

# “Because of your Hardness of Heart”

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 27 April 2025

Preacher: Joe Hall

[ 0 : 00 ] In Jesus' name, amen. Well, it was about this time last year, I think, we had Matthew's gospel in our morning.! That Jesus is the promised king from God.

That is, he is the Christ, the Son of God. He's shown us that through his healings. I've lost count how many now, but we have even more, don't we, at the beginning of our passage this morning. Large crowds followed him and he healed them there. Here is the king then, setting the world the right way up again. At reversing the curse that brought sickness and death and suffering into the world through our sin.

But Matthew's been showing us that even more so through Jesus' teaching. We've just finished block four of five of Jesus' teaching in this gospel.

That's signposted for us in verse one, when Jesus had finished these sayings. And his word is still more kingly than his healings.

[ 1 : 29 ] Think about it. What is the most powerful thing that a king can do? It is to make proclamations, right?

To sign things into law. In other words, to speak. So as King Jesus speaks, he is breathing out the reality and truth of God's good and loving rule and reign.

As he teaches, he is forming a kingdom of God's people who live under his word. The last big section that we've covered from chapter 14 really focused on what King Jesus has come to do. That is to rescue us. And what he has come to rescue us from. That is our sin. And the last teaching block in chapter 18, Jesus taught us how to navigate then that reality of sin in the life and relationships of the church.

The section we're beginning today then follows on from that. It runs from chapter 19 up to 23. And the focus, I think, is the question that the disciples ask in 19 verse 25.

[ 2 : 47 ] Who then can be saved? At the next few chapters, we're going to meet different people or different groups of people who come to Jesus in different ways and see how Jesus responds to them.

Jesus is also going to give us stories or parables about people who either come into his kingdom or don't. And all of this helps us to see who then can be saved.

Who can come into God's kingdom? How must we come in? And his answers are surprising. Notice the disciples ask that question in astonishment.

Who then can be saved? Because Jesus' answers are surprising. We see straight away why in our passage this morning. If there was a first century school of Judea yearbook, the group we meet this morning would be voted by their classmates most likely to enter the kingdom of heaven.

That is the Pharisees. But what label does Jesus award them instead? Verse 8. Hardest heart.

[ 4 : 06 ] Hardest heart. Why does the Bible say this, Jesus? Because your hearts are so hard. Let's see then.

Who can be saved? Firstly, not hard hearts. Have a look at verse 3. And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?

Divorce? Now, that question will touch a really raw nerve for some of us. Divorce is a really sore topic. All of us, I think, will know somebody who is divorced.

Perhaps your parents even, or maybe you have been through a divorce yourself. It is really sore. And we will come back to that question. We'll give it time.

It's a really important question. But actually, the key bit of information in that verse comes before the question. And that's what the Pharisees are doing.

[ 5 : 08 ] They are not, as some of us will be, genuinely interested in what Jesus has to say about divorce. Matthew tells us they wanted to test him.

Now, interestingly, I found this out this week. The only times that this word actually comes up in this gospel are when it has to do with either the religious orders or the devil.

So back in chapter 4, this is the word that is used when the devil came to tempt or to test Jesus.

And so Matthew is hinting, isn't he, that these guys are here to do the devil's dirty work.

They have come to Jesus not to listen and to learn, but to try to trip him up and catch him out. Now, friends, we can ask Jesus any question.

Okay, there is no question that you cannot come to Jesus to ask him. But we can ask him in two different ways, can't we? One way is sitting over him, ready to kind of pick apart what he says, getting our own clever reply or our own next question ready before he's even finished speaking.

[ 6 : 25 ] Or the other way is sitting under him, ready to receive what he says and getting ready to put it into practice. We can't ask him a wrong question, but we can ask him in the wrong way.

Which way, then, are these Pharisees asking their question? Well, they came to test him. Some of you have had exams this week at school.

I hope they went really well. But the people who set your exam don't ask the questions, do they?

