

The Gospel of Matthew, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 23: Marriage, Divorce, and Children

Matthew 19:1-15

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Matthew 19:1-15 is doctrinally weighty and pastorally tender, and it must be taught as both. The central doctrine is the permanence of marriage. Jesus reaches behind the rabbinic debates and behind even the law of Moses to God's design in creation: one man and one woman, joined by God into one flesh, not to be separated. Teach this clearly and without apology. Marriage is a covenant God Himself makes, and divorce is contrary to His original intention. Jesus also exposes the deeper issue, hardness of heart, and lifts up the single life lived for the kingdom as genuinely honorable.

At the same time, the harder questions of divorce and remarriage have been studied earnestly by godly men and women who love the Lord and revere His word, and faithful Christians have reached different conclusions on some of them. The exception Jesus names involving sexual immorality, the meaning of Moses' permission, and the question of remarriage have occupied serious students of Scripture for centuries. Your aim is not to settle every disputed point in one class or to bind your own judgment on every conscience. It is to anchor students in what is clear, to point them to the safe ground of 1 Corinthians 7, and to call each believer to study prayerfully and be fully convinced before God (Romans 14:5). Be especially gentle; almost every class includes someone touched by divorce.

Beyond the doctrine, this passage forms hearts. Jesus calls us to keep our hearts soft rather than hard, to honor both marriage and singleness as God's good gifts, and to welcome the little and the overlooked the way He welcomed the children. The God who guards the marriage covenant gathers children into His arms. Teach the truth firmly and hold out grace freely, so students leave both clearer about God's design and softer toward the people around them.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jesus answers the question about divorce by quoting Genesis on God's design: male and female, joined as one flesh, united by God Himself (vv. 4-6). What does Jesus teach here about what marriage truly is, and why does He ground it in creation rather than in the law of Moses?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice Jesus' method before His message. The Pharisees want to debate the grounds for divorce; Jesus answers by establishing the nature of marriage. He goes back past Moses to the beginning, to creation itself (vv. 4-5). He quotes Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:24: God made them

male and female, and the two become one flesh. The foundation of His teaching is not a rule but a design.

Draw out what marriage is according to Jesus. It is the union of one man and one woman. It is a leaving and a holding fast, a public, permanent reordering of life around a new family. It is a one-flesh union, a profound joining of two whole persons. And crucially, it is God's work: "what therefore God has joined together" (v. 6). Every true marriage has God as its maker.

Explain why He grounds it in creation rather than the law of Moses. The law addressed a fallen situation; creation reveals the original and abiding design. By going to the beginning, Jesus shows that marriage is rooted in the unchanging purpose of God, not in shifting human legislation. This is also why the New Testament can speak of marriage as picturing Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:31–32).

Help students feel the weight and beauty of this. Our culture treats marriage as a contract between two individuals, dissolvable when it stops working. Jesus treats it as a covenant God makes and witnesses. That changes everything about how we enter, honor, and protect it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Marriage as God's design from creation: one man, one woman, one flesh (Genesis 1:27; 2:24)
- Marriage as a covenant joined by God, not merely a human contract (v. 6)
- Beginning with God's design rather than the exceptions
- Marriage as a picture of Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:31–32)

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Jesus go back to creation instead of debating the law of Moses?
- How does seeing marriage as God's design change the way we approach it?
- What does it mean that God Himself is the one who joins a husband and wife?

Question 2

Student Question:

Jesus says, "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" (v. 6). How does seeing your own marriage, or marriage in general, as something God joins rather than a human arrangement change the way you treat that covenant?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question makes the doctrine personal. Jesus says God joins a husband and wife together, so that what looks like a human relationship is in fact a divine work (v. 6). The practical question is whether we treat our marriages, or our view of marriage, accordingly.

For the married, this reframes the daily realities. The spouse across the table was given by God and joined to you by God. The covenant is not held together merely by feelings or convenience but by the One who made it. That truth calls for faithfulness, perseverance, and active nurturing of the union.

For the unmarried, this still matters. It shapes how we regard others' marriages, how we would prepare for marriage, and how we honor the covenant in a culture that takes it lightly. No one is exempt from holding marriage in honor (Hebrews 13:4).

Be gentle and practical. Ask students to consider one way they could honor the God-joined nature of marriage this week: investing in their own marriage, encouraging a couple who is struggling, or simply refusing to speak of marriage in the throwaway terms our culture uses.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Marriage as a covenant to be honored by all (Hebrews 13:4)
- Faithfulness and perseverance flowing from marriage being God's work
- Honoring marriage in a culture that treats it casually
- The whole church's stake in upholding God's design

Discussion Prompts

- How does it change your daily attitude to see your spouse as given by God?
- If you are single, how can you honor God's design for marriage?
- What is one way you could strengthen or encourage a marriage this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

The Pharisees ask why Moses then commanded a certificate of divorce, and Jesus answers that Moses permitted it "because of your hardness of heart, but from the beginning it was not so" (vv. 7-8). What is the difference between what God permits because of human sin and what God designs and desires?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

When the Pharisees counter with Moses' certificate of divorce (Deuteronomy 24), Jesus makes a vital distinction: Moses permitted divorce because of hardness of heart, "but from the beginning it was not so" (v. 8). God's permission is not God's preference. The law regulated and limited a practice that already existed in a fallen world; it did not endorse it as the ideal.

