

## Scripture Readings for Oct 7<sup>th</sup> 2018

### Genesis 2:18-24 (NIV)

<sup>18</sup>The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

<sup>19</sup>Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. <sup>20</sup>So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. <sup>21</sup>So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. <sup>22</sup>Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. <sup>23</sup>The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." <sup>24</sup>That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

### Mark 10:1-16 (NIV)

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. <sup>2</sup>Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" <sup>3</sup>"What did Moses command you?" he replied. <sup>4</sup>They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away." <sup>5</sup>"It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied. <sup>6</sup>"But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.'<sup>7</sup> For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, <sup>8</sup>and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. <sup>9</sup>Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." <sup>10</sup>When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. <sup>11</sup>He answered, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. <sup>12</sup>And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery."

<sup>13</sup>People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. <sup>14</sup>When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. <sup>15</sup>Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." <sup>16</sup>And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.

## Sermon: Divorce, Remarriage, and the Kingdom of God

Years ago, I remember hearing an interview with the actress Liza Minnelli speaking of her mother, Judy Garland. Liza was getting married and naturally wanted her mother to be there for the occasion; however, Judy Garland sent her daughter her apologies and said that she would “make it to the next one”! In 2014, when Gwyneth Galtrow and Chris Martin, the lead singer of Coldplay, announced their divorce, they described it as “consciously uncoupling.” This last week Gwyneth Paltrow got remarried – or should that be “consciously coupled” – to, as she put it, “The man she was always *meant* to be with.” Zsa Zsa Gabor was famously married 9 times – and that is not the record – and the shortest duration of a celebrity marriage, namely that of Britney Spears, lasted only 55 hours! The fascinating lives of the rich and famous always have a bizarre element to them, and the notion of the impermanence of marriage seems “baked-in” to the Hollywood scene, and this, in turn, influences the wider culture. Multiple sequential marriages are common place nowadays and someone wittily described this as “serial polygamy.”

Our reading today from Mark 10 is another tricky passage together with a “hard saying” of Jesus. I am acutely aware that divorce and remarriage is a sensitive issue in many families, including my own. Christians have sought the words of Jesus on this topic and have often come away disappointed and regard him as being excessively harsh and unfair. The matter of divorce is raised explicitly in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and in all three the message is positively *for* marriage and fidelity, and *against* divorce and legalism.<sup>1</sup> This was clearly a hot topic in the early church and it is only relatively recently in church history that divorced people have been allowed to remarry in *some* church denominations. I wish to explore *three* aspects of this passage today. First, we need to appreciate the *practice* of divorce in the first century. Second, we need to understand why Mark describes this as a “*test*” for Jesus from the Pharisees.<sup>2</sup> Third, we need to appreciate Jesus’ response in the context of his broader message of living out our lives in the “*kingdom of God*.”<sup>3</sup>

The Pharisees come to Jesus with the following question: “Is it *lawful* for a man to divorce his wife?”<sup>4</sup> Now Jesus had already had several encounters with Pharisees and the way Mark tells it they would be aware that Jesus quotes Scripture, even reinterpreting it, as part of his response. And Jesus, true to form, answers by saying, “What did *Moses* command you?”<sup>5</sup> This is a clever reply because not only did Jesus know his Scripture, he knew the Pharisees did too, and one would think that you can’t get more authoritative than Moses! The Pharisees replied, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Matt 5:31 – 33, 19:1-12; Luke 16:18. Paul writes about divorce and remarriage in 1 Cor7:1-16.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 10:2.

<sup>3</sup> Mark 1:15.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 10:2b.

<sup>5</sup> Mark 10:3.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 10:4.

