

IS IT LAWFUL FOR A MAN TO DIVORCE HIS WIFE?

MARK 10:1-16

On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus is continuing to reveal his mission as the Christ and his commission for those who desire to be his disciples. He has delivered the call to radical self-denial (8:34) which is a call that has been confirmed by God in his command from the cloud to “Listen to [His Son]” (9:7). As Jesus continues on the way to fulfilling his mission, his teaching becomes increasingly specific in regard to what radical self-denying discipleship looks like (9-10). And perhaps nothing requires more practical and continual self-denial than our commitment to faithfully love and commit ourselves to our spouse in marriage.

In this section (10:1-12), we read that the journey to Jerusalem has brought Jesus to “the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan” (10:1). As was his usual routine and custom, Jesus takes time to teach the crowds that had gathered there. As he’s teaching, a certain number of religious leaders come up to him and ask a question concerning divorce. We are told from the account that their question was not one of sincerity but was rather a question that they were hoping would trap Jesus into saying something condemning or controversial. In their effort to “test” Jesus, the Pharisees ask, “Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?”

Now before examining this particular portion of Scripture, it should be acknowledged that divorce is an extremely controversial subject that reaches into the depths of people’s souls at levels far beyond where other topics might go. It can trigger emotions of guilt, anger and great pain, and the truth of the matter is that many of us have been impacted by it directly or indirectly (whether it’s your parents, close family, friends, your own marriage, etc.).

And so, with that in mind, we ought to always approach this subject with serious caution and with the truth of the gospel – God’s hand of forgiveness and restoration is extended out to you no matter where you’ve been or where you’re coming from. Nowhere in Scripture do we see Jesus denying anyone who comes to him sincerely confessing their sin and repentantly asking for his forgiveness.

Now in looking at this passage, we see the Pharisees possibly trying to trap Jesus into saying something that might compromise or contradict the Law of Moses. The Pharisees believed in a liberal divorce policy in which almost anything could be considered a permissible case for divorce, and they felt confidently that they had the authority of Moses to defend their position.

However, Jesus, in his sovereignty, seems to know the motivation of their heart and therefore inquires about what Moses actually commanded. The Pharisees' response is a reference to a passage found in Deuteronomy which says that a man may write his wife a certificate of divorce if "he has found some indecency in her" (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

By asking Jesus what is lawful, the Pharisees are looking for what is permissible, but Jesus is calling his people to live by what is desired by God and commanded. Jesus redirects the focus of the conversation from what the Law of God permits to what the design of God intends. Jesus reveals the way in which God desires for his people to excel above and beyond what is permissible out of a heart that has been captivated and motivated by God's own great love for us. Jesus is continuing to communicate the new covenant way of life for those who are considered the new people of God. And as his people, we are to go beyond what is permissible and concern ourselves with God's design over our own desires.

Looking for What is Permissible

The Pharisees were a religious group that prided themselves in knowing the Law of Moses. Not only did they memorize, perform and teach the Law of Moses, but they also added a multitude of new laws that were given to instruct the people on how to uphold the original Law. But here is the thing about laws and even the Law of Moses. Laws are given to provide instruction, but in and of themselves, laws will never inspire anyone to go above and beyond what is required. Laws control chaos, but they lack any power whatsoever to enhance our character. In fact, laws are actually what arouses the sinfulness in all of us that then leads us to often look for the loopholes in the law and to begin asking questions like, "Is it lawful?"

Now, Jesus never responds to any traps concerning God's Law in a way that condemns or contradicts that Law. He didn't come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it (Matthew 5). And as we see here in this passage, his response to the Pharisees upholds the Law of Moses while at the same time challenging his opponents to go above and beyond what the Law requires of us.

Jesus has a way of continuing to expose the self-satisfying nature of the Pharisees. They were a people more concerned about themselves and their moral performance than the honor and glory of God. They tended to focus on their own religious performance more so than their relationship with God.

However, in their efforts for moral success, they had taken the commands of God and began redefining them and teaching them in a way that was more comfortable and achievable for them. They had a way of looking for what is permissible and accommodating to their own desires rather than what is preferred and in accordance with God's intended design.

And the tragic truth of the matter is that we're not much different. If we're honest with ourselves, then we'd have to admit that there is this curious desire inside all of us to know what we can get away with and how to avoid any consequences for doing it. Its like driving around 8-10 mph over the speed limit because we know that is the permissible range in which we can bend the law without having to pay for it by getting a ticket.

And we do this with the commands of God constantly. Just like the Pharisees, we begin to subtly look for what is permissible in the eyes of God rather than what is preferred and praiseworthy. So we ask questions like:

- What kind of movies or TV shows can I watch and not watch as a Christian?
- How far is too far physically before marriage?
- What curse words are okay for a Christian to use?
- When is it fine to get a divorce?
- How much money do I really need to give to the church?

However, as we see in this passage, Jesus doesn't take pleasure in what is permissible. True disciples of Jesus look to go above and beyond what is permissible and live in accordance with what God has intended and commanded.

Living by What is Commanded

Jesus responds to this question concerning what is permissible in marriage with a revelation concerning the true intention and design of marriage. And this ought to remind us that no matter the circumstances, you are not ready to discuss the issue of divorce until you have properly understood and accepted God's view of marriage.

