

Jesus on Marriage -Mark 10:1-12

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November 26, 2023

[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions, please get in touch with Pastor Derek at dberry@calvarybaptistsc.church.]

Take your copy of God's Word and meet me in Mark 10:1...

We live in an age of redefinitions. Everyone is redefining concepts commonly known and understood by the masses for ages. Some redefinitions are innocuous and have little impact on society; others can cause drastic cultural shifts. For example, terms like racism and intolerance have been redefined and narrowed to include a particular type of people. The concept of social justice has now taken on new meaning by being significantly broadened. And, of course, in our culture, by and large, marriage is being redefined right before our eyes.

In one sense, the redefinition has always been there, as people for the longest defined marriage simply as a tool for happiness; therefore, if things aren't going as planned, there's always divorce as the exit route. That, of course, is problematic and goes against the clear teaching of Scripture. Nowadays, we're finding an even more extreme redefining of marriage where it's no longer one man, one woman, but man and man and vice versa. The Bible is not silent on the issue of marriage. The Lord Jesus is not silent on the issue of marriage. In our text this morning, he explicitly pushes back against many cultural norms of both his day and ours to explain the meaning and purpose of marriage. We'll consider this text by considering five questions:

1. What matter of man is this?
2. Why do they ask this question?
3. Why was divorce permitted?
4. What is marriage and its purpose?
5. Why does God hate divorce?

Within these questions, we'll also consider sub-questions as well. So, let's start with the first. Once again, Jesus' authority is displayed for his disciples and the crowds to witness. As I've said from the beginning of this series, the gospel of Mark presents us

with a very view of the Lord Jesus. Once again, we find his magnetic personality drawing crowds unto himself. Many want to hear from this man who appears to be more than merely another rabbi. And they'd be correct because he's so much more. This is seen in this passage, where his unique authority is not presented in a miracle or exorcism but rather by his authoritative teaching of the Scriptures. Notice that it's his teaching provides the definite word on the Scriptures. One would expect in his day that the climax of a rabbi's teaching would be the quotation of the Law and what it teaches on a subject. However, in the case of the Lord Jesus, the climax of the teaching is his personal pronouncement of what he claims the Law teaches in 10:9, 11-12. This isn't merely a logical deduction from the Scriptures but a declaration of the will of God concerning Scripture. This leads us to ask, "Who is this man teaching? He teaches, unlike the scribes and rabbis of our day." That's because this is God himself teaching the people. Therefore, we shall listen to him. What God has to say regarding marriage is final because he's the creator of it. Sports have rules attached to them. The competitors must abide by the rules in basketball, football, and boxing. In the same way, we look to God and what he has to say regarding marriage and divorce because he's the creator who has the final and ultimate authority on the matter. With that said, let's reread verse 2 and consider the second question, "Why do they ask this question?"

Jesus' day was not unlike ours in that divorce was common. And there wasn't a universal consensus regarding the valid grounds for divorce. Jewish rabbis would frequently debate this topic. The Mishnah, Jewish writings compiled in the third century, contains the different rabbinic positions on this issue. For instance, one school of thought stressed that there had to be unchastity found in a wife for a man to be justified in divorcing his wife. Another school of thought taught that if a woman spilled a dish, her husband was justified in divorcing. And interestingly enough, both schools used the same text, Deut. 24:1 to prove their point. And just for context, let me read that passage.

"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...-Deut 24:1

So, some held a man could divorce his wife for any reason, while others were more restrictive. These Pharisees are looking to draw Jesus into their debate. So that's the context behind this question. Let's continue reading verses 3-5 to answer the question, "Why was divorce permitted?"

