

Bible Studies on

Matthew 13-19

Confronting Jesus

7 studies

with LEADERS NOTES

Study 1: Ears to Hear? (Matt 13)

Study 2: Removing Fear (Matt 14)

Study 3: Spiritual Cleansing (Matt 15:1-28)

Study 4: Show me a Sign from Heaven (Matt 15:29-16:12)

Study 5: Who do you say I am? (Matt 16:13-17:23)

Study 6: True Greatness, Real Forgiveness (Matt 18:1-35)

Study 7: Jesus on Divorce, Remarriage & Singleness (Matt 19:1-12)

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Introduction

Matthew's gospel gives us the longest exposition of Jesus – the king of the coming Kingdom of Heaven. In this soaring narrative, the reader is brought face to face with Jesus the Son of God and Son of Man and we are challenged to ask 'who is this man?'

Chapters 1-4 introduced us to Jesus and his disciples, before giving us perhaps the most famous sermon in history, the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7). Jesus' pattern for mission and ministry is revealed (chapter 8-9) and then his disciples are sent out to do the mission (Chapter 10). As we set into this middle section of the gospel we are effectively asked: do you think Jesus is the promised Messiah, the Lord, the chosen one, the Son of David, of Man? (Chapter 11-12).

In these Bible studies we look at the chapters 13-19 of Matthew's gospel. In this section, conflict with Jesus escalates, and each of us are forced to answer once again, 'Who do I say he is?', as the lines of who is in (and who is out) of the Kingdom of God get firmer, and opposition intensifies. At the same time, in his teaching, Jesus keeps pressing home the loving authority and power and grace that he, as the King of God's kingdom possesses - and confronting us with his inescapable and loving rule. He calls for our total allegiance, and divides people.

Each study will therefore be challenging and demanding as we are forced to ask whether we accept the Jesus as he is presented in the scriptures, or reject him for a Jesus we make in our image, who - in the end - will neither challenge us, nor save us.

Study 1 Leaders Notes: Matthew 13 - Ears to hear?

This chapter poses two immediate challenges: it's familiarity and it's length. Whilst familiar to many (and therefore tempting to not truly listen), the overall theme of listening means we need to move beyond familiarity. Also, the length is worth tackling (keep an eye on the time, and keep things moving), because each part contributes to an overall, unified message:

Ultimately, the final separation of the righteous and the wicked, not the day of judgment comes down to whether we are determined to listen to Jesus' words (and be transformed by them, bearing kingdom fruit), or not. How we listen to Jesus' words really matters.

The passage breaks down as follows:

Structure		Key challenge
13.1-2	Setting	We're listening ... but are we?
13.3-23	The Parable of the Soils (to crowd) & explanation (to disciples)	How seriously shall I listen to God's word? Am I determined not to let distraction, persecution, life's worries, and the love of money stop me thinking on God's word so that it bears fruit in my life for the kingdom of God?
13.24-30, 36-43	The Parable of the Weeds (to crowd) & explanation (to disciples)	Am I letting the word of God change me? At the end of the age, will I be shown to be amongst the weeds (one who causes sin and does evil - a pretend disciple?), or be seen to have been transformed by Christ's righteousness?
13.31-33	The Parable of the Mustard Seed & the Yeast	Motivation to listen: Do I believe that the kingdom of God will grow unimaginably large? Will I let it infiltrate everything?
13.34-35	Strategy of preaching to crowds in parables explained	
13.44-46	The Parable of the Hidden Treasure & Pearl	Do I treasure being in the Kingdom more than any other life treasure?

Structure		Key challenge
13.47-50	The Parable of the Net	How prominently does the separation on the day of judgment figure in my thinking?
13.51-52	Conclusion	Do we treasure God's word? (... the new treasures in Jesus' words, and the old treasures in the OT scriptures)?

There is important movement in this chapter between Jesus addressing the crowds, and then the disciples. Jesus tells the parables of the soils, the weeds, the mustard seed and the yeast to the crowds, but only gives his explanation of the parables of the soils and the weeds to his disciples, and only teaches that parables of the hidden treasure, the pearl, and the net to the disciples.

The question of 'Why does Jesus not teach everyone all the parables and their meaning?' is the puzzle of the chapter, and is answered in vv10-17: how we listen (i.e. whether we're hungry enough to come back and find out the meaning) is itself a determiner of whether we're 'in', or 'out' of the kingdom: of whether we're the good soil (or not), or good seed (or a weed to be weeded out). True disciples (with hearts for God) are thus discerned from nominal disciples (who worship God with their lips, but not their heart). Having said this, true listening should not be mistaken for intellectual curiosity over intellectual laziness: intellects can employ 'lip service' of the mind, not of the heart, and discipleship is a matter of the heart - as Jesus has already taught (Matthew 5.1-10).

Study 1: Matthew 13 - Ears to hear

Intro: Recalling the parables, and the parable of the soils

- Using a whiteboard, ask everyone to list out all of the parables of the Kingdom that they can recall. (2 mins). Then underline all the parables listed that come from Matthew 13, and write up any parables from Matthew 13 that have been left out.
- With Bibles closed, get the group to try and tell the parable of the Sower (soils) from memory. When they hit a wall, they can 'pass' to someone else by saying 'pass'. Don't correct them. See how close they can get before you read it. See if they include the explanation.

The Parable of the Soils

- Pray, asking God to help you listen to his word.
- Read the parable & explanation (Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23), asking after each section: What did we miss / what did we get wrong? What is the point? (V9b).
- Go through the different scenarios. What is the particular challenge posed by each soil?
- Path - Do we let Satan snatch the word away by not thinking on it after we've heard it?
- Rocky ground - Will I let persecution stop us listening to the word of God?
- Weeds - Do we let life's worries, and the false promise of wealth stop us listening to the word of God?
- Good soil - Shall I determine throughout my remaining years to both hear and understand God's word, and let it produce a crop of kingdom fruit in my life?
- Who does Jesus explain the parable to? Why not everyone? (v11-17). Ask someone to explain this. Discuss this. What's the point?

The Parable of the Weeds

- Read Matthew 13.24-30.
- What do you think this means?
- Now read the explanation - vv36-43. What does Jesus add that you missed?
- What's the point?
- How does this build on what's already been taught in the Parable of the Sower about hearing?

The Parable of the Mustard Seed & the Yeast

- Read Matthew 13.31-32.
- How small is a mustard seed? How big is a mustard tree? (A: there is no such thing as a mustard tree. A mustard bush grows to a max height of around 10 foot).
- What is Jesus saying?
- What is the challenge to us?

- Read Matthew 13.33
- What is Jesus saying? What's the challenge of this parable?

The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl

- Share your favourite moment on 'Antiques Roadshow' or at a Garage Sale [optional],
- Read Matthew 13.44
- What are we meant to grasp? Do you?

- Read Matthew 13.45-46
- What is the point? Is this the way that you think about the Kingdom of Heaven? What are we meant to see about what we most treasure? Is this true?

The Parable of the Net

- Compare vv 40-43 with vv49-50. What is the essential point to understand?
- What is the challenge?

