



## Group Discussion Guide

*For group meetings from January 10 afternoon through January 17 morning*

### **Matthew 19:1-12**

Matthew records that Jesus left Galilee and traveled to “the region of Judea beyond the Jordan,” which indicates a movement in the general direction of Jerusalem. In this gospel, the author chooses to focus on this one journey of Jesus to Jerusalem before his final Passover, while John shares that Jesus made several trips before that final Passover. Matthew’s account of this journey also is relatively short compared to Luke’s.

A group of Pharisees approached Jesus and sought to test him with a question about divorce. (It should be noted that divorce was only one-sided in this patriarchal culture; a man could divorce his wife but the opposite was not allowed). This topic was not in any way obscure; a great debate had arisen among Jews regarding what was right and wrong in the dissolution of a marriage relationship. There were two schools of rabbinical thought: one which believed a man could divorce his wife for almost any reason and one which believed a man could only divorce his wife if she engaged in sexual activity with another man. The Pharisees’ choice to bring this issue before Jesus revealed their desire to bring him into a controversy so he would lose popularity with people who would disagree with his answer. Another possible motive was to drag him into the debate regarding Herod’s divorce, in the hope that he would meet the same fate as John the Baptist.

Instead of referring to either school of thought, Jesus called the Pharisees back to God’s design for marriage, found in Genesis 1:27, 2:18, 2:21-24. A husband and wife become one flesh, and this union created by God should never be separated by the ways of mankind. This prompted the Pharisees to then ask why the law of Moses “commanded” a husband to divorce his wife when it was deemed appropriate. This was a reference to Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which allows for a man to divorce his wife but certainly does not command it. Jesus used this distinction in his response and reminded the Pharisees that Moses only allowed for a man to divorce his wife, but this was only due to “your hardness of heart.” Jesus states the one allowance for divorce was “sexual immorality,” the Greek word here is *porneia* and while there are various interpretations of what this specifically refers to, it is widely accepted that Jesus here meant sexual activity outside of the marriage relationship. So then, if a man’s wife engaged in sexual activity with another man, the husband was allowed to divorce her and still remarry. However, it should be noted that Jesus was not advocating for divorce in this circumstance. He said it was only allowed because of the hardness of men’s hearts, which is far from a commendation. The heart of his teaching was this: the marriage relationship is meant for a lifetime, and reconciliation of differences is the goal, rather than divorce. When the disciples heard Jesus’ response, they had difficulty accepting his teaching and suggested it would be better for a man not to marry than to risk entering into a covenant that they considered might be too difficult to

keep. Jesus responded by telling them that some men were able through various circumstances to control their sexual desires and remain unmarried, while others were not.

### **Matthew 19:13-15**

While the exact setting or reason for this account of people bringing children to Jesus for them to be blessed is not clearly given, this commentary note offers a possible explanation:

*It was a Jewish custom to bring a child to the elders on the evening of the Day of Atonement 'to bless him and pray for him' (Mishnah Sopherim 18:5). This may well be the background to this incident. The disciples' objection may then be to the popular assumption that Jesus is to be identified as a regular 'elder', as well as to the feeling that their Master has more important concerns than to be bothered by children.*

*R. T. France, Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 287.*

The view of children in this culture during this time period has been discussed in previous guides. They were viewed with little importance and not highly valued. However, when the disciples tried to stop the children from coming to Jesus, he corrected them. He told the disciples to let the children come to him, and reminded them that their relative humility and innocence meant they were very important within the kingdom of heaven. Jesus placed his hands on them (most likely touching a shoulder or the top of the head) as a sign of blessing and love.

