

Sermon for October 4, 2015 – 19th Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 10:2-12 (NKJV)

Theme: What does Jesus think about Divorce?

² *The Pharisees came and asked Him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” testing Him.* ³ *And He answered and said to them, “What did Moses command you?”* ⁴ *They said, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to dismiss her.”* ⁵ *And Jesus answered and said to them, “Because of the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept.* ⁶ *But from the beginning of the creation, God ‘made them male and female.’* ⁷ *‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife,* ⁸ *and the two shall become one flesh’; so then they are no longer two, but one flesh.* ⁹ *Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.”* ¹⁰ *In the house His disciples also asked Him again about the same matter.* ¹¹ *So He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her.* ¹² *And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”* (NKJV)

Imagine this situation: a husband and wife - married, but unhappy. They put on a good show but don't love each other anymore. All they do is argue. They rarely spend time together. They think: maybe getting married was a mistake. Maybe it would be best to get a divorce and just be good friends. Isn't it better to live a happy life, than to be trapped in a loveless marriage? And so the couple starts thinking about filing for divorce based on irreconcilable differences.

At first glance we might be tempted to think: “Well, I get it. I can just imagine how hard it would be to spend your life together with someone you don't really love. It probably would be better to just end the marriage than to go on.” This is what our sinful human heart thinks, which is driven by selfish motives and passions.

But, as Christians, we are not controlled by our sinful passions. We belong to Christ -so the real question we have to ask ourselves is: **What does Jesus think about Divorce?** With the Gospel of Mark as our guide, let us learn that 1) *Jesus doesn't want us to view marriage and divorce the way the world does.* 2) *Jesus wants us to know what marriage actually is.* 3) *Jesus wants us to understand that divorce is, in essence, a sin.*

Part One: Jesus doesn't want us to view marriage and divorce the way the world does.

Our sermon text finds Jesus teaching a crowd of people in a region near Judea but still under the control of Herod.

We read: ² *The Pharisees came and asked Him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”*

Now at first glance this question might seem innocent enough. Even the disciples were interested in what Jesus had to say concerning this matter. But there was more to the question than first meets the ear. Mark tells us that, in asking Jesus this question, the Pharisees were *testing Him*.

As I just mentioned, Jesus was in the area ruled by Herod Antipas, who, as the beheading of John the Baptist's illustrates, did not take kindly to people who criticized his divorce and remarriage. On top of this, if Jesus spoke out against divorce – which the Pharisees expected him to do - he would probably lose popularity points with the people.

But Jesus wasn't afraid of losing popularity. He was more concerned that people know the truth, and this is why he responded:

“What did Moses command you?” They said, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to dismiss her.”

The Pharisees had the first few verses of Deuteronomy 24 in mind, which talk about a man writing a certificate of divorce if his wife loses favor in his eyes because he finds something indecent or unclean about her. Many Jews interpreted this passage rather liberally: allowing trivial things, like being a bad cook, to be a cause for divorce.

You see then that the Pharisees (like the rest of the world) viewed marriage from a purely selfish view point. To them, marriage was merely a human arrangement, and they were more interested in what they could get out of it than the love they could offer. And if their “needs” or “desires” weren't being fulfilled, they looked for a way out - and Moses' instruction concerning a certificate of divorce seemed to provide just that.

But an honest reading of Deuteronomy 24 shows that God did not command this provision as a way people could “get out” of their marriages, but as a way to regulate and protect people from the sinful behavior of others.

You see, if a man divorced his wife, it would automatically be assumed that it was for adultery. The written certificate, however, gave the legal reason for the divorce – thereby offering some protection to the innocent so that they would not be stigmatized as adulterers. This is why Jesus said: *“Because of the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept.”*

Jesus was, in effect, saying: “God is not allowing divorce in this passage, rather, knowing that you would selfishly pursue divorce in spite of the fact that it goes against his will, God regulated it so as to lessen the devastating effects it would have on the innocent party.”

The Scriptures are clear: God hates divorce.ⁱ Why? Because God does not view marriage as a mere human arrangement between two consenting adults – and neither should we! As we will learn next, every marriage is God's gracious work – bringing a man and a woman together to accomplish His will.

Part Two: Jesus wants us to know what marriage actually is.

Jesus continues: *But from the beginning of the creation, God ‘made them male and female.’ For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh; so then they are no longer two, but one flesh.*

Our society only views marriage as a human arrangement in which people can fulfill their selfish passions. Now, I will say this: if this were true, then I could say nothing against homosexual marriage. But marriage is not a human arrangement. God instituted marriage at creation – creating us male and female so that each individual man might be united to the one woman created to complement him in order that they, together, might bring glory to God's name. Homosexual marriage, therefore, is a perversion of God's purpose and institution of marriage. It is wrong!