Reflection

- Review all the parables - go through them one by one, and the challenge that each poses.
- What is the connection between the challenge of the Parable of the Soils, and the challenge posed by the last parable?

- Now read vv. 51-52. The Old Testament contains treasures worth bringing out. Jesus' teaching contains new treasures, also worth bringing out.
- What characterizes the disciple of the Kingdom of Heaven?

- Can you think of a treasure which you have brought out? What treasure was it? Why was it a treasure to you?
- Share this with the person beside you.

Prayer

- Divide into men and women, and go to different rooms to share and pray.
- Share what treasure you saw tonight in Jesus' teaching.
- How were you challenged?
- What did you discover, or rediscover?
- How did God challenge you to change your life?
- Pray for one another, and for our church.

Study 2 Leaders Notes: Matthew 14 - Removing Fear

This chapter contains three well known and connected demonstrations of power.

1. The first shows the frightening face of human evil and power, in the weak & immoral Herod, who is ultimately more concerned to protect his reputation before his guests than in beheading Jesus' forerunner. This sad incident foreshadows the future confrontation between Jesus and Herod (culminating in the cross).
2. On hearing of this confrontation, Jesus withdraws, only for the crowds to follow him, leading to him feeding the multitude, numbering well in excess of 5000.
3. The third episode sees Jesus sending his disciples onto the lake whilst he prays alone. After a strenuous night of rowing through a storm, Jesus walks to them, showing his complete rule over the chaotic and fearful creation. Then comes the really remarkable bit: Peter asking to join Jesus, Jesus bidding him come, and Peter doing so! Verse 30-31 is the gospel in miniature, and results in the worship of Jesus.

Structure		Key points
14.1-12	The face of evil in human power.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Herod attributes God's power to Jesus, thinking Jesus is a resurrected John the Baptist. This begs the question: how did John die? Answer: a weak, immoral, and vain king manipulated by equally evil wife who resists God's call to repent. • This passage foreshadows the future confrontation between Herod and Jesus
14.13-21	<p>Jesus feeds the multitude in the desert.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Link: 'When Jesus heard about what had happened, he withdrew ...' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jesus uses his heavenly power to feed the multitude in the desert (J>Moses, J=God). • The 12 excess basketfuls provide a poignant message for Jesus '12 disciples: • the point is not just Jesus 'messianic status and ability to shepherd God's people to the promised land of heaven - (Ezekiel 34), but that his power is coupled with his compassion for others, an overabundance of provision, yielding satisfaction, not emptiness (c.f. 16.6-12).

Structure		Key points
14.22-36	<p>Jesus walks on water</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Link: <i>'Immediately</i> Jesus made the disciples get into the boat ...' • 22-27 - Jesus walks on water • 28-33 - Jesus saves Peter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is a racy section. Three times Jesus acts 'immediately' to care the for disciples: sending them away from the 5000; putting their fears at rest (v27); catching Peter who was sinking (v32) - the emphasis on Jesus' care for his disciples (contra Herod). • The section is laced with fear. The 4th watch of the night is the darkest watch (3-6am), when the disciples were most exhausted and afraid (v26). • Jesus' own walking on the lake signifies several things: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He is the 2nd Adam, ruling the creation; • He is the LORD God, first over creation and not subject to it (worthy of worship) - "I am". • Peter's walking on water signifies that in Jesus, we too can rule the world as intended, with the curse of creation undone. Also, it confirms Jesus as the LORD, I am, to Peter. • Jesus' catching of Peter is the gospel in a nutshell. • Jesus' question (v31) assumes that if they grasped that Jesus is God who saves them, and is concerned for them, they should not fear.

Study 2: Matthew 14 - Removing Fear

Intro: When have you been scared?

- In pairs ... when has the misuse of human authority scared you? ... or fear of the supernatural?
- (Leader): Pray, that God would help you better understand Jesus' authority, his attitude towards us, and that we would place our confidence in him.

Herod, and the beheading of John the Baptist

- Get a confident reader to read Matthew 14.1-12, alerting everyone that most of the story goes back in time to explain verse 2 (i.e. why Herod was saying, 'John the Baptist has risen from the dead'). Ask everyone to sit back, close their eyes, and imagine the story unfolding as described.

- Who are the characters?

Consider the attitudes towards John:

- What did Jesus think of John? (Matthew 11.11)
- What was Herod's attitude towards John?
- What was Herodias' attitude towards John?
- What was Herodias' daughter attitude towards John?
- Explain these.

- Who has the power?
- What do you think of Herod?
- Can you think of any contemporary 'Herods' who today foster fear?
- Why, do you think, is this story here?

Jesus, and the feeding of the 5000

- This story is familiar. But Matthew tells it deliberately. We need to slow down and listen to how Matthew tells it, the clues to its meaning lie in its telling.

- So, to slow everyone down to listen closely to Matthew's telling, get people to shut their Bibles, and then guess how it starts and progresses verse by verse, with you filling in the blanks by reading the verses.

- Now get someone to read it out again (Matthew 14.22-36):
- What wasn't in Matthew's account that you thought would be?
- What was in Matthew's account that surprised you? What stands out?
- What's the point of all the bread that is left over?
- Comparing Herod and Jesus, what conclusions can we draw?
- How might we expect to see Jesus use his power when those he loves are in danger?

Jesus walks on water

- Read verses 22-26.
- Why might Jesus have immediately sent his disciples on ahead of him?
- What do you make of the disciples' initial response on seeing Jesus? Why?
- Read verses 27-30
- How does Jesus use his power?
- What on earth was Peter thinking? (v28)
- What on earth was Jesus thinking (in saying, 'Come')? Have a go at explaining this with reference to Genesis 1:26-28 and 3:17, and how this episode blows apart our expectations.
- Read verses 31-36
- Ask for a volunteer group member to use verses 30 and 31 to give a 3-minute impromptu gospel talk. (If no one volunteers, ask - 'Explain the gospel from vv30-31')
- Why is Jesus' question reasonable, given what happens in verse 32?
- The disciples worshiped Jesus. Think on verse 33. Would you have done the same (... really?), if you'd have been there? Why or why not? (c.f. Matthew 28:17; Revelation 19:10, 22:8-9)
- What is the significance of the connection between Jesus (in verse 36), and Peter (in Acts 5.15)?

Conclusion & Prayer

- Break into men's and women's groups for prayer.
- What have you learnt about Jesus and his use of power, and Herod's use of power?
- What difference does this make to you?
- Pray about this, with reference to what causes you fear.

Study 3 Leaders Notes: Matthew 15:1-28 - Spiritual Cleansing

This week, we move from last week's uncovering of Jesus as the compassionate Ruler, who uses his authority to save then restore us in the image of God over creation, to dealing with our real issue: our deep uncleanness because of sin. This comes to the fore initially through a discussion of what makes someone externally unclean, to the personal story of the Canaanite woman. The offensive note in Jesus' reply is meant to jar us, and to causes us to reflect on the level of humility required to admit our own spiritual uncleanness, and to come to him for cleansing.

