

Sermon outline and notes:

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Mark 10:1-16 “If You’re Considering Divorce”

Intro. This past Tuesday night I did something I’ve never done before. I stood before 12 of the couples of our church & led them to renew their marriage vows. All had been married 17 years or more. At least 3 couples had been married over 50 years! It was a joy to see evidence of the fact that these couples had already demonstrated commitment to their marriages. It was an added joy to see them renew their commitment to their spouses.

Yet all too often, marriages end in divorce. Well in this text of Scripture Jesus deals with the issue of marriage and divorce. The occasion for our Lord’s teaching on this subject is found in v.2. This was toward the end of our Lord’s ministry, and His enemies were looking for some opportunity to accuse Him of something. So they ask Him concerning the thorny issue of divorce. It was really a live issue at the time because King Herod had put away his wife and married his brother Philip’s wife. John the Baptist had been beheaded because he had spoken out against it. So they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” If Jesus answered no, it would bring him into conflict with Herod. Perhaps Herod & his new wife would do their dirty work for them & have Jesus arrested & put to death. On the other hand, if He said yes to their question, they could accuse Him of being lax in His teaching on divorce. In spite of their motive and the fact that some would not like what He had to say, Jesus answered their question and taught on this very important subject. I believe He did so because of the foundational importance of the marriage covenant.

This is one of the most important subjects of our day. They say that about 1/2 of all marriages end in divorce, which is not really true, because it is based on comparing the number of divorces with the number of marriages in the same year. Nevertheless, it is quite true that the number of couples divorcing has dramatically increased since 1960. One thing I like about the Bible is that it deals with life the way it is. And so, since divorce is common among us, God speaks to this subject in the Bible.

Now whenever you deal with the subject of divorce, we must be careful that we do not go in one of two extremes. We must not go in the direction of permissiveness, nor should we go in the direction of harshness. Now please understand that my message is not intended toward those of you who have gone through the pain of divorce. For most of you, it is something that you cannot undo. Rather, my main purpose is to help our young people and married people avoid the pain and consequences of divorce. My purpose is not to heap guilt upon your past, but to lead you to blessing concerning your future. If you have gone through a marital breakup & divorce, surely you would agree with me that I should do all I can to help people avoid getting to the point of divorce.

Now in Mal. 2:16 God says, “I hate divorce.” This is God’s attitude about divorce. God is not saying, “I hate the divorced person.” One thing He is saying is, “I hate the sins that lead to divorce.” So this morning we are going to look at some reasons why any couple who is contemplating divorce should reconsider their decision. This message will also speak to those of you who hope to marry in the future. It is also my goal that married couples will renew their commitment to their marriage on this Valentine’s Day in light of this message.

So why should anyone reconsider if they are thinking of divorce? First of all:

I. BECAUSE IT IS NOT GOD'S PERFECT WILL

Again, they asked Jesus in v.2, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" In other words, is it the right thing to do? Is it God's will? This is a very important question, because divorce was common in that day in Roman society, and it had even become common in Jewish society. Divorce is quite common today in our society. But the question remains, is this common practice lawful or right in the eyes of God? If you are a Christian, you want to know the answer to that question. If you are not a Christian, you should still want to know the answer, because going against God's will only brings harm to yourself & others.

Now to answer that question correctly, notice what Jesus asked in v.3, "What did Moses command you?" This was equivalent to saying today, "Well, what does the Bible say?" You see, the Bible is the standard that we should measure all questions of right & wrong. The reason we need such a standard is because men will have their own opinions about marriage and divorce, and men will never agree, because our opinions are usually influenced by our selfish desires. So when a Christian is contemplating divorce, they should submit their ideas & opinions to what the Word of God says. The Bible is God's final word for every subject. You do not need a second opinion.

