

This message may be painful and hard for those of you reading this today. What you hear as we talk about Jesus' teaching on divorce, in your hearts, will stand in such stark contrast to what our culture brings to this issue.

As we've been learning in Mark, God's Kingdom is the counter kingdom to the world's kingdoms. Some of you as you hear and reflect on what we're talking about might have feelings brought up that may be of regret, sorrow, anger, and guilt. It may bring up painful experiences that have marked you for life. I want you to remember that as Christ is teaching us here on marriage and divorce, we have this undergirding of this glorious gospel of grace that we stand upon, which brings us salvation, forgiveness, restoration, and healing. It's important that we come in understanding that and be reminded of that.

Everyone here has been touched personally by divorce, or we know someone who we love very much who has. I have sat with more people than I can count that are reeling or have reeled from a broken marriage. I have counseled more people than I can count who are in real struggles to try to save their marriage.

As a pastor, I want you to know that I don't believe that there are always the same pat answers for every marriage and every divorce situation or every remarriage situation that I'm invited into to minister alongside people in those areas. We hurt for people who are struggling in their marriages, and we pray for wisdom on how to counsel and encourage them well. We're really inspired when a couple heeds our advice and courageously fights for their marriage. I'm not naïve. I know marriages do fail in spite of prayers, in spite of the commitment of one of the spouses, in spite of receiving and trying to implement good biblical counsel.

I want to invite everyone today to just prepare your hearts in this way, to open your heart personally to this passage. Ask God to give you a tender heart, to give you a humble heart, to give you a heart to learn and be attentive to what he has to say. Pray to be attentive to what the Spirit wants to teach.

So here's what I know of what Jesus says about marriage and divorce. God's intention is that marriage lasts a lifetime, and divorce is a rare exception. I want to specifically address a few groups today.

First, to those whose marriages have failed. You've tried to save it. No matter what wrong things your partner did or you did, you are here today, and you're bearing the burden; you're struggling with the consequences of a failed marriage. May God encourage you today with his truth and grace.

May God speak to you today if your marriage is in crisis, where there's pain and confusion, and you don't know what to do next. You find that your heart is becoming hardened, and it scares you. You don't want that.

For those who are married but not in crisis and things are going great, just know that at some point, even Christian couples go through struggles in their marriage. For those who know and love people and want to help people that are going through hard times, because that's what we're called to do is rally around those going through hard times. That's what the body of Christ is to do. The church is called to do that no matter what.

Maybe you're single, and you're thinking, "Why am I here? You know, I should get an early start on the Warrior's game." And maybe you're not close to being married, but there's a reason, I trust in God's sovereignty, there is a reason that you're here today. I found that when I learn about the will of God in one area, it bleeds over into other areas. There are some words we'll offer to those who are single today. We try here at CPC to teach the entire word of God, not just the parts we want to teach, even those uncomfortable parts.

"Jesus then left that place and went into the region of Judea and across the Jordan. Again crowds of people came to him, and as was his custom, he taught them" (Mark 10:1). So Jesus is on the move. That place was Jesus's home base of Capernaum, a beautiful city on the northwest side of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus is finished in his ministry in Galilee to the north, and he's on the move to Jerusalem in the south. Jews that would travel between Galilee and Jerusalem would typically take an eastern route because they wouldn't want to go through the Samaritan areas. They would go through the eastern route, east of the Jordan River. The region called Peraea, which is in modern-day Jordan.

This was land given to Herod the Great by Rome. And then Herod the Great passed on this region to his son, Herod Antipas, which is a name that we heard earlier in Mark. In Mark 6, Herod Antipas was the one who had John the Baptist arrested because John spoke out against Antipas' sin of leaving his wife and marrying his brother's wife, Herodias. Antipas threw John in jail to shut him up. His brother's wife, Herodias, was so annoyed with John that she had this plan. On the night of a dinner party, she had her daughter dance for the guests, and then in a deal made with Antipas, John was beheaded and his head delivered to the party on a platter.

So back to Mark 10, the crowds were forming around Jesus, and he stopped and delayed his travel to teach the crowds in Peraea. *"Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?'"* (v. 2). So Mark is saying that the Pharisees tested him. Why were they testing him? Because they wanted to get Jesus in trouble. They were hoping to trap Jesus with this question of marriage and divorce. They were hoping that his answer would get him in trouble, maybe arrested the same way it did for John earlier. They knew what they believed about divorce, right or wrong. They didn't come to him to listen and learn. Their views were already formed.

