

Title: The Book of Mark: Part 27, Divorce and its Difficulty.

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Passage: Mark 10:1-12

Big idea: Jesus holds a high view of the Scriptures, and so should we.



In this passage of Mark, we are going to be dealing with one of the most heart-wrenching issues that people face today. The issue of divorce.

Now that we are all massively uncomfortable. I want to ensure that you understand where we are, why we are talking about this, and how I am going to approach it.

Here are the rules of our sermon content today:

1. Divorce is always painful, difficult, complicated, and never the ideal.
2. I cannot in any length of time deal with all the difficulties of divorce, especially not in a 35-minute sermon on a Sunday morning.
3. I will be taking a high-level view, and share biblical principles about marriage, divorce, and remarriage, but cannot get into the weeds of any of this.
4. I know that for some of you this is your story. Whether you come from a childhood or home of divorced parents, or you are divorced, I am not looking to shame or chastise you. However, if you are convicted rightly by God's Word, please get wise counsel, pastoral help, and repent of wrongdoing.
5. If your marriage is struggling, please invite your pastors and elders in to help you, and engage a Christian marriage counselor for help and perspective. Counseling is not a sign of weakness; it is an opportunity for strength.

<sup>1</sup>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. <sup>2</sup>Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" <sup>3</sup>"What did Moses command you?" he replied. <sup>4</sup>They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away." <sup>5</sup>"It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied. <sup>6</sup>"But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.' <sup>7</sup>'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, <sup>8</sup>and the two will become one flesh.' So, they are no longer two, but one. <sup>9</sup>Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." <sup>10</sup>When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. <sup>11</sup>He answered, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. <sup>12</sup>And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery."

Mark 10:1-12

So, while we will be dealing with divorce as its regulated in the Bible, today's Big Idea is actually not about divorce, it is much bigger than that.

## BIG IDEA

Jesus holds a **high view of Scripture**, and so should we, because it is for our good and flourishing.



You may have heard statistics about marriage in North America based on a survey done in 2008 by the National Marriage Institute, that postulated that marriages of every persuasion are 50% likely to end in divorce.

This has been hotly debated over the years, and new research actually shows something very different. The issue with the initial data was that Christian marriages were seen as an umbrella category. The category of “Christian” could mean that you were nominally Christian, family history was Christian, or that you were part of any “sect” or any branch that would hold its roots in Christendom.

The “Christian” category included people who profess a belief system but do not live a committed lifestyle. However, for those who were active in their church, the divorce rate was 27-50% lower than for non-churchgoers. Nominal Christians (those who simply call themselves “Christians” but do not actively engage with the faith) are actually 20% more likely than the general population to get divorced.

However, what the statistics show about practicing, Gospel centered, Christians, who are connected to a church community, and invested in deep accountable community, is actually much different. Dr. Brad Wilcox, director of the National Marriage Project, states that “active conservative protestants who attend church regularly are actually 35% less likely to divorce than those who have no religious preferences”.

So, while being a Christian obviously does not completely combat divorce rates in our world, a biblical commitment to the Word of God, actually does deeply affect and change our marriage realities.

Mark 10:1, “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.”

Jesus and the disciples were at Capernaum and were now coming into Judea nearer to Jerusalem. Again, crowds gathered around Jesus to hear him teach, and as was his custom, he taught them many things.

Mark 10:2, “Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’”

The Pharisees came to Jesus, and Mark records for us, in order to test Jesus by bringing up the issue of divorce.

They were testing Jesus based on the two thoughts about divorce in the Jewish Pharisaical schools.

1. Rabbi Shammai
  - This was the more conservative school of thinking, that made no allowances for divorce outside of sexual infidelity.
2. Rabbi Hillel
  - This was the more liberal school of thinking and allowed for a man to write a ticket of divorce to his wife for any reason that he felt he wanted to.

It is important to note that neither of these schools of thinking were advocating for divorce, but that they had different ways of accepting the reasons a man may divorce his wife.

This issue comes from Deuteronomy in the Law of Moses or the Pentateuch, the 5th book of the Old Testament.

The issue here is less about their request for information, and more so to do with the test that they have for him.

The issue of the day for the Pharisees, was that they did not like Jesus. He had been disrupting their traditions, their views, their followers, and most importantly to them, the power they held over the Jews as their religious leaders.