In verse 5, Jesus answers the question very simply, “Because of your hardness of heart.” Before the fall of humanity, there was no such thing as the hardness of heart; therefore, there wasn’t a need for laws to deal with theft, slavery, and divorce. What Jesus sees in his day, and what we see in ours, is the effects of sin. Every distortion we see or come in contact with can be traced back to Genesis 3. We’ll never grasp the remedy until we understand the origin of every deformation and evil in our world. Ever since Adam sinned, and we, being in Adam, also sinned, God has graciously met sinful humanity where they are. The laws of social order written to OT Israel were meant to restrain sin and its effects.

To use another sports analogy, think of the game of basketball. Fouling is not meant to be a part of the game. In a perfect basketball game, there would be no fouling. However, when the rules were created, they kept in mind that we don’t live in an ideal world. There are dirty players, and there are unintentional fouls as well. So, although we don’t wish for any fouls, we need to create parameters to deter individuals from fouling and make it so that basketball doesn’t transform into boxing.

Similarly, sinful men and women will break the marriage covenant, although this was never the design, as Jesus will explain later; therefore, regulations for divorce and remarriage are given to minimize the harmful effects on the innocent parties. In his work, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, John Frame provides helpful commentary on this subject matter.

“God determined that a prohibition of all divorce would be, for fallen people, unbearable, and therefore counterproductive for good social order. Sin would certainly lead to divorce; the law could not be expected to prevent that. The best thing that the law could accomplish would be to regulate divorce to mitigate its oppressiveness and maintain the rights of those cast aside.”

Another good example of tolerating and regulating a practice due to the sinfulness of humanity is slavery. God could have outlawed this practice entirely, but he instead placed parameters around it to limit the effects of this evil. Owning another human clearly goes against God’s original design. However, God is for the broken-hearted and oppressed, so he ensures that these practices won’t lead to extreme cruelty among his people. Certain aspects are outlawed and punishable by death, such as man-stealing.

Another good example of this is polygamy within the Old Testament. We’ve already read verse 6 and will consider it in detail momentarily, so we know that God’s original design has always been one man and one woman in marriage. Polygamy in the OT never has favorable outcomes. This is the author’s way of indirectly showing us the error of this

practice. However, it was tolerated for a time to ensure the rights of each wife were safeguarded, especially a first wife when another younger and more fertile woman was added.

¹⁰ If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights. -Exodus 21:10

And you also have to remember how dependent women were on men financially during the times of OT Israel. Now, like slavery, there were times when polygamy was explicitly outlawed.

¹⁸ And you shall not take a woman as a rival wife to her sister, uncovering her nakedness while her sister is still alive. -Lev 18:18

¹⁷ And he shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away, nor shall he acquire for himself excessive silver and gold. -Deut 17:17

So, like divorce and slavery, although the Lord chose to tolerate it for a time, he never sanctioned it because it wasn't a part of his design for marriage. Continuing to answer the question, "Why does God permit divorce?" Divorce, in certain instances, protects the rights of the innocent. In the case of a wife sent away by her husband in Deut 24, the certificate of divorce avoids marital limbo but allows her to remarry another man, thereby avoiding possible poverty and shame. And the NT provisions for divorce do something similar, but we'll save that for later. So, Jesus answers the question, "Why does God permit divorce." Let's reread verses 6-8 and answer our fourth question this morning, "What is marriage and its purpose?"

In verse 6, God answers a question that probably wouldn't have come up in previous generations. However, it's impossible not to address this issue in our current culture. By quoting this OT text, the Lord Jesus identifies a race of people, humans, who are two different kinds, male and female. That's it. Based on God, who wrote the script and the rules, only two genders or sexes exist. And it's God who assigns them. Therefore, we're not authorized to change what God has given. And what of marriage? You have some who claim that the point of marriage is two consenting adults coming together to sacrifice and love one another; therefore, this can happen within a homosexual relationship. The problem is you run into this seminal text regarding marriage.

God has communicated his design; anything outside of this doesn't constitute marriage. Two men cannot be married. Two women cannot be married. A man and an animal cannot be married. A man or a woman cannot marry themselves. Marriage only exists

between one man and one woman. Out of all the truths in the Scriptures, this one will most likely lead to persecution in the West today. However, we must stand on the truth of God's Word that doesn't change based on the cultural waves.