What, then, does the Bible teach? The Bible for the Jews of that day was the Old Testament. So they answered Jesus from the Old Testament Law. In v.4 they said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to dismiss her." They referred to Dt. 24:1, which says, "When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house..." Now there are a couple of points that are raised by this Scripture, & the comments made about this Scripture.

A. Divorce Is at Best Only a Concession - Remember that divorce was not introduced by God with His approval. Rather, divorce was invented by man, for divorce was already going on by the time the subject was introduced in the Bible. And all that God was doing here was seeking to regulate a practice that was already going on.

Now the Pharisees stated that Moses "permitted" divorce, but left out the reason for such permission. In Matthew's account of this Scripture text, he quotes Jesus as saying that "Moses ... permitted you to divorce your wives" (19:8). Jesus makes it very clear that this was a Mosaic concession. It was not commanded by God that people *should* divorce their wives, but that if they did, the practice of divorce was to be regulated in the way stated. For example, you were to make it legal with a written document. This would publicly declare her status as no longer married, and that she could legally become the wife of someone else. Otherwise, the divorced woman would often be left defenseless and destitute, unless she could go & live with her father or brother. The divorce law also stipulated that once she remarried, the first husband could not take her back in marriage, even if her 2nd husband died.

In that text in Deuteronomy, God permitted divorce only in a narrowly defined case, if her husband "found some uncleanness in her" (Dt. 24:1). Now the controversy is what did God mean when He said "some uncleanness"? What are the proper grounds for a divorce? There were two schools of thought among the Rabbis at that time. The liberal followers of Rabbi Hillel interpreted it to mean almost anything. For example, if a wife burned her husband's meal, or even over-salted it, he could divorce her. Or if he didn't like some flaw in her personality or body, he could divorce her.

I have been told that some time after my great-grandfather Felker's wife died, he married a woman from Gainesville, GA. Shortly after getting married, he discovered that she had a habit of cracking nuts, which annoyed him. She refused to quit this habit. So he divorced her or annulled

that marriage shortly after they were married. If that story is true, I am quite sure that he did not have biblical grounds for ending his marriage. 1 Cor. 13:7 says that love “bears all things....”

The second school of thought was taught by Rabbi Shimmai & his followers said that the uncleanness only referred to some premarital sexual sin. For example if a newly married husband discovered that his wife was not a virgin, then he could put her away. For example, in the case of Joseph, he was going to divorce Mary after finding out she was pregnant (Mt. 1:19). A betrothal was so binding that it took a divorce to end it. Jesus seems to define in Mt 5:32 what Moses had in mind. He said, “But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality....” Some interpret that narrowly to mean only pre-marital sexual immorality. I believe it probably includes adultery. After all, under Mosaic Law the adulterer would be stoned to death, and thus the innocent person would be free to remarry.

So we see that God permitted divorce only as a concession to the reality of human sin, and due to very limited reasons. Next, we need to:

B. Recognize the Cause of the Concession – In v.5 Jesus made it clear that the cause of divorce was the “hardness of your heart.” The very fact of divorce among the people of Israel was an evidence of the hardness of their hearts. Any time there is a divorce in a family, there is hardness of heart by one or both of the married persons. There is a refusal to yield or make concessions. When the Bible says that Pharaoh hardened his heart, it means in essence that Pharaoh just insisted on his own way. He refused to be swayed or influenced by anyone. Even so, in marriage, people tend to harden their hearts when problems develop. They want to have their own way. Such people lose love and tenderness in their marriage. Hardness of heart can also refer to a refusal to forgive when mistakes are made. And so every time a divorce happens, it is because of a problem that has developed. And such sin leads to divorce.

If you want to avoid divorce, I hope you see an important lesson. A successful & lasting marriage requires a soft heart. You must be willing to yield & make concessions for the sake of the marriage. As Paul says, “Love is slow to wrath and is kind.... [It] does not behave rudely, does not seek its own.... [Love] bears all things... endures all things....” (1 Cor. 13:4-7). Remember that marriage is the union of two sinners, and not of two angels.