Now, in Matthew's account of this chapter 19, Matthew adds these words to the question "for any and every reason." "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason." In the ancient world, this was called "any case divorce." In California, it's called "no-fault divorce." In fact, I don't know if you know this, but our state is the first state in the country to create no-fault divorce, and there are approximately a hundred thousand California couples who get divorced every year.

So we need to understand that many Jews did have a high regard for marriage, and their high regard centered on their interpretation of the law of Moses. Their question to Jesus came from Moses's teaching in Deuteronomy 24:1 considered the law of God given to Moses that he taught. So it's important to understand the background of this question.

Notice that they ask, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife," not vice versa. In Jewish culture, marriage was not the union of two equals. Women were not allowed to divorce their husbands, but a husband was allowed under Jewish law to divorce his wife. So what the Pharisees are really asking is not if it's even lawful for a man to divorce his wife, but upon what grounds may a man divorce his wife. What grounds is it lawful? Divorce was legal just as it is today, but on what grounds? Let's read Deuteronomy 24:1.

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, Deut. 24:1

Now, it may not sound like at first glance that the original intention of this is to give legal protection to women. It's more to give men an out here. But there was grace, and there was a heart for women even in the Old Testament here. The purpose of the law here was to protect a woman when her husband did divorce her. With a certificate of divorce in her hand, she was no longer legally bound to her husband, and she could remarry. A certificate of divorce benefited the woman because a woman did not have the economic means or opportunity to support herself back in that day. Being married meant survival to a woman back in the Old Testament times, the times of the law.

So the center of the Jewish debate in biblical times centered on the meaning of the quote, "indecent about her." There was a conservative interpretation of Deuteronomy 24, led by a rabbi name named Shammai, who said a man could only divorce his wife if she was sexually unfaithful to her husband. But there was a more liberal interpretation of Deuteronomy 24, led by a rabbi named Hillel, who said that a man could divorce his wife basically for any reason. Such as if she speaks to another man in public or if she was not a good cook. There was another rabbi named Akiba who taught that a husband could divorce his wife if he found someone more beautiful than his current wife. Basically, he could divorce his wife at any time for any reason. The liberal view meant that a man could divorce, and anything could be interpreted as indecent.

I love Jesus's answer here. Jesus, who perfectly obeyed the law and was the fulfillment of the law, answered the question with a question. There seems to be a pattern. *"What did Moses command you?" he replied*" (v. 3). To paraphrase Jesus here, "Your opinions don't matter here. What Moses, the lawgiver, says does matter."

"They said, 'Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away'" (v. 4). And then Jesus tells them why Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce. It goes to a heart issue. *"It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied*" (v. 5). It was never God's intent, but divorce was a concession due to a hardened heart. In Matthew 19, Matthew includes more of Jesus' teachings on divorce, and here Jesus gives this rare exception where God accepts divorce. Starting in Matthew 19:7.

"Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery." Matthew 19:7-9

Jesus said, "Moses permitted." He didn't say, "Moses commanded." He says he permitted them to divorce their wives because their hearts were hard. So, Jesus gives a very specific and rare exception. Let's look at the disciples' response to this in Matthew. *"The disciples said to him, 'If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry'"* (Matthew 19:10). What the disciples were revealing here is they're in the divorce for any reason camp. The disciples were thinking, "Are you kidding, Jesus? My friend, my daughter, my mom is stuck in this bad marriage, and they can only get out of it if their spouse does something immoral?"

The real issue in divorce, the biblical teaching, is the hardness of the heart. We don't need to chase down all the nuances that define the hardness of the heart right now, but here's what we need to know. Jesus is focusing on the key issue of divorce

when one or both in the marriage are persistently, deliberately unrepentant of immoral behavior and unwilling to follow God's ways; God allows permission for divorce. I'm not saying because your husband was unfaithful to you, you should divorce him.

We need to remember in this teaching today the whole arc of scripture. If we are searching the scriptures for an escape clause to get out of our marriages, that means we're not in the right place in our hearts. We need to understand that this is a place for redemption, a place for restoration. If we are searching and praying for repentance and forgiveness, if we're turning our lives around, if we're doing that self-examination, and if we're trying to get close to the heart of God, we can do that as we seek to improve and save our marriages. But we need to put it out there that a rare exception for divorcing is adultery.