This study, therefore, requires the leader to ask searching questions of all group members, and to give each member time to reflect on their own need for cleansing.

Structure		Key points
15.1-11	Jesus offends the religious authorities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Jesus is north in Galilee, by the Sea of Galilee, and receives a delegation of religious authorities from south in Jerusalem, who have travelled to question Jesus about concerns over their own laws (which were non-biblical, and additional to the laws of Moses, which Jesus upholds – c.f. Matt 5.17-20).• Attention to extra religious scruples has created a false righteousness, blinding the Pharisees to their own neglect of the substance of God's requirements of them. This results in a religion of lip service to God, passed off as true religion, when in fact it is false.• As the following verses show, their error is not warranted: to sit in judgment of religious authorities, we should search our own hearts - all of us are capable of deep hypocrisy.

Structure		Key points
15.12-20	Jesus offends his disciples: It's our hearts, not dirt that makes us unclean.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The theme of this section is offense: Peter points out that Jesus' quotation of Isaiah 29 offended the Pharisees, whereupon Jesus offends Peter: 'Are you so dull?'. Jesus' offense of the authorities, and Peter anticipates his offensive words to the Canaanite woman, and then ourselves as we reflect on the meaning. The question, 'Are you so dull?' Needs to be asked of anyone not convinced of their depravity before God. • Total depravity does not mean that we are unable of doing any good at all: it simply means that everything we do will be tainted by sin. We are fallen, and incapable of doing what is purely good. • This means that we don't just need to be <i>forgiven</i> for our guilty actions; we are wretched - we need to be <i>cleansed</i>.
14.21-36	Jesus offends a needy woman, who responds with humility and faith	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tyre and Sidon are towns on the coast, just beyond the northern borders of ancient Israel, and (in the first century), Judea. It's Gentile territory. • The woman's cry of faith in verse 22 is set against Jesus' rudeness and the disciples' lack of compassion (verse 23). • Jesus' rudeness is heightened in verse 24, then again in verse 26. Why is Jesus so rude? To make us see what's required to be made clean: a recognition that our need for cleansing is more odious, more serious, more offensive than our pride in not asking for help. Jesus' rudeness makes us reflect on what depths of desperation, humility, and faith is necessary to beg of Jesus to be cleansed. Jesus willingly vindicates such faith.

Study 3: Matthew 15:1-28 - Spiritual Cleansing

Intro:

- Are there things about Jesus (or you being Christian) which are offensive to your family and friends? Discuss.
- Honestly, what do you find offensive about Jesus?
- Do you think God finds anything in you offensive?
- Pray: giving thanks that Christ overlooked the repulsion and offence of going to the cross, and that God, through the cross, overlooks what is offensive in us, and washes us clean. Pray we would be offended about what God is offended by.

Jesus offends the Religious Authorities.

- Read Matthew 15.1-11
- What was the intent of the religious authorities travelling all the way north to Galilee to meet Jesus?
- What is the charge? (NB: there is no explicit law per se in the Old Testament law about needing to wash ones hands before eating).
- What is the essence of Jesus' counterattack? (vv. 3-9)
- What is his issue with the religious authorities? (See Matthew 5.17-20, 23:23-28)
- Who, do you think, is Jesus offending here?

Jesus offends his disciples

- What do you think? Are people basically good with a track record of occasionally slipping up? Or are we corrupted at our core? Does this mean we're unable of doing anything good at all?
- What about you? Are you essentially good with occasional slip-ups?, or deeply rotten at heart? What do you think? How would you put it?
- Read Matthew 15.12-20
- After offending the Pharisees, now Jesus offends Peter by calling him 'dull'.
- What is his point?

- Look at the list. Think about each. Are these in your own heart? Yes?, or No?
- What is the honest conclusion about your spiritual condition? Is this an issue for you? When?

Jesus offends a needy foreign woman.

- Read Matthew 15.21-28.
- What is shocking about this?
 - What are the 'steps' in Jesus' rudeness?
 - V23
 - V24
 - V26
 - What are the woman's 'steps' in meeting her rude obstacles?
 - V22
 - V25
 - V27
 - What do you think? Would you respond like this? If not, how would you respond? (Think: what would your essential message be to Jesus about himself, and about yourself?)
- What does this woman grasp about herself (and her daughter), and about Jesus that would enable her to make such steps?
- What does Jesus' rudeness cause us to ask of ourselves?
- Given our own heart uncleanness, if this woman's helplessness, and her daughter's spiritual condition is a mirror on our own spiritual condition, how does she teach us?

Prayer

- Alone or as a group, sit and read Psalm 51. David moves through several needs - mercy (from being punished), transgressions blotted out; iniquity washed away; his depravity (a rotten core – v.5); for God to not see his sins; a new, pure heart, not to be cast away ... deliverance from guilt.
- Now read to the group Matthew 5:3-4 and pray Psalm 51.

Study 4 Leaders Notes: Matthew 15:29-16:12 - 'Show me a sign from heaven'

Today's passage comprises three 'moments' in three locations, but put together, they build on each other.

1. In the first, Jesus repeats his earlier sign (to the Jews), but this time to the Gentiles, clearly showing him as from God, and clearly showing the blessing that comes to others from him, who comes from heaven.
2. In the second, Jesus labels the request for a sign by the Pharisees and Sadducees as wicked, because it implies a refusal to believe the clear signs already given.
3. In the third, Jesus warns his disciples against their unbelief of heart evident in their words, which is like 'yeast' (i.e. it can quickly grow).

Structure		Key points
15.29-39	Jesus feeds 4000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • De ja vu with 14.13-21 (feeding of 5000)? The teaching value is in the repetition (see the table below to compare accounts), but what is the point? • Check out the table below to compare the accounts of the different events. There are many similarities to both events, but some crucial differences: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location & audience. The feeding of the 5,000 took place on the Sea of Galilee, either in the Gennesaret valley, or near Bethsaida (either case, in Jewish heartland). The feeding of the 4,000 took place in the region of the Gerasenes, in the region around the Decapolis (Gentile territory). Clearly this miracle was meant for both Jews and Gentiles and teaches about the abundant blessing that Jesus brings. • Both accounts begin with healings, but this account has a more extensive description of the healing (vv. 30-31, signalling the arrival of God's day of redemption – c.f. Isaiah 35.3-10, esp. vv. 5-6). This is remarkable since Isaiah 35 has Jews in mind, but here we see the Messiah is for the Gentiles too! • There is a special teaching point for Jesus' disciples - 16.5-12 (see below).



