

# Ancient Marriage and Modern Questions

*A sermon on Luke 20:27-38 by Nathan Nettleton, 10 November 2019*

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## Message

The biblical pictures of marriage reflect our struggle to live our way into the vulnerable intimacy and relational fruitfulness that God wants for us and with us.

## Sermon

In tonight's gospel reading, we heard a group of religious leaders asking Jesus a question about marriage, and so I'm going to talk about marriage tonight. But I need to admit up front that I'm faking it a bit here. Because while the question put to Jesus uses marriage to make a point, both question and answer are really about resurrection. There were two prevalent views of life after death in Jesus's day and this story is part of the debate between the two. The modern view that you live on as a disembodied spirit after your body dies was not one of the two. It wasn't even on the radar. One view was that the only way you live on is through your children, hence the connection to marriage and child-rearing. The other, which Jesus defends, is that there will be a day when all the dead are raised back to life.

If I was faithfully preaching the message of our gospel reading, this would be a sermon about resurrection, not marriage. So I'm really just taking a minor part of the reading and using it as a leaping off point, but with that confession out of the way, I'm going to go right on doing exactly that.

In the recent heated debates over the legalising of same-sex marriage, the Christians who opposed it spent a lot of time talking about "the biblical view of marriage". And although there are only a handful of passages where Jesus talks about marriage at all, I certainly never heard this one being raised. No surprise there, because I don't know of any Christians trying to protect or revive this particular biblical view of marriage.

The question put to Jesus starts with this: "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother."

Now it would be very easy for me to just stand up here and use this to make fun of those who demand that we return to the biblical pattern of marriage, and laugh about how none of them seem to be advocating compulsory marriages between men and their widowed sisters-in-law, but that would be a cheap shot at an easy target.

The more important questions are "what was this marriage practice?" and "what can we usefully learn from it as we seek to piece together the biblical views of marriage and make sensible use of them as we address the real life questions facing both married and unmarried people in our very different modern world?"

Actually, there are numerous marriage practices described in the Bible which are not at all part of what most Christian family values advocates are wanting to see recovered. Many of the marriages described in the Bible were arranged marriages, where you do not choose your own marriage partner, but accept the choice made for you by your family. This is still the

normal practice in much of today's world, and often with considerable success, but it doesn't appeal to most of us who have grown up in the modern west.

Many marriages in the Bible were between close relatives. Some parts of the Bible express a vehement opposition to interracial marriage that sounds racist and even fascist to our ears. Many of the biblical heroes had multiple wives, and their polygamy is mostly not criticised in the Bible. And many of the stories and laws about marriage in the Bible are clearly much more concerned with the passing on of a man's name and property than they are with the happiness, fulfilment or even safety of his wife.

That's where this story comes in. The biblical marriage law that they are referring to when they say, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother," comes from Deuteronomy 25: 5–10. The practice goes by the name of *Levirate* marriage, a word that comes from the Latin word for brother-in-law. Its purpose is clearly stated: "the first son will be considered the son of the dead man, so that his family line will continue in Israel."

It is very easy to dismiss this as an expression of the extreme patriarchy of a bygone era, and that's true – it is all about protecting the passing on of the man's name and the man's property. It's true, but it may also be an over simplification, because the reality seems to have been more complex. There are only two stories in the Bible, other than this hypothetical one, that describe Levirate marriage happening. There is Tamar and Judah in Genesis 38, and Ruth and Boaz in the book of Ruth. In both cases, when a genealogy is later given for a descendant, it is not the dead man who is named as the father, but the actual biological father. So despite the stated aim of passing on the name of the dead man, it doesn't seem to have worked that way in practice.

It will have still functioned to keep the dead man's property in the family, but when put alongside other teachings about the care of widows, it seems that the practice was actually more concerned with ensuring the welfare of widowed women. In a very patriarchal society, very few women had the possibility of financially providing for themselves, and so they were dependent on the support of fathers, husbands or adult sons. In that context, this law sought to protect widowed women from being cast into destitution. As the Tamar and Judah story shows, the practice was not particularly popular with men, but it did serve to protect women.

Right back at the beginning of the Bible, in the Genesis creation stories, there is a vision of marriage based on the idea that it is not good for us to be alone, and we can see how this Levirate practice recognised just how important it was for a woman not to be alone in the hyper-patriarchal world of the ancient near east. Even for men it was almost impossible to do the labour required to make a living without a wider family of labourers. It was not good to be alone if you wanted to survive.

But we live in a very different world where it is quite possible for men and women to live independently and survive quite well. The Genesis image of not being good to be alone is not therefore a condemnation of those who remain single, whether by choice or by lack of opportunity.

Indeed, contrary to the near idolatry of marriage in many of today's churches, both Jesus and the Apostle Paul recommended voluntary singleness as the ideal for Christian disciples. Those

who do not have to factor responsibilities to spouse and children into their planning have a much greater freedom to drop everything and give their all for the sake of the kingdom. There are some shining examples of that truth right here in this congregation, and we'd be struggling if we lost the disproportionately generous contributions that they make to our common life. So any church that makes single people feel like they haven't yet made it has very little claim to taking the biblical teachings on marriage seriously. Happy voluntary singleness should be celebrated, honoured and supported.

But as both Jesus and Paul concede, happy voluntary singleness is not an option for everyone. For many, the idea that it is not good to be alone is a profound existential reality, a deep psychological and physical need. The creation accounts in Genesis present this with an equality that is remarkable for its day. The needs of both are seen as important, and they are given to one another to meet this deep need for togetherness.

