.* Not everyone can remain single, like the eunuchs, except those to whom it has been given. This is what Jesus seems to indicate.

Look carefully at the word 'given' and let me ask you this question. To whom has it been given? Has it been given to you? Are you able to remain single for the sake of the kingdom of God? How do you know? Do you feel that it has been given to you because you have no struggle to remain single? 'It is easy for me to be single because I have no desire for marriage. And because I don't feel the need to have a married life, I can say that it is given to me to remain single.' Is this really the meaning of the word 'given'?

You see, this passage deals with our perception of God's will for us. This is a very important and practical subject because it determines every aspect of the way we are going to process a decision and the way we are going to act.

It is my observation that many Christians have a deterministic view of God's will. What do I mean by a 'deterministic view' of the will of God? Let's take this example. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians

1:1, *Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God...* We have a deterministic view of the will of God when we say that Paul was an apostle because God made it so that Paul could not be anything but an apostle. He was the kind of person who must be an apostle. If he tried to go anywhere else, he would not be able to turn around because God has determined his direction. God has determined what Paul would be.

And we have the impression here in Matthew 19:11 that Jesus confirms this view. When the Lord says, 'Not all men can receive this situation but only those to whom it is given to be single,' that is a pretty deterministic statement, isn't it? God has determined certain people to be single and the rest, to be married. Moreover, with regard to those who were born eunuchs and those have been made eunuchs, we cannot say that they had any choice. In that sense, their state of celibacy has been determined. Is that a correct conclusion?

People who have a deterministic view of God's will believe that God has an ideal and detailed life uniquely designed for each person and that individual plan must be discovered. Once discovered, it becomes the basis for making decision. The way they discern the will of God for their life is based on some inward impressions that seem to be leading to a specific course of action, on a sense of peace when that decision is considered, and on external signs pointing in the same direction. The agreement of those 'signs' gives them a strong conviction that they are following God's will.

Well, it is hard for me to agree with this understanding of the will of God. If we stick to the subject of marriage, I don't think that God determines that a particular person is to remain single and another to marry. Just look at our passage in v. 12. If the word 'given' means 'determined,' then we have a problem with the last words in v. 12. Jesus says, *He who is able to accept this, let him accept it.* 'He who is able to remain single, let him do it.' If it has already been determined, it is difficult to give a meaning to Jesus' words, *He who is able to accept this.* To be able to receive something puts the responsibility on the individual and implies that he has the freedom to choose. There is really no point talking about the ability to accept something if everything has already been decided.

It is true that the condition of the first two categories of eunuchs was determined. They were born eunuchs or they were made eunuchs. Their celibacy was not a matter of choice. It was imposed on them. But notice this. It was determined, yes, but not by God. Concerning the second category, Jesus specifically said, 'Made eunuchs by men.' Not by God. God is not responsible for their condition. It is men who made them eunuchs. We can say the same thing for the first category. God is not responsible for those who are born with defective reproductive organs. There is a difference between God's intention and the consequences of sin. A congenital abnormality does not imply that it has been determined by God. If such a thing exists, it is because sin has entered into our world and caused all kinds of problems to arise. And congenital defects are part of those problems. It is not that God purposely made man's body to be defective.

Paul, the bachelor

The main passage in the Bible on singleness is found in 1Corinthians 7 where the apostle Paul developed the subject in detail. 1Corinthians 7. We will read the first seven verses.

1 Corinthians 7:1. Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman.

2 But because of immoralities, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband.

3 Let the husband fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband.

4 The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.

5 Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again lest Satan tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

6 *But this I say by way of concession, not of command.*

7 *Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that.*

Paul says in the first verse, *It is good for a man not to touch a woman.* 'To touch a woman' means to have sexual intercourse (ESV). Certain translations (NIV, GWN) have the statement, *It is good for a man not to marry.* However, Paul recognizes that those who are single are particularly vulnerable to sexual temptation. For that reason, he says that each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband (v. 2).

If you read the rest of chapter 7, you will see that at no point in this chapter does Paul affirm that the marriage decision is determined by God. It is regulated by the will of God, yes, but not determined by it. I think it is important to see the difference. It is regulated in the sense that the commands of God intervene in certain aspects of the decision. The first defines the acceptable group from which a mate may be chosen: a believer can only marry another believer. This is clearly stated in v. 39 of this same chapter. *A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, **only in the Lord.*** That is to say, only a Christian. Obviously, such a requirement is not restricted just to Christian widows. It applies to all Christians. The second aspect deals with the obligations of those who choose to marry. These obligations prohibit intimate relations outside of marriage (v. 2) and sexual fraud within marriage (vv. 3-5). Once the marriage is in force, they must be obeyed.

Marriage: free to choose

So the decision to marry or to remain single is regulated but not determined by God's will. God does not decide for us. We have the freedom to choose. The following verses in chapter 7 speak about that freedom.

- *1 Corinthians 7:25: Now concerning virgins I have **no command of the Lord...***
- *1 Corinthians 7:28: But if you should marry, you **have not sinned**; and if a virgin should marry, she **has not sinned.***
- *1 Corinthians 7:36: But if any man thinks that he is acting unbecomingly toward his virgin daughter, if she should be of full age, and if it must be so, **let him do what he wishes, he does not sin; let her marry.***
- *1 Corinthians 7:39: A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, **she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.***

'I have no command of the Lord'; 'if you should marry, you have not sinned'; 'let him do what he wishes'; 'she is free to be married.' All those verses contain expressions of freedom of decision.

On what basis, then, should a person make that decision? In Paul's mind, the choice of celibacy or marriage is based upon a good 'spiritual judgment.' His procedure is to enumerate the pros and cons that characterize both states. It is the responsibility of the believer to weigh those factors and then to choose the state which, in his judgment, will bring the greatest benefit to the kingdom of God as well as to himself.

Since Paul prefers to be single (v. 7), his stress is on the value of singleness. Here are his reasons:

- to avoid needless troubles (7:28)
- to make better use of limited time (7:29-31)
- to be free from concern (7:32)
- to be able to give undistracted attention to the things of the Lord (7:32)

What about marriage? There are some real values to marriage that not only make it a good option, but for many, the more preferable one. Since Paul was responding to a letter from the Corinthians concerning sexual immorality, he emphasized the fact that sexual sin is greatly reduced by the state of marriage (7:2-5). Contentment with a condition of celibacy requires a 'gift' from God which only certain people possess (7:7). Without that gift, a person who tries to serve God as a single man is likely to be distracted by sexual enticements.

So, how should one decide the issue of marriage? First, know the word of God. Every aspect of your life should be regulated by God's word. Seek the counsel of mature Christians to know what are the factors involved in marriage. Weigh all those factors, including your own make up. Taking into account your personal inclination is part of the equation. Pray about it. Then use your judgment to make a wise decision. For some, singleness is better than marriage. For others, the natural state of marriage is better.

You see that it is not a question of trying to find the decision that God has already made for us. The fact that it is given does not mean that it is determined. We are free to choose. But understand that with this freedom comes the responsibility to make wise decisions, decisions that will best enable us to obey the Scriptures.

In conclusion, let's return to Matthew 19:10-12. Jesus taught that singleness and marriage are both acceptable to God. God does not determine them. This means that marriage is not commanded of anyone, neither is abstention from marriage, even for the sake of the kingdom of God. For some, as the disciples expressed, 'it is better not to marry.' But others could find celibacy too hard to handle. The ability to function effectively as a single person had not been given to them. For these people, marriage would be preferable to singleness.