This distinction matters far beyond divorce. Throughout Scripture God sometimes permits, regulates, or works around human sinfulness without approving it. We must never mistake what God tolerates in a fallen world for what God designed and desires. The standard is the beginning, the design, not the concession.

Apply it carefully. People sometimes reason, since God allowed it, it must be fine. Jesus dismantles that logic. The certificate of divorce protected a vulnerable woman in a hard situation; it did not bless the breaking of what God had joined. God's accommodations to human weakness are acts of mercy, not changes to His will.

Help students carry this principle into their own thinking. When we are tempted to treat a divine concession as a divine endorsement, we should ask instead: what was God's design from the beginning? That question keeps us aimed at His heart rather than at the lowest allowable standard.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The difference between what God permits and what God designs (v. 8)
- God's accommodation to human sin as mercy, not endorsement
- Creation design as the standard, not the concession
- The danger of treating God's tolerance as His approval

Discussion Prompts

- Where do people today confuse what God permits with what God approves?
- How does aiming at God's design rather than the minimum change our choices?
- Why is it important to read the law of Moses in light of the beginning?

Question 4

Student Question:

Jesus locates the root of divorce in "hardness of heart" (v. 8). Where in your relationships, marriage, family, or friendships, is your own heart in danger of growing hard, and what would it look like to keep it soft before God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus names the real culprit behind divorce: hardness of heart (v. 8). Before there is a certificate, there is a hardening, a slow calcifying of love into resentment, of tenderness into self-protection. This question turns the spotlight from doctrine to the condition of our own hearts.

A hard heart does not usually happen all at once. It grows through unforgiven offenses, unspoken resentments, contempt allowed to settle, and grace withheld. It can harden a marriage, but also a friendship, a relationship with a parent or child, a place in the church.

Help students examine where hardness is creeping in. Is there a relationship where they have stopped extending grace, where bitterness has taken root, where they have quietly given up? Hardness of heart is reversible, but only if it is named and brought to God.

Point to the remedy. God promises to take away the heart of stone and give a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26). Soft hearts are kept soft through repentance, forgiveness, honest prayer, and the daily choice to love. Encourage one concrete step toward softness this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Hardness of heart as the root of broken relationships (v. 8)
- The gradual nature of hardening through unforgiveness and resentment
- God's promise to replace a heart of stone with a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26)
- Repentance and forgiveness as the path to a soft heart

Discussion Prompts

- Where is your heart most in danger of growing hard right now?
- What tends to harden your heart toward the people closest to you?
- What would it look like to keep your heart soft before God this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus names sexual immorality in connection with the exception to His teaching on divorce (v. 9). What does this passage teach about how seriously God regards faithfulness within marriage, and about the weight and permanence of the marriage covenant?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus names sexual immorality (the Greek *porneia*) in connection with the one exception to His teaching that divorce and remarriage constitute adultery (v. 9). However we ultimately understand the scope of that exception, and faithful believers differ, the point of the verse is unmistakable: marital faithfulness matters enormously to God, and the covenant is weighty and binding.

Help students feel the seriousness. Jesus treats the breaking of the marriage covenant as a grave matter, not a private preference. The one-flesh union is so real that tearing it apart does deep damage, which is why God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16), not because He hates people, but because He hates what it does to them.

This is the right place to teach the permanence and weight of the covenant, and to reserve the disputed questions of the exception and remarriage for the heavier treatment in Question 9. Here, keep the focus on the high value God places on faithfulness and on guarding the covenant before it is ever broken.

Bring it home practically. Faithfulness is protected long before a crisis, in the daily guarding of the heart, the eyes, and the affections, and in the active nurturing of the marriage. The best defense of the covenant is a marriage tended with care and a heart kept pure.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The seriousness of marital faithfulness to God (v. 9)
- The weight and binding nature of the one-flesh covenant
- God's hatred of divorce as concern for His people (Malachi 2:16)
- Guarding the covenant through daily faithfulness of heart and life

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God take faithfulness within marriage so seriously?
- How is the marriage covenant protected long before any crisis?
- What guards your own heart and affections in faithfulness to God's design?