So we have seen that anyone should reconsider divorce because of the question it raises concerning God’s will. Secondly, you should reconsider divorce:

II. BECAUSE IT CONTRADICTS GOD’S PLAN

Beginning in v.6 Jesus goes back from the 5th book of the Bible to the first book of the Bible. One way to solve the divorce problem is to get people back to the way God created marriage. Since God created marriage, He has the right to make the rules, and we would do well to live by His rules.¹ Now because of the seriousness of divorce & the sacredness of marriage, don’t enter into marriage lightly. Let’s look into God’s plan for marriage. Note first of all, notice:

A. We Should Recognize Gender Distinctions – In the last of v.6 Jesus quoted from Genesis saying that God “made them male and female.” When God created man, he made a distinction between the sexes. But feminists want to minimize the distinctions between men and women, boys and girls. In their zeal for equal pay and equal benefits, they ignore the obvious design differences that God has created. There are many differences between men and women.

¹ By the way, this is why “gay marriage” is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. God created marriage, & He created it to be between a man & a woman. It is not up to us to change what God has done.

Obviously, there are important physical differences, but there are also emotional differences and general differences in the way men and women think. These differences give men certain strengths in some areas, and they give women certain strengths and advantages in other areas. Recognizing these differences does not mean that women are inferior to men. In fact, someone has well said that a woman is infinitely superior ... at being a woman. And a man is infinitely superior at being a man. Have you ever seen a man try to be a woman? Have you ever seen a woman try to be a man? Neither is a pleasant sight. A marriage is better off when the distinctions are recognized and celebrated.

Because of God-ordained differences between men & women, there are different roles in marriage. Women are usually better equipped for the care-giving role, and men are usually better equipped for physical work, providing protection, & for leadership. Usually men are better at getting things from the top shelf of the kitchen!

Notice something else from our text about God's plan for marriage:

B. We Should Leave Father & Mother – In v.7 we see that the Genesis account also says, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother....” This is especially true of a man. No wife should have to compete with her husband's mother in the same household.

This touches on a real problem in marriage. The in-law relationship can cause problems in a marriage, and contribute to divorce. Mom & dad, don't you go against God plan for marriage here, and try to hinder this principle of leaving father & mother. Don't you keep a tight grip on your married children. You must let them go, and allow them to be on their own. In fact, you should insist upon it. Let them make some mistakes and learn from them. Don't let them become financially dependent upon you. And young couples, don't you put your relationship to your parent ahead of your relationship to your spouse. You ought to honor your father & mother even after you are grown and married, but that doesn't mean you have to go see them every weekend, and spend more time with them than you do your own husband or wife.²

C. We Should Cleave to Our Spouse – In the end of v.7 we see that the man should not only leave father and mother, but also “be joined to his wife....” The word translated “be joined” (*proskollao*) means “to be glued to” or “adhere to.” When you marry someone, you should understand that God expects you to stick together for the rest of your life. This is why it is so important that you marry the right person. Young person, before you marry someone, ask yourself, “Would I want to live with this person for the rest of my life?” Furthermore, a Christian should only marry another Christian. Don't let your emotions cause you to rush into a marriage & marry the wrong person.

One time a man was wearing his wedding ring on his index finger and someone commented to him, “Hey, you've got their ring on the wrong finger.” The man replied, “Yep, that's because I married the wrong woman.”

You had better be careful about that. You had better ask yourself, “Will I still love her after she has put on 40 extra pounds?” Will you still love him when he has lost 40,000 hairs from his head? Will you still love that spouse when he or she takes their teeth out at night, and you try to kiss them and you realize that their lips have collapsed for lack of support? I don't know what that's like, but I might find out some day!

² By the way, this same principle applies to second marriages when children are involved. This often creates a conflict of loyalty between your children & your new spouse. The problem is you can't leave your minor children to cling instead to your spouse.

