

Session 4. It Was Not So

Movement II. Christ Restores It

Passages: Matthew 19:1-12; Mark 10:1-12; Luke 16:18; 1 Corinthians 7:10-11; Deuteronomy 24:1-4

Part 1. Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. That the group works out for itself, by comparing the Gospel accounts side by side, that Jesus answered a live legal controversy by going behind the law to creation, and that his answer was heard by his own disciples as absolute.

Catholic Touchstone. A ratified and consummated marriage between two baptized persons cannot be dissolved by any human power or for any reason other than death. The Church has no authority to dissolve it because the Church did not make it (CCC 1614, 1640; Code of Canon Law, canon 1141).

What You Need to Know

This is the session where the study stops being beautiful and starts being expensive. Everything before tonight your couples could hear as poetry. Tonight they hear a claim with teeth in it, and the honest ones will feel it.

Your job is not to soften the teaching and not to weaponize it. It is to let them see that Jesus said it, that his own disciples heard it as extreme, and that he did not take it back when they complained.

THE QUESTION IS A TRAP, AND IT IS A SPECIFIC TRAP

Matthew 19:3 has the Pharisees ask whether it is lawful to divorce for any cause. That phrase is not filler. It drops the question into a live rabbinic dispute about Deuteronomy 24:1, which permits a man to write a certificate of divorce if he finds in his wife some indecency.

The rabbinic tradition preserved in the Mishnah records two schools reading that phrase very differently, one narrowly, concerning sexual immorality, and the other broadly, so that almost any displeasure would serve. Treat the rabbinic material as background rather than as proof, since the sources were compiled later than the Gospel scene, but the dispute itself is well attested and it explains the shape of the question. They are asking Jesus to take a side in an argument about how loose the grounds are.

He does something neither school expected. He declines to interpret Deuteronomy at all.

BEHIND MOSES TO THE BEGINNING

Jesus answers by asking whether they have not read, and then he quotes two verses: Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:24. Those are the two verses your group read in Session 1, and the group should be allowed to notice this on their own.

Then he adds a sentence that is not in Genesis: what therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder. This is the hinge of the entire Catholic doctrine of marriage. The joining is God's act, not merely the couple's, and therefore its undoing is not within human competence.

When they push back with Moses, he draws a distinction that should be underlined: Moses allowed, for your hardness of heart. He does not say Moses was wrong. He says the permission was a concession to a condition, and that the condition was not original. From the beginning it was not so.

THE EXCEPTION CLAUSE, HANDLED HONESTLY

Matthew has a phrase that Mark and Luke do not: except for unchastity (Matthew 19:9; compare 5:32). The Greek word is *porneia*. This is one of the most argued phrases in the New Testament and you should not pretend it is simple.

Lay out the readings honestly.

- Read as adultery. Then Matthew permits divorce and remarriage after adultery, which is roughly the position of most Protestant traditions and, by a different route involving pastoral tolerance, of the Orthodox churches.
- Read as an unlawful union in the first place. On this reading, *porneia* covers unions forbidden by Jewish law, including those within prohibited degrees of kinship. 1 Corinthians 5:1 is the clearest support, since it concerns a man with his father's wife; the appeal to Acts 15:20 and 29 is a debated reading, since those verses prohibit *porneia* without defining it. On this reading Jesus is saying that an incestuous or otherwise invalid union may and must be dissolved, because it was never a marriage. This corresponds closely to what the Church now handles through declarations of nullity.
- Read as permitting separation but not remarriage. On this reading the exception concerns putting away, that is, ceasing to live together, and the prohibition on remarriage stands untouched.

The Church has not defined which exegesis is correct, and you should say so plainly. What she has defined is the doctrine: the bond of a ratified and consummated sacramental marriage is not dissolved by adultery or by anything else except death. Note the distinction carefully, because it is exactly the kind of place where the Church permits latitude in exegesis while holding the doctrine firm.

THE TWO THINGS THAT SETTLE IT

First, Mark and Luke have no exception at all (Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18). Mark even extends it symmetrically to a woman divorcing her husband, which was highly atypical and legally constrained in a Jewish setting. Many scholars take the symmetry as a sign of a Gentile or Roman readership, though the inference is debated.

Second, St. Paul, writing earlier than any of the Gospels, gives the ruling as a command not from himself but from the Lord: the wife should not separate, and if she does, she should remain single or else be reconciled (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). That sentence is decisive for the Catholic reading, because it contemplates the separation and still forbids the remarriage.