So why did he give this exception? He's arguing that Moses made a concession in the law. Why? Because of the prevalence of sin. Divorce certificates were issued to prevent further sin and the toll that it takes on people around them in the community. It was God's heart letting us know that sometimes a marriage must end to prevent further evil and further damage. Back to Mark 10. So Jesus then pivots, and he gives us more of an understanding of God's heart and intention for marriage.

I don't think we'll ever understand God's view of divorce fully until we understand God's view of marriage. That's how Jesus taught it here. He opened up on divorce, and now he's going to talk about the view of marriage. Jesus now takes us back earlier than the law, earlier than Deuteronomy. He takes us all the way back to the creation account in Genesis 2. There are two creation accounts in the Book of Genesis. Genesis 1, which culminates in the Sabbath, keeping the Sabbath, and Genesis 2, which culminates and leads to the institution of marriage. Jesus is quoting from Genesis 2.

Mark 10:6 states, *"But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.'"* So God's intention in his creation was to create two distinct sexes, similar, but distinctly male and distinctly female. Distinct by design was all God's plan, all God's idea from the very beginning. *"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife,"* (v. 7). So God's intention is for a man and a woman to leave their home, leave their father and mother, their families of origin, and leave the authoritative structure of that family that they were raised in, and create a new family—husband and wife with its own authoritative structure.

The idea is that the two would hold fast or cleave together as husband and wife. And they had to leave before they cleave. *"and the two will become one flesh."* So they are no longer two, but one flesh" (v. 8). This is a beautiful picture that the two are no longer two; they have been united. They are a new creation. They become one flesh. Everything changes. One flesh, of course, is sexual oneness, but it's more. It's 24/7. It's lifelong unity. It's commitment and faithfulness. It's long-term. It's not a man and a woman

cohabitating. It's not just a team. It's more than friends. It's not roommates. God's plan is that they will never view their individual lives the same again. It's never about me again. It's about we. Paul Tripp, one of my favorite teachers, says,

Our culture has reduced marriage to a temporary vehicle for our own momentary happiness. It's 'I love me, and I will love them for the things they can do for me. And when they can no longer give me what I want, I can leave.

So now, with big decisions, it's not just me. Money—whose money is it? It's not his or hers; It's ours. Viewing our free time through a "we" perspective. Household responsibilities, parenting through a "we" perspective. And Jesus adds to his previous quote from Genesis 2. We say this a lot at weddings. *"Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate"* (v. 9).

How many of you have worked with Superglue? You know, it's one thing to work with white glue, but when you work with Superglue, there's something that makes me a little nervous about that. There's something so permanent that when this is joined together, will it ever come apart again? I think that's a great analogy for this. Go home today, maybe between the Warrior game and our practice lab tonight. Go home and get out your super glue, and put two pieces of paper together. And I will bet you that after that glue dries, you can't possibly pull those two apart without changing them, damaging them, and tearing them. And if you can do that and you show up tonight and show me, I'll buy you a cup of coffee next week. I'm almost sure. I would've said steak dinner if I was a hundred percent sure.

So do we get this from this verse? God joins together marriages. Marriage is an expression of God's sovereignty. God creates attraction. He creates desires. God arranges the details for a couple to meet and bring a couple together. What a wonderful story to tell about a couple and how they met, and how God orchestrated it. Why is this important? It's important because God is not shocked or dismayed at what happens when a sinner marries another sinner. It's going to be difficult. He knows all our weaknesses. He knows our stress points. He knows the places we need to grow. And sometimes, in some seasons, we're just plain not as compatible as we should be.

Marriage is bigger than my marriage or your marriage. Marriage is not about our definition of happiness. Marriage is part of God's grand redemption plan. The covenant of marriage will reveal the state of our faith in our hearts, reveal our spiritual maturity, and reveal growth areas for all of us.

Jay Kessler, a classic writer on marriage, wrote this. He called this *The Laboratory of Marriage*.

God has made us all individuals. And then he made half of us male and the other half female, and then he created marriage. Unless you think this was a cosmic practical joke, he must have had a reason. One explanation is that God wants to challenge

us to change and grow to our fullest potential as human beings. And there's no better laboratory than marriage to help us do that. God's intention for marriage—a lifelong, exclusive relationship between one man and one woman. It is a path of discipleship for all of us.

