

Mk. 10:1-12...I doubt there is anyone here who has not been directly affected by divorce. This subject stirs up a lot of feelings. If you are divorced you may live with a low-grade guilt about this subject. Whenever you hear the “D” word they get a sinking feeling. You may even feel judged because no one understands your situation. Those who have never been through a divorce can become judgmental. “How could anyone break their wedding vows? We’ve managed to be miserable all these years and stay married why can’t they?” The truth is marriage is a testing ground. The Pharisees asked Jesus about divorce, “in order to test Him...” Few things test our discipleship like marriage and divorce.

In order to understand this passage a little background is in order. There were two schools of Jewish thought regarding divorce. The Rabbi Hillel represented the “any cause divorce” position. A man could divorce his wife for any cause. If she burned the toast he could divorce her. If he found her undesirable or found another woman more desirable, he could divorce her. The other school of thought, represented by the Rabbi Shammai, took the position that divorce was prohibited except in the case of adultery. The Pharisees, who were frequently putting Jesus to the test, are trying to trap Jesus between the horns of a dilemma: Are you with Hillel or Shammai? Jesus responded by acknowledging that their law allowed for divorce in some circumstances...v. 5.

Jesus rejected divorce “for any cause” but He did not reject divorce for all causes. In other words, there are times when divorce is a reasonable response to human depravity. That is what Jesus means by Moses permitting divorce because of “hardness of heart.” God instituted marriage in a perfect environment but when the first married couple rejected God’s counsel, everything broke. It’s no surprise that the new sinful state of man has serious implications on the permanence of any relationship. It doesn’t matter what you may believe about divorce, you can be liberal, conservative or have no opinion about it at all, it will not change the fact that in a fallen world, divorce happens. So Jesus acknowledges the fact that the scriptures attempt to regulate our fallenness.

The Bible not only reveals the perfect will of God but it also regulates human failure. Slavery, for example, is not God’s ideal but there is a lot of instruction in scripture about the regulation of that practice in ancient times. In this fallen, imperfect world, there are circumstances that come up which sometimes call for a less than perfect solution.

In Jesus’ day, only men could initiate divorce. In order to protect the woman and enable her to marry again, she needed a certificate verifying the fact that she had not committed adultery. If this sounds sexist to our modern ears it was. In a male-dominated culture the scales were tipped in favor of the man. So the Law gave some protection to a woman who was the innocent party in an intolerable marriage. If you examine the context of this teaching in Mark 10, you discover that just before and after this discussion of divorce are statements about children – 9:42 and 10:13-16. Mark arranged this material in a way that underscores Jesus’ love and compassion for those who are vulnerable. Divorce is permitted to protect the vulnerable party.

Then Jesus presents, in simple terms, God’s definition of marriage...vv. 6 – 7. God created man in two versions; male and female. They were designed to be complementary. Marriage is defined as one man joined to one woman for life. It’s not complicated if you accept the authority of the scriptures. That’s the core issue in the current debate over the definition of marriage. Where does your authority lie? Where do you go to get answers to life’s ultimate questions? Is this the Word of God or the suggestions of men? Do you “trust in the Lord with all your heart” or do you “lean on your own understanding?” Marriage is not man’s idea, it’s God’s. Marriage is a work of God and gets its meaning from God.

v. 8 – The two shall become one. The meaning of marriage is primarily the portrayal of the covenant love between Christ and his Church. “Marriage among Christians is mainly meant to tell the truth about the gospel—that Christ dies for his church who loves him, and never breaks his covenant with his bride.” Piper

v. 9 – God has joined them together. We have no right to separate what God has joined together. God will never separate Christ from His church. Let your marriage tell the truth about that. To walk away from marriage for another relationship is to lie to the world about the covenant between Christ and the Church. God joined this. There is more to marriage than your happiness or your needs or your plans. Marriage is about God our Father and Jesus Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit transforming so that we can illustrate the relationship between Christ and the church. That is why the Bible says God hates divorce. He doesn’t hate the divorced. He hates divorce because it distorts the image of His relationship with His people.

So let me summarize this big topic:

**1. Divorce is preventable** if we are committed to growing in Christ. The heart of divorce is hard-heartedness or stubborn unrepentance. Rules and regulations may govern external behavior but they have no effect on a hard heart. Furthermore they will not provide the glue that holds a marriage together. We all know people who are legally married and mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually divorced. Only as I open my heart to the transforming power of God’s grace will I be able to make the adjustments necessary to sustain a loving relationship with my wife.

