



## **"What Does Jesus Say About Divorce"**

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**Mark 10:2-16**

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**9:15 AM Service**

### **What does Jesus have to say about...**

The Gospel According to Mark helps us clear some space in our hearts and minds on the basics of faith, religion, and what following Jesus means for us here and now. We are trading confusion for clarity and spirituality in general for following Jesus specifically.

I am reminded personally that I sometimes prefer ambiguity to clarity. Mark Twain is purported to have said, "Some people are troubled by the things in the Bible they can't understand. The things that trouble me are the things I can understand"

Today we take a bit of a turn toward three areas we might expect and one we might not. What does Jesus say about money and wealth? What does Jesus say about the use of power? What does Jesus say about how we help others? You might expect those.

What we might not expect is this one: "What does Jesus say about divorce?"

### **The challenge of talking about divorce:**

A sermon on divorce is likely to miss the mark, I think, for at least three reasons:

1. A lot of us have experienced the pain of divorce -- either through the failure of our own marriage or the collapse of our parents' marriage. We don't want to be reminded of the feelings of failure, guilt, anger, frustration, and on and on. We continue to wonder, as we watch both the successes and failures of our children and, perhaps, our siblings and ourselves, how much the experience of divorce has had an impact. Others of us have fought to hold on to a marriage and wonder sometimes, in the anger and conflict, the eroded trust and repeated attempts to start fresh, well, whether the better course might be to end the marriage altogether.
2. The second reason a sermon on divorce might fail completely is because it will be like listening to a speaker using a foreign language. Divorce is so prevalent in our culture, so acceptable, so legal a way to terminate a binding covenant, that we wonder why bother bringing it up in a sermon on Sunday morning. Divorce is more like a trip to the emergency room or rehab center -- not exactly what anyone would choose, but it is something from which and through which most people most of the time recover. Couple this with the way in which Christian understandings and practice are so counter-cultural and it is no surprise that Christians and non-Christians might be talking about marriage and mean two substantially different things.

3. And, finally, the third reason this might fail miserably is because, like Mark Twain, we might be confident that we already know what Jesus says about divorce and, since we don't agree with it or like it, we're already pretty much concluding that this sermon will be a waste of brain space. Maybe. But again, we might not have Jesus fully in focus on this.

So, with every expectation of failure and little prospect of anything useful, let's dive into the Scripture:

### **The Question Behind the Question**

Mark 10:1-4

*"Jesus then left that place and went into the region of Judea and across the Jordan. Again, crowds of people came to him, and as was his custom, he taught them. Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" "What did Moses command you?" he replied. They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away."*

One of the most important things we need to do when we read the gospels is to ask "**where** is this taking place?" and "**when** is this taking place?"

Jesus is in Judea on the east side of the Jordan River. So, what?

Mark has already given us a clue as to what is going on in this encounter with Jesus:

"Some Pharisees came and tested him (with a question) ..."

What's the test?

There are two of them embedded here, I think.

The first has to do with the fact that on the east side of the Jordan in Judea, Jesus was not far from one of King Herod's fortresses. It was and is called Machaerus. You probably don't recall the name, but you will recall what happened there. It's where King Herod threw a wild drinking party to celebrate his birthday. The entertainment that evening was to have his step-daughter, Salome, provide the exotic dancing for all the male guests. Fully inflamed with alcohol and lust, he promised to give her whatever she asked for and -- after consulting her mother, Herodias -- she asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Why was Herodias so enraged with John the Baptist? Because he had publicly and forcefully called out the marriage of Herod and Herodias as fraud -- they had, in a pact of power and sex, colluded to divorce their partners and marry one another (See Mark 6:14-29; see also Josephus *Antiquities* 18.5.2). If Jesus opposed divorce, the Pharisees could report him to Herod as another trouble-maker undermining the King just as John the Baptist had done. If Jesus approved of divorce, he would be contradicting the prophet John the Baptist.

