

August 7, 2011

Marriage is God's Making

Mark 10:1-12

INTRODUCTION

There won't be much application to this text today because we are going to open up so many cans of worms as we go that trying to resolve every difficulty that you may have is a fool's errand. My assignment is only to preach the text and explain as much of the main context as I can in forty minutes.

- MARRIAGE IN THE CULTURAL CONTEXT
- MARRIAGE IN THE CREATIONAL CONTEXT
- MARRIAGE IN THE CASE OF DIVORCE

The Big Idea is that God has made every marriage permanent in order to tell the gospel.

DOCTRINE

I. MARRIAGE IN THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

A) The Context of First Century Israel

1. *And he left there and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan, and crowds gathered to him again. And again, as was his custom, he taught them. And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" (1-2).* The first piece of context we have here is that Jesus is teaching the crowds. Matthew 19 provides the parallel. Secondly, the statement is a reaction to a specific question that was convoluted to begin with. So two facts come together as one—Jesus is not teaching these crowds, systematically, on a doctrine of marriage and divorce; and secondly, when He does teach on it, it is in response to a specific question meant to trap Him.

2. Yet a third piece of the puzzle comes in from Matthew's Gospel. They asked: "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for **any cause**?" [19:3] The Gospel of Matthew was addressed to the ethnic people of Israel and in their culture the Pharisees had developed what has been called

the “any cause clause” for divorce. Often the law of Moses was torn out of its context to justify everything from polygamy to divorcing one’s wife if she burnt the dinner! In other words, the Pharisees are not asking Jesus whether or not there is ANY exception to the obligation to stay married (as Piper thinks¹), but, rather whether or not there is ANY exception to the right to divorce. The right to divorce under a variety of circumstances was taken for granted. The issue was whether or not some Pharisees had abused the law and thereby sanctioned the abuse of women. If Jesus said ‘Yes’ then He would be a libertine; if He said ‘No,’ then their trap was laid and that class of Pharisees would be all the more set to kill Him. It may have been an attempt to get Him in trouble with Herod as well, since John had been arrested for this very thing. But as usual, Jesus would not be trapped by their shallow cleverness.

B) The Context of the Mosaic Covenant

1. *He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away” (3-4).* The abuse of the law was of a law in Deuteronomy 24:1, which states, “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—” here we see that “finds no favor in his eyes” became torn from the following words “some indecency in her.” But whatever the abuse, God himself provided this mercy to women to prevent them from being stoned (perhaps if they were innocent, or perhaps even if they were not). Jesus himself seems to repeat this exception in the New Testament:

It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, **except on the ground of sexual immorality**, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery [Mat. 5:31-32].

And yes, since there are perpetrators and victims of divorce, Jesus is taking it for granted that remarriage is permissible for the victim, as the parallel passage in Matthew makes clear.

And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, **except for sexual immorality**, and marries another, commits adultery [Mat. 19:9].

¹ Piper sees his own exegesis of Matthew 5:31-32 as the basic context of this incident, which would make “any cause” refer to the non-exception to Jesus’ prohibition of divorce and remarriage. Thus Piper also has to explain away the apparent exception provided in 5:32 by making *porneia* mean an unfaithful act that would cause a pre-marital end to the engagement.

The assumption of the law was that acceptable divorce implied the right to remarry, since the certificate (commanded by God) read “Free to remarry.” So naturally if there is an innocent party to the divorce, then the exception carries over to the freedom to remarry. As to the exception, John MacArthur points out that “Adultery—especially unrepentant or long-term unfaithfulness—constitutes a serious breach of that union, even apart from the formality of a divorce...a case in which divorce would simply be a legal acknowledgment that the permanent union had already been permanently and irreparably ruptured by the guilty person’s sin.”²

2. Jesus is saying to his culture—which is much stricter than ours—in effect, ‘You have heard it said about divorce that it is ‘okay,’ provided A, B and C—but I say to you that divorce *always* lies about God and it *always* make people into false-gospel-telling adulterers.’ The exception is a kind provision for the victims in a cursed world, but it’s not an ‘okay.’ This merciful concession explains the next words. *And Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment (5).* Understand that when Jesus says that **he wrote you this commandment**, he means God and Moses. He didn’t mean to suggest that Moses was just out there writing this part without God’s permission!

