

## Truths We Should Understand about Divorce

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The Gospel of Mark: Mighty and Mild / Mark 10:1-12 / February 25, 2024

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### Introduction:

Our passage covers an uncomfortable subject, as we see Jesus interact with the Pharisees questioning him about divorce. The most recent statistics indicate that over 30% of all marriages end in divorce. Christian marriages show little difference, ending in divorce 20-25% of the time. This means there are likely some here today who have experienced the impact of divorce firsthand. When we include that impact on family and close friends, we understand why this subject makes us uncomfortable. Pastor John Piper said it best when he preached on this passage, saying, “Few things are more painful than divorce. It cuts to the depths of personhood unlike any other relational gash.” (John Piper, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/what-god-has-joined-together-let-not-man-separate-part-1>) As we come to this passage, we can be tempted to gloss over the strength of Jesus’ teaching, but we should always let passages like this do what they are designed to do, which is to pierce our hearts with the truth, convict us of our sin, and point us to the redemption and power Christ provides. The biggest temptation we face is to try to determine all the possible biblical permissions for divorce before dealing with the actual words of Jesus before us. As we will see, while there may be a biblical allowance for divorce at times, that shouldn’t be the first place our mind goes or our main take away from this passage. In fact, that temptation is part of what led to this moment. Look at the way this interaction begins in verses 1-2, “And he left there and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan, and crowds gathered to him again. And again, as was his custom, he taught them. And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’” Mark carefully identifies where Jesus left and went in verse 1, most likely placing him in the region of Herod, where John the Baptist was beheaded for speaking against Herod’s unlawful marriage. This could be the reasons the Pharisees’ purpose was to test Jesus. Their question wasn’t as much about the lawfulness of divorce in general, because it was well known that Jewish law permitted divorce, but rather when divorce is lawful. In Matthew 19:3, Matthew records the Pharisees asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” By this point, there were two schools of rabbinic teaching on when divorce was lawful. The less followed, conservative School of Shammai said it was only lawful after sexual immorality or infidelity. The more followed, liberal School of Hillel said it could be even over a spoiled meal or the husband finding another woman more attractive (James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, 299). Just like today, people had come to prefer the easiest way out. The Pharisees either desired to pit Jesus against one school of thought and by extension upset the people, or against Herod himself in order to get him killed. Yet, Jesus goes to the heart and calls for a deeper understanding and a desire to honor God’s design in marriage, instead of allowing people to stay in their superficial obedience. In this, Jesus helps us to see 3 truths about divorce that should undergird all of our thoughts on it. First, in verses 3-5, Jesus help us see how,

### Divorce is the Product of Sin

I love to watch Jesus interact with his opponents because He always sees beyond their questions and to their hearts. Church, that is what Jesus is after for us as well. Look at verses 3-4, “He answered them, ‘What did Moses command you?’ They said, ‘Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.’” Jesus starts by asking them a question, pointing them to the sufficiency of scripture to guide their hearts. Notice how he phrases that question, “What did Moses command you?” Pay attention to the Pharisees’ response, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce.” Jesus asks what Moses commanded, and the Pharisees refer to what Moses allowed, showing their faulty thinking right away. Their response points back to the Scripture each rabbinic school was seeking to explain. We find the allowance by Moses in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, where he gives a command for when a man writes a certificate of divorce and sends his wife away because he has found “some indecency in her.” The question was what “some indecency” meant. The outcome, as we have seen, was most adhering to a loose interpretation.

Notice how Jesus responds in verse 5, “And Jesus said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment.’” Jesus immediately turns their attention to their hearts. “Hardness of heart” is a term often used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to refer to the people of Israel as “stiff necked,” being hardened against God and resistant of His commands (R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 391). Jesus is saying, because of your rebellion against God’s commands, Moses wrote a command regarding divorce. To understand the main point Jesus is making, we need to consider the purpose of a divorce certificate. The certificate required the husband to include the reason for divorce and a statement about the wife being free to remarry. So, in the case of an unlawful marriage, the certificate actually served as a tool to protect the rights of the wife, giving her some dignity and a chance to remarry. When we consider the flow of this interaction, Jesus is insinuating the one with a hard heart is the man who is sending his wife away. Now, certainly, Jesus is not saying sin is only in the heart of the issuing the divorce. Sin is the cause of all kinds of devastation in marriages. Physical and emotional affairs, every kind of abuse, anger, manipulation, selfishness, are all due to sin. But we should recognize, Jesus is showing that sin is the cause of their loose interpretation of Moses’ allowance. As William Lane says well, “Jesus’ purpose is to make clear that the intention of Deut. 24:1 was not to make divorce acceptable but to limit sinfulness and to control its consequences.” (William Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark*, p. 355) Family, make no mistake, while divorce may not always be sinful, it is always the product of sin. Whether it is sin that causes someone, while married, to harmfully break the marriage covenant, or sin that leads to someone initiating divorce for unlawful reasons, Jesus shows us divorce is ultimately the product of sin. Any allowance of divorce is to limit sin and its consequences, often in protection of the innocent party, not to make divorce normal and accepted. This leads us to the second truth, in verses 6-9, where Jesus helps us see how,

