

"What God Has Joined Together, Let Not Man Separate"

As we look at our passage for today in Mark, we are confronted with a very real issue, aren't we? The issue of marriage and divorce is a very real issue today in our society, and it was a very real issue back then as well. Today, the issue that might come immediately to mind is the issue of the definition of marriage. Many states, including our own, are pushing for an official definition of marriage between one man and one woman. And though this is a hot issue today, and something indirectly addressed in this passage, the real question that is raised here is about divorce.

And it would benefit us greatly to focus on that today. Because I think in so many ways, this is a far greater problem in our society than the definition of marriage between a man and a woman. Don't get me wrong, Jesus himself defines marriage in our passage today as between a man and a woman. In fact, he assumes that definition and quotes Scripture about it. But what he is answering here is a question about divorce. And in our society, with about 50% of marriages ending in divorce, this is a very real issue. A very closely related issue is that many people today live together before they get married, and often never even get married, which is effectively a low view of marriage that ends in a sort of divorce. That's a closely related issue. So just in terms of numbers and statistics, a much more common issue in our society is divorce, adultery, and fornication, than even homosexuality. Now of course, this doesn't mean we can't address all these issues as Christians. But I just want to highlight a major problem in our society that seems to be becoming more and more socially acceptable, even while it seems that marriage vows often remain the same - "til death do us part."

And as much as free and easy divorce is common today, it was a real issue back during Jesus' earthly ministry as well. At that time, there were two prevailing Jewish views on the subject of divorce. The school of Hillel thought a husband could divorce his wife for almost any reason in which he found his wife no longer acceptable to him. She could burn a meal, and that might be grounds to divorce her. The other view was the school of Shammai. That view said that the husband could divorce the wife only if there was some moral failing of the wife, typically of a sexual nature. Both schools were trying to interpret Deuteronomy 24, which describes a man giving his wife a certificate of divorce when she no longer finds favor in her because of some indecency or uncleanness found in her. It's in the context of that religious debate that the Pharisees ask Jesus if it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife. And so this was a real issue back then, and it is a real issue today. Let's look at how Jesus responds with his teaching on marriage and divorce.

In verse 1 we find Jesus arriving in Judea. This is an important scene change. Most of Jesus ministry up to this point in the book of Mark has been in Galilee, which was in northern Israel. Now in Mark we'll see his ministry focus turn toward Judea, which is southern Israel where the capital Jerusalem is. In Mark we'll see from here on out his ministry headed more and more toward Jerusalem, which is where his final confrontation with the religious leaders will be, where his trial will be, and where he'll be crucified. So everything in Mark at this point is turning and looking toward the cross.

And with that context, we find the Pharisees in verse 2 questioning Jesus about divorce. But it says in verse 2 that they were questioning him in order to test him. We've already seen Jesus beginning to have conflict with the religious leaders, and this is all the more fitting now that Jesus had arrived in Judea. The confrontation is building, the confrontation that will lead to the cross.

But why were they testing him on *this issue*? In other words, it seems that their question was intended to be some sort of trap. But how? Well, one possibility is that they wanted Jesus to weigh in on this debate. Many people were becoming more and more lax on their attitude of divorce. The school of Hillel, which was the view that allowed divorce for almost any reason, was becoming more and more popular. Maybe they had already heard that Jesus held a more strict view. Maybe they thought they could alienate Jesus from many of his followers if he expressed too strict of view on divorce. You know how it goes, when you have to weigh in on a hot topic, say a political issue, that can gain you some supporters, but it can also alienate you from people who disagree with you. Maybe that's what the Pharisees were hoping to accomplish by asking Jesus this question.

It's also possible that they hoped for something even more sinister. As Jesus enters Judea here, he is entering the territory immediately controlled by King Herod. Remember, John the Baptist had spoken out against Herod for marrying Herodias, the wife of his own brother. Herodias had essentially divorced or separated from her husband Philip to marry Herod. When John the Baptist spoke out against this as a sin, it ended him up in prison, and ultimately cost John his life. Maybe the Pharisees hoped that Jesus' speaking against divorce might land him in a similar fate.

And so the Pharisees ask Jesus, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" But Jesus then turns the question around and asks them for a biblical answer. Jesus basically says, well what does the Bible say? "What did Moses command you?" Of course the Pharisees then answer very vaguely. They reply with the biblical passage that had sparked all the current debate in the first place: Deuteronomy 24. That passage, as we read earlier in the service, talks about a man giving his wife a certificate of divorce. And so the Pharisees basically appeal to that verse as a biblical mandate for divorce.

