

Permanence of Marriage

By John D. Laing

Pre-Session Assignments

One week before the session, students will take the following assignments.

Assignment One

Find two couples and prepare to share their answers to the following questions:

1. What is the hardest thing about marriage and staying married?
2. What would you say has been the key to your success in marriage?
3. Do you have any advice for people who are not yet married, so they will have lasting marriages?

Assignment Two

One student should look up Genesis 1:26–28 and prepare to share what is happening in the story (and in the surrounding verses). Another student should look up Genesis 2:18, 21–24 and prepare to share answers to the following questions: What does the passage describe? What are the implications of these verses for understanding the purpose of marriage and its permanence?

Assignment Three

Conduct research on Deuteronomy 24:1–4. Research may be via Internet search, interview with ministerial staff, commentaries, or similar. Prepare to share your answers to the following questions: What was the purpose of the divorce certificate? Why can't the first husband take the wife back? Under what conditions can he give her a certificate of divorce? Is the language of command or permission used here?

Scripture to Memorize

“And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.” Matthew 19:9

Session Goal

Consistent with God's Word and in the power of the Holy Spirit—by the end of this session, disciples will be able to explain the biblical principles undergirding the permanence of marriage, and will be able to interpret the meaning of Matthew 19:3–12.

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It's in the Book

30 minutes

Real-Life Scenario

Jack and Diane were two American kids who grew up in the heartland. They fell in love and were married right after graduation. Five years later things were not as fun as they had imagined. Jack was working sixty hours per week and was hardly ever at home. Diane handled the bills and found they were always short on money. This, along with Jack's alcoholism, led to many fights. After months of constant fighting, Jack and Diane were ready to call it quits. What does the Bible say about this? Should they divorce because of their "irreconcilable" differences?

Assignment One Feedback

The student who completed **Assignment One** during the week can now report on interviews with couples.

Discussion Question

What are some common features of successful marriages? Did you hear any common advice in the interviews? As the lesson proceeds, consider how the answers shared measure up to the biblical material.

Read Matthew 19:3–12 out loud.

Studying the Passage, vv. 3–4

Verse 3. Pharisees. The Pharisees were the religious leaders most in touch with the common people. They served in local synagogues. They were unlike the Sadducees, who were from the Levite tribe and served the temple in Jerusalem. **is it lawful . . . to divorce.** The Pharisees asked Jesus the key question about divorce as a test.

Verse 4. Have you not read. Jesus answered by first quoting two passages from the creation story (Genesis 1:27 and 2:24).

Assignment Two Feedback

The student who completed **Assignment Two** during the week can now report on the two passages from Genesis.

Studying the Passage, Matthew 19:5–6

Jesus's answer to the Pharisees is related to our previous lesson on the purpose of marriage in creation and the image of God. Marriage was instituted by God, according to His design, to achieve His purposes.

Verse 6. What therefore God has joined. Jesus notes that marriage is a connection *God has made* between husband and wife. Because this is God's work, humans should not and cannot simply undo it by signing some legal documents. The connection between the husband and wife is spiritual in nature.

Discussion Question

There is some debate among Bible scholars about verse 6: some argue that the structure means Jesus meant humans *cannot* separate what God has united, while others argue it means humans *should not* separate what God has united. Does it make sense to think humans can undo or destroy a work of God? Why or why not? Can you think of any biblical examples or stories that may help here?

Studying the Passage, Matthew 19:7

Verse 7. Why then did Moses. The Pharisees challenged Jesus's answer by appealing to a passage from the book of Deuteronomy (24:1), suggesting that Moses *commanded* the people to give divorce papers.

Assignment Three Feedback

Read Deuteronomy 24:1–4 out loud. The student who completed **Assignment Three** during the week can now provide more insight into this passage.

Studying the Passage, Matthew 19:8–10

Verse 8. Moses permitted you. Note that Jesus changed words in order to correct the Pharisees' incorrect understanding. Moses *permitted* divorce rather than *commanded* it. Divorce was not part of God's will. **Verse 9. commits adultery.** Jesus takes it a step further. Those who divorce and remarry are guilty of adultery, a sin that was punishable by death!

Verse 9. except for immorality. The only exception He provided is sexual immorality. The Greek word for *immorality* here is *porneia*, from which we get our English word "pornography." In Greek it clearly refers to sexual activity of a negative sort. Even though elsewhere Jesus said that one who lusts after a woman is guilty of adultery in his heart (Matthew 5:28), He did not mean for His words to be used as an excuse for getting a divorce. Instead, He simply meant to highlight the spiritual requirements of God's law and our guilt for violating it.

