

## The Son Teaches the Ethics of His Kingdom: On Marriage and Divorce

Matthew 19:3–12

**As Matthew tells the story of Jesus’s life and ministry, he tells the truth about the Pharisees’ combativeness toward Jesus.** They are constantly confronting Jesus, not least whenever he draws nearer to Jerusalem (for example, Matt 12:1; 15:1; 16:1). Jesus has made plain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer, die, and be raised (16:21; 17:22–23), and he has led his disciples from Galilee into Judea (19:1–2). Like clockwork, the Pharisees then find Jesus and “test” him (19:3).

In particular, the Pharisees try to entrap Jesus by inciting him to misspeak or anger people regarding his interpretation of the Law (19:3). The Pharisees quite deliberately choose a provocative topic: divorce. Just as matters relating to marriage and divorce are controversial in our day, so also they were in Jesus’s day—even if some of the particular issues differ. But Jesus does not shy away from directly responding to the Pharisees’ questions (19:4–9). In fact, he even further instructs his disciples regarding the ethics of community life in the kingdom of heaven (19:10–12). In the process, Jesus clarifies the radically distinct nature of the ethics of his kingdom, relative to the Pharisees’ ethic.

The way Jesus directly, clearly, and wisely responds to the Pharisees (and the disciples) sets a good example for us. Sometimes we wrongly imagine that when matters are delicate or controversial, we should refrain from dealing with them clearly. But wisdom demands that we articulate biblical truth clearly, *not least* when those biblical principles are commonly misunderstood or misapplied. Wisdom also demands that we articulate that biblical truth graciously, humbly, and compassionately, relying on God’s mercy toward broken, weary sinners like us. As Paul urges, “*Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person*” (Col 4:6).

Jesus’s instruction is not merely revolutionary in his day. It is also revolutionary in ours. Only those who humble themselves before God like a child will receive it (see Matt 18:1–6; 19:13–15). For example, Jesus’s clarity about God’s purpose for marriage (19:4–6, 8–9) stands against our culture’s lackadaisical attitude about so-called no-fault divorce. And Jesus’s clarity about the all-surpassing importance of the kingdom of heaven for some “who have made themselves eunuchs” (19:11–12) stands against our culture’s obsession with romance and marriage as the end-all-be-all. Each of us will be challenged and confronted by Jesus’s words, if we are hearing them rightly.

**We all have experienced pain and frustration** relating to the topics of marriage, divorce, and singleness. Some of us are single and wish we could be married. Some of us are married and wish we could be single or married to someone different. Some of us are widows. Some of us have experienced betrayal and loss that resulted in divorce. All of us have sinned in some way and fallen short of God’s demands relating to sex and marriage. In our small-group discussions this week, let’s be particularly sensitive to one another in this regard. As we allow Jesus’s words to challenge and confront us, it is important that we remember Jesus’s heart. Jesus tells us the truth because he loves us. He desires that we know the joy and freedom of glorifying our heavenly Father through our obedience. Just as none of us is outside the target of his truths, so also none of us is beyond the hope he offers.

**Basic Preparation:** Read Matt 19:3–12, and respond to questions 5, 6, 10, 14, 15, 17.

### Full Preparation: Five-Day Plan

- **Day 1:** Read Matt 19:3–9; Questions 1–3
- **Day 2:** Read Matt 19:3–12; Questions 4–5
- **Day 3:** Read Matt 19:3–12; Questions 6–10
- **Day 4:** Review Matt 19:3–12; Questions 11–14
- **Day 5:** Review Matt 19:3–12; Questions 15–17

## HEAR THE WORD

**Pray** that God will open your heart to receive his Word. Pray that by his Word he'll strengthen you in knowing Christ, becoming like Christ, and making Christ known. Then, remaining in that posture of prayerful God-reliance, **read** the full passage (perhaps even aloud). For help in answering these questions, see the appendix, which defines tools for biblical exposition and offers guidance on how to use them.

1. When Jesus leaves Galilee and enters Judea, the Pharisees confront him to test him (19:3). They pose to Jesus a series of challenging ethical questions, specifically pertaining to divorce (19:3, 7). They feel threatened by this rabbi's popularity and authority, so they attempt to lead him to say something controversial that would diminish his support base.

What do the Pharisees' strategy and specific questions reveal about their heart?

2. In Jesus's response to the Pharisees' first question about the lawfulness of divorce "for any cause" (19:3), Jesus appeals to the Law. Specifically, he alludes to Gen 1:27 and cites Gen 2:24. Review Gen 1:26–28 and Gen 2:18–25. (See also Malachi 2:15.) What is Jesus's main point here, in Matt 19:4–6?

