

The Gospel of Matthew

Lesson 23: Marriage, Divorce, and Children -- Matthew 19:1–15

The Pharisees come to Jesus with a question, but it is not an honest one. Matthew tells us plainly they came “to test him” (v. 3). The question of divorce was a hot dispute in their day, with rival schools arguing over how easily a man could send his wife away, some saying only for serious cause, others saying for almost any reason at all, even a burned meal. They want to trap Jesus in the crossfire. Instead, He lifts the whole conversation up and out of their squabble, back to the beginning, back to the heart of God.

“Have you not read,” He answers, “that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female?” Then He quotes the words spoken at the first wedding in Eden: a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. And He draws the conclusion the Pharisees did not want to hear: “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (v. 6). Marriage is not a human arrangement to be dissolved at will. It is a divine union, glued together by God Himself.

When they push back with Moses and his certificate of divorce, Jesus makes a piercing distinction. Moses permitted divorce “because of your hardness of heart, but from the beginning it was not so” (v. 8). God’s permission of something is not the same as God’s design for it. The disciples are so shaken by the high view of marriage that they blurt out it might be better not to marry at all. Clearly this is holy ground, and it must be walked carefully and tenderly.

And then, as if to show us the heart behind the doctrine, people start bringing little children to Jesus. The disciples try to shoo them away, too busy and important for such small interruptions. But Jesus says, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven” (v. 14). The same Lord who guards the permanence of marriage gathers the children into His arms. He is fierce about His design and gentle with His people, and we need both this morning.

Group Discussion: When the Pharisees ask about divorce, Jesus answers by going all the way back to creation and God’s original design for marriage. Why do you think He refuses to argue about the exceptions first, and what does that teach us about where we should begin when we think about marriage today?

Personal Reflection: Jesus says marriage is a one-flesh union that God Himself joins together. Whether you are married, single, divorced, or hoping to marry one day, how does seeing marriage as God’s design rather than a human contract change the way you think about your own life and relationships?

Read Matthew 19:1–15

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?

7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Genesis 2:18–25, God’s design of marriage as a one-flesh union from the beginning; 1 Corinthians 7:10–16, Paul’s instructions to the church on marriage, separation, and the believer who is left; 1 Corinthians 7:39, the widow free to remarry only in the Lord; Malachi 2:13–16, God as witness to the marriage covenant; Mark 10:13–16, Jesus welcoming and blessing the little children.