We need first to appreciate that divorce was common and, for Jews, that was at the *sole* prerogative of the man. A wife was essentially treated as a “thing” or a possession; she had no legal rights and, consequently, her future was in the hands of the male head of the family.<sup>7</sup> The mention of Moses is a reference to Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and even there the *practice* of divorce is assumed to be both prevalent and lawful.<sup>8</sup> It is a somewhat obscure passing reference, but it affirms that the man can simply write a letter of dismissal if he finds something “objectionable” or “offensive” about his wife. Well, what on earth does that mean?! In Jesus’ day there were two main schools of rabbinical thought. The rabbinic school of Shammai contended that the something “objectionable” could only mean sexual misconduct, like adultery.<sup>9</sup> The more liberal followers of Rabbi Hillel argued that *anything* that displeased the husband was sufficient grounds for divorce, including poor cooking, talking to a strange man, speaking disrespectfully of her husband’s relatives in his hearing, or if she was an argumentative woman whose voice could be heard in the next house! Rabbi Aqiba (Akiba), a contemporary of Mark, argued that finding a more attractive woman was even reason enough! As you might expect, Hillel’s interpretation was more generally followed, but it is clear that the men made the rules. Given the situation in which the husband could dismiss his wife at will, the divorce certificate was a protective mechanism against the husband’s whim, specifying that she was now free to remarry.

What does Jesus say? He agreed that Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and so divorce his wife, but he adds that this was *not* God’s *intention*, but a response to the *stubbornness* of men. Indeed, the prophet Malachi writes many years later, “Do not let anyone be faithless to the wife of his youth. For I *hate* divorce, says the LORD.”<sup>10</sup> But to back up this claim, Jesus quotes Moses by stating that it was *God’s* creative intent to make them male and female and for them to be joined together so the two will become one flesh.<sup>11</sup> Two things are happening here: Jesus uses Scripture to refute Scripture, and Jesus switches topic from divorce to that of *marriage* and he appeals to the argument of creation.<sup>12</sup> The two becoming “one flesh” is more than the sexual union, it means that the couple are now an indivisible, spiritual ‘unity.’ Marriage, then, says Jesus, is much more than the *contractual* arrangement in the eyes of God. Consequently, “What *God* has joined together, let no *human being* separate.”<sup>13</sup> This convincing appeal goes beyond that of Moses, Israel’s great lawgiver, to God himself and to divine intent - so silencing the Pharisees.<sup>14</sup> Jesus leaves his implied supplementary question

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<sup>7</sup> The result was that the man could divorce his wife on almost any grounds, while there were very few on which the woman could seek divorce. At best, she could only *ask* her husband to divorce her. The only grounds on which she could legitimately do that was if he became a leper, or if he engaged in a disgusting (unclean) trade - such as that of tanner, or if he sexually assaulted a virgin, or if he falsely accused her of her a prenuptial sin.

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the specific issue addressed is whether a man having (legitimately) divorced his wife can *remarry* the same woman if she has subsequently been married and divorced in the intervening period! (The answer was **no!**)

<sup>9</sup> Matthew’s famous “insertion” (see Matt 5:31-32; 19:1-9) seems to follow the stricter view of Rabbi Shammai.

<sup>10</sup> Mal 2:14-16. Note, Jesus does not cite this obscure minor prophet, but Moses, the writer of the authoritative Torah.

<sup>11</sup> Gen 1:27, 2:24,5:2. Note that the Pharisees would have agreed that Moses wrote Genesis!

<sup>12</sup> Incidentally, Essene law also appealed to Genesis to argue against divorce; it is not clear if Mark appreciated this point.

<sup>13</sup> Mark 10:9.

<sup>14</sup> Again, the outcome of this confrontation confirms the authority of Jesus to speak on behalf of God.

hanging in the air, namely: “Are you Pharisees cooperating with the hardheartedness of this (evil) generation,<sup>15</sup> with *your* human traditions, or will you instead endorse God’s intention?”

