

# Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

Mark 10:1-12

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An oft-repeated statistic is that roughly half of all marriages in the United States end in divorce. This is a sad commentary on the state of marriage in our nation. Perhaps even sadder is the fact that the divorce rate among people in the church is roughly the same as those outside of the church. This morning, as I stand here to try to explain what Jesus taught about divorce, I recognize that I am part of those statistics. My understanding of divorce has changed as a result, but the clear teaching of scripture has not. This morning, our goal is to unpack what Jesus taught about divorce, and then ask what we can do as believers to live in accordance with His standards, as well as helping others to do the same.

## The Pharisees' Question

We pick up this morning in Mark chapter 10, where Jesus is once again surrounded by crowds. As was Jesus' custom, He began to teach them.

Then Jesus left Capernaum and went down to the region of Judea and into the area east of the Jordan River. Once again crowds gathered around him, and as usual he was teaching them. <sup>2</sup> Some Pharisees came and tried to trap him with this question: "Should a man be allowed to divorce his wife?" <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered them with a question: "What did Moses say in the law about divorce?" <sup>4</sup> "Well, he permitted it," they replied. "He said a man can give his wife a written notice of divorce and send her away." <sup>5</sup> But Jesus responded, "He wrote this commandment only as a concession to your hard hearts. <sup>6</sup> But 'God made them male and female' from the beginning of creation. <sup>7</sup> 'This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, <sup>8</sup> and the two are united into one.' Since they are no longer two but one, <sup>9</sup> let no one split apart what God has joined together." (Mark 10:1-9, NLT)

The Pharisees seemingly come to ask Jesus a theological question. Marks tips us off, however, to the fact that the Pharisees really weren't looking for Jesus to settle a debate, they were looking for ammunition to use against Him. So they ask a seemingly simple question, "Should a man be allowed to divorce his wife?"

Jewish understanding on this question was pretty unanimous that a man should be allowed to divorce his wife. The debate tended to revolve around under what circumstances he was allowed to do so. The Pharisees may have been hoping to get Jesus in trouble with the King Herod, because John the Baptist had been imprisoned and executed by Herod Antipas after he said Herod was wrong to marry his brother's wife. They may have been hoping that Jesus would say something that would similarly anger the king and enable them to have Jesus arrested.

Jesus, however, was unwilling to step into their trap. He answered their question with a question—what did Moses say about it? Their response was that Moses said a man can

divorce his wife if he gives her a written notice. They were referring to Deuteronomy 24, which says,

“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. <sup>2</sup> When she leaves his house, she is free to marry another man. <sup>3</sup> But if the second husband also turns against her, writes a document of divorce, hands it to her, and sends her away, or if he dies, <sup>4</sup> the first husband may not marry her again, for she has been defiled. That would be detestable to the Lord. You must not bring guilt upon the land the Lord your God is giving you as a special possession. (Deuteronomy 24:1-4, NLT)

The law said that if a man found something wrong with his wife, he was required to give her a certificate of divorce that freed her from him and permitted her to get remarried. The religious leaders debated at great length what it meant to “find something wrong with her”. Many interpreted the law as saying that a man could divorce his wife for essentially any reason if he saw fit to do so. Our legal system takes the same view today, with what is sometimes called “no-fault” divorce. States with no-fault divorce (like Illinois) do not place any conditions on when a person can seek a divorce. Any married person can divorce their spouse at any time for any reason.

The Pharisees were surprised by what Jesus said next. Rather than pointing to Deuteronomy, Jesus pointed to one of the other books of Moses—Genesis. Jesus pointed to the fact that God created marriage to be between one man and one woman for life. Two people become one. God did not intend for that bond to be broken. Jesus explained that Moses wasn’t saying divorce was acceptable, he was placing boundaries on a practice that was already happening.

Apparently, men were abandoning their wives and walking out on their marriages. In the ancient Jewish culture, a woman had very little ability to care for herself. If a man abandoned his wife, she was left with no recourse, no rights, and no means of support. By requiring the man to provide a certificate of divorce, the woman was permitted to remarry, which would enable her to be provided for once more. It also prevented her first husband from trying to remarry her, treating her like property to be bought and sold.

Moses was not commanding divorce. He wasn’t really even condoning it. He was merely restraining it. Moses’ command about divorce is not much different than the commands about slavery in the Old Testament. The commands about slavery were not condoning the practice, but merely seeking to place limits and protect the people who were victims of it. Moses’ command about divorce is in a similar vein. This, I believe, was the point Jesus was trying to make. Jesus was answering their questions about divorce by reminding them what God said about marriage. He punctuated His teaching by saying, “Let no one split apart what God has joined together.” God joined these two people together in marriage—therefore only God has the ability to separate them.

I once spoke to a lawyer friend who scoffed at the idea that only God can separate two people. He said he laughs any time he attends a wedding where this verse is read. But

the truth is, no matter what a judge may say, the relationship between two married people is never dissolved. They may separate their property, they may live separately, they may even take new spouses, but they will never be truly separate. They cannot return to the way they were before they were married. If they have children together, that is especially true. They truly will have to learn to work together until death parts them. This was God's design. Man's attempts to undo it will be futile.

