

**“More: Hardness of Heart”**

**Dr. Jay Howell**

**Mark 10:1-12**

January 14, 2024

We continue our series “More,” this look at Christ’s call to discipleship, to self-giving, to becoming less, becoming servant of all. We’re dropping into a particular section of the Gospel of Mark, just going bit by bit. Now this part of Mark finds Jesus offering his disciples a series of challenging teachings, all part of this revolutionary idea that to become great as one of his followers, one must become last of all, servant of all. They were challenging then, and they’re challenging now.

Today we come to a passage that certainly fits the bill. I shared last week that the Gospel of Mark would be going into the subject matter of divorce and remarriage. This subject matter has potential to be painful and makes today one of those weeks when we have to be particularly mindful of how we approach Scripture.

Because we recognize that as we approach God’s Word today, there may be any number of us for whom this subject matter will be sensitive. Every Sunday, one of our Deacons is ready to pray with you in Fowler/the Chapel. And every Sunday, we as pastors are eager to speak with you and pray with you. Today, just in recognition of the sensitive subject matter, one of our pastors, along with the Deacon, will be in Fowler/the Chapel after the service to hear you, talk with you, pray with you.

But let us approach the Word of God with confidence, confidence that God’s Word is not idle, and is given for us. Let’s go to God’s Word together, Mark 10:1-12.

***He left that place and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. And crowds again gathered around him, and, as was his custom, he again taught them.***

***Some, testing him, asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.” But Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But 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.”*

*Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. 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.”*

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

Holy God, you have blessed us with glimpses and testimonies of your love for us in how you have raised up those who love others in your name. We pray that when our love is imperfect and flawed, when the love of others is imperfect and flawed, that we would be upheld by your steadfastness and grace. And we pray that you would help us to hear that love and that grace through your Word to us. For the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Like I shared last week, Jesus gets into some difficult territory this week, as we pick up right where we left off. He had just shared a series of teachings about the dangers of exclusion or thinking oneself better than another. He goes so far as to warn that if your eye were to cause you to stumble, tear it out.

Then in today’s text, in an encounter with some Pharisees, Jesus addresses a question that was something of a flashpoint. “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” they ask.

This is the sort of question, the sort of topic that every single person here has some kind of personal connection with. It could be a relative. It could be a friend, a friend’s parents, or a friend’s child. It could be your own parents or you yourself who has gone through the pain of a divorce, of a marriage ending.

It is precisely because of those personal connections that this is not some lofty, theoretical topic. You can talk about the theology of marriage and how it reflects the union and love of God himself, and that’s good. But these are real questions that hit directly upon real life and real pain.

As I may or may not have shared at one point or another, divorce is inescapably part of my own story. My parents separated and divorced when I was in high school and both remarried. You can talk about incompatibility. You can talk about who may have wanted it more than the other. You can talk about, in the long run, what kind of things might have been for the better. But you can’t talk about it for too long before, no matter what, the pain and grief of it to all involved is felt, even if it’s not spoken of: the pain to the couple, to children, to a whole family.

And so when the passage comes to what sound like its harshest words, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and

marries another, she commits adultery,” it’s impossible not to put a face to that. More pertinent to my story, depending on how you approach that verse, along with a few others in Scripture that deal with it too that we’ll get to, one or both of my parents would be implicated. This is not theoretical to me, nor I would imagine is it theoretical to any of us. This verse has a face.

When Jesus responds to the Pharisees’ question, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” he goes to the technical answer first, which of course they already knew. He asks what Moses commands, that is, through the Mosaic law, the Torah.

Their answer is a reference to Deuteronomy 24, and this is what that 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, gives it to her and sends her from his house, <sup>2</sup> and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, <sup>3</sup> and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, <sup>4</sup> then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled.”

So in other words, the Pharisees are correct when they answer Jesus, and when it comes to the technical answer, yes it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife. If he was displeased with her, he had to write out some kind of certificate, give it to her, and send her away.

But they weren’t there for the technical answer. Nor was Jesus, for that matter.

You see, hovering in the background wasn’t just the lawfulness of this practice, but what appeared to be a more cynical abuse of the practice, seen in some high profile splits.

Chief among them is something that Jesus had a close connection with. A local/regional ruler at the time was a man named Herod Antipas, married to a woman named Herodias. They were both among the social elite of Jewish society, and they both had divorced their first spouses (with Herodias divorcing Herod Antipas’ brother, no less), because as it appears, they weren’t pleased with the status or social potential of their first spouse, and then they marry each other.

No doubt they followed the letter of the law. No doubt some certificate of divorce was written. But everyone who saw the situation knew that it was purely for political and social gain, at the expense and exclusion of someone else. The question was, was it still lawful?

The way Jesus was connected to this was through his cousin John, John the Baptist. John did not mince words about the nature of this new marriage. He called it out. And just a few chapters earlier, it shares of how Herod and Herodias had John arrested and executed.

This isn’t theoretical for Jesus either. And that relationship, that cynical dissolution of one marriage for social and political gain, is hovering in the background of all this.

So Jesus calls out not the law in Deuteronomy that was used to justify the divorce, not the law, but the cynical use of that law. “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you.” That is, the commandment was given to put some kind of boundary and protection in place, since before that point, men could just send their wives away without any restriction. At the very least, then, some kind of written proof that the dismissed wife, vulnerable that she would be, had been sent away and had not abandoned her husband.

Jesus then invokes a deeper truth, the union of marriage at creation itself, from Genesis, ending in, “So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” In other words, marriage is much bigger than something that can be dissolved by just filling out a form, even if that process is described in the law. Exploiting that accommodation for the sake of convenience and calling it piety goes against gravity of marriage in the first place.

