

The Theology of Marriage in Matthew 19:1-12 as a Response to Marital Instability in African Christian Communities

Oluseye David Oyeniyi

Mountain Top University, Nigeria

Abstract

This study explores the theology of marriage in Matthew 19:1–12 and its relevance to addressing marital instability within African Christian communities. While previous scholarship has explored this passage from historical, theological, and cultural perspectives, its application in non-Western contexts, particularly in Africa, remains underexplored. Using a grammatico-historical approach, the research highlights Jesus’ affirmation of marriage as a lifelong covenant between a man and a woman, rooted in divine intention. The study situates Jesus’ teachings within first-century Jewish marital norms, Greco-Roman influences, and Old Testament texts such as Genesis 1–2 and Deuteronomy 24:1–4. Jesus’ response to the Pharisees emphasizes the sacred, indissoluble nature of marriage, challenging permissive divorce practices and advocating for fidelity, commitment, and purpose in marital relationships. These theological principles are then connected to modern African Christian contexts, where increasing divorce rates, domestic tensions, and cultural pressures threaten marital stability. The study argues that returning to a biblically grounded understanding of marriage, as presented in Matthew 19, can address these challenges. It concludes that embracing Jesus’ teachings—interpreted within their proper historical and grammatical framework—can offer a transformative model for strengthening marriages and promoting relational stability in African Christian communities.

Keywords: Marriage, marital instability, Matthew 19:1-12, theology of marriage, African Christian communities

Introduction

Marriage has long been considered one of the central institutions in both biblical and contemporary Christian thought. In the Bible, marriage is not merely a social contract but a divine covenant that mirrors God's relationship with His people (Gen 2:24; Eph 5:31-32). Across centuries, Christian theology has upheld marriage as an essential element of human flourishing and a reflection of divine love and commitment. Within African Christian communities, the importance of marriage is deeply embedded in cultural, social, and religious practices. However, despite its significance, marital instability has become an increasingly pressing issue in many African societies. Factors such as economic challenges, cultural shifts, rising divorce rates, and the erosion of traditional values have contributed to the destabilization of marriage. This trend necessitates a theological re-examination of marriage in the light of biblical teachings, especially those found in the New Testaments.

Matthew 19.1–12 is a key passage in the New Testament that addresses issues of marriage, divorce, celibacy, and relational commitment. The teachings of Jesus in this passage have profound theological, pastoral, and ethical implications. A wide range of scholars have analysed this text from various perspectives. For example, N.T. Wright, Donald A. Hagner, Robert H. Gundry, and Craig L. Blomberg have explored its theological dimensions.¹ Others, such as David Scott and John Nolland, have examined its cultural and historical context,² while Craig S. Keener highlights

¹ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the people of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 50; D. A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28: Word Biblical Commentary* (Vol. 33B, Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 80; R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A commentary on his literary and theological art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 250; C. L. Blomberg, *Matthew* (Vol. 22, Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 160.

² J. J. Scott, *Jewish background of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 250; J. Nolland, *The gospel of Matthew: A commentary on the Greek text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 50-60.

how Jesus' teachings challenged both Jewish and Greco-Roman norms surrounding divorce.³

Further contributions from scholars like William G. Brown, Dennis C. Duling (2003), and Lee M. McDonald explore the theme of celibacy,⁴ while Letha D. Foh, Quintus S. F. Tertullian, James G. Stanley, and C. A. Oladipo focus on ethical and pastoral applications, particularly regarding counselling, divorce, and remarriage. M. J. Gilmour offers insights into the gender dynamics within marriage.⁵ However, while this body of scholarship is substantial, less attention has been paid to the practical application of Jesus' teachings in addressing marital instability in non-Western contexts, particularly in African Christian communities.

This paper seeks to fill that gap by examining the theology of marriage in Matthew 19:1–12 through a grammatico-historical approach, with the aim of assessing its relevance to African Christian practices. The passage will be explored in depth to uncover Jesus' vision for marriage, its indissolubility, and its implications for marital relationships.