### **Sin Disrupts God’s Good Design**

Jesus doesn’t leave us to simply realize divorce only exists because of our sin but leads us to see sin’s effect on God’s design in marriage. Look at the flow of verses 5-8, “And Jesus said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart he 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.’” Jesus contrasts the cause of Moses’ command with God’s design from the beginning of creation. First, he establishes that God created both male and female. He quotes Genesis 1:27 which speaks of how both men and women are created in the image of God. In drawing from this, Jesus celebrates God’s original creative design, creating male and female as two distinct sexes designed to compliment each other. He also elevates the dignity and value of women, who were largely viewed only in their relationship to men within Judaism. In doing this he counters the rabbinic assumption that women were subject man’s will in the Jewish divorce policy and reminds them that women are equal in value and dignity. Then, he draws a conclusion from Moses’ command in Genesis 2:24, that says, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh,” saying, “So they are no longer two by one flesh.” Jesus reminds everyone of the elevated relationship of marriage above and beyond the husband’s honor of his father and mother, which was the first commandment given towards people, because, in marriage, two were becoming one. See the truth Jesus is making here. As R. T. France notes, “[This statement] lifts marriage from being a mere contract of mutual convenience to an ‘ontological’ status” (R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 392). Family, our marriages will change when we grasp this truth. In marriage, God makes a “one flesh” union that is designed to change the very nature of our being. Notice the conclusion this brings Jesus to in verse 9, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” God is the Lord of marriage, and God’s design is to create a permanent union between a man and a woman that no one should separate. Family, this means any sin which leads to divorce is disrupting God’s good design. And whether there are permissible grounds for the divorce or not, it disrupts God’s good design of a new and permanent union.

That means divorce should never be something we, as Christians, take lightly and should break our hearts. There is one more truth to see in verses 10-12 before we can draw out some practical conclusions. There Jesus helps us see how,

### **Divorce has Significant Ramifications**

As is typical in Mark's writing, following a public teaching of Jesus, we're drawn into a private conversation with the disciples that expounds on what Jesus taught. Look at verses 10-12, "And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. And he said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.'" Before this moment, the discussion involved only the act of divorce. When the disciples ask him more about this, the focus shifts to what follows divorce, namely remarriage. Mark's purpose isn't to give an exhaustive teaching on remarriage, or even answer all of our questions, but to show the significant ramifications of the Pharisees loose interpretation of Moses' allowance. Note how the focus is on the person initiating the divorcing and remarrying after, not the one who has been divorced. Whether it is the husband or wife who initiates it, Jesus says they are essentially committing adultery when they marry someone else. In other words, sin leads to more sin. Again, the context shows this is primarily speaking about a divorce initiated for flippant reasons. Jesus is saying, "you may have legally broken up the marriage but you have not truly separated the one-flesh union God created. So, you would be committing adultery in remarriage, even though you are no longer legally married." Church, don't jump in your mind to what this means for a biblical permissible divorce, that is not the goal of this passage at this point. It is important to note that Mark doesn't include the clause Matthew does of "except for sexual immorality." I do believe we see allowances in the Bible for divorce to continue limiting the consequences of sin, but I am not going to give those to you today. If sin is wreaking havoc on your marriage leaving you to consider divorce, we have counseling available to help you work through that. However, this morning, I want to stick within Mark's purpose in only recording what he does. The ultimate goal of this passage is to have us feel the weight of divorce, seeing how it separates what God has joined together, and can lead to more sin. The main goal of Jesus in this interaction is to call God's people to glorify Him through our marriages. That is what God is primarily after in our hearts this morning. Family, we need a higher view of marriage in our churches, not simply to keep us from the act of divorce but to keep us from every sin that leads it. A desire to glorify God in our marriages is the answer, not to figure out when we can and cannot biblically divorce. If we want to live according to God's original design, we should never separate the one-flesh union He has created. This means we should always be quick to repent of our sin and turn to Christ to help us in our marriages. Glorifying God in our marriages will lead to less sexual immorality, less abuse, less fits of anger and manipulation. Glorifying God in our marriages will lead to more faithfulness, less flippant divorces, and a greater understanding of God by the world around us, because Paul tells us in Ephesians 5:31-32 that this one flesh union is a reflection of the union between Christ and His church. And praise God that is a union that will never be separated. So, what we can practically draw out of this passage to help us going forward? First,

#### **1) Strive, in the Spirit's Power, to Honor God's Good Design**

Christ is calling us to see God's good design in marriage and strive to live in it, not letting anything separate it. He wants us to see that divorce is never the preferred option and God always wants us to honor His creative purposes. The intent is not to leave us with guilt when we fall short, or make us think God never forgives those who have had marriages fail. It's also not to keep us in harmful relationships where sin is placing one party in danger. The intent is to call us to the unique call of discipleship in marriage. To honor and nurture our marriages in order to have them come under God's good design and glory Him. As William Lane says better than I can, "Behind this solemn prohibition there is a deep concern for personal relationships.

