DIVORCE AND CHILDREN

Matthew 19:1–15

Key Verse: 19:14

“Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.’”

In the previous chapter Jesus gave his disciples several teachings on how his followers should live in community with one another. Instead of competing for the top position, we should take the lowest one. Instead of avoiding the weak, we should welcome them. Instead of being obsessed with self, we should be careful about our influence on others. Instead of being self-indulgent, we should fight against our own sins. Instead of despising and ignoring the weak, we should treasure them and risk everything to rescue them. Instead of gossiping behind each other’s backs, we should talk to each other directly and personally to work out problems, and we should learn to listen humbly to one another. Instead of holding grudges, we should remember God’s great mercy and forgive one another from the heart.

Though today’s passage begins a new section in Matthew’s Gospel, it continues the themes of chapter 18. It tells us further about the community of Jesus’ followers. Marriage and children are very practical aspects of any community. In the community of Jesus’ followers, marriage and children are an opportunity to practice the love of Jesus. May God open our hearts to learn how we can be a community that does not hinder but draws people to our Lord Jesus.

Look at verse 1. The phrase “When Jesus had finished saying these things…” indicates in Matthew’s Gospel that one of Jesus’ major discourses is now over (cf. 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 26:1). He leaves Galilee and travels to Judea and the other side of the Jordan because he’s on his last journey to Jerusalem, where rejection, suffering and death await him. Look at verse 2. Though it’s a hard time for him personally, Jesus welcomes these crowds that also need healing. Jesus’ healing ministry shows that he has authority from God to teach.

Sadly, there are those who don’t see it that way. Verse 3a says, “Some Pharisees came to him to test him.” Throughout Matthew’s Gospel Pharisees come to do this (12:2,14,24,38; 15:1; 16:1; 19:3; 22:15,34,35). No matter how powerful Jesus’ teaching and healing ministry is, they are bent on discrediting Jesus, because they perceive him as a threat to their own positions. Their testing of Jesus literally means they were tempting him. It’s hard to be criticized and challenged constantly. But Jesus handled it with such strength and grace because he was depending on God his Father.

What did these Pharisees say this time? Look at verse 3b. Then as now, marriage was a hot-button issue. In Jesus’ day there were two schools of thought about divorce. The conservative side taught that divorce should be avoided; the liberal side taught that it should be allowed. The Pharisees weren’t interesting in learning from Jesus about which side was right; they brought this up to get him to take sides and lose some of his popularity, and maybe, to say something wrong.

How did he respond? Read verses 4–6. When he was being tested or criticized, Jesus loved to respond by saying, “Haven’t you read?” (cf. 12:3,5; 21:16,24; 22:31) Jesus was always talking about the Bible and basing his teaching on it. Answers to questions and criticisms can always be found in Scripture. In this case, Jesus went all the way back to the beginning of Genesis, in the two stories of creation.

In Genesis 1 the phrase “[God] made them male and female” (Ge1:27b) tells us about the origin of marriage. Marriage began not with a contract between two people, but with creation itself. What’s the point? It tells us that God made one man for one woman, and that one woman for that one man. It means God created marriage to be mutually exclusive, and for life. So we have an expression, “Made for each other.” Instead of focusing on each other’s flaws, a husband or wife need to see each other from God’s point of view, as God’s perfect match for me.

Next, in Genesis 2 the man leaving his father and mother and being united to his wife (Ge2:24) tells us that marriage is a life commitment. Now, his wife should be more important to him than even his own parents. The same is true for the wife; her primary commitment in life needs to shift from her parents to her husband. A husband and wife need to be committed to each other even more than to their own children. Without this kind of practical commitment, the marriage is greatly weakened. In Greek the word “united” in verse 5 literally means “glued.” The commitment glues the husband and wife together, and so does their intimacy. If we neglect intimacy, the marriage glue is weakened. People may have many human ideas about it, but God ordained for the two to become one flesh.