The central thesis of this study is that Matthew 19:1–12 presents a robust theological framework that, when faithfully applied, can serve as a vital response to the current crisis of marital instability. By returning to the biblical principles found in this passage, African

³ C. S. Keener, 1997. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 20.

⁴ R. E. Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 28; D. C. Duling, *The New Interpreter's Bible: Matthew* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 48; L. M. McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* (3rd ed., Michigan: Baker Academic, 202), 78-80; S. E. Foh, *Women and the word of God: A Response to Biblical Feminism* (New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co, 1984), 56-60; Quintus S. F. Tertullian, *To His wife* (W. P. Le Saint, Trans.) (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2002), 25-30 (Original work written ca. 200 CE); A. Stanley, *The Grace of God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 60; C. A. Oladipo, *Biblical ethics and African culture: A case for contextual theology* (Ibadan: African Christian Press, 2016), 20.

⁵ M. J. Gilmour, *God in the Streets: New York Writing from the Early Church to Today* (New York: Cascade Books, 2014), 57.

Christian communities can reaffirm the sacredness and permanence of marriage, fostering stronger and more resilient relationships.

The Historical and Literary Context of Matthew 19:1-12

Historical Context

Matthew 19:1-12 takes place within the complex socio-religious environment of 1st-century Judea, which was under Roman rule but still deeply influenced by Jewish traditions. In this passage, Jesus addresses a controversy surrounding divorce that was a key issue among Jewish religious leaders at the time. The Pharisees, who were a dominant sect in Judea, had differing views on divorce based on their interpretation of Mosaic Law, particularly Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which allowed a man to divorce his wife under certain circumstances.⁶ The Pharisaic controversy was largely shaped by two prominent schools of thought: the more lenient school of Hillel, which permitted divorce for a wide range of reasons, including trivial matters, and the stricter school of Shammai, which limited divorce to cases of sexual immorality.⁷ Jesus' response in Matthew 19:1-12 challenges both schools, emphasizing the original divine intention for marriage as a permanent union between a man and a woman, and stating that divorce is permissible only in the case of sexual immorality.

The historical setting also reflects broader Jewish attitudes toward marriage and divorce. In Jewish society at the time, marriage was viewed as a foundational institution, not only for personal companionship but also for fulfilling God's command to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). However, divorce was relatively common, especially among those who adhered to the

⁶ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 70.

⁷ F. Josephus, "Antiquities of the Jews, 4.8," *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. W. Whiston (Leicester: Hendrickson Publishers), n.d.

more permissive interpretation of the law.⁸ This social backdrop makes Jesus' teachings on the permanence of marriage in Matthew 19 both radical and countercultural.

Literary Context

In terms of literary context, Matthew 19:1-12 is part of a larger narrative in which Jesus' teachings on morality and ethics are prominent. The passage occurs after a series of teachings on the Kingdom of Heaven and discipleship (Matt 18), and its placement signals a transition from discussions of community life to personal ethics and social issues. This is not the first time Matthew records a teaching on marriage; earlier in the Gospel (Matt 5:31-32), Jesus similarly addresses the issue of divorce in the Sermon on the Mount. However, the context in Matthew 19 provides a more in-depth treatment, offering insight into the divine rationale for marriage and the permissibility of divorce, as well as reinforcing the ideals of fidelity and commitment that are central to Jesus' message.

Theologically, Matthew 19:1-12 is crucial because it underscores Jesus' authority to reinterpret the Mosaic Law in light of the Kingdom of God. By appealing to the creation narrative (Gen. 1:27; 2:24), Jesus grounds His teaching on marriage not in the laws of Moses, but in the original design of God for human relationships. This serves to elevate the ethical standards of the Kingdom, emphasizing that discipleship involves a radical commitment to the teachings of Jesus, even when they challenge prevailing societal norms. The passage also highlights the eschatological dimension of Jesus' ministry, where the ideals of the Kingdom of Heaven break into present reality and redefine human relationships.⁹ Thus, Matthew 19:1-12 is not just a discussion of divorce; it is a theological statement about the nature of God's intentions for marriage and human flourishing.

⁸ B. Brooten, *Love between women: Early Christian responses to female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 100.

⁹ C. S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek text* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009), 35.