Now, we know someone else who had been disrupting the Pharisees previous to Jesus - John the Baptist.

John the Baptist had gone to Herod the Tetrarch the “king” of Israel, or governor, because of an unlawful thing that was happening. Herod had married his brother’s wife, Herodias.

Herodias eventually manages to have John beheaded, through manipulating Herod through her daughter.

Herod was doing something so heinous and immoral, that John the Baptist could not stand by, and allow for it to take place.

How were the Pharisees testing Jesus?

1. If Jesus agrees with Hillel, then he is a liberal who does not hold to the teachings of the law and is therefore a false teacher of God’s law (in their mind).
2. If Jesus agrees with Shammai, he is now lumped in with John the Baptist, and maybe they could get Herod to kill Jesus in the same way. That Jesus is disapproving of Herod and his families’ actions, calling into question their “kings” rule.

This trap was actually quite well thought out, and had very little to do with the scriptures, as we shall see, and far more to do with getting rid of any rival of the Pharisees.

Mark 10:3-4, “What did Moses command you?” he replied. They said, ‘Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.’”

Jesus then masterfully asks them what the Law actually said.

Jesus does this to show them he is not interested in playing their games and knows exactly why they are trying to trap him.

Now this is an important time for us to stop and understand what the Bible says about divorce.

I want it understood:

1. I cannot fully communicate all that the Bible teaches or all that needs to be said about divorce in a 35-minute Sunday sermon.
2. I cannot give any definitive answer about divorce for anyone outside of slowly walking with and through the pain and difficulty of what has led someone to need a divorce.
3. God’s intention is never for divorce. It is not commanded in the Bible at any place, but it is regulated by God for the benefit of women in particular, but mainly for the protection of the innocent party, if there is one.

Moses “permitted”, some translations say “allow”, so even to the Jewish teachers of the law divorce was not something God commanded, but something that God had regulated. And the issue was their interpretation of those regulations, causing the rift between Shammai and Hillel.

The things that are clear:

1. It is regulated.
2. You cannot just toss someone aside and then marry another without legal action taking place, to actually dissolve the marriage, and allow for the woman being given the certificate of divorce to go on her way and marry another. Men were not to keep their “displeasing wives” hostage.
3. Divorce must be done with intention.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4, “If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD. Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.”

The issue that was being discussed between the conservative and liberal views of divorce all settled around one part of this passage. What does it mean for a woman to be displeasing, and indecent?

The liberal (Hillel) view was to say that a man could divorce his wife because she burnt the toast, or she made his white shirt pink by washing it with a red sock. The conservative view was the correct view, in that displeasing and indecent speaks about an issue of infidelity.

Indecent actually means nakedness. This would be a strong correlation to something akin to, if not, adultery.

So here the Pharisees were arguing over whether or not to view this “decree” or regulation from God as a scapegoat to get out of a marriage, or a real reason, primarily and only due to sexual infidelity.

The punishment for adultery was death by stoning, and so this divorce clause that God gives in Deuteronomy is actually protective and gracious to guilty parties.

You can see why they believed this to be a great trap for Jesus.

But Jesus is going to respond to them, in a very Jesus like way.

Mark 10:5, “It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,” Jesus replied.”

It was because of the hardness of your hearts, God allowed for this regulation to be in place, because divorce among God’s people is never to be desirable.

Notice the wording here. “Your hearts”, not ‘their hearts’. Not the hearts of those in the past, not the hearts of the wayward Israelites as they are given the law in the Old Testament; but now, your hearts, human hearts, because our hearts are hard, and our hearts are evil. Because our hearts lead us to sin, Moses allowed this.

Now Jesus is going to get to the heart of the matter. He does not just let that idea stand, instead Jesus takes them back to the beginning, before the concession of the Law, before the regulation of divorce, to how God intended it to be, when our hearts were not hardened by our sin.

Mark 10:6-8, “But 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.”

Jesus affirms God’s design for human identity and flourishing. Male and female, both made in God’s image and likeness.

A man will leave his father and mother, and be united, or cleave, to his wife. The two different entities will become one entity. They are one flesh consummated by the sexual union.

Mark 10:9, “Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”

Jesus says that this marriage act is God’s act, it is not a human construction. In very simple terms, this is why humans cannot just make up their own versions, or invent new ways of doing marriage, and family. It is only God’s good will and design.

