



## **SINGLES' SUNDAY**

### **LECTIONARY COMMENTARY**

**Sunday, November 15, 2009**

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**Lection – Matthew 19:10-12** (New Revised Standard Edition)

(v. 10) His disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” (v. 11) But he said to them, “Not everyone can accept this teaching but only those to whom it is given. (v. 12) For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.”

#### **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

For generations, the Church has lifted marriage as a chief aspiration of Christian life, leaving single people waning under a cloud of stereotypes and inadequacy. In the wake of societal factors that substantially limit the quantity of marriageable partners, singleness has become a lifelong reality for many. For others, singleness is an intentional decision. For still others, it is a means for complete abandonment to Christ and the work of the Kingdom.

Singles Sunday draws singles-focused ministry onto the ecclesial main stage, affirming singleness as a valued part of the faith community and a high call to Kingdom service. Singles Sunday offers a healthy and helpful perspective of singleness and the various ways it benefits Christ's Kingdom. Created as an opportunity to celebrate and affirm the significance of single persons in the work of the Church, Singles Sunday illumines the contributions of this often misunderstood demographic. Chris Jackson addresses some of the stigmas/myths attached to singles in his work, Black Christian Singles Guide to Dating and Sexuality. Jackson points out at least three myths often attached to singles: 1) if you are single, you are lonely; 2) If you're single, you must be searching; and 3) if you are single you must be gay (if you are male and over 30).<sup>1</sup>

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Matthew 19:10-12**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Context of the Interpreter**

Serving in pastoral ministry and having never been married, I witness firsthand the prejudices waged against single people in the black church. Despite one's spiritual discipline, professional training, or ministerial experience, pastoral search committees prefer married pastors, couples seek married counselors, and congregations select married people rather than single people as spiritual custodians (Deacons and Elders). Perhaps it's due, in part, to our society's flawed characterization of singleness as a disposition toward sexual promiscuity or its unsubstantiated correlation between singleness and instability. In any case, several stigmas accompany singleness, especially people who have never been married and are of a certain age.

The church has wronged single people by identifying singleness as a holding pattern until "the right one" comes along, instead of viewing it as a holy opportunity for complete abandonment to Kingdom service. Perhaps the rise of divorce among black Christians and the proliferate use of online matchmaking services indicate that our pursuit of married life has squandered our opportunities for purposeful singleness. One can only hope that churches will stop using Singles Sundays as opportunities to chide people for having sex outside of marriage, enjoying evenings out that married people may now have forsaken (but actually fondly miss), and urging singles to offer more free time to the church because it is assumed that they have more time to offer. Our focus text boldly celebrates the significance and holy passion of those who choose singleness (celibacy) for the sake of the Kingdom.

### **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

Our focus text is the conclusion of a conversation initiated by Pharisees who test Jesus about acceptable terms of divorce. The structure of this pericope can be illustrated this way:

A<sup>1</sup> – Pharisees ask Jesus about acceptable terms of divorce (Matthew 19, v. 3)

B<sup>1</sup> – Jesus responds to the Pharisees (vv. 4-6)

- A<sup>2</sup> – Pharisees ask Jesus about acceptable terms of divorce (v. 7)  
     B<sup>2</sup> – Jesus responds to the Pharisees (vv. 8-9)  
         C – The disciples give a retort (v. 10)  
 D<sup>1</sup> – Jesus gives a challenging disclaimer (v. 11)  
     E<sup>1</sup> – Jesus responds to disciples (v. 12a-c)  
 D<sup>2</sup> – Jesus’ challenging disclaimer (v. 12d)

While verses 3-9 concerning divorce have parallel passages elsewhere in Matthew, Mark and Luke, our focus text, verses 10-12 concerning eunuchs, has no parallel passages in any of the Gospels. Given the uniqueness of our focus text, and Jesus’ central role in it, several exegetical and interpretive opportunities arise.