So, what is marriage? If it's merely a societal invention, then people are free to redefine the marriage contract to meet their evolving needs. Tim Keller points out that a significant shift began over a century ago as people began to think of marriage from the standpoint of personal fulfillment, with little concern for duty or the benefits of a stable marriage to the community. This approach has led to much of what we see today, including skyrocketing divorce rates. The idea that marriage is a contract established by humankind is a lie. I like Jim Newheiser's definition, "Marriage is a lifelong covenant of companionship between a man and woman that has been established under God and before the community." It's a covenantal relationship, which is why God rebukes the men abandoning their wives through the prophet Malachi as those who dealt treacherously with the wives by covenant. Kostenberger defines marriage as "a sacred bond between a man and a woman instituted by and publicly entered into before God (whether or not this is acknowledged by the married couple), normally consummated by sexual intercourse." That's another excellent definition.

I mentioned that marriage is covenantal. There are several implications to that fact. A biblical covenant involves mutual obligations, promises of blessing upon fulfillment, and consequences for breaking the covenant. Marriage is under God. It's not merely a contract between two people. He's the third party who joins these two together as one. Marriage is for companionship. God states, "It is not good for the man to be alone." Therefore, he makes him a helper. Before this point, everything was declared "good," so this should be a striking statement to us in Genesis. No other creature paraded before Adam was a suitable mate and companion for him. The unique and intimate aspect of the marriage relationship is encapsulated in verses 7-8. God's design is for the husband and wife to walk together as lifelong best friends.

Marriage authorizes sexual intimacy. This is a part of the oneness we find in verse 8. God intends for sexual intimacy to take place exclusively between a man and woman who have entered into the marriage covenant together. And look what happens when we jettison God's word—broken hearts, a multitude of diseases, homes devoid of fathers, and the slaughter of innocent babies who didn't ask to be placed in that predicament. God's laws are meant to cause human flourishing. Therefore, death is evident when we fail to follow the God of the bible. Lastly, marriage is for life. We see that in verse 9. It's designed to last until death parts the husband and wife. Paul makes this point in Romans.

² For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. -Romans 7:2

So, marriage is covenantal, it's under God, it's for companionship, it authorizes sexual intimacy, and it's for life.

So, let's get to our last question, "Why does God hate divorce?" Again, we will also answer other questions under this umbrella. Let's reread verses 9-11.

Here are five reasons why God hates divorce. First, it breaks a covenant made before God. Consider what Malachi reminds the Jewish men who were possibly divorcing their wives for pagan women.

¹⁴ But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. -Malachi 2:14

Our God is a God of covenants! That's how he relates to his people. He made a covenant with Adam, Noah, Abraham, David, etc. Therefore, the breaking of a covenant is heinous in his eyes. And since we've already established that marriage is under God, a willful breach of the marital covenant is a sin against God himself.

Second, it fails to reflect the covenant relationship between Christ and his Church. Paul reveals in Ephesians 5 that marriage is meant to image the relationship between Jesus' sacrificial covenant love for his bride and the church's honor and respect for her savior. Divorce completely distorts this picture.

Third, divorce harms the innocent spouse. God is a protector of the innocent and weak; therefore, he hates divorce because it hurts the spouse who sought to keep their side of the marriage covenant. Again, the book of Malachi is evidence of this.

Fourth, it harms the children that may be involved. Even secular sociologists admit that there can be devastating effects of divorce. When professing Christians divorce for unbiblical reasons, children are provided with a terrible example, and it may signify that the gospel wasn't enough to solve their family's problems.

Fifth and lastly, divorce harms the community. The lack of a nuclear family can have destructive effects on the wider community. We've witnessed that a society that lacks stable marriages will deteriorate over time.

