

*Jesus' Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage: Mark 10:1-12*  
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Sunday, January 23, 2010

This morning's sermon will be the conclusion of the sermon series on marriage as well as our return to the sermon series through the Gospel of Mark. We'll be looking at Mark 10:1-12 which was the reason for these several sermons on marriage. This passage contains Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage, but I didn't want to just consider these verses for one Sunday and then move on. So we stepped back to look at the biblical teaching on marriage, beginning with creation and the fall, then Hosea, then Ephesians 5 and 1 Peter 3 and 1 Corinthians 7. And the huge reality that we've seen in these passages is that human marriage is intended by God to be a picture of Christ's marriage to the church. That's why God created marriage—to be a parable of Christ's relationship with His bride. This is seen in human marriages when husbands love their wives sacrificially and thus lead like Christ, and when wives joyfully submit to their husbands like the church submits to Christ. And human marriages are also a faithful pointer to Christ and the church when a husband and wife are committed to one another for life. God designed marriage to be life-long. It is supposed to be permanent. It must not be torn apart by divorce, because Christ never divorces the church.

I recognize that these sermons may be extremely painful for some of you. If you've been through a divorce, if you've been remarried after a divorce, the Bible's teaching on this issue could be very difficult to hear. I want you to know that my hope is to speak the truth in love. It's certainly not my intention to be harsh or condemning in any way. And if I've been insensitive in anything I've said, I do apologize. If that is the case, please tell me.

This is a sensitive and difficult topic, but I believe that what the Bible has to say about it is for our good and comes from a loving God. Therefore, even if these things make us uncomfortable, we should be grateful that God's Word speaks to these matters. After all, the Scriptures aren't there to make us feel good about ourselves. They are there to show us our sin and point us to Jesus. And that's my sincere hope for these messages. I hope that we will see our sin, whatever those sins may be, and that we will repent of those sins and cast ourselves upon the mercy of Christ. And I pray also that the Bible's teaching on the permanence of marriage will cause us to rejoice in the permanence of Christ's marriage to the church.

Last week we studied Paul's teaching on divorce and remarriage from 1 Corinthians 7, and I argued that Paul gives no

allowance for divorce and remarriage while the spouse is still living. He speaks to the situation where an unbelieving spouse deserts and divorces a believer, and he says that “in such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved” (verse 15). They should allow the divorce to happen. But, I argued, the flow of thought in those verses does not suggest that there is a freedom to remarry. The only time when remarriage is legitimate is when the person’s spouse has died. You can look at last week’s sermon on the church website to see the explanation of those things in more detail.

This is a minority position, as I mentioned. Most biblical interpreters, even very conservative ones, think that there are two biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage. One is when an unbelieving spouse abandons a believing spouse. That’s from 1 Corinthians 7, and I tried to show last Sunday why I don’t think that gives a person grounds for remarriage. The second ground for divorce that many point to is adultery, and that comes from Matthew 5 and Matthew 19. My goal today is to explain why I don’t think that is a legitimate ground either.

Let’s start in Mark 10:1-12. The Pharisees came to Jesus “to test him” as verse 2 says. They were continually trying to corner Him, trying to get Him to say something that would hurt His reputation. This was yet another malicious strategy to take Jesus down. Do you remember why John the Baptist was beheaded? Because he spoke out against Herodias, who had left her husband Phillip and married Phillip’s brother, Herod. Maybe the Pharisees thought, if we can catch Jesus saying something similar, maybe Herodias will take Him down, too.

So the Pharisees asked Jesus, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” Jesus answered them by asking another question, “What did Moses command you?” We have to remember that Moses was the human author of the Pentateuch, the first 5 books of the Old Testament. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Moses wrote these books. So Jesus is referring back to the Pentateuch and asking what is commanded there that relates to marriage and divorce. And as we’ll see in a moment, the section Jesus primarily has in mind is Genesis 1-2.

