

For Better or for Worse...

Mark 10:1-12 Genesis 1:27; 2:24 Deuteronomy 24:1-4
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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After hearing those scripture passages, I bet right about now you're thinking to yourself: Gosh, I am so glad I came to church today to hear this sermon about **divorce, remarriage, and adultery!**

Since you are aware that I have neither experienced what it's like going through a divorce, or even a marriage for that matter, you may be questioning my qualifications to speak on such subjects. That's okay, I question them myself. For some of my cues have come from comedians. Jeff Dunham, bringing back the old art form of ventriloquism, has a character in his act named Walter. Walter is a crotchety old man who often complains about his marriage.

Jim asks Walter how long he has been married. After Walter responds, "47 years," he asks Jim if he remembers the "until death do us part" line during his wedding. After Jim responds, "of course I do." Walter, advises, "Well later on you'll realize that you were actually setting a goal." Not a very affirming comment on the state of marital bliss.

It is true, my personal experience with divorce is limited. Both sets of my grandparents had a big celebration on their 50th wedding anniversaries, one set celebrated their 60th. My own parents were married for 53 years. None of my aunts and uncles divorced. The closest family connection I have to divorce is my older brother, who has been married and divorced twice.

What is your experience, either firsthand or secondhand, with divorce? What are your thoughts and feelings on the issues that are brought up in today's biblical text from Mark about remarriage? Before we get into this passage, it's good to acknowledge that each of us come to these issues with a different perspective. Dotted through any congregation, including this one, are divorced persons and persons who have remarried (or re-partnered) following divorce. So **I am keenly aware of the potential that this scripture passage (and this sermon) has in reopening old wounds.**

So let me say right from the start that ultimately, **the purpose of this biblical passage, in its context, is not to impose guilt or condemnation. In fact, rather than establishing hopelessly high standards for marriage, Jesus, as we will see, is calling us to a purposely high vision for marriage.**

There are volumes of things that could and need to be said about ways to strengthen marriages and help relationships work better. But that is not the focus of this particular sermon.

Just as divorce is difficult and problematic on so many levels in our day and age, so it was in Jesus' day as well. I'm sure it always will be. The gospel writer Mark informs us that the Pharisees, who were obsessed with the legalism of upholding the law, came to Jesus and asked him if it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife, or to put it more literally in the Greek, to "put away" his wife. Perhaps the most important element in this story is the way **Jesus redirects the question of the Pharisees to make the conversation not so much about divorce, but about the ideals for marriage itself.**

For you see, there was really no question or debate about whether or not divorce was lawful in Jesus' day, it was. The Pharisees were simply trying to trap Jesus into saying something they could use against him. Jesus, as it seemed was his custom, answered the question with a question of his own. "What did Moses command you?" he asks the Pharisees. They reply by reciting the law as recorded in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, one of our Old Testament readings this morning.

The Mosaic law simply states that if a man is displeased because he finds something unseemly or objectionable about his wife, he was permitted to give her a bill of divorce and cast her from his house. The law goes on to declare that a man was not allowed to remarry his ex-wife.

There were two schools of Jewish thought on what the law meant when it said a man could divorce his wife if he was displeased with her. One school of thought said divorce was only allowed in the case of adultery. The other school, which became the norm, interpreted the law as widely as possible, taking to mean a man could divorce his wife for nearly any fault that he might find in her.

Divorce, therefore, even for trivial reasons, became common. Believe it or not, there is evidence that some men sought a divorce if their wife spoiled a dish of food, if she danced in the streets, if she talked to a strange man, if she spoke disrespectfully of her husband's relatives in his hearing, and my favorite, if she was a brawling woman! Do we have any brawling women here at church this morning? (They actually provided a definition. A brawling woman was defined as a woman whose voice could be heard in the next house. Yikes, imagine the divorce rate if that were the law today.) So yes, **the law that allowed a man to divorce his wife was being egregiously abused.**

Note, of course, that the ancient law did not allow a woman to divorce her husband. Why? Because women, for the most part, were treated as if they were the property of men. Women, therefore, had almost no legal rights or recourse.

Jesus' response to the Pharisees is fascinating. First, he says that the divorce law itself was written in Moses' day because of the hardness of people's hearts. In other words, divorce was simply the lesser of two evils – an escape hatch to reduce the destructive effects of a hard heart – a failure caused by our sinful human nature.

