

Jesus on Marriage and Divorce

Mark 10:1–12

Turn to Mark 10. Near the end of Mark 8, Jesus said, “*if anyone wants to follow after me, they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*” From that line to the end of Mark chapter 10, Jesus teaches about discipleship, what it actually means to follow him. This is for all of us, he’s talking to us all the way through this, because we follow him.

For years I was surprised that Mark the writer would include this marriage teaching in a section on discipleship. Why does he leave discipleship to include Jesus teaching on marriage? Someone eventually told me what should have been obvious to me all along: to Jesus, being faithful in marriage was an essential part of being his disciple (2x).

In Jesus’s time, no one else taught about marriage as strictly as he did. In Jewish society, divorce was available if you wanted it, and there was quite a bit of that. They were relaxed about divorce and remarriage because Moses never condemned it. Moses permitted divorce and remarriage.

In Roman society as well, divorce was pretty easy, and there was no stigma for those who were divorced. So when Jesus insisted that married couples stayed together, that was unusual.

Just for the record, I am divorced and remarried. My first wife and I were together for four years. No children. Then she moved out and later divorced me. Four years after she left, Marilyn and I were married. While the divorce was going through, I had a strong sense of being defiled. I felt I was a dirty cup. How can I give people God’s living water if I am a dirty cup?

The Lord gave me a brief answer: “serve me where you can.” Five words. That helped a lot. First of all, he still wanted me to serve him. That was a big relief. Second, some people won’t want us, because I’m divorce and remarried. That has been true. “Serve me where you can.” But Jesus said that I would be able to serve in some places, so I should serve there. So I have.

1 Pharisees Test Jesus: Is it Lawful to Divorce? – Mark 10:1–2

Jesus then left that place and went into the region of Judea and across the Jordan. Again crowds of people came to him, and as was his custom, he taught them. Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

Pharisees tested Jesus to get him in trouble. Jesus had already taken a hard line on divorce. In Matthew 5, the Sermon the Mount, six times Jesus said, “You have heard it said, but I say to you ...” and then he would tell them how his standards were stricter than what they had heard. Two of those six were about complete faithfulness to our spouses, and against divorce.

Moses mentioned divorce in Deuteronomy 34, but did not discourage it. He only said that if a man divorces a woman, he needs to give her a certificate of divorce, to make clear that she's free of him and can marry another. Jesus was much stricter than Moses.

So the Pharisees wanted Jesus to repeat his stern teaching about divorce, and then they would accuse him of disagreeing with Moses. It seemed like a good plan.

2 Jesus Answers with a Question: What did Moses Tell You? – Mark 10:3–5

“What did Moses command you?” he replied. They said, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.” “It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,” Jesus replied.

Jesus was wily in conversations like this. They wanted to end with Moses, but he guessed their plan, and he made them begin with Moses. He asked them for what they wanted to be their punch line: what did Moses say? All Moses said was give her a certificate of divorce, to prove that she's free to remarry, and send her on her way. Deuteronomy 34.

Jesus always defended Moses, and he did that here as well. Even when what Moses commanded was not enough, that was not Moses's fault. It was your fault, said Jesus, it was Israel's fault. Your hearts were hard, so Moses could not say what should have been said.

3 The Marriage Ideal in the Creation Stories – Mark 10:6–9

Jesus went on: “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.”

Jesus knew that the Pharisees could not understand divorce until they better understood marriage. They asked Jesus about divorce, and he answered with marriage teaching, because that's what they needed to learn.

That's the first thing to note, and the second thing is that for Jesus, what we need to know about marriage is in the creation stories. Jesus taught them what was embedded in the creation stories all along. He got it all from Genesis 1 and Genesis 2.

We have two creation stories. In Genesis 1, God creates everything by speaking, and completes it in six days. In Genesis 2, God creates by forming things, it sounds like he is using his hands, not his voice. And in Genesis 2, he does it all in one day. And he does not create things in the same order in the two stories. And so on.

In both stories, though, creating humans is the high point of God’s creation. Both stories emphasize male and female. The creation stories cannot speak of God making humans without speaking of male and female and marriage between them. In both stories, we do not understand humans until we understand male and female and marriage.

