

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 3/6/05 Brad Brandt

Mark 10:1-12 "What Jesus Thinks about Divorce"*

Main Idea: In Mark 10:1-12 we find out what Jesus thinks about divorce.

I. Jesus received a question about divorce (1-2).

A. Keep in mind the context.

1. Jesus is helping people.
2. The Pharisees are trying to trick Jesus.

B. Keep in mind this isn't the only passage on the subject.

II. Jesus gave an answer about divorce (3-9).

A. Go to the Scriptures (3-4).

1. The Lord used the Bible to deal with problems.
2. The Pharisees used the Bible to cause problems.

B. Go back to the beginning (5-9).

1. God created us (6).
2. God created marriage (7).
3. When two people marry they become one (8).
4. When two people marry, it's supposed to be permanent (9).
5. Divorce exists because people have a heart problem (5).

III. Jesus gave another answer about divorce (10-12).

A. He emphasized the seriousness of divorce.

B. He emphasized the value of women.

C. He emphasized the need for the cross.

1. God hates adultery, as He does all sin.
2. God loves sinners and sent His Son to rescue them.

Response: Choose today to uphold the sanctity of marriage.

1. If married, cherish your spouse.
2. Encourage others to do the same.
3. Help those who are in trouble.

"I've got a right to be happy." Those words might best sum up the spirit of the age in which we live. This is generation of self-fulfillment. Talk about duty and loyalty and commitment, and you'll like see cavernous yawns if not disdainful stares. "I'll be committed, as long as I get something out of it. I'll be loyal to you, as long as it adds to my sense of self-worth." And so on.

What happens when two people who are living for self-fulfillment *get married*? It's a time-bomb just waiting to explode. And the explosions can be heard all around us. The feelings of infatuation fade in time, as feelings often do. Then what?

Some say then it's time to cut your losses and move on. John Adam and Nancy Williamson write in the book *Divorce: How and When to Let Go*:

"Your marriage can wear out. People change their values and lifestyles...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."

We're going to address a very delicate subject today, one that may be painful to consider. The subject is *divorce*. Opinions abound when divorce is discussed, so I'd like to narrow the scope. We're not going to discuss what I think or what you think or what other people think. We're going to consider what the Lord Jesus thinks about divorce. We're also going to find out what Jesus thinks about people who want to debate the subject of divorce for academic reasons. Jesus' words are helpful and hope-giving, as we'll see. In Mark 10:1-12 we find out what Jesus thinks about divorce.

I. Jesus received a question about divorce (1-2).

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

There are two things we need to keep in mind at the outset.

A. Keep in mind the context. Mark says that Jesus "left that place," referring to Capernaum in Galilee (9:33). He headed to Judea. That's south. That's also where Jerusalem is.

Mark is introducing a new section in his portrait of Jesus. The Lord has been ministering for over two years primarily up north in Galilee. Now He's heading south, heading to Jerusalem, heading to the cross. Mark's going to devote chapter 10 to Jesus' ministry in Judea and Perea. Then he focuses on Jesus' passion week in chapters 11-16. That's key. He devotes six chapters to tell us about Jesus' final week—yes, ten chapters to get to that week, and six chapters to detail what happened in His final week.

Let that sink in. You need to grasp the significance of Jesus' final week. It's why He came. Many people view Jesus as a great teacher and miracle worker, which He was. But that was warm-up, so to speak. He came to give His life for sinners.

We need to keep that in mind as we study His teaching about divorce in chapter 10. He will have some firm things to say in chapter 10. What He did in the final week says there's hope for people whose marriages are in trouble or have already failed, as well as for all others who struggle with the weight of sin.

Notice the contrast in verses 1-2.

1. *Jesus is helping people.* He's teaching them, just like He did wherever He went. At times He healed, but teaching was His emphasis. By teaching, He's helping people. In contrast...

2. *The Pharisees are trying to trick Jesus.* Back in 3:6 the Pharisees made their decision about Jesus. He *must go*. Since that time they've been looking for a basis to get rid of Him.

Their question is a test. It's a clever question. Note the location again. Jesus is in the territory of Herod Antipas. Antipas is the wicked king who put John the Baptist to death. Remember why? John denounced Antipas for his adulterous relationship with his brother's wife. He "put away" his wife and married his brother Philip's wife.

"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" they asked. If Jesus said "no" He could be in trouble with Herod, not to mention be in conflict with Old Testament teaching. If He said "yes," they could accuse Him of being soft on sin and lax with God's Law.

