

Marriage and Children

Mark 10:1-16

Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife? Is it lawful for people to get a divorce? That's the question Jesus was asked, and according to the Jewish tradition of the time, divorce was allowed. However, there was quite a bit of controversy about when it was legitimate, and that's the argument into which the Pharisees were trying to draw Jesus.

Now, the Old Testament passage which allows divorce, the passage the Pharisees quote in verse 7, comes from Deuteronomy 24. This is what it says: "When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house,² and if she goes and becomes another man's wife,³ and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife,⁴ then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance."

As we can see, the law is quite clear about the restriction on remarrying someone in this particular, rather convoluted situation. But it doesn't really explain the circumstances in which divorce is allowed in the first place. What is this "indecency" which a woman can commit, which would allow her first husband to put her away? Some of the rabbis took a very narrow view, saying that divorce could only be allowed in cases of adultery. Others took a very expansive view, saying that a man could divorce his wife if she served him overcooked food or if she talked too loud in the house.

Now, we modern Americans might find this sort of discussion more than a little old-fashioned. With the explosion of "no-fault" divorce laws in the late 1960's, we've come to expect that marriage vows can be broken for any reason – or for no good reason at all. In fact, legal marriage has become the one civil contract that either party can break without suffering any consequences whatever. It is not at all unusual, for example, for a woman to walk out on her husband regardless of his desire to preserve their marriage, taking the children, and half of his earnings in the bargain – and there's very little he can say about it.

And the church has all too often gone right along with way the broader culture has undermined marriage. Very seldom do ruling or teaching elders ever try to hold anyone accountable to his or her vows, much less to investigate whether a divorce is legitimate. For everyone knows exactly what would happen if such an attempt at church discipline were to be attempted – the church member would simply go down the street to another congregation, which would welcome him or her with open arms.

Now, living as we do in the buckle of the Bible Belt, I know many of us were shocked and dismayed when the Supreme Court forced the states to recognize same-sex

marriage, but shouldn't we have seen this coming? After all, both church and state have long since redefined marriage as serial monogamy. By rule and by example we've established that you can marry as many different people as you like, but only one at a time. Both church and state have thus come to embrace the Romantic idea of marriage as existing simply for the emotional fulfillment of the couple involved, and thus valid only as long as both people continue to be happy. But if that's true, then why can't people define happiness however they choose? If a man happens to be happy with another man, or if a woman happens to be happy with another woman, who's to question that? It's happiness that is the point, right?

So yes, the question of marriage – how permanent it is, and what it really means – is still very much with us. So how did Jesus respond to the question in His day? Let's first notice what He didn't do. He didn't get down in the weeds, picking a side in the raging debate about when divorce is allowed and when it isn't. In fact, He didn't go into any of the details about any of the other ways that self-centered – or as Jesus put it "hard-hearted" – human beings fail to achieve God's design for marriage.

No, instead of condemning all the wrong ways to engage in human intimacy, He simply tells us what is right. Instead of condemning each and every way that human beings fail to hit the target of marriage, Jesus instead tries to paint the target for us more clearly.

Okay, so what does that target look like? To answer that question, Jesus goes all the way back to the beginning, to Genesis 1:27 to be precise. God's initial plan was to make human beings in the image of God, both male and female. This radical notion of equality, that men and women are of equal worth in God's eyes, equal bearers of the divine image, is the foundation of everything else Jesus has to teach us on how men and women are supposed to relate to one another.

So, how are male and female people supposed to display the image of God which we all bear? At least in part by engaging in the same sort of life-giving creativity that God displayed when He made Adam and Eve. For what did God tell that first couple? "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." In other words, human sexual activity, and the children that so often result from it, is a good part of God's perfect plan for us.

And so before we go on, we must be perfectly clear about this. No matter what the so-called "progressives" may say, no matter what the Romantic devotees of the sexual revolution may believe, the Christian faith is not, in fact, rooted in the patriarchal subjugation of women. And it is not somehow sexually repressed, denying the joy and fulfillment of human intimacy. No, the Bible teaches that the equality of the sexes, the importance of intimacy, and the bearing of children are woven into the very fabric of God's creation, a creation that God said was "very good."

Ah, but how are these ideals to be achieved? How are we to uphold the equal worth of men and women in relation to one another? How are we to pursue true intimacy with one another? How are we to bring up children in the proper way? The answer to all of

these questions, as Jesus says in verses 5 and 6, is Christian marriage. And once again He quotes from Genesis, this time from chapter 2 verse 24. We therefore cannot deny that God's target, God's original design for marriage was for one man and one woman to leave the families in which they grew up, and to join themselves together in an intimate union of both body and spirit, a union that is so radical, so complete that they can be said to be one flesh.

Oh, and how long does Jesus say that such a union should last? Notice Jesus' point of emphasis in verse 6 – they aren't two different individuals any more, but one flesh. To divide the marital union would thus be tantamount to cutting someone in two – and many of those who have been through it have borne sad witness that this is in fact how a divorce feels. And just to make sure there's no misunderstanding on this point, Jesus adds a phrase that is repeated at most weddings, whether people really believe it or not: What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.