And when they get your answer, they read through it and say, wow, I really learned something today.

No, they sit there, don't they, and they say, right or wrong? And they put a cross or a tick next to it.

That is how the Pharisees are asking their question, isn't it?

We're here to grade you, Jesus, not to learn from you. We're the teacher. You're the students.

Friends, that is always the wrong way to come to Jesus.

[ 7 : 27 ] It's also the wrong way to come to God's word. Notice their question is about what is lawful.

Now, the Pharisees were a religious order that believed that God would come to the rescue of his people when they were pure and holy enough.

So, for them, God's law had become nothing more than a list of do's or don'ts. If you could tick the box next to each command, then you were holy, ready to be rescued.

But the result of that was pretty wild because while they would have had pretty strict standards for most of life, the way that worked out in their marriages was very different.

See, God allows for the reality of divorce in his word. But because the Pharisees wanted to turn everything into a box they could tick, they could only think of things as commands to obey.

We have a saying, don't we? If the only tool you have is a hammer, everything becomes a nail.

Well, that was the Pharisees with the Bible. Their only tool was obedience.

[ 8 : 38 ] So, everything in God's word became to them a command. In this case, the relevant bit of Bible is in Deuteronomy 24, and the command, if you were to go back there, says, you can't divorce and remarry the same person.

So, the command is to put a restraint on divorce and remarriage. However, there's some context that leads up to that command that sets out a situation where a man might divorce his wife.

But how have the Pharisees read that, verse 7? Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and send her away?

To see what they're doing, they have taken what God allows as a tragic reality in a fallen world, and they've turned it into another nail that they could hammer, another command that they could obey.

Jesus not so subtly sets the record straight, doesn't he, in verse 8? He said to them, because of your hardness of heart, Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, brackets, he never commanded it.

[ 10 : 05 ] The law in that passage says the ground for divorce is indecency, meaning something like uncovering, so sexual sin.

But even then, divorce was only ever a permission and not an instruction. Which means we have to ask, don't we?

We have to ask the question, how had such seemingly law-loving people got God's law so wrong? Well, friends, it is because they already knew the answer that they wanted before they had taken the time to read what God really said.

And so they end up telling God, don't they, what he should have said. Thou shalt divorce thy wife for any cause, rather than listening to what God really says about divorce, which we'll come to in just a moment.

But friends, can you see the problem, the heart problem? Sitting over Jesus and sitting over his word and correcting him, filtering him, editing him, testing him, instead of sitting under Christ and

under his word to listen and learn, to receive and obey.

[11:32] Jesus tells them and us exactly what that's called, verse eight, hardness of heart. You think of a stone, right? Things just bounce off the surface.

Nothing's getting in. Jesus says that we can be like that with him and with the Bible. Who then can be saved?

Not those with hard hearts until they are softened. I wonder, friends, today, are you sitting over Christ or are you sitting under him?

Well, how we listen to his teaching now, I think, will help us to know. To come back round to it then, it is a really raw question for us, but let's listen to what Jesus says from God's word.

Just like when he answered the devil's temptation, so now he answers the Pharisees' test, have you not read? He takes them straight back to the Bible.

[12:45] And he takes them way back before the law to the beginning in Genesis at creation. Have you not read, said Jesus, that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female and said, this is Genesis 2, verse 24, therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife and the two shall become one flesh.

So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate. God created human beings, he created us male and female, and he created marriage. So what's God's design for marriage? Jesus goes straight, doesn't he, to that key phrase in Genesis, the two shall become one flesh. From that, he draws a very simple conclusion, verse 6, so they are no longer two, but one flesh.

Therefore, verse 6, what God has joined together, let not man separate. Marriage is done by God, says Jesus.

He's the one. He unites a man and a woman together as one. And separation, divorce, the undoing of that union is done by man.

[14:18] But we shouldn't do that, he says. When God has taken two and made one, we should not unmake that one back into two.