Read verse 6 again. It’s more than physical union. It’s a mystery that two persons become one, but it’s something God does. We need to think of our spouse not as a burden or annoyance or even as my enemy, but as a person with whom God wants me to be absolutely united. This is Jesus’ answer to those who have questions about divorce. In light of his words, divorce is not just about “irreconcilable differences”; it’s rebellion against God’s sovereign will. We live in a culture where divorce is rampant, even in the church. But God said through the prophet Malachi, “I hate divorce” (Mal2:16, NLT). He’s talking about divorce among his people. It’s not meant to get us to hate all divorced people. God wants us to be merciful and compassionate towards them. But why does God want a believing husband and wife, especially, to stay together? Malachi says it’s because they belong to him in body and spirit, and when they live in him, they also belong to one another in body and spirit. Also, when they keep their marriage alive and healthy and are faithful to each other from the heart, they can raise godly offspring. God especially holds husbands responsible. He wants us to guard our heart and not be unfaithful to the wife of our youth. He wants us not to overwhelm our wives with cruelty, but protect them (Mal2:15,16). This protection includes not complaining about our wives to others. Sometimes marriage can be hard, but people shouldn’t give up so quickly and easily. As the saying goes, “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” God refines and matures us through being faithful to our marriage commitment. Especially, godly, faithful husbands are so important in the community of Jesus’ followers.

Look at verse 7. Jesus had already talked about this back in chapter 5 in his Sermon on the Mount (5:31,32). At that time, sadly, it was popular among Jewish rabbis and Pharisees to divorce their wives. They were using Deuteronomy 24:1 as their justification: “If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house…” According to Matthew 19:7, the Pharisees call this verse a “command.” But actually it’s not a command, but a concession. It’s a classic case of taking something out of context to get what we want. If we read on in Deuteronomy 24, we find the point is in verse 4: “…then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again…” When Moses wrote this, he was actually trying to protect women from whimsical, tyrannical men. Men would kick out their wives, abusing their power, but when they got lonely, they’d go out to find them and try to take them back again, even if their ex-wife had remarried.

What did Jesus say? Read verse 8. What did he mean that “your hearts were hard”? It means men’s hearts can become hardened by sinful desire. When their wives don’t satisfy their desires, husbands can harden their hearts and become so cruel. In Jewish society, women had to get special permission from the courts to divorce their husbands. It’s hard for modern people to digest. But Jesus taught against divorce to protect women. Matthew the former tax collector may have known many women who had to turn to “the world’s oldest profession” (cf. 21:31,32) simply because their husbands had cast them out on a whim. Jesus didn’t care that his view on marriage would make him unpopular. Because he was a shepherd who respected women, he strongly denounced men’s right to divorce them based on a vague interpretation of something “displeasing” or “indecent.” Based on God’s creation truth, Jesus upheld the union of marriage.

Read verse 9. Jesus was addressing all the hypocritical rabbis and Pharisees who thought they were so knowledgeable of the Bible, so strict, so spiritual. If they have divorced their wives and remarried, Jesus calls them “adulterers.” What a powerful rebuke! So often, the real motive for divorce is to switch partners. Instead of making many excuses like a smoke screen, we need to be honest about what’s really in our hearts. And we need to ask God’s mercy to help us to stay faithful to him and to our spouse. We really need the help of the Holy Spirit to do this. In light of the parable Jesus just told about the unmerciful servant, we need to remember God’s great grace to us so that we can forgive our spouse from our heart.

In verse 9 Jesus gives only one valid reason for divorce: “sexual immorality.” Why only this? Why not alcoholism, or physical abuse, or mental cruelty? It’s because all these other vices can be addressed, but sexual immorality undermines the very glue of marriage. We also should notice that even in the case of immorality, divorce is not commanded but allowed. It means that great effort first should be made to help the erring partner to repent. It reminds us of Jesus’ teaching on helping a fellow believer who sins. He said the relationship should be ended only when the person refuses to listen to repeated urging from more and more of God’s people (18:15–17).

