

The Christian Home

Lesson 5: Covenant Love: Permanence, Forgiveness, and God's View of Divorce -- Matthew 19:3–9; Malachi 2:13–16

Almost everyone reading these words has been touched by divorce. Perhaps you watched your own parents' marriage come apart and you still carry the ache of that broken home. Perhaps you have signed papers you never imagined you would sign, and the memory still stings. Perhaps you sit beside someone in the pew on Sunday who is quietly carrying that grief. This is tender ground, and we walk it carefully, because behind every word about divorce there are real people and real wounds. So let us begin not with a debate but with the God who designed marriage and who weeps over what sin does to it.

When the Pharisees came to Jesus with a hot-button question of their day, whether a man could divorce his wife "for any cause," they expected Him to take a side in the rabbis' argument. Instead He did what He always did. He went back to the beginning, back to the garden, back to God's design: "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female," and "what therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." The word for "joined" is a word that means to glue or cement two things into one. Marriage, Jesus says, is not a contract two people sign and tear up at will. It is a union God Himself makes, and that is why it is meant to last a lifetime.

The prophet Malachi shows us the heart of God on this with startling force. He pictures the altar wet with the tears of wives who have been cast aside, and he says God will not accept the worship of the men who have dealt treacherously with the wife of their youth. "The man who does not love his wife but divorces her," God says, "covers his garment with violence." And then the line that should make all of us tremble: God hates divorce. Not because He despises the people caught in it, but because He loves them and grieves the devastation it brings, the broken vows, the wounded children, the shattered trust.

Here is the road we will walk in this lesson. We will hold firmly to what Scripture makes clear: that God designed marriage to be the lifelong, one-flesh union of one man and one woman, that He hates divorce and the ruin it causes, and that divorce for trivial or selfish reasons flatly contradicts the Lord. We will also be honest that faithful, Bible-believing Christians have come to different conclusions on some of the harder questions, and we will not pretend those questions away. And we will keep saying, all the way through, that God hates divorce but He does not hate the divorced, that repentance is always the open door back to the Father, and that in Christ all things can be made new. Read these passages prayerfully, and let the God of the covenant speak.

Group Discussion: Our culture often speaks of divorce as a private decision with no larger meaning, simply two people choosing to move on. Scripture speaks of it as the tearing apart of

something God has joined, and says that God hates it because of what it does to people. Why do you think God takes the permanence of marriage so seriously, and what is lost when a society treats marriage as easily dissolved?

Personal Reflection: Wherever you find yourself, married, single, or carrying the weight of a past divorce, consider how you have thought about the permanence of marriage. Have you quietly held an escape hatch in your mind, or believed that some wounds put a marriage beyond hope? Where do you need to hear, today, both God's call to covenant faithfulness and His grace for the broken?

Read Matthew 19:3–9; Malachi 2:13–16

Study Questions

1. When the Pharisees test Him about divorce, Jesus answers by returning to creation: "He who created them from the beginning made them male and female," and "what therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matthew 19:4–6). What does it mean that God, not the couple alone, joins a husband and wife together, and how does that truth establish marriage as a lifelong union rather than a contract we are free to dissolve?
2. Jesus treats marriage as a permanent bond, not an arrangement to be kept only as long as it is convenient. Have you ever quietly held an unspoken escape hatch in your own mind, an 'if it gets bad enough, I can always leave'? How might fully embracing the permanence of the covenant change the way you invest in your marriage or prepare for one?
3. Malachi confronts men who wept at the altar while God refused their worship, because they had been faithless to "the wife of your youth ... your companion and your wife by covenant" (Malachi 2:13–14). Why does God tie a man's worship so directly to how he treats his wife, and what does it tell us that God calls Himself a witness to the marriage covenant?
4. Malachi warns, "let none of you be faithless to the wife of his youth." Faithlessness rarely begins with a dramatic betrayal; it grows quietly through neglected promises and small treacheries. Where might you be tempted toward little unfaithfulnesses, of attention, of honesty, of devotion, that erode a covenant over time? What would guarding your faithfulness look like in practice?
5. When the Pharisees press Him about why Moses 'allowed' divorce, Jesus answers, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so" (Matthew 19:8). What does it mean that divorce was a concession to human sin rather than part of God's design, and what does Jesus mean by "hardness of heart"?
6. Jesus locates the root of marital breakdown in hardness of heart, the slow calcifying of love into resentment, pride, or indifference. Where do you sense hardness creeping into your own heart toward your spouse or others close to you? What would it take to let God soften that hardness before it does its damage?
7. Covenant love is sustained not by the absence of failure but by the ongoing practice of forgiveness and reconciliation. God Himself models this, remaining faithful to an unfaithful people and making all things new in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). How does the gospel of

forgiveness shape the way a marriage survives and heals, and what hope does it hold out even to those whose marriages have already been broken?

8. Forgiveness is the lifeblood of any lasting marriage, yet we often nurse old wounds and keep accounts of wrongs. Is there a resentment you have been holding against your spouse, a parent, or someone close to you that God is calling you to release? What is one concrete step toward reconciliation you could take, trusting God with the result?
9. In Matthew 19:9 Jesus says, “whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.” Some things here are clear and beyond serious dispute among those who take Scripture seriously: God’s design is the lifelong union of one man and one woman, divorce for trivial or selfish causes contradicts Jesus, and polygamy is excluded. Other questions, such as the precise scope of the ‘exception’ and whether and when remarriage is permitted, are questions on which faithful Christians have reached different conclusions. What do you understand Scripture to teach clearly here, where do honest believers differ, and how should a Christian go about becoming fully convinced in his own conscience before God (Romans 14:5)?
10. Look back across both passages, and across the whole weight of this lesson, God’s design, His grief over divorce, His call to faithfulness, and His abundant grace for the broken. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these truths. Whether you most need to deepen your commitment, soften your heart, extend forgiveness, or receive grace for a past failure, what is the one thing you most need to carry into this coming week?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Mark 10:2–12, Jesus’ parallel teaching grounding marriage in creation; 1 Corinthians 7:10–16, Paul’s instructions to the married, including the departing unbeliever; 1 Corinthians 7:39, a wife bound as long as her husband lives, then free to remarry only in the Lord; Hosea 3:1, God’s redeeming love for an unfaithful spouse as a picture of His covenant faithfulness; 2 Corinthians 5:17, the new creation in Christ in whom the old has passed away