

"Marriage and Divorce" - Mark 10:1-12

Marriage and divorce – This has the potential to be an uncomfortable subject. Divorce is so very common in our culture and marriage is getting less and less so. I doubt that there are many families who have not been touched, who have not been impacted by the tragedy of divorce. I know our family has been impacted. Divorce leaves wounds. I know it fosters great anger, bitterness and guilt and at the same time, it is so common that many folks see it as almost inevitable.

A few years back, a couple approached me about officiating at their wedding and they wanted to change their wedding vows from “as long as we both shall live”, to “as long as we both shall love.” When I told them, I wasn’t at all comfortable with that, they decided to find another pastor. It troubles me, because they were setting themselves up for failure by acknowledging that their marriage could fail.

This morning, we’re going to see what the Bible tells us about marriage and divorce and specifically, what Jesus has to say about marriage and divorce. I know many of you have experienced divorce first-hand, and I want to assure you that my purpose is not to dredge up any regret or guilt; my purpose is not to make anyone feel bad. My purpose is simply to deliver the truth as it is recorded in the word of God.

As it is with many Biblical doctrines, there are denominational traditions and doctrines that error on both extremes of what the Bible teaches. Some evangelical pastors teach that divorce must never happen, no matter what the circumstances. In fact, I know a number of pastors who will not officiate at a wedding where one or both of the individuals has been previously divorced. There are Village Missions pastors that hold this view. With all due respect, this view is goes beyond what the Bible teaches.

On the other extreme, there are pastors who have completely caved to the culture and tolerate divorce for the most trivial and whimsical reasons you can imagine. As I said, we are interested in what the Bible says, and we are going to do our level best to avoid the ditches on either side of the road.

The 9th chapter ended with Jesus teaching the disciples in a house in Capernaum of Galilee. These were important lessons about how His disciples were to behave, important lessons about humility and obedience.

As we begin the 10th chapter we find a pretty significant temporal gap. Mark leaves out some stuff. Jesus has left Galilee and led His disciples Southward into Samaria, Judea, and Perea and wherever He was, He continued to teach, heal, cast out demons and minister to the crowds that gathered. He was in the last 6 months of His earthly ministry, and as such, He was preparing His Apostles for their role in establishing the Church. Matthew and Mark don’t say much at all about this phase of His ministry, this final Judean ministry, but Luke and John fill in the blanks. You can read about this phase in Luke, from the end of the 9th chapter to the middle of the 18th, and in John Chapters 7-11. There’s a lot of important stuff there, but Mark jumps to the end of what is called Jesus’ Perea ministry.

Perea was a region on the Eastern bank of the Jordan river that extended to the South of the Sea of Galilee to about halfway down the East side of the Dead Sea. It was an area administered by Herod Antipas. It was also a region through which Jewish pilgrims would pass on their way to Jerusalem for the feast days. It was a long way around, but this allowed them to avoid Samaria. No self-respecting Jew would pass through Samaria as they considered Samaritans to be ungodly half-breeds. So, they took the long way around through Perea. There would have been a number of Galilean pilgrims who would

have encountered Jesus and stop to listen to Him teach. That's where we find Jesus and His disciples as chapter 10 opens, on the East side of the Jordan River in the region of Perea.

Then He arose from there and came to the region of Judea by the other side of the Jordan. And multitudes gathered to Him again, and as He was accustomed, He taught them again. (Mark 10:1)

Jesus did what He always did. Whenever folks gathered to Him, He delivered the truth. But among the people who gathered around, there was a group that was not at all interested in the truth.

The Pharisees came and asked Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" testing Him. (Mark 10:2)

Now, the Pharisees weren't at all interested in a truthful answer. This was an ambush. They were trying to set Him up. They were scheming to discredit Him in front of the crowds.

Divorce, you see, was absolutely epidemic in the culture of the day. The rabbinic tradition had twisted the scriptural view of marriage to the point that a man could divorce a woman for almost any reason. And here they were in a region ruled by Herod, who set the example by divorcing his wife and marrying Herodias, who had been his brother Philip's wife. He stole his own brother's wife! Nice guy! And John the Baptist called him out for it. So, Herod arrested him, and eventually executed him. I wonder if these Pharisees were hoping Jesus would take such a hard line on this issue of divorce that Herod would do the same thing to our Lord.

