

THE DIVORCE TRAP

One of the great blessings of preaching through books of the Bible is that, sooner or later, you will preach on every subject imaginable. But, one of the disadvantages is that, sooner or later, you will preach on every subject imaginable. Today we come to one of those necessary but difficult subjects.

As chapter 10 opens, the Lord Jesus is moving steadily closer to His destiny. Verse 1 says, "**Then He arose from there and came to the region of Judea by the other side of the Jordan.**" Jesus leaves Galilee and heads toward Judea, His ultimate goal is Jerusalem. Every step He takes brings Him closer to the cross where He will lay down His life sinners who need salvation.

As Jesus prepares His disciples for the cross, His enemies increase their attacks. The Jewish religious leaders attempt to discredit Jesus in the eyes of the people.

The Pharisees and the Scribes come to Jesus seeking His opinion on the hot button issue of divorce. They really didn't care about the Lord's opinion, they were actually trying to catch Him in a trap.

It may seem strange to us, but divorce was even more rampant in that society than it is in ours. Some historians have noted that it was not uncommon for a Roman male to have as many as fifteen to twenty wives in his lifetime. Divorce rates among the Jewish people were not that drastic, but divorce was a real problem in that society.

It continues to be a problem in ours as well. There are almost one million divorces in America each year. The human tragedy that arises out of these divorces is immeasurable. Think of it this way, when a million marriages end in divorce there are at least two million adults and several million children that are affected. Add to that the devastation that divorce brings into the extended families of those folks, and the number of those impacted by divorce becomes staggering. Not a single person involved in any area of a divorce escapes totally undamaged.

That being said, we are living in an age when nearly every family has been touched by the cold hand of divorce. I realize that I am preaching to some people who have been through divorce. You know the pain, the shame, and the turmoil of divorce much better than I do. My intent today is not to hurt you any more than you have already been hurt. I simply want to try and preach what Jesus said about this issue in as loving a way as possible.

So today, I want to tackle the issue of marriage and divorce. In the short time we have this morning I cannot cover this subject comprehensively. I am sure that I will not answer all your questions. What I hope to do is to stimulate your heart and mind to seek the truth of God's word regarding this issue.

Please follow along in your Bibles as I read **Mark 10:1-12**:

1 Then He arose from there and came to the region of Judea by the other side of the Jordan. And multitudes gathered to Him again, and as He was accustomed, He taught them again.

2 The Pharisees came and asked Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" testing Him.

3 And He answered and said to them, "What did Moses command you?"

- 4 They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to dismiss her."
5 And Jesus answered and said to them, "Because of the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept.
6 But from the beginning of the creation, God 'made them male and female.' ;
7 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife,
8 and the two shall become one flesh'; so then they are no longer two, but one flesh.
9 Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."
10 In the house His disciples also asked Him again about the same matter.
11 So He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her.
12 And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

Today I want you to see The Pharisees And Their Attack; The Lord And His Answer; and The Disciple And Their Amazement. Let's consider these thoughts as I try to preach on the subject: What About Divorce?

I. THE PHARISEES' ATTACK (vs. 1-2)

The Pharisees come to Him with an argument they think is unanswerable. We are told in verse 2 that they came to Him **"testing"** Him. This word carries the idea of *"testing in a malicious sense."* These men are trying to trap Jesus in a theological debate. They are trying to undermine His credibility in the eyes of the people. Verse 1 tells us that a great crowd has gathered to hear Jesus teach. They may even be trying to get Jesus arrested and killed.

To understand the nature of their attack, we need to first understand the state of marriage in Israel in that day. Marriages in ancient Israel were not usually based on romance. Men took wives for convenience. Marriage was the only lawful way for a man to satisfy his sexual appetite. When a man married a woman, he got a sexual partner, and as a bonus, he got someone to clean his house, cook his meals, wash his cloths and give birth to his children. Women were viewed as possessions that could be acquired and abandoned as the needs and desires of the husband changed.

The question the Pharisees ask is very straight forward. They ask, **"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"**

There were two basic schools of thought on this topic in Israel. Two rather famous rabbis had handed down their teaching on the matter and most people in Israel followed one of these two rabbis.

One of these rabbis was a man named Shammai. He taught that the only lawful reason a divorce could be granted was for adultery. The Law commended that adulterers were to be put to death by stoning, Lev. 20:10. By the New Testament time period, however, stoning for that reason had been outlawed, and divorce became the remedy for adultery in the marriage. Only the man was allowed to seek a divorce; women could not divorce their husbands regardless of their

reasons. The teachings of Shammai were followed by a small minority of the population and the religious leaders.