One of the reasons that divorce is so painful is because it's not only kind of legal paperwork, or even memories, families, love being broken, it is one flesh being ripped back into two.

And those who have been through that experience know that that is as terrible as it sounds. It shouldn't surprise us, friends, that people going through divorce can feel like they're losing themselves.

Something that God has created in their lives is being destroyed. someone whom they have been knitted to sexually, emotionally, spiritually is pulling away from them.

In a very real sense, says Jesus, they are being cut in half. Friends, when God created us, divorce was not supposed to happen. It's not what we're made for, it's not what marriages are made for, it's a one flesh union between a man and a woman for life.

[15:45] So then, here's the question. Why does God's law allow divorce if it shouldn't happen? Now that's the right question to ask and it's the question the Pharisees are asking but in the wrong way, isn't it?

Verse 7, they said, why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and send her away? They're not interested in finding out, are they? They're just arguing back. But let us listen to Jesus' answer, verse 8.

He said to them, because of your hardness of heart, Moses allowed you to divorce your wives but from the beginning it was not so.

So God's word does not contradict itself. God never commands us to get divorced. That would go against his will for us. But he does allow it.

And he allows it, says Jesus, because of your hardness of heart. In other words, when God gave his law, he priced in the corruption of the human heart.

[16:56] So he gives divorce as a concession to the fact that we as human beings are so sinful that sometimes it is no longer possible for us to stay one flesh with another sinner.

Which doesn't reflect very well on us, does it? It's like the newly qualified driver say is given a new car and asks, why is the insurance so high? And the answer comes back, because you are likely to drive recklessly, smash up your car, and write it off.

Oh, thanks. Why does God allow the possibility of divorce in every marriage? Because there is a very real possibility, brothers and sisters, that you will sin recklessly, smash up your marriage, and

write it off.

So far from being something that God commands for us to be righteous or holy, Jesus says divorce exists because you are such a sinner. friends, if you're married, he's talking to you and me.

Jesus is not speaking about that other couple that you know who are going through a hard time in their marriage. He is talking to me and you sitting here today.

[ 18 : 24 ] Your husband, your wife, I've seen the unlikeliest Christian marriages break apart through sin. Okay, divorce does not exist for people out there, out there somewhere.

Jesus says divorce exists because of people like me and you. None of us are protected from the reality of divorce because none of us are immune from the corruption of sin.

And if we don't believe that, if you don't believe that you could sin your marriage apart, then we do have a problem, don't we?

We have a hard heart problem and we are in danger because we are sitting over Jesus and saying, I'm not like that. That could never happen to me. We heard from Ephesians recently, didn't we?

It is only by God's grace and in his strength that we can last in marriage at all. See, brothers and sisters, God didn't give his law as a tick list so that we could sit and tick it off all the commands in our lives and show him how good we are.

[ 19 : 29 ] He gave the law to show us how wrong we are and how we can't live up to his standard to convict us of our sin. The presence of divorce in his word reminds us of that.

But from the beginning it was not so, says Jesus. In a world without sin, there would be no need for divorce. This is really sore for all of us because it's Jesus speaking to our heart, isn't it, and what we're like inside.

But before we move on, let me say, if you are divorced, that is not necessarily a sign of your personal sin or a sin in itself.

What do I mean? Jesus says, verse 9, I say to you, whoever divorces his wife except for sexual immorality and marries another, commits adultery.

So Jesus, in line with God's law, permits divorce when the husband or wife has committed sexual sin. Sex has been described as the glue that holds a husband and wife together.

[ 20 : 45 ] It is the ultimate God-given expression of that one flesh union. sin. So when sex is taken outside of that relationship, it dissolves the union.

It breaks the covenant. Now, those words should pour cold water on us if we've drunk the spirit of our age which says it's not such a big deal.

Rather, how serious is sexual sin that God, who created marriage to last for a lifetime, would say it is a fair reason for it to come to an end because it has broken the marriage bond beyond repair.

