

## 2. Hearts Wide Open Mark 10:1-16

### Divorce is a messy business

For any who've been through it, divorce is one of the most difficult storms in life. One writer put it like this:

“No one gets out completely unscarred. When people who have grown together are separated, it's never a simple, clean disconnection. It's like pulling a tree out of the ground - it's a violent act, and you can't do it without some damage.”<sup>1</sup>

Another writer:

“I didn't know it was going to hurt so much. I wanted the marriage to end, yet I wasn't prepared for all the pain ... the emptiness in the pit of my stomach ... tearing me apart. Is there anything left to look forward to? Nothing matters. I feel so alone.”<sup>2</sup>

### Factors which may compound the loneliness include:

1. **The shame of rejection.** Being rejected by the person who promised to love and do life with you leaves a lot of shame - especially if you've been ditched for someone else.
2. **The guilt of failing the marriage.** Both parties may carry a deep sense of failure following the divorce.
3. **Loss of mutual friends.** There's awkwardness among the friendships you both enjoyed. In-laws are often distanced. People at church may wonder what's happening and keep their distance.
4. **Coping on one's own.** You go out - on your own. You come home - on your own. You go to bed - on your own. You manage the household - on your own. For those with sole custody, there's raising children on your own.

### Divorce is not the unforgiveable sin

Sometimes the relationship is so messed up, that one or both parties decide the marriage is over. It takes two people to make a marriage; yet only one person can end it! I've listened to women and men who've tried desperately to save their marriage, but it still fell to pieces.

Sometimes it's only with hindsight that people realise how they contributed to the breakdown of the relationship and subsequent divorce. Some have told me, “If I'd known how much pain there would be in divorce, I would have worked harder towards saving the marriage.”

For all of us who've messed up in relationships, there is good news: Jesus loves and forgives you. He wants to dwell in your heart by faith. He wants to heal your hurts, and give you a hope and a future. By his grace and leadership, you don't have to keep messing it up!

Friends, if you've been through divorce, today's message is not to knock you down or beat you up, but rather to rediscover God's amazing gift and purposes for marriage. Amen?

### Jesus is questioned about divorce

In today's reading, Jesus is on his way from Galilee to Jerusalem. He has entered Judea and crossed the Jordon to the region of Perea, territory ruled by Herod Antipas. This is in the same region where John the Baptist had been preaching and baptising people (Matt 3:1-6).

While Jesus is teaching the crowds, some Pharisees ask Jesus: “**Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?**” (Mark 10:2 NIV)

It's a good question; but I suspect they ask it with hostile intent. Just a few years earlier, Herod Antipas arrested, imprisoned, and eventually executed John the Baptist. Why? **For John had been saying to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.”**(Mark 6:18 NIV)

<sup>1</sup> Tim Stafford, *Love, Sex, & the Whole Person*.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Jeffers, *The Journey from Lost to Found*.

Herod Antipas was first married to the daughter of Aretas, king of Arabia. During a trip to Rome, Antipas stayed with his half-brother, Herod Philip, and fell in love with Herodias, his brother's wife. They both divorced their spouses and married each other.<sup>3</sup> John's critique of their actions landed him in jail and got him killed!

Now that Jesus is in Herod's jurisdiction, the Pharisees might be trying to get Jesus killed!<sup>4</sup>

Most Jews agreed that divorce was lawful – under certain circumstances. In Deuteronomy 24:1, Moses wrote: **Suppose a man marries a woman but she does not please him. Having discovered something wrong with her, he writes her a letter of divorce, hands it to her, and sends her away from his house.** (Deuteronomy 24:1 NLT)

Now debate had continued for years over what “something wrong” (or in other translations “something indecent”) might be.

One school of thought followed Rabbi Shammai, who lived a generation or so before Jesus. He said a man could divorce his wife if he married her on the understanding that she was a virgin - and then discovered she was not (see Deut 22:13–21). Adultery would fall into the same category. In Matthew's account, Jesus concedes that adultery could be grounds for divorce (Matt 5:32, 10:9).<sup>5</sup>

The other school, following Rabbi Hillel, held that “something indecent” might include anything which her husband found offensive. It could be for many reasons: if she served up badly cooked food, for example; or even (one rabbi said) because he found her less beautiful than some other woman.

When Jesus asks the Pharisees, **“What did Moses command you?”** they quote Deuteronomy 24: **“Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.”**

In ancient Jewish culture, only men could institute divorce. Once the certificate of divorce was obtained, he could send her away – allowing her to remarry; or return to her father's home. In many cases, the woman and her children were reduced to poverty, hardship and shame.

