

Marriage Commitment

Mark 10:1-12

Introduction

When I was young there was talk at school and particularly at youth groups and in churches that you wouldn't want to risk ruining the rest of your life by sleeping with your boyfriend or girlfriend. If you slept with someone before getting married you may get a reputation, you may have the responsibility of having a child, you might catch a disease and so on. One of the strongest words of caution that was mentioned was, "Why would you want to settle for God's second best for the rest of your life."

I have to say that while there are elements of truth connected to that teaching, there is also a some significant flaws. In particular there is the flawed thinking that a sexual sin will mean forever settling for God's second best, as if God forgives other sins fully but not those ones. I am well aware of 1 Corinthians 6:18 where Paul writes, "Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body." However, that verse is in the context of Christians going off to temple prostitutes and so is not directly related. Having said that, I am aware of the impact that sex and sexual sins has on people.

As we read this section of Mark's Gospel I am not wanting to downplay the impact which divorce and sexual sins have on people but neither do I want to remove this message from Jesus' broader teaching of the way God deals with human failure and sin, calling people to repentance and a restored relationship..

And before we look at this passage, I am conscious that some people here have been divorced, some are separated and going through divorce processes now, others lived with a partner as if married and some of you are in that arrangement now (even though you may be aware that it's not a formal marriage "before God and people.") and some of you will have slept with someone while being married to someone else. Aware of this, I am going to pray and ask that the Lord would give me sensitivity in my

speech as well as truth and clarity and that everyone here would have open ears and hearts with a willingness to be guided by the Holy Spirit.

[pray for message and for those listening]

Question For Testing (vv. 1-2)

So then, as we look at what's happening here at the start of chapter 10, we notice that Jesus is on the move and teaching people again and there are some Pharisees who again want to see if they can catch Jesus out.

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's the point of the Pharisees testing Jesus on this question? While it's not clarified, a reasonable idea is that Jesus has moved into the territory of Herod Antipas. You may remember that John the Baptist had been beheaded by Herod at the instigation of his wife, Herodias. This happened because John had said that it was wrong that Herodias had abandoned her husband, who happened to be Herod's brother, Phillip, to marry Herod. Perhaps the Pharisees were hoping that Jesus will say something that will raise the ire of Herod or Herodias which would see this trouble maker locked away.

Whatever their motivation, the question is legitimate and important, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" It is phrased this way because in the culture of the time it was essentially men who did the divorcing.

Allowances for Weakness (vv. 3-5)

How does Jesus answer this important question? As an able debater and story teller Jesus asks a question in return. Asking questions is always good because it normally helps to clarify the question as well as gives opportunity for people to present their own bias or agenda. On this occasion listen to the way Jesus asks the question and to the way the Pharisees answer:

‘What did Moses command you?’ [Jesus] replied.

They said, ‘Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.’

It should be noted that the Pharisees have given a true summary of what Moses permitted, which is recorded in Deuteronomy 24:1, “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, gives it to her and sends her from his house.”

Although this sounds unpleasant to our modern ears, this allowance did actually serve as a protection to wives. A wife being ‘sent away’ normally meant that she was sent back to the care of her family, not just abandoned, and by having a certificate of divorce she was in a much stronger position legally to seek re-marriage. Without a certificate a man would often be reluctant to take a divorcee as a wife for fear that the divorce wasn’t legal and so he could be held culpable for committing adultery against the husband.

However, did you notice the difference in wording between Jesus’ question and the Pharisees’ response? Jesus asked, “What did Moses command you?” but the Pharisees replied, “Moses permitted [...]” By Jesus asking about what was commanded, he is looking for the intent, goal, or ideal of marriage but the Pharisees respond by pointing to what was permitted or allowed. The Pharisees’ answer demonstrates that they want to know what is acceptable under the law (which normally indicates a dealing with the law at a surface level) rather than engaging with the heart of what God’s desire is for marriage.

Jesus picks up on this in when he next speaks, “‘It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,’ Jesus replied.” Yes, there is permission for divorce, but why focus on that when you should be emphasising the goal and intent of marriage? You focus on what is permitted (what you can get away with) if your hearts are hard. Does that mean that the law was wrong? No, I don’t think Jesus is saying that but rather Jesus is simply pointing out that the law doesn’t always fully express God’s heart on a matter.

Why then would God have allowed for such a provision? Because the alternative was worse. Without this allowance you may have had un-checked adultery as people remained legally married but pursued other people. Also, consider the risk, particularly to women, of domestic violence if there was no avenue for a man to leave a relationship which the husband wanted out of. Were a spouse to feel perpetually trapped perhaps that person might take extreme measures to be out of the relationship.

God's Ideal (vv. 6-9)

In contrast to what is permitted, Jesus focuses on what God did actually command regarding marriage:

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.” So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.’

