

“Marriage & Divorce”
SERMON MANUSCRIPT DRAFT
Mark 10:1-12
March 16, 2025
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We return this morning to the Gospel of Mark, as Jesus makes his way toward Jerusalem while continuing his teaching, preaching, and ministry.

With that in mind, we turn now to Mark 10:1-12.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Mark writes:

^{10:1} “And he left there and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan, and crowds gathered to him again. And again, as was his custom, he taught them.

² And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” ³ He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” ⁴ They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.” ⁵ And Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. ⁶ But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ⁷ ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, ⁸ and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. ⁹ What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”

¹⁰ And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. ¹¹ And he said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, ¹² and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, we do believe that your word
is firmly fixed forever, with you, in the heavens.
Your faithfulness endures to all generations,
you have made this world and it stands as you will it to.
Lord, as your people, help us to never forget your precepts,

Because by them you have given us life.
Grant us this life now, through this your word.
In Jesus's name. Amen
[Based on Psalm 119:89, 90, 93, 94]

Introduction

We come this morning to a striking and counter-cultural passage of Jesus's teaching.

It's also a passage that can be easily misunderstood, and so we've got to do a bit of work to make sure we interpret this passage rightly, and then apply it to ourselves faithfully.

And as we do that, what we see is that there are biblical grounds for divorce, but ordinarily God calls us to remain faithfully committed to our spouse, even in a difficult marriage, because God has remained committed to us.

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Now ... let's take that one piece at a time.

There Are Biblical Grounds for Divorce

The first thing we need to recognize is that there are biblical grounds for divorce.

Now, there's a lot to say on this. And I know, because a few months I taught an adult Sunday school class in which I spent almost an hour laying out and explaining 28 statements on divorce and remarriage. I can't repeat all that this morning, but if you want more on the question of biblical grounds for divorce, you can find that class on our website. It's titled "The Westminster Confession, Part 71" and I'll include a link in the sermon manuscript as well. [<https://www.faithtacoma.org/westminster-confession-various-speakers/the-westminster-confession-part-71#>]

This morning I'll have to give the very streamlined version, because while this is important context, it's not what our text is really focused on.

Now, to even say that there are biblical grounds for divorce might seem like a contradiction of the text we just heard, but it's not if we understand this passage in context.

The Pharisees are asking Jesus to speak into a rabbinic disagreement still being debated in his day.

And the disagreement had to do with the verse the Pharisees only partially cite in verse 4. The verse as a whole is describing a situation in which a husband divorces his wife, it says: "because he has found some indecency in her."

In Jesus's day, there was debate about what this meant.

One school of thought – the school of Shammai – emphasized that word “indecency” and taught that Deuteronomy 24:1 meant that “A man may not divorce his wife unless he has found unchastity in her.” In other words, except for a sin of betrayal like adultery, a man may not divorce his wife.

But another dominant school in rabbinic thought – the School of Hillel – took an extremely broad reading of what the “indecency” of Deuteronomy 24:1 might be, so much so that they said that a man might divorce his wife for “any matter” including, they specified, just because she has spoiled a meal she was preparing for him.

Yet another prominent rabbi taught that the wife didn't even need to do anything wrong for her husband to divorce her, but a man could divorce his wife simply on the grounds that he found another woman he wanted to marry instead, whom he found more physically attractive. [*m. Git.* 9:10]

These were the debates going on among rabbis about divorce in Jesus's day. And these are the debates they're asking Jesus to speak into.

And so the Pharisees weren't asking in verse 2 if there were ever biblical grounds for divorce – every group of Jews at the time knew the Bible taught that there were. Instead, they were asking what Jesus thought of the views of the School of Hillel, which taught that a man could divorce his wife for any cause.

And what's implied in Mark's account here is made clear in Matthew's account of the same conversation, as he records the question as: “Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?” which seems to make it clear that the Pharisees are asking specifically for Jesus's assessment of the School of Hillel's “any cause” divorce.

And so the question being asked is not “Are there any biblical grounds for divorce at all?” But rather: Are there specific narrow grounds for divorce, or may a man divorce his wife for any cause he pleases? [For more on this, see Edwards, 299-301 and Instone-Brewer, 134-136]

Jesus responds that the grounds for divorce in the Bible are, in fact, narrow. And by doing that, Jesus is restoring Moses's words in Scripture to their original intent.

