

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: BREATHLESS

(studies in the Gospel of Mark)

What Jesus Meant Was...

(Mark 10:1-12)

Study #19

Introduction: And they lived happily ever after...

There's nothing like a happy ending - and our favorite fairy tales all end happily.

- The wicked witch gets hers.
- The long-suffering cinder girl finds happiness.
- The monster changes back to a handsome, but now loving, prince.

Everything resolves. The story ends, all wrapped up with a nice little bow on top.

Typically, my goal (realized or not) in a sermon is to end with a satisfying resolution, too. I try to bring a clear explanation and a concise summary and a straightforward application of whatever text we find before us on a given Sunday, complete with a bow.

But there are those times when the Bible leaves us scratching our heads. And at some level, and to some extent, today may be one of "those" Sundays. This may be one of "those" sermons.

Over the next two Sundays we will be looking at a couple of different exchanges between Jesus and certain people, both of which are followed by an exchange between Jesus and His disciples.

It is easy to imagine, at the end of both of these exchanges, the people Jesus originally speaking with AND the twelve apostles scratching their heads, wondering, *"What in the world did Jesus mean by THAT? What in the world do we do with THAT?"*

In preparing the message for today - a message dealing with the themes of marriage and divorce and remarriage - I have been aware of how challenging Jesus' words are. I've also been aware of the challenge involved in bringing this message.

And I realized that I was feeling a tremendous pressure to give you, this morning, a complete, encyclopedic, exhaustive answer to every question you might have about marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

I've gotten over that.

Countless books have been written by good and godly men and women who have given themselves to understanding what Jesus meant by what He said here and elsewhere. Very often, these good-hearted, brilliant authors don't agree with each other. It's complicated.

So I'm under no delusions that I have the corner on the market on truth here today. Plus, we don't have time to explore all the issues that we might about married life. Plus, a little Holy Spirit prompted head-scratching is good for all of us. So, if you leave today with some questions still "out there" and unanswered, that's OK. Wrestle on.

At the same time, I will tell you that what Jesus says is as clear as a bell (any problem with understanding Him lies with us, not with Him) and we will work to not only understand Him, but also to apply those words.

This morning I want to lay out what Jesus says, as clearly as I can. I want us to grapple with His words. But we also will need to admit that at the end of the day, there will probably be a few loose ends.

Everything might not be all wrapped up in a nice neat package. You might leave with more questions than you had when you came in, maybe even as dazed and confused as a few first century disciples were after they had heard from Jesus.

But I'm also hopeful that God will do something in each one of our hearts and minds as we approach the themes of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. I'm prayerful that by the time we finish you will have seen new things or that you will have seen things in a new way. I want us to see things the Jesus way.

And before launching into the text, a personal, more pastoral thought...

This is sensitive stuff, and I know it. When bringing a message dealing with marriage, I'm hitting close to the heart. And when it comes to marriage, well, many of us are in very different places.

Your experience with marriage may be wonderful - or not. You may be currently married or formerly married. You may be hopeful for marriage or married again. Divorce may be in your past. And without being too cynical, divorce may be in your future.

It is my fervent hope and prayer that God will bring a measure of **clarity** as we pay attention to Jesus. And beyond clarity, **conviction** for moving forward as we think through Jesus' teaching about marriage. And wedded to conviction, **compassion** toward those around us who may be hurting or who may be facing great challenges.

So we prepare for a bit of tension as we turn to Mark 10.

Jesus is, again, on the road. He is leaving the relatively friendly territory of Galilee, the region where He was best known, where He had been raised, and where crowds usually flocked to Him. He is moving south.

His ultimate destination is Jerusalem. From this point forward in the Gospel of Mark, the cross will loom increasingly large. Jesus is traveling south to Jerusalem to die. But there are stops along the way.

His route took Him from Galilee, across the Jordan River to the region of Perea, the area to the east of Palestine. As He traveled south, crowds still flocked to Him.

[1] Getting up, He went from there to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan; crowds gathered around Him again, and, according to His custom, He once more began to teach them.

These southern crowds would have been drawn to Him for the same reason those in Galilee were. He had a reputation as a master teacher and miracle-worker.

They had heard the news that He just might be the promised Messiah, the One who would break the chains of Rome and bring freedom to Israel.

But as people gathered to Him, not all those in the crowd were friendly. Among those in the crowd were Pharisees.

Jesus, on Marriage (vv. 2-12)¹

Jesus and the Pharisees (vv. 2-9)

A question from the Pharisees (v. 2)

[2] Some Pharisees came up to Jesus...

You'll remember that Pharisees were a popular group of spiritual leaders in the first century. They knew their Bibles and were champions of orthodoxy. But, they were legalistic, joyless religionists. Not surprisingly, they opposed Jesus.