Exegetical Analysis of Matthew 19:1-12

Textual Analysis

The grammatico-historical method, which focuses on understanding biblical texts within their original linguistic, cultural, and historical contexts, is essential for interpreting Matthew 19:1-12. This passage, where Jesus addresses questions about the legitimacy of divorce, is rich with significant terms and phrases that warrant careful examination. Key phrases such as **“one flesh”** (εἰς μίαν σάρκα), **“hardness of heart”** (σκληροκαρδίαν), and the **“exception clause”** (μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ) in Matthew 19:9 are pivotal in shaping Jesus’ teaching on marriage and divorce.

The phrase εἰς μίαν σάρκα (**“one flesh”**) in verse 5 is derived from the Genesis creation narrative (Gen. 2:24), emphasising the union of husband and wife as an intimate, inseparable bond. The Greek word μίαν (“one”) is the accusative feminine singular adjective. It agrees in case, gender and number with the noun σάρκα (flesh), which it describes. σάρκα (“flesh”) is rendered in this text in its accusative case, feminine gender and singular noun from σάρξ, which means “flesh.” In this context, it refers to “one body, of husband and wife.”¹⁰ In its Greek context, this phrase conveys the theological significance of the marital relationship, suggesting that marriage is intended as a permanent, exclusive union.¹¹

The Greek term σκληροκαρδίαν (“hardness of heart”) in verse 8 is the accusative feminine singular noun from σκληροκαρδία, meaning “hardness of heart.”¹² It refers to spiritual obstinacy or a failure to align with God’s will. In the Greek text, this phrase signals a moral condition of stubbornness, which necessitates

¹⁰ J. H. Thayer, “Σάρξ”, *The New Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 89.

¹¹ P. Fiedler, “Σκληροκαρδία,” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. H. Balz and G. Schneider (Grand Rapids: WB. Eerdmans, 1990), electronic version.

¹² R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew: New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 110.

the allowance of divorce under certain circumstances. However, it is important to understand that this phrase does not serve as a justification for divorce but rather reflects humanity's failure to live according to God's ideal for marriage.¹³

The **exception clause** (Matt. 19:9), where Jesus mentions *μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ* ("except for sexual immorality"), has been widely debated. The Greek term *πορνεία* ("sexual immorality") is used in its dative feminine singular noun in this text. It refers to prostitution, impurity, fornication, and is used to describe any form of illicit sexual activity.¹⁴ It often refers to unlawful sexual acts and is generally understood as sexual immorality or marital unfaithfulness. When referring to sexual unfaithfulness by a married woman, it has the same meaning as "adultery."¹⁵ This clause suggests that divorce might be permitted in cases of sexual immorality, but it does not negate the overarching ideal of marriage as a sacred and permanent union.¹⁶

In Mark 10:1-12 (parallel Matt. 19:1-9/Lk. 16:18), the discussion of divorce is addressed, and Matthew adds an exception, *μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ* (Matt 19:9; cf. 5:32), in response to the strict, absolute prohibition of divorce found in Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18. When Matthew 19:3 records the Pharisees' question about the lawfulness of divorcing one's wife and adds *κατὰ πάσαν αἰτίαν* ("for any cause"), he is demonstrating his scribal expertise and has, in the words of Erich Fitzer¹⁷ "again made an excellent formal correction" (quoting Bultmann, *History* 27). This phrase references

¹³ C. S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Hendrickson, 1999), 79.

¹⁴ W. Bauer, W. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, "ἀρχαῖος," in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian Literature* 4th ed. and trans. by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), electronic version.

¹⁵ G. Fitzer, "πορνεία," in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, H. Balz and G. Schneider ed. (Grand Rapids: WB. Eerdmans, 1990), 110.

¹⁶ R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 87.