The other reason God gives for divorce is abandonment. When a husband or wife walks out on a marriage, so if your husband or wife left you or divorced you, we'd also count neglect or abuse under that category as well.

When someone violates or walks out on a marriage emotionally, that can be a ground for divorce. I say that because every divorce is painful, but you don't have to feel guilty if it was for a reason that God allows in his word.

[ 22 : 06 ] God says if you were sinned against in these ways, you are not guilty and you can remarry. However, those reasons are few and specific.

And we can lose sight of that, can't we, because it's become so normal. I read this week that statistically half of all marriages in the UK end in divorce.

But we should not ever treat divorce lightly or be quick to reach for it because Jesus says it wasn't like that in the beginning. That's not what marriage is for.

It's a very last resort in a very few cases and every single time is a tragedy. As we've listened, friends, I wonder what you've been thinking.

It's really raw stuff, but have you in your heart been pushing back, picking apart, picking holes, seeing if Jesus passes your test?

[ 23 : 12 ] Or have you been taking it in and figuring out what to do with it now, how to live it out best in your life? I'm sure we have loads of questions, loads of questions.

The question is, how are we asking those questions, to lecture or to learn, with a hard heart or a humble heart?

who then can be saved? We find out in verse 10 that some of those who heard Jesus were indeed listening with humble, soft, and receptive hearts, which is where we come into land in our second

point.

Hard hearts, now humble hearts. Having heard Jesus, the disciples have another question, verse 10, or really more a conclusion, isn't it? Not who then can be saved, but who then can be married. The disciples said to him, if such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry. Now, if that sounds like an overreaction to us, notice that Jesus doesn't correct them.

[ 24 : 23 ] He says, yes, sometimes you're right. See that? In verse 11, he said to them, not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given.

So the disciples' reaction in some ways is the right one, isn't it? If we want to take Jesus' teaching seriously and live it out in marriage, we need God to give us what we need because we don't have it in ourselves.

If you listen carefully in the marriage service, the wedding service, which I don't know if we always do because we get caught up, don't we, in it. But if you listen carefully, there is this holy hesitation that comes after the explanation of marriage and before the couple make their vows.

Therefore, marriage is not to be entered into inadvisedly, lightly, or carelessly, but reverently, soberly, and in the fear of God.

marriage and divorce. Some of you are thinking about getting married or engaged. I want to ask you this morning, have you really wrestled with verse 10 and prayed hard for verse 11?

[ 25 : 44 ] If we understand Jesus and the Bible's teaching on marriage and divorce, we should be deeply convicted of our natural selfishness, carelessness, and lust.

And only in that posture of humility, repentance, and total dependence on God should we consider promising to love, cherish, honor, and protect another person for the rest of our life.

Jesus' words, don't they impress upon us this truth? Only get married with a humble heart, because the consequences otherwise are disastrous.

But I think the bigger point that Matthew wants us to see here is that if we understand not only his words about marriage, but actually anything in God's law and anything in God's character and anything about Jesus' teaching, we should be deeply humbled like that.

The king's words have had that right effect on the disciples, haven't they? They are convicted. We talked about two different ways to ask a question. See how different their question is from the Pharisees.

[ 26 : 54 ] The Pharisees sat over Jesus and asked, how quickly can we get divorced? The disciples sitting under Jesus are now asking, how slow should we be then to get married?

married? The difference between those two questions isn't in their battle with lust or their desire for a relationship or their view of women.

Their difference is in their heart towards Jesus. One is taking in his words, the other isn't. And so I want to ask you, this is the question this morning, the question.

However you sit here today, whether you're married, single, divorced, widowed, are you humbling yourself before the king this morning?

Are you hearing King Jesus and inwardly bowing your head and admitting that you cannot live in his kingdom unless he gives you the grace?

[ 27 : 58 ] That's what God's law should do to us, drive us to our knees and send us to Christ for grace? If you're hearing him and inwardly ticking the boxes this morning, haven't done that, have done that, haven't done that, never thought of that, or rewording or reframing what he's saying so that you can tick them, your heart is still hard and it needs to be humbled again as you come to the king.