In Genesis 1, male and female become fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. Children require a man and a woman being together. In Genesis 2, God makes one man into two people, a man and a woman. They both forsake all to come together and become one flesh again.

The creation stories cannot speak of God making humans without speaking of male and female and marriage between them. For Jesus, the real marriage teaching of the Bible is in the Creation stories.

“*At the beginning the Creator made them male and female,*” says Jesus, quoting Genesis 1. Why does Jesus quote that male-female line? The Pharisees assumed that marriage was between a man and woman. But they weren’t the only ones listening. There were also Greeks around, and Greeks sometimes had same sex relationships.

In the time of Jesus, the capital city of Galilee was Sepphoris. Sepphoris was near Nazareth and Capernaum, and bigger than either one. But it is never mentioned in the Gospels because Jesus never went there, only to the lost sheep of Israel. But Jews knew how the Greeks lived, and maybe some were listening, so Jesus made clear that marriage meant male and female, and that he was getting this from Genesis 1.

4 The Lord’s Marriage Sentence

Then Jesus quoted the whole marriage sentence from Genesis 2:24, so we will review that. The Lord’s marriage sentence has five parts:

(1) *For this reason.* The marriage sentence ends with: “they become one flesh.” For what reason do they become one flesh? Because they began as one flesh. God made the two out of one. God made the woman from a piece of the man’s side. [Slowly:] He made two from one. They become one again because they began as one.

(2) *A man will leave his father and mother, and a woman will leave her father and mother.* Every person has a life long duty to serve and honour their parents. Honour your father and your mother, in the ten commandments. That is our first human responsibility. When we marry, our spouse becomes first life-long priority and our parents the second priority. Marriage means making all other relationships secondary.

(3) *And he will be joined to his wife, and she will be joined to her husband.* They will leave, and then they will cleave. A man will stick to his wife, and she will stick to her husband. They bind themselves to each other, they join themselves to each other, together for life.

(4) *And they will become one flesh again.* They began as one flesh, one body, before God divided Adam into two, and now they are one again. The primary expression of being one flesh is sexual intimacy, but it is not limited to that. Even when husband and wife are not getting along very well, they are still one flesh.

(5) *What God has joined.* Jesus adds something not in Genesis, that when they marry, God himself makes them one. They don't make themselves one, God makes them one. "What God has joined" are the words that Jesus uses. This is as true when unbelievers marry as when believers marry. What God has joined, says Jesus, people should not separate.

Jesus repeats the male and female of Genesis 1, and the marriage sentence of Genesis 2:24. The Pharisees asked about divorce for any reason. Jesus answered, "since they are no longer two but one flesh, because God has joined them, divorce fails to understand what God has done."

God made male and female from one flesh to design us to get married. It is a natural outcome of how God made us that a man and a woman would want to come together this way. The reason people keep doing this, even when they don't know God at all, is that God made both out of one flesh so that coming back together would be normal and natural. This is still true all over the world, and has been since creation.

Couples in our day sometimes want to be one flesh without leaving and cleaving. They don't forsake all others. And they don't bind themselves to each other. They go past all that and just be one flesh, by which I mean sexually intimate. When a man and a woman do not forsake others, and do not bind themselves to each other, they just decide to share a bed, that is sexual immorality, plain and simple.

Two minor points: One, God and his Son Jesus have strong ideas about what marriage is, and how spouses need to be faithful to each other, but the Bible says very little about what a wedding should be. I like traditional Christian wedding vows. But God does not stipulate what should happen in a wedding, as long as the couple follows that marriage sentence.

Two, the Creation stories assume that men and women will marry. In the rest of the Bible, though, there are quite a few godly people who for different reasons never married. The prophet Jeremiah was told not to marry, and it doesn't seem that Elijah or Elisha married. Neither John the Baptist nor Paul got married. Above all, Jesus never married. Living celibate was always honorable before God.

5 Jesus Explains to his Disciples – Mark 10:10–12

When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. He answered, "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."