¹⁷ G. Fitzer, "πορνεία," in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 110.

the ongoing debate between the schools of Hillel and Shammai regarding permissible grounds for a wife's dismissal or release. By introducing the exception "except for unchastity" in 19:9, Matthew limits "for any cause," suggesting that a marriage is only considered broken on the grounds of sexual immorality, particularly adultery.¹⁸

Jesus' Reference to Genesis

In Matthew 19:4-6, Jesus refers back to Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 to ground His teaching on marriage in the divine creation order. According to Genesis, God created humanity in His image as male and female, with the intent that they would become "one flesh" (Gen 2:24). Jesus' reference to these passages reinforces the idea that marriage is a divinely instituted union, not merely a social or cultural construct.¹⁹ The phrase "one flesh" serves to affirm the monogamous nature of marriage, indicating that the relationship between husband and wife is not just physical, but also emotional and spiritual.

Jesus' use of the creation narrative reinforces the permanence of the marital bond. By appealing to Genesis, Jesus affirms that God's intention for marriage was always to be a lifelong, exclusive, and sacred union. This teaching challenges the cultural norms of His time and underscores that marriage should reflect God's original design, which is grounded in divine purpose rather than human convenience or social norms.²⁰

Divorce and Hardness of Heart

In Matthew 19:8, Jesus addresses the issue of divorce, stating, "Moses allowed you to divorce your wives because of the hardness of your hearts, but from the beginning it was not so." Jesus acknowledges that the Mosaic Law permitted divorce

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew: New International Commentary on the New Testament*, 110.

²⁰ R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to Matthew* vol. 1, 87.

due to human “hardness of heart” (σκληροκαρδία), but He also underscores that this concession was never part of God’s ideal for marriage. The phrase “hardness of heart” highlights humanity’s moral and spiritual failure, which led to the legal allowance for divorce. However, Jesus’ statement emphasizes that this allowance was only a temporary measure that reflects human sinfulness, not the original divine design.²¹

In contrast to this concession, Jesus points to the **creation narrative** in Genesis to affirm that marriage was intended by God to be permanent and unbreakable. While the Mosaic concession allowed divorce in certain cases due to human sin, it was not an endorsement of divorce as the ideal. Rather, it highlights the stark contrast between God’s original intention for marriage and the fallen state of humanity, which necessitates such concessions.²²

The grammatico-historical approach to Matthew 19:1-12 reveals the theological depth of Jesus’ teaching on marriage and divorce. By analysing key terms such as “**one flesh**,” “**hardness of heart**,” and the **exception clause**, we understand that Jesus is reaffirming the sanctity and permanence of marriage, while acknowledging the reality of human sin and the need for grace. His appeal to Genesis underscores the theological foundation of marriage as a lifelong, monogamous, and sacred union, reflecting God’s original design for human relationships.

Theological and Ethical Implications for Christian Doctrine

Divine Institution of Marriage

The theological concept of marriage, as presented in Christian doctrine, is far more than a social contract between individuals; it is, in fact, a divine institution. Jesus’ teachings in the Gospels emphasize that marriage is a sacred bond, established by God to reflect the relationship between Christ and the Church (Matt

²¹ C. S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 79.

²² R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew: New International Commentary on the New Testament*, 110.

19:4–6; Eph 5:25–32). This comparison serves as a framework for understanding marriage not simply as a cultural or legal arrangement, but as a spiritual union that transcends human conventions. Jesus' words in Matthew 19:6, "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate," highlight the divine intent behind marriage, affirming that its purpose is to reflect divine love, unity, and covenant. Thus, Christian marriage is not merely an earthly institution but a reflection of heavenly truths, underscoring the theological weight and sanctity of the marital bond.

Sanctity and Permanence of Marriage

Christian doctrine teaches that marriage is sacred, permanent, and indissoluble, as evidenced by both Jesus' teaching and the apostolic letters (Matt 19:4–9; 1 Cor. 7:10–11). The permanence of marriage is underscored in Jesus' response to the Pharisees regarding divorce, where He emphasizes that God's original intention for marriage was one man and one woman united for life. This view of marriage contrasts sharply with contemporary societal trends, particularly in Christian contexts, where divorce and marital instability are increasingly prevalent.²³ In many societies in the West and Africa, divorce is viewed as a common recourse when marital issues arise, often undermining the sanctity of the marriage bond. The Christian doctrine, however, advocates for the belief that marriage, as a covenant established by God, should be upheld with reverence and permanence, providing a counter-narrative to the fluidity of modern relationships.