Following that, in a separate setting with his disciples, he then shares the stark warning: “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery.” Full stop. By the letter of it, no exception.

It’s on that front that many a harsh word has been spoken, labeling this or that relationship as adulterous, labeling this or that divorce or second marriage as legitimate or illegitimate. And what pain has been caused in doing so.

This isn’t the only time Scripture speaks about this topic. The tricky part is that Scripture seems to offer different language about it. In Matthew’s retelling of this encounter, and in another reference in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offers an exception, “except in the case of unchastity” or “sexual immorality” depending on how you translate a particular word *porneia*. So it raises the question: which one holds authority? The one where Jesus offers no exception whatsoever? Or the one where there’s this exception provided for unchastity? And then, trickier still, just what is meant by “unchastity”? Physical acts with another person? Or is a mental or emotional form of unfaithfulness sufficient to justify divorce?

Then muddying the waters further, the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 speaks of how a believer, married to an unbelieving spouse who is then deserted by that unbelieving spouse, is no longer “bound,” but does that mean the believing spouse is now free to marry again, or just no longer bound by some marital obligation to the unbelieving spouse, but otherwise still subject to Jesus’ words that one who divorces a spouse should not remarry, period, since Jesus didn’t say anything about desertion or abandonment, only unchastity.

Looming in the background here, for me at least, is the notion of spousal abuse. If one spouse is physically, emotionally, abusive to the other, should that abused spouse be free not only

to divorce the abusive spouse but also marry someone who would love them and treat them with respect? Gut reaction, I dare say, says yes, of course. But guess what? Abuse is not included, not directly at least, in the provisions mentioned by either Jesus or Paul as legitimate grounds for divorce and remarriage.

What holds authority here? There are many who have drawn the lines strictly, literally, and in the process labelled harshly any number of relationships not just as ill-advised but adulterous, or compelled any number of abused individuals to “stick it out” in horrible situations. So if you are inclined to say, “The Bible says *this*, so I believe *this*,” be careful in how you share such conviction, because the church has done great harm in this way.

But bend the meaning of these words, say of expanding the definition of “unchastity” or “desertion” until it includes just about any form of discord between a married couple runs the risk of putting us right back in the situation then: of a technicality being used to justify the cynical ending of a marriage for selfish purposes.

What are we to do? As people of faith, as disciples of Jesus, as those called to become “last of all,” “servant of all” how do we respond to this?

As Jesus does in his response to the Pharisees, I believe we must hear the word in the world it was given, and we must cling to deeper calls to union, to love, to humility, to service.

Ultimately, I don’t think it’s a coincidence that this teaching is offered within this series of other teachings on discipleship.

There’s a book I recommend to couples from time to time. It’s called *Sacred Marriage* by Gary Thomas. I don’t endorse every single thing he writes, but his basic approach I think is helpful. He points out that marriage, honestly, isn’t talked about so much in Scripture. That’s not to say it *isn’t* talked about. It’s a significant theme, don’t get me wrong. But when it comes down to it, the subject of marriage isn’t given nearly the amount of air time as things like justice for the poor, the sinful obsession with money and possessions, the coming of the kingdom of God, and loving and serving the Lord with faithfulness.

It’s in light of that truth that Thomas offers the insight that marriage is not the end all be all of relationships, not the goal of life, but for those who choose to be married, especially in the context of faith, there’s a missional, testimonial aspect of it. Because part of the calling in a Christian marriage is saying not just that you love another person, but that you are vowing to love that person in a manner that is a reflection, a testimony of the way God loves us. It is a vow to faithfulness, to grace, to forgiveness, and, perhaps on the point of these teachings on discipleship, to mutual selfless service, of becoming last of all, servant of all, and of your spouse making the same commitment to you.

Now in some way, every Christian is called to live a life of faithfulness, grace, forgiveness, and selfless service, but if one is called to marriage, it's like saying, "A primary way in which that call will be lived out in my life is in how I am faithful, gracious, forgiving, and selfless in my relationship with this particular person, and he/she back to me." It's a beautiful thing to imagine. Downright challenging to implement.

I know Frances hasn't spoiled the surprise for you, but I'll just come out and tell you. Despite what I know all of you believe, I am not the perfect husband. I am not always the paragon of graciousness, forgiveness, and selfless commitment to my wife. But the beautiful thing is, when I fall short of that vow, I'm married to someone who has also committed to be gracious and forgiving to me.

These are deeper truths and calls as to how as followers of Jesus we are to live, and how we are to enter into covenantal relationship like marriage. It means, when it comes to divorce and remarriage, we should be slow to marry, and even slower to divorce. It means when it comes others' relationships, we should be compassionate, not presuming to know what happens behind the doors of another household, or the pain that one spouse or both spouses have carried and endured for a long time. It means we can hold the calling of marriage as a high one, a claim upon every facet of one's life and not one that should be so easily or cynically discarded, while also understanding the role of hyperbole in Christ's teaching—after all, Jesus had just gotten done saying if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out—not seeking to prescribe legitimacy to one marriage or another based on a formula or intersection of formulas offered across three books of the Bible or more.

And when it comes to matters of love, of romantic love, may we not commit the sin of those who abused that law in Deuteronomy, and may we not commit the sin of the Pharisees who sought to trap Jesus through it: may we not be so hard of heart, toward our spouses, toward those who have lost spouses, and toward those who seek to live out love as they follow Jesus.

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