

Disciples & Divorce¹
Mark 10:1-12
ABC 11/5/23

Every generation of Christians seems to think they live in the most sinful time of human history. That may be true, because humanity has not changed since the fall; we are still sinful. In our culture with its no-fault divorce, we might think the US leads the world in divorces. Guess what? We don't! We tie for 10th along with Denmark, Latvia, & Lithuania. The top 3 are Maldives, Kazakhstan, & Russia.² & there have been societies in the past that were even worse. Why do I bring up divorce? Because that's what the Pharisees ask Jesus about in our text today, Mk 10. Divorce has been a hot topic among those who follow God for thousands of years. Even though divorce is brought up in our text, Jesus' primary focus continues to be preparing His disciples for His death & for their role as servant leaders in His church (since Mk 8:31). In this chpt we find Jesus' teaching about the radical demands of His kingdom with reference to marriage (1-12), children (13-16), & finances (17-31). With regard to marriage, Jesus' followers aren't to abandon their marriage simply because they're tired of it or think they'll be happier elsewhere. True discipleship isn't about self-gratification but about giving oneself in sacrificial service for the kingdom of God. Jesus' statements about marriage & divorce are part of His difficult demands for being His disciple. He's already told them they must lay down their lives to be His disciples (8:34-38); to be great means to be a servant (9:35, 37); many who think they are 1st will be last & many who think they are last will be 1st (9:35; 10:31); & whichever of the disciples wants to be 1st must become the slave of all (9:35; 10:44). In other words, if a believer wants to be great in the kingdom of God, he must humbly lay down his life in serving others. Jesus' teaching on divorce occurs right in the middle of this instruction about being great in His kingdom. All this teaching goes against what the disciples thought. It's clear the disciples weren't true servants yet. Instead of being humble, they looked down on those they thought unimportant. When Jesus says He'll set the example of being a servant by dying on the cross, Peter rebukes Him (8:32). They don't understand

¹ For further study on the topic of divorce see Guy Duty's, *Divorce & Remarriage* & John MacArthur's, *The Divorce Dilemma*

² <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/divorce-rates-by-country>

what Jesus teaches (9:32), they argue about which one of them is the greatest (9:34), & they don't understand what Jesus says about divorce (10:10). Marriage is all about humbly serving your spouse.

1. Departure For Judea 1

Mark says, **Getting up** while Mt 19 says, **when Jesus had finished these words...** He's been in Capernaum where He taught on humility & discipleship. In rabbinic tradition, Jesus sat while He was teaching & now **Jesus** got up & **He went from there**. He not only left Capernaum but also Galilee & travels south. Jesus will spend a few months in the Judean region, ministering to the people like He'd done in Galilee. Neither Mark nor Matthew give us the details of this Judean ministry but Lk (10-18) & Jn (7-11) describe many of the events during this time. **Beyond the Jordan** was on the east side of the Jordan River, from the south end of the Sea of Galilee, all the way to Jericho & was called the region of Perea. There was a large Jewish population there & **crowds gathered around Him again**. What did Jesus do? What He normally did, **He once more began to teach them**. Mt adds, **He healed them there too** (19:1). Jesus consistently showed His compassion, authority, & deity by healing others. He'd also teach them the truth concerning salvation, the good news that God alone can save someone from their sins, & their need to turn from their sin in repentance, & depend on God alone through faith in His Son.

2. Discussion About Divorce (2-9) While teaching & healing in this region, the Pharisees come to Jesus. They want to discredit Him before the people, damage His popularity, & destroy Him. They've been plotting to kill Him since Mk 3:6. Here they'll make another try at trapping Him using divorce as the issue. 2