They showed up in this crowd, pushed to the front and tossed a grenade-shaped question at Jesus. Mark tells us that their intent was to trip Him up.² They were ***"testing Him."***

The question they asked was not a bad question. And asking a respected rabbi a question like the one they are asking here could have been a great thing to do. Mark wants us to know that this is not what was going on.

¹ This is the only teaching about marriage, divorce and remarriage in Mark's Gospel.

² The word that we translate "test" is often translated "tempt."

In this very public setting, with a crowd in place and the disciples listening, the Pharisees ask this question:

[2] Some Pharisees came up to Jesus, testing Him, and began to question Him whether it was lawful for a man to divorce a wife.

Let's notice a couple of things. First, we notice that they didn't ask if it was lawful for a woman to divorce her husband. That thought would not have crossed the minds of the Pharisees. Theirs was a very one-sided perspective tilted toward a male-sided world.

Notice, too, that the issue at hand is not the grounds of divorce. They weren't asking, "*Under what conditions can a man legally divorce his wife, Jesus?*"

That question was hotly debated in Jesus' day among the Jewish rabbis and we might have expected that the Pharisees would have been VERY interested in Jesus' position on that question.

But their question concerned the legitimacy of divorce at all. On this issue, virtually all the rabbis were in agreement.

And the question makes me wonder if maybe the Pharisees suspected that Jesus had contrarian views on the subject. Maybe they thought that if He came out publicly on what He really believed He would be labeled extreme, outside the mainstream, against the flow, or even absurd.

They might have hoped that His views would have made Him unpopular with the crowds. A very strict view on divorce could certainly have made Him more unpopular with popular rabbis and even landed Him in hot water with political leaders.

You'll remember that Herod Antipas had divorced his own wife and married his brother's wife, Herodias. This conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees was taking place in the same region (Perea) in which John the Baptist had run afoul of Herod and lost his life.

Perhaps the Pharisees even hoped that Jesus' position on divorce would leave Him open to the charge of contradicting Moses.

The Pharisees, here, are doing what we will increasingly see political operatives do to their opponents as the race for the United States presidency draws nearer. The questions asked are designed to put the answerer in an awkward position, with no good response possible.

Questions like, "*Have you stopped cheating on your income taxes yet?*" puts the person in a defensive position from the get-go.

It just so happens, though, that Jesus, being the Son of God, was remarkably adept at dealing with pharisaic traps.

Very characteristically, Jesus responded to the question He was asked with a question of His own.

A Moses conversation (vv. 3-4)

[3] And He answered and said to them, "What did Moses command you?"

And to His question about the "command" of Moses, they answer in terms of the "permission" Moses granted.

[4] They said, "Moses permitted a man TO WRITE A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE AND SEND her AWAY."

Get this. Moses never commanded that a man divorce his wife. But he did allow that it might happen. And the passage that the Pharisees' quote is taken from gives insight into the understanding of divorce in Judaism.

Deuteronomy 24 - which is the only passage in the Law that dealt with divorce - tells us that divorce is allowed under certain conditions. It tells us that when divorce occurred, the right to remarry was assumed.

Deuteronomy 24 also sets up a hypothetical situation designed to protect the woman.

If a man divorced his wife, she was free to remarry. If she remarried and the second husband also divorced her, then under no circumstances was the first husband to remarry her.

This provision protected a woman from being passed around as if she was nothing more than merchandise.

The Jewish rabbis of Jesus' day all knew Deuteronomy 24, but they came to different conclusions on what might be legitimate grounds for divorce.

The more restrictive - and minority position - was represented by the school of the Rabbi Shammai, who allowed divorce only on the basis of some moral impurity on the part of the wife.

More popular was the school of Hillel, which allowed divorce for a spoiled meal or even if a man "*found another fairer*" than his wife. (so Rabbi Akiba).³

The first time I went to Russia, I discovered that divorce was very prevalent, and so I determined to speak clearly about the importance of marriage whenever I had the chance to do so.

I was teaching through the Minor Prophets, and when I came to the passage in the book of Malachi that deals with divorce, I discovered a glaring problem in the Russian translation of the Bible.

The prophet Malachi, quoting God says, "***I hate divorce!***" (2:16) When I quoted that verse, I noticed question marks forming on the faces of the students. That is because in the version some of them were using, the old Russian translators had rendered that phrase, "*If you hate her, divorce her!*"

That was a tragic mistranslation, but it represented the essential thinking on divorce in the days of Jesus. (And perhaps in our own day, as well...)

In Jesus' day, the rabbis debated about where were the permitted grounds of divorce. But everyone admitted to the possibility of divorce (again, that of a man from his wife; not vice versa) and remarriage.

