



Speaker:
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Divorce and Remarriage

Series: The Gospel of Mark · 33 of 33

1/24/2021 (SUN) | Bible: **Mark 10:1-12**

And he arose from thence, and cometh into the coasts of Judaea by the farther side of Jordan, and the people resort unto him again; and, as he was wont, he taught them again.

And the Pharisees came to him, and asked him, "Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife?" tempting him. And he answered and said unto them, "What did Moses command you?" And they said, "Moses suffered to write a bill of divorcement, and to put her away." And Jesus answered and said unto them, "For the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept. But from the beginning of the creation God made them male and female. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife, and they twain shall be one flesh. So then they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder."

And in the house his disciples asked him again of the same matter. And he saith unto them, "Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery."

This week, we re-join Jesus and the disciples as they journey South to Jerusalem, where the pivotal event in God's salvation would take place.

Jesus runs into a crowd. In that crowd are some Pharisees. And we know they're never around to learn from Jesus', but to trap him in some way. They'd previously tried to cast him in a bad light regarding the Sabbath and his attitude to handwashing and fasting. Now they turn to the thorny issue of divorce.

No doubt, they're hoping Jesus would say something contrary to either the Mosaic Law or the law of the Land. If he undermined the Mosaic Law, they could show the people he wasn't a prophet. If he spoke against the law of the land, they could grass him up to the authorities. Perhaps they hoped the issue would offend the adulterous Herod particularly, and he would deal with this Jesus in the same way he did John.

The Jewish attitude to marriage was variable. One school taught divorce was only allowed if one of the parties had been involved in some sexual immorality. Another view, held by the school of Hillel, allowed divorce for almost any reason. A man could get rid of his wife for over-cooking a meal or putting too much salt in it!

I love the ways in which Jesus responds to his opponents. His speech wouldn't impress the Greek philosophers of his day; his methods are too simple. But they are powerful.

After considering what Moses taught, he rewinds back to the very beginning, in the Book of Genesis. He acknowledges that, yes, Moses made provision for divorce. But he emphasizes this was far from God's ideal. He shows them marriage was meant to be for life. He upholds its sanctity. The man leaves the family he grew up with—just as the woman leaves her family—and they join together to become one. God put them together, and those who desire to undo that do so at their peril.

In the complexities of life, we discover a multitude of situations that we find tough to judge. The Bible isn't a book containing lists of rules we need to follow. We're to obey God, but *that's not the same thing*. To have a book that covered every conceivable situation that would arise throughout history is impossible. Instead, God lays down principles, and he expects us to exercise wisdom in applying them to our own situation. We pray for guidance, and we could take into consideration all the council of God given in the Bible.

We're given an ideal concerning marriage. It's between one man and one woman. They're to love each other and submit to one another. They can enjoy intimacy within it. It's the structure through which new members of the human race are brought into being. The two parties are to be faithful to one another. And this partnership is to go on until one of them dies.

Marriage, taking place as it does in this sinful world, is always marred by sin, and even the best ones can go bad. Couples stop putting effort into their marriage. They commit adultery. There's a multitude of reasons, but the sad fact is in our own country almost half of all marriages end in divorce.

Marriage and Society

The institution of marriage is not only to be valued for its benefits to the partners in it. In his wisdom, this union the Lord has created is of benefit to the whole of society. Throughout history, societies have found the benefits of strong marriages and strong families.

Just look at the case of children whose parents are married. They benefit from that stability. Research carried out by the Rowntree Foundation showed children from families that had been "re-ordered" by separation or divorce were more likely than children from intact families to have encountered health problems...to have needed extra help at school, to have experienced friendship difficulties and to suffer from low self-esteem.

The marriage unit, as designed by God, benefits the couples themselves, any children they have, and the wider society.

In our day, it's become fashionable to distort God's model of marriage. And this isn't only because of a few mischievous individuals who want to experiment with different setups. The attack on the marriage unit is highly organised. Several political movements have the undermining of marriage as part of their core principles.

Marriage considered spiritually

You'll have heard me remind you before of how **the union of one man and one woman was designed by God to represent the relationship between Jesus Christ and his bride, the church**. He loved his elect people so much he came to this earth with the intention of offering his own self up as a sacrifice so they could go free.

The married couple are to take for their example some of those characteristics seen in this heavenly union of Jesus and his people. For example, husbands are told to love their wives just as Christ loves the church. Has any husband ever managed this? Absolutely not. But they, like everyone else, are to strive for the ideals God gives us.