The other rabbi was a man named Hillel. Hillel held a very liberal view of divorce. He taught that a man could divorce his wife for any reason at all. If she took down her hair in public; if she was seen talking to another man; if she ruined a meal by burning the food or by putting too much salt into it; if she spoke evil of her mother-in-law; if she was infertile; even if her husband saw a woman he thought was prettier, he could divorce her. As you might imagine, this was the most popular view of divorce among the male leaders of Israel. Most of the Pharisees followed the teachings of Hillel. Matthew's account of this same encounter in Matthew 19:3, makes it clear what they were asking, **"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?"**

Why would they use this question to attack Jesus? When you think about, it was very ingenious. If Jesus sided with the view taught by Shammai, He would alienate many of the people who came to hear Him speak. Most of the men in His audiences would have embraced the teachings of Hillel.

Perhaps they were hoping that Jesus would contradict the Law of Moses and they could accuse Him based on that. Jesus had often attacked their interpretation of the Law of Moses.

Of course, this confrontation took place in the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas. Remember him? He was the King who married his brother Phillip's wife. She was his half-niece. John the Baptist had condemned Herod's divorce and remarriage. Herod put John in prison for his words, and eventually had him killed. It may be that the Pharisees hoped to see Jesus arrested and executed for preaching against the marriage of Herod and his wife.

Whatever their motives were for coming to Jesus, these men were not interested in the truth. They were only interested in justifying their own sinfulness in their own eyes.

II. THE LORD'S ANSWER (vs. 3-9)

The first thing Jesus does is to turn the tables on them, v. 3. He asks them **"What did Moses command you?"** In other words, Jesus asks, "What does scripture say about this matter?"

Jesus knows what these men believe about this issue. He knows that most of them have been married and divorced multiple times. He knows they are guilty in the eyes of God. He knows they are trying to trap Him.

So, Jesus focuses the issue on the Word of God. That is always a good tactic to use when someone tries to draw you into a theological argument. Just look at them, hand them a Bible and say, "Show me!"

Their answer, v. 4, proves their ignorance of both the Word of God and of divorce. They answer, **"Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to dismiss her."** Their response in Matthew 19:7 more clearly shows what they thought about divorce, **"Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?"** These men felt like divorce was not just a right, but an obligation to be followed.

The Pharisees base their argument on Deut. 24:1-4. Most Jews interpreted this passage to teach that divorce was an obligation. However, a careful reading of

these verses clearly reveals that they do not command, recommend, or even suggest divorce. These verses were given to regulate a situation that had gotten out of hand.

Men were divorcing their wives and sending them out of their homes with a “bill of divorcement”. It is said that the husband had found some “uncleanness” in his wife. This word does not refer to adultery or fornication. Both of these offenses were punishable by death, Deut. 22:20-22.

The word speaks of an immodest act that falls short of the legal definition of adultery. She might have been caught flirting with other men or uncovering herself in public. Some scholars believe that it might refer to any reason the husband could think of that made him want to get rid of her.

At any rate, the husband divorces the wife and sends her away. She goes out and marries another man. Because there was no legal ground for the divorce, she becomes defiled when she remarries. She is guilty of adultery. This law prohibits her first husband from remarrying her if she is divorced again, or if her second husband dies.

So, rather than commanding or condoning divorce, Deut. 24:1-4 was given to control divorce, which was rampant in that society. The Pharisees and others who advocated easy divorce were guilty of misinterpreting and misapplying the Word of God.

Jesus responds to their question by reminding them, **"Because of the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept,"** v. 5. In other words, divorce is always the result of sin and hardness of heart.

Every divorce occurs because there is sin in the hearts of one or both of the parties involved. Regardless of the reasons for a divorce, there is always sin at the heart of it. One or both of the parties involved is guilty of some “hardness of heart” in the matter. One or both parties will not repent of their sins or forgive the other.

In ancient Israel, divorce was out of control. Men were divorcing their wives for all kinds of frivolous reasons. All a man had to do was to say to his wife three times, “I divorce you!”, and in the eyes of man, they were divorced. These women were being sent out of their homes by their husbands with no legal protection. A “bill of divorcement” told society that the woman was not a harlot, but that she was free to remarry.

The law Moses gave them was given to control a sinful system that arose out of man’s refusal to honor God’s ideal for marriage. Such a situation should never have existed in the first place, but because of the sinfulness of the human heart it did and it needed to be controlled.

Now having dealt with the pet scripture of the Pharisees, Jesus goes back to God's original design for marriage.

God's Design for Marriage (vs. 6-8):

1. Marriage is one man for one woman. In verses 6-8, Jesus goes back to the beginning, all the way back to creation. The Lord reminds them that **"from the beginning of the creation, God 'made them male and female.'** (see Gen. 1:27). God’s command to this first couple was for them to **“be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth,”** Gen. 1:28.