So, this was an attack ... an ambush. And Jesus did what He always did. He prevailed. It reminds me of the old proverb: "If you enter into a battle of wits, it's best not to go in unarmed." Well, I don't know if these guys were completely witless, but they were certainly out of their depth. Jesus prevailed by referring to scripture. That, by the way, should be a lesson for us! God's word is truth and we need to be people of the truth.

And He answered and said to them, "What did Moses command you?" (Mark 10:3)

Moses wrote the first 5 books of the Bible, So again, Jesus was asking them in essence, "What does scripture say?"

They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to dismiss her." (Mark 10:4)

Now, the Pharisees were referring to a passage in Deuteronomy.

*"When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she **finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce**, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, when she has departed from his house, and goes and becomes another man's wife, if the latter husband detests her and writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her as his wife, then her former husband who divorced her must not take her back to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance. (Deuteronomy 24:1-4)*

So, it is obvious that Moses presumed that there would be divorce, and he was giving a precept to be followed. By the way, the word translated "uncleanness" in our New King

James does not refer to adultery. Adultery was punishable by death under Levitical Law. No, this refers to something that brings shame to the husband. The ASV translates the phrase “some unseemly thing”. The ESV translates it “some indecency”. The NIV, “something indecent about her”. You get the idea.

But by the First Century, the rabbis had interpreted this to be pretty much any reason the husband could come up with. Spinning around so her ankles were exposed in public was cause for divorce. Disagreeing with her husband, even in private – cause for divorce. Burning his dinner – No, I’m not making this up. One rabbi even advocated divorcing a wife if she no longer seemed attractive to her husband or, if you simply found someone you liked better. And notice, these were all privileges that only the husband could take advantage of. Women had no say in the matter because they were considered nothing more than chattel goods.

Listen to how Jesus responded:

And Jesus answered and said to them, "Because of the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept. (Mark 10:5)

Because of the hardness of your heart; divorce was an accommodation made because of humanity’s depraved, sinful nature. It remains so today. And then Jesus goes back to Scripture:

But from the beginning of the creation, God 'MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE.' 'FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH'; so then they are no longer two, but one flesh. (Mark 10:6-8)

Jesus took them back to Genesis, chapter 2, before the fall and He explained God’s design for marriage. Other than salvation, I don’t know that there is any better gift God can give than a partner in marriage. God designed marriage, He instituted it, and if He is honored in the marriage, He will bless it. I praise Him every day for the incredible gift He gave me in Kris!

Marriage is not a social contract between two people. Marriage is a sacred covenant between three parties: a man, a woman and Almighty God. Two individuals become one flesh. Each partner brings their own strengths to shore up the other’s shortcomings and it is a beautiful thing – two become one flesh. Husband and wife operate as a unit and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, a wonderful, symbiotic relationship.

Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate." (Mark 10:9)

Did you catch that? What **God** has joined together. It is God who institutes a marriage, and it is a beautiful, beautiful thing. It is certainly not God’s will that a marriage breaks up.

So, if marriage is such a great thing, why does it seem so hard for so many people? It’s because of sin. It’s because of the curse. Turn to Genesis, Chapter 3.

To the woman He said: "I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; In pain you shall bring forth children; Your desire shall be for your husband, And he shall rule over you." (Genesis 3:16)

I want to focus on that last phrase: **Your desire shall be for your husband, And he shall rule over you.** I’ve actually heard people teach that this is God’s design for marriage. No, no, no ... this is part of the curse! This is not at all the original design for marriage. Because of the fall, friction and dissonance entered the marriage relationship. Because of the fall, we have a natural tendency to put self above all others. We no longer consider ourselves to be one flesh. We start asking, “What’s in it for me?” And, “Am I getting my needs met?”

Women have a sinful tendency to try to dominate their husbands. Sometimes it's subtle, covert, manipulative. Sometimes it's overt, and involves a raised voice. Maybe stuff is thrown to try to make the point. But the underlying motivation is to try to get the husband to do what the wife wants him to do, to fulfill her perceived needs and there exists a definite lack of respect. That is what "Your desire shall be for your husband." means.