## The primary cause of divorce

Jesus digs deeper than the piece of paper that formalises the end of a marriage. He tells the Pharisees that Moses made provision for divorce **“because your hearts were hard.”** While people give various reasons for divorce, hardness of heart is always the root cause.

At their wedding, couples make this vow freely and willingly: **“...I promise to be faithful to you as long as we both shall live.”** But sadly, some are unaware how much character, perseverance, and hard work it takes to keep this promise.

We tend to be lazy: we want great relationships with minimal effort or sacrifice!  
We expect the other person to make us happy, and then get upset when they don't!

When the “me” replaces the “we”, selfishness and hardness of heart can creep in. Over time, hardness of heart can build up layers of apathy, fault finding, conflict, unresolved hurts, resentment, bitterness, and blame. If a couple keep digging in their heels, refusing to apologise and be reconciled, it can end up in divorce.

Why did Moses permit divorce? Sometimes a legal breakup is less damaging than staying in an abusive or toxic relationship. *The NIV Study Bible* puts it well:

“Divorce was an accommodation to human weakness and was used to bring order in a society that had disregarded God's will, but it was not the standard God had originally intended... The purpose of Dt 24:1 was not to make divorce acceptable, but to reduce the hardship of its consequences.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Dicken, F. (2016). [Herod Antipas](#). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, ... W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

<sup>4</sup> Earlier in Mark: Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus. (Mk 3:6 NIV)

<sup>5</sup> In 1 Corinthians 7:15, Paul cites desertion by an unbelieving spouse as another possible grounds for divorce.

<sup>6</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, (Zondervan, 1985), 1513.

## God's blueprint for marriage

Jesus points us back to God's original intention for marriage:

**“But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’**

**‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh.**

**Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”** (Mark 10:6-9 NIV, Gen 2:24)

Jesus upholds the sanctity of marriage. God's blueprint for marriage is that two become a united team, supporting one another, doing life together, sharing its joys and sorrows, and sharing intimacy – for as long as they both live.

Jesus also seeks to safeguard marriage against hardness of heart which threatens to destroy it. Marriage was never meant to be disposable. If we think it is, we can give ourselves permission to be selfish and demanding. If we don't get all that we expect from our spouse, then the temptation is to consider a divorce so we can find it in someone else.

But this was NEVER God's intention for marriage.

- The oneness in marriage is to be an echo of the closeness between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The three Persons are always giving honour to each other – and always working together in all the acts of God.
- Faithfulness in marriage is a pointer to God's faithfulness to humanity. He never gives up!
- The passion shared in marriage reflects the bonds of intimacy between Jesus and his bride: the Church.

In private, the disciples question Jesus further about this. Without naming Herod Antipas and Herodias, Jesus' reply is consistent with the position taken by John the Baptist.

## Hearts wide open

How can God keep our hearts soft and open to one another? How can we engage in healthy relationships, so we don't 'divorce' ourselves from God - and each other?

**1. Find your identity and security in the Father's love.** When we don't know **who** we are, or **whose** we are, we look to others for security, significance and worth. When our expectations are not met, we are disappointed and devastated: “What about me?”

Friends, this hole in our hearts is one that only God can fill. Jesus could freely give into the lives of others because he was totally secure in his Father's love. Jesus brings you and me into this same relationship. When you and I are totally secure in being loved and forgiven children of the Father, we can give freely to others without demanding in return.

**2. Let Jesus dwell in your heart through faith.** As Jesus lives in our hearts, he frees us from selfishness – giving us compassion for others. When you realise that Jesus loves every other person just as much as he loves you, it changes you from the inside out. As you look at people through Jesus' eyes, your ears open to their stories and your heart opens to their needs – moving you to listen, encourage, help, care or pray for them.

**3. Ask the Holy Spirit to keep renewing your heart.** When our capacity to love runs dry, we can always ask the Holy Spirit to renew our love for God; and for those God has given us. In marriage:

1. It's more important to be the right person than to have the right person.
2. Listening and understanding one another is more important than winning an argument.
3. Remembering your vows helps us to keep appreciating, honouring, respecting, and serving one another.

May God give us soft and open hearts – so our marriages and families will flourish; so people can see Jesus in how we relate to one another; and so God's blessings will ripple through the next generations. Amen.

(c.1780)