God's design for marriage is built into creation. It is inherent in the nature of human beings as male and female. God made a man and a woman. He did not make a group of people that were free to join themselves together as they saw fit. It was not one man and several women. It was not two men or two women. It was to be one man and one woman, only. Any other combination was against God's original design.

In the order of creation, there was one man and one woman. There were no extra people. There were no other choices. They were created for each other and for no one else. Their union was complete, and they are a pattern for all to follow, every marriage is no less an indissoluble union between one and one woman.

2. Marriage is a primary relationship. Under God's divine design Jesus says, **"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife."** **"Be joined"** literally means *"to be glued together"*. The marriage bond is a strong bond. God meant it to be an indivisible bond that was to endure for a lifetime. All other human relationships are secondary to this one. We are to leave father and mother and be glued to each other. In God's view, marriage is a lifetime commitment between one man and one woman for one lifetime.

3. Marriage is becoming one flesh. In verse 8 Jesus says, **"and the two shall become one flesh"; so then they are no longer two, but one flesh.** This speaks of far more than just the joining of their bodies together in the act of having sex. It suggests that they become one person in God's eyes.

The married couple becomes one in their goals, their direction, their will, their emotions, their mind and their spirit. They move together through life not as two separate people, but as one. When a marriage produces a child, that baby is the perfect picture of their oneness. Their child is the fusing of two persons into one. Babies are a living, breathing illustration of the biblical principle of "one flesh".

4. Marriage is God's work. In verse 9, Jesus reveals God's view of marriage, **"Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate"** Jesus tells us that every marriage is "made in heaven". The union of two people in the covenant of marriage is a sacred and honorable thing in the eyes of God, Heb. 13:4. Jesus is telling us that God marriage is the work of the Lord while divorce is always the work of man. No one has the right to destroy a marriage. What God has glued together is not to be ripped apart by man!

When a marriage is destroyed through divorce, a creation of God is destroyed by man. No matter what your reasons were for getting married, your marriage was the creation of God. It is not your place to tear that bond apart. It is your place to make your marriage work and to make it last a life time. In our day, marriage has become a disposable commodity. People get married on a whim and divorced at their convenience. That is not God's will for marriage. God's desire is that every marriage last a lifetime.

Unfortunately, sin has ruined everything God created, even the institution of marriage. The sad truth is, people get married and people get divorced too. The rest of this passage, and this message, deal with divorce and its aftermath in the lives of men, women and families.

III. THE DISCIPLES' AMAZEMENT (vs. 10-12)

In these verses, the scene shifts. The Pharisees did not get what they came after. In fact, if you read Matthew's account of this encounter, Jesus basically called them adulterers, because they were divorcing their wives at will and marrying other women, Matt. 19:9. They have once again been embarrassed by Jesus and they leave.

When Jesus is alone with His disciples, His men are concerned about the things they have heard Jesus say. They want to know more. In truth, they are astonished! Divorce was so common in that day that nobody thought anything about people divorcing and remarrying. What they have heard Jesus say about marriage has alerted them that God has a higher view of marriage than what they have been taught and shown by society.

In verses 11-12, Jesus makes a straightforward statement about divorce. He says when either a man or a woman divorces their mate and marries another person; they are guilty of adultery in the eyes of the Lord.

Mark does not mention any exceptions. Matthew's account does. There Jesus says, **"And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery."**

The exception of course is sexual immorality. So, if you divorce for the cause of sexual sin and marry somebody else, that's not adultery. That's the exception. Jesus taught the same thing in His sermon on the mount in Matthew 5:32. But here Mark is giving the rule, not the exception to the rule.

Divorce, even in this kind of extreme situation, should always be the last resort. Reconciliation, repentance and restoration should all come first.

Let me just say that although divorce is always the result of sin, divorce is not the unforgivable sin. All sins can be and are forgiven at the cross of Jesus Christ.

If you are married and your marriage is strong, you should come with your spouse and bow before the Lord in thanksgiving. You should praise Him for blessing you home and you should ask Him to help you divorce proof your marriage. There are plenty of families that have been shattered by the blight of divorce, and many thought it could never happen to them. No home, no family, and no person is above it happening to them.

If you are divorced, or if you are divorced and remarried, then you need to know that God understands the pain you have been through. And you need to know that God forgives. You are not a second-class believer just because you are divorced or remarried. If you have been divorced, you should also bow before the Lord. If you haven't already, ask God to forgive you. And ask Him to help you be holy in whatever marital state you find yourself today.

If you have been guilty of judging the victims of divorce, you need to bow before the Lord and seek His forgiveness.

If you have never been saved, you need to know that Jesus Christ will save your soul and forgive your sins if you will come to Him and ask Him. If you have never received Christ into your heart, I invite you to do that today.