Structure		Key points
16.1-4	Demand for a sign	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Pharisees' and Sadducees' demand for a sign from Jesus takes place back in Jewish territory. The demand is ridiculous: Jesus has just done Messianic healings (fulfilling Isaiah 35), and miraculously fed the multitudes. The demand comes from an unwillingness to believe, despite the evidence. The issue with unbelief is not evidence, but an unwillingness to believe Jesus is from God. • Jesus labels the refusal to believe (behind the smokescreen of not enough evidence) as 'wicked' and 'adulterous'. • The sign of Jonah is not explained here, because it has already been explained, in Matt 12:40-41. This is the second time that Jesus has been asked for a sign from heaven (12.38), which Jesus also labelled wicked and adulterous, given the miracles he'd already done in full view of everyone (eg. 12.1-14).
16.5-12	Jesus warns his disciples about a faithless response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Despite the significance the feeding of the 4000 may have had for the Gentiles, Jesus builds on his denunciation of the previous demand for a sign by applying the feeding miracles to the disciples as a warning. • The reason why Jesus warns the disciples is that - they too are of 'little faith', and vulnerable to falling into the same unbelief as the Pharisees and Sadducees. • This warning therefore applies to all of Jesus' disciples, and even more for those who've come after Jesus' disciples' and who have not been personal witnesses ourselves to his miraculous signs. Where then is our 'evidence'? I'm guessing ... our experience of his grace, the reasonableness of faith (evidence for resurrection etc.).

Comparison of the Feeding Miracles

Feeding of 5000 - 14.13-21	Feeding of 4000 - 15.29-39
<p>13 When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns.</p> <p>14 When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.</p>	<p>29 Jesus left there and went along the Sea of Galilee. Then he went up on a mountainside and sat down. ³⁰ Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. ³¹ The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.</p>
	<p>32 Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way."</p>
<p>15 As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food."</p> <p>16 Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."</p>	<p>33 His disciples answered, "Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?"</p> <p>34 "How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked.</p>
<p>17 "We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered.</p>	<p>"Seven," they replied, "and a few small fish."</p>
<p>18 "Bring them here to me," he said. ¹⁹ And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people.</p>	<p>35 He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. ³⁶ Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, and when he had given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and they in turn to the people.</p>
<p>²⁰ They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.</p>	<p>³⁷ They all ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.</p>

Feeding of 5000 - 14.13-21	Feeding of 4000 - 15.29-39
<p>²¹ The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.</p>	<p>³⁸ The number of those who ate was four thousand men, besides women and children.</p>
<p>22 Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd.</p>	<p>³⁹ After Jesus had sent the crowd away, he got into the boat and went to the vicinity of Magadan.</p>

Study 4: Matthew 15:29-16:12 - 'Show me a sign from heaven'

Intro

- Have you ever said, or has anyone ever said to you, 'If God wants me to believe in him, he needs to appear in front of me and show me a miracle, and then I'll believe'?
- (If so, what were the circumstances? What was your response? What was the effect - belief, or unbelief?)
- (If not, what might cause you to ask such a question yourself? If someone said it to you, how would you respond?)
- In this passage, this question is asked, and we hear Jesus' response. There are three 'moments' in three locations, but put together, they build on each other.

Jesus feeds the 4000.

Get the group thinking:

- What was the point of Jesus feeding the 5000 back in chapter 14?
- If Jesus has fed 5000 people already, what - do you think - might be the point of repeating the miracle with 4000? (Listen to answers)

Map.

- Use a map to show the possible locations where Jesus fed the 4000. (google 'Gennesaret valley, Bethsaida map'). Point out that it's a different spot to where he fed the 5000 (in the region of the Decapolis - Gentile territory).
- Open your Bible to Matthew 15.29-39.
- Read it out.
- What stands out?
- Have someone read the feeding of the 5000 (from 14.13-21), while the rest of the group keeps their eyes on the feeding of the 4000.
- Get the group to point out the similarities and differences.
- (c.f. Isaiah 35.5-6)
- Why the two accounts?
- What should be our response?

The Demand for a sign

- Read Matthew 16.1-4
- Is the request for a sign in verse 1 reasonable?
- The Pharisees and Sadducees ask Jesus for a sign from heaven, and he answers them by referring to 'the sign of the times'. What is this 'sign'?
- Explain Jesus' assessment of their generation in verse 4.
- What is the sign of Jonah? (Get some to recap in their own words what Jesus is referring to in the story of Jonah, then read 12.38-41).
- What 'sign(s)' has Jesus given us? Are these greater, or lesser? Is there then more, or less 'evidence' available to us? What then, are the 'signs of our times' that we must interpret??

Jesus warns his disciples about a faithless response

- Jesus has given a repeated and miraculous sign that he is from heaven, bringing far more blessings to people than even they expected or needed. So when the Pharisees and Sadducees demand a 'sign' that Jesus is from heaven, Jesus rebukes them. What do you think - could you be that wicked, that adulterous?
- Read 16.5-12
- What prompted the disciples' misunderstanding? (v8)
- What are we meant to understand from Jesus' repeated miracle of feeding the multitudes?
- What is the 'yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees'? (v11-12, c.f. 23.16-22)
- Why must we be on our guard against this?
- What does this look like - Positively? - Negatively?

Prayer

- Split into men and women, go to separate rooms for prayer.
- Talk with each other about what challenges you have in faith.
- How can you guard your own heart?
- How can you help each other guard your hearts?
- Pray for one another.

Study 5 Leaders Notes: Matthew 16:13-17.23 - 'Who do you say I am?'

This study covers a lot of ground. As leader, you will have to keep things moving. The theme is introduced by Jesus in his personally posed question of 'Who do you say I am?', and moves through a) various misunderstandings: caused by wrong expectations, and a wrong understanding of the cross; and of what it means to follow him; b) to shock at his glory (and expectation of his coming); c) to Jesus' frustration at the disciples ongoing lack of faith; d) to grief at Jesus' shocking prediction of his death. So, it has the heights of revelation and glory, the lows of anticipating Jesus' own death (& our own, in following him), and the difficulty of faith on the ground in this exalted and humiliated Son of Man.

The challenge in leading this study is to get the group, who will be familiar with these passages, to answer afresh Jesus' personal question to us, 'Who do you say I am?'. It can't be enough to say glibly, 'You are the Christ', but not then be prepared to sacrifice all for him. Jesus' call to discipleship and faith is searching, and if we don't feel the challenge, we are still mimicking Peter in his half-right answer. Discipleship requires a theology not just of glory, but of the cross. As Jesus points out to Peter, we cannot have glory without the cross.

Structure		Key points
16.13-20	Who do you say I am? Christ?!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Son of Man’ is Jesus’ chosen way to refer to himself. Jesus was certainly spoken of as being a messenger from God, endowed with God’s power. Peter’s confession marks a turning point. Our challenge is twofold: 1. Do we (in our own default thinking) rely on Jesus as our Christ from God? 2. Is our expectation like Peter’s - ONLY that he should save us (a theology of glory), but omitting the cost of discipleship / a theology of the cross? • ‘On this rock I will build my church’ - grammatically the ‘rock’ is not Peter (contra Roman Catholicism), nor simply the confession (‘You are the Christ’); but the fact that Peter was the foundational apostle who made this confession, and this was the testimony which subsequently would be preached to all the world by all the other apostles too. • Binding and loosing on earth and in heaven. As the first amongst the apostles who made this confession, Peter and his confession is the key to the gospel, which - when accepted - will see someone saved; and which - when rejected - will see someone stay in their condemnation. Peter (and those after him, including us!) can declare someone saved or otherwise on the basis of their acceptance or rejection of the gospel. Our authority is the apostolic gospel, grounded in Peter’s confession.