But Jesus was not satisfied with their response. In verse 5, Jesus responds to their answer with his own biblical case. He begins by correcting their view of Deuteronomy 24. He says in verse 5 that Moses wrote that law because of the hardness of man's heart. In other words, Moses in Deuteronomy 24 was giving a law in concession to the reality of divorce. That is a lot different than Moses giving a law encouraging divorce or saying that divorce is not sinful. Think about some other laws. For example, there is a Mosaic law that says if a man steals an ox, he shall repay five oxen for the one ox. Moses, by giving that law, doesn't say that it's okay to steal someone's ox. It's not Moses giving a stamp of approval for the sin of stealing. No, that too is a law in light of the man's hardness of heart. Because people do sin, there are laws that deal with certain sins. That doesn't make the behavior right.

That's clearly the case when we look at the context of Deuteronomy 24. First, Moses never encourages divorce in this passage. Second, the law is written in a descriptive way. It uses the language of "when a man" divorces his wife and gives her a certificate of divorce. It then goes on to say in that law, that after the woman marries another man, if that new marriage later ends, regardless of how it ends, the original man is not allowed to remarry the woman. So actually that's the whole point of Deuteronomy 24. It's to tell the person who divorces his wife that

this is a serious and final action that you are doing. Make sure you think twice before doing it.

Another benefit of Deuteronomy 24 is that it provided the woman with a certificate of divorce. She could take this to a future husband as proof that she was free to remarry. That *is* the context of Deuteronomy 24: the divorced wife remarrying. This would be an important document for her and her future husband. Remember, the punishment for adultery meant death for both the woman and the man committing adultery. If the original husband didn't like the woman remarrying, he could lie and claim she was still his husband, and have them both stoned to death for the sin of adultery. He couldn't get away with that sort of lie if he had given her a certificate of divorce.

So you see, nothing in Deuteronomy 24 has Moses encouraging divorce. The law is very concessionary. Should a man divorce his wife for whatever reason, he needed to give her a certificate of divorce, and he couldn't reconcile with her if she went and got remarried. That was the extent of the Old Testament provision. Nothing more. Nothing that allowed people to make up any reason to divorce a spouse.

So that's Jesus' first response. He corrects the Pharisees bad interpretation of Moses. Then Jesus goes on to make his own case from Moses why marriage is to be a permanent thing. Jesus goes on to say that divorce is a sin, and he makes that case *from Moses*, by quoting from the book of Genesis which was recorded by Moses. In verse 6, Jesus quotes Genesis 1:27. That's the creation account where it says that God created both male and female. And of course immediately after this verse in Genesis is God's mandate to mankind to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth, and subdue it. So, do you see why Jesus quoted this passage? He's showing that from the beginning of creation, God created humans with a plan - for a man and woman to be joined in marriage. And then for those married couples to go and propagate, having offspring to fill the earth!

The second quote in verses 7-8 really drives home this point. Jesus is quoting Genesis 2:24, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This is a classic verse on the institution of marriage. This is the verse that is written after the whole ordeal where God first said, that it is not good for man to be alone. And so then God has Adam survey all the animals. None of them prove to be a match for Adam. And so God finally takes a rib from Adam and makes the first woman, Eve, a helper suitable for man. And after Adam saw his new wife, and cried out in joy, that is when this verse is written. That is when God then institutes marriage. He institutes marriage as between one man and one woman, and these two are then to become one.

Jesus concludes the matter in verse 9 saying, "therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate." Do you understand Jesus' point? Do you see the biblical case he has just made for why divorce is a sin? He shows from the first two chapters of the Bible, that from the beginning God instituted marriage. Marriage is an institution from God himself. God joins people together, and in our sinfulness we should not separate them. In God's original design, a man and a woman were to leave their parents and be united together in a lifelong union with one another. That is called family. And for many, he then blesses them with children, who eventually grow up and generally do the same. Of course, some choose celibacy, and Jesus even elsewhere says that if that is done for the sake of the kingdom, then that's actually a good thing. But yet clearly, Jesus shows that for those who do engage in the institution of marriage, it is intended to be a permanent, life-long, commitment. That was God's design from the start, and since

marriage is something God created, he gets to define it. And Jesus says here, that God does not want divorce. The prophet Malachi said just that, that the Lord God hates divorce, Malachi 2:16.

Though that ends Jesus' discussion here with the Pharisees, the question is brought up again shortly by his disciples as soon as they are alone in a house with him, verse 10. Now the disciples are obviously not trying to test Jesus like the Pharisees were. They were apparently genuinely interested to hear more from Jesus when they were alone with him. Remember, Jesus would typically teach in parables in public and then privately Jesus would explain the parables to them. Maybe they thought if they asked Jesus again about this in private that he might add some additional qualification or explanation. It's quite possible that the disciples were of the school of Hillel that favored lax restrictions on divorce. In the Matthew account of this passage the disciples are actually reported as having a lot of surprise to Jesus' teaching. Sadly, they conclude that in light of his teaching it is better to not get married!