Because both the Old Testament and the New Testament gave just two grounds on which divorce was biblically permitted.

One was the category of adultery. In the Old Testament, that's what's in view in Deuteronomy 24:1, and it's reaffirmed by Jesus in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9.

The other category is abandonment – when one spouse functionally ends the marriage by abandoning the other. We see this given as grounds for formal divorce in the Old Testament in

Exodus 21:10-11 and it's reaffirmed in the New Testament by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:15.

So the Bible gives two main categories of acceptable grounds for divorce.

And it's worth adding that for centuries, there has been a view within the Reformed tradition that said that "abandonment" of the marriage might come about not only by one spouse physically removing themselves from the marriage, but also by one spouse driving the other spouse away through "malicious dealings" which resulted in "intolerable conditions" for the other spouse. This is what we today refer to as domestic abuse, or oppression through coercive control. [For more on this historically, see the 1992 PCA Study Report on Divorce and Remarriage, pages 189-199: <https://pcahistory.org/pca/studies/divorce-remarriage.pdf>]

Now ... let me say two things about this. First, just what constitutes biblical grounds for divorce in such setting gets complicated quickly. If you've been to one of the *Protect the Flock* seminars we've hosted, you have some sense of how complicated such situations can be. As I said earlier, I spoke at more length about this in my Sunday school class a few months back, and so if you have technical questions on this subject, I encourage you to listen to that class. [<https://www.faithtacoma.org/westminster-confession-various-speakers/the-westminster-confession-part-71#>]

That said, if you think that you might be in an abusive situation yourself, please come and talk to us – either to one of the pastors here, or to a woman in leadership here at the church whom you trust. We want to help if you're in a situation like that. All three of our ministers here at Faith have received training to help us distinguish between a difficult marriage and an abusive marriage. Those are two categorically different things that need categorically different responses.

And I say that because I want to be clear that the rest of my sermon this morning is about difficult marriages – not abusive or oppressive marriages.

If you're in an abusive or oppressive marriage, different steps need to be taken to protect you and keep you safe than what I'm outlining in my sermon this morning. So if you're experiencing abuse in your marriage, don't misapply my sermon to your circumstances, but instead please come and speak to us about your situation, so we can come alongside you in it.

With all that said, the Bible gives biblical grounds in which divorce is allowed: adultery, abandonment, and abuse which constitutes an abandonment of the marriage.

That's what we see in the Bible as a whole, and understood in context, Jesus is not contradicting that Biblical teaching here.

But Ordinarily God Calls Us to Remain Faithfully Committed to Our Spouse

There are biblical grounds for divorce ... but what Jesus emphasize here is that ordinarily God calls us to remain faithfully committed to our spouse in marriage.

And this is the real thrust of our passage this morning.

When Jesus is asked about divorce, he clarifies how we should think about such questions by first reorienting us towards God's creational intent for marriage.

Jesus says: "from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

God designed marriage, Jesus tells us. It's not a human institution. It's of divine origin.

And as such, God gets to define what marriage is. And God's intention for marriage is that it be a life-long knitting together of two people – that as long as they both shall live, husband and wife should love, and serve, and remain faithfully committed to one another.

It's a beautiful picture of what marriage is supposed to be.

It comes with the demands of true commitment ... but that commitment is not a foreign demand God imposes on romantic love or human sexuality ... but rather exactly what romantic love and human sexuality were designed for. As C.S. Lewis puts it: "those who are in love have a natural inclination to bind themselves by promises. Love songs all over the world are full of vows of eternal constancy. The Christian law [of marriage]" Lewis continues, "is not forcing upon the passion of love something which is foreign to that passion's own nature: it is demanding that lovers should take seriously something which their passion of itself impels them to do." [Lewis, *Mere*, 98]

No one wants a life of serial monogamy – of one relationship after another, each ending in pain and heartache. What we long for is a commitment to another person that grows in depth and love over the course of a lifetime.

That's what we long for. And that's what marriage was designed to be. And God calls us to treat marriage as he intended it – as a life-long union of two people in love.