The Pharisees answered Jesus' question from the legal code of Moses. Divorce is allowed.⁴

Their answer, though, doesn't end the conversation. Jesus responded to their Moses quote with blunt words that completely undercut current scribal orthodoxy and threw a monkey wrench into this scene.

Back to basics (vv. 5-9)

Hard-heartedness (v. 5)

[5] But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment."

Jesus points out the obvious here. And that is that the legal provision in Deuteronomy 24 was not intended as a statement of God's heart for marriage.

It was only included in the Law as a concession to human weakness and sin. Given that men would divorce their wives, what was written in the Law set out a way to limit the damage.

It was a provision meant to deal with human "hardness of heart" but it says nothing about the way things ought to be.

So, when Jesus actually got around to answering the question they put to Him about divorce, He went to another passage altogether.

The original blueprint (vv. 6-8)

[6] "But from the beginning of creation, God MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE. [7] "FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL

³ More typical, "If she does not accept your control, divorce her and send her away." Or Josephus' "At this time I divorced my wife, not liking her behavior."

⁴ It is allowed without any statement of disapproval, which, of course, is not to say that it was approved of or blessed by God.

LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER, [8] AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH; so they are no longer two, but one flesh.

In these verses, the time frame in view is the beginning of human history. The physical setting is the Garden of Eden. The moral environment is perfection itself.

The verses Jesus quotes are lifted from Genesis 1 and 2. Taken together, we discover the essence of marriage.

When we turn to Genesis 2 we find the first wedding. God brings the woman to the man and the man is delighted with what God has provided. Adam and Eve form a “one-flesh” relationship.

Moses, who was writing this narrative, backed away from the Garden scene and addressed the people of his own generation on the plains at the foot of Mount Sinai. He told them that when a man leaves his father and mother (Adam and Eve had no parents to leave) and “*cleaves*” to his wife, the two will become one.

THAT is marriage. Marriage consists of a man and a woman leaving their parents (family of origin) to form a new family unit, entering into sexual union, and becoming a “one-flesh” unit in society.

This was God’s design for marriage from day one (actually, from Day Six). Boiled down to its essence, marriage is a “one-flesh” relationship where two become one.

Whether or not Jesus’ final comment was what the Pharisees expected, it nevertheless contradicted the prevailing wisdom about divorce in first century Judaism. His summary statement about divorce derives from the Genesis account.

Dissolving what God united? (v. 9)

[9] “What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.”

So, is a man entitled to divorce his wife? No.

“*One flesh*” could hardly speak more clearly of a permanent bond. Marriage is for life. It is not a contract of temporary convenience. Marriage is a lifelong covenant.

So, first principles (Genesis) take precedence over subsequent remedial provisions (Deuteronomy 24). Jesus’ teaching on marriage is based, not on a concession to hard-heartedness, but on the pattern set out in God’s original creation.

With that, class is dismissed. And we can just picture the Pharisees walking away, befuddled, but also knowing that, somehow, yet again, they have been bested and busted by Jesus.

Jesus and His disciples also walked away, returning to the house where they were all staying.⁵ Once there we discover that His teaching on marriage and divorce had been quite unsettling to the twelve.

Jesus and the Disciples (vv. 10-12)

The disciples are blown away! (v. 10)

[10] In the house the disciples began questioning Him about this again.

It could be that this was the very first time they have heard Jesus’ thoughts on divorce. If so, it’s easy to imagine that they were confused. What He had to say was SO different from what they had heard all their lives. They want further instruction.

Jesus was more than happy to oblige. So, He provided a further clarification.

Jesus on divorce and remarriage (vv. 11-12)

[11] And He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her; [12] and if she

⁵ This is a pattern. After a challenging talk, Jesus would often retreat to a house for further conversation with His disciples (7:17; 9:28, 33).

herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery.”⁶

Never did Jesus speak more clearly. And what He says is directly related to His understanding of the nature of marriage.

Marriage is a “one-flesh” bond between a man and a woman. And for a husband to divorce his wife and to go on to marry someone else, or for a wife to divorce her husband and then to go on to marry someone else is to commit adultery.

Conclusion:

Now, here is where I plan to keep the promise I made at the beginning this morning about not answering every question and not wrapping everything up with a nice neat bow on it.

In twelve verses all of our questions about divorce and remarriage are not answered. (At the same time, we do have a sense, though, of the revolutionary nature of Jesus’ kingdom. He redefines everything, including our understanding of the most basic building block of society, the relationship between a husband and a wife.)

As we conclude, I am going to address some of the practical implications arising from Jesus’ words here. But I will neither resolve all issues nor solve all puzzles (but you knew that).

I will first say that there is something refreshing about Jesus’ call to think about marriage in the way it was meant to be from the beginning. That perspective is so compelling.

What a brilliant way to attack an issue. Go back to original intent. Check the blueprints.