**2. Divorce is never required.** A violation of the marriage vow does not require the injured party to seek a divorce. Just because a vow has been broken you are not REQUIRED to divorce. If being unfaithful made divorce necessary I wonder how many times God would have divorced me by now? Love covers a multitude of offenses.

**3. Divorce is permitted in some but not all circumstances.** There are three reasons for divorce – adultery, desertion and MY reason. I don’t have any statistics on this but my observation is that most divorces are not for reason of adultery or desertion, the two causes mentioned in scripture. This is where things get tricky. The same human flaws that lead to conflict in the marriage relationship are also capable of justifying any reason for a divorce. I once counseled a woman who said she divorcing her husband because he was

“a jerk.” I said I had had some experience with that since my wife married one of those! Her reasons for divorce were pretty thin. On the other hand I have heard horrendous stories in which a woman places herself and her children in mortal danger by staying with her husband. Every situation is different and the decision to dissolve a marriage is painfully personal.

What about remarriage? That’s the subject of vv. 10-12. **Remarriage is permitted if the divorce was for “biblical grounds.”** Usually a pastor is not consulted before the decision to divorce but that is not true of remarriage. The pastor is now asked to be part of that process. Before I ever do a remarriage I ask a lot of questions. I want details not because I am curious but I want to know if the people who are getting remarried have fully dealt with the past. Have they grown through the pain of divorce? Do they understand more about themselves and about what it takes to make marriage work? Are they at peace with family members? I also check to see if either ex-spouse remains unmarried. For all I know, there is an “ex” out there been praying daily for reconciliation. As soon as I perform the wedding I have made reconciliation impossible. We are called to be ministers of reconciliation.

**Divorce is forgivable like any other sin.** God hates divorce but divorced people hate divorce too. No one plans to get divorced. I did a wedding last night and the couple who stood in front of me were not thinking, “I wonder how long this marriage will last?” People mean it when they say, “Until death do us part.” But stuff happens, people change, relationships wither, wedlock turns to dead lock, lovers become mortal enemies and holy matrimony often ends in hateful acrimony.

We are flawed creatures and there is nothing like marriage to magnify our flaws. “One of the best wedding gifts God gave you was a full-length mirror called your spouse. Had there been a card attached, it would have said, ‘Here’s to helping you discover what you’re *really* like!’” Gary and Betty Ricucci, in Thomas, p. 89)

That’s why the only hope for our marriages is the gospel. The gospel is the good news that even though I am known intimately, I am loved unconditionally. Even though I am flawed and fallen I am also forgiven.

“By grace, people who have failed at marriage and who have divorced for the worst or most trivial of reasons may be redeemed from guilt. People who have destroyed marriages through their adulteries can be pardoned. People whose hearts and behaviors have been cold, hard, and unfeeling can be made whole. And this is by forgiveness and renewal from above – not through another divorce, not by the penance of celibacy, and not by unringing the bell of harm already done. What law cannot do, grace accomplishes. What law cannot do, Christ’s blood forgives. What our legalistic interpretations have confused, the redemptive presence of the Holy Spirit can sanctify.” Rubel Shelly, *Divorce and Remarriage: A Redemptive Theology*, quoted in CT, October ‘07

If you’re divorced there are a couple of things you should know:

1. God knows all about the pain of divorce. He has been through it Himself. God made a covenant with Israel. He vowed to care for her and to love her unconditionally. But Israel was unfaithful and chased after other gods. One of the most heart-wrenching verses in all of scripture is: **Jeremiah 3:7-8**, "I thought, 'After she has done all these things she will return to Me'; but she did not return, and her treacherous sister Judah saw it. And I saw that for all the adulteries of faithless Israel, I had sent her away and given her a writ of divorce, yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear but she went and was a harlot also." God hates divorce because He has been through it. He says, "I know what it's like to be rejected, to be betrayed."

2. God established the very first Divorce Recovery program in history on a hill called Calvary. Col. 2:13-14 describes what He did there. "When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross."

Think of it: God took the record of all our sins and, instead of holding it up to our face he puts the list in Jesus' hand and nailed it to the cross. The guilt of failure produces wasted lives. And Jesus wants your life to be rich and full and meaningful and effective for Him. That's why Jesus stood up in a synagogue and quoted **Isaiah 61:3**, proclaiming that to all who mourn, he would give, "beauty for ashes, joy instead of mourning, praise instead of despair." Will you accept His love and forgiveness this morning?