Scholars are divided over the type of activity Jesus refers to here. The most common understanding is marital unfaithfulness, but some think it is a reference to violations of the sexual purity regulations in the Old Testament Law (Leviticus 18:1–18). Under the first interpretation, divorce is allowable only if one's spouse commits adultery and has thereby violated the marriage covenant. Under the second, divorce is allowable only if the marriage was not originally approved by God (that is, between two close relatives who are forbidden from being married), and therefore, no true spiritual connection had been forged by God.

The second has the advantage of maintaining that humans cannot separate what God has united (since He did not unite those where divorce is allowable). Both interpretations greatly restrict divorce and point to the indissolubility (permanence) of the marriage relationship and connection.

Verse 10. better not to marry. The disciples' response to Jesus's teaching indicates how overwhelming it was for them. Our response does not need to be so drastic.

It is only better not to marry in two cases:

1. If you enter into marriage too lightly and end up getting divorced for unbiblical reasons and thereby fall into adultery. (This seems to be the disciples' concern).
2. If God has called you to remain single. (Jesus discusses this calling in verses 11–12).

Read 1 Corinthians 7:10–16 out loud.

Studying the Passage, vv. 10–15

Last week we saw that believing husbands and wives can play a significant role in the unbelieving spouses coming to faith. This week we want to consider what 1 Corinthians 7 says about marriage and divorce.

Verse 10. The primary concern here is for reconciliation when there is strife and for the married couple to remain together. **not I, but the Lord.** Paul clearly states that his teaching here is from Christ and is not merely human opinion. **leave.** The Greek word *chorizo* means to separate by space and thus, “leave.”

Verse 11. divorce. Interestingly, though, the word for **divorce**, *aphiemi*, literally means “to go from,” and thus, also “leave” or “send away.” The word here (and in verse 12) is different from the words used in the Gospels (Matthew 5:31; 19:3, 7–8; and Mark 10:4) for **divorce**, *apoluo* and *apostasion*, which have the stronger connotation of destruction of the relationship (*apoluo*, “destroy or let loose from”). The discrepancy has led some biblical scholars to argue that 1 Corinthians 7 does not speak of divorce but rather separation, which can be used as a tool to work through marital problems before reconciling.

Verses 12–13. divorce and send . . . away. The Greek words in these two verses are the same (*aphiemi*), illustrating the issue noted above. What is most important is staying together.

Verse 15. let him leave. The important point here is that verse 15 does not clearly allow for divorce. The spiritual union of husband and wife speaks against it. This verse may speak of abandonment, and in that case the believer should accept it (literally, **not under bondage**), while seeking restoration.

Heart and Hands

8 minutes

Read again the **Real-Life Scenario** near the beginning of the lesson. Consider whether your answers have changed during the session.

Be silent for two or three minutes. Thank Jesus for His sacrifice and for the gospel. Adore Him for His glorious reign on the throne of heaven.

Then ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you:

1. A way the Scriptures you studied today will change your heart (the real you) for the glory of Christ.
2. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to stop doing something in your life for the glory of Christ.
3. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to do something for the glory of Christ.

Write what the Spirit says to you below and then be ready to share what you have written with the group.

Since Last Week

5 minutes; see page x

Grace-Filled Accountability

5 minutes; see page x

Planning for Evangelism, Missions, and Service

5 minutes; see page x

Prayer

7 minutes; see page x

At Home: Nail It Down

Jesus took a strong stand against divorce. Under the conditions He set forth as God's desire from the creation, few (if any) divorces today could be considered legitimate. Even with the more lax reading of *porneia* ("immorality") in Matthew 19, divorce is only allowable in cases of adultery and is not required or desirable.

Marriage, by its nature as a spiritual union akin to Christ's relationship with the church, is meant to be permanent (in this life), and it may not even be possible to dissolve in God's eyes. To seek divorce is to try to undermine the work God has done in uniting the husband and wife.

In 1 Corinthians 7, the apostle Paul addressed problems of abandonment and irreconcilable differences, and while he allows separation, he strongly encourages couples to seek reconciliation rather than divorce. Christ died to reconcile us to God, and the Holy Spirit can effect similar reconciliation in the marriages of those who truly desire to live in accordance with God's Word.

Parent Question

How does Jesus's reference to the creation of Adam and Eve help Him answer the question of whether divorce is allowable?

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