The Pharisees' question about whether divorce is lawful is unusual, since the right to divorce was widely held within Judaism. What was debated were legitimate grounds for divorce. The stricter school of Rabbi Shammai allowed divorce only in the case of adultery. The more liberal school of Rabbi Hillel allowed it for almost any reason. Like today's no fault, irreconcilable differences divorces, back then you could divorce your wife for almost any reason. Rabbi Akiba went so far as

to say divorce was allowed even if a man *found another fairer than his wife*.³ It's not clear that any rabbi in Jesus' day would have condemned divorce outright. Malachi's protest against divorce in the OT, "**let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth. For I hate divorce,**" says the **LORD, the God of Israel...** (Mal 2:15-16), was turned on its head in the Aramaic translation, which reads, *If you hate her, divorce her*.⁴ A casual, accepting attitude toward divorce was the order of the day. Men were told that if his wife doesn't follow his direction, *separate her from yourself*.⁵ Josephus describes how he divorced his 1st wife because he *was not pleased with her behavior*.⁶ Divorce was as common then as now. Matthew says the Pharisees asked, **Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?** (19:3). This isn't a random question but a calculated attack. The Pharisees want a ruling from Jesus on the legitimacy of divorce. Whether this is a test of Jesus' legal knowledge or an attempt to trick Him into provoking the anger of Herod Antipas, Jesus refuses, as we'll see, to play their game. They knew what Jesus believed because He'd already taught in the SOTM, **I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; & whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery** (Mt 5:32). They knew what He believed. By asking this perhaps they hoped Jesus would sound harsh & unforgiving, so the crowds would turn against Him. They're trying to force Jesus to take a side so He will alienate a large portion of the population who are divorced or are in support of divorce. They're asking, *Is divorce an ongoing, continual possibility?* They're pressing Jesus to answer, *Are we continually free to divorce?* The Pharisees are even more calculating because they've saved this question until Jesus enters this region. They shrewdly ask Him to declare His position on divorce now, because the ruler over Perea has already arrested & killed John the Baptist, because John condemned the marriage of Herod Antipas. Herod was married & Herodias was married to his brother, Philip. Antipas desired Herodias & courted her away from her husband, his own brother Philip. Herod then divorced his wife, & Herodias divorced Philip. They then married each other. John the Baptist spoke out against their marriage, *It isn't lawful for you to have your*

³ Mishnah, *Git* 9:10

⁴ David E. Garland, *Mark*, p 378

⁵ Sir 25:26

⁶ *Life* 76 §426

brother's wife. You can't just divorce your wife & steal your brother's wife. That's adultery (Mk 6:17-18). Herodias hated John for that & pressured her husband to arrest John. You know the rest of the story. A banquet, a seductive dance, & a foolish promise led to *off with his head!* John confronted Herod & Herodias about divorce & it cost him his life. With Jesus, the Pharisees might have been hoping He'd publically declare the same position John held in the very territory ruled by Herod with Herodias. If they played this perfectly, Herod (or Herodias) would arrest Jesus & kill Him.

How does Jesus answer this question? If He replied that it wasn't lawful for a man to divorce his wife & marry again, He'd place Himself in opposition to Herod, who'd done just that (Mt 14:1-12). The Pharisees could then hope John's fate would also become Jesus' fate. The Pharisees may also have been setting a theological trap. The theological controversy among the rabbis concerning marriage & divorce came from Dt 24.

When a man takes a wife & marries her, & it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecent in her, & he writes her a certificate of divorce & puts *it* in her hand & sends her out from his house, & she leaves his house & goes & becomes another man's *wife*, & if the latter husband turns against her & writes her a certificate of divorce & puts *it* in her hand & sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her to be his wife, *then* her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD (24:1-4a).

The debate came with the definition of **indecent**. It doesn't say that the **indecent** is adultery. The law clearly stated the penalty for adultery was execution (Lev 20:10). If a man's wife committed adultery, he didn't have to bother with a divorce. He could have her stoned to death. Obviously, **indecent** means something else. Literally, it means *nakedness* & came to describe some shameful acts that were short of adultery. The Shammai school, the conservatives, argued that the only thing that would justify a divorce was the act of sexual infidelity. Anything less than that wasn't grounds for divorce, & the couple, even though they might be bitter & unhappy, had to stay together. The Hillel school, the liberals, took a much broader view of the **indecent**. They said it referred to anything a woman did that embarrassed, disgraced, or displeased her husband. Thus, they permitted divorce on virtually any ground. By Jesus' time, the prevailing view was that of the Hillel school.