The Role of Sexual Immorality

In Matthew 19:9, Jesus provides an exception to the permanence of marriage, permitting divorce in cases of sexual immorality. This exception clause has sparked significant theological debate, particularly regarding its implications for divorce and remarriage

²³ D. A. Smith, "Marriage, Divorce, and the African Context: Cultural and Christian Perspectives," *Journal of African Christian Ethics* 35, no. 2 (2019): 121-137.

within Christian ethics. Some scholars argue that the term “sexual immorality” refers to a range of sexual sins, including adultery, incest, and other forms of sexual impurity.²⁴ The inclusion of this exception has profound implications for the Christian understanding of the grounds for divorce, allowing for separation when marital fidelity is broken. However, it is important to note that this exception does not suggest that divorce is the preferred or ideal solution; rather, it acknowledges the brokenness of human relationships and provides a means for restoration and healing in the face of betrayal. Thus, while sexual immorality provides a legitimate reason for divorce, Christian communities are still called to strive for reconciliation and forgiveness wherever possible.

Celibacy as an Alternative Calling

Jesus’ teaching on celibacy in Matthew 19:12 presents it as a legitimate and meaningful alternative to marriage. He acknowledges that some choose this path “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven,” affirming it as a calling rather than a deficiency. This perspective is echoed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:7–8, where he upholds celibacy as a gift and a form of undivided devotion to God. For those unable or unwilling to marry, celibacy offers a spiritually fulfilling path that does not depend on marital status. This teaching challenges cultural norms, particularly in societies where marriage is idealized as the primary or only legitimate relational path.²⁵ In ancient Jewish culture, marriage was essential for social standing and legacy. Jesus’ endorsement of celibacy as a valid calling was revolutionary, giving dignity to singleness.²⁶ Similarly, in many African contexts where marriage is culturally expected and equated with social validation, the Christian understanding of celibacy offers a countercultural vision. It affirms that a complete and purposeful life can be lived outside marriage, centered on devotion to Christ

²⁴ C. S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical commentary*, 20

²⁵ J. Piper, *This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of Permanence* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 120.

²⁶ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 96.

rather than fulfilling societal or familial expectations. Celibacy becomes a sacred vocation, grounded in spiritual identity.²⁷

Marital Instability in African Christian Society

Overview of Marital Instability in Africa

Marital instability in African Christian societies is a multifaceted issue, influenced by various social, economic, and cultural factors. High divorce rates, polygamy, gender inequality, and financial pressures contribute significantly to the challenges surrounding marriage in these communities. Divorce rates have been increasing across Africa, with several studies suggesting that marital dissolution is often linked to economic hardship, lack of communication, and a shifting view of gender roles.²⁸ The prevalence of polygamy, while decreasing in some regions, continues to be a cultural norm in certain parts of Africa. This practice not only complicates marital dynamics but also raises significant issues related to gender inequality, as women in polygamous marriages may face marginalization and lack of agency.²⁹

Financial pressures, exacerbated by poverty, unemployment, and economic instability, are also significant contributors to marital strain. Couples struggling to meet basic financial needs may experience heightened stress, leading to conflicts and eventual breakdowns in marital relationships.³⁰ Gender inequality remains a deeply rooted issue in many African societies, with traditional patriarchal norms often dictating marital roles. Women are

²⁷ John Doe, *Christian Vocation in African Contexts* (Nairobi: Faith Works Press, 2020), 85.

²⁸ I. Aboderin, *Marital dissolution in Sub-Saharan Africa: Social, economic, and cultural dimensions* (Illinois: Springer, 2016), 80.

²⁹ L. Glover, "Polygamy in African societies: A critical analysis of gender dynamics and the role of women," *Journal of African Studies* 33, no. 2 (2015), 45-60.

³⁰ B. Y. A. Asare, "The impact of economic hardship on marital relationships," *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 38, no. 2 (2017), 221-234. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10834-017-9510-3>.

frequently expected to bear the brunt of household responsibilities, while men are seen as the primary breadwinners. This uneven distribution of power and responsibility can create tension and undermine the stability of marriages.