In the early 1990s, British journalists would often telephone a Bishop or theologian to ask about divorce. They weren’t wanting to write an article about the church’s attitude to divorce, as such; no, they were wanting to write about Prince Charles and Princess Diana. In other words, it was a trick question! In a similar way, the same thing was happening when the Pharisees asked Jesus about divorce; there was a political element to the question. You will remember that John the Baptist had criticized Herod Antipas over his divorce of his wife to marry his sister-in-law, Herodias.<sup>16</sup> Earlier, Mark writes, that after losing a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees concerning healing on the Sabbath, the Pharisees went out and immediately to conspire with the Herodians against Jesus on how to destroy him.<sup>17</sup> The Pharisees “testing” of Jesus therefore needs to be appreciated in this political context. Would Jesus, like John the Baptist, also condemn Herod? As we have seen, Jesus does *not* respond in terms of the legal grounds for divorce, but on the divine intent for marriage in the first place. Thus, he cleverly avoids taking sides on the hidden question about Herod Antipas’ marriage to his sister-in-law.

As is typical, Mark follows-up with Jesus conversing privately with his disciples on this matter and Mark uses this to speak to the concerns of his readers. What Jesus says is shocking and unprecedented for any Rabbi! “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.”<sup>18</sup> What are we to make of this?

First, as I said earlier, I realise that this matter is very personal to many here today - if not for yourselves, for family members. Of course, I want to be pastorally sensitive, but it is impossible to cover this complex topic in a short sermon. So, if what I say frustrates you, don’t go away angry never to be seen again; rather come back during the week and let’s talk more. But let us begin that conversation here by trying to understand what Jesus was saying, and – just as important - what he was *not* saying.

Second, on the one hand Jesus is *realistic* and recognises that divorce happens; there is, after all, no Mosaic law forbidding divorce. Consequently, in Jesus’ day, divorce for the most trivial of reasons, or for no reason at all, was tragically common – as I said earlier. A divorced woman could easily find herself begging for food on the street or prostituting herself for income. Jesus had a pastoral concern for

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<sup>15</sup> See Mark 8:11-13; 9:19.

<sup>16</sup> See Mark 6:17–18. The (strict) Essenes, the group that is traditionally associated with John the Baptist, interpreted the Mosaic law as arguing for the permanence of marriage - and this even had implications for kings. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century, the marriages of royalty followed non-Jewish law, which is why Herodias was able (scandalously, from a strict Jewish perspective) to divorce her husband to marry Herod Antipas. Viewed in the light of the marriages and divorces amongst the members of a Herodian family, as well as the manipulated political marriages in Rome, the Pharisees ‘banana-skin’ of a question is much more dangerous and Jesus responds at his peril.

<sup>17</sup> Mark 3:6; see Mark 2:18-3:6 for full context. Again, note that an angry Jesus “was grieved at the Pharisees’ *hardness of heart*” (3:5). Moreover, Jesus is now moving toward Jerusalem.

<sup>18</sup> Mark 10:11-12.

women whose few rights they received through marriage could be lost simply by a signature on a piece of paper. Consequently, strengthening the bond of marriage would have been welcome news for the rights of women. Although the Jewish Torah does not forbid divorce, what Jesus reminds his disciples is that *adultery* is against the 7<sup>th</sup> commandment, and then he radically links the two together by saying if the *man* who divorces his wife remarries, *he* commits adultery against his *first* wife. In this dramatic statement, Jesus elevates the status of the woman and makes the man culpable of adultery against his wife. Remember, Jesus was speaking to Jewish *men* and they would have found this notion most alarming. Adultery was seen as something a wife could do *against* her husband, but *not* the other way around – she was seen as property!<sup>19</sup> This is a revolutionary statement concerning discipleship and is a further dire warning to those who would cause “little ones to stumble,” as we heard last week.<sup>20</sup> Note too that Mark also presents the equivalent scenario: If a woman divorces her husband and marries another man, she too commits adultery.”<sup>21</sup> Only the man could dissolve the marriage in Jewish law, but a woman could instigate divorce in the Greco-Roman world and hence this statement was of practical importance to the early church. Jesus’ statement, harsh as it may seem at first glance, respects the integrity of the one who is *not* applied the divorce as an injured party.