Unfortunately, many Christians today approach questions of divorce the same way the Pharisees did. We look in the scriptures for the conditions under which we are permitted to exit our marriages rather than looking at God's design for marriage and trying to find ways to fulfill our marriage vows, even in difficult times.

With that said, as we piece together the teachings about divorce in the Bible, there are situations where divorce seems to be permitted (but note, it is never commanded).

- Marital unfaithfulness—repeated and unrepentant adultery. Adultery under Old Testament law was punishable by death, so it makes sense that divorce is permitted in this instance. (Matthew 5:32)
- Abandonment by an unbelieving spouse. If one spouse becomes a Christian after they got married and the unbelieving spouse chooses to leave the marriage, we are told the believing spouse is released from their vow. (1 Corinthians 7:15)

Beyond this, the Bible does not really give exceptions. Admittedly, the Bible may also not be exhaustive on the matter of divorce. I certainly think there are times (such as abuse or addiction), where a physical separation is necessary in a marriage, with the goal of giving one another safe spaces in which to work on what is needed, but the goal should still be to save the marriage. Our goal should be to follow God's design, not look for loopholes. Are there situations where divorce may actually be necessary? Yes. But I also believe this is the exception rather than the rule. I simply cannot believe that divorce is *necessary* half of the time. Marriages will never be perfect, but I believe God intends for marriage to teach us and shape us as people as we learn to live together. God has called us to learn to live with one another, and I believe if both partners are willing to make the effort, God can restore even the most damaged relationship.

Many today believe the purpose of marriage is to provide fulfillment. They conclude that if they do not feel fulfilled by their marriage relationship, then the relationship has failed and should be abandoned. But I don't believe God's design for marriage is primarily to make us feel fulfilled. I think it is to help us grow. Marriage reveals our flaws in ways that no other relationship can. To make a relationship between two sinful people work, you must deal with some uncomfortable truths about yourself. In the process, we become more like the people God would have us to be. Marriage slowly teaches us to see beyond ourselves, to see other people, and to learn how to love someone—recognizing that many times love is not primarily an emotion, it is a choice.

I don't mean to say that there are no blessings to marriage. Some of the greatest joys of life can only be experienced within the context of marriage—it is only when you have forged this close, intimate, and trusting relationship that you can experience some of the

joy God intended. But it takes hard work to get there. That kind of joy is a reward for putting in the necessary work. Many today never get to experience that joy because they give up far too quickly. Marriage is going to be difficult, but we must have faith that following God's design will ultimately be best—and that He will bless our efforts.

## **The Disciples' Question**

As was often the case, when Jesus and the disciples were alone, they asked for more information on what Jesus had said to the crowds.

<sup>10</sup> Later, when he was alone with his disciples in the house, they brought up the subject again. <sup>11</sup> He told them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries someone else commits adultery against her. <sup>12</sup> And if a woman divorces her husband and marries someone else, she commits adultery." (Mark 10:10-12, NLT)

What Jesus said about marriage and divorce was such a radical departure from what the disciples had been taught that they wanted more information. Jesus doubled down on what He said before, saying that if a man divorces his wife and marries someone else, he is committing adultery. He then went another step and said that the same thing goes the other way as well! In Jewish culture, women had very few rights, and it would have been unheard of for a Jewish woman to try to divorce a man. But Jesus speaks clearly—in either case, for a person seeking an unbiblical divorce (meaning one that does not fall into the exceptions noted before), to get remarried is to commit adultery.

If God has joined people together and those two people attempt to separate, they are still joined, even if they imagine that they aren't. Jesus is not leaving us room to jump out of one relationship so that we can jump into another one.

Does this mean that a person who has been divorced can never remarry? Clearly, based on my own life, you know that I don't think that is what the Bible teaches. If there is adultery or abandonment by an unbelieving spouse, then remarriage is permitted.

But that raises some difficult questions, because many of the divorces we see in our culture today do not seem to fit into the categories in which the Bible permits divorce. Some have gotten remarried, even though their divorce was not biblically permitted. What are we to do in those situations?

If you are married to someone, even if remarriage was not biblically permissible, you should stay married to that person! Trying to undo one sinful action by engaging in another one is foolish.

It is important to remember something about divorce—it is not the unforgivable sin. Adultery, divorce, and other such sins are incredibly damaging, both to those directly involved, and often to a significant group of people who are collateral damage—but they are not unforgivable sins. That means they can be forgiven.

This is not a license for us to sin with impunity. This does not mean that it doesn't matter whether we fulfill our marriage vows or whether we follow God's design and instructions

regarding marriage. But a person who has failed in these ways in the past does not need to keep beating themselves up for their failure. The past cannot be changed, and a person who admits their sin and seeks the Lord's forgiveness is forgiven! We must strive to move forward, living in the light of God's Word, obeying Him to the best of our ability in the situation in which we currently live. Don't allow the sins of the past to rob you of your future.