LISTEN TO THE DISCIPLES

The best evidence for how absolute Jesus sounded is the reaction of the men who liked him. In Matthew 19:10 they say that if this is the case, it is better not to marry. Nobody says that in response to a moderate ruling. And Jesus does not reassure them. He talks instead about those who are able to receive the saying, and about eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom.

That last part is not a change of subject. Jesus has just made marriage permanent, and immediately puts alongside it the vocation of those who forgo it entirely for the kingdom. The two vocations interpret each other: each is a whole self given away without a return ticket.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is the passage under dispute. Read what it actually does: it presumes divorce as an existing practice, restricts the man from taking back a wife he divorced after she has married another, and never commands or commends divorce.
- Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 are the verses Jesus quotes. Your group met both in Session 1.
- Malachi 2:14-16 stands behind the prophetic protest against faithlessness in marriage. Session 3.

- Ezra 9 and 10 record a mass dismissal of foreign wives, which is a genuine difficulty and worth naming honestly if someone raises it. It should not be read as a divine authorization of divorce, and the Church has not defined a single interpretation of the episode.
- 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 gives the apostolic ruling, and 7:12-16 gives the case of a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever, which becomes the basis of what the Church later calls the Pauline privilege. Session 9.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: THE COUNCIL OF TRENT ON WHAT ADULTERY DOES NOT DO

The Council of Trent taught that the Church does not err when she teaches that the marriage bond is not dissolved by the adultery of one of the spouses, and that neither party may contract another marriage while the other lives.

Note what the canon carefully does not do. It does not deny that separation may sometimes be right. It denies that the bond itself has been broken.

Council of Trent, Session XXIV, canons on the sacrament of matrimony, especially canon 7.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. THOMAS MORE AND THE COST OF A MARRIAGE CASE

St. Thomas More was executed in 1535 for refusing to swear an oath, and the whole crisis that produced that oath began with a king who wanted his marriage declared null and could not get it.

Be precise with your couples about what he died for. He did not die making a speech about indissolubility. He died refusing to say, under oath, something he did not believe to be true about a marriage. That is a smaller and harder kind of courage, and it is closer to the kind they will need.

Historical summary. More refused the oath required under the Act of Succession in 1534 and was convicted of treason and executed in 1535 in connection with the royal supremacy. The two statutes are distinct and should not be merged.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: AN EARLY CHRISTIAN VOICE ON REMARRIAGE

The Shepherd of Hermas, an early Christian writing widely read in the second century, addresses a husband whose wife has committed adultery. In substance it says that he should not continue to live with her while she persists, and that he must not marry another, so that the door to her repentance and return stays open.

That reasoning is worth pausing over. The prohibition on remarriage is presented not as cruelty toward the innocent party but as the thing that keeps reconciliation possible.

Summary of The Shepherd of Hermas, Mandate 4. Note for the leader: an early Christian text, not Scripture and not the voice of a canonized saint.

Catechism Connection

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 1614-1615 treats exactly tonight's passage: Jesus takes up marriage as it was in the beginning, and the disciples' reaction shows how heavy the teaching sounded. The Catechism does not minimize that.

CCC 1640 states that the bond of a valid sacramental marriage is perpetual and exclusive, and that the Church herself cannot dissolve it.

CCC 2382-2386 covers divorce, including the recognition that civil divorce may sometimes be the only

possible way to secure legal rights, care of children, or protection, and that a person can be the innocent victim of a divorce. Have this ready; someone in your room is the child of one.

Code of Canon Law, canon 1141 states the doctrine in its legal form: a ratified and consummated marriage can be dissolved by no human power and by no cause other than death.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

One Flesh pays off tonight, and the group should get there first. When Jesus quotes Genesis 2:24, wait. Somebody will recognize it from Session 1 and from the discovery moment that week. Let them say it before you do. If nobody does, ask where they have heard those words before, and wait longer.

The Bridegroom is quiet tonight, with one exception: if anyone connects the permanence of the covenant to Hosea, affirm it and move on. Do not preview Session 6.

They Have No Wine arrives next week at Cana. Tonight ends heavy on purpose, and next week begins with a wedding party running out of wine. That is deliberate sequencing, so resist the urge to soften tonight in order to make the room feel better. Session 5 will do that work with the text rather than with reassurance.