This issue of ‘separate’ is huge because this truly is the divorce issue. Let no man, make a mockery of what God has designed for the union of marriage between a man and woman.

This all takes place in Genesis before sin enters human hearts, before our hearts are hardened by sin and against God.

So, Jesus qualifies that divorce is only even regulated, because humans’ hearts are marred by sin.

I want to say it this way as clearly as I can. It is always sin that leads to divorce.

Now, what is interesting here in Mark's Gospel is that Jesus does not say anything further to the Pharisees, or at least Mark does not include anything more.

Mark 10:10-12, "When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. He answered, 'Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.'"

Jesus expresses a high view of marriage, by the consequences of divorce. If you divorce your wife, for the reasons Hillel teaches about, you commit adultery. The same is true whether it be a man or a woman.

In Mark's Gospel this is all we get.

A few ground rules and statements need to be laid out here in regard to how to apply this teaching.

1. I cannot explain each and every situation in regard to this topic in 35 minutes and it would be irresponsible for me to try.
2. The things that I'll give are generalities and cannot include extenuating or deeply personal realities.
3. Where the Bible is clear, we must accept and submit ourselves to its clear teaching and commands in obedience.
4. Where the Bible is unclear, we must be gracious and submit ourselves to local Pastors and Elders in authority over us.

## **BIBLICAL MARRIAGE & DIVORCE PRINCIPLES**

### **Marriage is God's good and perfect general design for humanity.**

(Genesis 1:27, 2:24, Mark 10:6-8)

- Marriage is God's design for human sexuality, procreation, and is the basis of every society in the world.
- Marriage is covenantal, and men and women are to cleave to one another and exclude all others.
- Marriage is not just a sexual union where the two become one flesh, but also a companionship union, in which each party forsakes all others and gives themselves fully to their spouse for companionship and unique friendship.

### **Singleness is not only good, it can be preferred.**

(1 Corinthians 7:25-38)

- Singleness is seen largely in our Christian society as a disease, this is hurtful, wrong, and unhelpful. People who are single are not that way because they are in some rebellion against God, for some, it is because God has chosen for them to be single, for others, they are choosing themselves.
- Singleness gives opportunity for each single person, to be "one-minded" in serving the Lord as married people do not have the ability to be fully attached to God's work in the world.
- Not all single people are single because they want to be, so tread with caution and grace.
- Single Christians deserve long lasting, deep Christian community and friendship in the same way that married people do, but it needs to look different.

### **God hates divorce, but God doesn't hate all divorces.**

(Malachi 2:16)

- God gave Israel a certificate of divorce due to their hardness of heart, and their continual rejection of the covenant relationship they had with God.
- The regulations made by God in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, and for what Jesus gives as concession in Matthew 19:9.
- Because God hates divorce and the wake of pain and heartache and destruction it leaves in its path, every effort should be made to reconcile every marriage issue.
- Christians must do marriage differently than our world, no-fault divorce is a cancer to our society, and our churches, and the church in the west has largely shirked its responsibility in this regard.

## **Not all divorces are legitimate.**

(Matthew 5:32-33)

- We should never be looking for ways to get a divorce or looking for a way to get out. Unless the concessions made by Jesus in the New Testament (NT) are met, divorce is off the table.
- Divorce for any reason outside of the permissible concessions made in the NT, causes adultery.
- In 2005, there was a study done about the reasons for divorce amongst North American Society. Here are the reasons for divorces that people listed:
  - lack of commitment, their partner didn't hold up their end of the bargain 73%
  - Argumentative relationship 56%
  - Infidelity 55%
  - Marrying "too young" 46%
  - Unrealistic Expectations/Incompatibility 45%
  - Lack of Equality in Marriage 44%
  - Lack of Preparation/No Pre-Marital Counseling/Couples Counseling 41%
  - Abuse 29%
- What is important to understand is that biblically speaking only 2 of these reasons listed are biblical grounds to pursue divorce.

## **Every legitimate divorce is a result of sin, but not all divorces are sinful.**

(Deuteronomy 24:1-4, Matthew 5:32-33, Matthew 19:9)

- If God did not allow for any concession to marriage covenant being broken, then when he gives a certificate of divorce to wayward Israel, he is setting a dangerous standard.
- To cause a biblically legitimate divorce, something sinful and terrible has had to happen, leaving a wake of pain, and hurt. We must offer truth and grace.

