

**10** The 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 receive this saying, 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 men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.” - **Matthew 19:10-12 (ESV)**

I make it a regular practice to read church history. (1) This week I came across an account of Origenes Adamantius (185-254 A.D.). Much could be said about Origen's positive and negative contributions to the formulation of Christian doctrine, but I would like to draw attention to something tradition says Origen did as a youth. Apparently, sometime after beginning to study the Bible, Origen came across Matthew 19:12. Taking the passage literally, he castrated himself. It is said that later in life Origen disapproved of such an interpretation of the passage, which seems to be more in keeping with the allegorical leaning hermeneutic often associated with him. If Origen's youthful understanding and application of this verse was wrong, and it was, what was Jesus teaching in this verse?

In response to Jesus' teaching on divorce in Matthew 19:1-9, His disciples make the statement *“If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry”*. Having understood the earthly permanence of marriage Jesus taught from the creation narrative, the disciples reasoned that the prospects of finding one's self in a bad marriage without the option of a “no fault” divorce outweighed the potential benefits of marriage. We may expect Jesus to rebuke the disciples for this assertion, but the Savior affirms the disciples reasoning for *“those to whom it has been given”*. But, who are “those” and why is better for them not to marry?

They are the eunuchs. Jesus describes three categories of “eunuchs” in the passage. The first two are physical and providential (birth defect and mutilation at the hands of other men) while the last is spiritually metaphorical and volitional (conscious decision to remain unmarried). This last category of eunuch is spoken of by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:6-9:

*“Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.”*

The reason it is “better” for the eunuchs not to marry is that their condition benefits the kingdom. (2) Speaking of the last category of eunuch, Jesus says they have made the choice of celibacy *“for the sake of the kingdom of heaven”*. While singleness and marriage are both gifts from God, celibacy is “better” in the sense it provides a unique ministry advantage over married life. Paul writes in **1 Corinthians 7:32-35**:

**32** I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. **33** But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, **34** and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. **35** I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.

The eunuchs have or have chosen conditions that allow for a clear focus on the kingdom of heaven and holy living void of the worldly distractions marriage brings, namely pleasing one's spouse. The advantage of celibacy (and marriage) is determined by its contribution to the kingdom. (3)

So then, the supremacy of the kingdom of heaven is at the heart of Jesus' teaching on singleness and this is in keeping with the emphasis on the kingdom throughout the book of Matthew where Jesus speaks of the kingdom's great worth:

**44** *“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.* **45** *“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a*

merchant in search of fine pearls, **46** who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it. **Matthew 13:44-46 (ESV)**

and gives the command to seek it first:

**33** But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. **Matthew 6:33 (ESV)**

As believers we have been transferred from the power of darkness and brought under God's reign by the work of the Holy Spirit and through faith in Jesus who is now our King (Colossians 1:13). If we are to be good subjects, the kingdom should mean everything to us and we should do all things for the sake of it because of and in response to Christ's perfect life, sacrificial death and resurrection. But, does it and are we? Maybe you find yourself living more like the rich young man found at the end of Matthew 19 who values the things of the world over the kingdom.

These questions may be helpful to consider as we think about the supremacy of the kingdom in our lives: What do you value more than the kingdom? Do you do what you do and chose what you chose for the sake of the kingdom? More specifically, if you are single whether by your own desire or not, have you considered and utilized the advantages your condition (temporary or not) has for the kingdom? Have you taken into account these kingdom advantages as you contemplate whether or not to pursue marriage? If you are married, do you value your marriage over the kingdom? Do you see your status's connection to the kingdom of heaven? Are you striving to live in some respect like you are not married for the sake of the kingdom (see footnote) and what would this look like? What may you need to let go of to properly live for the sake of the kingdom?

Pastor Rich

(1) *I'm currently reading joyfully through the 2000 Years of Christ's Power series by Nick Needham, which I highly recommend.* <https://www.amazon.com/000-Years-Christ's-Power-Vol/dp/1781917787>

(2) *I do not take this to mean singleness (or marriage) is "better" on the aggregate. After all both conditions are gifts from God. I also find it interesting that the passage following Jesus' teaching on singleness is "Let the Children Come To Me". Singleness can't (shouldn't) produce children to whom belong the kingdom of heaven. This unique privilege is reserved for those who are married.*

*There is also considerable overlap between singleness and marriage. Paul calls those who are married to act as though they aren't:*

**29** This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, **30** and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, **31** and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away. **1 Corinthians 7:29-31 (ESV)**

*and Jesus, who is single, receives the children as many who are single among us receive our children and participate in their being raised in the fear and admonition of the Lord for the sake of the kingdom.*

(3) *Though I did not draw directly from it, I found skimming this article to be a helpful refresher to the theological topic of the kingdom:* <https://www.liqonier.org/learn/articles/what-is-kingdom-god>