

“What Did Moses Command You?”

Mark 10:1-12
January 21, 2007

A confession up front: I would appreciate any prayers of, “help him, Jesus,” or any other intercession along a similar line. The topic of discussion in our sermon text is divorce.

There is a temptation for a preacher – including this one – to skip texts like the one that we have this morning. I asked all around the office if someone else wanted to preach on divorce and there were no takers. These are hard words in modern ears. The next alternative to skipping it is to explain it away; arguing that the words do not mean what they say.

Unfortunately, as we approach this Mark text, the words mean what they say, but the context is actually as important as the specific subject of the conversation – thus it is going to sound like I am explaining it away.

So, as we begin here this morning, let me start with a simple statement:

God hates divorce.

That is not my opinion, those are God’s words. We find that in the Old Testament, Malachi 2:13-16,

“Another thing you do: You flood the LORD’s altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, “Why?” It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not [the LORD] made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. “I hate divorce,” says the LORD God of Israel, “and I hate a man’s covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,” says the LORD Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.” (Malachi 2:13-16 NIV)

Hear this carefully: He does not hate those who have been divorced; he hates the faithlessness that generates divorce. Metaphorically, Malachi is addressing the marriage covenant between Israel and God, and how Israel has broken that covenant and God has been faithful. Yet, Malachi also was addressing the laxity and faithlessness with which men were treating women.

So, as we approach our text this morning in Mark, we need to hear this encounter with that in the background. God hates divorce.

Our text does not change that proposition; however, divorce is simply the presenting problem for a much deeper reality.

Mark 10:1-12

Jesus leaves Capernaum, where he had been teaching, and goes into the land beyond the Jordan. He has set his sights on Jerusalem. He and the disciples begin walking the road that pilgrims would have taken in order to get to Jerusalem. They would have been traveling from the south, and at some point would have crossed the Jordan River into an area called Perea. This is an important detail because Jesus has entered into the land governed by Herod Antipas. The Pharisees' question about divorce is directly related to Herod; and the Pharisees are trying to set Jesus up in a confrontation with Herod.

Refer back to Mark 6 for a moment. Beginning at verse 7, we get the account of how Herod has married Herodias, who was his brother Philip's wife; problem being, Philip was still alive at the time. Herodias had deserted her husband and divorced him – presumably under Roman law because women did not have that right even under the law of Moses discussed in our text today.

Herod, for his part, had divorced his wife. What we do not see mentioned here is that Herod's divorce led to war; his ex-wife was the daughter of the king of Nabatea. She went home, told her father, who got angry and attacked. If Rome had not intervened to stop the war over Herod's divorce, Herod probably would have lost the kingdom.

So, yes, divorce is the topic, but it is just the surface of something much larger. In short, would Jesus speak against the king and risk being beheaded -- the result that John the Baptist had received.

Look for a moment at the dialogue between Jesus and the Pharisees. It is a pretty quick conversation. Apparently, they interrupt Jesus as he is teaching the crowds to ask this loaded question to test him. Jesus indulges the question and simply asks back, "What did Moses command you?" Lost in the translation is Jesus' annoyance with the Pharisees, expressed in the "you" of his question – it is not, "what did Moses command?" It is, "what did Moses command *you*?"

They respond with a summary of Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which addresses the situation where a man writes his wife a certificate of divorce if "she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her." Basically, the Pharisees are arguing that divorce is lawful because Moses allowed for it.

Jesus' rebuke is both profound and staggering to the Pharisees. He acknowledges their citation of Moses' words but states that Moses allowed the exception because of the hardness of *their* hearts. That phrase, "hardness of heart" rings like the words of a prophet; specifically, Ezekiel, to whom God said, "They will not listen to you, for they are not willing to listen to me; because all of the house of Israel have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart." (Ezekiel 3:7). Moses' command on divorce was not a permission; it was a reflection of human sinfulness and designed to protect *women* from hard-hearted men.

Then, Jesus talks about the created order. From the beginning, he says, with echoes back to Genesis 1:1 ("In the beginning"), then he quotes the Genesis passage about God's purpose in

marriage. God's purpose in marriage, Jesus is saying, is the command; not the permission to get out of it because of faithlessness.

The issue is faithlessness – the same issue that he has been addressing since Peter's confession. "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you?" Those were the words he spoke to the father who was asking, "Are you powerful enough to help me?"

Here, the Pharisees are pitching for permission to be faithless with one another. Jesus' rebuke points out that God's plan was for faithfulness. Divorce is not something to be celebrated.

As we look next at Jesus' later discussion with the disciples, he elaborates on the theme of the importance of faithfulness. The phrasing is important: "whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her," leaving one for the other is a manifestation of faithlessness. So it is with a woman who leaves her husband for the purpose of marrying another. Jesus is rebuking both Herod and Herodias for their faithlessness. There is no royal exception to God's purpose. Leaving the marriage relationship for another is adultery.