## **Conclusion**

This passage strikes a nerve with many of us. Many pastors will not preach on divorce because they don't want to offend people. Still others may preach on it but will not do so in love. I hope you know that our approach is simple: we preach on what God's Word says and we don't skip the hard stuff. We want to know what God says rather than convincing ourselves of what is right in our own eyes. But because many people in the church today have been divorced, many of us feel condemned by our failures. The Church has sometimes done a poor job of ministering to those who experience divorce. We've looked at Jesus' teaching, now let's look at some principles we can draw from it.

**First, we must take marriage seriously.** Many people today enter marriage concluding that if it doesn't work, they'll just get divorced. Such marriages are doomed from the start. Others are unwilling to make the commitment required in marriage, so just act married, without making any commitment to each other. This too is harmful. God's design for the family is to take place within the context of marriage. It is good, but it is also a serious commitment. We must teach our children the importance of marriage vows and the value of marriage. Remind people that singleness is not a curse. It is better to remain single than to enter a marriage you aren't committed to.

**Second, we need to help people succeed in marriage.** God designed marriage. It is good. It is also difficult. Two selfish, sinful people learning to live as one is never going to be an easy process. I don't think God intended for it to be so. God knew that the process of learning to love another person in marriage would end up knocking off a lot of our rough edges, and it would force us to confront some uncomfortable truths about ourselves. Unfortunately, some of the same attitudes about marriage that pervade our world have come into the Church. As such, many in the Church entertain the notion of divorce when they feel like marriage is no longer fulfilling, or when they are tired of the hard work, or when they feel like something better has come along. We sometimes encourage people to give up rather than encouraging and helping them to keep going.

We should cheer others on in their marriages. We should celebrate with people as they do the hard work of learning to love another. Those who have been successful in marriage should teach and encourage those who are in earlier stages. We should encourage people to seek help when they face troubles. And we should gently challenge those who are unwilling to confront their own sins and failures. Sometimes the most loving thing we can do is to gently speak truths that may be uncomfortable to hear. As Christ's Church, we should view marriage the same way He did. He had a high view of marriage. We should too, but rather than using that truth as a club to beat others, we should use it as motivation to find ways to help others succeed.

**Third, we must remember that divorce is not the unforgivable sin.** Churches have sometimes treated people who have been divorced like lepers. They are viewed as failures who are no longer fit to serve in any significant capacity in the Church. I don't believe that was Jesus' intent. While divorce is something God hates (as does everyone who has experienced it), God does not hate people who have been divorced. While those of us who have been divorced must look inward, deal with our own sinful actions that may have contributed to the end of our marriages, and do the hard work of dealing with those actions, we must also remember that divorced people can be forgiven. This is not a license to disobey God's commands, but an encouragement for the Church to rally around those who have failed rather than attack them.

**Fourth, we must allow God's Word to set the agenda, not our desires or the arguments of the world.** The Pharisees and other religious leaders of Jesus' day looked to God's Word to find loopholes to justify doing what they wanted. Divorce was only one such area in which they did this. We would be remiss if we only looked at this passage as teaching about divorce—it also teaches us how to approach God's Word. We must submit ourselves to the teachings of scripture. Sometimes what God says flies in the face of our desires. Often it flies in the face of the prevailing wisdom of our day. Our task is to study God's Word and submit ourselves to its clear teaching, instead of coming to God's Word looking for permission or excuses to justify what we want to do. Jesus' teaching about marriage flies in the face of our culture, but it is not the only teaching that does so. We must approach God's Word humbly and submissively. We must allow our agendas and priorities to be set by Him as opposed to trying to impose our agendas on Him.

**Finally, we should see our need for God's help.** Marriage has a funny way of spotlighting our failures. And God's Word is sometimes relentless in highlighting for us all the ways in which we fall short of His standard. Rather than throwing up your hands in despair, rejoice in the fact that God also offers us help. He promises that we don't have to walk alone. If you find yourself struggling in your marriage, with a particular sin, with faith, or anything else, let me remind you that you don't have to face it alone. Many things seem insurmountable when we think of doing them in our own strength. The good news is we aren't called to do them in our strength. When you find yourself struggling, come to the Lord and ask for His help. That which seems impossible in our strength is not in His.

I hope that as you look at this passage, you do not feel beaten down, but encouraged and emboldened. My hope is that as we look at Jesus' teaching about marriage, we will be driven to obey His commands, trusting that He will enable us to do so. And I hope you see that this attitude applies to far more than just marriage. Much of what God tells us seems impossible in our own strength—but He doesn't ask us to do it alone. We must seek His help as we seek to obey Him. We must help each other as we strive to obey His commands. I cannot promise it will be easy, but I do promise that His way is the best, and that doing things God's way not only spares us from pain, but also is the only way to experience the joy He intended for us.

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