Jesus goes back to the creation mandate to describe not just what God allowed for, but was actually the goal and heart of God’s intent of marriage.

I just want to make a few observations about marriage that we see in these verses and I’ll take them in the order they come up in the verses: First, God’s design for marriage is with “male and female”. If someone ever says to you, “Jesus never teaches on homosexuality,” they’re not really telling you the truth. At various times Jesus makes his view clear by re-stating God’s design for marriage at creation as involving a man and a woman. I’m not going to labour this here because that’s not the focus of these verses but it is worth remembering.

Second, I’m tempted to wonder why it is that it’s men who need to be told to leave home? Maybe all those jokes men make about their mother in-law should be made by women instead?! Seriously though, what we do see here is that the marriage relationship is to be the most important relationship a husband and wife have. A husband and wife are to be so closely identified with each other that they are no

longer identified as being separate but rather they have become one flesh. Please note though that it is the two that have become one, not the halves which have become one. Men and women are whole in themselves and do not need a spouse to be complete. Rather, it is once the commitment has been made to come together in marriage that the union is so encompassing that the husband and wife become one flesh.

Finally, marriages ultimately are before God. It is God who works to make the two become one and this is why it's so serious for people break apart the union which God has created.

This then is what God commands about marriage. This is God's ideal and goal for marriage. Marriage is to be the closest relationship that a man and a woman will experience to the point where they are one flesh and it is to be for as long as they live.

The Damage of Divorce (vv. 10-12)

Why is this so important? Why is there a significant difference between what is permitted or allowed and what is the goal? People are allowed to get a divorce but that's not the goal of a marriage. Jesus clarifies things more to his disciples when they ask him privately about it.

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.'

For people today we think about things "in the moment" and sex today has predominantly been reduced to a mere physical act. For some people today fidelity is an unnecessary burden before or after marriage and for some in marriage too. In contrast to such thinking we are here presented with an ideal for marriage as being life-long and thus even if people are now separate, even if there is a formal certificate of divorce, there is a bond to the other person which is now corrupted.

Some of you may know that Jesus elsewhere does give an explicit permission for divorce and that being where either the husband or the wife have been unfaithful. Other than Mark always being brief, I think the reason that Jesus doesn't mention that permission here is because here the primary emphasis of Jesus is to present the ideal of marriage, the goal to be aimed for.

Adultery obviously comes from the same word as 'adulterate' and adulterate means, "to render something poorer in quality by adding another substance." (OED) The involvement of another person in a relationship, whether from the past or in the present, decreases the quality of the current relationship.

The reason why Jesus doesn't want people to take the path of what is permitted and instead pursue the ideal of marriage which God instituted and creates is because Jesus wants what is best for us and for our relationships.

Conclusion

So where do we go from here? Is the goal of this message just to make a bunch of people feel guilty? Not really, no.

So as to not go beyond the passage, I won't go into detail as to when I do see reasonable grounds for divorce though I will say in passing that where the marriage relationship is fundamentally broken and the image of Christ's relationship with the church, which marriages are supposed to represent, is so distorted (such as because of marital unfaithfulness or domestic abuse) then I do think that divorce is warranted.

But let's stay with Jesus' words here. What would Jesus have his disciples and listeners do in response? Here we need to remember that some of his listeners may have already been divorced, so what is Jesus saying to them?

Here are some take away messages for us: First, don't try to engage with God through rules. This leads to pride and legalism. Instead, look at the heart of God's engagement with humanity. This will lead to humility, as we realise how often we fall short of the ideal, and to life as we engage personally with God.

Second, for those of us who are married, may we cherish our marriages and strive for the ideal which God has created for us to enjoy. For some of us that may mean making the tough choice of putting extra efforts into our marriages. This may include receiving counselling because we want to honour God and enjoy marriage as God designed it.

Third, if you have committed adultery or you allowed a marriage to fail because you didn't feel like putting in the work to fix it, or for some similar reason, then do say sorry to God and ask for forgiveness. I wonder how many people who heard Jesus speak approached him and said, "But I'm guilty of that. I thought I was getting divorced according to what was permitted under the law but now I see that I've committed adultery before God by getting married again. What do I do?" Would Jesus answer, "That's it! No forgiveness for you!"? Jesus' character and teaching says that that's not the case. If you have sinned in this area, ask for forgiveness and receive the forgiveness which Jesus is so ready to grant to people who genuinely admit their failure and acknowledge their need.

We're going to have a song now to help us reflect on this. As you listen to this song please think about engaging with God personally rather than through rules, striving to pursue God's ideal of marriage either for ourselves or if you're not married for someone you know, and for asking for forgiveness.

At the end of the service if you would like someone to pray with you please don't leave without that happening. I and _____ will be available and are very happy to pray for you.

[Lead into Come As You Are]