

Jesus and Divorce

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[0 : 00] Okay, so today we are going to be thinking about marriage and divorce. Why? Well, because it's the next section in the Gospel of Mark that we've been going through Sunday by Sunday. And so in a reading from Mark chapter 10, you see that Jesus is asked about the grounds for divorce, and he answers by talking about the meaning of marriage.

And what Jesus says here could not be any more relevant to us in our day, at our time, because his words are contemporary, and they speak to what it means to be married.

So last month, no-fault divorce was allowed in England and Wales. So the Divorce, Dissolution, and Separation Act 2020 came into effect on the 6th of April.

Now, previously, anybody who wanted to divorce their spouse had to prove that their marriage had irredeemably broken down. That was because of adultery or unreasonable behaviour or desertion or separation.

But the new law, the no-fault divorce law, makes the process far easier for married couples to separate without assigning blame to anyone. And columnist Amanda Plattel, herself divorced, says this.

[1 : 21] She says, however much this law tries to redefine the dissolution of a marriage as quick and no fault, the undeniable truth remains that divorce hurts.

It hurts everyone involved. That's true, isn't it? In fact, a new study published by Demographic Research, which uses data from 17 countries, has found that when it comes to educational attainment, parental divorce has a larger impact on children than parental death.

Also, a recent study found that family breakup was the single biggest predictor of mental health problems in teenagers. And in addition, NHS data has shown a threefold increase in mental disorders for children under 10 who experience parental separation.

So, divorce clearly causes damage. And that's why we should not be so quick to dismiss what God says to us in his word about marriage.

Because God's design for how we are to relate to one another is best, even if many would not want to admit it. But of course, this is not just an area that matters for our society.

[2 : 39] Because we will all have been impacted by divorce in one way or another, whether that's personally, whether that is in our family or amongst our friends or in our church, as well as in society at large.

And so we are well aware that this is a very sensitive and a very painful area for most of us. And so we'll all come at the subject of marriage and divorce with different questions in our mind.

Questions about the meaning of marriage. Questions about the legitimate grounds for divorce. Questions about the appropriateness of remarriage. As well as so many other different kinds of questions.

There are just so many unique personal pastoral situations that there is no way that we can speak to every single scenario in one talk. Or answer every question.

Or even apply the principles to your specific situation. And so let's just remember the context for what is being said here.

[3 : 42] The context is, Jesus is teaching in Mark's gospel about discipleship. About what it means to follow him. And so obviously, if we're going to follow Jesus, that is going to have an impact on how we relate to people around us.

Especially how we relate to our spouse in our marriage. But what Jesus teaches here are principles that apply to everybody. And so what we're going to do is we're going to look at these.

And then I'll try and apply them broadly to different groups of people at the end. So here's the three points we're going to look at this afternoon. First of all, hearts are hard. Second, marriage is to be maintained.

And third, divorce is never desirable, but is permissible. And these all have to be held in tension. So let's look first of all, first point, hearts are hard.

Now that sounds like a strange place to start. But if you notice in the Bible passage, that is the answer that Jesus gives to the question that he has asked. So let's look at verse 1 to 5.

[4 : 43] 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?

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 to you this law, Jesus replied.

Okay, so the Pharisees, that is the teachers of the law, they wanted to trap Jesus. And so they test him by asking, is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife? But Jesus springs the trap by responding, what did Moses command you?

And so they respond, Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away. Now the Pharisees here are referring back to a passage in Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Bible, Deuteronomy chapter 24.

And this is what it says in Deuteronomy 24 verse 1. It says, if a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her and he writes her a certificate of divorce.

[6 : 00] And it goes on. You can check that later. So Jesus acknowledges that divorce is a reality in the law of Moses. It was permitted because hearts were hard.

So the debate isn't about whether divorce was permitted. It was. But on what grounds was divorce permitted? That's the issue the Pharisees want to test Jesus on.

And it all comes down to a phrase in that passage in Deuteronomy chapter 24 and verse 1. There's a phrase that says something indecent about her.

What does something indecent mean? It's ambiguous, isn't it? What kind of indecency would constitute grounds for a divorce? That's what it all comes down to.

That's what the Pharisees are wanting to test Jesus on. And what does Jesus think about this particular matter? And there were two schools of thought about this that were common and known at the time of Jesus.

[7 : 03] One more conservative school of thought. The other more liberal school of thought. And so both are in the Mishnah, which is the oral law in Judaism.