3. Following Jesus's initial response, the Pharisees follow up in a further effort to entrap Jesus by appealing to the Law themselves (Deut 24:1–4).

- a. Review Deut 24:1–4. What is the main intent of this law? What is Moses's (and God's) aim/purpose in giving these instructions in Deuteronomy?

- b. What is Jesus's main point in his response to the Pharisees' second test, in Matt 19:8–9?

4. Various other biblical passages deal with issues relating to marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Review each of the following passages, and note what each *particularly* contributes to the topic.

- a. Jesus's instruction to his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:31–32)

- b. Paul's instruction to the local church in Ephesus (Eph 5:22–33)

c. Paul's instruction to the local church in Rome (Rom 7:1–3)

d. Paul's instruction to the local church in Corinth (1 Cor 7:10–16, 39)

5. The disciples express astonishment over Jesus's response to the Pharisees (Matt 19:10).

a. In particular, what astonished the disciples (19:10)?

b. What main point does Jesus make in response to his disciples' question (19:11–12)?

On hearing Jesus's response to the Pharisees' question about divorce, the disciples conclude, *in my paraphrase*, "If it's really the case that when a person remarries after divorcing (except in instances when sexual immorality has precipitated the divorce), he or she is committing adultery, then people shouldn't even get married!" (Matt 19:10).

But Jesus qualifies their conclusion. To do so, he uses the analogy of a "eunuch," which is (often) a man who has been castrated, usually in order to serve a specific civil or social function, such as in the service of a queen (see Acts 8:26–40). Jesus explains that only those who are "eunuchs" (literally or metaphorically) should actively refrain from marrying. Jesus mentions three types of "eunuchs":

- (1) born "eunuchs," that is, people born without the capacity for sexual intercourse;
- (2) man-made, career-related eunuchs, that is, men who have been castrated for a particular reason;
- (3) voluntary "eunuchs," that is, those men and women who choose abstinence in order to advance the kingdom of heaven (see, for example, Paul's discussion in 1 Cor 7:32–35).

6. What are some **themes** (that is, recurring ideas) of this passage?

*Note specific verses in your answer.*

Pick one of those themes. How is this theme relevant to your current circumstances?

7. What are the distinct parts of this passage, and how do they hold together **structurally**?

*To show the passage's shape, briefly outline it in whatever form of outline you prefer.*

8. What does this passage **mainly** reveal about the character and ways of **God**, specifically the Lord Jesus Christ? *Articulate your answer in one sentence.*

9. Based on the passage's various themes and structure, what do you think is its **unifying theme**? *Articulate the passage's main, unifying theme in one sentence.*

10. Considering all that you have observed about this passage, how would you summarize the author's main **aim/purpose** in writing it? That is, what effect did Matthew intend his words to have in his original audience? *Articulate the author's aim in one sentence.*

**The gospel of the kingdom enjoins whole-hearted loyalty to the Savior King. May we humbly receive and obey his instruction regarding marriage, as glad citizens of his kingdom.**

In Tim and Kathy Keller's book on marriage, they comment on Paul's instructions in 1 Cor 7:25–40, where Paul shows the implications for marriage and singleness of Jesus's having ushered in the kingdom of God. The Kellers write:

What does this mean for our attitude toward marriage and family? Paul says it means that both being married and not being married are good conditions to be in. We should be neither overly elated by getting married nor overly disappointed by not being so—because Christ is the only spouse that can truly fulfill us and God's family is the only family that will truly embrace and satisfy us. ...

Christianity's founder, Jesus Christ, and leading theologian, St. Paul, were both single their entire lives. Single adults cannot be seen as somehow less fully formed or realized human beings than married persons because Jesus Christ, a single man, was the perfect man (Hebrews 4:15; 1 Peter 2:22). Paul's assessment in 1 Corinthians 7 is that singleness is a good condition blessed by God, and in many circumstances, it is actually better than marriage. As a result of this revolutionary attitude, the early church did not pressure people to marry (as we see in Paul's letter) and institutionally supported poor widows so they did not have to remarry. ...

Why did the early church have this attitude? The Christian gospel and hope of the future kingdom de-idolized marriage. There was no more radical act in that day and time than to live a life that did not produce heirs. Having children was the main way to achieve significance for an adult, since children would remember you. They also gave you security, since they would care for you in old age. Christians who remained single, then, were making the statement that our future is not guaranteed by the family but by God.