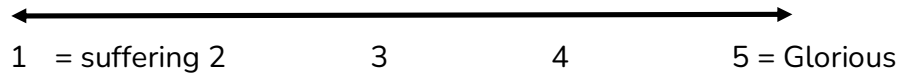
Structure		Key points
16.21-28	<p>Double shock: Suffering, then Glory</p> <p>Shock: Jesus predicts his death & res.</p> <p>Shock: Jesus says his disciples must follow him down this path</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Never Lord!’ Peter’s rebuke stems from a misunderstanding of how Jesus would achieve victory (more of Psalm 45, or 2 Samuel 22, than also including Isaiah 53). • ‘Get behind me Satan!’ The strength of Jesus’ rebuke, and his declaring Peter now a personal ‘stumbling block’ (Gk: ‘skandalon’) to himself is shocking. The temptation posed is for Jesus to be Christ without going the way of suffering or the cross. This temptation is strong for Jesus, but cannot work: the cross is the necessary way for him to become Saviour. • The next step that Jesus makes is to point out that there is a necessary and inescapable link between his own necessary path to the cross, and the path of his disciples. Disciple literally means ‘follower’. We have to choose whether the orientation of our life is to live for now (to gain the world), or the life to come (to find your life); to please ourselves, or our Father. • v28 poses an issue. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This can’t refer to Jesus’ return on the Day of Judgment (ala Matthew 25.31). 2. Another possibility is Jesus’ transfiguration, or Pentecost, but this is unlikely because v28 implies a longer wait, within the lifetime of Jesus’ disciples. 3. Another possibility is Jesus’ resurrection and ascent into heaven (ala Daniel 7:13), but again, the time reference seems to speak of something longer off. 4. Another possibility is the kingdom breaking through with the outpouring of the Spirit, though it’s unlikely this is what Jesus refers to because of the reference to the disciples seeing ‘the Son of Man’. 5. The final option is more likely: the witness of the resurrection & ascension of Jesus as Lord of all, and then the outpouring of the Spirit because of his reign, and the multiplication of believers thereafter.

Structure		Key points
17.1-13	Seeing the Son of Man transfigured in Glory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Although the transfiguration doesn't fulfil 16.28 entirely, it allows us to glimpse Jesus' glory. • Moses' and Elijah's appearance shows Jesus in continuity with the Old Testament law and prophets. Peter's suggestion is human, but assumes equality between these 3 impressive figures. • The bright cloud recalls God's presence on Sinai with Moses, and the voice is the second heavenly endorsement (see Matt 3.17), but puts Jesus ahead of Moses and Elijah: 'Listen to <u>him</u> (he's greater than them!)'. • Jesus' comment in v7 is unique to Matthew's account, recalling 14.31, and is the gospel in a nutshell. Verse 12 is also unique to Matthew, but ties his theology of glory with his theology of suffering.
17.14-20	Son of Man frustrated at lack of faith	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From the heights of seeing Jesus' glory on the mountain, they now come down. Jesus' outburst in verse 17 indicates real frustration with his disciples at their limited faith (c.f. also 14.31). • Verse 21 shows that the prob is not the volume of the disciples' faith (even small faith can produce astounding results), but it's quality: it is disbelieving. • Removal of mountains is proverbial for overcoming great obstacles: (Isa 40.4, 49:11, 54:10; Matt 21:21-22).
17.22-23	Shock: Jesus says he will be handed over, killed, and raised.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This second prediction of Jesus' passion (& resurrection) fills the disciples with grief: they cannot reconcile a theology of glory and suffering. If they can't do this for Jesus, how will they do it for themselves? Can we?

Study 5: Matthew 16:13-17.23 - 'Who do you say I am?'

Intro: Who do you say I am? Christ?!

- Pray
- Imagine a 'suffering -> Glory' scale, rated 1-5,



- Rate Jesus on the scale during his earthly ministry
- Rate Jesus on the scale now
- Rate his disciples on the scale
- Rate his disciples on the scale now
- Where are you on the scale?
- What is your expectation for the rest of your earthly life?

- Read Matthew 16:13-20
- 'Who do you say I am?' Jesus asked. Peter answered.
- Honestly, speaking in your own terms, how would you answer this?
- What did Peter mean?

- How have people explained Jesus' words in verse 18?
- What can we say he meant? Why?

- Forgiveness only comes to anyone through the gospel. Earlier, the disciples were given authority to cast out demons. Now they get a greater authority. (Remember, Jesus was accused of blasphemy for declaring someone forgiven - Matt 9.2-3). So, explain verse 19 (c.f. also 18.18).

Double shock: Suffering, then Glory

- First Shock: Read Matthew 16.21-23
- What was the mismatch in expectation between Peter and Jesus?

- Where does this come out today?

- Second shock: Read Matthew 16.24-28

- Explain the necessary connection between Jesus' suffering & glory, and that of his disciples.
- What do you think - have you gained your life, but forfeited your soul?
- What is our encouragement? (vv. 27-28)

Seeing the Son of Man transfigured in Glory

- Although the transfiguration doesn't fulfil 16.28 entirely, it allows us to glimpse Jesus' glory, and it's astounding. Read Matthew 17:1-8
- Put yourself in Peter, James and John's shoes. What would have astounded you the most?
- What do you think Peter was thinking?
- What is God's point to Peter? ... to us? (v6)
- Where is the gospel?
- Read Matthew 17.9-13
- Jesus moves immediately from the revelation of his glory to another revelation of his coming suffering. What is the connection?
- What should be our response?

Son of Man frustrated at lack of faith

- From the heights of glory on the mountain, Jesus descends to the muck of evil down below.
- Read Matthew 17.14-23
- Who is Jesus frustrated at? (c.f. Matt 10:1) Why are they (and indeed, their generation) 'perverse'?
- Why couldn't they drive the evil spirit out? (.. aren't Jesus' two statements in verse 20 contradictory? ... what's the real issue?)
- What do you think ... is the disciples' grief appropriate? (v.23)

- Given Jesus' statement in verses 24-28, how would faith help?
- For you Does it? (What's your expectation of suffering, and/or glory?)

Prayer

- Split into men and women.
- Share what God has helped you to see.
- What would 'losing your life' look like for you? Talk about this, feel free to discuss this honestly with one another, and to comment on each other.
- Pray for one another, that we would have a connected theology of suffering and glory, and expectations formed by Christ.

Study 6 Leaders Notes: Matthew 18:1-35 - True Greatness, Real Forgiveness

This chapter is timeless. It deals with the topics of true greatness, our heavenly Father's compassion on the lost, restoring a sinful brother or sister, and our need for to forgive others from the heart. One thread that joins the sections is the threat of being excluded from the kingdom of heaven. But the dominant thread behind all the positive exhortations that weaves through each section is of God's own heart that none should perish, but all turn from their sin. It ought to be our prayer that God would change our hearts through Christ's words here.