Marriage is also not a way for a man to get a personal slave who will fulfill his every whim. It is not a means for a woman to get a “sugar daddy” who will support her lust for material things. God made humans

male and female – not merely so that they could have sex and procreate. No, he created us for marriage. And what is marriage?

It is when a man and woman leave the former family bonds into which they were born so that they might form something new together – making a life-long commitment of love to each other. They are joined together emotionally and spiritually to such a degree that they become as one. What does that mean? It means that they no longer live selfishly – each for themselves. They live for each other. They live as one. Just as your head makes decisions that benefit your body, so the husband is to live for his wife; and just as your body supports your head, so the wife is to support her husband. I know that my illustration sounds a little absurd because no one ever thinks of the head and body operating separately from each other – but that is exactly the point Scripture makes concerning marriage: God desires that husband and wife be so united in a bond of love and commitment that it would be absolutely absurd for one to operate independently of the other.

Marriage, therefore, is not about what I get and how I feel, but its about how I – as a man –can love and benefit my wife; and how my wife – as a woman – can help and support me. Together we work and live to glorify God until death do us part.

The LORD never promised anyone an easy life in this wicked world. Because of sin, there will always be conflict. My sinful nature will constantly attempt to flare up – trying to live selfishly, and wreak havoc on my marriage. My wife’s sinful nature will do the same. Christians acknowledge this fact. They realize that there will be times when they don’t feel like they love their spouse. But when those times come, the Christian will go to Christ in prayer and ask for his help – remembering that their marriage (as difficult as things may seem) is from God. He brought them together to serve his purpose, to glorify his name. He will, therefore, send his Spirit to help them bear their crosses and bring relief and resolution in his good time.

Marriage is God’s work. He brings a man and a woman together in a bond of love to accomplish his will. *Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.*

Part Three: Jesus wants us to understand that divorce is, in essence, a sin.

Now what I said about marriage and divorce might have come as a bit of a shock to you. Maybe you never really thought of marriage as more than a human institution. Maybe you wondered if divorce really is that bad. If you are wondering these things, you are not alone. Even Jesus' own disciples needed clarification. We read: *In the house His disciples also asked Him again about the same matter. ¹¹ So He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. ¹² And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”*

Is divorce really that bad? Yes, it is. To divorce someone merely because you can’t seem to get along or because you feel like you would be better off with another person, is a sin. Whoever divorces his/her spouse and marries another is committing adultery and, as the Scriptures say: *Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders . . . will inherit the kingdom of God.*ⁱⁱ

Jesus is clear: divorce is a sin. HOWEVER, before we leave this point we have to be clear on what divorce is and why it is a sin. When we think of divorce, we think of the person filing the papers to officially dissolve the marriage in the eyes of the state. God views it differently.

Let me explain what I mean with two illustrations: A wife cheats on her husband and he files for divorce.

Even though he is the one filing the paper work, God will hold the wife accountable for the divorce because she, by her actions, broke the marriage bond. If a man emotionally abuses his wife– driving her to divorce him – he is the one who, by his actions, broke the marriage bond. God will hold him accountable for the divorce, not her.

The point I am trying to make is this: God hates divorce, but the person he holds accountable is not necessarily the one filing the papers. God searches the heart – knowing every sinful, selfish motive lurking therein. Whoever willfully refuses to fulfill their role in marriage breaks the marriage bond by breaking his or her promise. If a divorce results because of it, God will hold that person accountable.

As we close this section on divorce, there is one more thing I need to say. Yes, Jesus' teaching is clear: divorce is a serious sin that puts a person under God's wrath. But as you hear Jesus speak this truth, remember also who he is: the dear Lamb of God, who came to be sacrificed on the cross for the sins of the world. The LORD laid upon him the iniquity of us all – including the iniquity of sinful divorce or any other way we may have broken our marriage bonds. Jesus died so that, whoever looks to him in true repentance and faith might be forgiven of all sin. Therefore, if you are divorced and are worried that you may have been at fault, then look to the cross and repent - confessing your sins to Christ. He is merciful and just – promising to forgive all our sins and to purify us from all unrighteousness.

Yes, brothers and sisters in Christ, look to the cross. Jesus' love for us not only forgives our sins, it is also the power behind every Christian marriage. Jesus' love for me is the power behind my love for my wife – just as I know it is the power behind her love for me. Jesus' love helps us keep our marriage in its proper perspective. It moves us to forgive each other just as he forgave us. And, as we view the cross together – Jesus' love for us strengthens our bond to each other – making marriage the wonderful blessing God created it to be. All to the glory of his name. Amen.

ⁱ Cf. Malachi 2:16

ⁱⁱ 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 NIV84