The second trick question was an internal squabble among the Jewish leaders and their rabbis. This is why Jesus asked, "What does Moses say about divorce?" Back in the Pentateuch, the Five Books of Moses, specifically in Deuteronomy 24: 1-2,

"Suppose a man marries a woman but she does not please him. Having discovered something wrong with her, he writes a document of divorce, hands it to her, and sends her away from his house. When she leaves his house, she is free to marry another man."

Deuteronomy 24:1-2 NLT

The raging debate was over what constituted finding something 'unpleasing' in the wife. That is, what were the grounds for divorce? Two prominent rabbinical schools had squared off on this. The School of Rabbi Shammai restricted the grounds to immorality -- usually adultery. The School of Hillel permitted divorce on the ground of any displeasure of the husband, including burning his dinner or being less attractive than another woman. So, they were asking Jesus if he was a Conservative or a Progressive. Could he be pigeonholed as part of one team or the other?

Jesus response opens the way for us to see that before a marriage is dissolved, several other things that should be together have already come apart.

*"It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied. "But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.' 'For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So, they are no longer two, but one flesh." Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate."*

Jesus contrasts two realities: human hardness of heart and God's original intention. The disconnect between these two provides the reason for the "certificate of divorce".

For God's original intention of the covenant between a man and woman in marriage, Jesus quotes the early chapters of Genesis. Let's go back there for a few moments ourselves.

*But for Adam (Heb.: ish/ "the man") no suitable helper was found. So, the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping he took one of the man's ribs (alt: took part of the man's side) and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib (alt: part) he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.*

*The man said, 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman (Heb.: ishah/the woman) for she was taken out of man.*

*For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. They were both naked and they felt no shame. (Gen. 2:20b-25).*

### **The Divorce of "We" in Favor of "Me"**

What reason? Because they belong together, come from the same root, if you will, are an expression of the very nature of God. What did God say when the first humans were created? "Okay, I've been practicing on everything from hippos to heffalumps, now I'm ready for the magnum opus, the *piece de resistance*: human being. Not at all! Everything already had its place. Not a warm-up or pilot project. But now comes something totally awesome. God will create something in God's image -- sort of like God's understudy or stand in. To administer the creation under God's direction and authorization and as God's stewards/managers. But please notice this verse reflects a conversation within the Trinity.

*Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule... So, God created man in his own image...male and female he created them.*

Men and women **together** hold the image of God; not separately. *For this reason*, has to do with the leaving of our separateness and the affirmation of our partnership. Peter Lombard, 11th Century French theologian, observed that on his feet either, because she was not intended to be his slave, but from his side, precisely, because Eve was not taken from Adam's head, because she was not intended to be his ruler, nor from she was intended to be his companion.

And that *one flesh* part, being united with one another, well, that is talking about sexual intercourse. Not, by the way, because the sexual union was the high point of the relationship, but because the sexual union was symbolic of the partnership, the complementarity, the essential unity of the man and woman.

### **The Divorce of Sex from Relationship**

Speaking of sex...

In our sex-obsessed culture we are often so focused on the mechanics of sex and try so hard to give ultimate meaning to sexual relations, but fundamentally sexual relations point to something else: an intimacy, a complementary, a loving relationship as a sign of God's faithful love in our world. The problem with topless bars and pornography is not that they emphasize sexuality too much but that they do not emphasize it enough. They totally eliminate relationship and confine sexuality to the narrow parameters of human anatomy. They have not elevated sex, they have trivialized it.

### **The Divorce of *Eros* from *Agape***

This, of course, seems naive and idyllic. Because it is. We don't live in the Garden of Eden, do we? Something else has insinuated itself into humanity. Last week we saw that the temptation was to become like gods; in our pride to chart our own course. But have you noticed in these accounts of the first humans what happened when they declared their independence from the Lord?

They sewed fig leaves to hide themselves from one another and they hid from God among the trees of the garden. And when God asked what happened, because it was clear something had suddenly taken them away from him, they began pointing and blaming. And so, the fault line appeared between man and woman as well as between the first humans and God. That is what sin brings: alienation from others and from God.

