

The Debate about Divorce (Part 1)

Mark 10: 1-12

Our text today deals with an issue that has caused debate, division, and devastation for centuries. It is a sensitive issue that has affected a large majority of people, either directly or indirectly. I am well aware of the hurt and devastation associated with divorce. I was raised in a broken home; my parents separated and eventually divorced when I was seven years old.

I approach this passage with care and compassion for those affected by divorce. It is not my desire, nor my intention to add to the hurt and despair of anyone. Unfortunately within the church, this issue has been dealt with very harshly for centuries. In many Baptist churches, those who have experienced divorce are often ridiculed, prevented from any form of service, and made to feel like second class citizens.

I am sure we all have our own opinions regarding divorce, but I am not interested in the opinions of men. I want to allow the Word of God speak for itself. Surely we all can benefit from a biblical perspective of this issue. As we examine the [truths](#) disclosed within the text, I want to consider: [The Debate about Divorce](#).

I. A Tempting Word (2) – [And the Pharisees came to him, and asked him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife? tempting him.](#) Jesus and the disciples had departed from Capernaum, making their way into the area of Judea, on the other side of the Jordan River. As was usually the case, a crowd began to gather, and Jesus began to teach them. The Pharisees quickly showed up among the people. Notice:

A. Their Question (2) – [And the Pharisees came to him, and asked him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife?](#) As Jesus began to teach those who had gathered, the Pharisees immediately questioned Him about the legality of divorce. We will discuss their motives in a moment, but in reality this was a question that many had likely considered. In Jesus' day, divorce was more common than it is within our day. History reveals that many Romans would have as many as fifteen to twenty wives within their lifetime. The rate of divorce among the Jewish population was not that high, but it was quite common. All that was required for a divorce to be legal was a bill of divorcement. This is in reference to the stipulation in the Law for divorce, [Deut.24:1-4](#). While a provision was made for divorce in the Law, this was never the will of God. He never encouraged divorce. (We will discuss this further in a moment.) Clearly the Pharisees had asked about an issue that all were familiar with, and many had experienced, much like modern society.

B. Their Motivation (2) – *And the Pharisees came to him, and asked him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife? tempting him.* As was typically the case, the Pharisees were not interested in hearing from the Lord or learning anything from Him. They came that day, as they had many times before, seeking to tempt the Lord. In fact, this was a loaded question. There were two basic lines of thought in that day regarding divorce, motivated by two different 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 commanded 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, she could be divorced. 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. This is clear in Matthew's account of this same encounter in [Matthew 19:3](#), they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?"ⁱ

- By asking this question, the Pharisees hoped to trap Jesus. If He embraced the view of Shammai, the more conservative view, He would alienate many of the men in Israel. (Many are determined to please the flesh and justify their actions, regardless what the Bible teaches.) If He agreed with Hillel, the more liberal view, He might have pleased the Pharisees and many men, but He would have lost credibility with the people. We will discover that Jesus dealt with the issue the same way that we must. He pointed them to Scripture.

II. A Trusted Word (3-9) – Here we find how Jesus dealt with the Pharisees' question. Notice:

A. The Response (3-4) – *And he answered and said unto them, What did Moses command you?^[4] And they said, Moses suffered to write a bill of divorcement, and to put her away.* Rather than addressing their question directly, Jesus responded with another question – what did Moses command you? In essence Jesus challenged them to consider the Word of God. What is recorded in Scripture regarding divorce? Jesus knew their minds were already made up regarding this issue. Likely most of them held the liberal view, and saw divorce permissible for any reason, under any circumstance. They were not interested in learning anything from Jesus, or gaining a biblical perspective on this matter. They only sought to hinder and discredit the Lord and His influence.

- Verse 4 – *And they said, Moses suffered to write a bill of divorcement, and to put her away.* We need to take a moment to consider the Pharisees line of thought. They responded that Moses “suffered” to write a bill of divorcement, to put away their wives. This can imply either “*permission or instruction.*” Consider their response in the parallel passage in Matthew. *Mat.19:7 – They say unto him, Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?* It seems apparent that the Pharisees not only viewed divorce as permissible, but commanded of the Lord. It was not viewed as an act reserved for extreme circumstances, but they had actually perverted the Law into a license to sin and mistreat their wives.