Watch the room. This is the session where a participant with divorced parents, or with a previous marriage, is most likely to go silent. Note who it is and follow up privately this week, before Session 9.

IF A COUPLE IS IN AN IRREGULAR SITUATION (LEADER ONLY)

A participant who has been divorced. Tonight will be hard for them no matter how well you teach it. Two rules. Do not say anything from the front that implies the divorced are second class, because the Church does not teach that (CCC 2386 explicitly contemplates the innocent victim of a divorce). And follow up privately within a day.

A participant with a prior marriage and no declaration of nullity. If this has not already reached the pastor, it must reach him this week, because a wedding date may be unseetable until the case is resolved. Do not guess at the outcome, do not estimate a timeline, and do not tell them it will probably be fine. Walk them to the priest.

Children of divorce, which will be a large share of your room. Many of them are here precisely because they have decided not to repeat it. Tonight can land as either hope or accusation depending on your tone. Say plainly at some point in the evening that nothing tonight is a judgment on their parents, whose situations you do not know.

A couple where one is cohabiting or civilly married already. Hold it. Session 9 handles convalidation and Session 10 handles living arrangements. Tonight is not the night.

Session Goals

1. The group identifies the Pharisees' question as a request to take sides in an existing dispute about the grounds for divorce.
2. The group notices without being told that Jesus answers by quoting the two verses they read in Session 1.
3. Every participant can state the difference between Moses allowing something and God commanding it.
4. The group compares Matthew, Mark, Luke, and 1 Corinthians side by side and can say which contain an exception and which do not.

5. The three main readings of the exception clause are laid out honestly, and the group can distinguish an open exegetical question from a settled doctrine.
6. Nobody leaves believing that the Church claims a power over the bond that she explicitly denies having.

Time Note and Pre-Chosen Cuts

Ninety-minute plan. Opening prayer, 5 minutes. Win questions, 10. Reading Matthew 19:1-12 aloud, 6. Build questions 1 through 4, 22. Live discovery moment with the four column comparison, 15. The exception clause and the steelman, 22. Send and Live It, 7. Closing prayer, 3.

Seventy-five minute plan. Cut Build question 3 and the Dig Deeper box. Do the four column comparison from the front rather than in pairs, but still make them read the verses aloud.

Do not cut the disciples' reaction in verse 10. It is thirty seconds and it does more work than any argument you could make.

Part 2. Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

OPENING PRAYER

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lord Jesus, when they came to you with a legal question you gave them a harder answer than they wanted. Give us the honesty to hear what you actually said rather than what we would prefer. Some of us are carrying wounds from marriages that ended, and some of us are afraid of the promise we are about to make. Meet all of us here. Speak to us as one who knows what it costs to keep a covenant. Amen.

Win. Getting Started

Open questions. No wrong answers, no answer box. Let every couple speak once before anyone speaks twice.

- A.** Have you ever asked someone a question hoping they would give you permission rather than an answer? What happened?
- B.** What is the longest you have ever kept a promise that got harder than you expected?

Build. Into the Text

Read Matthew 19:1-12 aloud. Ask a second reader to read Mark 10:1-12 immediately afterward, without commentary in between.

- 1.** Look closely at the question in Matthew 19:3. What are the exact words, and what does the phrasing tell you about what they already believe?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause. They are not asking whether divorce is permitted. They assume it is, on the basis of Deuteronomy 24:1, and they are asking how wide the grounds are.

In the rabbinic tradition preserved later in the Mishnah, this was a running dispute between two schools, one reading the phrase some indecency in Deuteronomy narrowly and the other broadly. Treat that as helpful background rather than as proof, since the sources were compiled after the Gospel scene. The dispute itself explains the shape of the trap: any answer places him in a camp.

- 2.** He does not answer the question he was asked. What does he do instead, and what two passages does he quote?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

He goes behind Moses to creation and quotes Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:24.

Wait here. Someone in the room read both of those in Session 1 and found the second one again in the discovery moment that night. Let them recognize it out loud. If nobody does, ask where they have heard those words before and let the silence do its work.

The move is the whole argument: the grounds for divorce are the wrong question if marriage is a design rather

than an arrangement.

3. Verse 6 contains a sentence that is not in Genesis. Find it. What does it add?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.

Two additions. First, the joining is God's act. The couple consents, but the bond that results is not merely the sum of their two intentions. Second, the undoing is placed outside human authority, which is a claim about competence, not about willpower.