Kind of like a commentary on the written law. And this is what it says. It says, The school of Shammai say, A man may not divorce his wife unless he has found unchastity in her.

For it is written, Because he hath found in her indecency in anything. And the school of Hillel say, He may divorce her even if she spoiled a dish for him.

It is written, Because he hath found in her indecency in anything. Okay, so did you get that? In the Mishnah, two schools of thought. One conservative, one liberal.

The conservative school took a very strict line. Where the only valid reason for divorce was a wife's sexual immorality. So the emphasis is being on the indecency.

[8 : 04] Whereas the liberal school took a much more relaxed attitude. Where they would permit a husband to divorce his wife for pretty much any reason. The emphasis being on the anything.

So if she burnt your dinner, If you were a man and your wife burnt your dinner, Apparently you had legitimate grounds for divorce. In one school of thought. Now the Pharisees wanted to know if Jesus approved of this kind of no-fault divorce.

And that's why Jesus has to tell them the reason for Moses' law in the first place. It was allowed because of hard hearts. Now hardness of heart in the Bible essentially describes rebellion against God.

And so divorce was never part of God's original intention for marriage. But it was permitted because of human sin. So Moses gave the law in part for legal protection for the woman.

It is unfair, isn't it? If you're divorced because you forgot to switch the parados off one evening. Or, I don't know, hard-boiled eggs when they should have been soft-boiled.

[9 : 16] But it was intended, the law was intended to prevent damage limitation. And so what was meant to be a concession, in a sense, Had been turned into a license for divorce.

So the law had been abused, Jesus says, because of sinful hearts. The law was being abused. And so divorce was allowed as a concession, not as a rule. And so the Pharisees didn't approach Jesus, you notice, Because they were really concerned and distressed about the breakdown of marriages.

They don't seem to care about that. They weren't really worried about the neglect or abuse of women. And that wasn't their issue. They just wanted to know how easy it was to get shot of your wife.

Now, I don't think this is exactly our issue today, is it? But we still need to guard against hard hearts when it comes to our relationships. Because if we understand God's intention for marriage, outlined by Jesus, Then we should never be thinking, well, what can I get away with?

Or how does this best suit me? Because that completely misses the point. And so we should never be trying to think of twisting God's good purposes To suit our sinful hearts.

[10 : 35] Because our hearts will often want to make excuses for our sinful behavior. We will want to justify to ourselves why we should be doing this kind of thing.

And so we've got to be aware, haven't we, of rebelling against God And how we treat other people. Especially those we're married to. Okay, so that's the first thing.

Hearts are hard. The second thing is marriage is to be maintained. Marriage is to be maintained. So when Jesus is asked about the permissibility of divorce, What he does is he answers by establishing the permanency of marriage.

Look at verse 6 to 9. 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.

And so they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate. So see what Jesus does here.

- [11 : 39] He goes away back to the beginning, back to creation in Genesis, To give God's design for marriage. And that's where the Pharisees needed to start on the subject of marriage.
- And so does anyone who wants to talk about marriage needs to go back to the beginning. Because we need to begin with God's original intention for marriage Before debating the grounds for divorce.
- That makes sense, doesn't it? And so all the Pharisees were obsessed by what Deuteronomy said, That the fifth book, Jesus says, What about Genesis?
- The first book. Five books of Moses, the Pentateuch, the law. What about book number one before you get to number five? It's as if he's saying, Don't you know what it says in Genesis?
- Because if you want to understand marriage, Jesus is saying to them, And everything related to marriage, including divorce, Then go back to God's will and God's purpose for marriage When he first established it at creation.
- [12 : 45] Because God's original intention for marriage still stands. It always does. So what is God's intention? Well, Jesus quotes from Genesis chapters 1 and 2.
- Firstly, Genesis 1, 27. God made male and female. And then secondly, Genesis 2, 24. Where he says, A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife.
- And the two will become one flesh. And so that's why no one should separate what God has joined together. So marriage should be maintained.
- Because when two people become one, Then they should stay as one. And so the very fact that the Pharisees are even asking about divorce Proves the point that they were very little concerned about marriage.
- They don't really care about God's purpose for marriage. And that's why Jesus has to take them away back to the beginning. Because they want to focus on the acceptable reasons for divorce.
- [13 : 49] Whereas Jesus wants to focus on the sanctity of marriage. They want to know when you can end a marriage. Whereas Jesus wants them to know that you shouldn't. Because whatever the later permission for divorce, It can never change the permanent nature of marriage.
- And so the answer to the question of the Pharisees in verse 2, Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife? Is there in verse 9. Therefore, what God has joined together, Let no one separate.
- So Jesus is saying, God hasn't changed his mind on marriage. Whether in Moses' day or in Jesus' day, Even in our own day. God gave it as an exclusive and permanent relationship Between one man and one woman.
- And so what Jesus is doing here is, He's not lowering the bar for marriage. And that's not because Jesus doesn't care about people. It's precisely because he does care about people.
- That marriage is to be maintained. Because if God designed marriage to last, Then divorce will always be a tearing apart Of what God intended to be stuck together.
- [15 : 04] And it's always going to be painful. It's always going to cause hurt for somebody. And Jesus is well aware of this.
- In fact, he's more aware of this than anyone. About the pain and hurt of divorce. And that's why he's saying, Don't do it. God loves us too much to see us hurt.
- Or to see us hurt other people. Now, that's not to say that divorce is always wrong. It isn't. We're going to get to that. It is simply to say that God's original intention For marriage is that it should last.