Question 6

Student Question:

The disciples react by saying that if marriage is this serious, it may be better not to marry (v. 10). Where are you tempted to back away from God's high calling because it feels too demanding, and how does Jesus meet you in that?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The disciples' reaction is almost comic in its honesty: if the commitment is this serious and this permanent, "it is better not to marry" (v. 10). They had absorbed the casual view of divorce, and Jesus' high standard stuns them. Their response reveals how demanding genuine discipleship can feel when we first really hear it.

Use this to surface a common spiritual move: when God's call feels too high, we are tempted to lower it, dodge it, or back away from it entirely rather than lean into His grace. The disciples wanted an escape hatch; Jesus offered them a higher vision instead.

Apply it broadly. We do the same with forgiveness, with generosity, with purity, with truth-telling. The standard feels impossible, so we quietly conclude it must not really apply to us. Jesus does not lower the bar, but neither does He leave us alone to reach it.

Point to grace. The same Lord who calls us to a demanding faithfulness gives the grace, the Spirit, and the community to live it. The answer to a high calling is not retreat but dependence on the God who enables what He commands.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The high cost and calling of genuine discipleship (v. 10)
- The temptation to lower or dodge God's standard when it feels demanding
- God's grace to enable what He commands (Philippians 2:13)
- Leaning into grace rather than retreating from the call

Discussion Prompts

- Where does God's calling feel too demanding to you right now?
- How are you tempted to back away rather than depend on His grace?
- How has God enabled you to do something that once felt impossible?

Question 7

Student Question:

Jesus speaks of those who remain single "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" and says, "Let the one who is able to receive this receive it" (vv. 11–12). How does this passage honor the single life, and what does it teach the whole church about valuing both marriage and singleness?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus speaks of three kinds of people who do not marry, including those who choose singleness "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven," and He says, "Let the one who is able to receive this receive it" (vv. 11–12). Far from treating singleness as second-class, Jesus honors it as a genuine calling that can free a person for undivided devotion to the Lord.

This is important and often neglected teaching. Both Jesus Himself and the apostle Paul were single, and Paul speaks of singleness as a gift that allows undistracted devotion to the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:32–35). The church should never make married people feel like the only complete Christians, nor treat singles as merely waiting for real life to begin.

Help the class value both states rightly. Marriage and singleness are each gifts from God, each with their own joys, callings, and challenges. A healthy church honors and includes both, and learns from both.

Be sensitive to the singles in the room, whether never married, widowed, or divorced. Affirm that a full, fruitful, God-honoring life is entirely possible in singleness, and that their devotion to Christ is precious to Him and valuable to the body.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Singleness for the sake of the kingdom as an honorable calling (vv. 11–12)
- Singleness as a gift that can allow undivided devotion to the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:32–35)
- Both marriage and singleness as good gifts from God
- The church's call to honor and include both the married and the single

Discussion Prompts

- How does this passage challenge the way we sometimes treat single people?
- What can the church learn from those who serve the Lord in singleness?
- How can we better honor both marriage and singleness in the body of Christ?

Question 8

Student Question:

When the disciples turn children away, Jesus rebukes them and welcomes the little ones (vv. 13–15). Who are the people you are tempted to treat as interruptions or as unimportant, and how might Jesus be calling you to receive them instead?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The scene shifts tenderly. People bring children to Jesus to be blessed, and the disciples, perhaps thinking the Master too important for such small matters, rebuke them. Jesus is indignant in the parallel account (Mark 10:14) and says, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven” (v. 14).

This question presses on our tendency to sort people into the important and the negligible. The disciples treated children as interruptions to the real work. Jesus treated them as welcome guests of the kingdom. He consistently noticed and received the people others overlooked.

Ask students to name their own version of the children pushed aside: the elderly, the disabled, the newcomer, the person who talks too long, the child who needs patience, the one who can do nothing for us in return. Whom do we treat as an interruption to our real priorities?

Hold up Jesus’ example. The kingdom belongs “to such” as these, to the small, the dependent, the lowly. To receive them is to look like Jesus; to hinder them is to stand in His way. Encourage one concrete act of welcome this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus’ welcome of children and the lowly (vv. 13–14)
- The kingdom belonging to the humble and dependent (v. 14; 18:3)
- The danger of sorting people into important and negligible
- Receiving the overlooked as a mark of Christlikeness

Discussion Prompts

- Who do you tend to treat as an interruption rather than a person to welcome?
- How does Jesus’ welcome of children challenge your priorities?
- What is one concrete way you can receive an overlooked person this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Jesus teaches the permanence of marriage with great clarity, yet questions about divorce and remarriage have been studied earnestly by faithful believers who reach different conclusions.

