

Marriage and Divorce -- Mark 10:1-12

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Please bow your heads with me for prayer:

Lord, Your Word is living and powerful, sharper than a two-edged sword. It pierces and divides the soul from the spirit and the joints from the marrow. It discerns the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. May Your Word cut through the fog and reveal what's in our hearts. And then, may it heal, so that we can leave here completely whole. In Jesus' name, amen.

The topic of our story today is marriage and divorce. To help us understand what is taking place in this story, we are going to spend a few minutes considering divorce in first century Jewish culture. You will not find a Hebrew or Greek word equivalent to our English word "divorce". It seems that divorce is a foreign concept to God that He never intended to exist. The words used in the Bible that have been translated, "divorce", mean to "send away", "dismiss", or "cut off". Clearly the act of divorce in Jewish culture was initiated by the husband, who "sent his wife away" or "cut her off from his family". No mention is made of this practice until after the Israelites had come out of Egypt. It seems that they had picked up the practice of divorce from their pagan neighbors. And by the time the Israelites are ready to enter the Promised Land, the practice had become widespread. It had become so widespread, that, as we will see, Moses instituted a civil law in Israel putting a limit on the number of times a woman could be divorced or "cut off".

Women had very few rights in the Jewish culture. They were seen as property. A man could dispose of her whenever he saw fit. In Jesus' day all kinds of reasons for divorce had become acceptable. If a man's wife burned his food, he could legitimately divorce her. If his wife exposed her arm in public, he could rightfully send her back to her father's house as an outcast. If a man found a more attractive woman, he could cut his wife off from his family, and if she married anyone else, she was seen as an adulterer.

So, as you can see, the practice was perhaps more corrupt than it is today. This is what Jesus is confronted with in our story today.

Let's begin now with a summary:

As Jesus arrived on the eastern shore of the Jordan River near Judea, the crowds gathered around Him, and He taught them. The Pharisees came to test Him. They asked Jesus if it was permissible for a man to divorce his wife. Jesus declared that divorce had been allowed by Moses because of their hardened hearts. He further stated that God's original plan was for a husband and wife to be united in a oneness that was never to be broken. Jesus also informed His disciples that to marry someone after getting a divorce is to commit adultery.

Let's now consider what Jesus experienced in this story. It is found in Mark 10:1-12. First of all, Jesus experienced teaching near Judea. It is interesting to note that the events recorded in Mark 10:1 took place approximately six months before Jesus' death. He has been teaching and healing for about 3 years now. And He has only a half of a year left to go before He will be condemned as a criminal. Mark 10:1 is also significant as it marks the beginning of a new phase in Jesus' ministry. The word translated "people" is actually the word for "crowds". Jesus has now come out of seclusion. Mark 7:24-9:30 have pictured a time in Jesus' when He went into relative seclusion. He traveled outside Israel. He spent time alone with His disciples. He tried to stay hidden. But now we find Him welcoming the crowds as He had throughout His ministry. And, as Mark notes, He again acts according to His own custom. He ministers to large crowds of people. And primarily this involves teaching. In Luke's account of Jesus' ministry he spends a great deal of time recording what took place during this phase of Jesus' ministry. In fact, from Luke 9:51 through Luke 18:14 Luke records what is known as Jesus' Peraean ministry. Luke is the only gospel writer who gives any detailed record of this time in Jesus' ministry. Mark sums it up in one verse - Mark 10:1.

Second, Jesus experienced being tested. It's no surprise really to discover in Mark 10:2 that the Pharisees are the ones putting Jesus to the test. They have repeatedly done it before. In fact, they have been spying on Him for close to 2 years now. Jesus had been staying away from Judea, so now that He comes near their territory, they pounce quickly. Several months have passed between verse 1 and verse 2 of Mark 10. It is likely that only a few weeks remain before Jesus will be put to death. The evidence for this is seen in comparing Mark's account with Luke's account. Mark 10:13-16 records the same story as Luke 18:15-17. And, if you remember, Mark 10:1 records the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Peraea, which is also recorded in Luke 9:51 and onwards. So all the stories in Luke 9-18 take place between Mark 10:1 and Mark 10:2. For whatever reason, Mark, as well as Matthew and John, skip over about four to five months of Jesus' closing ministry in Peraea.