There were actually two common views on divorce in Jesus' day, and the difference had to do with how one interpreted Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Deuteronomy 24:1 states, "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..." The question pertains to what Moses meant by "something

indecent" (or, 'some uncleanness'). Rabbi Hillel took a very liberal approach and said a man could divorce his wife for just about any reason, including burning his food. Rabbi Shammai and his followers, however, were more strict, teaching that the words "something indecent" referred only to premarital sin. In other words, if a newly married husband discovered his wife was not a virgin, he could then put her away.

Please also realize this. Under the Law of Moses, adultery was not grounds for divorce. Adultery was grounds for death—the adulterer and adulteress were stoned to death (Deut 22:22). J. Vernon McGee observes, "Now today we don't stone them to death. If we did there would be so many rock piles we wouldn't be able to get around them."

So there's the question: "What do you think, Jesus? Is divorce lawful?" Please don't miss the source of this question. This question about divorce is coming from people who didn't want answers so they could help people, but came from critics who wanted ammunition to discredit the answer-giver. If an honest struggler had asked the same question, would Jesus have answered differently? I believe so. More about that later.

In addition to keeping the context in mind we must...

B. Keep in mind this isn't the only passage on the subject. Divorce is a complex subject because divorce involves complex people and often complicated circumstances. Remember that what you're about to hear isn't all the Bible has to say about divorce, nor is it all Jesus had to say about it. Other important passages include: Matthew 5:31-32, Matthew 19:1-12, and 1 Corinthians 7, for starters.

So the question has been asked. "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

II. Jesus gave an answer about divorce (3-9).

In His answer Jesus pointed His hearers (and us) in two directions.

A. Go to the Scriptures (3-4). Verse 3—"What did Moses command you?" he replied." Moses, the person through whom God revealed the first portion of the Scriptures. Jesus pointed those who had questions about divorce to the Scriptures. That's key. Our opinions just cloud the issue. What does God say? To find out we must go to His Word.

Verse 4—"They said, 'Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.'" Their answer indicates their motive. "Is it lawful?" they had asked. But they know what the law says. Here they refer to the Deuteronomy 24 passage.

Notice another contrast, this time between the way Jesus and the Pharisees used God's Word...

1. *The Lord used the Bible to deal with problems.* And that's obviously good. On the other hand...

2. *The Pharisees used the Bible to cause problems.* They loved to debate the Bible, even about delicate subjects like divorce. And if they could use the Bible to get something they wanted, in this case to get rid of Jesus, they did so.

Be careful how you use the Bible, my friend. God gave it to us to be a light, not a fire-starter.

So what did God say through Moses about divorce? "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away," they said. In middle-eastern culture in Bible times, women had very few, if any rights. A woman was basically "at the complete disposal of the male head of the family," as Barclay puts it. A wife could not divorce her husband, not under Jewish law. At best, she could only ask her husband to divorce her. In fact, the only ground for which a woman could claim a divorce were if her husband were a leper, if he engaged in a disgusting trade such as that of a tanner, if he ravished a virgin, or if he falsely accused her of

sexual sin.

On the other hand, men had the legal power to divorce their wives. And they did. In giving this law, God was protecting not only His reputation, but His people, especially women.

The Law actually protected the wife by restraining the husband from whimsically choosing to discard her like a piece of unwanted furniture. Under the Law a man had to get a "bill of divorcement." Without that clause a man could have acted impulsively, kicked his wife out of the home, and caused her to be a social outcast. So the Mosaic law, in part, prevented wives from being the victim of a selfish husband's whim.

This is key. When God gave Israel this instruction He wasn't endorsing divorce per se, but was regulating it. Indeed, He was seeking to restrain it and make it more difficult for men to break their marriage bond.

So the Law itself was good and was pro-marriage. Part of the problem was that the Jews began to mistake God's gracious provision in allowing divorce as His approval of it.

To address that problem Jesus pointed them in a second direction. First, go the Scriptures. Then...

B. Go back to the beginning (5-9). Verses 5-9—"It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied. "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. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

The Pharisees went back to Moses, but needed to go further, to God's original intent in creation. When we go back to the beginning we discover five important insights.

1. *God created us (6)*. "But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.'" Why are we here? Because God created us. And how did He create us? As male and female, Jesus emphasizes, referring to Genesis 1:27.

Please note that sexuality exists according to God's design. God created two sexes, male and female.

Is that important to see? Yes. By design, by *God's* design, marriage is between a man and a woman, not two men nor two women. Furthermore, it is God's intent that the bond between a man and a woman is the most intimate relationship in the human race. The parent-child relationship is wonderful. The bond between two good friends is special. But this goes further. In marriage a man and a woman become *one flesh*. Two people become one, not just one in spirit, but "one flesh."

Wiersbe observes, "Since marriage is a physical union, only a physical cause can break it—either death (Rom 7:1-3) or fornication (Matt 5:32; 19:9)." More about what can cause a marriage to break apart in a moment...