Jesus does not envisage marriage as it is at times but as it can and should be—a call to fidelity, peace, and love.” (William Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark*, p. 357). Family, will you strive to glorify God in your marriages? And if you aren’t married, will you help those around you seek to glorify him? Second,

## **2) Recognize the Truth about Our Sin**

This passage shows how our sin disrupts God’s good design in marriage. It focuses primarily on divorce as the product of that sin, but we should understand all of sin’s effects on our relationships. Our sin disrupts the sweet fellowship intended in the one-flesh union God designed. Our selfishness keeps us from mutual submission and sacrifice. Our lust causes us to seek satisfaction in sexual immorality. Our pride leads to the abuses and manipulation we see. Our vanity leads us to expect things of our spouses, and marriages, that we should never expect, which in turn leads to wrongfully separating the one-flesh union God has made. We need to recognize the truth about our sin. Third,

## **3) Weep Over the Destruction of Sin**

As we have seen, the sin of unlawful divorce leads to significant ramifications. Likewise, sins that lead to lawful divorces have significant ramifications. Chances are many of us have felt those. There are scars that run deep, damages from abuse, difficulties with trust, families now separated, friendships lost, questions of past decisions, feelings of insufficiency, guarded relationships, guilt, and shame. The list could go on because the devastation is real. We should weep over the destruction of our sin and how it has wreaked havoc on our lives and marriages. If your sin is causing strife in your marriage, weep over its destruction. If your sin has caused you to break your marriage covenant, weep over it. If your sin is causing you to withhold forgiveness, weep over it. If you recognize sin is what led to an unlawful divorce in your past, weep over it. If your sin hasn’t led to divorce yet, but has it being contemplated, weep over it. Family, we should weep over the destruction sin. However, if any of this describes you, don’t stop there, but run to the final response,

## **4) Turn to Jesus for Hope following Sin’s Destruction**

Here in lies the astounding beauty of the gospel. Back in Mark 3:28-29, Jesus says, “Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness but is guilty of an eternal sin.” Listen to what Jesus says in verse 28, “all sins will be forgiven the children of man.” If your sin led to divorce or is leading to a divorce, it can be forgiven as you come to Christ. If you realize a past divorce was wrong, don’t live in guilt and shame, turn to Christ and know you are forgiven. Then honor him where you are now. If you still experience any guilt from your part in a failed marriage, your sin is forgiven because of the blood of Jesus Christ. If sin has crept into your marriage and is causing havoc on your relationship, it can be forgiven. Jesus’ death on the cross covers all of sin of those who come to Him, and He promises to cleanse us from all unrighteousness when we confess it to him. As Christians, we shouldn’t live in the guilt of sin because Christ is the solid rock on which we stand. And His death and resurrection provides great hope. He provides comfort and peace in our pain, cleansing power from sin, and strength to face tomorrow. He is always faithful when the people around us fail to be faithful. He laid down His life for us and He will sanctify us through His Word and prayer. So family, wherever you are at this morning with this subject, know you can find hope in Jesus Christ.

Conclusion:

As the worship team is coming to lead us in a time of response, we want to close in a unique way today to center our hearts on that hope. Because we recognize the way sin has wreaked havoc on marriages and how the impact of divorce is felt by so many people, we want to begin our time of reflection encouraging those who have felt this particular sting of sin with the hope only God provides. If you feel the weight of Jesus’ words in this passage, know that He calls you to come find forgiveness and rest in Him. Run to Jesus in this time for hope, and find His loving embrace today. We are going to begin our time of reflection with a song that sings the blessing God gives to His people in Numbers 6:24-26.

If you have felt the sting of sin in marriage and divorce, in any way, whether directly or indirectly, we want to encourage you to receive during this song while others sing this blessing over you. I am going to pray for those who may feel the impact of sin from divorce or are feeling it in their marriages and then we will reflect together. If you need specific prayer for anything you are facing, we have a team of people ready to pray with you and for you during this time. You will find them worshipping on the front rows or at the bottom of the stairs in the back. Let's find rest in God today and ask Him to do a mighty work of healing and restoration through this time of reflection. Would you pray with me?