Jesus responds with this statement:

"Because of your hardness of heart [Moses] wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." (Mark 10:5-9)

Jesus is quick to point out the way in which the passage in Deuteronomy that the Pharisees used to defend their position was actually a text of exception and grace by God and not a text concerning the true intention and desire of God. This was an exception given on account of man's sinfulness rather than an instruction on how to live in righteousness.

According to Jesus, this passage in Deuteronomy wouldn't even exist if it hadn't been for the hard-heartedness and sinfulness of man. This law was given to control what the people had turned into a chaotic mess. It actually served as a way to protect women in that culture, and it proved that divorce was something to be taken very seriously.

Today, many people treat sex and marriage like our own appetites for food and drink. We view them through the lens of our own personal pleasure and happiness, and therefore search and sample the menu for what might bring us the greatest delight and satisfaction. We've even given into the philosophies of the latest health journals that preach the needed health benefits of regular and active sexual pleasure. While Christ declared freedom to eat and drink what you desire, this is certainly not the case when it comes to sex and marriage.

Sex is not primarily designed for our own personal pleasure. It is designed for that, but that is not its primary design. The primary intent and design of sex is the sacred consummating act of uniting two people (male and female) as one holy union and now one holy new entity before God. Defiling the true design of sex is defiling that which is considered sacred in the eyes of God (1 Corinthians 6).

There is more to marriage than personal pleasure between two consenting partners. God created the institution of marriage as a holy exclusive union between a man and a woman. It is a relationship intended to display purity, faithfulness and permanence. You see, marriage is much more than two people who love each other getting together under one roof to live life together. It's not simply about an overwhelming feeling of love for someone else. No, it's about a sacrificial commitment to love someone else. It's meant to be an image of God's sacrificial commitment to love us, his people. The institution of marriage is God's sacred illustration of his love and redemptive plan for mankind.

Have you ever even considered that? From the very beginning, my marriage and your marriage was meant to be a real-life portrait of God's love and redemption for his people. The apostle Paul later calls marriage a profound mystery that points to Jesus and his people.¹

As God's people, we ought to go above and beyond what is permissible and concern ourselves with God's design over our own personal desires. We are called to be faithful to our wife no matter the circumstances just as God is faithful to us despite our sinfulness. As a Christian, when you say, "I do" it means "You will" no matter the cost or the condition. We should never diminish God's standard by dishonoring our commitment to love our wife.

¹ see Ephesians 5

And for those who are single, you are called to be faithful to your future wife even if she doesn't even seem to be on the radar yet. Think about that. Don't patronize Jesus by trying to figure out what you can get away with when it comes to your commitment to love someone else. This was the problem with the Pharisees. They were searching for ways out of their commitments. They looked for what is permissible rather than living by what was preferred.

Don't try to manipulate and abuse God's grace. Stop searching for what God may tolerate and strive for what God treasures. An authentic Christian disciple is a man of commitment no matter what it may cost him. After all, it was God's covenant commitment to faithfully love us that ended up costing him his life.

Loving Like We've Been Loved

Perhaps one of the most powerful ways God has communicated his covenant commitment to faithfully love his people is through a marriage he ordered for his prophet Hosea.²

Hosea is called by God to marry a woman named Gomer who would end up leaving him and committing adultery with another man. Not only is he called to marry such a woman, but then he is also ordered by God to remain faithful in his commitment to love this woman no matter what it may cost him personally. We can only imagine being in Hosea's shoes when God orders him to continue to love his adulterous wife rather than leaving her or forsaking her (which he was entitled to do). God called Hosea to excel above and beyond what is permissible because through Hosea's marriage, God was communicating the ultimate way in which he continues to love his people despite our unfaithfulness to him.

Like Gomer, we too are adulterers in our covenant relationship with God. How often do we forsake our relationship with God for fleeting one-night stands with the things of this world? However in Christ, God has sacrificially continued to love and pursue his people to the point of literally dying for his people on the cross. We must never forget that God has refused to leave us or forsake us despite being completely justified and entitled to do so.

² read Hosea 1-3

The incarnation, life, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension and imminent return of Christ demonstrates the ultimate act of self-denial by God himself. In calling for a radical self-denying commitment to love our spouse no matter what it may cost us, God isn't commanding Hosea or us for that matter to do anything that he himself isn't already doing for us.

Laws will never inspire us to go above and beyond what is required; only the love of God demonstrated in the cross of Christ possesses the power to inspire a righteousness that exceeds mere religious adherence. Christ has not come down the mountain with laws on stone but with the love of a Savior. The love of Christ ought to radically transform his people to live in the shadow of his ultimate sacrifice and his ultimate act of self-denial.

According to Jesus, divorce is only permissible on the grounds of adultery, but even then, it is only the permissible path rather than the preferred path. Radical forgiveness and unconditional commitments to love others is the way of righteousness. May the cross of Christ inspire us to continue in our commitment to love our bride no matter what it may cost us. May we not be people who look for what is permissible, but instead may we be people who live by what is commanded and love our spouse to the level that Christ has loved us.