Before you get married, you had better give the matter some careful thought. Marriage can be the source of great happiness & joy. On the other hand, if you go against God's plan, it can bring equally great misery and heartache.

Now looking at v.7 let me ask you a question. Which is the permanent relationship in a *household*? The parent-child relationship or the husband-wife relationship? It is the husband-wife relationship. A couple is very foolish to make their children their whole life. Some boy or girl is going to come along and take away your son or daughter, and all you will have left on a day to day basis is your spouse. Now how does that sound? If it doesn't sound good, then you are not following God's plan for marriage.

Now why is it that you should cleave to your spouse? In v.8 we see that Genesis goes on to say, "and the two shall become one flesh." Then Jesus adds His own comment, "so then they are no longer two, but one flesh." That is a reality whether you wish it so or not. Marriage is the most intimate union in the human race. This is not true of a father and son or a mother and daughter, but it is true of a man and wife. And because you have become one with your spouse, what happens when you break the union? Both of you will get hurt. The breaking of the bond of marriage will break your heart.

Now Jesus Himself gives the application. In v.9 He says, "Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate." Since divorce is not God's plan, and since you have become one, don't let some marriage counselor cause you to leave your spouse, especially if you don't have biblical grounds. Some will even justify it by saying that God wants you to be happy. Now where is that in the Bible? He wants you to have joy, but the joy of the Lord does not depend on a happy marriage or happy circumstances. Or your parents or friends may counsel you to divorce. But Jesus said, "What God has joined together, let not man separate."

Yet someone says, "Yes, but God didn't join us together, so it's OK to divorce." But God isn't talking about Adam & Eve at this point. He's talking about any couple that gets married. Marriage is a divine institution, and if you are married, then God has joined you together whether or not a preacher tied the knot.

Now this is what God's plan should do. Let's say you're having problems in your marriage. Yet God says stick together. Divorce and splitting up are not part of His plan. So if divorce is not the right option, and if you know that you are going to have to stay with this person, then you will realize that you have only two choices left: 1) work out your problems or 2) live in misery. Now if you rule out divorce, then you will be highly motivated to work out your problems and improve your marriage. Right?

Finally, you should reconsider divorce:

III. BECAUSE IT CAN LEAD TO TERRIBLE CONSEQUENCES

Divorce can lead to a number of harmful consequences spiritually, emotionally, and physically.

A. Divorce Can Lead to Adultery – Notice what Jesus says in vv.11-12, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." Jesus warns that divorce for the wrong reason can lead to adultery, at least in the eyes of God. This is pretty serious because when you commit adultery, you are breaking one of the 10 commandments. We know that adultery is having a sexual relationship outside of marriage. But according to vv.11-12, we must define it more broadly.

According to Jesus in these verses, you can commit adultery in the following situation. Suppose you are having trouble in your marriage & you are no longer attracted to your spouse.

Meanwhile, you have found someone more attractive & pleasing to you. Now as a God-fearing person, you know you should not be like Tiger Woods and have an affair with that person while you are still married to your husband or wife. Why, that would be adultery. Some 93% of people in America consider adultery morally wrong (2003 survey). But you think of a plan. You go and demand a divorce. In most states your spouse can't stop it. Once you get it, you feel that it is perfectly OK to marry that other person, and when you enter into a normal marital relationship, then you think you are not committing adultery. But Jesus says here, "Oh, no! If you initiate a divorce & leave your spouse, that does not give you a moral right to go and have a sexual relationship with another person, even if you are married to that other person. Why? Because in the case of such a 2nd marriage, it is clearly a marriage outside of God's will. Now Jesus is by no means saying here that every divorced person who remarries is committing adultery. But in the specific example cited, such a person is. Too many divorces take place because the husband or wife has found someone else, and divorce has become an acceptable way to make legal what is immoral. Surely this is why the apostle Paul, after referring to our Lord's teaching on this subject, said in 1 Cor. 7:10-11, "A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife."