Read verse 9 once more. Jesus is teaching people who divorced for superficial reasons not to remarry. It could also mean that instead of divorcing, it’s better to stay separated for a while and work on our problems, seeking godly counseling and God’s help. Let’s pray that God may bring healing to many people in our nation who have suffered through painful marriages and divorce. Let’s pray that we may share God’s mercy and forgiveness and help divorced people to have hope in God. And let’s pray that God may raise godly couples in our community who can be a blessing through their loving marriages.

Look at verse 10. The disciples were scared. They thought it was too hard to stay committed and faithful to one lady their whole lifetime. Men are still afraid of committing to marriage. What did Jesus say to them? Read verses 11,12. Here Jesus is saying that marriage is normative for most people. And he gives his followers the only valid reason not to get married. It’s “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.” It’s not to avoid the struggle of being a responsible husband and father, or wife and mother. And it’s only for the very few people who can accept it. Eunuchs, people who biologically cannot marry and have children, were looked down upon by the Jews. But Jesus isn’t making fun of them; he’s valuing them as precious human beings. He’s also valuing those who “live like eunuchs.” It may mean they never marry, or it may mean they choose to live apart from their spouses for some amount of time so that they can spread the kingdom message. Whether we marry or stay single, we should live for God’s honor and glory, for his kingdom and his will, regardless of what suffering we may have to endure.

Look at verse 13. It was a common custom among the Jews to bring little children to rabbis to be blessed. These little children may have been brought by their parents, grandparents or caregivers. It’s a bit surprising that the disciples rebuked them—especially after Jesus had just recently placed a little child among them and taught them to welcome children (18:2,5). Why did the disciples do this? Clearly they were not really listening to what he taught them. It may be their idea was that Jesus was too tired, or too busy, or too important to be bothered. Or it may be that they thought these people were being too demanding. The disciples’ idea was very different from that of Jesus.

Read verse 14. So many people around the world in history have been so comforted by these words of our Lord Jesus. So there’s the famous hymn: “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red, brown, yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight, Jesus loves the little children of the world.” What a beautiful king Jesus is! How humble, how loving, how gracious! He didn’t mind that some of these little children were dirty, full of germs, and smelly. He wasn’t too tired to welcome them, embrace them, place his hands on them, bless them and pray for each one, and they were not his own children or grandchildren! In the community of followers of Jesus, children should be welcomed, not sequestered or dumped somewhere. In his community, marriage is important, and children are also important. We should not sacrifice marriage and children in the name of ministry; we should build up marriages and children as the core of our ministry.

Read verse 14 again. Jesus says here that the kingdom “belongs to such as these.” He the same thing earlier, in 18:3: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” What does it mean to be like little children? It means to be humble, simple and trusting, instead of proud, complicated and suspicious. Jesus wants us to run to him with an open heart like a little child, even with all our weaknesses and sins, asking for his mercy, help and love. We should never become too proud to come to Jesus.

Read verse 14 once more. Jesus said, “do not hinder them.” Perhaps it’s connected with his teaching on divorce. When parents divorce, in many cases it hinders their little children from growing well. Especially when believing parents divorce or have a poor marriage relationship, it hinders their children from wanting to come to Jesus. Parents who truly love each other and are faithful to each other are expressing healthy faith in Jesus and are a blessing to their children. And if little children represent those who are seeking God, Jesus tells us not to hinder such people from coming to Jesus, either. It’s sad but true that many people try to go to church, but they get so disillusioned by the behavior or practices of the church members. We should make up our minds not to put any obstacle or stumbling block in people’s way—whether it be our cultural traditions, rules or expectations. We should do our best not to hinder but help people come to Jesus. May God make us a community that welcomes people who are like little children and shows them how beautiful a life in Christ is.