

BACK TO BASICS

Mark 10:1-12

Our culture aggressively promotes self-centeredness, but puts a shine on it by calling it “self-fulfillment”. By elevating our happiness as the highest good we are reaping the storm particularly in the most basic of our relationships – our marriages. Consider the advice from one contemporary book on marriage:

Your marriage can wear out. People change their values and lifestyles. People want to experience new things. Change is a part of life. Change and personal growth are traits for you to be proud of, indicative of a vital searching mind. You must accept the reality that in today’s multifaceted world it is especially easy for two persons to grow apart. Letting go of your marriage—if it is no longer fulfilling—can be the most successful thing you have ever done. Getting a divorce can be a positive, problem-solving, growth-oriented step. It can be a personal triumph.¹

If this is the stuff we are reading or watching on TV or being taught in school, no wonder the divorce rate in the church is so high. We need to get back to the basics of marriage as created by God.

A confrontation with a group of Pharisees provided an opportunity for Jesus to take His disciples back to the basics of God’s intent for marriage.

THE PHARISEES ATTEMPTED TO TRAP JESUS WITH A QUESTION ABOUT DIVORCE (10:1-2)

Mark 10:1-2 (ESV)

¹ And he left there and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan, and crowds gathered to him again. And again, as was his custom, he taught them. ² And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

Jesus left Capernaum and came to Perea on the east side of the Jordan. The ruler of Perea was Herod Antipas whom John the Baptist had confronted on account of his unlawful marriage to Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife (6:14-29). Machaerus, Antipas’ mountain fortress, was located in Perea and was the place where John the Baptist had most likely been imprisoned and executed.

The intention of the Pharisees may very well have been to compromise Jesus in Herod’s eyes, perhaps in hope that Herod would seize Jesus as he had John the Baptist. The Pharisees may not have been working alone; the Herodians may have been in on this attempt to trap Jesus for we know that the Pharisees and Herodians had been cooperating in an effort to destroy Him (3:6).

Mark 10:2 (ESV)

² And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

¹ John Adams and Nancy Williamson, *Divorce: How and When To Let God*, as quoted in R. Kent Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant and Savior*, vol. 2, Preaching the Word (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1989), 43.

This question was not coming from out of the blue; it reflected a heated debate centered on the interpretation of a phrase in Deuteronomy 24:1. The Pharisees (and general public) accepted that divorce was lawful, the debate was over the *grounds* for divorce.

Deuteronomy 24:1 (ESV)

¹ “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...

The debate centered on the meaning of the phrase *some indecency*. The burning question in Jesus’ day was, “What does *some indecency* mean?”

The very liberal rabbinical school of Hillel interpreted “indecent” in the widest manner possible. They said that a man could divorce his wife if she spoiled his dinner! They also extended “indecent” to mean walking about with her hair down, speaking to men on the street, or speaking disrespectfully of her husband’s parents in his presence. Rabbi Akiba, who was of this school of thought, went even farther, saying that the phrase “she finds no favor in his eyes” meant that a man could divorce his wife if he found another woman who was more beautiful!

On the other side of the debate was the conservative rabbinical school of Shammai which limited *some indecency* to inappropriate sexual conduct short of adultery. Because adultery was punished by execution, *some indecency* could not mean adultery, but could refer to sexual misconduct such as shameful exposure.

This was the social and theological context of the Pharisee’s question to Jesus by which they hoped to trap Him.

THE “ONE-FLESH” UNION OF MARRIAGE ALLOWS NO “LAWFUL” GROUNDS FOR DIVORCE (10:3-9)

Mark 10:3-4 (ESV)

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.”

Notice that Jesus sought a *command* of Moses about divorce, but all the Pharisees could give Him was a *concession*. This is the heart of the problem, the Pharisees interpreted Deuteronomy 24:1-4 as permission to divorce when, in fact, it was not permission, but a provision to limit divorce and its affect on women.

Let’s read Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 (ESV)

¹ “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, ² and if she goes and becomes another man’s wife, ³ 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, ⁴ 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.

This provision was made because men were divorcing their wives in defiant disobedience to God's design for marriage. Deuteronomy does not give permission for divorce but deals with the reality that men were divorcing their wives. Deuteronomy 24:1-4 was given to provide a degree of protection for the woman who was divorced by her husband. The bill of divorce authenticated her release from the marriage contract and affirmed her right to remarry.

Far from supporting the practice of divorce, Deuteronomy was in reality a witness to the stubborn wickedness of men's hearts in rejecting God's design for marriage.

Mark 10:5-9 (ESV)

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."

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 was necessitated by the hard heartedness of men who refuse to obey God's will. The term translated *hardness of heart* is used primarily of people's attitude towards God rather than of the way they treat each other. Jesus made clear that the intention of Deut. 24:1-4 was not to make divorce acceptable but to limit it and its consequences. Jesus makes clear that all divorce is caused by the hard heartedness of one or both of the spouses towards God and His will.

