

Divorce & the Gospel

Mark 10:1-12

One of the things we see when we read the Bible is God's deep concern to meet us where we are. The Bible isn't a book of spiritual aphorisms for positive thinking or a twelve-step program for better living. God's law is inspirational, but not merely sentimental. It speaks to us in the context in which we actually exist—sin. The only church that won't have to deal with divorce is a church that refuses to on some misguided principle. Moses dealt with it and so does Jesus. This is a hard topic but one in which God's justice applies. When we actually do apply it, there is opportunity for clarity, healing and peace.

What is Marriage?

Jesus leaves Capernaum and is now in Judea, not far from Jerusalem (v1). The Pharisees show up to test him to see if he is on Herod's or (their view of) Moses' side. They ask with the wrong motives and therefore get the wrong answers. Jesus takes them back to the beginning (Gen. 1:27; 5:2; 2:24). God made man and woman to be together, so a man leaves and cleaves, and they are one flesh (vv6-8). A marriage is a sexual union between a man and a woman bound by a covenantal oath (Mal. 2:14). It's possible to have the union without the oath (1 Cor. 6:16), and the oath without the union, but marriage requires both. God designed this most intimate union to be vulnerably sacrificial, a wonderful picture of Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:25ff). The question is what can you give, not what can you get and when can you leave. Jesus' answer reveals marriage was never designed to be broken.

When is Divorce Permissible?

The Hillel school of thought took "If then she finds no favor in his eyes" (Dt. 24:1ff) at out-of-context face value, allowing for divorce for burned food! "If she does not accept your control, divorce her and send her away" (Ben Sira 25:26). Those who followed Shammai taught that divorce was prohibited except for sexual immorality, and only the husband could divorce the wife. Ironically, Deuteronomy 24 is about protecting a woman from being mistreated. She can only be divorced for "sexual uncleanness", meaning infidelity, and a man who divorces her can't remarry her for his convenience or gain. Jesus is being asked about a specific situation here, not giving a systematic theology of divorce. He is being asked about "any cause" divorce, the controversial teaching of Hillel (Matt. 19:3). All Jews knew about the cause of abandonment which allowed divorce for neglect of food, clothing and love (Ex. 21:10-11). Marriage today doesn't require less, but some churches are in the odd position of allowing divorce for adultery but technically not for murder. Paul explicitly allows for divorce in these circumstances (1 Cor. 7:12-15). Some situations call for it (Matt. 1:19).

Divorce Meets the Gospel

Why is Jesus (and Mark) taking time to talk about marriage and divorce? He is teaching his people how to live with their closest neighbors, to put together what Edmund Burke called "little platoons". Relationships and sexuality was crazy in the New Testament church but Jesus' teaching transformed people, and we want him to do it again. Divorce rates in America were at 10% in 1910, 25% in 1948, today it's probably in the 40%. It is erroneously believed that Christians divorce as often as non Christians, when in fact Protestant couples active in their faith are 35% less likely to divorce than the religiously unaffiliated. As the Word of God is set aside in churches, we should expect what we're getting—marriages falling apart. So we need to turn back to Jesus' teaching.

- i. He radically honors wives who have the same exclusive claim on their husbands that husbands do on their wives (v11; cf. 1 Cor. 7:4).
- ii. He teaches the wonderful design and union of marriage.
- iii. He meets all of us where we are at with grace to be faithful to him as we conduct our relationships with others.

NOTES FOR LITTLE SAINTS

Today's Passage: Mark 10:2-9 *2 And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" 3 He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" 4 They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away." 5 And Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. 6 But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 7 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, 8 and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. 9 What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."*

1. Jesus is getting asked hard questions and giving wonderful answers. How does God make mankind, and what do they do (verses 6-7)?
2. Because God made man and woman, what happens when they get married (verse 8)?
3. God gives us the wonderful gift of marriage between a man and a woman, and in this wonderful union children like you are brought into the world. What does Jesus say man should not do (verse 9)?
4. Draw a picture of a husband and wife doing something fun together like swimming at the beach, hiking in the mountains, playing badminton or your choice!

Memory Verse to Recite Next Week:

"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." --Mark 10:7-8