



Sermon

Marriage and Divorce

Genesis 2:18-24, Hebrews 1:1-4, Mark 10:2-16

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I have to admit that I would rather preach on Hebrews 1 than on the other two passages; it is a case of how many people must I offend in how short a time! So may I start by saying my intention and desire is not to offend but to try to be faithful to what we have received of the teaching of our Lord.

I am well aware that this is a sensitive passage especially for those divorced, those remarried and in the debates on sexuality. I also acknowledge that different people sincerely interpret the Bible in different ways – however I can only speak with integrity if I say what I believe, because these are not light matters but have great significance in our lives now and eternally.

I will touch on Hebrews to start because it tells us some wonderful things about the Lord Jesus.

God had spoken through prophets formerly to the Jewish people, but the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ is the greatest there can be - not just only words but his person and his life.

Through His Son, God the Father created the universe. It is God the Son who sustains all things by his powerful word. Jesus is the radiance of God's glory. Jesus is the exact representation of God the Father's being.

If you want to know what God is like – look at Jesus Christ, God the Son. If you want to know what God thinks, listen to Jesus.

That is important as we come to the gospel passage where we hear his teaching. Jesus was asked a trick question about divorce. We know of two reasons it was significant:

1. Jesus was then in the territory ruled by Herod Antipas. Herod eloped with his brother's wife, Herodias, and married her. John the Baptist had challenged this as adultery and been executed to silence him. So there was political risk in the answer to the question.
2. It was also a contemporary debate with two schools of thought. Rabbi Shammai taught that divorce was only allowed in cases of moral indecency particularly adultery, while Rabbi Hillel taught that it was allowed for anything which was not to the husband's liking. It was a debate that was active at the time.

Jesus responded with a question: "What did Moses command?" They refer to part of Deut 24 which talks about a woman being divorced by her husband, marrying another being divorced and then not being allowed to remarry the first man.

Their tone was how much can we get away with? The Law seems to take it for granted there would be divorce but seeks to regulate some undesirable outcomes. Not least the status of the divorced and vulnerable woman.

By giving her a bill of divorce, it meant she could remarry and not be left destitute. Jesus says this was an accommodation to the hardness of people's hearts which by implication led to divorce. Instead he reaches back behind Moses' commandment to the intention of God for marriage as expressed in the creation account of Gen 1 & 2.

From Gen 1, he quoted that God made humanity male and female. From Gen 2, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.'

He added, "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

Jesus takes us back to God's purposes and intention for marriage. (Remember that he is God the Son who made everything and sustains everything.)

When asked about marriage he declares that we are male and female. The pattern is for a man and a woman to leave their parents, cleave to each other and become one flesh.

There is a leaving – a new relationship is to be formed separated from their childhood dependency on their parents. There is a cleaving to each other (the Hebrew word means they are glued together). They become one flesh. This expression always refers to the sexual act which is not only reproductive but forms a union of souls.

The idea of one flesh is explained by Prof George in this way: The organs of the body are co-ordinated for a common biological purpose – our physical life. If two individuals are to unite organically (that is physically) they must become a co-ordinated whole for a common biological purpose. They cannot unite for the purposes of digestion or blood circulation – each body is self-sufficient for those functions. But individual adults are naturally incomplete with respect to one biological function: sexual reproduction.

In sexual intercourse, "...their bodies become, in a strong sense, one—they are biologically united ... similarly to the way in which one's heart, lungs, and other organs form a unity: by co-ordinating for the biological good of the whole. In this case, the whole is made up of the man and woman as a couple, and the biological good of that whole is their reproduction." ¹

Jesus points to what he says is God's intention for marriage: the lifelong union of a man and a woman. Firstly, I understand marriage is by Biblical definition between a man and a woman.

Secondly, I understand it is intended to lifelong. Certainly, people may not attain to that – we are all fallen and wounded but that is the intention for marriage.

He adds "what God has joined together, let man not separate." Privately, afterwards he expanded on this to his disciples in verse 11, saying that to divorce and remarry is to commit adultery.

However, there are two exceptions elsewhere in the New Testament:

In Matthew's directly parallel account, he records Jesus giving an exception to this statement. Since both gospels are inspired, I see no reason to ignore that condition.

Matthew 19:9 "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, **except for marital unfaithfulness**, and marries another woman commits adultery."

Here Jesus allowed divorce in the case of marital unfaithfulness. In 1 Cor 6:15, Paul allows that in a mixed marriage where one spouse has become a Christian and the non-Christian does not wish to remain with the Christian, the Christian may be free of the marriage.

¹ George, R. P., Girgis S. & Anderson R.T., "What is Marriage?", *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy*, Volume 34, No. 1, pages 245-287, Winter 2010.

I don't lightly remarry divorcees. In England, while I was training the rules were changed from the Bishop giving approval for a remarriage to allowing the priest to assess the rightness of the proposed marriage. I do make enquiry and discuss it with the couple but as you can imagine it is a very difficult conversation.

What should we understand? We need to take marriage seriously. I believe the reason Jesus commands us to protect marriage is because the cost is so high when they fail. Spouses are torn emotionally, the wounds of rejection are huge. Children suffer a lack of security and also the wounds of abandonment and rejection. It is very messy.

As a society we have believed lies about love. Because of the romantic stories of Hollywood and popular fiction, people believe that the first rush of attraction is long term love, but we know it isn't – that true deep love develops over time. It is like comparing port with champagne. The bubbles may go flat but if we will stick with it something better grows. The point of the marriage covenant is to help us through the tough times, to help us when we are angry, hurt and disappointed, to support us when hope is extinguished.

Prayer is the key: Stormie Omartian in her book "The Power of a Praying Wife" tells of being desperate to walk out of her marriage when she sensed God telling her to stay, to pray and to trust him. She stayed, she prayed. Her prayer changed from "Change him, Lord," to "Change me, Lord," and the marriage changed. She has now been married forty years.

God does not desire divorce, so we can be confident of his help as we pray. Prayer ministry may help us deal with the wounds of the past, which can act as emotional bruises making us too sensitive to today's knocks and bumps.

Isaiah 59:1,20 "Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save²⁰ "The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins," declares the LORD."

He is able to save and heal where we think it is impossible. We may need to humble ourselves and get help to heal our broken marriages and wounded lives.

It may be that divorce and remarriage have already happened. We cannot go back. But the good news is that God is full of grace and forgiveness. There is always forgiveness when we repent and ask him to forgive us. We don't want to go deliberately into sin, but if we are convicted of sin we can turn to God for his mercy and he promises forgiveness.