But the Pharisees aren’t thinking of that. They aren’t thinking back to creation. They’re thinking of a passage in Deuteronomy that could be read as condoning divorce. They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.” Now listen to what the passage that they are referring to actually says. It’s in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, “When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, and if she goes and becomes

another man's wife, and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the Lord. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance."

Notice that Moses did not command divorce here. Neither did he condemn divorce. The reality of divorce is simply assumed in these verses, and there's not a command to say that divorce is right or wrong. It's describing a situation where a woman is married to one man, then married to another man, and the only explicit command is that she cannot go back and marry the first man after being married to the second man. That's what those verses are about. But this is the passage the Pharisees went to, and you can see what their assumptions are. They assume that the verses in Deuteronomy 24 clearly allow for divorce. The wording in Matthew 19 is even stronger. There they are recorded as saying, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" So they were reading a lot into that passage.

Look at how Jesus corrects their assumptions in verses 5-9 of Mark 10. He begins by addressing the Deuteronomy passage and says, "because of your hardness of heart [Moses] wrote you this commandment." In other words, what you've pointed out is the exception that proves the rule. Divorce is not part of God's plan. Divorce is wrong and sinful. God hates divorce. And yet because of their hardness of heart Moses had to write this commandment to regulate the sinful practices of divorce and remarriage. That commandment did not mean that God thought divorce was good or acceptable. He was not endorsing it in any way.

A similar issue in the Old Testament is polygamy. Polygamy was practiced by many in the Old Testament, even by many who are extremely praiseworthy in other respects. But that doesn't constitute an endorsement of it. That doesn't mean that polygamy is right or good or acceptable. It just was, and the Old Testament describes that for us. You can't read the accounts in the Old Testament and then argue that polygamy is OK. Neither can you read Deuteronomy 24 and argue that divorce is OK.

In verse 6 Jesus goes back to creation. Moses' commandment in Deuteronomy 24 was due to the people's hardness of heart. It was meant to regulate a sinful practice. But the passage in Moses that really gets to the heart of the divorce issue is Genesis 1-2, as Jesus points out. Jesus says, "But from the beginning of creation [and then He quotes from Genesis 1:27],

‘God made them male and female.’ [Then He quotes from Genesis 2:24], ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’” This is the great creation statement on the permanence of marriage. Two individuals leave their families of origin and cleave to one another, and they become one flesh. This is the mystery and the majesty of what God has designed marriage to be. And the one flesh union of marriage is never to be severed. When you try to rip apart a union that is so fundamental and so profound, it’s going to cause immense damage.

That’s the end of Jesus’ quotation from Genesis. In the middle of verse 8 He concludes His quote from Genesis 2:24, and then He elaborates, “So they are no longer two but one flesh.” Jesus is emphasizing the significance of the one flesh union. When a man and woman are married, they become one in such a way that it’s no longer appropriate to think of them as two independent, autonomous, self-directed individuals. They are certainly not independent in the sense of having the right to detach themselves from the one flesh union and then attach themselves to another partner. That’s the mentality of sinful humanity, but Jesus says that marriage establishes such a radical bond between a man and a woman that they are no longer two but one flesh.

In verse 9 Jesus explains the important implication of this one flesh union and shows how it answers the question that the Pharisees asked back in verse 2. They had asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” Here’s the answer, based on the quotations from Genesis: “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” That is an amazing statement. The verse speaks of divine action and human action. It may be surprising to hear Jesus speak of marriage as a divine action—“what . . . God has joined together.” We may think that marriage is mainly a human action. A man asks a woman to marry him. She accepts. They make vows to one another. A pastor or justice of the peace pronounces them husband and wife. Isn’t this something that humans do? Not ultimately. This is what is so radical about Jesus’ words here. He’s saying that when a man and woman get married, it’s ultimately God who is joining them together. The union of marriage is something that God does.

We have to recognize how all of this goes against our self-centered, self-directing, sinful assumptions. “I want to do what I want to do. I don’t want to answer to anybody. I’ll enter into marriage if I feel so inclined at the time, and I’ll end that marriage if I feel so inclined at some later point in time.” That’s the divorce culture in which we live. And that’s the sinful nature within us.