Key issues:

	Key Issue	Explanatory notes
18.1-5	True Greatness requires becoming like a child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Greek construction in verse 3 is an 'emphatic negative future' (i.e. there's NO WAY this cannot be the case). • 'Becoming like a child' means acknowledging our need for help, and then asking for it, believing that the one more powerful than you who cares for you can do for yourself what you cannot. This is essential to accept a Saviour. • Greatness in the Kingdom of Heaven is defined in terms of humility which thinks nothing of glory or pride or position. • Verse 5 = a huge endorsement by Jesus himself for children's ministry, and has implications for church.
18.6-9	Causing to stumble & child abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The flip side to the high endorsement of valuing children in Jesus' name is the seriousness with which he treats sinning against them in such a way as to make them fall away. • 'Causing to stumble' comes from the Greek 'skandalidzo' (from which we get the word 'scandalize'), meaning 'to cause to stumble in your faith so as to walk away'. • Verse 6 - if a disciple of Jesus should so scandalize a child as to cause them to walk away from him, capital punishment would be a better option (than facing him on the day of judgment).

	Key Issue	Explanatory notes
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verse 7 - Because of human sin, these things are lamentably inevitable, but this in no way excuses the perpetrator. Indeed, Jesus warns his disciples in the strongest of terms against such activity (which also causes them to stumble) - entering heaven maimed is a better outcome than being thrown into hell. Persistent, habitual, unrepentant sin will cause us to stumble in our faith (c.f. 13.41). Physical maiming won't change a thought, but Jesus highlights radical steps worth taking to repent. • Jesus was the first to conduct 'safe ministry training'! We need to take it seriously. The assumption is that human depravity renders any of Jesus' disciples a potential abuser of children.
18.10-14	Show God's heart towards children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verse 10 is the alternative positive mindset to adopt. Rather than seeing children as prey to be exploited, instead, 'do not despise one of these little ones'. The reason concerns their angels. Does this refer to guardian angels? (There is no other verse which suggests this). Or it may refer to the spirits of children who have died who are with God. • The point of the parable of the lost sheep is in verse 14 - the Father does not want any of these little ones to perish. So - treat them as Jesus would!
18.15-20	Dealing with someone who's sinned in the church	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elsewhere we are told 'bear with one another and forgive whatever grievances you have against one another' (Colossians 3.13). Not all sin needs confronting someone over. Confronting someone is for their good, not yours. • Note the steady increase of pressure brought to bear. The aim is their repentance, then restoration in church. Treating someone as a 'pagan or tax collector' is to treat someone as an unrepentant sinner needing the gospel. • Context suggests that Jesus' comment about '2 or 3 gathered in my name' refers to his power present for the church to pronounce a sinful member to be forgiven by God (on the basis of their repentance); or not forgiven (on

	Key Issue	Explanatory notes
		the basis of their repeated unrepentance). This statement is often misapplied.
18.21-35	Parable of the unmerciful servant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This parable will be important for the next passage/study on divorce and remarriage. • The injustice of the servant's lack of pity for his fellow servant is accented. The master's resultant anger & punishment is just. The point is that we will not be forgiven (the greater amount) if we do not forgive our fellow brother or sister from the heart (the lesser amount). Jesus tells us this not to be mean, but so that we will not be treated similarly, given God's prior mercy towards us in Christ. • 'Forgiveness' does not equate to reconciliation where there is no repentance (c.f. v.17). This is especially important where there are cycles of abuse. Pastorally, breaking those cycles by leaving may be necessary. But in terms of our own attitude towards the repeated sinner, what this equates to is each of us not holding in our hearts a sin done against us by another, even when unreconciled. The test is that when you think of them, you wish them well. Jesus does not here address the question of 'How to forgive?', but praying for your enemies is key (5.44). Restoration of relationship is another step, requiring (mutual) repentance.

Study 6: Matthew 18:1-35 - True Greatness, Real Forgiveness

Intro

- Yes / No Questions for private reflection on the topic of forgiveness:
 - a) In your heart of hearts, do you believe that God has forgiven you completely?
 - b) Is there persistent sin you have not fully repented of?
 - c) Is there someone at church who has sinned against you and is unrepentant? Are they unaware of their sin? Is this something you simply need to forgive, or do they need to be made aware of what they've done so that they can repent?
 - d) Think of the person whom you are most aggrieved by, or angry with. Have you told God your decision to forgive them? When you think of them, do you immediately wish them well? If not, do you ever pray for them, for their good?
- Pray that God would help you understand his heart on sin, repentance and forgiveness.

True Greatness requires becoming like a child

- Read Matthew 17.24-18.5.
- Jesus' question in 18.1 follows on from the discussion about the 'kings of the earth' (17.25). Clearly 'greatness' was a topic on the minds of the disciples.
- What must we each learn from children about entering the kingdom of heaven? (v.3)
- What then, does it mean to be great? Can you think of anyone like this?
- Verse 5 describes children's ministry at church. How? Explain Jesus' endorsement.

Causing to Stumble

- Jesus' close identification with lowly children means a high endorsement of children's ministry conducted well in his name. The flip side is that he takes very seriously when such a position is abused. In this section, we hear Jesus mentioning the words 'cause to stumble'. These come from one Greek word - 'skandalidzo', from which we get the English word 'to scandalize' - but which means to cause someone to stumble in their faith so as to walk away from Jesus. We are about to

hear Jesus giving us 'safe ministry training', especially in relation to how we treat the little ones who believe in him, when we come to them 'in Jesus' name'.

- Read Matthew 18.6-9
- From v6 - what would cause a child to stumble in their faith? What else? Being drowned with a millstone around your neck was a bloodless form of capital punishment. What is this better than? What is Jesus deadly protective of?
- From verse 7 - 'such things must come'. Why must they?
- Does this mean perpetrators aren't to blame? (v.7)
- To who is Jesus speaking? In context, what is Jesus talking about (most immediately)? What else?
- What are we to take seriously? (c.f. also 13.41)
- If cutting off your hand doesn't deal with sin's intention (which is a heart & mind issue), what is Jesus advocating?

Show God's heart towards children

- Positively, what is to be our approach towards children?
- Why does Jesus need to teach this? (What might be our otherwise default attitude? Has this been your attitude?)
- What is God's heart towards children?

Dealing with someone who's sinned in the church

- Jesus wants our attitude towards children to be the same as the Father's attitude to them. We assume this is true with a Christian who sins. What is the Father's attitude towards them?
- Read Matthew 18.15-20.
- Jesus advocates increasing the pressure. Why? For whose benefit?
- Is this the recourse for every sin? (c.f. Colossians 3.13, Ephesians 4.2)
- What does it mean to 'treat them as they would a pagan or a tax collector'?
- Verse 18 sounds like 16.19. What does this mean?

- Given the context, is verse 20 there to introduce into church services? If not that, what is meant? (c.f. vv.18-19).

The parable of the unmerciful servant

- Following on from the previous discussion (about what you should do when someone sins, for their repentance), now Peter raises the issue about our attitude towards them if they keep sinning against us (i.e. if they're unrepentant).
- Read 18.21-35
- What do you think? Is the master's anger justified? What is the point?
- What is the application?
- What does it mean to 'forgive your brother or sister from the heart'?
- How would this apply in an abusive situation, where the cycle of sin keeps repeating?
- How is it possible to forgive a repeat offender from the heart? (c.f. Matthew 5.44).