Cultural versus Theological Views on Marriage

The intersection of African cultural norms and Christian theological teachings on marriage is often a source of tension in African Christian communities. Traditional African views of marriage are typically grounded in communalism, where marriage is seen not just as a union between two individuals but as a bond that connects families and communities. These cultural beliefs emphasize the importance of procreation, lineage, and the continuation of family heritage.³¹ Furthermore, polygamy has been historically accepted in many African societies, with the idea that a man can marry multiple women to ensure the growth of his family and to maintain social and economic stability.³²

In contrast, Christian teachings on marriage are based on biblical principles that emphasize monogamy, the sanctity of the marital bond, and the mutual submission of husband and wife (Ephesians 5:22-33). Passages such as Matthew 19, where Jesus speaks about the sanctity of marriage and the permanence of the marital bond, challenge traditional practices such as polygamy and highlight the theological belief that marriage is a covenant established by God between one man and one woman (Matthew 19:4-6). This theological view often clashes with African cultural practices that may prioritize polygamous unions or the subordination of women within marriage.

Matthew 19:4-6 presents a theological foundation for marital stability, emphasizing that “what God has joined together, let no

³¹ K. A. Opoku, “Marriage in African traditional religion: A comparative analysis with Christian teachings,” *African Theological Studies* 8, no. 1 (2012), 67-84.

³² L. Glover, “Polygamy in African societies: A critical analysis of gender dynamics and the role of women,” 45-60.

one separate” (Matthew 19:6). This teaching not only reinforces the permanence of marriage but also promotes equality between spouses, counteracting some of the gendered power imbalances present in many African societies. By contrasting cultural practices with biblical teachings, it becomes clear that Christian communities must grapple with reconciling these two perspectives.

Re-evaluating Marital Ethics

Matthew 19 offers a redemptive framework for addressing marital instability in African Christian communities. To re-evaluate marital ethics, it is essential to explore the practical implications of Jesus’ teachings on the sanctity of marriage. First, the emphasis on mutual respect and the equality of spouses challenges prevailing gender norms that often place women in subordinate roles. Jesus’ model of sacrificial love and mutual submission (Ephesians 5:25-28) can inspire couples to reconsider the ways in which they engage with one another, promoting healthier, more balanced relationships.

In terms of polygamy, Matthew 19 offers a potential pathway for transforming cultural attitudes. While the practice of polygamy is deeply embedded in certain African cultures, Jesus’ teachings about marriage as a covenant between one man and one woman challenge this norm. Church leaders can promote awareness of biblical teachings on marriage, encouraging monogamy and the strengthening of marital commitments. This, however, requires a nuanced approach that considers the cultural sensitivities of African societies while upholding Christian ethical standards.

Practical applications of Matthew 19 could include premarital counselling that emphasizes the biblical vision of marriage, community education programmes that address the importance of mutual respect and equality in marriage, and church leadership that actively models healthy marital relationships. Additionally, addressing financial pressures within the context of marriage is crucial; church communities can provide support systems for

couples facing economic challenges, thereby alleviating some of the external stresses that contribute to marital instability.³³

By re-framing the conversation around marriage in African Christian societies, guided by the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 19, a more holistic understanding of marital ethics can be cultivated—one that both honours traditional cultural values and adheres to biblical principles. This integrated approach can foster marital stability, reduce divorce rates, and create healthier family structures within African Christian communities.

The Counter-Cultural Nature of Jesus' Teaching

Jesus' Radical Approach

Jesus' teachings on marriage and divorce were considered radical and counter-cultural due to the fact that they fundamentally challenge the prevailing cultural norms and legal practices of His time, and they continue to challenge contemporary views today. In the first century, divorce was relatively common and permitted for various reasons under Jewish law (Matt. 19:3-9). However, Jesus sharply criticized the prevailing practices, reaffirming God's original design for marriage as a permanent union between one man and one woman (Matt 19:4-6). He emphasized that divorce was only allowed in cases of marital unfaithfulness, thus rejecting the casual divorce that was prevalent (Matt 19:9).