The cause of all divorce is hard-heartedness toward God.

It is the refusal of the husband to love his wife as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for her in all the myriad ways a man can violate that command that leads to divorce. It is the failure of the wife to respect and submit to her husband as the Church does to Christ that leads to divorce. Some Christians believe divorce is the sin; that God hates divorce. So they stay married believing they are obeying God's will yet they are bitter towards their spouse, unloving, disrespectful, mean, etc. God does hate divorce, but He also hates bitterness, lovelessness, disrespect – all the things that erode a marriage and slide it towards divorce.

Jesus took the Pharisees back to Genesis 1 & 2. Marriage was created by God. It is the union of a man and a woman to be "one-flesh". Though this includes the sexual union, the "one-flesh" union encompasses every aspect of the relationship. According to Jesus, God joins the two into one. When a man and woman marry there is a divinely enacted change in their being; they are no longer two, but one flesh. If God is the one who joins a man and woman into a permanent "one-flesh" union then it must always be against His will for that union to be broken. If that union is separated, it is always because of the hardness of heart of one or both spouses towards God's will.

But the human action of divorce does not in fact reverse or dissolve the one-flesh union. As Jesus said, "they are no longer two but one flesh". When we marry we are no longer two independent beings who may choose to go our own ways, but we are a single indivisible unit. Because this is so, marriage is not a contract. Because we become "one-flesh" it is not merely that we *should* not be separated; we *cannot* be

separated in the eyes of God. This is the truth that stands behind Jesus' statement to the disciples recorded in verses 10-12.

DIVORCE DOES NOT DISSOLVE THE “ONE-FLESH” UNION (10:10-12)

¹⁰ And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. ¹¹ And he said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, ¹² and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

Jewish divorce was specifically with a view to remarriage: the certificate given to the divorced wife read, ‘You are free to marry any man’. Jesus’ statements here therefore assume that remarriage will follow divorce. Remarriage results in adultery against one’s original spouse precisely because the “one-flesh” union is not dissolved by the divorce.

Since divorce cannot dissolve the “one-flesh” union into which God joins a man and woman at marriage debating “lawful grounds” for divorce is completely inappropriate. There are no “lawful” grounds; any reason given for divorce is a sinful reason – it comes from stubborn disobedience to God’s will for the marriage.

As we have throughout the Gospel of Mark, we see again that the ethics of Jesus’ kingdom is radically different than that of first century Judaism and certainly different than the world’s.

It is extremely important that we embrace Jesus’ teaching on the essence of marriage. He takes us back to the basics to understand that marriage is the joining of a man and a woman by God into a lifelong one-flesh union inseparable by anything except death.

Marriage is the joining of a man and a woman by God into a lifelong one-flesh union inseparable by anything except death.

To my unmarried brothers and sisters I would encourage you to...

- Write this definition of marriage down so that you keep a clear understanding of the nature of marriage.
- Approach marriage very seriously – certainly with joy – but with a sober mind.
- Determine now that you will date and marry only a genuine follower of Jesus (1 Cor. 7:39-40).
- Determine now that divorce will never be an option or consideration in your marriage; slam the door shut now on that issue. Only marry someone who has the same conviction.
- Before you marry, get in-depth premarital counseling from a biblical, Christ-centered counselor or pastor.
- Once married, stay plugged into a church family and build relationships with mature married couples.
- Be encouraged, God knew what He was doing when He created marriage. If you marry wisely with the right understanding of the nature of marriage, you will be richly, richly blessed. The “one-flesh” union is real and wonderful.

Jesus takes us back to the basics regarding divorce.

All divorce is the result of hard heartedness towards God and divorce does not dissolve the “one-flesh” union of the man and woman whom God has joined together in marriage.

To my divorced and remarried brothers and sisters I encourage you to receive the Word of God that Jesus is teaching us. Even though your marriage experience hasn't followed God's ideal, it won't do to say that Jesus isn't teaching us the truth about marriage or that your divorce wasn't the result of someone's hard heartedness or that to remarry is not to commit adultery against your original spouse. These things are true and we would do well to accept these truths. And if we have sinned regarding divorce and remarriage, we confess it, receive forgiveness and go forward in grace and freedom. Be the godly husband or the godly wife God calls you to be in your present marriage; God is marvelously redemptive and gracious as many of us have experienced.

In closing, as in the days of Moses so also in ours; people will divorce. Pray for your pastors and elders that God would give us wisdom to minister in the balance of truth, love and grace. Pray for our unmarried brothers and sisters that the Holy Spirit would persuade them that the teachings of Jesus are true and right and the best way to live. Pray for those in our church family experiencing difficulty in their marriages that the Spirit would minister the healing truths of Scripture to their hearts and minds and empower them to become the husbands and wives God calls them to be.