Instead of ruling on legitimate grounds for divorce, Jesus turns them to the true nature & purpose of marriage & the hardness of human hearts that leads to divorce. The Pharisees come seeking reasons for divorce. Jesus responds that God's will was clearly set out for marriage in Gen 1–2 long before regulations for divorce were given. **3**

Jesus points the Pharisees back to God's Word. *What did God command you to do through Moses?* He exposes a fatal flaw in the Pharisees' whole approach to the law. They come to the law asking, *What does it allow me to do?* or, to put it more bluntly, *what can I get away with?* This preoccupation with legal loopholes ignores God's will, which is primarily concerned with love for God & for our neighbor (12:31). They're interested in their rights not their responsibilities. *They pursue legal liberation for a behavior no matter how it might affect another person.*⁷ Jesus doesn't avoid their question, but He cut through their customs, overlooked their culture, smashed their tradition, discarded what the rabbis taught, ignored everyone's opinion, & focused on God's Word as the only solution to their question & the only authority to obey. The Word of God is the truth that trumps all opinion. It's the Bible which overrules the rabbis. It's the Scripture Jesus relies on to answer this question. In doing so, He exposes their sinful interpretation. He proves to them God had a different plan for marriage. He asks them, **what did Moses command you?** They respond, **4**. The Pharisees aren't interested in God's design for marriage. They're not interested in one man & one woman united for life. They want to change their wives like they change their clothes. They needed an OT passage to help them justify divorce & that's Dt 24. They manipulated it, missing God's meaning. Dt 24:1-4 doesn't outline grounds for nor endorse divorce. It simply places restrictions on the man if he should divorce his wife. Moses never commanded divorce but only permitted it for less than ideal conditions. But the Pharisees were treating Moses' teaching on divorce as a command.

The Pharisees said, *There it is, Jesus. Moses commands divorce & you can send your wife away for any indecency or uncleanness!* & then they defined that any way they wanted. But what Moses wrote was only a compromise situation designed to reduce the fallout from men's hardness of

⁷ David E. Garland, *Mark*, p 379

heart. The legislation on divorce protected wives from abandonment. It freed a wife from the accusation of adultery when she, out of necessity, remarried; & it prevented the 1st husband from destroying her new marriage by trying to reclaim her.⁸ Dt 24 is a preventative principle so men don't say, *I think I'd like to try another wife for a few months. If I don't like her, I'll take my 1st wife back.* You can't do that. Once you divorce your wife, it's assumed she'll marry someone else. & when she does, there's no having her back. It's a command not to remarry a woman that you've divorced who has now married someone else. By referring to what **Moses permitted** (4) the Pharisees are looking for loopholes, what they can do & still stay within the legal limits of the law. Jesus redirects them from what God permits to what He commands. What God commanded was lifelong commitment to the marriage covenant (6). What He permitted was divorce because of the hardness of human hearts. **5**

While the Pharisees saw law & loopholes in Dt 24:1–4, Jesus saw it as concession because of the hardness of human hearts. **Hardness of heart** is found 5x in the LXX, always in the context of stubborn resistance to God. God didn't sanction divorce. He allowed it sometimes because of human sinfulness & for preventing even greater harm. Yet it was never God's intention for marriage. How did God's perfect design of marriage get so corrupted? Because of sin. God hates divorce. He never commanded it, & His original design of one man & one woman for life is perfect. To demonstrate this, Jesus goes back to God's creation of marriage. **6-8**