And again, I think we can do that diagnosis and surgery even as we sit and listen to him now. What does he say to these humble-hearted disciples?

Well, we heard him say about marriage, not everyone can receive this saying but only those to whom it is given. I take it then that it's those to whom it's been given are those who God calls to get married and who stay faithful to their husband or their wife.

And that is a gift from God. we cannot do that on our own. But let's not make the mistake of thinking that that raises people who are married to a higher level.

Married people do not get more grace than anyone else. That is not what Jesus is teaching. It's not what the Bible teaches. He says to some God gives the humanly impossible task of being faithfully married.

[ 29 : 29 ] And to some he gives the humanly impossible task of being faithfully single. both are equally humanly impossible but for his grace.

We know that because he goes on verse 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. That translation a eunuch was usually someone in a king's court who was occupationally single.

Their work meant they were unable to marry. But Jesus here is using the word eunuch in its broadest sense of someone who is single for the sake of the king.

In other words he's talking about Christians who are called to remain single out of devotion to Christ. And that can be for different reasons he says.

[ 30 : 36 ] Again I'm really conscious I tremble as I stand before you this morning on this holy ground of his word that this is really raw stuff and it can be really sore stuff as well.

Not only is he speaking about singleness sometimes these verses are used to speak about people who experience same sex attraction. They're not about that specifically but sexuality is caught up in these categories isn't it?

Some are called to be single by nature from birth some by nurture through the impact of others some by choice because they have wanted it.

Notice Jesus doesn't split hairs over those categories he simply says that God's call to singleness might come at different points or in different ways for different people.

For some it might be following a traumatic relationship or upbringing. For others there might be a physical cause or to do with sexual desire or simply having never met someone that you wanted to marry or perhaps because you want to use your time and energy for the service of Christ rather than to invest that in marriage and family or any number of other reasons.

[ 31 : 56 ] It might be something that you choose or it might be something that you would never have chosen. But brothers and sisters if you're single for whatever reason Jesus gives you the grace to faithfully live a single life for him just as he gives the grace to others to be faithfully married for him.

Neither is better. Paul will later say that his singleness is a gift. He even goes as far as to say he wishes that all are single as he's single so it is to devote themselves to Christ's service.

Now for some that is Christ's call. Let the one who's able to receive this receive it. He says to others Christ's call is to marriage only to those to whom it's given he says.

But to all of us he says realize how insufficient you are in yourself to live the life that I've called you to live apart from my grace.

Sometimes when you have a young family people will say to you I don't know how you do it. One of the best outcomes from a sermon like this I think would be if each of us could look around the room and be sufficiently humbled that we could say that to anyone.

[ 33 : 25 ] That someone who's married could say to somebody who is single I don't know how you do it. And somebody who's single could say the same to somebody who's married and each could say to the other from the heart only by the grace of Christ can I live faithfully as he's called me to.

Brothers and sisters let that be the confession of our hearts as we bow this morning before King Jesus humble ourselves under his word of truth come under his conviction and throw ourselves upon him as our savior and king for his grace.

let's come to him in prayer together. Lord we are humbled and broken before your word this morning.

Your word is true. It is faithful. It is good. And Lord by your Holy Spirit we pray that you would help each of us to receive it with a soft and an open and a repentant heart.

Oh Lord none of us none of us can live in the way that you call us perfectly. But Lord we throw ourselves upon your grace upon your daily forgiveness upon your strength Lord to live the life that you have called us to.

[ 34 : 59 ] Help us we pray never to sit over you to resist to push back upon your word. Help us we pray and we need help to sit under you and to receive it.

Teach us Lord we pray by your Holy Spirit how to live this life and to walk with you and to follow you. And help us we pray as a church family to help one another to walk together Lord to speak that truth into one another's lives with love and to support one another Lord in the walk that you have

given us we pray in Jesus name.  
Amen.