In responding to questions about divorce, Jesus is not so much giving an exhaustive dissertation on divorce as much as he is stressing God's heart for faithfulness. Yes, it is a condemnation of the hardness of heart that leads to breaking faith. But in these few words, he is not addressing all questions of abandonment or abuse, or what to do if someone has left you. The Pharisees are asking him generally about this specific situation to trap him; Jesus shows that God views situations differently than we do.

God sees situations very differently than we do. Our understanding of success looks very different than God's does. Consider as an example the popularity of the movie a few years ago, "The Bridges of Madison County." The basic premise was that a photographer from National Geographic comes into this Midwestern community. He encounters this lonely, underappreciated wife. They begin spending time together and they develop this wonderful "love" affair. There is heartache as her husband returns and they are unable to continue. This is not uncommon in our modern age: "love" is defined as "what pleases me now" and "what would make me happy." We do not see movies about how a fifty or sixty year marriage took place – it would be too boring for us.

God, on the other hand values faithfulness. "From the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

Thus, Jesus' answer to the Pharisees question seems rather pointed. God's plan is for faithfulness. His follow-up with the disciples was even more pointed. Legal divorces did not make the actions of Herod and Herodias acceptable in God's eyes. Divorce does not justify adultery.

The Pharisees tried to put him in a box – yet Jesus demonstrates that God cannot be contained in man-made traps. While it is easy to point fingers and condemn the Pharisees here, we also need to see how we do the same thing. We often try to put God in a box so that he works for us, or so that we can do what we want despite the corrective we find in Scripture.

This is how I find that I try to put God in a box: God, I have been faithful to you, so you owe me. For others, it is the prosperity gospel, “God, I have been faithful, so give me riches.” For others, it is the desire to justify themselves in something they know is wrong, “God, it’s not like I’m murdering someone, it’s only a little thing and I really need it.”

Every time we try to put God in a box – yes, every time – we find that God is going to rebuke us for our hardness of heart.

Even so, here’s a word of caution as you read our text this: do not mistake God’s judgment on divorce to be an eternal rejection of those who are divorced – even for reasons of adultery. In the Old Testament texts, God’s expressed hatred of divorce and adultery is coupled with calls for renewed faithfulness. The prophet Hosea married a woman who was unfaithful to him on God’s command and God used that marriage to proclaim his redemptive plan for Israel.

Here is where the context is so critical in understanding this morning’s text. Jesus is walking the road to redeem those who have been divorced from God through sin. He is walking the road of faithfulness, the road that will lead him to suffering, to rejection, to abuse, and to the cross. He is walking that road because God loves you and God loves me.

A well-known speaker started off his seminar by holding up a \$20 bill.

In the room of 200, he asked, "Who would like this \$20 bill?" Hands started going up.

He said, "I am going to give this \$20 to one of you but first, let me do this." He proceeded to crumple the dollar bill up. He then asked, "Who still wants it?" Still the hands were up in the air.

"Well," he replied, "What if I do this?" And he dropped it on the ground and started to grind it into the floor with his shoe. He picked it up, now crumpled and dirty. "Now who still wants it?" Still the hands went into the air.

"My friends, you have all learned a very valuable lesson. No matter what I did to the money, you still wanted it because it did not decrease in value. It was still worth \$20."

"Many times in our lives, we are dropped, crumpled, and ground into the dirt by the decisions we make and the circumstances that come our way. We feel as though we are worthless. But no matter what has happened or what will happen, you will never lose your value in God's eyes. To Him, dirty or clean, crumpled or finely creased, you are still priceless to Him."

Scripture is abundantly clear that God is faithful and true, just and righteous, and his steadfast love endures forever. Understand the distinction: God does not say “divorce is OK, and, sin is OK.” God hates sin. But God reaches out and embraces the sinner. God takes the action while we are still hard of heart, while we were yet sinners: He acts in redeeming us, washing us clean in the blood of the lamb, adopting us as his children, restoring his covenant with us by writing it upon our hearts, and preparing us to be citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of God.

Jesus is now fully engaged in his role of fulfilling the work of the Son of God. You will notice for the remainder of the gospel that there are fewer miracles and more pronouncements and teaching. He has his eyes set on Jerusalem.

So, what should you take from this morning’s sermon?

God values faithfulness. Hardness of heart causes sin.

Jesus redeems us from unfaithfulness. What we say each Sunday is true: when we repent of our sins and trust in God’s mercy through his son Jesus Christ, we are assured of the good news of the gospel: In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.

Thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

8:15 offering

10:00 offering