We don't find God's plan for marriage in Dt 24, but earlier in Gen 1–2, which is also a book of Moses. To prove His point, Jesus quotes from Gen 1:27 & 2:24. **From the beginning of creation** means in mankind's pre-fallen state. According to Jesus, the creation account establishes heterosexual lifelong monogamy as God's created order for marriage. Becoming **one flesh** is a powerful image. In a mysterious way, 2 distinct individuals now become united as a single entity, a couple. This new unit takes priority over previous allegiance both to parents (**leave his father & mother**) & to individual rights. The 2 are now responsible for the needs of the other (1 Cor 7:3–4). Since Adam & Eve had no parents to leave, the leaving of father & mother was a principle to be

⁸ David E. Garland, *Mark*, p 379

applied to all future generations. The marriage relationship is designed by God to be closer than the parent/child relationship. Husbands & wives are one for life. God intends for them to leave & be their own family. The word **leave** is a harsh term, meaning to abandon, leave behind, neglect, forsake, or even intentionally forget. **9**

Jesus concludes with a command. Since marriage is a sacred union accomplished by God Himself, no human being has the right to rip it apart. Jesus attacks this casual attitude toward divorce & calls them to honor the sacred marriage commitment. Marriage is an unbreakable union between one man & one woman. According to Mt 19:4, Jesus prefaced His reply with a pointed rebuke of the Pharisees' spiritual pride. **Have you not read...?** In spite of their supposed expertise in the law of Moses, Jesus charged them for their ignorance of it. Adam & Eve form the pattern for marriage, since **from the beginning of creation, God made them male & female**. Divorce & remarriage were impossible, since there were no other people. The Hebrew word translated **joined** in Gen 2:24 signifies the strongest possible bond & can be translated *cling, fasten its grip, follow closely, hold fast, stay close, or stick together*. Marriage involves 2 people unbreakably connected together, & pursuing hard after each other to be united in mind, will, spirit, body, & emotion. So strong is the union between husband & wife that the **two ... become one flesh; so they are no longer two, but one flesh** (8). That indivisible oneness is seen generally in the product of the **two**, their children. Breaking the marriage bond breaks the family bond, inflicting further damage. Every marriage is an act of God by which He bestows upon a man & a woman the common grace of a fulfilling union. Since it's God who creates the partnership, breaking a marriage destroys something divinely made. Therefore, Jesus commanded, **What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate** (9). To destroy a marriage is to destroy a creation of Almighty God. God's view of marriage & divorce is clear & unambiguous. It offered no support for the common Jewish view that divorce was permissible for any reason. To claim, as some professing Christians do, that God led them out of a marriage is to lie & make God a liar.

3. Disciples' Private Instruction (10-12) In vs 2-9 Jesus was talking to the Pharisees about divorce. Now in vs 10, Jesus is inside a house somewhere in Perea, talking to His disciples about divorce &

remarriage. Mark doesn't record the shocked reaction of the disciples to these words but Matthew does. **The disciples said to Him, "If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry"** (19:10). The Lord's word on divorce was so scandalous, the disciples ask Jesus, *Say what? We're not sure we heard You right.* **10**

In light of the generally casual attitude toward divorce in Judaism, Jesus' statement surprises the disciples & provokes further questions. Jesus' teaching represents the high standards of Christian discipleship. **11**

If Jesus' words in vs 9 were surprising to the disciples, this additional instruction is even more shocking. Jesus cuts through their customs, overlooks their culture, smashes their tradition, discards everything the rabbis taught, & speaks the truth. Not only is divorce contrary to God's purpose, Jesus says, but it results in adultery when the divorced spouse remarries.⁹ The logic here draws from Jesus' teaching in vss 6–9. If the 1st marriage is permanent in God's eyes, then remarriage after divorce is equivalent to adultery against the former wife.¹⁰ Some have claimed that Jesus allows divorce here (5) but rules out remarriage (11–12). This misses the point of the passage. Divorce without the right to remarriage was inconceivable in 1st-century Judaism. By its very definition, divorce meant the right to remarriage. Also, while Jesus acknowledges the reality of divorce (5), He in no way condones it, viewing it as contrary to God's will. Vss 11–12 don't introduce teaching different from vss 5–9, but rather explain its implications.¹¹ Divorce is contrary to God's purpose for marriage, arises from hard human hearts, & produces adultery. **12**