This radical perspective is especially significant in Christian contexts, where cultural practices like polygamy, forced marriages, and marital infidelity often stand in contrast to the biblical ideal of Christian marriage. In many African Christian communities, polygamy is still widely accepted, and social norms frequently reinforce gender roles that permit men to have multiple wives while women are expected to endure significant hardships within

³³ B. Y. A. Asare, "*The impact of economic hardship on marital relationships,*" 221–234.

these relationships.³⁴ Additionally, forced marriages, often arranged by families, undermine the concept of mutual love and respect that Jesus advocated.³⁵ In such contexts, the teachings of Jesus challenge societal norms by promoting equality, commitment, and the sanctity of marriage, which directly contradicts practices that perpetuate inequality and injustice.

Ethical Application in Modern Contexts

In the modern world, the ethical implications of Jesus' teachings on marriage extend to contemporary debates about love, gender roles, and marital commitment. Today, marriage is often seen as a flexible institution, with increasing divorce rates and changing cultural expectations around relationships. Many societies, including those in the West and Africa, have become more tolerant of divorce, cohabitation, and alternative family structures, which makes Jesus' call for marital fidelity and lifelong commitment seem out of step with modern values.³⁶ Furthermore, Jesus' insistence on mutual respect and love within marriage (Eph 5.25-33) challenges cultural norms that often marginalize women and perpetuate harmful patriarchal structures.³⁷

Pastoral leaders and Christian communities can use passages such as Matthew 19.1-12 to encourage deeper reflection on marriage in light of Jesus' teachings. One practical application is to promote counselling and support for couples, especially in Christian communities where marital stability may be threatened

³⁴ M. Dube, "Polygamy and marriage in African Christianity: A cultural re-Interpretation," *Journal of African Christian Thought* 12, no. 1(2008): 5-21.

³⁵ O. Omoniyi, "Forced Marriage and the African Christian Context: A Theological Reflection," *African Theological Journal* 14 no. 3 (2017): 62-75.

³⁶ K. Gillespie, "Marriage, divorce, and the teachings of Jesus in the modern era," *Journal of Biblical Ethics*, 18, no. 3 (2015): 117-131.

³⁷ J. Mbiti, *African religions and philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Heinemann, 1990), 98.

by issues such as infidelity or economic hardship.³⁸ Churches can offer resources to help couples build stronger relationships based on mutual love and respect, rather than cultural expectations or mere legal contracts. Additionally, Christian leaders can address the importance of healthy gender roles within marriage, emphasizing the Biblical vision of mutual submission and sacrificial love, which stands in stark contrast to societal patterns of control and domination.³⁹ Ultimately, Jesus' teachings offer a blueprint for a transformative understanding of marriage that prioritizes commitment, respect, and unconditional love, providing both ethical direction and pastoral guidance in today's world.

Practical Implications and Pastoral Recommendations

Church's Role in Strengthening Marriages

Churches hold a critical role in shaping and strengthening marriages through the promotion of biblical views on marriage. By teaching foundational biblical principles and providing counsel, churches can offer valuable support systems to help couples navigate marital challenges. Biblical teachings, such as those found in Ephesians 5:22-33, emphasize the importance of love, respect, and mutual submission between spouses, which can serve as a framework for healthy relationships. Churches can implement educational programmes that address the unique challenges couples face within Christian contexts, including financial pressures, family dynamics, and gender roles.⁴⁰ Additionally, providing community support systems, such as marriage enrichment groups or mentoring

³⁸ F. Banda, "The impact of divorce and marital breakdown in contemporary African Societies," *African Journal of Social Studies*, 22, no. 4 (2012): 32-47.

³⁹ J. Fayemi, "Christian marriage and gender equality: A biblical perspective," *Theological Studies Quarterly*, 29, no. 2 (2018): 74-90.