It was given to be the most fulfilling way For a man and a woman to relate to each other.
Not just for our own flourishing personally, But for the flourishing of all humanity.

And so we need to feel the weight Of what Jesus says about marriage first, Don't we?
Before we too quickly jump To discussing divorce. Because divorce and remarriage Need
to be taken in the wider context Of what marriage is for.

[16 : 14] Just think about flying an airplane. Now, you don't learn to fly a plane By concentrating on
how to crash land, do you? And it seems like the Pharisees Wanted to know how to crash
land a marriage.

Whereas Jesus wants to talk about Staying in the air And enjoying, even surviving, the
journey. And so whatever exceptions there might be For divorce, the main thing We need
to see Is that marriage is supposed to be A permanent, lifelong union.

That's our second point. Marriage is to be maintained. So how then should we think about
divorce? Well, on to our third point. Divorce is never desirable, But it is permissible.

Verse 10 to 12. So Jesus, get this, He tackled the matter of divorce By emphasizing the
meaning of marriage. So His disciples ask Him about this.

Let's read those verses. 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.

[17 : 28] Sounds like a downright prohibition Of divorce, doesn't it? On any grounds. And so the
question is, Well, are there any grounds For divorce, according to Jesus?

Well, going by the previous discussion With the Pharisees on Deuteronomy 24 About
divorce, And going by the answer To Jesus' disciples here In verse 11 and 12 About the
wrong reasons for divorce, Then the answer is yes.

Yes, there are grounds for divorce. And here's why this is such A sensitive matter.
Because according to Jesus, Divorce is never desirable, But it is permissible.

In other words, Divorce is not always sinful. I think we need to get that, Don't we? Kevin
DeYoung, Whose church I visited earlier This year in February, He has articulated this
well By saying, Listen to this, Is every divorce the product of sin?

Yes. Is every divorce therefore sinful? No. I think that is a really helpful way To summarize
how we should think About divorce.

[18 : 44] Every divorce is the product of sin, But not every divorce Is therefore sinful. Of course,
many divorces are sinful. Sinful.

But Jesus indicates at the end of this passage That not every divorce is. So when is
divorce permissible? Well, we need to look at what Mark says In his gospel, But we need
to go wider too.

So the first thing is Divorce is permitted For sexual immorality. Now if we read Matthew's
account Of the same incident That Mark records here The parallel account Listen to what
Jesus says This is Matthew chapter 19 verse 9 I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife
Except for sexual immorality And marries another woman Commits adultery So did you
hear that bit?

Except for sexual immorality So sexual immorality Is the exception Jesus makes for
divorce Sometimes it's referred to As the exception clause But why does Mark not include
it here?

Well, there are various suggestions But I think the simple reason That Mark doesn't include it here Is because it was so well known It was a given It was already assumed That sexual immorality Was grounds for divorce So Jesus doesn't need To state the obvious here Now sexual immorality Is the Greek word pornea And it refers to any kind of Sexual practice Outside of marriage Between one man and one woman So pornea Sexual immorality Clearly includes adultery So Jesus does permit divorce For sexual immorality Having said that While divorce is permitted For sexual immorality It is not compulsory But are there any other grounds?