Although Jewish women, for the most part, couldn't initiate divorce,¹² Roman women could. In the Greco-Roman world in which Mark wrote his gospel, divorce was even easier, more informal, & much more common. Having 20 ex-spouses wasn't unusual. Either spouse could divorce simply by leaving home with that intention, & no justification was needed.¹³ Mark includes these words of

⁹ While Matthew's parallels (5:32; 19:9) introduce an exception clause, **except for sexual immorality**, neither Mark nor Luke (16:18) includes this phrase

¹⁰ Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, pp 425–426

¹¹ RT France, *Mark*, p 393

¹² Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.7.10 §259

¹³ David E. Garland, *Mark*, p 382

Jesus to make it clear that what applies to the husband also applies to the wife. He holds both sexes equally accountable. All divorce is contrary to God's Word & God's will.

Again Mt 19:10, **The disciples said to Him, "If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry."** They get it. When you get married, you're married for life. It's for good. It's forever. Their entire lives, the disciples had been told they could dump their wife for showing her ankles, messing up her hair, or talking bad about their mother-in-law. One rabbi said, *A bad wife is like leprosy—divorce her & be cured.* Another said, *If a man has a bad wife, it's a religious duty to divorce her.* Now they're getting a picture of God's holiness & character & His design for marriage. This is serious stuff. Judaism defined *divorce* as a husband's *right*, & then debated under what circumstances he could exercise this right. Jesus points out that divorce is neither a right nor a privilege, but rather a condescension to human sinfulness. It's contrary to God's will, even though it is *permitted* in certain circumstances.

There are 3 main views concerning divorce & remarriage in the church today.¹⁴ 1) Some say divorce is never allowed & that any divorce is viewed as illegitimate in God's eyes. They don't permit divorce on any grounds.¹⁵ They often cite this passage, declaring that Jesus overruled Moses' concession to human hardness of heart & absolutely banned divorce. Marriage, they say, is to be forever, because Jesus restored the original view of marriage, removing all provisions for divorce. 2) Others say divorce is allowed with specific causes, but remarriage is not. 3) Others allow for divorce & remarriage, but only on the biblical grounds of adultery (Mt 19:9) & desertion (1 Cor 7). But God's plan for marriage hasn't changed. Even if there's been adultery (or desertion) in a marriage, divorce doesn't have to happen. Remember Hosea & his wife, Gomer? Adultery is a sin with massive consequences, but adultery isn't the unforgivable sin. Reconciliation & forgiveness should be sought, remembering God's amazing forgiveness which was extended to you in Christ. Eph 4:32 says, **Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ also has forgiven you.** Honor the heart of God & be supportive of reconciliation.

¹⁴ R. C. Sproul, *Mark*, p 245

¹⁵ John Piper holds this view (www.desiringgod.org/articles/divorce-and-remarriage-a-position-paper)

Obviously, I don't have all the answers & we don't have time to look at all the Scriptures that come into play. But I think certain conclusions can be made. 1st, divorce is always tragic & a failure of a sacred covenant. Jesus responds to the casual attitude of His day with the shocking claim that, in light of the one-flesh union, remarriage after divorce constitutes adultery. This points to the true nature of marriage as a one-flesh union for life & the tragedy of divorce.

2nd, though sometimes necessary, divorce is always a result of human sinfulness. That God would allow us to end our marriages when they are violated by sexual immorality or desertion is an amazing concession to human sin, but that concession doesn't go so far as no-fault divorce or divorce on any grounds. Though God allowed divorce, He never sanctioned it.