In Mark 10:2 the Pharisees ask Jesus if it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife. The word translated "lawful" actually means "permissible". It is not a legal term. It is dealing in the area outside the direct teaching of the law. In essence they were asking, "What do you think?" In Matthew 5:30, 31 in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus had already made His statement on divorce. Here He had declared that the only acceptable cause for a divorce is sexual immorality. In any other situation when a man sends his wife away with a certificate of divorce as a candidate for marriage to another man, he is causing his wife to commit adultery. And whoever marries her also commits adultery. Surely these strong statements would have stuck clearly in the minds of the Pharisees. But they now want Jesus to repeat His words in order to use them as evidence that Jesus was contradicting the law of Moses.

In Mark 10:3 Jesus responds to the Pharisees question with a question directed back at them – "What did Moses command you?" He holds up Moses as the authority. Jesus realized He didn't have to condemn the widespread divorce in His society. Moses, rightly understood, already did. In Mark 10:4 the Pharisees refer to Deuteronomy 24:1-4. They are the words of Moses. Let's read the passage so we can understand the law that they are referring to. (Read) Notice what word the law begins with – "When...." In other words, Moses is saying, "When this happens, here's what to do." He's not telling Jewish men to divorce their wives. They were already doing that. Neither does he tell them to stop divorcing their wives. He doesn't prescribe or condone divorce. He simply allows it. The situation describes a woman being sent away (divorced) from her husband and then going and marrying another man. At this point if the woman was sent away (divorced) by her second husband or if her second husband died, she would not be allowed to re-marry her first husband and, by implication, any other man. So, Moses' law allowed divorce, but it put limitations on it – "When this happens, here's where to draw the line." Also notice these three words used in verse four - "defiled" (or "contaminated"), "abomination" (or "something disgusting"), and "sin" (or "going astray"). This woman has been defiled as a result of being divorced. The divorce is seen by God as an abomination and a sin. It may also be helpful to note that this law in Deuteronomy 24 is a civil law. It is not a moral law.

Third, Jesus experienced defending marriage. In Mark 10:5 Jesus declares that Moses' command was God's way of setting a limit on the widespread practice of divorce at that time. God's plan for them was to experience something much better than that. Jesus then, in verses 6-8 of Mark 10, quotes from Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:24. Both of these verses describe God's plan for the human race in a perfect, newly created world. These verses, and not Deuteronomy 24, set the example. They are the pattern to follow. God made Adam and Eve male and female. They were united in a marriage relationship. Their union was so complete, they became as one. And in Mark 10:8-9 Jesus adds an imperative. "Don't let anyone separate the man and woman God has brought together. Don't you dare tear apart the marriage relationship, which God has established."

Last of all, Jesus experienced warning against adultery. Mark 10:10-12 is a later discussion. Jesus and His disciples have left the crowds and have now come to the house where they are staying. The fact that the disciples felt a need to question Jesus concerning His statement on marriage and divorce reveals that they are disturbed by what He has said. In fact, Matthew in his account makes this quite clear. In Matthew 19:10 they respond to Jesus' statement on marriage and divorce by saying, "If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry." Some of us may be feeling the same way today - "This is a hard saying! I don't know if I can live up to this." But Jesus doesn't back down. He extends His previous statement. In essence, He says, "Whoever doesn't follow God's original plan for marriage commits adultery." Adultery is repeatedly condemned

in Scripture. God specifically forbade it the 7th of the 10 commandments. And at last it is condemned in the book of Revelation (Rev. 2:22). By equating marrying a divorced man or woman with committing adultery, Jesus couldn't have been more clear in His denunciation of divorce. But notice also in Mark 10:11, 12 that Jesus puts men and women on the same ground. The standard is the same for men as it is for women.

Today's story might seem a bit harsh and even a little radical or extreme. You might feel like Jesus' words have cut you like a knife, exposing your failures and sin. But this story is about more than pointing out sin. It has been recorded so that we might be healed. The same Word of God that cuts also heals. So let's consider now how this story reveals Jesus as our Example. How does this story help us to see the healing that God wants to bring into our lives, so that we can be healthy Christians?