This is why the Church says she cannot dissolve a valid sacramental marriage. Not that she declines to. That she has no power to (CCC 1640; canon 1141). It is worth stressing that this limits the Church rather than empowering her.

4. They answer him with Moses. How does he characterize the Mosaic permission, and what is the significance of the word he uses?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.

Allowed, not commanded. A concession to a condition. And the condition is diagnosed, not excused: hardness of heart, which is exactly what Genesis 3 produced in Session 2.

Ask what it means that God legislated around a hardness he did not approve. It means the law was doing damage control, and that Christ is now addressing the damage itself.

LIVE DISCOVERY MOMENT

This is the central discovery of the session. Put four references on a board or a sheet, in this order, and have four different people read them aloud while everyone else writes.

Matthew 19:9. Mark 10:11-12. Luke 16:18. 1 Corinthians 7:10-11.

The question to the room: which of these contains an exception, and what exactly does each one forbid? Give them eight minutes with the texts.

What they will find: Matthew has a clause about unchastity. Mark and Luke have none. Mark states it symmetrically, applying to a wife who divorces her husband, which was highly atypical in a Jewish legal setting, and which many scholars take as a sign of a Gentile readership. And St. Paul, writing before any of the Gospels, presents the ruling as coming from the Lord rather than himself, and says that a wife who separates should remain single or be reconciled.

Then ask the question that matters: Paul contemplates the separation actually happening, and still rules out the remarriage. Paul never discusses Matthew's clause, so this cannot settle its meaning by itself. What does it tell you about how the earliest apostolic witness handled separation and remarriage?

Let them answer before you teach anything about porneia.

THE EXCEPTION CLAUSE

5. Matthew alone has the phrase except for unchastity. What are the possible things that phrase could mean?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Lay out all three honestly, and do not present the Catholic reading as obvious.

One. It means adultery, and Matthew therefore permits divorce and remarriage in that case. This is broadly the Protestant reading, and the Orthodox churches reach a comparable pastoral outcome by a different route.

Two. It refers to a union that was unlawful from the start. On this reading porneia covers unions forbidden under Jewish law, including marriage within prohibited degrees of kinship. 1 Corinthians 5:1 is the clearest support; the appeal to Acts 15:20 and 29 is debated, since those verses prohibit porneia without defining it. On this reading Jesus is not creating an exit from marriage but excluding relationships that were never marriages. This is close to what the Church now treats through declarations of nullity.

Three. It licenses separation, that is, ceasing to live together, while leaving the prohibition on remarriage untouched. This fits 1 Corinthians 7:11 precisely.

Say clearly: the Church has not defined which of these readings of the Greek is correct. She has defined the doctrine that the bond of a ratified and consummated sacramental marriage is not dissolved except by death. Distinguishing an open exegetical question from a settled doctrine is exactly the discipline this study is trying to teach.

BUILD THEN PRESS: JESUS MADE AN EXCEPTION, AND THE CHURCH HAS OVERRIDDEN HIM

Build it at full strength.

Build it fully. Your couples have friends who make this argument, and it is not a stupid one.

Matthew twice records an exception, at 5:32 and again at 19:9. The plainest reading of porneia in a marital context is sexual infidelity. Matthew was written to a Jewish Christian audience who would have understood the Deuteronomy debate, and he shows Jesus taking the stricter of the two schools rather than abolishing the category of lawful divorce altogether. On this reading, a wronged spouse is free. Meanwhile the Catholic Church, which claims to be preserving a hard teaching, in practice grants tens of thousands of declarations of nullity a year, which look to an outsider like divorce with a Latin name. So the objection sharpens: the Church appears to have deleted an exception Jesus made, and then quietly manufactured a wider one of her own.

Then press.

Concede the first half honestly. The clause is there, the adultery reading is a serious reading held by serious Christians, and anyone who tells your group that the Greek obviously means an invalid union is overstating. It does not obviously mean anything; that is why the argument has lasted.

Press first with Mark, Luke, and Paul. Three witnesses, including the earliest one, state the prohibition without any exception, and Paul explicitly contemplates a separation and still forbids the remarriage. Whatever Matthew's clause is doing, the earliest apostolic ruling did not treat it as an exit.

Press second with the disciples' reaction. If Jesus had merely endorsed the stricter of two existing schools, the disciples would have had no reason to say it is better not to marry. That reaction strongly suggests they heard the teaching as radically demanding.