There it is: God's plan for human intimacy, the target which all Christian marriages should strive to hit. Sexual relations should only take place between one man and one woman joined together in the security of intimate union for one lifetime. So any Christian that teaches or tries to live by that standard is not trying to be harsh or judgmental or bigoted – we're just repeating what Jesus Himself said.

No, it really doesn't matter how we sinful human beings might miss the target. It doesn't matter if people want to get married on the Elizabeth Taylor plan – eight times to seven husbands. It doesn't matter if two men or two women want to marry each other. It doesn't matter if two women want to marry one man or two men want to marry one woman. It doesn't matter if someone thinks he can sleep around with all sorts of people either before or during his marriage. In the face of all these and many other sins, our job as Christians is not to pass judgment on anyone involved. Instead we are simply to do what Jesus did – to hold up God's target clearly and consistently, and try to encourage people to hit it.

Ah, but the next story in Matthew's gospel, the story we find in verses 13-15, reminds us that we must hold this target up with the greatest of humility. For just as Jesus' disciples had no business looking down on children, who were considered to be the least important people in society, so we have no business looking down on anyone who fails to hit God's target for marriage in any way.

Instead, we need to be honest about the sin that remains in all of our hearts. For don't we all continue to struggle with selfishness, with wanting other people to please us? Don't we all have sincere and earnest desires that aren't holy or healthy in some way? Jesus told us in the Sermon on the Mount that anyone who even looks at someone else in a lustful manner has committed adultery in his heart – have any of us even come close to meeting such a high standard?

No, the sad fact is that none of us have any room to sit in judgment on anyone else. Instead, we all need to heed Jesus' warning in verse 14 that only those who practice

true humility, only those who consider themselves as weak and as insignificant as little children can possibly enter the kingdom of God.

But this need for humility also gives us a clue as to how we can strive to hit the target of Christian marriage, or at least how we can get closer to it. For Paul tells us exactly the same thing in Ephesians chapter 5 – that husbands and wives should be subject to one another. And what is mutual subjection, what is considering someone else's needs as more important than our own desires if not an expression of humility?

Of course, Paul says husbands and wives should express this mutual subjection in different ways. A husband, he says, is to love his wife as Christ loved the Church, giving up everything he is and everything he has for her, desiring her holiness above all things. And a wife, he says, is to respond to this sort of godly, self-sacrificial leadership with respect, treating her husband as the head of the family even as Christ is the head of the church.

No, such radical humility isn't easy for anyone – that's part of the reason why hitting God's target for marriage is so tough. So it's no wonder that the disciples came to the conclusion they reached in verse 10 – that maybe it's better for some folks not to get married at all. And notice that in verses 11 and 12 that Jesus doesn't disagree with them. Instead, He points out that some people do in fact choose to remain unmarried "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven."

So when we put everything Jesus and Paul have to say together, the clear implication is that marriage is only for those who are willing to surrender themselves, to give themselves completely to their spouses in a permanent and self-sacrificial way. Those who aren't ready or willing to make such a humble, life-long commitment, those who instead cling to the Romantic notion that marriage is about personal happiness or self-fulfillment, well, they should just stay away from the altar.

So yes, Jesus' teaching on children immediately follows His teaching on marriage to underscore the need for husbands and wives to humble themselves before each other. But I wonder if there's not another reason Jesus mentions children at this point. Maybe He wants to remind us of the great need children have for their parents' marriages to be healthy.

For however heartbreakingly it is for a couple when their dreams of wedded bliss come crashing down, any failure to hit God's target for marriage has an equally devastating impact on their children. For let's face it – even secular sociologists admit that children from broken homes are not only at greater risk of all kinds of academic and behavioral difficulties – we also have a hard time forming healthy, long-lasting relationships.

And our parents' divorce can affect our spiritual lives as well. In fact, both from personal experience and from working for seventeen years at CHA, I have found this to be true: a child whose human father fails to keep his promises will have a harder time

trusting a Heavenly Father to be faithful to His Word. A child who feels abandoned and rejected by either or both of his parents will have a hard time believing that God wants to touch him and bless him, as Jesus did for the children in verses 13 and 15.

And so, one of the main reasons we should seek to hit God's target for marriage isn't just so that our marriages will be happier and so that more children will be born. No, we should encourage couples to live together according to God's plan so that their children won't be hindered from coming to Christ, so that their children won't become so suspicious, so callous, so cynical, so hardened that the good news of Christ's sacrifice for them makes no sense. Or to put it more positively, as children see their parents giving themselves completely to each other, making sacrifices for each other because they love each other, the idea of Jesus making a sacrifice for sinners like us because He loves us won't seem so strange.

In other words, one of the best ways we can encourage the children to come to a saving knowledge of Jesus is not just to explain what God's target for marriage is, but to live out His life of self-denying, self-sacrificial love in marriage, not allowing anyone or anything to put asunder what God has joined together. And, come to think of it, that might just be the best way to reach out to all those who disagree with us on the definition of marriage as well.

So, will we continue down the proud and selfish path the Romantics have forged for us, a path that has led to so much of the cultural chaos in our world today? Or will we listen to Paul? Will we listen to Jesus? Will we follow the One Who went so far as to die for His unfaithful bride? Will we humble ourselves before one another so that we and our children might be truly blessed?