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**United**

Mark 10:2 – 16

There are some sermons that are plain *exciting* to preach. They come together quickly and feel energizing to get onto the page. You are excited to get into the pulpit, because you know that it is relevant and encouraging. It's a feel-good sermon, and it feels good to give it. Then there are sermons that you've struggled with for days and barely eek out, putting your nervous habit of biting your fingernails to good use.

You might have guessed with that kind of introduction, that writing this sermon was the *latter* experience for me. Preaching on a topic that so many can relate to, but have experienced with great pain, is *not* enjoyable to me. Divorce is painful and common, in and out of the church. On top of that, texts like Mark 10 have been used to guilt and manipulate, causing even greater pain. With that said, I would like to state up front, that my purpose is not to cause guilt, shame, or pain, but to invite us into a deeper consideration Scripture and discipleship.

Let's start with Scripture. I invite you to keep your Bibles open to Mark chapter 10 to follow along.

In Mark 10, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, to the cross. He knows that he will suffer and die, and is obediently journeying to Jerusalem. Verse 1 says that he enters the region of Judea, where our story takes place. He's getting closer to his destination, and he's not far from where King Herod lives.

This is the King Herod who married his sister-in-law, Herodias, and was criticized by John the Baptist. Do you remember that story from a few weeks ago? Herodias held a grudge against John, because he said that it was unlawful for Herod to have his brother's wife. Herodias' daughter danced for Herod, and Herod promised to give her anything she asked for, up to half his kingdom. She asked her mother what she should ask for, who told her, "The head of John the Baptist" (Mk 6:24b). Herod did

not *want* to have John killed, but because he made the promise to her and in front of guests, he ordered for John to be beheaded.

As Jesus enters Judea, he teaches the crowds, and guess who shows up? None other than the usual suspects, the Pharisees. You can almost hear the menacing soundtrack as they approach. They have come for no other purpose than to test Jesus. And it's *immediately suspicious* that their test centers on a topic that led to John's beheading, right in this very area. "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" they ask Jesus (Mk 10:2b).

In their day, divorce was a hotly debated topic, with Pharisees taking two different sides. There was the restrictive School of Shammai, which held that divorce was permitted for "adultery and adultery alone," and there was the lax School of Hillel, which gave a wide range of reasons for a man to divorce his wife. For example, "If a wife spoiled a dish of food...talked to a strange man, if she spoke disrespectfully of her husband's relatives in his hearing, if she was an argumentative woman...defined as [a] voice [that] could be heard in the next house," all of these and more were reasons a man could divorce his wife. And it was *this* view that prevailed in their day. "The result was that divorce for the most trivial reasons, or for no reason at all, was tragically common." And "women hesitated to marry...because marriage was so insecure."<sup>1</sup>

Divorce was common, because it was widely accepted and implemented by the religious leaders. This was no secular process. Certificates of divorce were written by skilled rabbis and lodged with the Sanhedrin, the Jewish court. And "the process of divorce remained on the whole exceedingly easy, and at the entire discretion of the man."<sup>2</sup>

The Pharisees come to test Jesus, by asking if it's *lawful* for a man to divorce his wife. It's clearly a test, because the only answer is, "Yes." Of *course* it's lawful for a man to divorce his wife. So if Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, 278.

<sup>2</sup> Barclay, 277.

takes the bait and says “yes,” maybe he’ll get caught in a dispute over which school of thought he agrees with, his response will reach the ears of Herod, and he really *will be* in trouble!

But Jesus doesn’t care to argue or to play their game. In verse 3, Jesus responds with a question. “What did Moses command you?”

They reply, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away” (Mk 10:4).

Did you catch that? Instead of referencing a *command* of Moses, they point to a *permission* found in Deuteronomy 24.

But Jesus is not wanting to hear whether or not Moses *permitted* divorce; he wants to hear what Moses *commanded*. In verse 5, Jesus says that it was because of their hardness of heart that Moses wrote that 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 flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Mk 10:5 – 10).

Instead of quoting from Deuteronomy, Jesus quotes *another* book that was commonly believed to have been written by Moses, the book of Genesis. He quotes Genesis 1:27 and 2:24, pointing to the deeper reality of marriage, that in marriage, two become one. Two were created to become united as one flesh; therefore, let no one separate what God has united. It is *nothing* to rejoice over, when a loophole is discovered or when reasons stack up to sever a marital relationship. Jesus wants to dwell on the *purpose* and *reality* of marriage, not quibble over how to justify divorce and put a feather in *any* theologian’s cap.

God created man and woman to be *united*. God did not intend for that union to be severed, for that relationship to end. God’s intention was that that union would last forever. And Genesis reveals

something *more*, something *deeper*. Genesis says that in marriage, two become *one flesh*. *Two become one flesh*.

One of my favorite things as a little girl was to hear the story of how my parents met. I don't know how many times they told me, but it never got old. There was always a new detail, always an angle I hadn't heard. I later learned from a counseling professor in seminary, that one of the indicators of a healthy marriage, or even a *hopeful* marriage, is one where the couple fondly remembers the beginning of their relationship and how they met.