2. *God created marriage (7)*. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife..." That's a quotation of Genesis 2:24. The quote continues in verse 8, "And the two will become one flesh."

God created marriage. When two people marry it's more than a social contract. They are entering a covenantal relationship that God Himself established. Marriage occurs when a man leaves his parents and then enters into a bond with his wife.

Do miss that when two people marry their new relationship takes precedence over their ties to their parents. They are to *leave* and *cleave*. Much marital discord results from a failure to leave, then cleave.

Isn't it interesting how Jesus turned the discussion about divorce into a discussion about marriage? That's something we ought to do. People want to debate the grounds for divorce. It would be better to urge people to consider the importance of marriage, especially *before* they marry. J. Vernon McGee's observation is timely, "I have so many questions from people asking about the grounds for divorce. When they are ready to get married, they never talk to the preacher. They are not interested in finding out whether he would approve or not; their only question is whether he will marry them." And then he adds, "The basic problem is marrying the wrong person. It looks to me like we are locking the stable after the horse is gone. There are people getting married who ought not to get married."

3. *When two people marry they become one (8)*. "So [now Jesus is drawing a conclusion based on the two Genesis quotes] they are no longer two, but one." That's significant. When two people say "I do" before God and witnesses, something amazing occurs. Something new results, something that wasn't there before. Two people become one. And in order for their marriage to work they must function as one, and if they fail to function as one (in the way they view money, child-raising, career pursuits, and everything else) they will drift apart. But the fact remains, God says the two became *one*.

4. *When two people marry, it's supposed to be permanent (9)*. "Therefore [here comes the punchline for Jesus; based on the facts that God created us and marriage, and based on the fact that when two people marry they become one, this follows...] what God has joined together, let man not separate."

Man must not take it upon himself to take apart what God has joined together. Beloved, God intends marriage to be permanent.

When two people marry, there is one word that ought not be in their vocabulary, and it's divorce. Young people, if you're not ready to commit your life to that person, then don't get married. It's till death.

Why then is it that divorce exists anyway? Look back at verse 5, "'It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,' Jesus replied."

5. *Divorce exists because people have a heart problem (5)*. Here's why God gave instructions about divorce in His Law. Not because He favors divorce, but because He knows the heart problem of mankind. Without these guidelines, selfish men would have been quick to give way to their covetous hearts, forsake the wife of their youth, and engage in adulterous interaction with other women while still married. The Law prohibited that. As Cole observes, "Better, ...we might paraphrase, easy divorce than open adultery and defiance of all marriage codes. It was the lesser of two evils in Israel, but its very existence showed a fatal flaw in humanity, to which Jesus drew attention."

God established the guidelines for marriage. And God also has also established certain guidelines to allow for divorce. His desire is for marriages to last and for couples in those marriages to be committed to each other and work through inevitable problems. But He does permit divorce, as He explains elsewhere in His Word, in the case of adultery and desertion.

In certain cases God allows for divorce. "Why would He allow for something that wasn't His original plan?" Because of His mercy. He is a redeeming God who works with sinners right where they are to take them where they should be.

Divorce exists because people have a heart problem. What is that heart problem? We are sinners who think of ourselves first. When two sinners marry they are in trouble from the start unless they know the One who changes sinners self-focused hearts. When God gave Moses this instruction about divorce He was graciously giving His people deterrents to help keep sinners in check. That's what the Law is. The Law can't change a sinner, but it can deter sin. And the Law reminds us that we need someone who can change sinners. We need a Savior. That's why Jesus came.

He died for sinners. Ponder these words by J. Vernon McGee, "It may likewise be said that murder was not in His plan, but murderers have been forgiven. Divorce is a sin, but divorced people can be forgiven. And I think that under certain circumstances divorced people can be remarried; that is, from a scriptural viewpoint. I don't know why we will forgive a murderer but often refuse to forgive a divorced person. We act almost as if he has committed the unpardonable sin. People who are saved after securing a divorce ought not to bear the stigma any more than any other sinner who has been saved. We are all sinners saved by grace."

III. Jesus gave another answer about divorce (10-12).

Verse 10—"When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this." Apparently what Jesus just said caused the disciples to think of further questions. Matthew's account indicates the disciples responded, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry (Matt 19:10)."

Jesus responded to their confusion in verse 11—"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.'"

Matthew's account includes more of Jesus' response than Mark's. They were writing for different audiences, Matthew for Greek-speaking Jews, Mark to Romans. Mark's readers weren't as familiar with the Old Testament as were Matthew's. Mark shows Jesus emphasizing three things.

