

Challenging Lifestyles Session 6

Matthew 5:31-31 and 19:3-12 – How to Respond to Divorce

Resource: *Challenging Lifestyles* (Nicky Gumbel, chpt 6); *The Marriage Book* (Nicky and Sila Lee)

Timing: 40-50 minutes, leading into ministry

Buzz groups: Suggestions are boxed, pairs or groups of 3-4 will work best

Illustrations: Suggestions are noted, but your own ideas and stories are preferable

Focus: Major on the one or two points most relevant to your group, being as sensitive as possible

Icebreaker: What's the best or worst date you have ever been on (maybe don't say who with!)?

Introduction (read the texts and start by praying for open and compassionate hearts)

Recap last time on *Sex in the 21st Century*, and introduce *How to Respond to Divorce*.

Divorce is incredibly painful and we welcome anyone affected by it very warmly – the church is a hospital that we all need and God is in the business of restoration!

We are all directly or indirectly affected by divorce. The impact on individuals and on society is huge. [National Statistics Summer 2007 No. 128 & National Statistics Online 'Divorces in 2005']

UK	1961	2005
Marriages	350,000	284,000
Divorces	27,000	155,000

How should we respond? What did Jesus say about divorce? He started by talking about marriage.

1. Choose Wisely (19:4-6, 11-12)

The Point: We have a choice whether to make good or bad decisions in this area.

Some choose to be single, as Jesus did 'because of the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 19:10-12). But Jesus talks about marriage as the usual choice for single people (Matthew 19:4-6). So when you're single you have freedom of choice. But getting married ends the time of choosing! It's no failure for a relationship not to end in marriage; one date doesn't commit you to another one! When dating don't be overly risk-averse or over-intense; and stay within healthy, godly boundaries.

Illustrate: Perhaps tell a brief story about an amazing or nightmare date you once had. Or share how you decided to ask/say yes/say no to getting married. Use what will be helpful for the group.

Application: Single people who are dating could read "*Ready for Marriage*" by Nicky and Sila Lee.

2. Invest Massively

The Point: Marriage is an investment in itself, and one that requires ongoing investment too.

Cohabitation first is seen as a responsible choice given divorce risks. But is this view warranted? Later divorce rates are higher if they marry. If not, 95% of cohabiting couples split within 10 years. Rick Warren US survey found that where the prevailing divorce rate is 1:2.5, when the couple are married by a minister, attend church and read the bible and pray together regularly it's 1:1105! So (1) have Jesus at the centre; and (2) invest in marriages

Application: You don't have to be married to invest in marriage. You can offer to babysit for friends, family or colleagues so they can go out together, or tell them about *The Marriage Course*.

Buzz groups: Did the people in relationships modelled to you during your formative years “Choose Wisely” and “Invest Massively”? What else would you like to replicate or avoid in their example?

3. Concede Reluctantly (5:31-32; 19:8-9)

The Point: Although God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16), it may be permitted only in extreme cases.

The Pharisees, using Deuteronomy 24:1, ask Jesus whether there are exceptions (Matthew 5:31)? They say Moses *commanded* divorce, but Jesus corrects them: no, he only *permitted* it – the basic strict view is intact that it was never supposed to occur (see 19:3-9).

Only in very extreme cases does Jesus acknowledge divorce may have to occur (19:9).

Some interpret the “Mattean exception” clause (5:32 and 19:9) of marital unfaithfulness as grounds for divorce very literally, noting that passages in Mark (10:11-12) and Luke (16:18) are stricter still. But others point to the Apostle Paul’s view that other grounds can exist too (1 Corinthians 7:15).

We can be sure that it’s never right to use the bible’s teaching as an *excuse* for divorce – but that divorce is a last resort that may have to be reluctantly accepted.

Application: *Breaking Up Without Cracking Up* by Christopher Compston may be very helpful.

4. Rebuild Carefully (‘...and marries another woman...’, 19:9)

As Christians we always try to hold together the prophetic (belief in the permanence of marriage) with the pastoral (a gracious view towards remarriage). How can we do this?

One way we can do this is to give Services of Blessing in the church for remarriages, after the remarriage ceremony has taken place at the Registry Office, to pray down God’s blessing on them.

Illustrate: A remarried member of the group may wish to give a testimony about this service.

Application: *The Divorce & Separation Recovery Course* is a great way to begin this process.

5. Embrace Unconditionally

The Point: Embrace those struggling in marriage or affected by divorce and seek their restoration.

None of us know what it’s like to walk in someone else’s marriage or sleep in their bed, so we have to be very careful not to judge others going through hard times.

When a relationship breaks up, people are often broken-hearted – just those who Jesus longs for and considered himself sent to help (Isaiah 61:1, quoted by Jesus in Luke 4:18 and Psalm 34:18). The ministry of Jesus is grace, forgiveness and transformation – giving people hope again.

Consider asking a member of the group with a relevant testimony about either their own or their parent’s marriage, to close by sharing the difference a relationship with Jesus made and how Christians helped them get through difficult times.

Ideas for Ministry

- Singles pray for all the married couples in the group, then vice-versa, asking for God’s help.
- Pray for group members and their friends, whose lives have been influenced by divorce. Ask the Holy Spirit for encouraging and inspiring words or pictures for their courage and healing.
- Some in your group may have found the evening hard, in which case avoid being too intense.