B. The Reality (5-6) – *And Jesus answered and said unto them, For the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept.* ^[6] *But from the beginning of the creation God made them male and female.* Jesus turned the tables on the Pharisees, revealing the reality of the situation. While God had allowed a provision in the Law for divorce, it was not within His sovereign plan for humanity. This provision was granted because of the sin of the people and the hardness of their hearts. The original Law was never given to condone or encourage divorce; it was given to control divorce which had become rampant in that society. (This truth remains today. While divorce is permissible for basically any reason in American society, it is never encouraged by God. Sin is the root of every divorce. Some may be totally innocent in the matter, dealing with an unfaithful spouse, but sin is always present in divorce.)

- Jesus spoke of God’s original plan with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. He created one man, and then He created one woman for that man. There were not several women created for Adam. God intended marriage to be between one man and one woman for one lifetime. The confusion and permissibility regarding marriage today is certainly not according to God’s design for humanity. The world may seek to redefine marriage, but actually they have no right. Laws may be passed concerning what is acceptable for marriage, but they will never change God’s Word.

C. The Responsibility (7-8) – *For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife;* ^[8] *And they twain shall be one flesh: so then they are no more twain, but one flesh.* Jesus revealed that a man and woman were expected to leave their original family, father and mother, and cleave to their spouse. The relationship with their new spouse took priority over former relationships. Once together, they were to cleave to one another. This has the idea of “*sticking like glue, clinging and joining to.*” This reveals an intentional desire to unite as one. The commitment of the husband is now solely to his wife, and her commitment is solely to him.

- Upon the marriage union, the couple becomes one flesh in the eyes of God. They are no longer viewed as separate individuals, but one person before God. When two become one, there is to be no separation of that union. This involves more than a mere, physical union. The two

become one in heart, spirit, and mind. They are expected to embrace the same goals and work together to preserve the union for the good of the family unit. These two have become one and no longer have the privilege to operate independently.

D. The Requirement (9) – **What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.** This is a sobering word. Jesus revealed that this union was ordained and sanctioned by God. The couple has united in a marriage covenant before the Lord. Neither they nor anyone else has the right or authority to dissolve that union. The marriage covenant is entered into as an agreement between themselves and the Lord above. Marriage is not based on the authority of men, but God alone. What God has joined together, man has no right to separate. (For this reason, I choose not to officiate weddings where divorce is an issue. I do not stand in judgment of anyone, but I was not privy to the events that resulted in divorce; therefore I cannot rightly discern whether God will bless such a union. I do not condemn those who do, but that is the stand I have taken since I began in ministry.)

- In many cases, divorce was not desired by one of the parties involved. They may have done all they could to reconcile the relationship and keep the marriage intact. These are certainly unfortunate situations. However, many enter into a marriage with the wrong attitude. They assume they will give it a try, and if it doesn't work out they will divorce and remarry. This was never the plan of God. He never encourages or commands divorce. Reconciliation is to be sought rather than divorce. That is clearly what the Bible teaches. When I counsel couples before marriage, I always ask them to make a commitment to each other and the Lord that they will not resort to divorce as a solution to their problems. When both are committed to each other and the Lord, the marriage will survive!

Conclusion: We will finish this up in our next study. I wanted to take the time to deal with this faithfully and thoroughly. It was not my intention to degrade or bring additional hurt to any who have experienced divorce, but we must consider it from a biblical perspective.

While divorce is the result of sin, it is not the unpardonable sin. If your actions in the past resulted in divorce, there is forgiveness if you will come before the Lord and repent, if you haven't already done so. You are not a second class citizen within the church. Being divorced and remarried prevents men from serving as pastors and deacons, but it does not prevent individuals from serving the Lord. If you are not divorced, but have judged others unfairly, you need to repent of sin. As believers, we need to do all we can to encourage one another. Come if there are needs.

ⁱ The Sermon Notebook - The Sermon Notebook – Mark.