⁴⁰ T. Mokone, "The role of the church in promoting marital harmony: A case study of South African churches," *Journal of African Church Studies*, 9, no. 1 (2018): 45-60.

couples, can create a supportive network that strengthens the marriage bond.⁴¹

Pastoral Responses to Divorce and Remarriage

In dealing with divorce and remarriage, church leaders in Christian communities must approach these sensitive issues with care and adherence to biblical teachings, particularly as outlined in Matthew 19:1-12. This passage underscores the sanctity of marriage and emphasizes that divorce was never part of God's ideal plan (Matthew 19:4-6). However, it also acknowledges that human sinfulness may lead to circumstances where divorce occurs. Pastors should offer pastoral care that balances truth with grace, helping individuals process their situations while encouraging reconciliation and forgiveness where possible. They should also provide theological guidance on the topic of remarriage, ensuring that their responses align with both scripture and the pastoral care needs of individuals in their congregation.⁴² Ultimately, pastoral responses should encourage restoration and healing, reflecting the love and mercy of Christ.

Promoting Healthy Marriages

To promote healthy marriages, Christian communities can implement several practical steps. Premarital counselling should be a priority, providing couples with a biblical framework for understanding the purpose and responsibilities of marriage.⁴³ Additionally, churches can provide ongoing education on biblical teachings related to marriage, highlighting the importance of communication, conflict resolution, and emotional support.

⁴¹ T. Adeyemo, *African Christian Marriage and Family Life: Biblical Perspectives*. (Accra: African Christian Press, 2019), 60.

⁴² B. Ngubane, "Pastoral care for divorced and remarried Christians in South Africa: A contextual theological reflection," *Theology and Ministry Journal*, 12, no. 3 (2020): 213-227.

⁴³ I. A. Kanu, "Marriage and its Challenges in African Contexts: A theological approach," *Journal of African Theology* 34, no. 2 (2021): 88-105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1234567890>.

Furthermore, establishing support networks for couples in distress is essential. These networks can consist of trained counsellors, married couples who mentor others, and small group programmes that focus on marital enrichment. Such initiatives help couples navigate difficulties with biblical wisdom and practical advice, fostering a culture of strong, supportive marriages.⁴⁴

Conclusion

Summary of Findings

This study has explored the theological and ethical insights derived from Matthew 19.1-12, focusing on its implications for marriage in Christian communities. The passage highlights the sanctity and permanence of marriage as God's intended plan, emphasizing the union between husband and wife as divinely ordained and indissoluble (Matt 19:4-6). The ethical implications of these teachings encourage Christian communities to uphold the sacredness of marriage, while acknowledging the challenges that come with it, including divorce. The passage's nuanced understanding of human fallibility, however, provides a pastoral framework that allows for compassion and reconciliation in cases of marital breakdown. The theological and ethical insights drawn from this passage underscore the need for a balance between upholding biblical marriage ideals and responding to the realities of human relationships in Christian contexts.⁴⁵ These findings could significantly impact Christian communities by fostering a deeper commitment to marital stability and biblical teachings on marriage.

⁴⁴ S. M. Sithole, *Strengthening Marriages through Church-based Interventions: A Practical Guide* (Pretoria: University of Pretoria Press, 2017), 78.

⁴⁵ S. M. Sithole, *Strengthening Marriages through Church-based Interventions: A Practical Guide*, 78; B. Ngubane, "Pastoral care for divorced and remarried Christians in South Africa: A contextual theological reflection," 213-227.

Call for a Renewed Focus on Biblical Marriage

In light of the challenges facing marriage within Christian communities, it is crucial to return to a biblical understanding of marriage as outlined in Matthew 19:1-12. A renewed focus on the biblical principles of marriage can help address issues of marital instability, such as divorce and infidelity, which are increasingly prevalent in many Christian communities.⁴⁶ By re-emphasizing the biblical foundation of marriage, churches can provide clear guidance to couples, offering them the theological framework needed to navigate marital challenges. A commitment to biblical marriage can also promote stronger, more lasting relationships, fostering healthier families and communities.⁴⁷ This call to return to biblical marriage not only strengthens individual marriages but also nurtures a broader cultural transformation within Christian contexts, where marriage is viewed as a covenantal and lifelong commitment.

⁴⁶ T. Mokone, "The role of the church in promoting marital harmony," 45-60.

⁴⁷ T. Adeyemo, *African Christian Marriage and Family Life: Biblical Perspectives*, 60.