And so here, Jesus tells us that ordinarily – that outside of those cases where there may be biblical grounds for divorce – ordinarily, God calls us to remain faithfully committed to our spouse, as long as we both shall live.

That's what Jesus teaches here.

Even In A Difficult Marriage

Now ... it's easy to say that when a marriage is good. Who wouldn't want a good marriage to continue?

But what makes our text this morning difficult for many to swallow is that the emphasis here is that this calling – this command – to remain faithfully committed to our spouse, as long as we both shall live ... Jesus applies this command to difficult marriages as well.

After all, by opposing divorce outside of the narrow biblical grounds given for divorce, Jesus is primarily speaking to those who would like to get a divorce, but who don't have biblical grounds for it. He's speaking primarily to those who are dissatisfied or disappointed with their spouse or their marriage.

And upon hearing that ... some will object that Jesus's teaching here is just out-of-date – it's old fashion. It may have worked in his day, but it doesn't fit in ours.

But actually, Jesus's teaching was quite counter-cultural back then too.

A divorce was pretty easy to get in Jesus's days, and the Pharisees clearly intended to keep it that way. [Edwards, 300]

Jesus wasn't repeating the quaint, old-fashion views of his day. He was cutting against the grain of his culture then, just as his words cut against the grain of our culture now. Jesus confronts us just as he confronted them. He speaks not as a man of his time ... but as the Son of God, come to speak God's truth to his people. And as he does, he needs to be taken seriously.

Jesus proclaims to us boldly that ordinarily God calls us to remain faithfully committed to our spouse in marriage, even in a difficult, or disappointing, or disadvantageous marriage.

Let's be honest. When some of you heard the picture Jesus described of God's creational intent for marriage – of two becoming one – and you thought that might sound nice ... but it doesn't sound like what you have. Your marriage is difficult. Your marriage is disappointing. Your marriage is a disadvantage to you.

Maybe the conflict in your marriage is overt. There's anger. There's open contempt. There are arguments and passionate frustration.

Or maybe the marriage is just cold and lifeless at this point. You've become roommates ... occupying the same house, but cold and distant from each other.

Or maybe the marriage is just disappointing. Your spouse is not what you thought they'd be. They've fallen short of your hopes and expectations ... so much so that you feel like they're holding you back – having them in your life has on the whole, been a disadvantage to you.

Or maybe the other person hasn't done anything wrong ... but you just want someone different.

Brothers and sisters ... there are a lot of marriages that fall into these categories.

And if that's you, you need to face it. And then you need to ask: What is Jesus calling you to?

Because really, this text is addressed to you. Jesus isn't speaking here about those who are happily married – they aren't asking for a divorce. And as we said he's not principally focused here on those who do have biblical grounds for divorce either.

Primarily Jesus's teaching here is for those who want out of their marriages – who are unhappy with their marriages – but there are no biblical grounds for divorce. Their marriage is just difficult. It's disappointing. It feels like a disadvantage.

And Jesus's instruction here is that even if your marriage is difficult, or disappointing, or disadvantageous, God calls us to remain faithfully committed to our spouse in marriage.

But what's that supposed to look like?

Well first, it looks like the very basic commandment that Jesus gives to all his followers.

When asked what the greatest commandment was, Jesus said that the first is to love God. But the second great commandment, he said, is: “‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” [Mark 12:31]

As you face a difficult marriage, on the most basic level, God is calling you to love your neighbor – in this case your closest neighbor – as yourself.

Now that's easy to say. But in a difficult marriage it can be much harder to actually do.

In fact ... maybe for you it feels like your closest neighbor – your spouse – is sometimes the hardest person for you to love.

Maybe it feels like years of hurt or frustration have built up ... so that the littlest thing sets you off now, and the small disagreements so easily escalate into major accusations.

Maybe you look at your spouse, and all you see is their flaws ... their shortcomings and failings come right to the surface, and critiques and criticisms of them just flood your mind ... so much so that ... frankly ... in your more honest moments, it's a little scary to you that you can be so critical.

Or maybe it's not what you see but what you hear. Whatever your spouse says, if you're honest, you perceive it as a slight, or a put-down, and you lash out in defensiveness. Even a complement meet with suspicion, and you suspect it's a critique. And your guard is so heightened that if you're honest, some part of you knows that you are putting the worst spin on everything they say to you.