How can a Christian hold firmly to God's design for marriage, think honestly and humbly about the harder questions of divorce and remarriage, find safe ground, and remain tender toward those who carry the wound of a broken marriage?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest and most sensitive question of the lesson, and it deserves careful, humble treatment. Begin by affirming what is clearest, because here there is no serious disagreement among those who take Scripture seriously: God's design for marriage from the beginning was one man and one woman joined for life, and God hates the devastation that divorce brings (Genesis 2:24; Malachi 2:16). Teach the permanence of marriage plainly and let it stand without softening.

Then be honest about where the harder questions begin. In Matthew 19 the Pharisees framed their question around the law of Moses (Deuteronomy 24), and Jesus answered within that discussion, naming an exception involving sexual immorality (v. 9) to people still living under the Law. Faithful, godly Christians who love the Lord and revere His word have reached different conclusions about how to apply that exception and about remarriage. Some hold that divorce and remarriage are permitted only for sexual immorality. Some add desertion by an unbelieving spouse, drawing on Paul's words that the believer in such a case "is not enslaved" (1 Corinthians 7:15). Some, weighing the audience and setting of Matthew 19, conclude that Christians have somewhat broader liberty under grace and look first to Paul's instructions to the church. This is not a debate a single class can settle, and you should not pretend it can or bind your own judgment on every conscience.

Point clearly to the safe ground of 1 Corinthians 7. Paul lays out a path on which a believer cannot go wrong. For someone whose marriage is broken, three options carry zero chance of being mistaken: remain unmarried, be reconciled to the spouse (1 Corinthians 7:11), or, after a spouse has died, be free to marry, only in the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:39). Any other path may turn out to be permissible in God's sight, but it carries at least the possibility of being wrong, and that alone deserves careful, prayerful weight before God. Some views, of course, cannot possibly be right, such as divorce for trivial or selfish causes, which flatly contradicts what Jesus taught here. But among the views that take the marriage covenant seriously, more than one is held by serious students of Scripture.

Call each believer to personal conviction. Romans 14:5 charges each of us to be fully convinced in his own mind, and Romans 14:23 warns that whatever is not from faith is sin. So urge your students to study the passages prayerfully, weigh them honestly, and act on the conclusion they can hold with a clear conscience before God, not merely on what a preacher, an elder, or a long-standing assumption has handed them unexamined.

Finally, be tender, because someone in your class is almost certainly carrying the weight of a broken marriage. God hates divorce because of what it does to His people, but He does not hate the divorced. He loves them. He is faithful and just to forgive (1 John 1:9), and repentance is

always the door back to fellowship with the Father. The woman at the well had five husbands, and Jesus offered her living water (John 4:17–18). In Christ the old has passed away and the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). Teach the truth without flinching, and hold out grace without reserve.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's design of marriage as permanent, the clear and undisputed foundation (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4–6)
- The exception for sexual immorality named by Jesus, spoken in the context of the law of Moses (v. 9)
- The range of faithful views on divorce and remarriage held by serious students of Scripture, none of which a single class should bind on every conscience
- The safe ground of 1 Corinthians 7: remain unmarried, be reconciled, or remarry only after a spouse's death and only in the Lord
- The call for each believer to be fully convinced before God (Romans 14:5, 23)
- God's grace and tenderness toward the divorced who come to Him in repentance (1 John 1:9; John 4:1–26; 2 Corinthians 5:17)

Discussion Prompts

- What is the clear, undisputed ground that all faithful Christians can stand on regarding marriage?
- Why is 1 Corinthians 7 described as safe ground for someone facing these questions?
- How can we hold firmly to the truth about marriage while being genuinely tender toward those wounded by divorce?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking back over the whole passage, from marriage to children to singleness, name one specific way Jesus is calling you to honor His design, soften your heart, or welcome someone He loves this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Use the capstone to gather the whole passage, which moves from marriage to singleness to children, all held together by the heart of Jesus. The thread running through it is that God has a good design, and that God is tender with His people. Faithfulness to His design and tenderness toward people are not opposites; in Jesus they are one.

Invite each student to find their own point of response. For some it will be honoring God's design for marriage more seriously. For others it will be softening a heart that has grown hard.

For others it will be valuing singleness rightly, or welcoming someone they have treated as an interruption.

Press for one specific step. The passage is too rich to leave at general agreement. Ask each person to name a single concrete way they will respond this week, and consider a moment of quiet for them to write it down.

Close in worship and grace. The Lord who guards the marriage covenant is the same Lord who gathered children into His arms. He is firm and gentle, holy and merciful. Lead your class to trust His design and to rest in His tenderness, asking Him to form both in them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The unity of faithfulness to God's design and tenderness toward people
- Honoring marriage, singleness, and the overlooked as expressions of Christlikeness
- Concrete, specific obedience as the fruit of genuine encounter with Christ
- Resting in the grace and tenderness of Jesus

Discussion Prompts

- What one truth from this passage is God most pressing on your heart?
- What specific step will you take this week in response?
- How can this class pray for you, especially if these questions touch a tender place?