The Apostle Paul too expresses this with equality, but he puts it in quite blunt earthy terms. After advocating the benefits of singleness, he says that nevertheless, it is better to marry than to burn with unrequited need (1 Corinthians 7:9). He makes it sound very much like second best, but he is clear that if physical and emotional needs for togetherness are going to burn you up otherwise, then it is not good to be alone and you'd best marry.

So both the often ignored Levirate marriage laws and the often quoted vision of marriage in the Genesis creation stories take quite seriously the reality that even in a world where singleness is no longer financially dangerous, many many people still find that for them it is not good to be sexually alone. And when we acknowledge that as a foundational biblical teaching, it gives us a different starting point for tackling some of the questions we face about marriage and sexuality in today's world.

Let me give two examples before I close. A less high profile one before I get to the obvious one. One of the questions that a lot of Christian moralisers have been unwilling to discuss is the situation of people who live with significant disabilities that make it unlikely that they will find marriage partners. Most of them still experience sexual need and desire. Surely the principle that it is not good to be burning alone still applies, but Paul's recommendation of marrying remains out of reach.

There are quite a lot of sex-workers who provide their services in a caring and respectful way to such clients. Obviously the moralisers are not going to support that, and I don't feel entirely comfortable about it either, but my comfort is neither the question nor the answer. Until we have a better answer to the real life need for sexual intimacy, then we have got absolutely no place judging anyone else for their answers.

The more obvious, although probably no more important question is the question of same-sex marriage. The opponents focus all their attention on the way the Genesis stories put forward only a pairing of male and female as the answer to this need for togetherness. But those stories were not addressing the question of who can marry. They were addressing the question of how we were going to multiply and fill the earth. Apart from anything else, we have now so thoroughly filled the earth that you could argue that the more important question now is how we are going to stop multiplying and over-filling the earth.

But seriously, if we start from the biblical recognition of it being better to marry than burn, we will approach the question very differently. Even if you firmly believe that same-sex love-making always falls short of the will of God, you still need to grapple with this biblical teaching that says that placing sexual expression within committed covenant relationships is better than letting sexual need and frustration burn out of control with all the problems that that can cause.

If, like me, you believe that God is happy to bless same-sex love-making, then the questions are still important, but no different than they are for those of us who are heterosexual. Paul doesn't actually say that it is better to have lots of sex than to burn; he says that it is better to marry than to burn. In an age of casual recreational hook-up sex, this is a significantly counter-cultural challenge. It is calling us to treat sex as something far more precious, as something that can only flourish at its ultimate best when protected by a covenant commitment to disciplined fidelity.

This is not necessarily a welcome viewpoint in either the gay community or the straight community. A gay activist (whose parents may be in this room!) once accused me of being a social conservative who was trying to foist a heteronormative definition of marriage on an unwilling gay community. I'm probably guilty as charged. I can accept changing the definition of marriage to being between two people, but if you remove the commitment to permanent sexual exclusivity from it, I think you are actually going backwards and turning marriage back into something that is essentially a contractual arrangement about property and legalities. As [one thinker put it](#), it makes marriage sound like little more than "a really good employee benefits plan".

You don't have to be a moralising conservative to see that the Bible is calling us to a higher view of marriage and sex than that. Read the erotic love poetry of the Song of Songs for a far richer and more exhilarating vision of a God-blessed passionate marriage. But this is not something that just happens. As unpopular as it might be in our instant gratification consumer society, the best that marriage can offer is only available to those who are willing to give it the commitment, discipline and hard work required.

Elite musicians and athletes have to be incredibly committed and disciplined to become the best. They'd be the first to tell you that just doing lots of it won't make you the best. Being the best lover is the same – it takes serious commitment and discipline, and the fruits of that are rich, but they're not quick. I'm not a hardline opponent of all sex before marriage, but I do believe that a healthy committed loving marriage creates the conditions in which sexual and emotional intimacy can go to another whole level.

Marriage certainly doesn't guarantee that. Just like most musicians and sports fans, most married couples settle for a tolerable mediocrity. With neither of them really willing to do the hard work of becoming the best, they stop calling the best out of each other, and marriage becomes a kind of negotiated truce. You don't challenge me, and I'll put up with you.

And that's not wrong. It ticks the boxes of better than being unhappily alone, and better than burning. It ticks the box of providing a safe and secure context for raising children. And as I acknowledged before with my example of severely disabled people, absolute best is not an option for everyone. No amount of commitment and discipline is ever going to make me an elite soccer player, and many many of us are too wounded, traumatised or afraid to ever be

able to venture into the sort of soul-baring intimacy and vulnerability that unlocks the deepest mysteries of passionate marriage. For many of us, just overcoming our fears enough to stay together and stay faithful and respectful and caring is an enormous achievement. That's no failure in the sight of God.

But for all of us, there is a call to keep moving, to stretch and grow and be gradually healed and deepen our capacity for love in all its aspects. Not many of us will ever achieve anything close to the depths of intimacy that would have been open to all if our world hadn't become so broken and corrupted and abusive. But that's no different from saying that we never taste the full depths of intimacy with God when we commune at this table. We taste only the first fruits, an enticing promise of something much more that lies still beyond our reach.

Even the best sex that any of us might taste in the best of marriages is just like that. Even if you reach the kind of love where you can gaze into each others eyes and feel like you are looking into the depths of one another's souls and fusing into one another as your bodies explode with ecstatic joy, you will still only be tasting the first fruits. In the fullness of the final harvest, we will find ourselves not only melting into one another, but together into God, but for that we'd have to return to the real question of our gospel reading, because that level of healing and wholeness will only be fulfilled on the other side of the resurrection.

For the coming of that day on this, we yearn and pray.