All law speaks to hardened hearts—“The law is not laid down for the just but for the unjust” [1 Tim. 1:9], so making an exception here, as if this is a footnote, is ironic liberalism. The law to Israel, or the way that ethnic Israel related to the law, is referred to as the reading of a heart of stone. God wrote this law on tablets of stone and the heart of the people was just like the thing that God wrote it on [cf. 2 Cor. 3:3, 7, 14-15]. The law was given to restrain the evil of the hard-hearted unfaithful one, to lessen it, not to place a scarlet letter on the victim. The most immediate meaning of **hardness of heart** is that these Pharisees were interpreting the law through the lens of what God would permit or allow them to get away with. A soft heart, by contrast, would be looking in the law for what pleases God, what He desires, what brings God the maximum amount of honor and glory.

3. But the important thing about this “hardness of heart” is this: Jesus is saying that God has introduced mercy in reducing the remedy for adultery from death to divorce. Since sin came into the world, the law of Israel was a very gracious thing. Every sin deserved death as God had promised from the beginning. This evil thing called “divorce” was just one example among thousands of things that God now “allowed,” not in the sense of condoning, but in giving a merciful remedy to care for a wicked people.

² John MacArthur, *The Divorce Dilemma* (Day One Publications, Leominster, England 2009); pp. 22-23

II. MARRIAGE IN THE CREATIONAL CONTEXT

A) God Made Marriage to Speak About Himself

1. *But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female' (6).* Before Jesus speaks of God making the marriage of Adam and Eve, He first draws our attention to the creation of man and woman *per se*. In the creation account Moses speaks of this human being as an image of God, and then male and female in the same breath:

Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them [Gen. 1:26, 27].

Marriage does not have a separate function than this imaging forth of God: this display of God's glory. It is another aspect of the same function. Male and female were not an afterthought to the function of the image. Now in the second chapter, it is God himself that walks the bride down the aisle of the first wedding:

And the rib that **the LORD God** had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." **Therefore** a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh [Gen. 2:22-24].

2. And that last statement is where Jesus picks up in his argument: *'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.'* So they are no longer two but one flesh (7-8). **Therefore**. In other words, because I made man to display my glory and because I made woman to display my glory, *therefore*, put them together and the only reason they're together is to display that same glory in a one-flesh way. That is what marriage is and it isn't anything else. Human beings do not have the right to reinvent it; and for that same reason, no judge, no piece of paper, no mid-life crisis, no sweet sound from Hollywood, no conservative over-correction, nor anything else, has the power or authority to make it something else.

B) Man is Commanded Not to Divorce What God Has Married

1. *What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate (9).* We recognize these words from right before the preacher says, "You may now kiss the bride." It may surprise you to discover that it's a command from **God**. This completes Jesus outmaneuvering those who tried to trip Him up. The liberals were wrong; the conservatives were wrong. God's design

is that our marriages would tell the gospel in its fullness, and that means that anyone who is still generally able to do it should seek reconciliation. This standard is higher for the man, for two reasons—first, in the old creation, Adam was made the head and was given the principle responsibility of dominion (thus Jesus says “let not **man** separate”); second, in the new creation, Christ dies for the bride *in spite of*, and *because of*, her very act of infidelity: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” [Eph. 5:25]. Therefore forgiveness even for unfaithfulness, and blood-earnest reconciliation, tells the gospel most clearly and brings God the most glory.

III. MARRIAGE IN THE CASE OF DIVORCE

A) Divorce is the Act of the Unfaithful, Not the Victim

1. If you are troubled by this teaching, you are not alone. It says that, *in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter (10)*. This is always what the Gospel authors do when the disciples’ heads are wringing from a difficult teaching—they made a point to ask him privately. But here is the gist of it: *And he said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery” (11-12)*. There is an unfaithful and a victim. He says that the man or woman who marries another **commits adultery against** their real spouse. In other words, to say about divorce that “it takes two” or to treat it as some perpetual, unforgiveable sin, misunderstands the kind of violence that kills this covenant. I realize that brings up a dilemma. God commands “Let no one” separate what God has joined, and yet it is a command that is often disobeyed. But when it is, Jesus is saying that there is an innocent party, which He is defining as the one against whom the adultery is **against**.

2. But notice that the parallel is not between a husband and *his* wife, but between a man who commits this sin and a woman who commits this sin. The Greek word for “she” is carried over from the prior word *gunaika* which may mean either “a woman” or “the wife.” The context decides which. Here, since Jesus parallels the two actors as having initiated the action of divorce, it is much more reasonable to conclude that Jesus is talking about two possible initiating actors—whether a man or a woman—and not a single couple: the one the initiator, the other acting later. The reason this matters should be clear. Jesus isn’t talking about the “sin of the two in the couple,” but the sin of divorce (whether it is the husband who commits it or the wife). The sin of divorce is the *act* of divorce, not the condition of “being in it.” The person who has been abused or abandoned is no more guilty of divorce than the orphan is guilty of the “parent” who left them in a basket on the orphanage steps.