I've already mentioned an example of how this heavenly picture can be marred through lack of love or submission. There's also unfaithfulness, same-sex partnerships, polygamy, and others. Imagine for a moment what type of image these confused setups show. What's meant to emulate the relationship between Jesus and his bride instead portrays something unpleasant. If a husband fails to love his wife, he's acting like a saviour who has no real love for his church. If a wife tries to be the dominant voice in the marriage, she's acting like a church that rails against God. All these behaviours violate God's design.

Respecting that God has created different roles within the marriage has a bearing on the set-up of the church as well. God expects us to see to it we maintain different roles for men and women in the church. Christian women don't need to fight for equality: they already have it. God's love for them is equal to that of men. But the roles they take on must maintain the distinction between men and women. It's for this reason we insist pastors, teachers, and other elders are male.

We looked at what marriage is, its benefits for society, and we've considered it as a picture of Christ and his church.

Marriage complexities addressed

Jesus lays down a rule here that seems pretty black and white. **Divorce and remarriage are sinful**.

Brethren who find it difficult to function without clear rules like to extract verses like this and hold them up as justification of a hard-line position they take. I suppose we all do this with different issues. To be fair, though, it's usually based on a desire to obey God.

With any portion of scripture, we need to consider the context it's found in. What was the cultural setting? Who was the audience? Were there special circumstances at that time? Sometimes, the context makes no difference—but sometimes it does. An example would be Jesus telling his hearers they should always pray in secret. Does this mean we can't have prayer meetings? No: there was a particular sin among the people of his day, and he told them what they needed to hear. In our society, where public displays of religion are despised, Jesus would probably tell us *to pray on the street corner!*

Also, we need to view other verses in scripture that could shed light on the one we're looking at. It looks here as if there are no exceptions to Jesus's rule. Divorce is never okay.

But if we take a look at Jesus's words as recorded in Matthew's gospel, we see at least one exception:

And I say unto you, whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.

Matthew 19:9

So if one party in a marriage has been unfaithful, this is grounds for divorce. As an aside, I should point out unfaithfulness does not *require* divorce. Someone might decide to forgive an unfaithful spouse and stay with them.

Also in Matthew's gospel, we read about Mary's husband Joseph:

Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away [divorce her] privily.

Matthew 1:19

It's *because* he was a good man and didn't want to embarrass his wife that he started planning their divorce.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, we read the following:

What, know ye not that he which is joined to a harlot is one body? For two, saith he, shall be one flesh.

1 Corinthians 6:16

Why this is important is when an unmarried man sleeps with a prostitute or any woman, he is unwittingly declaring to God this woman is now his wife! Now many a Christian man has been involved in sexual immorality before they were saved. But say one found a good Christian wife. If we take Jesus's words in our passage today in their strictest sense, when this man walks away from that prostitute and joined himself in marriage to another, he was committing adultery. But does anyone believe his Christian marriage was a sinful act? Of course not. We believe rather that God *blesses* such a union. So Jesus's declaration has more to it than first appears.

Let me pause for a moment to make it clear I'm not rooting through the scriptures trying to find reasons to justify people getting divorced and remarried. I want to portray marriage as a sacred bond just like Jesus did. But the serious Bible student has to be prepared to put time and effort into his search for truth and not be satisfied with simplistic understandings.

The truth is we often find situations we have to deal with that are very problematic. Often, pastors face situations where it's difficult to apply scripture, because **sometimes there is more than one scriptural principle that applies, and they can conflict with each other.** We're NOT talking about scripture contradicting itself. The best way to make the point is by example.

Several weeks ago, there was an incident again involving the Pharisees. They criticized Jesus's followers for breaking Sabbath rules. Jesus pointed to an event in their own history

where a rule given by God had been broken. King David had been out and about and was extremely hungry. He requested some of the showbread from the priest. The priest was in an awkward situation. He had two principles given by God which could be applied to the situation. He had a duty to maintain the tabernacle practices as given by God. He had another duty to show love to his fellow man. **One of these principles of God's had to be broken** on that occasion. The priest decided, quite rightly it turned out, that helping a brother in need was more important at that moment than keeping to the minutiae of the rules about tabernacle service.

Only last week, we saw another conflict with a young man who was exorcising demons. You'll remember the disciples told him to stop his activities because he didn't identify with them. One principle drawn from scripture shows the church is not the place for lone wolves. If you belong to God, and wish to work for God, you should do it by being attached to a local church. On the other hand, scripture also tells us to be witnesses for Jesus Christ. Jesus teaches the disciples to leave such people alone, and instead encouraged them and teach them. They'll attach themselves to a church in time.

I compared this to an example in the Old Testament. Someone had been prophesying in the Spirit...but not in the prescribed place. On the one hand, there was a rule they had to be not over here but over there when they prophesied. On the other hand, it was a good thing to prophecy! Moses had two competing principles. Like Jesus, he reasoned it was better to be doing God's work in a slightly unconventional way than to not be doing God's work at all.