Or maybe your attitude towards your spouse is less like anger ... and more like contempt. They've disappointed you in so many ways, that now, when you look at them, you sneer in your heart ... you belittle them and mock them in your mind. Your knee jerk response to everything they say or do ... is an eye roll.

Or maybe for you it looks less like anger or contempt ... and more like cold detachment. You've shut down towards your spouse almost completely. Half the time when they say something to you ... you don't even really respond or give them your attention.

Whatever it may look like for you, it may feel like of all the people in the world, your spouse is the last person you could love as you love yourself, the last person you could show real warmth towards, the last person you'd want to make yourself vulnerable to, the last person you could sacrificially love and serve.

And yet ... if you're not going to show that kind of love to them ... if you're not going to extend this kind of sacrificial love to your spouse ... then who would you extend it too?

This is the person with whom you stood before God and said that you would love them, and you would remain faithfully committed to them, "For better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in health and in sickness."

You know ... the second half of each of those vows was real.

You took a vow to love them above all others in this world. And if now ... you're not going to love them well ... does that really say something about them ... or does it more say something about you?

Jesus calls us to love even our enemies. How much more must he call us to love the one we vowed to love above all others?

Jesus reminds us in our text this morning, that God calls us to remain faithfully and lovingly committed to our spouse in marriage, even in a difficult or a disappointing marriage.

Because God Has Been Faithfully Committed To Us

Now that's pretty heavy. And it may be very difficult.

And so you might wonder: How are you supposed to do this? What's supposed to motivate you, what's supposed to give you hope, and what are the practical steps like?

And the answer to all three of those questions is rooted in the same thing: God's faithful commitment to us.

God calls us to remain faithfully committed to our spouse, even in a difficult marriage, because God has remained faithfully committed to us.

Jesus doesn't bring up this rationale here. But it pervades the Bible.

Again and again the Bible tells us that God's relationship to us, his people, is like a husband's relationship to his wife – it's like a marriage. And over the centuries, it hasn't been a great marriage

... because we have so often been unfaithful to God. And yet, generation to generation, century to century, he has remained faithfully committed to us.

And that fact should give us motivation, hope, and steps forward.

First, it should motivate us. We're not being asked to give anyone anything that we have not already received ourselves. We're not being asked to do anything for anyone that has not already been done for us.

Jesus loved us when we were still his enemies. Jesus died for us when we were still cold and fickle towards him. Jesus served us when we were still ungrateful towards him.

And then he says to us, in the Gospel of John: "Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another."

Jesus is not asking us to do for our spouse anything that he has not already done for us. Jesus has remained faithfully committed to us, and he has loved us, despite how difficult, and disappointing, and disadvantageous we have been to him. And realizing that this is the kind of gracious love we have received should motivate us then to love our spouse with a similar love – even in the context of a difficult marriage.

But our relationship with God doesn't just give us motivation. It should also give us hope.

Because we serve a God who brings new life out of brokenness and death. He brings salvation out of crucifixion. He brings resurrection out of apparent defeat.

And it's that God who tells us in Romans 8:28 that he works all things together for the good of his people.

Now ... I have no idea what the specific good is that God may work in your situation.

Maybe God will bring good to your marriage itself – healing the relationship over time so that it is a blessing and not a trial.

Or maybe God will work through you to bring good to your spouse, helping them repent of their sins and grow in their relationship with the Lord and with you.

Or maybe that's not the kind of good God will bring in your situation. Maybe your spouse will remain cold ... and your marriage will remain a burden ... but as you seek to love someone who does not deserve it, just as Jesus loved you when you did not deserve it – maybe in that context God will work wonders in you: in your heart, and your soul, to conform you to the image of his Son in ways that would not have happened otherwise.

I have no idea how God will use the trials you may face in your marriage. But I do know that he can use them, and he will use all things in your life for your good as you follow him.

And that should give us hope.

Finally, our relationship with God also gives us practical steps forward. God calls you, in practical and concrete ways, to start turning towards your spouse, instead of away from them. He calls you to turn from criticism, and contempt, and coldness ... and to seek to show them kindness, and grace, and warmth.

That might seem daunting. But it's not something you have to tackle all on your own.