First of all, Jesus is our Example in that He called attention to God's original plan. Jesus lived above the norm. He didn't just follow along with the culturally acceptable practices. His life revealed a better way. He turned the focus away from what Moses allowed (divorce under certain circumstances) to God's plan for His people in a perfect world. In other words, Jesus was saying, "Moses allowed divorce because of your spiritual depravity. But this is not what God wants for you. From the beginning of creation God intended the union of marriage to never be broken." As our Savior He came to restore what had been lost. He had come to heal broken relationships. He had not only come to save us from death, but broken lives. I praise God that Jesus is a Savior who gives me hope of a better life and freedom from unhealthy relationships. And I'm glad His solution is found not in running away but in being transformed from the inside out.

And so He reveals that a healthy Christian is someone who seeks complete restoration. How often we run so we can be free from unpleasant relationships. It might be a boss or a coworker, a spouse or a church member. One day all mean people will be destroyed. When Jesus returns to take us to heaven, we will be free from all unhealthy relationships. But Jesus shows us in this story that He came to give us freedom and healthy lives today. He has the power to change people, not just circumstances. Jesus reveals that God's solution to a hurtful marriage relationship is not divorce. His solution is changing the spouses' hearts, and bringing them into complete oneness. I love the attitude Paul reveals in Philippians 3:12. (Read) Paul reveals himself as someone who is constantly striving to reach full restoration – "No, I'm not there yet. I still am not where I need to be. My way of dealing with people and problems is not always how Jesus would handle them. But I do not focus on my failures. I don't mourn all the things that are wrong in my life. I press on. I keep reaching for complete restoration.

Second of all, Jesus is revealed as our Example in this story in that He defended marriage. You can sense the passion in His voice. In Mark 10:9 He gives a convicting summary after referring to God's original pattern in Genesis - "Don't you dare separate what God has joined together!" God doesn't want anyone destroying the marriage relationship. And so Jesus reveals that a healthy and dangerous Christian is someone who defends marriage. I personally feel that the widespread divorce among God's people is just as revolting to Him as the widespread aborting of unborn babies. And yet many more people are defending the unborn today than are defending the God-ordained union of marriage. Marriage is being trampled on by atheists and Christians alike.

Some of you may have listened to the radio program, "Family Life Today". My wife, Cesilia, and I went to one of their marriage conferences, "Weekend to Remember". We were both impressed with their intentional effort to save the marriage as well as the family. In fact, at one time we actually considered joining their employed staff. They are following Jesus' example of defending marriage. One of the best books Cesilia and I have read on marriage is [DNA of Relationships for Couples](#). It takes you on a journey of four couples (their names are pseudonyms) who attend an Intensive program hosted by the National Institute of Marriage. All four couples have come to the program as one last attempt to save their marriage. And the authors, Greg Smalley and Robert Paul, work with all of their might defending marriage, following Jesus' example. As a result every couple chooses to stay together. The book is in a story format, so it is very engaging and keeps your attention. But every year the National Institute of Marriage helps save hundreds of marriages.

Some of us may have to start with working to save our own marriage. Others of us might be able to work together as husband and wife to save other people's marriages. Even if you are single, you can still follow

Jesus' example in defending marriage. Today our country is being swept by a movement to redefine marriage as any two people who want to live together, including men with men and women with women. The male and female marriage relationship God created in the beginning of Creation is under fire. Let us do all we can to defend marriage.

Often the subject of marriage and divorce awakens feelings of pain and disappointment. Many of us are made aware of our failures. For those of us who are struggling in this area of our lives, let me say this. Before we do anything else, we first need to experience a healthy marriage with God. You may not have thought of yourself as being married to God but the Bible repeatedly uses marriage to describe our relationship with God. In closing I invite you to turn with me to Jeremiah 3:8, 14. (Read) The story of God choosing to marry unworthy and unfaithful Israel is a sad story. As God's wife not only did Israel give herself to other gods but she even became violent to the point of crucifying the Son of God. Even after the divorce papers were certified, God still called to Israel, "Return to Me. And I will bring you to Zion, our home." We find in the book of Revelation God is still calling. In Revelation 3:20 He says, "Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with me."

How is your marriage with God? Does He have all of your heart? Today I would like to have a special prayer for the relationships in your life that need God's healing and life-changing power. Maybe the relationship that needs the most attention right now is your marriage with the Lord. Maybe it's the relationship with your spouse. Whatever your unique situation and needs may be today, I invite you to come forward as we sing our closing hymn.