We need Jesus to obliterate those man-centered and sinful notions about marriage, and we need Him to give us a God-

centered vision of marriage. God joins together a man and woman in marriage. And therefore He's the only One who has the right to end a marriage, which He does by death. When one of the spouses dies, the marriage is ended, and that is God's doing. "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." Only God can separate a marriage. Man has no right to do so.

If you are considering divorce, or if you know someone who is considering divorce, or if at some point in the future you are tempted to contemplate divorcing your spouse, you must see this truth. You have no right to separate a union that God has made. Don't rebel against God by attacking something and trying to destroy something that He has made. Don't try to tear something apart that He joined together.

I know that some marriages are really rough. You may feel like your home is a living hell, and you might think that as bad as divorce is, it would at least be better than the turmoil and agony of what you're living in now. If you're in a situation like that, I sympathize with your struggle, and the elders of this church want to help you in whatever way we can. But I cannot give you any biblical justification for divorce. The counsel I want to give you, on the authority of God's Word, is to stay in your marriage, however difficult it may be. If there is physical abuse, you need to separate and find a safe place for you and your children. There may be other situations where a temporary separation is needed. Seek godly counsel in these situations. But do not divorce. You have no right to do so.

In verses 10-12 the discussion of divorce continues, but now only with the disciples in the private setting of the house. The Pharisees are gone now, and the disciples are trying to process the things Jesus has just said. So Jesus clarifies what He's saying in a very vivid and emphatic way. "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

This is a bold and absolute statement against divorce. The one flesh union of marriage is life-long in God's eyes. Therefore to separate from that union which God established and to form a new union with someone else amounts to adultery.

This is a hard teaching. It's an extremely high standard for marriage. The disciples reacted to this, and their response is recorded in Matthew 19. They said, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." And Jesus said that some, indeed, would receive that and live single, celibate lives for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. But the point is that the disciples recognized this as a very hard teaching, a very high standard. So if you're feeling astounded, maybe appalled by this absolute prohibition against divorce, then you're in the same place the

disciples where in. This does not fit with our assumptions. This does not fit with the guidelines we would make for divorce and remarriage. But these are the commands of our Lord.

### **The Exception Clause**

Now we have to talk about the exception clause that appears in Matthew. There is no exception given to the absolute commands in Mark 10. Luke 16:18 is the same, “Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.” There is no exception there. But in Matthew, and Matthew only, an exception clause appears in two places where Jesus speaks about divorce. The first is in Matthew 5:31-32, “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” That’s in the context of the Sermon on the Mount. Then in Matthew 19 we find the parallel passage to Mark 10, and Jesus says, “whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery” (Matthew 19:9).

Most people take this to mean that in the case of adultery, divorce is allowed. That’s the majority position. But let me give you some reasons why I don’t think that’s the case. First of all, it should give us pause when we see that neither Mark nor Luke have the exception clause. We have to wrestle with the question of whether Mark and Luke assumed the exception clause (and, if so, why they decided not to include it) or if it’s added in Matthew for some specific purpose.

Secondly, if we take the exception clause to refer to adultery, we have to wrestle with how to apply that. This is one of the questions that I seriously struggled with in terms of the majority position, and it’s part of what moved me away from that position. In Matthew 5, right before the section on divorce is the section on lust, where Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matthew 5:27-28) So my question is, If Jesus allows divorce in the case of adultery, then does He also allow divorce in case of lust? That’s a pretty slippery slope, and it seems that any wife could claim to have grounds to divorce her husband.

Thirdly, and this really gets to the heart of the debate, the word that is translated “sexual immorality” is the Greek word *porneia*, which typically refers to fornication, which is

distinguished from *moicheia*, which means adultery. So if the exception clause really referred to adultery, it would be a lot clearer if the word *moicheia* appeared there. But instead, the word *porneia* is used. The only other place in Matthew where *porneia* is used, it is used alongside *moicheia*, which suggests they are two distinct categories of sexual sin. In Matthew 15:19 Jesus says, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery [*moicheia*], sexual immorality [*porneia*], theft, false witness, slander." So it's curious that the exception clause has the word for fornication rather than the word for adultery.