A. He emphasized the seriousness of divorce. "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her." Again, Mark wrote this gospel for a Roman audience. In the Roman Empire, immorality was rampant and excused, much as in our day. Mark helps his readers see that Jesus calls His followers to a higher standard than the world accepts. In Mark's day divorce was easy and common, again as in ours. Mark's intent isn't to deal with exceptions. His intent is to highlight how serious a marriage commitment is, and how serious it is to break that commitment.

Yes, these are strong words, but Mark knew his audience needed them. So do we.

You may be thinking, "Earlier you said there may be grounds for divorce. In Matthew's account Jesus gives a ground for divorce, doesn't He?" Yes, we read there (Matt 19:9), "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, *except for marital unfaithfulness*, and marries another woman commits adultery."

What does "marital unfaithfulness" [Greek word *porneia*] mean? Ed Dobson says there are three basic interpretations:

One, the "Engagement View." This view holds that the word *porneia* means "fornication" and refers specifically to premarital sex. In NT times marriage actually began with the engagement covenant. An engaged couple was legally married, though the marriage was not finalized until twelve to fifteen months later. This view says that *porneia* refers to unfaithfulness during this betrothal period. The problem with this view is that in the Bible *porneia* refers to illicit sexual relationships in general, not just premarital sex.

Two, the "Incest View." People who hold this view believe *porneia* refers to the marrying of a close relative. But this view doesn't fit the data well either.

Three, the "Illicit Sex" view. Here *porneia* refers to illicit sexual behavior in general. It's a broad term that can refer to all types of sexual immorality including incest, sodomy, harlotry, perversion, and all sexual sin before and after marriage (Dobson, 65). This view seems most likely.

Here's Jesus' point. In contrast to the school of Hillel which allowed for divorce for any trivial reason, Jesus said that sexual immorality was the only allowance for divorce.

To summarize, by taking into account these three texts in which Jesus addresses the subject of divorce (Matt 5, Matt 19, Mark 10) we can draw five conclusions:

- a. God's intent is for marriage to last a lifetime.
- b. God did not institute divorce, but He regulated it.
- c. All divorces stem from sin, though not all divorces are sinful.

Marriages don't fall apart because two people are doing what pleases God. Ultimately, a marriage dissolves because of sin. But not every divorce is sinful. A person may have biblical grounds to end the marriage. Though divorce is not the ideal, there are times when it is permissible. Such as when?

- d. There is one ground for divorce among believers—*porneia*.
- e. When there has been *porneia*, a believer *may* divorce his spouse.

The key word is *may*. The Bible does not require divorce in such cases, but it is permitted. Indeed, the goal would be to see the person guilty of *porneia* repent, and be reconciled to God and his spouse.

Is it possible? Sometimes. Remember Hosea? His wife, Gomer, was guilty of *porneia* in a severe way. Yet he remained faithful to her, and eventually restored her to the Lord and to himself.

The bottom line again, as seen in Mark's account, Jesus emphasized that divorce is serious.

B. He emphasized the value of women. As stated earlier, one of the main reasons God gave guidelines for divorce in Deuteronomy 24 was to protect women. It's noteworthy that Jesus here refers both to a situation where a man divorces his wife (11) and to one where a wife divorces her husband (12).

Jesus did what the rabbis refused to do. Wessel explains, "He recognized that a man could commit adultery against his wife. In rabbinic Judaism a woman by infidelity could commit adultery against her husband; and a man, by having sexual relations with another man's wife, could commit adultery against *him* [emphasis added]. But a man could never commit adultery against his wife, no matter what he did. Jesus, by putting the husband under the same moral obligation as the wife, raised the status and dignity of women."

C. He emphasized the need for the cross. He mentions "adultery" in verse 11 and again in verse 12. Adultery, a violation of the ten commandments, was a sin punishable by death in the Old Testament economy. When someone enters into a sexual relationship with another person who is not their spouse, it is adultery and it is a violation of the marriage covenant. It is not simply an "affair." It is a sin.

You say, "How does this point us to the cross?" In this way. We learn two things about God here.

1. *God hates adultery, as He does all sin.* All sin. "The wages of sin is death."

2. *God loves sinners and sent His Son to rescue them.* That's why Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem, to rescue sinners, every kind of sinner, that includes adulterers, as well as liars, gossips, and the rest. God hates sin—that's why He sent His Son to the cross, to pay sin's penalty. But God loves sinners and will accept them if they will repent and receive His Son as their Savior and Lord.

I urge you to see your need for the cross today, my friend. Come to Jesus and He will save you.

Response: Choose today to uphold the sanctity of marriage.

How so? Let me give three practical challenges...

1. *If married, cherish your spouse.*
2. *Encourage others to do the same.*
3. *Help those who are in trouble.*