

Why God “Hates” Divorce

Mark 10:1 says, “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.”

As we continue our series from Mark this morning, I would remind you that Jesus and His disciples are on their way south to Jerusalem. They are moving from the glory of the Mt. of Transfiguration to the suffering of Mt. Calvary, moving from being bathed in heaven's light to the darkness of the garden tomb. The enemies of Jesus are becoming more and more determined to silence and destroy Him.

This is important to recognize as we move further into Mark 10; notice verse 2: "Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?'"

The Pharisees do not ask this question because they are looking for moral guidance but to set a trap for Jesus. Mark says they “tested him by asking.” This reminds me of what we see between reporters in today’s media and those running for President in the 2008 election. Biased reporters ask loaded questions to test and hopefully create a sensational headline for the evening news. Right or wrong, candidates will probably be chosen and next year’s election will probably be decided on how skilled the candidates are in dodging questions rather on the strength of their character or overall ability to run the country.

Coming back to Jesus and the Pharisees, [The Pulpit Commentary](#) gives this explanation: “in the time of our Lord the scribes and doctors of the Law were ranged in two parties, namely, the followers of Hillel, the most influential; and the followers of Shammai. These two schools differed widely on the subject of divorce. The followers of Shammai only permitted divorce in the case of moral defilement, while the followers of Hillel placed the matter entirely in the power of the husband. The object, therefore, of this artful question was to entrap our Lord, and to bring him into collision with one or other of these two opposing parties.” In other words, if Jesus said that it was illegal for a man to divorce his wife except in the most blatant cases of immorality, he exposed himself to the hostility of many of the wealthy classes, who divorced their wives for any cause. But if he allowed the lawfulness of divorce at all, then they would accuse Him of breaking the implied command of Genesis two, where a man and a woman marry to become “one flesh.” The way the Pharisees had it figured, Jesus would be in trouble with someone regardless of his answer. It was a trick question. They have presented Moses arguing with Moses and they want Jesus to pick between them.

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Notice in verse 3, how Jesus takes the initiative and gains control of the conversation. Rather than allowing them to pin Him down one way or another, He asks a question of them: Mark 10:3 says, “What did Moses command you?” he replied. Here we see that Jesus gets the Pharisees to reveal their hand. Will it be Moses number one or Moses number two? How do you vote? Do you stand with Hillel or Shammai? In verse 4, They reveal their choice, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.”

It's interesting that although the Pharisees were legalists, they were legalists in a way that would benefit their own desires. Though generally speaking they were conservatives, they liked the liberal divorce law. Matthew's version of this same conversation reveals just how liberal that law was: Matthew 19:3 says, "Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?'"

In a culture where power was heavily given over to men, the Pharisees liked the idea that wives could be treated as property to be controlled and discarded at will. It's what you would find among Muslim extremists today. Wear your burka and stay in line or you're gone. Speak up and you're smashed back down. Sin and be stoned to death. The husband has all the control. We need to understand the conversation here in this context or we will misunderstand where Jesus is coming from. We will also miss how this conversation plays into His rejection and crucifixion. The Pharisees weren't going to like what Jesus says next.

Jesus says, in Mark 10:5-9: "It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," "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."

Jesus explains the Moses' number two position as an accommodation to man's sinfulness. Because of Israel's inability to keep faith with the Lord and because of men's stubborn hearts in relation to their wives; and, because they were going to divorce no matter what God said, Moses gave them a procedure where it could be done orderly and in a way that the disposed of wives would have some measure of legal protection. The certificate of divorce gave the divorced woman certain rights; the right to return to her father's house for support and protection, the right not to be further molested by the husband who divorced her, even the right of marriage to another man.

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The writ of divorce was a way to ease the burden of a divorced woman, in a society where otherwise she would have no hope for a new beginning. Jesus acknowledges and explains the origins of the divorce regulations found in the Law of Moses. He doesn't dismiss them.

But neither is Jesus going to allow the Pharisees to make Him a champion of divorce. Divorce is never God's perfect will or a part of God's perfect plan. In fact, as stated in Malachi 2:6, God ‘hates divorce.’” Jesus stands for what God has ordained: One man plus one woman equals one flesh for a lifetime. What God has joined together, let no man put asunder!