Pray

- In a group, read out again the opening Yes / No Questions for reflection on the topic of forgiveness, and ask people to review their answers:
 - a) In your heart of hearts, do you believe that God has forgiven you completely?
 - b) Is there persistent sin you have not fully repented of?
 - c) Is there someone at church who has sinned against you and is unrepentant? Are they unaware of their sin? Is this something you simply need to forgive, or do they need to be made aware of what they've done so that they can repent?
 - d) Think of the person whom you are most aggrieved by, or angry with. Have you told God your decision to forgive them? When you think of them, do you immediately wish them well? If not, do you ever pray for them, for their good?
- Get people to write out an answer:
 - How has God encouraged you?
 - How has God challenged you?
 - What do you need to do?
 - Can you do it?

- Pray in two's and three's about this.
- Pray also with thanks for the children in church, for the many who lead (up front & behind the scenes); pray for your kids leaders. Pray for all to have servant hearts.

Study 7 Leaders Notes: Matthew 19:1-12 - Jesus on Divorce, Remarriage & Singleness

In churches there may be people who are single and not thinking of marriage, people who are single who would love to be married and have never been married, and people who are single because they are divorced. And equally there are people who are married, either on their first, or second marriages. Some have been divorced and remarried. When talking about relationships we raise some thorny matters:

- Singleness. Beyond the pastoral pain of those who are single but who wish to be married, should singleness be chosen, or encouraged, and under what circumstances?
- Divorce. If God's plan for marriage is for life ('until we are parted by death'), is it EVER appropriate for Christians to divorce? If so, why, and what constitutes 'valid' grounds for biblically-sanctioned divorce?
- Remarriage. If Christians divorce, is remarriage ever appropriate within the lifetime of your first spouse?

And, of course, they are personal issues. No one who's been divorced entered into marriage wishing that outcome. And it's possible for divorced or remarried people to feel marginalised, or subject to suspicion in church by people with a high regard for marriage and the Bible who are dogmatic in their assertions.

Background:

- **Creational intent.** Genesis 2:21-25 establishes marriage between a man and a woman as part of God's creational design, and a foundational building block of human society and relationships. The curse of sin introduces relational power-struggles within marriage (Gen 3.16b).
- **The impact of sin.** Whilst life-long marriage was God's creational intent, the Bible acknowledges that in some instances, sin will destroy a marriage. Divorce per se is not necessarily sinful (otherwise it would never have been given to Moses as a provision in the Old Testament law - Ex 21.10-11). What God hates is the breaking of vows which destroys a marriage. Divorce is given as a legal 'way out' for the vulnerable partner, so that they are free in the eyes of the community to remarry. Divorce in the Bible can only ever be initiated by the party sinned against. This is important in considering the Pharisees' question in Matt 19:3.

- **Old Testament grounds for divorce & remarriage.** The two key passages are Exodus 21:10-11, and Deuteronomy 24:1. Exodus is case law, applied to slaves, but the principle behind the case law is that divorce is permitted when the marriage vows to provide for your spouse are neglected. The other grounds from Deut. 24:1 is adultery. Neglect of provision (of food, clothing, sex), and unfaithfulness (adultery) are therefore things which break the marriage covenant, and can make divorce permissible.
- **The example of the LORD himself.** In the prophets, God himself is a divorcee (he married Israel at Sinai in the covenant ceremony, was sinned against when Israel committed spiritual adultery against him for centuries, and he finally divorced himself from Israel – c.f. Jeremiah 3:1, 8. The remarkable thing is that he remarries her (Hosea 2:16 - showing that remarriage of a previously divorced spouse is possible). God also contemplates divorce against Judah, who were more faithless to the LORD than Israel (Jeremiah 3:8-13). The fact that he doesn't divorce her but extends repeated offers of forgiveness upon repentance is a model for our marriages, and the background to Jesus' teaching on forgiveness when applied to marriage.
- **New Testament background:** For around 100 years before Jesus, two 'schools' of thought had existed regarding biblically-sanctioned divorce:
 - Rabbi Shammai (conservative): Old Testament permitted divorce for sake of vulnerable (sinned against) spouse, to allow for remarriage, on the limited grounds of neglect, or adultery (Ex. 21:10-11).
 - Hillel (liberal): Old Testament permits divorce for any reason, because anything could be (lit) a 'cause for adultery' (Deut. 24:1, NIV translates as 'something indecent about her'). The liberal Hillel interpretation held sway from around 100BC to 70AD amongst Pharisees.
- **New Testament identity.** All Christians (whether married or single) are Christ's bride, married to Christ. In that sense, Christian marriage is not ultimate: our union with Christ is. This stops us idolising marriage, and makes the choice to be single for the sake of Christ an honourable one.

19.1-3	The test: Divorce for any reason?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jesus' 'answer '...except for sexual immorality (v.9) 'needs to be read against the contemporary debate on Dt 24.1 that the Hillel vs Shammai rabbinical schools were having, re. whether divorce could be 'for any and every reason'. That is, Jesus 'sexual immorality 'concession is not the only concession permitting divorce in the Bible. Jesus is not commenting on neglect as a legitimate grounds for divorce (Ex 21:11), but only on adultery (from Dt 24.1), since the 'any cause 'argument relied on Dt 24.1, not on Ex 21.10-11. Jesus 'answer shows he endorses a conservative (Shammai) reading of Dt 24.1. But his previous teaching on 'how often should I forgive my brother '(Parable of the unmerciful servant) adds a newer, more conservative element: even in the case of adultery, if the offending spouse is genuinely repentant, then the aggrieved spouse should try to forgive, and not divorce them.
19.4-6	God's design for marriage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jesus' recourse to Genesis 2 as foundational means that the creational design holds sway in a post-fall world. • Sex doesn't make someone married, but it consummates marriage. Otherwise, church members in Corinth who'd slept with prostitutes would have had to marry them (c.f. 1 Cor 6). This is important in considering whether divorce is ever permissible. • 'Separate' is the word for Divorce. 'Let no one separate' does not say, 'Divorce is never permitted under any circumstances'. It means that it is not to be desired, or initiated by a sinful partner.