[20 : 40] Well again, we have to go Wider than Mark here Because secondly Divorce is permitted For desertion Desertion And this comes from 1 Corinthians chapter 7 Where Paul Has got a lengthy section On marriage And he picks up On a number of different Pastoral situations And we don't have time To go into this But Paul is speaking To the situation Of a believer Being married To an unbeliever And this is what he says In 1 Corinthians chapter 7 Verse 15 But if the unbeliever leaves Let it be so The brother or the sister Is not bound In such circumstances So this is a second ground For divorce It's desertion By an unbelieving spouse But again While divorce is permitted For desertion Again It is not compulsory And we'll come on to that Okay So when you add These two together Sexual immorality And desertion

When you add them You've basically got The two traditional grounds For divorce In Protestant theology In both cases The marriage bond Has been broken And so divorce Is permitted So is that it?

Well there's something else Because some Some consider There to be grounds For divorce Based on a passage In Exodus chapter 21 So we could say As a third thing Or maybe even Fitting into the second thing That divorce Is permitted Because of Desertion We could also say Divorce is permitted For neglect So listen to what Exodus chapter 21 Verse 10 to 11 says If he marries Another woman He must not deprive The first one Of her food Clothing And marital rights If he does not Provide her With these three things She is to go free Without any payment Of money Okay So speaking there About physical neglect That's obvious Which is tantamount To abuse As well as Emotional neglect And if it's happening Then in Exodus It says The woman is to go free Implying Divorce is permitted

Because of neglect Now I'm cautious About that one About that one Or indeed About going any further For searching For other grounds For divorce Because I mean Where do you stop?

I think God Has given us These clear principles And his intention And his intention is Lifelong marriage And Jesus Along with Paul Have indicated Clear divorce And so what We need to do Is to apply These principles That God gives to us Wisely And sensitively To each Individual situation We need to work Ourselves And see how God's truth Applies to Our own lives And our own Relationships Okay So that's divorce Well The question is What about Remarriage?

[23 : 53] Well see what Jesus says here Verse 11 And 12 If divorce Isn't permissible Then Remarriage Isn't Permissible Because it results In adultery In other words Jesus condemned Remarriage After an Invalid divorce So if you Shouldn't have Been divorced In the first Place Then to Remarry And enter A new Relationship Is sinful But If the Divorce Is permissible Then the Remarriage Is also Permissible In other words Remarriage Is allowed After a Valid Divorce But just Because a Divorced person Is free To remarry It doesn't Necessarily mean That they Should And again Many factors Will need to Be considered That come Into play In each And every Different Scenario So when it Comes to Jesus and Divorce What we Can say With clarity Is that Marriage is To be Maintained And divorce

Is never Desirable But it Is permissible And it's Permitted Remember Because of Human sin Because our Hearts Are hard Not because It was Part of God's Original Creation Intention For marriage Okay I said That I would End by Briefly addressing Different groups Of people So here are The groups Of people I will address The single The married The divorced And the remarried Four groups Now I am Aware that There will Be and Is a Mixture Of emotions Perhaps Feeling shame For the Past or Maybe pain In the Present or Just fear About the Future And what's Said today Won't Necessarily Address your Particular Circumstance And if So And if You do Want to Discuss Further Then please Do come And see Me Afterwards So we Can work Through How God's

Word does Apply to Your particular Circumstances Having said That let's Just seek to Apply these General principles About marriage And divorce To our Situations And I think Most of us Are in Those four Categories Single Married Divorced Or remarried So first of All the Single Maybe this Is for Those who Are younger So don't Think that Jesus has Got nothing To say To you Because you're Single When we're Looking at A passage About marriage Because he Does You know That our Culture Tells you That you Have got To be In a Relationship If you Are going To be Fulfilled As a Person But that Isn't True So don't Make an Idol Out of Marriage Don't Think that The one Thing you Need in Your life Is to Be married And then You'll be Happy Then you'll Be satisfied Then you Will be Fulfilled And all Your Problems Will go Don't Think you Need a Marriage To make You Complete

What we Need is Jesus Christ All of Us And we Need his Help For our Individual Circumstances And so What we Need to Do if We're Single Is to Faithfully Follow Jesus Is to Hear God's Intention His Good Purpose For sex And relationships And to Seek his Help To follow It That's What it Means to Follow Jesus If we're Single Second Group Are the Married If you're Married Stay Married God has Joined You With your Spouse And so The Maintenance Of Your Marriage Has Got To Be Your Priority Because There Is No More Important Human Relationship Than The Relationship You Have With Your Spouse So Do All That You Can To Cultivate A Healthy Marriage Because Marriage Is Precious And It Is Designed By God To Last So Guard Your Marriage