One of the couples I greatly admire at St. Timothy's is Warren and Jennie Finch. I admire their kindness toward one another, their deference to one another, the way they want to do things together – even watch our son for hours and hours! I love how they tease each other and greatly respect and love one another. They recently told me, tongue in cheek, that they feel exasperated, because they even make the same “smart” remarks to the silliest things. They laugh, because they have become more and more like one another as the years have passed, more and more as one.

Marriage is something we all feel strongly about, because it's foundational to who we are and how we understand the world. It's personal and sensitive, because in marriage, two become one. And perhaps the ones who know that best, are the ones who have lost their spouse, whether through death or divorce. When they lose their other half, the feeling often expressed is a loss of their own body. A friend once said, *I feel like I have lost a limb. Sometimes, it feels like that limb is still there, and I reach out, and there's nothing. I ache.*

One of the resources we distribute at St. Timothy's is a series of booklets called *Journeying through Grief*, by Kenneth C. Haugk. These booklets are powerful companions in grief. One of the ways Haugk describes loss is in reference to time. He writes that when you lose a *parent*, it is like losing your *past*. When you lose a *spouse*, it is like losing your *present*.

Marriage was created by God to unite us forever. And when that union is broken, there is a tremendous deal of grief. So there is no reason for Jesus to debate divorce.

Let's look at what happens next. In verse 10, it says that they go into the house, and his disciples ask him about this. Jesus replies in verse 11, "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" (Mk 10:11 – 12).

Jesus' response here seems *shocking*. For him *not* to comment on divorce with the Pharisees, but then to tell his disciples that remarriage is adultery, seems *especially* harsh. How do we understand these verses?

I needed some help, so I went to my commentary library. In a seminary professor's commentary on Mark, he highlights the strangeness of these verses. He writes, "Here Jesus seems to reintroduce rules about divorce right after arguing that texts containing such rules are not to be the focus...Everything depends on what question Jesus is answering."

Verse 10 says that Jesus' disciples ask him about "this." What is "this?" Two possibilities are: "1. When is divorce and/or remarriage wrong?" and "2. Is it still adultery if I first divorce my present wife and then marry the person I want to sleep with?" If Jesus' response is to the first question, a tension is created "with the message of the rest of Scripture" and with the "focus of [the previous verses], where Jesus is not preoccupied with rules about divorce." It just doesn't seem to fit.

So what if Jesus is answering the second question: *Is it still adultery if I first divorce my wife and then marry the person I want to sleep with?* If Jesus' response is to the second question, "Jesus is then insisting that God calls for marital faithfulness; he does not permit legal games to justify sin." These verses deny "that adultery can be legalized and...justified by means of divorce and remarriage."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Tim Geddert, *Mark*, 231.

In these verses, Jesus is also surprisingly *elevating* women. In a culture which gave women very little recourse in their marriages, Jesus is equally calling *men* to fidelity as he is to *women*. Men are responsible for maintaining their marriages, just as women are. Men and women are *equally responsible* for the care of their marriage.

As disciples of Jesus, it *matters* how we treat one another, especially the most vulnerable and the ones closest to us. It *matters* how we treat our husbands and wives. It *matters* what the quality of our marriages are like.

But wading into conversations about marriage and divorce is difficult, not simply because of how personal it is, but because there also have frequently been two polar opposite responses – the secular and the religious. The secular response is that marriage does not carry any deeper meaning than a piece of paper, so divorce is really ok, even if it's for a reason like your spouse no longer making you happy. But the Christian response has often been *equally* unacceptable. Many Christians read Scripture and come away with the idea that divorce is *never* acceptable, so women have been encouraged to stay in abusive relationships for years, silently suffering while the church turns a blind eye.

In Mark 10, Jesus gives no simple answer. He doesn't give a vote of confidence for divorce, and he doesn't deny divorce. He points to *marriage* and the seriousness of marriage. He points to a third way.

Life is not so simple, and Jesus doesn't treat it as if it were. His compassion for the hurt, the powerless, and the lost, meets you and me where we are, and gently shepherds us into deeper discipleship.

And that discipleship may take on a variety of forms. For those who are called to singleness, I encourage you to praise God for the unique union that you have with Jesus, wholly committed to his purposes. May God be glorified in your life! If you find yourself recently single, I encourage you to ask for prayer, that this unexpected time may draw you closer to God. If you are single but desire to be

married, I encourage you to pray for patience until God brings you the one who will sharpen you and draw you even more closely to Jesus. If you are in a painful marriage, I encourage you to seek support. You are not meant to go this alone. Ask for prayer from trusted friends or family, and find a counselor that you can trust. If you are in a healthy marriage, remember that your relationship with your spouse requires continual tending. And remember that your relationship with your husband or wife is the most important human relationship that you have – more important than your children, your parents, your coworkers, or anyone else. Treasure and give thanks for your spouse.

As we journey together on this path of discipleship, may Jesus *alone* be our shepherd, and may he guide us in paths of righteousness for *his* name's sake.