Conclusion

While we aim for the ideals given by God, and encourage others to strive for these ideals, we also acknowledge that difficult pastoral situations exist.

I felt a little apprehensive in preparing this message. Divorce and remarriage are sensitive and hotly debated issues. I wanted to be careful to not misinform people. I wanted to choose my words carefully so as not to put advice out there that could cause people to make sinful decisions. I know what I believe, and I think it to be scriptural. But it's a serious responsibility to describe what the Bible teaches with the right emphasis.

I found the following quote by the commentator, France, that articulates my own view very well:

["The practical application of this teaching in a society in which both adultery and divorce are common and legally permissible cannot be straightforward. But Mark's Jesus offers no direct guidance on the problem, simply a clear, unequivocal, and utterly uncompromising principle that marriage is permanent, and divorce \(together with the resultant remarriage\) is wrong. Whatever the other considerations which pastoral concern may bring to bear, some of them no doubt on values drawn from Jesus' teaching on other subjects, no approach can claim his support which does not take as its guiding principle the understanding of marriage set forth \[here\]."](#)

Like many others, I've found myself being asked for advice on marriage issues. And each person's situation is different from the others.

It's sad, but sinful people make mistakes in their choice of spouse. They change, but not in a God-ward direction. They allow the examples they see in the world around them to influence their attitude to their own marriage. They may become abusive to their partner. Many other things can go wrong. And the divorce figures I mentioned apply to Christian marriages as much as others.

The church's duty is to uphold marriage. It should teach Jesus's high view of marriage. Candidates for marriage should be made fully aware of the huge responsibility they're about to take on. The church must also support couples *during* their marriage, primarily through the teaching of sound doctrine and private encouragements.

But the church must also know how to handle marriage *breakdowns* with compassion. Our lives in general don't turn out as we'd have liked. None of us reaches the high ideals we know God lays out for us. And if we show each other compassion in our general failings, this has to extend to failures in marriage too. Sometimes, we have to pursue the lesser of two evils. Divorce could be one of them. But we must NEVER think that it's pleasing to God.

Some Bible students argue there may be a case for divorce but never *remarriage*. Here again, we'll be faced with situations that prove difficult to give counsel on.

Imagine a woman who's been through a divorce. She turns up one Sunday morning at New Road. And you have a chat and learn about her background. She desperately wants to remarry, and she gives two reasons. Firstly, she's desperately lonely. She needs someone to spend the rest of her life with. Secondly, she desires that intimacy that only a marriage can provide.

Like those Biblical characters I used in my examples earlier, you find yourself with two competing principles. On the one hand, you have the sacredness of marriage. Technically, the lady would be breaking God's law if she remarried. On the other hand, you recall the emphasis in the Bible about showing love and compassion to your brothers and sisters in Christ. And you might also recall this clear statement in scripture too:

I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, it is good for them if they abide even as I. But if they cannot contain, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn.

1 Corinthians 7:8–10

One way or the other, you **will** have to compromise on these two competing principles of God's.

Every situation is different; but let me use the same example and give you an idea of how I'd deal with it.

My first point would be to tell her about **the superiority of being single compared to being married**. Now I've been exalting marriage this morning, and in many churches being single is viewed negatively. Yet the scriptures tell us that, for the believer, being single is the better option—if they can handle it.

But I would have you without carefulness. He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord: But he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife.

1 Corinthians 7:32–33

I'd ask the lady, *Are you certain you can't remain single?* I'd show her how she can be a more efficient servant of God without the distractions of marriage. I'd perhaps suggest she spends a season thinking it over and praying a lot.

A few weeks pass, and she approaches me again. She insists she can't handle life without a partner. She persuades me she appreciates the gravity of the marriage bond, and even acknowledges her shortcomings as a wife. She shows herself humble before God.

I'd advise her to go back to God in prayer. To beg of God that he would draw a line under her life so far. To ask his forgiveness, even if her former husband was most at fault for the breakdown. To confess the importance of the marriage unit. And to ask that, if it's his will, he will find her a Godly husband.

Marriage is of God. It is important to him. People are to enter it with *no thought of the possibility it might fail*. When they promise God and all the other witnesses at their wedding they'll persevere in their marriage through both good times and bad, they must mean it.

If someone thinks an exception to God's rules should be made in their case, they'd better be able to make that case to God with a good conscience, never failing to acknowledge just how serious their request is.

Marriage: the great picture in the gallery of God. People, even those in the kingdom of God, frequently deface God's painting of marriage. This **is sinful**. But for those who have truly repented of their sinfulness, and wish to make a fresh start, they know they can go to a God who is rich in compassion and mercy.

God give us all heavenly wisdom as we try to obey him.

Amen.