Don't Think That You Are Above Temptation Don't Think That You Will Never Fail Because We Are All Capable Of Falling Into Sin And Destroying Our Marriages And If You're Going Through A Difficult Time In Your Marriage Don't Give Up Work At It And If You're Thinking About Divorce Then Please Speak To Someone And Seek Help You May Have Biblical Grounds For Divorce But That Need To Be The Only Outcome Because It Is Possible By God's Grace To Have Your Marriage Restored It's Not Easy It Is Hard And It Will Require Genuine Repentance And God's Help To Forgive But Reconciliation Can Come Or You Might Be Contemplating Divorce But You Don't Have Any Biblical Grounds For It And Seek To Maintain Your Marriage By Keeping Those Vows

[28 : 53] That You Made Before God On Your Wedding Day Stay Married Thirdly The Divorced If You've Experienced Divorce Then You Will Know The Pain Either Because Of What Caused The Divorce Or What Has Happened In The Aftermath Of The Divorce And Especially If You're The One Who Has Been Sinned Against Divorce Perhaps There's A Feeling Of Shame Of Disappointment Because Life Hasn't At All Turned Out The Way You Expected Or Wanted But If You Do Have Biblical Grounds For Divorce Then There Is No Need For Shame Nobody In Church Nobody In This Church Will Look Down On You Because Of What Has Happened This Church This Church Family Is Here So Everybody Can Be Loved And Cared For And Welcome But If It Has Been Your Sin That Has Caused The Divorce Then Obviously Repent Of Your

Sin Forgiveness Is Always Possible With God Do You Know Why We Spent So Long Practicing And Singing Psalm 51 It's Because Psalm 51 Has Got These Words Verse 17 A Broken And Contrite Heart You God Will Not Despise So Sin Should Never Be Treated Lightly And Repentance Must Be Genuine But There Is Mercy For You There Is Mercy For Me There Is Mercy For Everyone So Seek God's Grace To Find That Forgiveness And Then Go And Faithfully Follow Jesus Okay Single Married Divorced Fourthly The Remarried If You Remarried I Think The Implication Of The Teaching Here Is Stay As You Are Depending On Your Circumstances It May Be That Repentance For The Past Is Needed Perhaps Effort Is Required To Restore Or Reconcile

Broken Relationships That May Need To Be Done In Which Case Do It The Single Married The Divorced The Remarried Okay When It Comes To What Jesus Says About Marriage And Divorce It Doesn't Matter What Our Confused And Conflicting Culture Tells Us What Matters Is What Jesus Tells Us What He Says Because Following Jesus Is The Only Way To Flourish As A Human Being Because Not Only Does Jesus Lovingly Tell Us What Is Best For Us Jesus For Gives Us When We Fail Only In Jesus Can We Know For All For Our Sin And Our Shame And Our Guilt The Reality Is That We Are All Sinners We Are All Flawed Human Beings We We We We We We All Have Hard Hearts Which Resist God's Will For Our Lives

And Spoil Our Relationships And So We Are All In Need Of God's Forgiveness And The Good News Is That We Can All Have God's Forgiveness God Never Writes Anyone Off And Says That's It Scheme Over For You Pal You're Done You're Finished No Hope Never Does God Say That Jesus Came To Pay The Price For All Our Sin By Dying On A Cross Which Means There Is Always Grace There's Always Hope For Us As An Individual There's Always Hope For Our Marriages The Gospel Of Jesus Christ Is The Only Power In The Whole Wide World That Can Snatch Defeat Sorry Can Snatch Victory From The Jaws Of Defeat And So The Question Is Do You Really Believe This Do I Really Believe This Do We Believe That The

Gospel Of Jesus Christ Can Stop A Person In Their Tracks In Their Sin Soften Their Heart Turn Their Lives Around And Transform Their Marriages Because The Hurt And The Pain That Can Come In Marriage Or Through Divorce Can Be Healed By The The The God Life And the power of Jesus. And if that's the case, no one should ever think I need to run away from God because of what I've done. We should be thinking I've got to run to God, to his open arms, who'll welcome me back, who'll forgive me, who'll restore me. Doesn't mean to say everything in the past will be sorted, but he will be with me and he will help me and he has forgiven me. So never ever run away from God. So whether single, whether married, whether separated, whether divorced or remarried, what we all need to do is heed the call of Jesus to follow him. He knows what's best.

[34 : 06] He loves us. He cares. He forgives. He gives hope.