Husbands have a sinful tendency to try to control their wives by ruling as a dictatorial despot. Often, the wife is simply ignored as if she is unworthy of attention. You sneak off to your man cave or turn the game on a little louder. Way too often, it degenerates to verbal, emotional or even physical abuse. The man is not at all interested in his wife's interests, only his own selfish agenda.

This is sin, people!

Instead of a symbiotic, one-flesh relationship where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, marriage becomes a battlefield. And as the emotional and even physical turmoil piles up, no wonder folks would just rather bail! Or maybe the couple decides to suffer in silence, each going his and her own way, trying to avoid conflict by avoiding any intimacy. That is not what Jesus wants for your marriage!

Later on today, I want you to read Ephesians 5:22-33. But guys, you don't get to read verse 22; I want you to start with verse 23. Ladies, you can read verse 23, but I don't want you to get tripped up by the "s" word. Submit does not mean that you become a doormat, an inferior partner. In God's design, husband and wife are equal partners, even though they have differing roles. You are to be one flesh!

As you read through this, guys, I want you to notice that you are to love your wives as Jesus loves the Church. That is a selfless love. Jesus serves the Church. Jesus laid down His life for the Church. That is the standard, fellas. That is what you are commanded to do. Yes, you are to provide spiritual leadership, but you are to do so in the manner Jesus prescribed: servant leadership.

But Jesus called them to Himself and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. (Matthew 20:25-26)

"If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." (Mark 9:35)

You are to lead by servicing your wife, finding out what she needs and providing it sacrificially.

And wives, I want you to notice that you are to help your husbands become godly spiritual leaders not by manipulating them, but by giving them your respect. They won't always deserve it, but give it to them anyway. Offer suggestions and advice as the loving partner you are designed to be. Don't succumb to the temptation of trying to dominate or manipulate your husband.

Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. (Ephesians 5:33)

That is the Biblical model. That is what we need to strive for.

In the house His disciples also asked Him again about the same matter. So He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." (Mark 10:10-12)

Folks, please understand, God is no fan of divorce. In fact, in Malachi, He states it very explicitly:

... the LORD has been witness Between you and the wife of your youth, With whom you have dealt treacherously; Yet she is your companion And your wife by covenant. But did He not make them one, Having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. "Therefore take heed to your spirit, And let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth. "For the LORD God of Israel says That He hates divorce, For it covers one's garment with violence," Says the LORD of hosts. Therefore take heed to your spirit, That you do not deal treacherously." (Malachi 2:14-16)

God hates divorce, but because of the hardness of our hearts, in His infinite mercy, He does provide an accommodation. Matthew, in his account of this same event gives a little more of Jesus' saying:

*And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, **except for sexual immorality**, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery." (Matthew 19:9)*

Is it ever permissible for a Christian to divorce his or her partner? Well, it's in the Bible, right here in Matthew. There is an exception; an escape clause. And that's not the only place:

Speaking of marriages in which one is a believer and the other not, Paul tells the Corinthians this: Don't divorce your partner just because he or she is an unbeliever.

*But if the unbeliever departs, **let him depart**; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace. For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife? (1 Corinthians 7:15-16)*

Yes, God hates divorce, but accommodation is made because of the hardness of our hearts, because of our sin nature. However, you do not get to make up the grounds for divorce. You don't get to leave your spouse just because you get tired of him. (or her). You certainly are not to leave your spouse because you found someone more interesting.

my dear friends, if you are one who has gone through the heartbreak of divorce, understand there is mercy available in Jesus Christ. Even if the divorce was your fault, a result of your sin, Jesus has you covered.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

If you have been cleansed from all unrighteousness, that means you have a clean slate. If you have a clean slate, I see no reason why you should not be permitted to enter into a godly marriage. Yes, I will marry a couple who have previously been divorced, but we will need to make sure that repentance has taken place and forgiveness in Jesus Christ has been obtained.

God takes marriage very seriously. It is a sacred covenant between a man, a woman and Almighty God. It is authored by our Creator Himself.

Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate." (Mark 10:9)