So, divorce breaks a covenant made before God, it fails to reflect the covenant relationship between Christ and his church, it harms the innocent spouse, it harms the children, and it hurts the community. Therefore, God hates divorce. Now, are there valid grounds for divorce? I would argue that there are. In other words, all divorces happen because of sin, but not all are sinful. To be clear, there are men who I love and respect who would disagree. Men like John Piper and James Montgomery Boice hold the permanence view. Many in this view would argue that remarriage is prohibited in all cases except for when a spouse dies. To be fair, I think this view has a stronger argument than many give it credit for. It's not strong enough to convince me, but I see it as a valid view. They would point out that Mark doesn't record the exception clause in this text as evidence for the permanence view. They also claim that the exception is recorded in Matthew only because it's trying to clarify what Joseph was doing in "divorcing" his wife during the betrothal period. But I think we have good reason to believe that there are two valid grounds in Scripture for divorce and, therefore, two valid grounds for remarriage, apart from the death of a spouse.

First, the marriage covenant is not unbreakable, as some would assert. Jesus doesn't state that no man can separate what God has joined. Instead, he teaches that it shouldn't happen. In verses 11-12, Jesus refers to these individuals as being truly divorced and truly remarried. So they're no longer married to their former spouses. If you read Deut 24:1-4, you'll see that the man who asked for a divorce couldn't remarry his ex-spouse. But if people were still "married in God's eyes" or "one flesh" after divorce, why was the woman forbidden to remarry the man who divorced her?

Second, and what is probably the most robust case for this, the Lord himself is divorced! And it's due to a breach of the covenant.

⁸ She saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce. Yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but she too went and played the whore. -Jeremiah 3:8

So here we see the same twofold pattern of valid human divorce. The guilty party was guilty of covenant-breaking acts (adultery), and the innocent party chose to use those grounds to formalize the termination of the marriage. This leads to the exception clause that Jesus mentions in Matthew. Perhaps the audience dictated why it wasn't mentioned here in Mark. Plus, general rules can have exceptions that are stated elsewhere. To be clear, Jesus does teach divorce and remarriage as ordinarily adulterous and sinful. However, consider Matthew 5:32.

³² But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. -Matthew 5:32

So he affirms that there is one sin that so seriously violates the “one-flesh” principle underlying marriage that it gives the innocent party grounds to divorce. However, this doesn’t necessitate a divorce. Also, Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 7 heavily emphasizes remaining married. He even commands believers to stay married to nonbelievers, which may have been a debated question considering the book of Ezra. However, once again, there’s an exception.

¹⁵ But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. -1 Corinthians 7:15

So, following the teaching of Jesus, Paul expresses that if the unbelieving spouse breaks the marriage covenant in this manner, the believing spouse is free to divorce. The same Greek word for separate here is used in Mark 10:9, signifying divorce. Well, what of remarriage in these cases? We’ve already seen that divorce and remarriage are ordinarily sinful. However, I believe in these two instances, remarriage is permitted. Put very simply by John MacArthur, “Simply stated, when divorce is permitted, remarriage is permitted; where divorce is forbidden, remarriage is forbidden.” And I think that’s correct.

Here's one thing to consider. In the Old Covenant, the consequence of adultery was death, according to Lev 20:10. So in the Old Covenant, the innocent party was clearly free to remarry because their spouse was dead. Well, in the New Covenant, we’re not in a theocracy, so there’s no capital punishment for adultery. However, I don’t think the principle changes. The Westminster Confession of Faith alludes to this reasoning that the innocent party is free to remarry “as if the offending party were dead.”

I think the same goes for the believers who are abandoned by their unbelieving spouse, which is why Paul says they are not enslaved or in bondage.

In closing, our ethics on this issue will place us in hot water as Christians. However, it is an apologetic to a lost world of the beauty of the gospel. So, let us protect and guard the gospel well by living in light of God’s commands regarding marriage within our local church.

Let’s pray.