But Jesus then reiterates his teaching in verses 11 and 12. And he actually tells them a little bit more. He says that if either a man or a woman divorces their spouse and then remarries, that they are actually committing adultery. That means they are breaking one of the Ten Commandments. And so if it wasn't clear before, Jesus explicitly says that divorce is a sin.

And it's interesting that Jesus describes this both ways - that this is a sin both a husband or a wife could do. In the Mosaic Law, the passage on divorce was only describing the action of a husband divorcing a wife, not the other way around. For the Jews, it was a rather uncommon thing for a wife to try to divorce her husband. But this was a more common thing among Greeks and Romans. It was actually just a recently passed Roman law, about 75 years before, that allowed for a woman to divorce her husband. And of course, that is what Herodias had done in order to marry King Herod. According to the historian Josephus, she had sent her old husband a letter of separation.

And so Jesus doesn't hold anything back here. He declares that divorce is a sin, coming off even more extreme it seems than the school of Shammai, and against the more popular opinion of the school of Hillel. And he doesn't hold back from making a claim that the very action done by Herod and Herodias was wrong. Why? Because Jesus held fast to God's word. He authoritatively declared Scripture's teaching on the subject and he wasn't willing to water things down just to please man's sinful attitude and the current culture. Humans back then wanted an easy way to end an inconvenient marriage, and they still want to today, but Jesus was not willing to give in to sin.

And so Jesus presents here a biblical view of marriage and divorce. He says that marriage is from God. God has made the institution of marriage as something tied into the very fabric of humanity. Our whole civilization relies on it to survive and thrive. And God is given the credit for joining two people together.

Because of this, Jesus declares that divorce is a sin. Now I think it would be prudent to note that Scripture does give two situations where a believer is freed from a marriage commitment. The first is the case of adultery and the second is the case of desertion by a non-believer. The first case, adultery, is actually given by Jesus during this exact event. It's recorded in the Matthew version of this account, that Jesus says that apart from a case of sexual immorality, you are not freed from your marriage commitment. To marry someone else, in that case, would be adultery. The second case is concerning the very specific situation where a believer is married to a non-believer. The believer must stay married to the

non-believer. However, if the non-believer wants to divorce the believer, and there is nothing the believer can do to convince them otherwise, then Paul says that the believer is freed from the marriage commitment (1 Cor 7:12-17).

But realize that in both of these cases, there is still sin involved. In both of these two cases the divorce has still been initiated by a sin by at least one of the spouses. In the case of sexual immorality, the one spouse has sinned in such a way as to break the marriage himself. The divorce effectively happens at the time when the person commits that act of adultery. In that case the innocent party is freed from the marriage commitment, but it doesn't mean that the divorce is a good thing. No, God grieves along with the offended spouse that their spouse sinned against them in that way. It's the same way with the non-Christian who wants to abandon the marriage to the Christian. The Christian is not responsible in that case for the non-Christian leaving. They can't force them to stay in the marriage. When that happens, the Christian is freed from their marriage commitment. But that doesn't mean that the divorce is a good thing. No, God grieves along with the Christian that their non-Christian spouse sinned against them in that way. But in each of these cases, God sets the person free who was sinned against in this way, so that they can pursue a godly marriage. Essentially, in these situations, it is not the innocent party who is divorcing the sinning person as much as it is the sinning person who is divorcing the innocent person by their actions. Remember, God created marriage, and it's his blessing to provide people a spouse. So it makes sense that God would set free the person to pursue a godly marriage when their former spouse sins by divorcing them. Of course, as I speak about this, I hope you understand that usually divorce is not so black and white. Typically both parties in sinning in the situation. That is why our Westminster Standards wisely require that the husband and wife do not leave these matters up to their own discretion and wisdom, but require them to go to the elders of the church if either of them think they have biblical grounds for a divorce.

As we think about Jesus' teaching here on marriage and divorce, I would be remiss if I did not mention how Scripture describes the relationship of God and his people as a relationship of a husband and a wife. For example, Ephesians 5 makes the comparison of Christ as the husband who gives up himself for the church as his wife. These analogies in Scripture reinforce the high view of marriage that Jesus describes here. If God created the institution of marriage, and if he uses that institution to teach us a little bit about how he is relating to us his people, then that surely should heighten our own view of marriage!