As a result, as we see suggested in Genesis 3, we have a long history of men oppressing women. Not considering men and women as partners, but competitors. Maybe adversaries. So, we have this horrific heritage of patriarchy, discrimination, exploitation, separation. The clamor over sexual harassment is an indication of the entrenched mistrust and hostility between men and women. There are many divisions and hostilities in both the family of God and the larger human family, but the animosity between the sexes may be the most pervasive and enduring of them all. Ever since the Fall, human cultures have encouraged the dominance of men and the devaluation of women. (adapted from *Integrating Mars and Venus* by Rebecca Groothuis and Douglas Groothuis, *Christianity Today*, 7/12/1999)

So, when Jesus Christ, our Redeemer comes, what kind of redemption is it that he brings? The reconciliation between God and individuals? Absolutely.

The reconciliation between men and women? Yes!

The walls of separation have been broken down.

*There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)*

In the Gospels we see Jesus getting in trouble not because he was sexually promiscuous, but because he held women in such honor and esteem that he broke through conventional mores to include them among his followers. In the earliest church we have people like Lydia, Priscilla, Phoebe, Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis. And let's not forget above all how the Savior came. He wasn't inducted into the Elks Club or wasn't initiated into a Fraternity or named as a first round draft pick – he was born of a woman named Mary.

### **Divorce of Marriage and Vocation**

A study by the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University summarized the top reasons men are reluctant to commit to marriage:

1. They can get sex without marriage
2. They can enjoy the benefits of having a woman look after them by cohabiting rather than marrying.
3. They view the possibility of divorce as a potential financial liability.
4. They are not anxious to have children.
5. They fear marriage will require change and compromise in their lifestyle.

Now, with the possibility here that I am about to get into trouble with what I am about to say, a word to the women who have been waiting for that special man in your life to get the hint and get married, and wondering why he is so non-committal, these should be revealing. It's not that he's afraid to make a commitment because of some deep psychological scar from the past. You don't need to coddle him along because you are trying to be sensitive to his inner psychic world where he is afraid of abandonment and rejection. In fact, if these top reasons are close to accurate they indicate that men have a very clear understanding of marriage: it is a total commitment, not just a sexual convenience; it involves putting oneself on the line for the other rather than just having her around as a cook, cleaning lady and concierge; it WILL have an impact on their finances; it anticipates the possibility of putting children – snotty-nosed, screaming, ear-infection prone children – at a higher level than the home theatre and yearly trek to the Caribbean; and it will, without question or complaint, cause all manner of change and compromise in their lives.

So why get married?

I can make some guesses for people who are not Christ-followers, but they would just be guesses. I can point to something more specific for those who are Christ-followers, even if one person in the marriage is a Christ-follower. Even if that isn't how you started, but that is how you are now. It may surprise you to realize that the New testament regards romantic love as such a minor factor in marriage that it does not even mention it. That doesn't mean romantic love is unimportant. In fact, if you want a fully-loaded, steam up you glasses, I can't believe this is in the Bible description of romantic love, read the Old Testament book, Song of Songs. You may want to wear your asbestos gloves. Sexual attraction and romantic love are important to have in a marriage, but we cannot build a marriage, a lifelong covenant of faithfulness, upon them alone.

The point is that Christian marriage is far more than a private undertaking or a way to personal fulfillment. Christians contemplating marriage must consider the larger questions of vocation and calling, the good of others, and the well-being of the community of faith, and, most of all, how their marriage would advance or hinder the work of the kingdom of God. You see, Christian marriage is a matter of discipleship. It does not stand outside our obedience to Christ; indeed, it is to be an evidence of our obedience to Christ. (Foster, pp. 135,136)

So, if you are married, attention to marriage is an act of obedience to God. It is one concrete way we can put the kingdom of God first in our lives. We are serving Christ when we are investing time and energy into our marriage relationship. We are committing ourselves to gladly give our best hours and our peak energy to this taxing and rewarding effort. (Foster, p. 138).

