



*A Message from Mark!*  
**On Marriage &  
Divorce**

4th October 2009 - Pentecost 18  
Scripture: Mark 10:2-16

An eminent psychologist was called to testify in court. A severe, no-nonsense professional, she sat down in the witness chair unaware that the rear legs were set precariously close to the back edge of the raised platform. *“Will you please state your name?”*, asked the defence lawyer. Tilting back in her chair, the psychologist opened her mouth to answer, but instead catapulted head-over-heels and landed in a stack of exhibits and recording equipment. Everyone watched in stunned silence as she extricated herself, rearranged her dishevelled dress and hair and was re-seated on the witness stand. The glare she directed at onlookers dared anyone to so much as smirk. *“Well, doctor,”* continued the lawyer, *“perhaps we could start with an easier question!”*

I'd like to start with an easier text! This passage on divorce is not one of my favourites. I was tempted to avoid this preaching assignment, but decided that wouldn't be appropriate. You really don't want people to hate your sermons. And I have had people hate sermons I've preached on this text. I thought I preached a wonderfully grace-filled sermon on it some years ago in England, but a recently divorced woman told me it took her six months to come back to worship after she heard it. I asked her what she heard in the sermon that was so offensive. She said she didn't appreciate being labelled an adulteress. I asked if she had actually listened to the sermon because I was sure I hadn't said anything like that. She admitted that she pretty much stopped listening when she heard the words of the reading.

Sometimes we hear what we expect to hear. I encourage you to listen with open ears, an open mind and an open heart.

*“Some Pharisees came up to Jesus in order to test him. They asked; “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife.”*

In the discussion that follows between Jesus and the Pharisees, it appears at first glance that Jesus utterly forbids divorce. Jesus said that Moses only allowed divorce because of the hardness of men’s hearts. He went back further to the beginning of the Bible, to Genesis, where it is written that man and woman *“shall become one flesh. They are no longer two but one. What God has joined together, let no man put asunder.”*

From this, some churches have totally forbidden their members to get divorced. Others have tried to side step it (doing a “blind turn” in AFL lingo) by the quirky religious device of **“annulment”** instead of divorce. Others, such as the Uniting Church in Australia, accepts divorce as the best option where a marriage has irretrievably broken down. If Jesus utterly forbids divorce, on what grounds do we tolerate divorce and remarry divorcee’s? My hope today is to make this clearer in what follows.

### **THE SITUATION IN JESUS’ DAY**

I invite you to keep in mind two things when this passage from Mark’s Gospel is read. **First**, it’s a man’s game. The conversation started with the Pharisees asking if it were lawful for a man to divorce his wife. It was about men’s rights. In that era in Jewish culture, divorce was largely the prerogative of men, not women.

As far as I know there were only three grounds on which a woman could divorce her husband: If a Jewish man wanted to leave the holy land and go to live in a pagan country, she could refuse and seek divorce. If the man embraced another religion, the wife could divorce him. The third ground for divorce, I think, was if the man committed blasphemy.

On the other hand, men had numerous grounds. Women had no right of reply. If a man found anything **“unseemly”** in his wife, all he had to do was to write out a statement of divorce, listing the grounds, get it witnessed by another man, and then send the wife away.

Let me quote from the New Testament scholar Eduard Schweizer: “A *legalistic requirement forbidding divorce does not help.....but also a freedom in which a man can avoid the confession of guilt is even less beneficial.*” “*Divorce can be a sign of repentance by which two people face up to their failure. It can be a confession that they have not succeeded in living according to God’s will ..... Divorce can therefore set one free to experience the mercy of God.*”

## SUMMING UP

I believe that at one level, Jesus was confronting the male arrogance which had made divorce primarily a male privilege. He was angry with their treatment of women. His words about divorce and the hardness of men’s hearts are a social justice protest.

But even more, they’re a protest against moral and religious legalism, which does not put you closer to God but further away. Jesus was not putting a ban on divorce. He was putting a ban on self righteousness.

At a basic level, all of us has have committed adultery. What I mean is - we’ve watered down the perfect, beautiful, loving will of God on umpteen different moral issues. Everyone of us have compromised thousands of times.

Only when we stop trying to put ourselves in the right, when we cease asking “*when is it lawful*” to do less than the best, do we open up our minds and hearts to the renovating mercy of God. Then we’re enabled to get on with life, gratefully and grace-fully. This is the Good News by which we live!

To the praise of the Name that is timeless and the Love that is boundless.

**Amen!!**

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This put a woman in a perilous situation. She was disgraced in the community; her family were not likely to take her back. If she could not quickly find another husband, her options were either to become a servant, a beggar, or turn to prostitution to keep alive. So when Jesus speaks about divorce in his social environment, it should be heard as a vigorous protest against a grave social injustice.

