

NOON BIBLE STUDY: MATTHEW 19 (PART 1)

If you remember, this section is Matthew's collection of Jesus' teachings on interpersonal relationships. We have seen him address topics like stumbling blocks, conflict resolution and forgiveness. Now he will teach about marriage and divorce.

Matthew 19:1-3 - #1 - The Question

When the Pharisees ask Jesus this question, they are thinking back to the original teaching on divorce from Deuteronomy 24:1-4, where Moses permitted divorce if a husband found "something indecent" in his wife.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 - "When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found **some indecency** in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house, 2 and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man's wife, 3 and if the latter husband turns against her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her to be his wife, 4 then her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance.

As we have previously discussed, there was much discussion and debate on what "something indecent" means. There are two main schools of thought on what this might mean:

1 - School Of Shammai (Stict)

The School of Shammai held a conservative and restrictive view on divorce. According to their interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1, the phrase "some indecency" was taken to mean sexual immorality or marital unfaithfulness only. Shammai taught that a man could not divorce his wife unless there was clear evidence of adultery or similar sexual sin. This view sought to preserve the sanctity and permanence of marriage, offering protection for women in a culture where easy divorce could leave them vulnerable and shamed.

This position is reflected in the Mishnah Gittin 9:10, which quotes the school as saying, "*A man may not divorce his wife unless he finds out about her having engaged in a matter of forbidden sexual intercourse.*" In many ways, Jesus' response in Matthew 19 aligns more closely with this stricter view, as He reaffirms God's original design for marriage and limits divorce to cases of sexual immorality.

2 - School of Hillel (Loose)

In contrast, the School of Hillel took a much more permissive stance on the grounds for divorce. They interpreted “some indecency” far more broadly to include anything that displeased the husband, even trivial matters. For example, the Mishnah records that Hillel taught a man could divorce his wife *“even if she spoiled his dish.”* This lenient approach opened the door to divorce for nearly any reason, including things like poor cooking or a husband finding another woman more attractive. Rabbi Akiva, a later rabbi who followed Hillel’s teaching, even added that a man could divorce his wife simply *“if he found another prettier than she.”*

So, the Pharisees are asking Jesus where he lands on this interpretation debate and thus ask “is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all”. How does Jesus answer this question?

Matthew 19:4-6 - #2 - The Answer

Q - How does Jesus answer their question?

Remember, their question is “can you divorce for any reason” and he *doesn’t* directly answer this question. Instead he cites the first biblical record on marriage from Genesis 2:

Genesis 2:20-25 - The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him. 21 So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. 22 The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. 23 The man said, "This is now bone of my bones, And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man." 24 For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. 25 And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

They’re asking “when are you allowed to divorce” and he replies with essentially: “people shouldn’t get divorced”. Jesus’ response cuts through the popular debates by pointing back to God’s original intention in creation—that marriage would be a permanent, covenant union, not easily dissolved by human whim.

By answering their question “can you divorce for any reason” and he replies essentially: “don’t get divorced”, the Pharisees assume he must be on the side of no divorce. We see this in their follow up question where they cite Moses’ teaching on divorce. The Pharisees hear Jesus’ answer as *“no divorce is permitted”* and so they counter with *“oh yeah, well then why did Moses say it was okay to get divorced?!”*

Matthew 19:7-8 - #3 - The Rebuttal & Reply

In other words, “we think we hear you saying you can’t get divorced, even though Moses said we could.” Jesus has slightly deflected their question on divorce by affirming the importance of

staying faithful in marriage. But because they assume he is saying there is no reason for divorce, he answers more directly and highlights the reason divorce was even permitted at all.

Jesus says that the reason there is even divorce to begin with is because of sin, specifically because of the hardness of human hearts. It was not supposed to be this way. The culture of easy divorce and casual remarriage existing in the Jewish world and in our world today is very much at odds with God's design and desire as well as the teaching of Jesus.

Matthew 19:9 - #4 - Jesus' Position

“Except immorality” - The only permitted reason for divorce according to Jesus' own teaching is in cases of adultery. This is the Greek word “πορνεία (*porneia*) and it is often translated “sexual immorality” (ESV, CSB, NIV, NRSV) or “fornication” (KJV). The English word “chaste” (translated from *porneia* in Matthew 5:31) is defined as “innocent of unlawful sexual intercourse” (Merriam Webster).