### **Matthew 19:16-30**

Shortly after Jesus blessed the children, a wealthy young man (his financial situation and age are revealed a little later) came to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" There are some slight differences between this account and those in Mark and Luke, though they do not change the heart of the passage or its meaning. As Jesus responded, he focused on the word "good" because he knew this man did not fully understand its meaning. The man believed there was something he could do that would be good enough to grant him access to the kingdom of heaven. This is why Jesus explained to him, "There is only one who is good," with the implied "one" being God. Only God is good, and only He is good enough to dwell in the kingdom of heaven. One must therefore have the goodness of God granted to him to allow for entrance into the kingdom. Jesus told the man that keeping the commandments would grant him entrance. The man then asked which commandments must be kept, again demonstrating that his idea of "good" was based on human effort rather than the righteousness of God. Jesus pointed him to commandments 6-9 of the Ten Commandments, all of which deal with how one person is commanded to treat another. The man told Jesus he had kept all of these commandments and asked what else he needed to do to enter the kingdom, revealing that he sensed he still had fallen short of God's glory. It is likely that he sincerely believed he had kept these commandments, based on his understanding of them. Of course, Jesus taught that there was a difference between keeping the letter of the law and the spirit of the law, as he shared in the Sermon on the Mount. In response to the man's question, Jesus

responded that to “be perfect” (and therefore demonstrate the indwelling of God’s righteousness), he must sell his possessions and give the money to the poor, and then follow Jesus. The command to sell possessions is not meant to be a universal application for all who follow Jesus. This command was meant for this man, likely because Jesus knew his heart and therefore knew that his wealth was an idol for him. Once again, the Sermon on the Mount is the source for a more complete understanding of this encounter: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,” (Matthew 6:21). Jesus told this man that if he let go of what he valued on earth and followed him, he would have treasure in heaven. The encounter ends as the man leaves in sadness, because he had possessions that he was unwilling to part with.

Jesus then took the opportunity to tell his disciples that a rich person will find it difficult to enter the kingdom of heaven. He even went on to use an extreme analogy: it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a wealthy person to enter into the kingdom. This was not meant to indicate that wealthy people cannot be reconciled to God, because in just a few verses Jesus states otherwise. The heart of his teaching was this: those who have much according to the standards of this world are more likely to be like the rich young man and allow their possessions to be an idol. Certainly not all who are wealthy face this challenge, but many do. This teaching surprised the disciples, who then questioned how anyone can be saved. Jesus assured them that according to the ways of man salvation is impossible, but because of the power and righteousness of God, it is possible. Peter then wanted to know what he and the other disciples would receive for leaving everything behind and following Jesus. Jesus told them in his kingdom, which includes the new world, he will sit on his throne and the disciples will sit on twelve thrones as they judge the nation of Israel. Bible scholars differ on their interpretations of this verse as it relates to the meanings of “judge” and “Israel.” The main point is, those who first followed Jesus will indeed receive in the kingdom much more than they gave up on earth, as will everyone who has given up worldly relationships and possessions for the sake of Jesus’ name. Therefore, “many who are first” in this world “will be last” in the next and the opposite also is true.

## Discussion Questions

1. The Pharisees asked the question about divorce in an attempt to trap Jesus, and the prevailing attitude towards divorce at the time was a flippant one. What does Jesus' response teach us about God's design for and view of the marriage relationship? How can we ensure our view of marriage lines up with God's design and view?
2. Jesus told the Pharisees that God only allowed for divorce because of the hard hearts of people. How does this affect your view of divorce? How do we embrace this truth about divorce and also embrace the truth of God's forgiveness and grace?
3. Why do you think the disciples responded as they did in verse 10? How do you interpret Jesus' teaching in verses 11-12?
4. In light of verses 13-15, how should we who believe in Jesus view and treat children? What did Jesus mean when he said the kingdom of heaven belongs to them?
5. In your own words, how would you describe the rich man's understanding of the kingdom of heaven, his understanding of God and righteousness?
6. Why do you think Jesus told the rich man that, to be perfect, he needed to go and sell his possessions, give to the poor and then come and follow him?
7. How do you apply this statement of truth from Jesus: "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible," (v. 26)?