Just think how wonderfully this describes the saving work of Christ. If anyone would have grounds for a legal divorce, it would be God as husband of his people. For example, in the book of Hosea, our rebellion against God is described as harlotry. In Ezekiel chapter 16, God pretty much says the same thing. But in these prophecies of our adultery against God, God promises that he will restore us. And that is what Christ did in the cross. On the cross, he gave up his life, to save us his betrothed bride. He died on the cross, and now works in our hearts and lives, so that we his bride can be sanctified and cleansed. Jesus' saving love is showered upon us so that we his bride can be made a beautiful glorious bride to be presented to him without spot or wrinkle or any blemish. That is how Ephesians 5 describes the work of Christ for us. Our Lord could have divorced us and condemned us to death for our adulteries. But instead, he acted as a husband who loves us unconditionally. He sacrificed everything for his rebellious, scandalous, bride, so that he could be united to her as a faithful, and beautiful, wife in eternal bliss. If that doesn't heighten our view of marriage and cause us to be disgusted at divorce, then I don't know what will!

Brothers and sisters, marriage is under attack today. In the political world, we see this over the definition of marriage. But our passage today reminds of an even more prevalent problem in our society: divorce. Divorce is an evil attack on marriage. It is so very destructive to the husband and wife, not to mention to the children. And it grieves our Lord God who created the institution of marriage to be a good thing and a blessing to mankind.

And so I would ask, are you willing to take a stand on *this* issue? There are petitions and propositions flying around about the definition of marriage, but what are we saying about divorce? Do you fight to define marriage as a husband and wife, while being content to see those husbands and wives break off those marriages some 50% of the time? Now I'm not suggesting that we do or don't stand up politically about the issue of divorce. As you know, I try to not talk politics from the pulpit, so I'd leave that question up to you for now. But what I'm asking you to do is realize that this is a problem in our society, and from the statistics, it seems that this is a problem equally among Christians as non-believers.

Just as in Jesus' day, saying that divorce is a sin and not something to be done just because you are unhappy in your marriage, might not be very popular. But are we willing to speak the truth in love? Are we willing to stand up for what is right on this issue? You know it's still the common thing to do to have family and friends witness a wedding. How many of us as witnesses ever lovingly call people to account when they are thinking about divorce? I know that might not make you many friends, but just think about Jesus in this passage. Jesus was willing to stand up here for the biblical view of marriage and divorce even when it was not a very popular position at the time.

I think another way we can stand up for the biblical view on divorce is to be there for people who have suffered from their spouse divorcing them, despite their efforts. That might mean being there to comfort someone whose spouse just left them for someone else. Let's make sure not to judge people who we hear are divorced thinking that they sinned in the matter. If a person has biblical grounds for divorce for the reasons we already mentioned, we should not condemn the divorced person, but grieve with them, just as God grieves with them.

Along the same lines, maybe you have been part of a divorce that *wasn't* biblical. Maybe today you are hearing that Jesus calls this a sin and are feeling convicted. Maybe you are even feeling condemned? Maybe you recognize today that your divorce was a sin. Well, if that is the case, I would call you to the gospel - Jesus calls sinners to flee to him in faith and repentance, and he offers the forgiveness of sins. Yes, even the sin of divorce is a sin he forgives. So if you turn to Christ, he says to you that you are no longer condemned, but forgiven. Now let us not use that as an excuse for easy divorces. God knows our hearts. But for those who truly are grieved over a previous divorce, I would like to encourage you that Jesus' forgiveness and grace is sufficient enough. Of course, if you are truly repentant of this sin of divorce, and if you still have ability to try to restore your relationship with your previous spouse, then I would urge you to do so. If that is not an option for Biblical reasons, then you are set free to find a new Christian spouse. And so, if you have been in a divorce or separation I would urge you to seek counsel from the elders on whether or not you should be seeking to reconcile with your former spouse, or if you have biblical grounds to be set free from this marriage commitment and pursue finding a new Christian spouse.

I hope this discussion on marriage is a reminder to us who are married that divorce must not be an option. It shouldn't even be in our vocabulary with our spouses. We have made lifelong commitments to one another. Let us not fracture that through

adultery and divorce. May the great price that Jesus gave to restore us his wayward church, cause us to see the high calling we have been given as Christians who are married. Even if your spouse is not a Christian, you are called by God to be faithful to your marriage commitment to them.

And if you are not married, but are hoping to be married one day, I urge you to make sure that Jesus' view of marriage is your view of marriage. And I urge you to make sure that it is your potential spouse' view as well. Don't agree to marry someone who believes divorce is not a sin. And don't just assume your potential mate agrees with you on this. This is something to talk about with a potential spouse, *before* you get engaged.

This is obviously something controversial. It obviously is a subject close to people's hearts. If 50% of marriages end in divorce, it's extremely likely that either you have experienced a divorce or someone close to you has. To have this view that divorce is a sin will probably offend a number of people. But look how destructive divorce is. Is Jesus' command really that oppressive? And how can we disregard this call to hate divorce as Christ hates divorces when we see what ends he went to in order to save us his bride. What a great blessing it is to be called the bride of Christ whom Christ is preparing to present to himself when he returns. May we look forward to that great day of consummation! Amen.

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