

Family Matters

By Mark Jarvinen

² *Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”*

³ *“What did Moses command you?” he replied.*

⁴ *They said, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.”*

⁵ *“It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,” Jesus replied. ⁶“But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’ ⁷‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, ⁸and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”*

¹⁰ *When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. ¹¹He answered, “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. ¹²And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.”*

¹³ *People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. ¹⁵Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” ¹⁶And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.*

INTRODUCTION

In today's text Jesus voices his profound concern for stable marriage and family life among God's people. We could say that for Jesus, family matters. Beside the fact that our Old Testament reading today from **Genesis 2** establishes marriage as key to God's design for the family, it was also true on a practical level that marriage was vital to the economic survival of the family in the patriarchal cultural context

of Jesus' day. Women and children depended on husbands and fathers to provide for their daily needs. There were no other realistic options for their care. Without the protection of the Law against divorce, women and children were vulnerable and potentially at risk.

In this passage, we find Jesus once again at odds with the religious establishment of His day. They were very strict about their traditions, such as washing their hands before eating (**Mark 7**); but when it came to upholding the Law pertaining to more important and far-reaching issues like marriage, they were lax and divided in their opinion. In today's text we meet a group of Pharisees who came to test Jesus on this controversial subject, asking, ***"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" (v.2)***. Obviously they hoped Jesus would open his mouth and insert his foot, undermining his own growing popularity with the masses. As He did on other similar occasions, Jesus begins by appealing to the Law of Moses, answering ***"What did Moses command you?" (v. 3)***.

HISTORY

The law of God in **Deuteronomy 24:1** describes divorce this way:

"If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, (he may) write her a certificate of divorce, give it to her and send her from the house..."

In our text, this is the law to which the Pharisees appealed in answering Jesus. In doing so, it was as though they thought that the Law of Moses regarding divorce was only for their benefit as men. Deuteronomy 24:1 raises an obvious question: ***"What constitutes***

“displeasing” or “indecent” behavior on the part of a woman in the eyes of her husband?” Moses had intended this law as a step forward for women. Prior to this, women had had no rights whatsoever! They were treated more like property than people. A husband being commanded to provide a dismissed wife with a certificate of divorce at least allowed her to become the wife of another husband so she wouldn’t starve to death on the streets. With this law, Moses sought to limit sinfulness and to control its consequences. Fast-forward 1500 years to Jesus’ day, however, and there were two schools of thought on divorce. The school of **Rabbi Shammai** was very strict, limiting the displeasing and indecent behavior on the part of women to adultery. In this school of thought, an unfaithful wife could be dismissed by her husband. The school of **Rabbi Hillel**, however, was more liberal in its interpretation and allowed a man to divorce his wife for any reason whatsoever, even something as minor as burning his meal. As you might guess, this view had become quite popular, and many men were quite comfortable with this arrangement. Jesus, however, regarded this behavior as a misuse of the law which missed God’s intent for marriage altogether. God intended this Law for men to be more responsible in marriage, than to provide loopholes to escape it.

MARRIAGE

Jesus was a master at evading the traps set for him by the Pharisees. Instead of plunging head-long into the controversial topic of divorce, Jesus chose to first discuss God’s design for marriage, based on Genesis 1-2. Listen to **Mark 10:6-9**, which embodies a portion of the material from **Genesis** -

⁶ “But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’ ⁷ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother

and be united to his wife,⁸ and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh.⁹ Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

In short, dating back to creation, marriage is one woman, for one man, for life. We quote these verses at every Christian wedding. Imagine taking two pieces of paper and gluing them together. The glue represents marriage. With that bond, the two have become one. Now imagine trying to take the two sheets of paper apart. You wouldn't be able to do it without ripping the original pieces. The bond was intended to be permanent. Marriage is intended to be an organic union of body, mind, and spirit between a husband and wife, who are stuck together like glue. By God's math it's 1+1=1. ***“Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (v.9).***

By implication, marriage is a relationship that needs to be cultivated and maintained if it is to last for a lifetime. Luther stressed the importance of this when he said, ***“Let the wife make her husband glad to come home and let him make her sorry to see him leave.”*** It means working, sacrificing, forgiving, upholding, communicating, forgiving, putting the other first, and oh yes, did I mention forgiving? Let me say it again. ***“Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Col. 3:13).*** Someone has said that a good marriage is the union of two forgivers. After 42 years of marriage, I can say “Amen” to that.

