

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 4, 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 elaborate 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, marriages can really be broken for any old reason at all. In fact, 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 the government's watering down of marriage vows. Very seldom do ruling or teaching elders ever try to confront a church member about a divorce, or even to investigate whether a divorce is legitimate. For everyone knows exactly what would happen if such an attempt at church discipline were attempted – the church member would simply go down the street to another congregation, which would welcome him with open arms.

Now, I know we were all shocked at the recent Supreme Court decision legalizing same-sex marriage, but shouldn't we have seen this coming? After all, both church and state had basically already redefined marriage as serial monogamy – you can marry as

many different people as you like, but only one at a time. Both church and state have thus embraced the idea of marriage as simply for the happiness and 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?

Oh, 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 sinful – 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 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 repressed, denying the joy and fulfillment of human intimacy. No, we believe 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 7 and 8, is Christian marriage. And once again He quotes from Genesis, this time from chapter 2 verse 24. 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 the repetition in verse 8 – they aren't two different people 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 testified that this is in fact how a divorce feels. But just to make sure there's no misunderstanding on this point, He adds in verse 9 something 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. That's not anyone trying to be harsh or judgmental – that's what Jesus Himself said.

So, you see, 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 Mark's gospel, the story we find in verses 13-16, 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 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. After all, Jesus warns us in verse 15 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 putting someone else first 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 humility won't be easy for anyone – that's part of the reason why hitting God's target for marriage is so tough.

But I wonder if Jesus' teaching on children immediately follows His teaching on marriage for another reason. Of course He wants to underline the need for husbands and wives to humble themselves before each other if their marriages are to be successful. But I wonder if there isn't another connection – the need children have for their parents' marriages to be healthy.

Now, it is of course true that whenever a couple fails to hit God's target for human intimacy, there is much suffering involved for them. One of my earliest memories is of my Dad lying face down on the dining room floor, sobbing because his marriage to Mama was falling apart. A broken heart is no fun, as many of you can attest.

But there is a very real sense in which our failure to hit God's target has an even more devastating impact on the children. From personal experience and from working with so many kids from broken homes at CHA, I have found this to be true: a child who cannot trust his human father whom he can see will have a harder time trusting a Heavenly Father he cannot see. 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 verse 16.

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 the children won't be hindered from coming to Christ, so that they 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 be the best way to reach out to all those who disagree with us on the definition of marriage as well.