

Jesus' Teaching on Divorce.

Text: Mark 10: 1-12

There is a temptation for a preacher, including myself, to skip texts like the one we have this evening.

But the problem with working your way through a book is that eventually you come across a passage that is difficult to tackle.

Difficult to tackle because it deals with personal issues: marriage and divorce.

Here we have Jesus speaking about divorce, so we can't avoid having to deal with it.

We need to attempt that we hear God's word on the topic...
rather than state our own opinion.

The evidence is clear: many marriages today end in divorce.

If we have not experienced it personally, we know personally someone who has.

It's happening everywhere.

And they are getting out in increasing numbers.

What do we say about all of this?

Jesus has something to say about it, and we find it here in these verses in Mark 10.

To get a handle on what's happening here we need to see these verses in context.

And the opening verse gives us a great insight into the context.

(Mark 10:1) Jesus then left that place and went into the region of Judea and across the Jordan.

Mark chapter 10 marks an important shift in the ministry of Jesus.

Jesus leaves Capernaum, where he had been teaching, and goes into the land beyond the Jordan.

He has set his sights on Jerusalem.

He and the disciples begin walking the road that pilgrims would have taken in order to get to Jerusalem.

At some point they would have crossed the Jordan River into an area called Perea.

This is an important detail because Jesus has entered into the land governed by Herod Antipas.

Once again, Jesus is ministering as he did in Galilee.

People are drawn to him.

Crowds are following him.

(Mark 10:2) Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

Unfortunately public ministry means being dogged by the Pharisees.
It seems odd and out of the blue for the Pharisees to suddenly bring up the issue of divorce and remarriage (v2).

Yes, it was a matter of some debate amongst Jews, but it was a family and in house debate.

It is hard to imagine Jesus getting into too much trouble or alienating too many people by coming down one way or another in the Jewish divorce debates.

So why bring up the topic?

The Pharisees had been plotting with the Herodians for some time as to how they might dispose of Jesus.

Now the Pharisees see a chance.

Maybe we can get Jesus to issue a verdict on divorce that would be seen as a condemnation of Herod, and maybe Herod would behead Jesus too.

Back in chapter 7 Jesus had retired from his public Galilean ministry when Herod started to edgy and paranoid about him maybe being John the Baptist raised from the dead. But now he was back.

We need to remember why Herod had John beheaded.

Primarily because John had been openly condemning Herod's marriage to Herodius.

Herod had been married to the daughter of the King of Nabataea, a kingdom just to the east.

Herodius had been married to Herod's brother Philip.

Herod had gone to visit his brother, and there met and fell in love with Herodius, who didn't like her rich but non-ambitious husband.

So they plotted.

Herodius dumped her husband and Herod put away his wife, and they married each other.

John the Baptist had been getting in the way of their plans.

So Herodius tricked Herod into chopping off his head.

So, yes, divorce is the topic, but it is just the surface of something much larger. In short, would Jesus speak against the king and risk being beheaded?

But Jesus is a hard guy to trick or trap.

As often is the case, he answers the question with a question.

(Mark 10:3) "What did Moses command you?" he replied.

Jesus calls their bluff. He won't get caught in their trap.

He doesn't answer in his own authority...

but he asks them to go to Moses themselves to answer their question.

(Mark 10:4) They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away."

They didn't answer Jesus question.

He asked what Moses had commanded.

They answer with what Moses, they thought, permitted.

They answer the question, "what can I get away with?"

rather than the question, "what does God want?"

In Jesus' day divorce was very common.

There was a wide array of opinion about divorce, just as there is today.

But within mainstream Judaism there were two primary schools of thought, one very lenient, one more strict.

Both of these schools looked to a rather obscure passage in Deuteronomy, but interpreted it differently.

We need to look at that passage ourselves (Deuteronomy 24:1-5):

Read.

This passage is not about the question "What are grounds for divorce?"

It really shouldn't be used to answer that question.

This passage actually deals with a very narrowly defined situation.

Jesus always seems to get past the surface argument and get to the real issue (V5)

Moses didn't command men to put their wives away.

Rather, he presupposed that in your heard heartedness you were doing this anyway.

So Moses was dealing with those implications.

By providing a certificate of divorce, God gave protection for the woman.

This authenticates her release from the marriage and affirms her right to remarry.

The real issue or real problem with Israel is the same real problem with Rome and the Gentiles –

it is sin and rebellion and hardness of heart.

Israel had been called to show to the world the glory and truth of YHWH who made the world.

Israel had been called by God to show how things should have been.

But She had failed. Her heart had been and was now hard and opposed to YHWH.

Jesus doesn't go with their understanding...but goes back even further...

To the time of creation.

To God's original blueprint for marriage.

The whole way the Pharisees are looking at it is wrong.
They are going to the passage in Deuteronomy looking for reasons a man may legitimately put away a wife.

We shouldn't be asking the question, "For what reasons may I get a divorce?"
We should be asking the asking the question,
"How can we be in agreement with the Creator's plan for marriage?"

Jesus had asked them what Moses commanded.

They answered with what Moses permitted.

Jesus now is going to tell them what Moses commanded for Moses was the author of the whole Pentateuch!

(Mark 10:6) "But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.' (Mark 10:7) 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, (Mark 10:8) and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. (Mark 10:9) Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

Human beings we were made by the Creator a certain way.

He made them this way on purpose.

He made them as male and female, as suitable and complementary opposites.

Each was made to need the other.