Sadly, marriage in our society, especially since 1969 with the advent of “no-fault divorce” has been informed more by Hollywood than by God's Word. According to author, **Chip Ingram**, Hollywood's version goes like this: **Step 1** – find the right person, **Step 2** – fall in

love, **Step 3** – fix all your hopes and dreams on that person. But we know what happens in most Hollywood marriages don't we? The "perfect partner," in spite of all their charm, good looks, and resources, reveals a flaw or two and relational conflict rears its ugly head. The fairy-tale wedding suddenly is not yielding the expected "happy-ever-after" life. The initial euphoria wanes. Disillusionment and discouragement set in. Anxiety escalates. Irritations increase, and with it, so does the blame. What's gone wrong? Not to worry, the Hollywood formula offers a quick and supposedly painless solution – **Take Step 4**, which is simply **"go back to Step 1" – find the right person - again. "Obviously, that's where it all went wrong,"** they say. ***"I married the wrong person."*** (Ingram, Love, Sex, and Lasting Relationships, p. 26-27). If only it was that simple. Sadly, national statistics demonstrate (depending on the source) that 60-67% of second marriages fail, and 70-73% of third marriages end on the rocks. (www.divorcesource.com). As Chip Ingram goes on to suggest, God's plan for marriage doesn't begin with finding the right person, but with ***"becoming the right person"*** by putting on Jesus Christ by faith, dying daily to self, and walking in His love. (**ibid. pp. 50-51**).

DIVORCE

But if one woman for one man for life was God's intent from the dawn of creation, why did Moses permit divorce at all in Deuteronomy 24? Here's Jesus' answer in **v. 5** of our text – ***"It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law."*** As stated earlier, Jesus taught that the permanence of the one flesh relationship was God's original intention for marriage since creation. Divorce was

merely God's reluctant provision for hard heartedness, a mere concession to the sinful nature of human beings that was the result of Adam & Eve's disobedience in the garden. Divorce was never to be exercised frivolously as a way to trade in one's spouse for a newer, better model, as was taking place in the Jewish culture of Jesus' day, and which, by the way, is taking place in our culture today. In other words, Jesus saw divorce as a major disruption to a relationship that God had intended to last for a lifetime, as evidenced by the fact that in **vv. 11-12**, He called a man's divorce of his wife and subsequent remarriage to another woman, and a wife's divorce of her husband and subsequent remarriage to another man, the sin of **adultery**. Adultery by a Jewish man had always been considered to be a sin committed against another married man involving his wife. Never before in rabbinic law had the concept of a husband committing adultery against his own wife been considered. This was a new teaching by Jesus, which elevated the status of the wife to the same level of responsibility and obligation for fidelity in marriage as her husband, giving her equal dignity as a person with her husband. God intends married people to stay together, nourishing the stability brought about by a commitment to one's spouse **"for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer until death do us part."** He is on the side of the unity, community and togetherness that marriage brings, not only for the benefit of the couple themselves but for children as well.

CHILDREN

Notice how **Mark 10:13-16** are about the love and care of children. People were bringing their little children to Jesus for a blessing, and were being turned away by His disciples as though they

were insignificant and unimportant. Jesus was indignant about this and recognized the children as rightful recipients of God's kingdom. What Jesus says against divorce and what He says on behalf of children in today's text are related. Jesus' heart of compassion was aroused on behalf of the vulnerable and victimized in society, whether it was for spouses victimized by frivolous, easy divorce; or children regarded as insignificant and unimportant. In each case, Jesus sought to uphold God's high standards of love for all people, especially the weak and vulnerable.

CONCLUSION

Today's text has provided a powerful lens into the family values of Jesus and how much the well being of families matters to Him. We have heard the high standard of the law held high. Did anyone feel themselves falling short of this high standard at any time during this message? I know I did. That's what the Law does. It shows us our sin, but that's not where God wants to leave us. The Gospel of Christ is for all of us who have fallen short. The Good news of forgiveness in Christ sets us free.

We spent considerable time talking about marriage and the importance of maintaining this God ordained union. Perhaps the Holy Spirit convicted you about neglecting your marriage. Acknowledge your sin, receive God's forgiveness, and begin thanking Him for knowing just what you needed in providing you with your spouse. Perhaps parenting has become a burden difficult to bear. May the grace of Christ renew your parental love for your children and strengthen you for the challenge of raising them.

We spoke about the fact that God hates divorce. If you're married but have been nursing the notion that you didn't marry the right person, that perhaps you could have done better, first of all acknowledge where this lie is coming from and then renounce the enemy and all his ways. Turn to Christ for his pardon and strength. Stop focusing on finding the right person, but by fixing your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith, find yourself becoming the person your spouse needs.

If there's marital brokenness in your past, acknowledge your hard heartedness and selfish pride as sin, but know that God has not abandoned you. By God's grace, let go of your anger, your shame, your need to ascribe blame. As is true for any other sin, there is forgiveness and healing for you at the cross of Jesus Christ. **A-men.**