Press third on the annulment charge, and be direct rather than defensive. A declaration of nullity is not a dissolution. It is a judgment that consent, capacity, or form was defective from the beginning, so that what looked like a marriage was not one. That distinction is real, and it is also true that a tribunal can be wrong, that numbers have varied enormously by country and decade, and that scandal on this point is a fair criticism of practice rather than of doctrine. Session 9 takes it up in full.

Do not overclaim. Do not tell the room that the Orthodox position is simply infidelity to Christ, and do not tell them that Protestants have not thought about this. Say that Christ has bound the Church here in a way that costs her, and that she claims no authority to release what she did not bind.

6. Read verse 10 again. What do the disciples say, and why is their reaction good evidence?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry.

Nobody says that in response to a moderate ruling. Their reaction is the best available evidence for how absolute the teaching sounded to people who had every incentive to hear it mildly.

And notice: Jesus does not walk it back, soften it, or clarify that they have misunderstood him. He talks about who is able to receive it.

DIG DEEPER: EUNUCHS FOR THE KINGDOM

Verse 12 is not a change of subject. Having just made marriage permanent, Jesus immediately places beside it the vocation of those who renounce marriage entirely for the kingdom of heaven.

The two vocations explain each other. Both are a whole self given away without a return ticket, and both are only livable as gifts. This is why priests and consecrated religious are not spectators at your wedding; they are the other half of the same sign (CCC 1618-1620).

COUPLE CONVERSATION (JUST THE TWO OF YOU, NOT THE ROOM)

Just the two of you. This is the most important Couple Conversation in the first half of the study.

When we each said yes, what did we privately assume the word forever meant? Answer honestly, including any quiet assumption that it would end if things got bad enough.

What is the hardest scenario you can name in which you would still be married? Say the scenario out loud. Do not promise anything yet.

7. If the bond really cannot be dissolved, what does that make the wedding day?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Not the beginning of a trial period and not a celebration of a decision already made privately. It is the moment something comes into existence that, once the marriage is ratified and consummated, neither of them can uncreate.

This is the answer to the question people ask about why the Church is so careful about weddings, and so slow about them. She is not administering a ceremony. She is witnessing the creation of a bond that, once ratified and consummated between the baptized, she cannot undo.

Hold this. Session 8 will read the actual words they are going to say.

Send. Carrying It Out

Open questions again. No answer boxes.

- Y.** What is one thing you have to stop believing about marriage if what Jesus said tonight is true?
- Z.** Who in your life needs to hear that the Church does not consider the divorced to be second class Christians?

Live It This Week

- **Say the hard scenario out loud.** Finish the Couple Conversation if you did not finish it in the room. Name the hardest situation in which you would still be married, and say it to each other.
- **Write to someone divorced whom you love.** A parent, an aunt, a friend. Not about theology. Just tell them you are glad they are in your life. Tonight's teaching is about the bond, not about ranking people.
- **Read Matthew 19:6 slowly every day this week.** One verse. It is your memory verse, and it may well be read at your wedding.
- **Read John 2:1-11 before next session.** Notice who runs out of what.

Closing Prayer

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you did not make it easier when they asked you to. You told the truth and let them decide what to do with it. Give us hearts that are not hard. Where our families carry the wounds of marriages that ended, bring your healing and keep us from judging what we did not live through. And when the day comes that we would rather have an exit, remind us what you said, and give us the grace to want it.

St. Thomas More, pray for us. St. Joseph, pray for us. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.

Matthew 19:6

Part 3. Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in the order it appears.

- Matthew 19:1-12. The session text.
- Mark 10:1-12. Read immediately after Matthew, without commentary between.
- Genesis 1:27 and 2:24. Quoted by Jesus. The group met both in Session 1.
- Deuteronomy 24:1-4. The passage under dispute.
- Luke 16:18. Used in the four column comparison.
- 1 Corinthians 7:10-11. Used in the four column comparison, and decisive for the Catholic reading.
- Acts 15:20, 29 and 1 Corinthians 5:1. The other uses of *porneia*, for the exception clause discussion.
- Matthew 5:32. The parallel exception clause.
- John 2:1-11. Assigned reading before Session 5.

Catechism Paragraphs Used

CCC 1614-1615, 1618-1620, 1640, 2382-2386. Code of Canon Law, canon 1141.

Before Next Session

Read John 2:1-11 before Session 5, and notice who runs out of what.