If His words seem to you to be blunt or harsh, I’m convinced that they are not. When He says what He says at the end (vv. 11-12), He is not

⁶ That Jesus countenanced the possibility that a woman might divorce her husband was a radical thought. While an accepted practice in Roman culture, such a thing was unheard of in Jewish society.

being mean. His words are loving and gracious because they protect the sanctity of a one-flesh union.

At the same time, I will freely admit that His teaching about marriage, divorce, and remarriage is challenging.

It went against the grain of first century Jewish culture and it certainly goes against the grain of 21st century American culture.

And, His teaching here is not exhaustive.

He doesn’t address specific issues. We have forming in our minds lots of, “*What if....*” questions. And He certainly doesn’t answer every question.⁷

What Jesus gives here is not a marriage seminar and it wasn’t intended to satisfy our curiosity about everything divorce, either.

If we want a thorough understanding of God’s mind on marriage, divorce, and remarriage there are dozens of other passages we will need to consult.

But here at the end, I want to summarize and apply what we have heard today in as helpful a way as I know how.

And the first word I want to say is **GRACE**.

Forgiveness is Available

Obviously, divorce happens. I’ve personally never met anyone who has entered married life dreaming of the day they will get a divorce. Yet it happens. Many of you here today have tasted the bitterness of divorce and many here today have remarried after a divorce.

⁷ For instance... - What are you supposed to do, today, if you find yourself married and divorced and remarried? What if you are divorced, but it wasn’t your idea? What if you intentionally divorced your spouse and are now open to pursuing reconciliation, but your former spouse has remarried? What if you divorced because of desertion or abuse or infidelity - do Jesus’ words mean that you can never seek marriage?

Before this morning, you may not have even been aware of what Jesus taught about marriage's sacredness or divorce's unnaturalness or the problems associated with remarriage.

Or maybe you did know, and you went ahead and divorced anyway. There wasn't even all that much of a reason to divorce - no adultery, no abuse, no desertion. You just took the easy way out and divorced. Now you wish you could reconcile, but it is too late. Your former spouse has remarried.

Maybe you were aware that reconciliation with your former spouse was the best of all possible solutions - and you never sought it, but simply chose to remarry.

To those of you who have violated Jesus' teaching when it comes to your one-flesh relationship with a spouse, forgiveness is available to you.

Grace covers the sins of gossip AND divorce, lying AND remarriage where there was a chance for reconciliation. Come to Jesus and confess your sin. Receive His forgiveness and be clean.

After a first word about grace, I offer a second word of **CAUTION** and **WARNING**.

Pay Heed to Jesus

If you have actively divorced your spouse and are currently divorced, today you have heard what Jesus says. It might be challenging to hear what Jesus says, but that doesn't mean that He didn't say it. (The disciples heard what He said and responded in Matthew 19:10 that if that's the way it is, it would be better to not even marry!)

If you actively pursued divorce for reasons of adultery, abuse, or desertion, let's talk. But if there was not some flagrant and terrible sin that led to your filing for divorce, Jesus' word to you is to pursue reconciliation with your former spouse.

The way back might be hard. It might involve lots of counseling. The road to reconciliation might involve eating crow, dramatic life-change,

repentance. But as long as there is even a shred of hope of reconciliation, Jesus says, don't travel the road to remarriage.

If you are divorced today, you are not damaged goods and your life is not over. Marriage may or may not be in your future.

There is a rich, abundant future for you - and God will walk you into that future as you trust Him.

So... first, grace; second, caution and warning. My third and final word, **FIGHT**. Yes, fight for your marriage. It is precious.

Fight for Your Marriage

Here is what I've come to after living with Jesus' words in Mark 10 for the better part of a solid week:

To enter into marriage is to enter into a deep, intimate relationship with another person that bonds you to that other person, body to body and soul to soul.

If you are not married this morning, there is a chance that you will one day be married. Understand what it is you are getting into when you marry. You are entering into a lifelong covenant that is to never be broken.

God's plan for unbroken, lifelong marriage is the realistic standard to which we are expected to conform. It is not "idealistic" and "pie in the sky" stuff. No. He wants husbands and wives to remain married to each other "till death separates them."

If you are married today fight for the health of your marriage with all the energy you can muster. If there are problems (and in what marriage are there not problems?), work on them. Seek advice from a trusted friend. Get professional counseling.

And I mean this whether you are married to the only person you have ever been married to or if you have been married and divorced. Throw yourself into your NOW marriage for all you are worth!

Women, the man to whom you are married is your soulmate. Men, the woman to whom you are married is your lifelong partner. Treasure your husband. Cherish your wife.

May we, today, be the people who listen to Jesus' words about everything He said - eternal salvation as well as marriage - and eagerly obey.