Our Lord is with you as you do these things, of course.

But he also gives you the Church. He gives you brothers and sisters, who can come alongside you, and help build you up and bear your burdens in the midst of a difficult marriage and a difficult calling.

He also gives you ministers. The pastors here at Faith are committed to helping struggling couples. Seeing us will not be a quick fix or a silver bullet. But we will strive to do our best to come alongside you, and try to help you heal your marriage, and build it into something that will glorify the Lord, and that could even one day be a delight to you.

These are just some of the practical helps and steps the Lord holds out to you if you find yourself in a difficult marriage.

Finally, if you're here this morning, and you are divorced, and as you hear this sermon, you're struck that your divorce was without biblical grounds, then you need to know that while there may be real sin in your divorce, an unbiblical divorce is not an unforgivable sin. It may be a serious sin, but it's not beyond God's grace and forgiveness in the gospel. If you have questions or concerns about that, please come talk to me or one of the other ministers here. We can talk through what repentance may look like in practical terms, and we can also assure you that as you seek repentance and come to Christ, you can have forgiveness.

Christ's mercy is great enough to cover the sins of all who truly turn from their sin and come to him in humble faith.

Whatever your situation, God's faithful and loving commitment to us offers us motivation to obey him, hope for what he is doing in our hearts and lives, and practical steps to walk forward in faithful reliance on him.

Conclusion

We see this morning that there are biblical grounds for divorce, but ordinarily God calls us to remain faithfully committed to our spouse, even in a difficult marriage, because God has remained faithfully committed to us.

And God's faithful commitment to us goes even farther beyond what he requires of us.

Because the truth is that we have given God biblical grounds to divorce us ... and yet he's still here with us.

Again and again, we have committed spiritual adultery against him, worshipping and serving idols in our hearts and lives, rather than him.

Again and again we have committed spiritual abandonment of God – wandering from him, and leaving him behind.

And when he came to earth, we – as humanity – even committed abuse against him: seizing him, beating him, and nailing him to a cross.

God has endured all this from us. And yet still he has remained faithfully committed to us.

If we face such situations, God allows us to seek a divorce. But God has done for us far more than he requires of us. Despite our spiritual adultery, despite our spiritual abandonment of him, despite the abuse he faced from us, despite all this, our Lord has remained faithfully committed to us.

That's how great his love is for us.

And so, even when he calls us to difficult things ... like loving a difficult person in a difficult marriage ... even then, how can we doubt that he cares for us? How can we doubt that he will work all things for our good? After all he has done for us ... how can we doubt his love?

Brothers and sisters, whatever stage of life you may find yourself in, as you look to those who are closest to you, our Lord, who humbled himself, and served us, despite how difficult, and disappointing, and disadvantageous we were to him – that humble Lord says to us: “Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples.”

And so, as we go from here, let us love one another – and especially those closest to us – just as Christ has loved us.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

- Bayer, Hans. Introduction and notes to Mark in *The ESV Study Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor, *Brothers Karamazov*. Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990.
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- Horne, Mark. *The Victory According to Mark: An Exposition of the Second Gospel*. Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003.
- Instone-Brewer, David. *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.
- Keller, Timothy. *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road*. Second Edition. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997.
- Leopold, Thomas. "Gender Differences in the Consequences of Divorce: A Study of Multiple Outcomes" *Demography*. June 2018. 55(3):769-797. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29654601/>
- Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*. New York, NY: Touchstone, 1943 (1996 Edition)
- Keller, Timothy. *Jesus the King*. New York, NY: Penguin, 2011.
- Wright, N.T. *Mark for Everyone*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

For my Sunday School class on 28 Theses on Divorce & Remarriage, see the "Westminster Confession, Part 71" class from December 15, 2024: <https://www.faihtacoma.org/westminster-confession-various-speakers/the-westminster-confession-part-71>

I also recommend two of the PCA's Study Committee Reports:

- The PCA's "Report of the Ad-Interim Committee on Divorce and Remarriage" (1992) (<https://pcahistory.org/pca/studies/divorce-remarriage.pdf>)
- The PCA's "Report of the Ad Interim Committee on Domestic Abuse and Sexual Assault" (2022) (<https://pcaga.org/aic-report-abuse/>)

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.