So, Jesus immediately drives the Pharisees back to basics. They wanted to have a discussion about their rights under the regulations of Moses; their right to divorce a woman. Jesus pushes them back to Genesis and the basic intention of God: From the beginning a woman and man were intended to stay together in mutual respect, trust and love. Clearly, the ideal for marriage was to be a life-long commitment.

Jesus takes us away from the compromises and confusions that happen when relationships do not work well, and he moves us back to God. That’s the only valid starting point as far as Christ was concerned. What does God see as the best possible way of life? Togetherness; an ever-growing love through a life of mutual cherishing. That is the goal!

## WHAT IS RIGHT

There is a great gulf between Jesus and legalistic religion. The Pharisees came asking “*Under what circumstances is it right for a man to divorce his wife?*”

Like their imitators in today’s world, some of the Pharisees always wanted to be in the right. They expected to get from Jesus a list of conditions under which they could divorce their wives and feel very righteous about it. That was their thing; the thing that gave them a buzz. **They had to be in the right.** It was not only in matters of divorce that they saw things this way. It applied to every other moral and religious issue. They were fanatical about justifying themselves. Therefore they were continually looking for ‘*mitigating circumstances*’. For it was such mitigating circumstances, deduced from the laws of Moses, that allowed them to maintain their high and mighty self-righteousness.

There we have it. In a society where marriage was in a mess, and where men were divorcing their wives for trivial reasons, these paragons of virtue

wanted to talk about rights. Jesus stumped them by in effect retorting: ***“It is never right to divorce your wife.”***

The only thing that God intends; the only thing in God’s eyes that can bear the load of being called ***“right,”*** is a life-long relationship of committed love. Such can only happen in an environment of shared grace, where forgiveness and respect is ever present.

### **OTHER RIGHTS**

You might think that Jesus is being very hard. He is. But that’s the only way Jesus can be if he really is a man of utter love. You see, all this talk about our rights is a self-deception which prevents us from achieving profound self-honesty, and from dealing with our own failings and those around us, cleanly and therapeutically.

Let’s illustrate this by taking the examples of telling lies or stealing. Both of these are forbidden by Moses.

**Lies:** Suppose that at 10 o’clock one night I answer the door bell to find a young man, a jilted ex-boyfriend of one of my daughters, standing there with the shape of a pistol bulging in his jacket. With steely eyes he asks whether my daughter is in. Seeing the gun and the scary look in his eyes, I’m constrained to say: ***“No.. I think she may have gone to the gym.”***

Of course, I’d be lying. My daughter is actually in her room with her earphones on listening to her favourite CD. I blatantly lie. Is it right to lie in that situation? Jesus, I think, would say ***“No! It is not right. To lie always adds to the breakdown of trust between people; that trust which is God’s best intention for us.”*** If we lie, we water down or adulterate the precious wine of human integrity and add to the cynicism of the world.

The lie I would tell may be the best thing I can do in a bad situation. It may be the lesser of two evils. It may be the best I can manage, both for the young man with the gun and for my daughter. But don’t let us confuse the issue, or feed our appetite for self-righteousness by decorating a lie with the word ***“right.”*** A lie can never be a glorious ***“right.”***

Jesus, by taking away my lust for always wanting to be in the right, opens me up to self-honesty, a caring compromise, and a repentance which continually seeks God’s grace and renewal in all my affairs.

**Stealing.** The same applies to stealing. If our country were ravaged by some disaster, and food resources were hoarded by the powerful and rich, while the rest of us were starving, what would you do? I almost certainly would steal to try and keep my family alive. It might be the best thing I could do in a bad situation. It might be the better of two evils. But it doesn’t deserve to be called ***“right.”*** It’s not God’s intention that we should steal from one another. Stealing, even if it is the best we can do in a bad situation, always adulterates the plan of God.

Far better for me to acknowledge the compromise I’m making, and say ***“Sorry again, Lord. Forgive me. It’s the best I can do.”*** In this way my self-honesty is maintained, the goal of God’s values are upheld, we are opened up to God’s compassion and saved from the insidious trap of self-righteousness.

### **SO, BACK TO DIVORCE**

The Pharisees came wanting a debate about legitimate grounds on which a man could discard his wife. They demanded grounds that would enable them to feel righteous if they should be involved in a divorce. ***“Teacher,”*** they say, ***“when is it right for a man to divorce his wife?”***

***“Never!”*** That’s certainly what Jesus’ reply means. He tells them that Moses allowed it only because of ***“the hardness of men’s hearts.”*** It’s a compromise; a concession to the folly and sin of human beings. But that’s not how God intended it to be. From the beginning God wanted men and women to live together in harmony. That’s the aim. That’s always the goal.

Jesus is not so much forbidding divorce as driving us to recognise our inability to fulfil the perfect law of God, and then offering us grace. Grace is the remarkable alternative to legalistic self-righteousness. In matters of marriage and divorce, as in all other ethical issues, we fail often, yet we can gladly avail ourselves of the liberating grace of God, through Christ Jesus our Saviour.