Tim & Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God*, 194–96.

More recently, Sam Allberry has written on marriage and singleness. In a summary of his book, he argues:

Both married people and single people need to understand what the Bible says about singleness. If married people don't understand the Bible's teaching on singleness, it probably means they haven't understood the Bible's teaching on marriage. ... Both marriage and singleness testify to the gospel. Marriage shows us the **shape** of the gospel in that it models the covenant promises that God has made to us in Christ. Singleness shows us the **sufficiency** of the gospel because it shows us the reality of what marriage points to—which is our own relationship with Jesus.

(Bolding is mine) <https://www.crossway.org/articles/how-both-singleness-and-marriage-testify-to-the-gospel/>

## DO THE WORD

Relying on God's grace, we believers in Christ must not only be *hearers* of the Word, but *doers* of the Word (see James 1:22). The following questions lead us to consider how God pierces our hearts through this passage and equips us for life and godliness.

11. In what ways do you find this passage accomplishing the **author's aim/purpose in your own heart**? *Refer to your summary of the author's aim/purpose in the previous section.*
  
12. Having studied Matt 19:3–12 and having read the excerpts on pg 5, what is **one way you would like to make progress in developing a more Christ-centered perspective** of your own situation, whether as a married or unmarried woman? What practical steps will you take this week to do so? *Be specific.*
  
13. If you more fully believed what this passage reveals about God, what's **one thing that would change** in your life—perhaps a change in attitude, practice, thought life, a relational pattern, or something else? *Refer to your summary of what the passage mainly reveals about God.*
  
14. Practically, how will you rely this week on the **resources God provides you** to trust this truth about him? *Consider how this passage indicates certain divine provision for believers' ongoing and ever-deepening trust.*

**Word-Filled Prayer** | Respond to God's Word by writing out a prayer to him.  
*Allow the words and ideas of this passage to guide your heart's meditation.*  
*Let the passage's revelation of Jesus shape your praise and petitions.*

## RETELL THE WORD

Relying on God's grace, we believers in Christ must not only be *hearers* and *doers* of the Word, but *sharers* of the Word. That is, God grants his redeemed-in-Christ image bearers the privilege of seeking opportunities in our various relationships to **retell God's Word clearly, wisely, and boldly** (see Eph 6:17–20; Col 4:2–6; 1 Pet 2:9–12; 3:15–16).

15. Who is **someone** with whom you want to retell the truths of this passage, especially its main theme and what it mainly reveals about God—perhaps a coworker, friend, family member, or neighbor?

*Specific person/group:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Specific truth to share:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Possible occasion for sharing this truth:* \_\_\_\_\_

16. What are some examples of how a believer might **unwisely communicate** the biblical principles of Matt 19:3–12, especially to a non-Christian or someone who has experienced severe pain associated with marriage and/or divorce? *Identify at least three pitfalls to avoid when articulating these principles; for example, “When retelling the truths of Matt 19:3–12, take care not to ...”*

17. How will your retelling and applications of this passage turn your listener(s) to **the person and work of Jesus Christ**, who is at the center of the Scriptures?

**Word-Filled Prayer** | Respond to God's Word by writing out a prayer for this person/ group.

*You may want to use words and ideas from the passage as you pray. Pray that God would open a door in their heart for his Word and enable you to speak his Word clearly, wisely, and boldly.*

*Pray that God's Spirit would help you exalt the Lord Jesus in your retelling.*

## **Notes from Video Instruction**



## Notes from Small-Group Discussion

### Small-Group Discussion Questions:

**Opening Question:** In your opinion, what's the biggest difference between the way the Bible talks about marriage and the way "Hollywood" often portrays and talks about marriage?

#### HEAR THE WORD

1. **Read Matt 19:3–12.** Discuss Study-Guide question 1.
2. Discuss Study-Guide question 2.
3. *If there is enough time:* Discuss Study-Guide question 3.
4. Discuss Study-Guide question 5.
5. What does this passage mainly reveal about Jesus? *Study-Guide question 8.*

#### DO THE WORD

6. Discuss Study-Guide question 12.
7. If you more fully believed what this passage reveals about God, what's **one thing that would change** in your life? How so? *Study-Guide question 13.*

#### RETELL THE WORD

8. Discuss Study-Guide question 16.
9. What are some opportunities and strategies for sharing this truth about Jesus? *Be specific. Refer to Study-Guide question 17.*

**Conclude by praying for one another in light of the passage.**