The disciples had never heard anything like what Jesus was saying. They had only been taught Moses, who said to make sure the husband gives her a certificate to say she's divorced and free to remarry. This prevents the husband from going back to her and claiming her again.

Divorce was easy in Jewish and Roman society, and remarriage after divorce was always assumed. When Jesus says that divorcing and remarrying is committing adultery, he has in mind a husband wanting a different woman, or a wife wanting a different man, and divorcing for that reason. When divorce is relatively easy, this is a real problem.

So a Jewish spouse wants a different partner and thinks: if I just take up with that man or that woman, it would be adultery. But if I get divorced first, then it's okay, it is not adultery. "No," says Jesus, "your plan was adulterous from the start, your plan was to be unfaithful to your spouse, and getting a divorce does not change that. It is still adultery."

6 Is Divorce Always Sinful?

The short answer is "no, divorce is not always sinful." When a husband and wife divorce, there is always significant sin somewhere in that couple. There is always a real failure to follow what the Lord said. But the divorce can be a response to sin, not necessarily the sin.

The Bible contains a variety of teachings on divorce, and we'll look at a few. Here in Mark 10, and in Luke 15, Jesus sounds like divorce is always sinful.

In Matthew we have two divorce teachings of Jesus, and in both cases divorce and remarriage is wrong, unless your spouse has been unfaithful. If your spouse has committed adultery, the Lord gives you freedom to divorce him or her. In that case, the marriage was broken by their sin, and the divorce itself is not sinful.

In Jeremiah's time, Israel had divided into two nations, Israel in the north, and Judah in the south. This is what God tells Judah through Jeremiah in Jeremiah 3. "I was married to two sisters," God tells Judah. The prophets often pictured God as his people's husband, and the nation was his wife. "I was married to two sisters," God says to Judah, "and I divorced your sister Israel because of her repeated adultery." Israel's adultery was her unending idolatry.

"I divorced your sister Israel because of her repeated adultery, and it went very poorly for her. And yet you, Judah, are doing the very same thing. What do you think will happen to you?"

God openly portrays himself as divorcing the ten northern tribes. So we cannot say that divorce is always sinful. In certain circumstances divorce is entirely acceptable to God and to Jesus.

In Romans 7, Paul says that if an unbeliever leaves the marriage, the believer is not bound, by which he means that the believer is free to remarry.

One more biblical observation to put divorce in perspective. There are a few sin lists in the New Testament. We went over one a few weeks ago, a list from Jesus in Mark 7. Paul has a few. These lists tell us the things that must not happen among God's people. Being divorced is **not** on any of those lists. So let's not treat it like it is.

By now you are getting nervous. You think I am paving the way for easy divorce. I am doing nothing of the kind. Every divorce is a major failure to live in the Lord's ways. Marriage faithfulness and loyalty is crucial to the Lord. That's why this teaching is in his discipleship section. The Lord wants faithfulness to our spouse.

But there are divorced people who carry an ongoing heaviness because of their divorce and remarriage, and that is not right. As Jesus said to the adulterous woman, "I do not condemn you. Go and sin no more."

Some of you might wonder why I did not say more about same sex marriage, which is a big controversy around us. I have two responses to that. One, I have been entirely straightforward about God's design in the creation stories. They leave no doubt about God's intentions.

Two, in our church and in churches everywhere, a far bigger challenge is how believing husbands and wives treat each other. Do not be distracted about the public fuss about other things. Are we following the Lord in his call to be faithful to our spouses? That's his call to us today. Do we want to be disciples of Jesus? Yes we do.

Are we loving our spouses as Christ and the church love each other? Jesus made our marriages a part of denying ourselves and taking up our crosses and following him. The good news is that God has said that he will equip us with everything good for doing his will, and will work in us what pleases him. Amen.

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, we who are married want to follow you. We want to be your disciples day by day in our marriages. Help us. May our faithfulness to our wives and husbands show that we truly follow you. Every day, lead us in the right path for your name's sake. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for teaching us about marriage. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and into Christ's perseverance. May the Lord of peace give you peace at all times in every way. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.