### **But Where Did Jesus Set the Boundaries?**

In this little interchange with the religious leaders about divorce, it is pretty clear that Jesus recognized God's provision for divorce because of our "hardness of heart" -- that is, because we separate all sorts of things God intends to be together: man and woman, sex and relationship, *eros* and *agape*, and marriage and vocation. But what are the *grounds* for divorcing?

*When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. He answered, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery."*

*Mark 10:1-6, 8-12 NIV*

Remember, Jesus was responding to the question about the "any cause" divorce -- meaning, a person could divorce for any reason whatsoever. He replied that this kind of divorce wasn't really a divorce in the first place because "any cause" was actually not a cause for divorce. The result? The person who has an "any cause" divorce (which would be almost all of the divorces at the time) would be committing adultery if he or she should remarry. (This, by the way, makes sense of the response of the disciples of Jesus as recorded in Matthew 19:10 -- "If this is the case, it would be better not to marry!") This lets us know what Jesus rejected -- the "any cause" divorce. But he did not reject the provisions of the Old Testament. He rejected a particular interpretation of the Old Testament in Deuteronomy (the "any cause" divorce initiated by the man).

What did Jesus affirm, however, as grounds for divorce?

First, the narrower understanding of Deuteronomy 24:1,2 which is adultery.

He also did not reject the other teaching on divorce in Exodus 21:10,11.

*Although the church forgot the other cause for divorce, every Jew in Jesus' day knew about Exodus 21:10-11, which allowed divorce for neglect. Before rabbis introduced the "any cause" divorce, this was probably the most common type. Exodus says that everyone, even a slave wife, had three rights within marriage—the rights to food, clothing, and love. If these were neglected, the wronged spouse had the right to seek freedom from that marriage. Even women could, and did, get divorces for neglect—though the man still had to write out the divorce certificate. Rabbis said he had to do it voluntarily, so if he resisted, the courts had him beaten till he volunteered!*

*These three rights became the basis of Jewish marriage vows—we find them listed in marriage certificates discovered near the Dead Sea. In later Jewish and Christian marriages, the language became more formal, such as "love, honor, and keep." These vows, together with a vow of sexual faithfulness, have always been the basis for marriage. Thus, the vows we make when we marry form the basis for keeping a marriage together and, when broken, raise the possibility that the marriage will end.*

*Putting all this together gives us a clear and consistent set of rules for divorce and remarriage. Divorce is allowed for a limited number of grounds that are found in the Old Testament and affirmed in the New Testament:*

*Adultery (in Deuteronomy 24:1, affirmed by Jesus in Matthew 19)*

*Emotional and physical neglect (in Exodus 21:10-11, affirmed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7)*

*Abandonment and abuse (included in neglect, as affirmed in 1 Corinthians 7)*

*Jewish couples listed these biblical grounds for divorce in their marriage vows. We reiterate them as love, honor, and keep and be faithful to each other. When these vows were broken, it threatened to break up the marriage. As in any broken contract, the wronged party had the right to say, "I forgive you; let's carry on," or, "I can't go on, because this marriage is broken." Therefore, while divorce should never happen, God allows it (and subsequent remarriage) when your partner breaks the marriage vows. (For concise article on the biblical "grounds", see David Instone-Brewer, "What God Has Joined Together", *Christianity Today*, October 7, 2007 <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/october/20.26.html>)*

Christian marriage is a calling. Our cultural default setting is that everybody should get married. And our cultural default setting is that if we don't like the marriage, we should get divorced. Some of us here today have been hanging on to a marriage by a thread...sometimes we're hanging on to a relationship in which we are abused or neglected or betrayed. Jesus affirms God's intention of a lifelong faithful love expressed in marriage but also the hard-heartedness of human beings like you and me which causes irreparable harm to the marriage covenant. Whether we are single or married, previously married, never married, widowed, divorced, re-married, we are all seeking to experience and express the redeeming and healing love of God in Jesus Christ.

As we come to the Lord's Table today, recalling the sacrificial love of God for each of us wherever we are and wherever we have been, all of us are welcome.