So I want us to go back to this Jesus elevating and protecting women here. As we said, a woman had no right to divorce her husband in Jewish culture. A total double standard. And look at how Jesus finishes his teaching in verses 10 through 12, as he teaches the disciples about the seriousness of divorce, adultery, and remarriage.

When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. He answered, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery." vv. 10-12

So at the end of verse 11, he says he commits adultery against her. That was not said. Jesus elevates the status of the wife to the same as the husband and places the responsibility of marital fidelity on both husband and wife equally. The wife who he's cheated on has equal dignity. Here, Jesus is blowing up the double standard. So what do we do with this? Divorce for the wrong reasons, plus remarriage, equals adultery.

We believe that Jesus is coming down here on the hardhearted Pharisees, who are handing out divorce certificates like candy for maybe the wives burning the toast. So stop divorcing; fight for your marriage, is what he's saying. And then a question that comes out of this is why would Jesus allow divorce for sexual sin? Because there's nothing that touches our humanity, our spirit, and our soul as the intimate union that comes through a sexual relationship. The world wants us to think of it as merely a physically pleasurable act, but there's so much more. It is a connection. It's a connection with God. It's a connection with our spouse. It's the deepest act of betrayal that can justifiably end a marriage when there's adultery.

I believe if a marriage has justifiable grounds of adultery, the divorced person can eventually remarry if there is no reconciliation possible. And the person they marry then is not drawn into an adulterous relationship because the marriage has ended, so they're free. There's no question in my mind where God and when God allows a divorce that he also allows for remarriage. It is important that we understand that adultery, though, does not require divorce. It's not commanded, but divorce may be the least ugly option to avoid greater suffering, greater sin, and greater evil.

Remember, it's the hardened heart example. We pray for hardened hearts to become softened hearts and softened hearts to lead to repentance, forgiveness, and healing relationships. And

we know of many marriages that have found healing on the other side of adultery.

So a side note for you who are not married. It's never a good idea for a Christian to pursue marriage with a nonbeliever. The Bible calls this being unevenly yoked. So imagine in your marriage that the deepest and the most important priorities of faith in life you can't share with your mate. Imagine trying to raise your children in faith and having no help or support or even maybe a pull away from your spouse. Learning from people I know and love, do due diligence on investigating faith issues before you allow yourself to fall in love with somebody.

So before we wrap up today, I want to leave Mark, and I want to go to the Apostle Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7. Paul adds more to what Jesus taught.

To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife. 1 Corinthians 7:10-11

So what Paul's bringing up here is when two believers separate for the wrong reasons, maybe they carry through with a divorce, but maybe not. Paul is telling them to remain unmarried. The goal is discipleship, that leads to reconciliation. And it's important for the church to know that we as a church have the responsibility to minister and include people who are separated or divorced, even for the wrong reasons. We should never isolate. We should never choose not to minister to people who have found themselves in these situations through their own decisions or the decisions of someone else.

And maybe couples can separate for the right reasons. In this sense, we have counseled couples toward legal separation because of severe problems in their marriage, and at the same time, we come alongside and support them in the work that they need to do in order to be reconciled and come back together.

Paul lives some of his life in places like Corinth. Marriages were messy in Corinth. We live in the Bay Area, where marriages are messy, but we must get in and provide the encouragement of grace and truth to help families who want help wherever they're coming from.

There is another rare exception we must mention as we bring this to a close. Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, wrote to the Corinthian church, where Gentiles were converting to Christ out of Paganism. And it was common for a married person to become a follower of Christ, and their spouse would not. It was a common and difficult problem that Paul needed to address. "Well, we're not on the same page anymore. We're unequally yoked. I'm going to leave my spouse." Here's what Paul says in verse 12. Paul is adding this under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. 1 Corinthians 12-13

So if you are a believer and your spouse is not a believer, and your spouse wants to stay married to you, you're called to stay in that marriage. Spiritual incompatibility is not proper grounds for divorce. And here's why he says to stay in that hard situation.

For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. 1 Corinthians 7:14

What is he saying here? Paul is saying your unbelieving spouse and your children are under the influence of the gospel that you now believe. It just comes out of you. There is no guarantee that your spouse or your children will come to a personal faith in Christ, but this verse is a reason to have hope.

They are being impacted by your life, by your words, and by your prayers. And may God bless everybody at CPC who is in this situation. But what if your unbelieving spouse leaves or deserts you? *"But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace" (1 Cor. 7:15).*

It's important that we understand this to mean that the unbelieving spouse is initiating the abandonment. And what he means here, literally, is physical abandonment. It's a stretch to use this passage to name abandonment as emotional abandonment, but I'm going to talk about that in a couple of minutes here.