Anyone who divorces for a reason other than adultery who then marries someone else, commits adultery because according to Jesus, the first marriage covenant hasn't really been broken. Jesus is not in favor of “easy divorce”. (In fact, even the USA did not have “no fault divorce” until 1969).

Sex is a beautiful thing created and commanded by God *within* the context of biblical marriage covenant. Previously we have defined “sexual immorality” as any inappropriate sexual practice. This would include sexual relations between unmarried people of the opposite sex (or same sex) as well as sexual relations by someone who is married with someone other than their spouse.

If a married person commits “sexual immorality”, they are breaking the marriage covenant and committing a sin which Jesus then permits the marriage to end. That doesn't mean it must, for there are many examples of forgiveness and reconciliation in such difficult moments. But if you marry someone who has been divorced for a reason other than sexual immorality, adultery is being committed.

Jesus' words here are strong—but they're not harsh. He's not trying to shame those with a difficult past or legalistically trap people in confusion. Rather, He's lifting our eyes to see that marriage is sacred, covenantal, and meant to reflect God's faithfulness. Divorce grieves God not because He's angry, but because it represents the breakdown of something beautiful that He created. At the same time, Jesus is not naive to sin, betrayal, or deep wounds—and He graciously makes room for situations of real brokenness. If this teaching feels weighty, it's because it is. But it's also good. And it invites all of us—whether married, divorced, single, or remarried—to treat marriage with reverence, and to walk with humility, truth, and grace in whatever story we're in right now.

Matthew 19:10-12 - #5 - The Reaction

Jesus' disciples react with the consideration that maybe people shouldn't get married at all!

Q - Why do you think they respond in this way?

Jesus brings up “eunuchs”—individuals who are celibate either by biological condition, external circumstance, or personal choice. In this context, he affirms that some of his followers will not marry, and far from being incomplete or second-class, these individuals have a unique and honorable calling within the kingdom of God. Paul echoes this same affirmation in 1 Corinthians 7:32–34, where he highlights the value of undivided devotion to the Lord.

But Jesus is not downplaying the goodness of marriage—he is raising the standard. Rather than seeing marriage as a casual agreement or a convenient arrangement, Jesus frames it as a sacred covenant meant to reflect God’s own faithfulness. In a culture (then and now) where commitments are often taken lightly and personal fulfillment is prioritized over covenant loyalty, Jesus reminds us that following him means approaching marriage—and all relationships—with reverence and responsibility. Whether we are called to marry or to remain single, both are weighty, holy paths that require prayerful thought and Spirit-led intention.

I certainly want to acknowledge that there are perhaps more questions that are raised by this section than are answered. The New Testament will give additional information on this topic in 1 Corinthians 7 - but truthfully this topic can be difficult to navigate in our modern world. The Bible doesn’t give us a rubric to address every single life situation for every single person. Instead, we have the foundational truth of the Scriptures which should be our starting point. From there we are instructed to pray, and fast, and pray and be in conversation with the spirit-led church elders that Christ has placed in his church. Too many Christians go at this alone or rely on a google search to find answers, too often only to validate what they already think or desire. There is a better way.

As we reflect on these truths, we also need to acknowledge that some among us may carry deep pain, confusion, or regret—especially if you’ve experienced divorce or remarriage, or if this is your first time hearing Jesus’ teaching on the subject.

Not every situation is directly addressed in these verses, and Jesus isn’t attempting to untangle every possible circumstance. But He is reorienting our hearts to God’s original intention—and inviting us to walk in light of that, wherever we are now. If you’re struggling, please don’t walk through it alone. Talk with a mature believer or elder, pray, seek God’s heart. His grace meets us in hard places—not to minimize truth, but to walk with us as we learn to live it out. There is no condemnation in Christ, but there is always an invitation to align our lives with His will—and to do so with the support of a Spirit-filled, truth-loving community.

Not every story fits neatly into a single category, and not every circumstance is covered in these verses. But all of us are invited to come before God with humility, honesty, and openness. Jesus’ words are not cold laws—they’re spoken with the compassion of a shepherd who knows our weakness and longs to lead us into truth, healing, and peace. If you need clarity, support, or forgiveness, bring it to Him. He’s not done writing our stories yet.