

Discipleship and Divorce

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I think I've performed something like 30 weddings at this point in my career. And, Natalie and I have done the premarital counseling for most of those weddings, which is a real honor. You're invited to sit across from a young couple who's excited about being in love and getting married. They share all their hopes and their dreams for the future with you. And, you smile at them and nod as they share all these things and you listen intently to them. Then, after they've finished, you proceed to tell them how marriage is a lot of work and entails huge sacrifices and is really, really difficult in many, many ways. That's what you do.

I know that sounds like the antithesis of good marriage counseling but it's not. Being married is hard work. That's why between 40 and 50 percent of marriages end in divorce in the United States.¹ Sharing your life with another sinner is never easy. And, it never has been easy—as we'll see in today's passage of Scripture.

Mark 10:1-12

Jesus then left that place and went into the region of Judea and across the Jordan. Again crowds of people came to him, and as was his custom, he taught them.

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

³"What did Moses command you?" he replied.

⁴They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away."

⁵"It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied. ⁶"But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.'⁷ 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife,⁸ and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh.⁹ Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

¹⁰When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. ¹¹He answered, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman

¹ See [this](#) article from the American Psychological Association.

commits adultery against her. ¹² And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.”

Introductory Comments

For many, the topic of marriage and divorce can be an especially sensitive one because it’s personal. Some here are divorced; others have parents who are divorced; and, almost all of us have friends or family who are divorced.

Since this is the case, it’s important for me to say that what I preach here today isn’t meant to rub salt into anyone’s wounds. I speak as a sinner; I speak as someone who falls short in my own marriage time and time again. I also, however, must speak as one who is trying to accurately explain what Jesus is teaching concerning marriage and divorce. So, it’s my hope and prayer (as always) that you will hear Jesus’s voice during this time because only what he thinks about these things truly matters.

Furthermore, if you are divorced, let me stress the grace and love of our Lord. Jesus loves you. Christ calls you into his service. I think particularly of the woman whom Jesus meets at the well (John 4) when I say this. She had had five husbands and was in the midst of another adulterous affair when she first encounters Jesus. Nonetheless, Jesus transforms her life—even using her as an evangelist in her town, even using her, perhaps, to call some ex-husbands to faith.

Friends, only Jesus is the good news. Only Jesus is the gospel. He’s the Savior for those who are married and those who are divorced. No one will enter the kingdom of heaven by having a successful marriage—but only through faith in Christ Jesus and by the grace of God (Ephesians 2:8).

Well, without further comment, let’s begin digging into Jesus’s teaching here. What is God’s intention for marriage in the lives of his people? In order to find out, we’re going to ask 3 questions: (1st) How do the Pharisees see marriage and divorce? (2nd) How does Jesus see marriage and divorce? (3rd) How should we see marriage and divorce? By answering these questions, we’ll begin to unpack this hard teaching from Jesus concerning these things.

Let’s begin with these trickster Pharisees.

1. How do they see marriage and divorce?

Now, I call them tricksters because that's what they are. The Pharisees come to see if they can trip Jesus up. Their question is a trap. Look at it again.

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

A couple of things are important to notice. **First**, this test or trick of a question from the Pharisees likely indicates that they know Jesus will have "extreme" views on the question of divorce. They are probably hoping that he will condemn divorce like his cousin, John the Baptist, had already done.

You see, this little question on divorce takes place in Herod Antipas's domain. The same Herod who had already arrested and eventually executed John the Baptist for condemning his divorce and remarriage to Herodias—his brother Philip's wife. So, that's the trick. They hope Jesus will do precisely what John had previously done and condemn divorce publicly. They want Antipas to hear about it and to arrest him. These Pharisees want Jesus out of the way.

Second, note that even if Jesus doesn't get into hot-water with Herod Antipas, he will likely say things that are off-putting to the crowds. Now, why do I say that? Well, I say it because this wasn't really a debated question in Jewish religious circles. Most everyone agreed that divorce was permissible. The real question or real debate concerned the grounds on which a man could obtain a divorce.²

- Could he get a divorce only for adultery?
- Or, could he get a divorce for almost any reason?

You see, if Jesus holds a more radical view on marriage and divorce than one of these two views, then he's going to push against the public orthodoxy of his day. He's going to upset the masses. So, even if Herod leaves Jesus alone, this question will likely cause him to lose face with the public. That's what the Pharisees are after. Their strategy is something akin to asking a Christian his or her views on sexuality in casual conversation today; it's a way to quickly marginalize us. So too, these men want to push Jesus to the margins. They want to make him seem backwards.

² F. F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, 57.

But, that's just their motive. What about their view? What do we find out here about their thinking on marriage and divorce? Well, it seems their primarily focused upon the negative question—*When can a man legally justify and obtain a divorce?*—rather than the positive question—*How can he honor God in his marriage?*

In this way, I would suggest the Pharisees viewed both marriage and divorce as merely legal subjects. They're like lawyers who are specializing in divorce law; they're interested in knowing how to manipulate the boundary lines of the institution of marriage—to know the loopholes in wedlock. They're aiming to be legal surgeons who are able to slice God's one flesh union in half.