First, Jesus hints that one’s aversion to the difficulties of marriage does not equip him or her life as a eunuch. After hearing that infidelity is the only acceptable reason for divorce, and that remarriage after divorce for another cause is a transgression punishable by death, the disciples make a critical claim. Imagine their surprise as Jesus dismisses their claim by outlining three reasons to remain single: being born a eunuch, becoming a eunuch by injury or medical procedure, or making one’s self a eunuch for the sake of the Kingdom. Jesus uses the socially sensitive term “eunuch” to respond to the disciples. In this, Jesus shifts the imagination away from marriage and its legal and religious burdens to an anatomically imperfect, non-sexual way of life with far reaching implications. In this, one sees the folly of the disciples’ claim in equating their aversion to the burdens of marriage to the acceptance of lifelong celibacy. Perhaps this is why Jesus says, “Not everyone can accept this teaching but only those to whom it is given.”

Jesus not only suggests that it is a difficult teaching, but that it may be too difficult for his disciples. While eunuchs were well-trusted keepers of royal harems and household officers, due to their anatomical abnormality, they were barred from the temple and ritual worship.<sup>2</sup> Because of their impotence, they had limited currency in the social structure of fathers who begat sons. Yet, Jesus affirms that the call of the Kingdom may lead people to accept this socially dejected and largely shameful public persona for a purpose of much greater depth and significance. It reminds us that the Kingdom may move us to an uncommon display of sacrifice. One would think this is within the scope of discipleship; yet, Jesus states twice that everyone cannot accept this teaching. How awkward for any of his disciples to admit that he was one to whom this teaching had not been given! It should be no surprise that some disciples had difficulty understanding the extreme self-surrender one would endure for the Kingdom. They had yet to fully understand the lengths to which Jesus would go.

Jesus additionally stakes a counter-cultural claim in suggesting that a self-made eunuch can participate in the sage of the Kingdom of heaven. In Jewish tradition, marriage is considered an essential human relationship. “Rabbis condemned the man who rejected his normal human impulses and failed to produce children, charging that it was ‘as if he shed blood, diminished the Image of God, and made the Shekhinah depart from Israel.’”<sup>3</sup> These people were loathed in most religious communities. Jesus would have been well aware of the stigma and contempt toward celibates. Yet, he disregards the social and

religious landscape and identifies this one who, according to public opinion, shames himself and makes him a welcomed participant in God's government on Earth. Jesus places the humiliated one in a positive relationship with the Kingdom of Heaven.

**A great sermonic and hermeneutical interpretive opportunity lies in the irony of Jesus as teacher and Jesus as eunuch.** Like the eunuch he describes, Jesus, being fully human, denied his human affinity for sexual companionship and gratification in order to accomplish a purpose of much greater depth and significance. He voluntarily restrained his human sexual impulses and failed to produce children because he is inextricably enmeshed in securing God's government on Earth. How fitting it is for Jesus to instruct this audience about his own experience as a man, his purposeful restraint and deep commitment to the Kingdom of Heaven. Moreover, Jesus "made himself" a eunuch. It was not a mystically or divinely deployed characteristic freeing him from effort or struggle. At every milestone, an opportunity for self-preservation and self-gratification existed, but Jesus willingly extended himself to the limit of human sacrifice. Let anyone accept this who can.

### **Celebration**

This text teaches us to celebrate self-abandonment to Kingdom service and our purposeful sacrifice to a call that has eternal significance. In it, we share in Christ's sufferings. In it, we understand more fully that we have a high priest which can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, he was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin (Translation of Hebrews 4:15).

### **Descriptive Details**

The descriptive details of this passage include:

**Sounds:** Frustration in the disciples' tone of voice (v. 10); and

**Sights:** An adversarial husband and wife (v. 10); three ways in which one becomes a eunuch (v. 12); the beauty of the Kingdom of heaven (v. 12).

### **III. Other Sermonic Comments**

- Make your Singles Sunday (which also doubles as Young Adult Sunday in many churches) more than a Sunday for listing the behaviors that singles are to avoid. Instead, celebrate the role of singles while avoiding attempts to rope in more to do work for the church because of an unsubstantiated belief that they are more available or interested.
- Suggested song: "I Surrender All." (Traditional hymn.)

### **Notes**

1. Jackson, Chris. Black Christian Singles Guide to Dating and Sexuality. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999.
2. Wood, D.R.W. and I. Howard Marshall. New Bible Dictionary. 3rd ed. Leicester, England. Dowers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996.
3. Eisenberg, Ronald L. The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions. Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2004.