Yet, Jesus does not declare the Deuteronomy passage invalid. Instead, **he moves the discussion from Deuteronomy back further to Genesis – from Moses to God – from divorce to marriage – from that which is permitted by the law to that which is intended by God.** By quoting passages from Genesis 1 and 2, our other Old Testament readings for this morning, Jesus seeks to focus on what he believes God had originally intended for human beings and human relationships at the time of creation.

What emerges is the **affirmation of marriage as the lifelong joining of two persons in a profound mystical union, being "joined into one flesh."** So yes, in a perfect world, filled with perfect people, where everyone loved perfectly, there would be no divorce, no separating that which has become one – God's original intent, according to Genesis. But we're not perfect, and the divine purpose in marriage is rarely fully achieved. **The two that have become one are often divided back into two.**

I think that we must also remember something very important at this point. It seems that in the Bible there is a certain *given*, that marriage was for everyone. Let us not forget that most marriages were arranged by parents when children were still very young. It wasn't a matter of "falling in love" with someone – it was a contractual arrangement. Divorce, then, was more about breaking a legal contract than it was, in

our modern understanding and I think in Jesus' understanding, the dissolving of a covenant relationship.

Issues concerning singleness or attraction to one's own gender are simply not addressed in these biblical texts. Therefore, I will not include them in this current discussion as well, as important as they are, especially to this community of faith.

After Jesus reminds the Pharisees of the law in Deuteronomy and of God's intentions for marriage in Genesis, he speaks with his disciples in private. (This is a common literary tool used by the gospel writer Mark.) We read in verses 10-12, "Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

There is a shift in perspective that may not be immediately apparent. Jesus now refers not only to men who divorce their wives, but also to women who initiate divorce proceedings against their husbands. But we have already seen that in Jewish law a woman, for the most part, could not divorce her husband. So what's going on here? Many biblical scholars believe that when Mark wrote this particular part of the story he was reflecting the later Greco-Roman law and the Gentile culture of the early Christian community in his day, which did allow either spouse to request a divorce. So the real question being addressed at this point in this text isn't so much about divorce as it is about remarriage.

Is Jesus creating a new legal code, thereby condemning all who divorce and remarry? Is he establishing a new and even more impossible law to replace the already impossible Mosaic law? The short answer (though not particularly simple) is no. As mentioned earlier in this sermon, rather than establishing hopelessly high standards for marriage, Jesus is calling us to a purposely high vision for marriage.

Instead of looking at the issue of divorce and remarriage through a legalistic lens, it needs to be approached pastorally. It's not as if Jesus is saying that those who are divorced are more sinful than those whose marriage is intact. An intact marriage proves neither that the marriage partners are sinless nor that they are less sinful than a couple that has divorced.

Is an intact but abusive marriage any less sinful than a broken marriage? No. Jesus was not telling a battered woman that she and her children must risk physical or psychological torment every day just to avoid divorce.

I think Jesus' approach is more along the lines that our only hope, whether single, married, or divorced, is the grace and forgiveness of God. **Jesus, I feel certain, was trying to challenge the casual attitude of his day toward marriage and divorce. Perhaps addressing that same casual attitude is the real lesson for the church today.**

It's not, then, a matter of wanting tougher laws and judgmental attitudes toward those who choose the route of divorce, or those who seek to remarry. Rather, it's a matter of **seeking to make relationships and marriage what God intends them to be – a source of mutual blessing for all involved.** It's a call to engage in the hard work to make a marriage successful. But we all know that isn't always possible.

A crucial issue in all this is what should our response be as a community of faith to those whose lives have suffered through the pain of divorce and a broken relationship? Nothing less than extending the comfort, love, and support that God extends to us. **The pastoral responsibility of the church is to participate in healing, not adding to the tragedy with judgmental attitudes or actions.** For yes, there are some

congregations where divorced persons feel that they are not welcomed. But that is not the case here at College Hill.

Perhaps the current high rate of divorce is partially an indictment directed toward the church itself for not doing enough to help support people in their marriages and partnerships.

So in the end the real issue isn't so much about divorce laws as it is helping ourselves and one another to strive for and work hard on the loving and lasting relationships that God intends – for better or for worse.

Amen.