So, the rare exception for divorcing is adultery and physical abandonment by an unbelieving spouse. So to summarize what we've learned today, marriage is the sacred union between one man and one woman, and God's intention is for marriage to last a lifetime. Divorce is not always sinful. Divorce is permitted but not required on the ground of sexual immorality. Divorce is permitted but not required on the grounds of desertion by an unbelieving spouse. When divorce is not permissible, any subsequent remarriage to someone other than your original spouse results in adultery. In situations where the divorce was permissible. Remarriage is also permissible. Improperly divorced and remarried Christians should stay as they are, but have a heart of repentance, recognizing God's forgiveness of their past sins, and make whatever amends that are necessary.

So rare exceptions for divorcing are adultery and abandonment by an unbelieving spouse. And I want to bring up this last one with a little caveat, hardheartedness. So there are some pastoral issues that I think are important for us to talk about. What about physical and emotional abuse within a marriage? And this

includes the idea of emotional abandonment. Oh, we're under the same roof, but you know, there's just nothing here.

Here's what I tell couples, never endure physical abuse. Get you and your family to safety, and then look at your next steps in a biblical way. Don't ever ignore illegal behavior that your spouse might be participating in. Don't be buried alive by addictions such as alcohol, drugs, pornography, or gambling that would put you in danger or empty your bank accounts. There are steps you can take with the support of the church so that you can find a place to be safe. And we have occasionally counseled for legal separation, still with the goal of eventual reconciliation.

I want to encourage you to talk to someone if you feel you are being emotionally abused. You may certainly have grounds to make a change, but talk it through with someone who understands biblical marriage, who understands passages like this on divorce, who can help you. It matters who you get your advice from. You need help to understand that this may be a discipleship issue, or it may be a hardness of heart issue.

What if I was divorced before I became a Christian? I know that applies to some of us in this room. I believe that when we become a Christian, when we've accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, and we've received his forgiveness, and we've received the gift of eternal life, we are new. We are brand new. Paul says, *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Cor. 5:17).* I don't see a pre-faith in Christ sin to be held against a genuine new believer. There may be consequences. There may be restitution that you may need to be a part of, but the richness of God's grace grants forgiveness for all sins. You're born again.

What should I consider if I'm a single person? Walk carefully if you feel God wants you to be married. Be patient. Trust in the sovereignty of God to bring you together with someone. You and others that you love should be able to track whether or not you're seeing the hand of God bringing you into a possible marriage relationship. Be certain that you are equally yoked. Be certain that you are called to be married. Because Paul does say marriage is hard, and it's better for some not to marry so they can be freed up to serve the Lord.

What if my marriage is a struggle? As was said, two sinners getting married, what could possibly go wrong? Even Christian marriages suffer. Maybe you can feel your heart beginning to harden towards your spouse. Recently, I sat with a man who was exasperated at his marriage. His wife wanted a divorce, and I told him that he needs to do everything he can to fight for his marriage. And what that looks like, only you and God know that. I told him to remember that his young kids were watching, and if he was divorced one day, they were going to ask him about it. And he needed to, before God, look them in the eye and honestly say he did everything he could possibly do to save his marriage with their mother.

Another statistic in California, two out of three divorced couples said that there was probably more they could have done to save their marriage. May we be the one-third that fights for God's institution of marriage. So what is the role of CPC in supporting the married and the divorced?

I think back to Julie and my marriage; 38 years back, in year seven of our marriage, we were not communicating. We did not know how to resolve conflict. We were going through some struggles, and I'll tell you, counseling was an awesome thing for us to receive. It united us. We learned skills to communicate. We learned skills to resolve conflict. Here I was, a pastor, and my marriage needed help. And the counseling was so central to our now 38 years of marriage.

We have pastors here, both men and women, to come alongside you to pray and support you. CPC has trained biblical lay counselors. We also have a wonderful relationship with professional counselors through the Christian Counseling Center here in San Mateo.

We recommend every time there's a family life conference, we recommend couples go on those weekend retreats for family life. I want you to know if you're struggling, you are not alone. Please don't give up. And may God bless all our marriages here at CPC. May we be a blessing and encouragement to all those who are in need. May they find grace and truth, whether they are married, whether they are divorced, whether they are alone, no matter their past.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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