Each was made to be lonely without the other.

At the right time when all is ready, the man is to leave father and mother and be joined together with his wife, becoming one flesh. This is the order of creation. And so, Jesus concludes, "What God has joined, let man not separate."

The oneness, the indivisibleness of the new unit, symbolized by their sexual union – this is an essential part of the Creator's plan for his world.

This is the plan for man and woman, the plan for family, the plan for human society and culture.

What God has joined, let not man separate, let Hillel not Separate, let Shammai not separate, let Herod and Herodius not separate, let the Pharisees not separate, and let Jesus' disciples not separate.

(Mark 10:10) When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this.

Jesus' words on marriage seem strong and severe to the disciples.

They ask, 'What do you mean Jesus?'

(Mark 10:11) He answered, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her."

Jesus' teaching here is radical.

Nowhere, under any circumstance, in rabbinic courts, was a husband said to commit adultery against his former wife.

A man could commit adultery against another man by seducing his wife (Lane). Or a woman could commit adultery against her husband by infidelity.

In either case, adultery was a wrong committed against a man.

Now not only is a man said to commit adultery against a woman, but against a divorced wife!

The divorce papers have in fact not relieved the man of marital obligation to his former wife.

Jesus is teaching that a paper divorce does not get us out from under the commandment, "Do not commit adultery."

What the civil authority may see as a divorce, God may still see as a marriage, and what the State may see as a remarriage, God may see as an adultery, since in His eyes the person is really still married.

Hard stuff to handle, I know.

Scripture does mention a number of 'exception clauses'.

In Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7

But I need to say here that Jesus is making a powerful case for the permanency of marriage.

Jesus lays down the Creator's position in no uncertain terms:

marriage is to be permanent.

What God has joined, let man not separate.

The fact that there is an exception clause should not be exploited by people.

But let's go back to the primary question of the passage.

In particular, what do Jesus' words about marriage, divorce, and remarriage say to those of us here today?

The whole thrust of the Bible is that we are to forgive as we have been forgiven.

We are adulterous in our relationship to Christ; he forgives us for that sin, restores us, and purifies us.

We too must be willing to offer similar forgiveness and restoration to our own spouses for all their sins against us, including adultery, if necessary.

We are to die to self; we are to find our satisfaction in God alone. If in the end we suffer for a while because of our trust in Christ, because we do not act as the world expects, God will redeem that suffering, and reward us, possibly in this world, certainly in the next.

Every marriage is somewhere on the continuum between as good as it can be and as bad as it can be.

Jesus and the disciples both recognized the challenges that are there in remaining faithful to one person over a lifetime in a fallen world.

And yet, faithful commitment to your husband or wife is God's will for your life.

The permanency of marriage offers the only sound structural foundation for community and society.

But it also allows for the growth and development of that kind of agape Christ-like love which God wants to bring about in our lives.

Marriage asks us to renounce ourselves and follow Jesus, to learn the way of the cross.

In marriage relationships we can learn to love as Jesus loved.

That above anything is our purpose in life.

I believe that no marriage is hopeless and no marriage is guaranteed safe and secure.

Hopeless marriages have been turned around by God's grace,
and what appeared to be good marriages crash and burn.

Marriage depends on two people continuing to work hard and make right choices.

But the command comes to us first as individuals. I am not called to love my wife to the extent that she is working hard at loving me. I am called to love her as Christ has loved me.

Some marriage relationships are things of beauty indeed. Others are fraught with trouble. Most are a mixed bag, sometimes great, sometimes really difficult, usually OK. If you are in a marriage situation that truly is difficult, turn your sorrow and frustration to God, and seek his strength.

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

Let your trouble be God's way of teaching you to love the unlovely, to give without expecting return. In this you become like your Lord Jesus.

As we often say, remember that every command implies a promise. God does not ask us to do the impossible. He makes Himself available to give strength and wisdom and

self control. He provides access to resources, to books, to video series, to other couples. So I am not saying let's be happy with mediocre marriages. We do need to work and strive to become what God intended in the beginning.

This gets us back to the heart of Jesus' teaching.

YHWH had promised that in the days of Messiah he would give a new heart to his people. This new heart would enable them to live they had been created to live as human beings. This is why Jesus goes back to Genesis when dealing with the issue of marriage.

This is one reason huge reason we are saved, to become what we were made to be in the first place. But we work and strive with a measure of wisdom and realism, always pressing forward, always growing in love, always seeking to put on Christ, and always learning to love as He has first loved us.

What about those who have divorced ?

To those, we have to say that what they have done is to sin against God and against their partner.

Pray for reconciliation.

Even if you can't imagine ever getting back together with your former husband or wife, pray that you might forgive them.

Get rid of all bitterness and anger.

Find hope and satisfaction in God, make him the desire of your heart.

If divorce is a sin, and we call it that, then we need to, in repentance, ask for forgiveness of God..

But at the same time, let me add that the sin of divorce is no different than any other sin. It is not the "unpardonable" sin.

And to make it otherwise is to sin an even greater sin, the sin of self-righteous spiritual pride. The sinner who casts himself upon Jesus in sincere repentance will find forgiveness. And we must forgive those whom God forgives. It is sad, but in some churches, you could be forgiven of murder, but not divorce.

I want you to know that God can heal and restore divorced persons and can use them in His Kingdom, not as second-class citizens, but in the same way he uses all saved sinners.

As saved sinners we are all engraved in His hands.

We are all safe in his arms.

What a comfort and blessing.