There is no care for people. There is no compassion in their question.

Friends, be careful with God's laws. We can so easily use them like this today. We can use them to batter and break people. Jesus has his harshest rebukes for those who use the law like that. Be careful. Be humble. Be gracious.

Let's turn now to Jesus's views.

2. How does Jesus see marriage and divorce?

Well, his view is nothing like the view of these Pharisees. Jesus sees divorce as a product of human sin. He sees it as a concession for hard hearts. Look at the text with me again. Why is there divorce? Jesus explains why.

It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law (v. 5).

You know, there are instances when I have to separate my kids. Maybe two or three or five of them are fighting. So first, I counsel them to be kind to each other. If that doesn't work, I command them to get along. And, if that doesn't work either, I have to separate them. I tell them that they're not allowed to play with or even talk to one another. Now, this isn't ideal. It's not what I want my children's relationship to be like. But, it *is* better than the explosive, sinful alternative.

Jesus explains that divorce emerged in a similar fashion. It's not God's design for marriage. But, because of our sinful hearts, the Lord allowed this law to be issued by Moses. It's a concession for fallen, hard-hearted people like us.

Next, however, Jesus does something really helpful. He shows us how to read and interpret our Bibles. He shows us how we must interpret Scripture in relationship

to Scripture. *How so?* Well, he takes the passage about divorce which the Pharisees are quoting here (Deuteronomy 24:1-3) and brings it into dialogue with another text which God inspired Moses to record (Genesis 1:27). This is the creation of marriage. This text in Genesis pictures God's original intention for marriage. Jesus is saying—*You need to think more deeply about the goal of marriage.* Look at his answer.

...at the beginning of creation God “made them male and female. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate (vv. 6-9).

So, while the Pharisees are focused on how to exit marriage, Jesus is focused on its design—on the goal of marriage, on its purpose. He points out that it was made for God. It was originally created so that man and woman could reflect God's image as a one flesh unity.

You see, the Pharisees had begun to view marriage as primarily about them. At best, they viewed it as a way for men and women to obtain benefit and pleasure. Yet, at worst, they saw it as a way for men to experience these things at the expense of women. In either view, the focus is primarily on what human beings will receive from the marriage arrangement. To this, Jesus says: *No!* He reminds us that marriage was created by God for God. This is precisely the key truth. Marriage is not primarily for our pleasure (though it is pleasurable). Marriage is rather primarily for the glory of its Creator. It's for the glory of God. The Bible tells us this.

For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him (Colossians 1:16).

Or:

...whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Or:

If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 4:11).

Certainly the “all things” and the “all” in these texts include our marriages. Marriage was created by the Son of God and for the Son of God. It’s for his glory. Therefore, as long as we treat marriage as if it’s primarily for us, it’ll disappoint us. Marriage won’t be a blessing but a curse or an idol that fails us.

Friends, don’t buy the romantic idolatry. Marriage is good and even very good but only if it’s primarily a way in which you serve and worship the Lord.

Today we often make marriage mean whatever it is we think it should mean. This, consequently, creates relationships which are supposed to serve our purposes; and, not surprisingly, whenever they don’t serve us, we dissolve them. To all of this, Jesus says: *No!* He says no to any self-centered view of marriage.

3. How should we see marriage and divorce?

Let me say, as your pastor, that I think there are times in this fallen-world life when divorce is unfortunately necessary. I don’t, however, come to this conclusion on the basis of my own wisdom or discernment. I come to it on the basis of Scripture and what it says. It is our final authority and guide in life. And, what it tells us clearly is that, while there are times when divorce is permissible, it should be our last resort. As Christians, we should always struggle and work to preserve the one-flesh union which God created in us and our spouse.

But why? Well, as I’ve already mentioned, we do so because we’re the Lord’s. We were created for his glory and praise, and this obviously includes our marriages. Marriage is a central way to reflect God’s image—the oneness of husband and wife in love and in service and in mission. This unity is supposed to preach profoundly, to the unbelieving world around us, about our triune God.

Friends, how could Jesus’s prayer for unity amongst us—unity that’s designed to testify of his divine unity with the Father—not include unity in the most intimate of relationships, that of Christian marriage (John 17)?

Friends, your marriage is meant to testify. People are to see something of God in our marriages. They’re meant to preach gospel to the world. Now, how this works is a mystery. The way God uses this institution for his glory is not easy to pin-down. Yet, there’s no denying that this is the case. God tells us it is thru the apostle Paul. In the Holy Spirit, Paul tells us this concerning marriage.

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:31-32).

How did Christ love the church? He did so sacrificially. He did so generously. He did so faithfully. Christ loved the church to love his heavenly Father.

Friends, view your marriage as Christ views his bride, the church.