A fourth observation is that in John 8:41 the Jewish leaders seem to be implying that Jesus was born as a result of *porneia*. They said to Him, "We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God." And the implication seems to be that they are scoffing at the idea of the virgin birth and assuming that Mary had sex outside of wedlock. She committed fornication (*porneia*).

And that takes us back to the beginning of Matthew which, interestingly, is the only Gospel which records Joseph's intention to "divorce" Mary because of her pregnancy. I preached on this passage the day after Christmas. Matthew 1:18-20 says this, "Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

Putting all these pieces together, it seems very likely that the exception clause (found only in Matthew) is explained by the need to leave an exception for Joseph's just intentions. He was a just man, and it would have been just for him to divorce Mary if she had committed fornication during the betrothal period.

This may sound complicated, and it is, but in light of the absolute prohibition against divorce in Mark and Luke, and the emphasis on the permanence of marriage that we have seen in other passages, it seems very likely that Matthew's exception clause has a more limited purpose. It's not to give a ground for married couples to get divorced when there is adultery. Rather, it's to explain to Matthew's readers that Jesus' statement here does not imply that Joseph would have been unjust in his plans. Divorce is justified if, during the betrothal period, there is fornication.

There are not a lot of people who hold this position, but there are some. John Piper is one, and you can read his position paper on divorce and remarriage on the Desiring God website.

James Montgomery Boice also defended this view, and you can read that in his commentary on Matthew.

My hope is to uphold a very high view of marriage and to plead with couples to stay committed to their marriage. I don't believe there are any biblical grounds for divorce. God has joined you together as a couple, and you don't have the right to end it.

There's one last question that I want to address briefly. What if you have already divorced and remarried? Does that mean that your relationship with your current spouse is adulterous? And if so, should you divorce again in order to reunite with your first spouse? This is a weighty question, because Jesus says, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." (Mark 10:11-12, ESV)

Let me read you John Piper's response to this question, because he has a lot more wisdom than I do and has thought about this much longer than I have. He says, "I do not think that a person who remarries against God's will, and thus commits adultery in this way, should later break the second marriage. The marriage should not have been done, but now that it is done, it should not be undone by man. It is a real marriage. Real vows have been made and sexual union has happened. And that real covenant of marriage may be purified by the blood of Jesus and set apart for God. In other words, I don't think that a couple who repents and seeks God's forgiveness, and receives his cleansing, should think of their lives as ongoing adultery, even though, in the eyes of Jesus, that's how the relationship started."<sup>1</sup>

What we saw in Deuteronomy 24 seems to argue in favor of this conclusion. A wife is not to go back to her first husband after being married to another man. I also thought about the situation where a believer is married to an unbeliever, as Peter addresses in 1 Peter 3 and Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians 7. In some cases that may be because a man and woman are married and then one of them becomes a believer. But there are also many cases where a believer sins and marries an unbeliever. They should not have entered into that marriage, and yet the biblical instruction is to stay in that marriage (1 Corinthians 7 and 1 Peter 3). So I think when a remarriage happens after divorce, even though it should not have happened, it should not be ended. Two wrongs don't make a right. What you should do is repent of past sins and seek God's grace to make the marriage you're in now as Christ-honoring as it can be.

In closing, let's remember again that this hard teaching on divorce and remarriage is Good News for us as Christians. Not only is God wanting to protect us from the heartache and

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<sup>1</sup> Sermon, "What God Has Joined Together, Let Not Man Separate, Part 2"



emotional pain of divorce, but He is showing us a picture of Christ's unbreakable commitment to His bride, the church. Let's celebrate Christ's sacrificial love for us that assures us of our eternal relationship with Him.