And Jesus is restricting remarriage for the adulterer, for the perpetrator, for the liar: not the victim, even while He is calling on anyone who possibly can to reconcile. And if we pay careful attention to the rest of the Bible, and its language and imagery of God as husband and Israel as his bride, we will start to see why all this is to be understood this way.

B) How and Why Divorce Lies About God's Faithfulness

1. I said at the beginning that God has made every marriage permanent in order to tell the gospel. So, marriage, like the gospel of salvation, is God's design, God's story, God's decree. You can no more opt out of the reality of what you represent in your marriage than you can opt out of confessing Christ as a Christian. In his book *Reforming Marriage*, Doug Wilson comments on Paul's analogy of the gospel in Ephesians 5:

Every marriage, everywhere in the world, is a picture of Christ and the church. Because of sin and rebellion, many of these pictures are slanderous lies concerning Christ. *But a husband can never stop talking about Christ and the church.* If he is obedient to God, he is preaching the truth; if he does not love his wife, he is speaking apostasy and lies—but he is always talking.³

Since marriage is meant to tell the world what Christ does for the church, then divorce says to the world that Christ abandons the church—which is a false gospel.

2. As a last point, remembering that Jesus is saying that there is the one who is violating the covenant and then there is the one who has been abandoned. The good news uses even this seemingly hopeless theme in the Scriptures—which gives divorcees hope that their life can still proclaim the gospel, and that their past can be put away. How does that theme play out?

Israel committed adultery against God and God promised her that He would divorce her: “Have you seen what she did, that faithless one, Israel, how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and there played the whore? And I thought, ‘After she has done all this she will return to me,’ but she did not return...for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, *I had sent her away with a decree of divorce*” [Jer. 3:6-8]. The covenant with Israel was a conditional covenant, to signify the way that God was married to those in the old creation, by law: “my covenant that **they broke**, though I **was** their husband, declares the LORD” [Jer. 31:32]. God made this marriage too; yet because of the hardness of their heart, and after centuries and centuries of seeking reconciliation, He finally does what He said He would do. When Israel could no longer be reconciled, He shows himself free to remarry and

³ Douglas Wilson, *Reforming Marriage* (Canon Press, Moscow 1995); p. 23

tell the gospel in a different way. So God divorced physical Israel; yet God never divorces spiritual Israel. They're both true and they're both major themes in the Bible. In both actions God was faithful to exactly what He said He would do. This explains exactly why there is an exception of infidelity for acceptable divorce, because such infidelity breaks the covenant so that the offended party is as free as a new creation. God showed a lot of patience with his old bride and He commands us to do the same. But we're not God.

If you disagree with this position, you would have to assume that God committed sinful divorce when Israel committed the decisive act of divorce against him. You would have to assume that Christ committed sinful divorce when his harlot wife, the church, belonged to another man, as Hosea says, or when He remarries her. Remember that law of Moses. It continues that the first husband "may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled" [Deut. 24:4]. And you would have to call the gospel itself an act of sinful remarriage when God takes a woman who belonged to others who are called husbands. The chief pagan god of the Old Testament was called "Baal," which means "husband," and Israel is pictured as an abused young woman who the Lord found and clothed and took in when the pagan lords and husbands had used her and left her for dead.

APPLICATION

1. Do not enter marriage lightly! This was exactly the application that Jesus drew out in Matthew's Gospel: "The disciples said to him, 'If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.' But he said to them, 'Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given' [19:10-11].

2. Do not miss the gospel in your pride or despair! This teaching is so devastatingly different that, typically, people hear this in two radically different ways and no one winds up hearing the gospel in it. I have prayed this week that this hearing today would be different. Usually people's ears toward this teaching divide into two camps: one side saying "Whew—guess I'm in the clear!" and the other side saying "Wow—my life is over!" and both sides miss the whole point. The One in this passage who is teaching you this hard teaching is the One all of your failures and your pride point back to. As the only faithful Bridegroom Jesus goes to the ends of the earth and breaks his body and spills his blood to gain someone who has committed an infinite adultery against Him. Before we look to the left or right to assess how others are performing on various spots on this stage, let's remember where we stand in relation to the only marriage that will last forever and how we got there.