All of us come to God every day as sinners in need of His grace. Those contemplating divorce or considering remarriage must approach this decision with prayer, repentance, humility, caution, & godly counsel. We must affirm strongly the true significance of marriage, the tragedy of divorce, & the redemptive power of the gospel. We must take greater steps to ensure the success of marriages. We should be doing everything in our power to prepare our children & youth to be good spouses & to strengthen existing marriages. & we must not forget the vital role of the gospel in all of this. Anyone who's been through a divorce or sinned sexually against their spouse needs to know these are not unforgivable. These sins are what sent Jesus to the cross & all who put their trust in Him are forgiven. The kingdom of God isn't closed to those who are divorced & we all should be quick to share this good news with those whose marriages have failed or are hurting.

Jesus makes radical demands of His disciples. He calls for us to put ourselves last in service to others & to be willing to sacrifice for others. These commands apply to the marriage relationship. If we obey the great commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself (12:31), that neighbor also includes your spouse. Loving a spouse as oneself rules out the possibility of divorce. If you think about it, the sin of divorce can occur in any marriage, whether there's a legal divorce or not. Many marriages may never end up in divorce court but they're just as cold & loveless & filled with hate & anger. One unhappy spouse observed, *I am not married, just undivorced.*¹⁶ God meant for the

¹⁶ David E. Garland, *Mark*, p 390

marriage between a man & woman to be mutually fulfilling & to last forever. In the context of Mk 8-10, the message seems clear. Since God meant for marriage to last forever, men should humbly serve their wives & wives should humbly serve their husbands. If we're looking for the answer to when we can divorce our spouse, we're asking the wrong question. We should be asking how we can serve our spouse? After all, that's what is pleasing to the Lord & true greatness is all about.¹⁷

PRAY

Communion – The similarity between marriage & our personal & corporate relationship with Jesus is commonplace in Scripture. Perhaps the most focused instance of this comparison is in Eph 5, where Paul speaks of Christ as a husband to His bride, the Church, & the bond between husband & wife as an embodiment of the mystery of union between Christ & His church. The husband is to cherish & protect his wife as he would his own body, & the wife is to honor & serve her husband as she would Christ Himself.

Wives, *be subject* to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself *being* the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives *ought to be* to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church & gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy & blameless. So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes & cherishes it, just as Christ also *does* the church, because we are members of His body. FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER & MOTHER & SHALL BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, & THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH. This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ & the church. Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, & the wife must *see to it* that she respects her husband (Eph 5:22-33).

Jesus says, Don't divorce your spouse & marry someone else. If you do, you've committed adultery.

Why is it adultery? Ultimately, because it betrays the truth about Christ that marriage is meant to display. Jesus never does that to His bride, the church. He never forsakes her. He never abandons her. He never abuses her. He always loves her. He always takes her back when she wanders. He is always patient with her. He always cares for her, provides for her, & protects her. &, wonder of wonders, He delights in her.

¹⁷ Kenneth Yates, <https://faithalone.org/grace-in-focus-articles/divorce-are-we-missing-the-main-point-mark-1011/>

When we partake of Communion, we would do well to see what we're doing as a renewal of our vow to submit to the Lordship of Christ, & a reaffirmation of trust in God's promise in Jesus to love & protect us, even to the giving up of His own life. In partaking of the bread & the wine, our life in Christ is renewed, & we rejoice like a bride whose husband has given his life for her but has been resurrected to continue living with her. In communion we have the opportunity to reaffirm our union with Jesus. Our earthly marriage to another mortal, however rich it is, will end someday, while marriage with Christ will last forever (Rev 19:6-9; 21:2-4, 9). PASS ELEMENTS

While they were eating, Jesus took *some* bread, & after a blessing, He broke *it* & gave *it* to the disciples, & said, "Take, eat; this is My body" (Mt 26:26).

As we eat of the bread we remember that Jesus **loved the church & gave Himself up for her**. He died in our place for our redemption, forgiveness, & salvation.

& when He had taken a cup & given thanks, He gave *it* to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins. But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom" (Mt 26:27-29).

We drink of the cup remembering Jesus' shed blood, His death for us. But we do so with eagerness, knowing that one day, we'll drink of the cup with Him in His Father's Kingdom at the **marriage supper of the Lamb** (Rev 19:9).