I would remind you again on where we are in Mark's gospel. The movement is down toward Jerusalem and the cross. We can imagine the Pharisees and teachers of the Law who followed the Hillel school, grinding their teeth and going away to plot Jesus' death. If your memory is good you will remember here what happened to John the Baptist. What did John do to invoke the wrath of Herod? Remember? He condemned Herod's marriage to his brother's wife Herodias. John said it wasn't right, and for that reason Herod threw John into prison and for that reason Herodias wouldn't quit until John's head was presented to her on a platter. No one was going to mess with their freedom to do whatever they pleased with whomever they pleased. Jesus certainly knew how His stand for God's original design for marriage would play in the minds of His enemies. Those who thought like Herod and Herodias were in the majority, at least among the privileged classes.

We get an idea of how pervasive the liberal attitude toward divorce was from an unlikely source. Jesus' own disciples questioned the sanity of Jesus' insistence that divorce was wrong. Mark 10:10-12 say, "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." According to Matthew 19:10, the disciples go so far as to say, "If this is the way it is between a man and his wife, it is better not to marry." Apparently their philosophy was never to enter into a relationship without an escape hatch. Their view of marriage was not very high. They too, wanted the freedom to do as they pleased.

It's amazing, isn't it, to see how far we've come only to end up where we began. The more things change, the more they stay the same. First century men and women wanted to do what they pleased, and Twenty-first century men and women want exactly the same thing. We want

license to sin, and if it's wrong to marry and divorce, well we won't marry to begin with. We'll just live together with no commitment.

But do you know what? That's exactly why God hates divorce and institutes marriage. It's all about the commitment. It is God's unwavering commitment to us and our commitment to Him in return that makes possible and secures our salvation. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." **That is commitment.** "That whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." **That, too, is commitment.**

In the Old Testament and in the New, God uses marriage as a metaphor of the covenant relationship between God and His people. God's faithfulness to us and our faithfulness to Him is of supreme importance. In Scripture, when God's people forsake Him and worship other gods, this is called spiritual prostitution. The whole book of Hosea is written to emphasize God's faithfulness toward His wayward people and to call them to come back under the shelter of their marriage covenant with God. One cannot break his or her marriage vows without also breaking covenant with God. The first reason God hates divorce is because it is a breaking of this sacred covenant.

A second reason God hates divorce is that divorce ruptures and brings chaos to families. Whenever the marital covenant is broken, the devil gains free access to everyone involved. Children and extended families inevitably suffer. Adultery fosters adultery. In Matthew 5:32 Jesus says, "But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery." This is a hard word, and I do not share it to condemn anyone who has been placed into this circumstance; God forgives all manner of sin. He is the God of new beginnings and freely forgives and blesses those who have failed or have become the victims of such failure. Even more than that, when they are offered to Him in a spirit of humility and repentance, the Lord can and does bless subsequent marriages. **His grace is greater than all our sin.**

Nevertheless, the second reason God hates divorce is that it brings so much confusion and pain to people whom He loves. When our hearts are broken, His heart is broken also. God is the God of peace and order and desires peace and order for His people. The commandments are given to establish and maintain a peaceful and orderly society.

The third reason God hates divorce is that it short-circuits our spiritual growth. I talked with you last Sunday about "askesis." I want to offer you another definition for "askesis" this morning. "'Askesis' is a place of confinement designed for the refinement of our souls," or as I said last Sunday, "to make us holy." Marriage too is a form of "askesis." In marriage we make commitments and accept certain restrictions. We promise to be loving and loyal to each other, and not to violate the sacred trust. We limit what we can do and say to those things that will enhance and preserve the marriage. Hopefully it is never as bad as being in the belly of a fish, still it is confining. But such confinement is good for us. Taking loving responsibility for another person is good for us. Making the kind of sacrifices and adjustments needed to live well in the committed relationship of marriage is good for us. God desires to use marriage to mature and perfect us—to squeeze the best from us for His glory. He uses marriage to teach us patience, self-control, generosity, forgiveness, and the real meaning of love. God hates divorce because it interrupts the process of our sanctification. What this really means is that God hates divorce because He loves us and desires us to become all that we are meant to be in Christ. Long-term intimate relationships are meant to mature us and make us more like Jesus.

God hates divorce because it breaks covenant, breeds chaos, and destroys one of His best plans for the protection and perfecting of His children. He invites us to keep faith with Him and with one another because, as Max Lucado says, "He's crazy about us." And, even when we fail, He's still crazy about us, crazy enough to allow Himself to be nailed to a cross for our forgiveness! We also need to know that once we've received that forgiveness from Him, no one can condemn us. Life begins anew from that moment on.

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Mark 10:1-10

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