19.7-9	Why then is divorce commanded?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jesus corrects the question - Moses never commanded divorce. Provision was made (it was permitted), but was only to be applied where hearts are hard (i.e. where there is no repentance. This means that biblically, divorce may be permitted where abuse continues). Divorce doesn't end the marriage. Sin does. Divorce is the legal consequence of a marriage ending through violation of marriage vows. • 'But it was not this way from the beginning' - the creational ideal is still to be strived for in marriage, even in a post-fall world. • 'Marital unfaithfulness' is 'porneia' - an all-encompassing term for all sexual activity outside of marriage, including (but not limited to) adultery. • The assumption behind verse 9 is NOT that all marriages (even after divorce) last for a lifetime (and that therefore all remarriage necessarily involves adultery, because the first marriage still stands in God's sight). The context was the discussion about 'any fault divorce' (v.3), excepting adultery as the cause. Verse 9 is saying that where divorce has been for non-biblical grounds (i.e. NOT because of neglect or sexual immorality), then the divorcees are still married in God's sight, and therefore (under those conditions), remarriage after divorce would constitute adultery. • Given the contemporary context of the question in verse 3 (asking 'Do you hold to the Hillel (liberal) position on divorce?'), Jesus' answer is about 'a cause of sexual immorality' (Dt 24.1), and not addressing the 'neglect' cause (Ex 21.10-11) at all. Jesus' silence on neglect here as a valid cause of divorce is not to be taken that couples can no longer divorce because of neglect.
19.10	Marriage is too hard!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The disciples' retort shouldn't be overstated, though it does reflect a cynical view of marriage as a duty and a life-long trap, one not easily exited. This is a common view today!

19.11 -12	On singleness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘This word’ is best taken to refer to the disciples’ misguided remark in verse 10 (‘it is better not to marry’), as if to say, ‘Not everyone can live chastely in abstinence from marriage’. Otherwise, if ‘this word’ refers to Jesus’ teaching in v4-10, it’s very unlikely that Jesus would then say, ‘but only accept it if you can’. • ‘Those to whom it (abstinence through not marrying) has been given’ refers to the impotent, or eunuchs, or those who choose celibacy to serve God without being encumbered by a spouse or children (1 Cor 7:7-9). It may also refer to those who experience same-sex attraction, but who are committed to a celibate life. Jesus does not mention here heterosexuals who would love to be married but are not.

Study 7: Matthew 19:1-12 - Jesus on Divorce, Remarriage & Singleness

Intro

- Pray – asking that we would be ‘strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus as we think and talk about divorce, remarriage, and singleness.
- Check in with the group - has anyone been divorced, and happy to let us know? (This will help the other group members to be sensitive and aware in the following study).
- In churches there may people who are single and not thinking of marriage, people who are single who would love to be married and have never been married, and people who are single because they are divorced. And equally there are people who are married, either on their first, or second marriages. Some have been divorced and remarried. No one who’s been divorced entered into marriage wishing that outcome.
- When talking about relationships we raise some **personal and at times thorny matters**.
- Whatever the background to someone’s situation, we should take our cue from Jesus’ conversation with the woman at the well in John 4: She had had five husbands, and was currently sleeping with another man. Yet Jesus spoke to her, when everyone else avoided her. He spoke to her with respect, and pointed her to himself and the eternal life in the Spirit she could have.

These are also **tricky matters to untangle**:

- Singleness. Beyond the pastoral pain of those who are single but who wish to be married, should singleness be chosen, or encouraged, and under what circumstances?
- Divorce. If God’s plan for marriage is for life (‘until we are parted by death’), is it ever appropriate for Christians to divorce? If so, why, and what constitutes ‘valid’ grounds for biblically-sanctioned divorce?
- Remarriage. If Christians divorce, is remarriage ever appropriate within the lifetime of your first spouse?

Getting started in thinking about Divorce, Remarriage, and Singleness

- Write up three headings on a whiteboard: “Divorce | Remarriage | Singleness”
1. Ask the group, ‘What would you say are the **common views** out there’ in our society about these topics?’ Write them up without comment.
 2. Ask the group, ‘Without looking at the bible, what do you think is Jesus’ summary teaching on these?’ Write these up without comment.
 3. Ask the group, ‘What are your questions?’ Write them up.

Listening to Jesus on Divorce

- Read Matthew 19:1-3
- Do the Pharisees want to learn? Do we?
- What do you think? How might this be a test?

Background:

- There was a well-known background debate behind this question. For around 100 years or so, ‘no cause divorce’ had been practiced in Judea. Essentially, a husband could divorce his wife for any reason, and send her on her way.
- How was this justified biblically?
- Conservatives (lead by Rabbi Shammai) saw this as an outrageous violation of scripture, which allowed for only two real grounds for divorce: neglect (Exodus 21.10-11), or sexual immorality (Deut 24.1).
- But a more popular liberal interpretation of Deut 24.1 had been adopted by the Pharisees, who said that the phrase ‘something indecent in her’ (NIV, or literally ‘a cause of adultery’) could refer to anything: anything theoretically could cause adultery (a cold dinner ... a rude remark ... ugly looks ...), so therefore - according to his liberal view - the Bible sanctioned ‘any-cause-divorce’. All a disgruntled

partner had to do was say, 'I divorce you', and leave the house, and the marriage was over ... all made proper by a divorce certificate.

- The Pharisees' question was essentially asking Jesus to comment on the 'sexual immorality' grounds for divorce in the Old Testament: was he a liberal (like them), or a conservative? Could a man divorce his wife for any reason, or only for adultery? (and neglect - although because the debate was around Dt 24.1, not Ex 21.10-11, neglect is not touched on here by either party).
- Check to see if everyone is on board with the background. Get someone to put it in their own words.

God's design for marriage today

- Read Jesus' response in 19.4-6
- How is marriage defined according to Jesus?
- According to Jesus, should this pre-sin model apply in a post-sin world?
- How does this correct the Pharisees?
- How does this correct the prevailing beliefs about marriage in our society today?
- Read verse 7.
- Ask the group to give their answer, before you read Jesus' answer.
- Read verse 8.
- Go back to the groups' listed questions on divorce.
- Use the background material (in the Leaders notes) to help answer any questions.

Listening to Jesus on Remarriage

- Read Matthew 19:9
- 'Marital unfaithfulness' (NIV) is the Greek word *porneia*, or 'sexual immorality', which is an umbrella term capturing all sexual activity outside of marriage, and which therefore includes adultery.
- Why would remarriage after divorce entail adultery?

- Remind people that Jesus is making a comment here about the debate on 'a cause of adultery' (from Deut 24.1), and is not touching on the other biblical grounds for divorce (neglect, from Ex 21.10-11).
- Is divorce always a sin, or always involves sin leading to divorce? Yes / No.
- If divorce in the Old Testament was a provision for an aggrieved partner whose marriage vows had been broken to be cleared to remarry, when would it be okay to remarry?
- What about abuse?
- This is covered from the principles drawn from the case law in Exodus 21.10-11. Since abuse is a specific form of neglect, and neglect is grounds for divorce, then abused partners may leave.
- How does Jesus' teaching from last week on 'how often should I forgive my brother' feed into this? (Answer: if an offending spouse seriously repents, then the aggrieved partner should forgive them, and should not divorce them).

Listening to Jesus on singleness

- Read Matthew 19:10-12
- How is the disciples' remark similar to current attitudes about marriage?
- 'This word' refers to the disciples' misguided and cynical view of marriage as a duty and a life-long trap, one not easily exited. The alternative to marriage is not immorality, but a chaste life outside of marriage. Who should accept this 'word'? (v12)
- What does it mean to 'live like a eunuch for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven'? How should we think about this?

Reflection:

- Go back to your questions.
- What have you learnt?

Prayer

- What prayer points come out of this study? Pray for these.