## **Remarriage is appropriate and acceptable after a biblically legitimate divorce is finalized.**

(1 Corinthians 7:12-16)

- This is a difficult conversation, and in no way can we deal with every and each situation.
- Does this mean that anyone who is divorced can remarry. Not necessarily, and we need to be clear about this. No one who is divorced should rush into, or lightly move into a new marriage, if they were the party at "fault".
- Those who have caused a divorce as one who acts like an unbeliever and abandons their marriage responsibilities and covenant should not get remarried because, in the words of Jesus, they are committing adultery.
- Those who have broken a marriage covenant with sexual infidelity should be exceedingly wary of remarriage so as not to engage in adultery.

## **The only stated biblical reasons for legitimate divorce are sexual infidelity and abandonment by a non-Christian partner.**

(Matthew 5:32-33, 19:9. 1 Corinthians 7:12-16)

This is where things get very difficult, and where we will spend the rest of our time in this study.

What constitutes for a divorce outside of the parameters of the biblical concessions given?

Are there any?

What happens if a wrongful divorce takes place?

These are hard questions.

I can only give you what I'm convinced of based on my study of this topic over the last month.

There is no command to get a divorce should you decide to reconcile the relationship as the innocent party from a biblical perspective. Divorce never needs to happen, but it may happen under the specified regulations that the Bible permits.

I cannot stress that enough. Divorce is permitted, not commanded.

But should you have a biblical reason for divorce you can legitimately file for and complete the dissolve of the marriage.

- Divorce can be biblically legitimate in areas of abuse.
  - Sexual abuse is sexual infidelity. Full Stop.
  - Emotional abuse is abuse of an image bearer of God, and a breaking of covenanting vows of love, faithfulness, honour, and charity.
  - Mental and psychological abuse is unacceptable in any and every relationship.
  - Physical abuse is never acceptable.

Now while Jesus does not mention any of these things, we can argue from other places, that Jesus makes exceptions to Law in the NT due to areas of life and death situations, and always preserving and caring for life.

One example that I came across was the example of Jesus feeding the disciples on the sabbath by picking grain on the wheat stock. His argument was that this was okay, due to the fact that David, ate the showbread only reserved for the priests which was unlawful for him to do.

David was not condemned for this act of love and care for human life, even though it was technically against the Law. And neither was Jesus going to condemn another person, when they had to forgo a biblical Law, when it comes to protecting human life.

\*\*\* However \*\*\* issues of abuse in a marriage need to be handled with upmost respect, care and dignity, and should include the Pastors and Elders of your church, law enforcement, and psycho-therapeutic help.

Pastors should never counsel anyone in an abusive relationship to remain in it and say that their covenant relationship means they have to stay in an unsafe environment. That is pastoral, spiritual, and authoritative abuse in itself.

For anyone who is abusing their spouse in any way, there needs to be drastic steps taken, alongside the possibility of divorce.

1. If your spouse is a believer who is repentant who has abused you, you can of course reconcile and should look to reconcile if you desire. But you are not bound to reconcile the marriage as a way of forgiveness. You do need to forgive a spouse who has abused you, but forgiveness and marital reconciliation are not the same thing.
2. If your spouse is unrepentant and refuses to change after going through church discipline, they are to be treated as an unbeliever who has rejected biblical authority and has abandoned their marriage covenant.
3. Any unbelieving “Christian” who rejects authority of the church is to be viewed as a non-Christian, and if they continue in their abusive behaviour and attitudes towards their spouse should be treated as an unbeliever who has deserted or abandoned their Christian spouse.

## **BIG IDEA**

Jesus holds a **high view of Scripture**, and so should we, because it is for our good and flourishing.



We need to understand that when the Bible teaches a difficult topic, we need the whole counsel of God. For if we were to just read Mark's Gospel, while the ideal is being presented, and no concessions given, we could easily put people in difficult positions, force them to remain in abusive situations, and even to disregard their pain as something they need to deal with on their own.

Jesus Responds to the Pharisees with the Scriptures, and in every difficult scenario we find ourselves in as Christians, or as people, in relationships, marriage, anything really, we must be willing to hold a high view of Scripture, and let it alone be our final authority for our decision making, for how we go about relationships, reconciliation, repentance, restoration and renewal.