Now according to Matthew's account (19:10-11), when the disciples heard this teaching, they said, "If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry." The Divine standard seemed too high, especially if you end up with a problem marriage. So Jesus said to them, "All cannot accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given." Jesus warned that staying single *and* sexually pure is not for everyone. On the one hand, the church must also uphold God's ideal plan for marriage. Remember, Romans 12:2 says that God's will is "good and acceptable and perfect." I believe we should uphold high standards for church leaders. On the other hand, it is vain to expect perfection of sinners. The reality is that many people will not live according to the highest standards of marriage. Remarriage is better than shacking up (1 Cor. 7:9), and we should be careful about demanding perfection in our personal relationships with people when there are areas in our own lives that are less than perfect. We should be forgiving & gracious toward those who don't always live up to the highest standards. If God was willing to allow some things in Israel "because their hearts were hard," we may well endure some things in churches and governments which we do not entirely like.

Finally, God hates divorce:

B. Divorce Can Adversely Affect Our Children – We read in v.13, "Then they brought little children to Him, that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked those who brought them." To them, the children don't matter. They thought Jesus was too busy for them. But then v.14 says, "But when Jesus saw it, He was greatly displeased and said to them, 'Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God.'" Is it not significant that a discussion of receiving and loving the little children immediately follows the passage on divorce? That's true in Matthew's account as well. As Jesus spoke of divorce, He thought of the little children, and that was a bad time for the disciples to try to forbid little children from coming to Him. Jesus did not think little boys and girls were of little importance.

Who usually hurts the most when a divorce takes place? Dr. Jerry Vines told of a friend who wrote him with news about his divorce. Then he added, "The children seem to be adjusting better than Judy or I." Was that wishful thinking or reality? Some children do adjust rather well, and a divorced couple can take steps to minimize problems for the children. But an honest evaluation of the impact of divorce upon children would lead one to conclude that it does have a negative impact upon the children. Consider how divorce can affect our children:

1. Emotionally - One problem is this, when a divorce takes place, often a child will blame themselves for what happened. An emotional scar often is what happens. I realize that some argue that keeping a child in an abusive home would cause as much or more emotional damage to a child. But that situation is not true in many cases of divorce.

2. Physically - Divorce even contributes to a shorter life span for children. The March-April '95 issue of *Family Research Report* reported a study of intelligent children that was begun in 1921. Today, most of those children have grown & died. Those children whose parents divorced lived on average 4 years less.

3. Spiritually - It seems that most children of divorce do not do well spiritually. I've seen it many times. When a couple divorces, they & their children often drop out of church. Some of these children have a problem relating to God as a good and loving heavenly Father. Many never believe in Christ as Savior.

Conclusion: Now in an audience this size, there are probably some who would admit that you have made some mistakes in one or more of the areas that we have talked about. Perhaps you did not do enough to keep your marriage together. Perhaps you even committed adultery along the way. Well I want you to understand how loving and forgiving God is. God has said, "Come, let us reason together" saith the Lord. "Though your sin be as scarlet they shall be white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isa. 1:18 KJV). Won't you accept His forgiveness? And if you have been sinned against, have you forgiven that spouse? Or have you hardened your heart? Why don't you seek to reconcile your relationship if it is not too late.

Perhaps right now in your marriage you realize that you have become hardened toward your mate, and a breakup is looming on the horizon. How about asking God to soften your heart, and resolve to work on restoring your marriage. Restore love & tenderness to your marriage. There may be some couples that will come together and kneel at the altar, and dedicate anew and afresh their marriage & home to God. There may be some in-laws that will commit to living according to God's plan.

Sources: J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); J.C. Ryle (1816-1900), *Mark: Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1993); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from sermon tape of 1/29/84); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Diligent: Mark* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1987). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). Compare sources for Matt. 19:1-12.

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