All this follows from Jesus’ claim that *God’s intent* was that marriage was meant to be permanent and much more than a *legal* contract.<sup>22</sup> This brings me to my third point; in responding to the Pharisees, Jesus expounded a positive *ethic* and *avoided* rule-making. What Jesus is *not* doing here with his disciples is unravelling his previous argument and making a new *rule* concerning divorce or remarriage.<sup>23</sup> Yet many Christians have seen this text as just that - and it has become a legalistic burden for many. Jesus is, therefore, *not* telling a battered woman that she and her children must risk physical and psychological torment every day in order to avoid a divorce! Nor is Jesus saying that the marriage *must* be preserved when one partner is unfaithful. In a broken world, divorce is sometimes necessary – it is the lesser of two evils. Nor does Jesus say you must never remarry after a divorce. A key element of the passage, however, is that Jesus insisted that the loose sexual morality of his day must be mended and that such behaviour was inadmissible in the kingdom of God. While serial polygamy may be the acceptable norm in society, that is not what God intended for marriage. Instead, Jesus calls for absolute purity of heart - a radical demand by this world’s standards.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See John 8:1-11 – where is the guilty man?!

<sup>20</sup> Mark 9:42-48. Note too Mark 9:50b – “Be at peace with one another.”

<sup>21</sup> Mark 10:12.

<sup>22</sup> Note too, marriage is a metaphor for the divine-human relationship in the Old Testament – see, for example, Hosea.

<sup>23</sup> Put another way, it is reasonable to assume that Mark, in editing his material, takes Jesus as being *consistent* in his main point on this matter, i.e., Jesus is not saying one thing to the Pharisees and another (opposing view) to his disciples.

<sup>24</sup> The words of Jesus in Mark 10:11-12 are disturbing and counter-cultural, then and now, for - in effect - Jesus made divorce a sin (it wasn’t before) because remarriage was inevitable in those days. Jesus does not address what those who were divorced and remarried were to do about that! Clearly, some sin has consequences that cannot be undone. Even so, I believe we can be truly forgiven and so confidently and sensitively move forward in grace and liberation from our past. God is the God of new beginnings, but I suggest that that is contingent upon us owning our past (i.e., repenting of previous attitudes and actions) as we move forward into the second marriage. Nevertheless, this still holds on the principle that God intends marriage to be life-long and I believe that ideal to be still true for a *Christian* marriage, regardless on how our culture views marriage today.

And that brings me to my last point. In the upside-down kingdom of God, Jesus subverts the patriarchal assumptions concerning marriage and elevates those at the bottom of the social ladder, including women and children. This is reinforced at the end of our reading when Jesus says ““Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”<sup>25</sup> As if to emphasise that point, Mark restates the words of Jesus, “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”<sup>26</sup> We often hear this explained in terms of the humility, obedience, and trust of a child; but this romanticises both the text and children! Children, as I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, had no rights or social standing. They were utterly dependent upon their father, who could – if he so wished – easily disown them.<sup>27</sup> To live in the kingdom of God, in this context, *is to be utterly dependent upon the Father; upon God’s grace, God’s generosity* – rather than based on our merit or by legal right or by a misplaced sense of personal entitlement.<sup>28</sup> And Jesus enacts that grace by taking a child into his arms and *blessing* them.

In closing, in the kingdom of God, God makes the rules! In a marriage where God reigns over both parties, there is mutual respect and concern for each other, and a spiritual unity emerges as the two become one. In a very real sense, we are all called to become like God if we want to live in *his* kingdom. We are therefore to be faithful in our marriages, because God is faithful. That is why we sang “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” today, which is always a good thing to remember – especially at Thanksgiving. God *is* king; to live in God’s kingdom today means that in our relationships we are also to be forgiving because God is forgiving; We are to be full of mercy, because God is merciful. We are to be pure in heart, because God is pure in heart. We are to be peacemakers in our marriages because God is a peacemaker and has made peace with us. And those who hunger and thirst for such things will be satisfied. Amen.

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<sup>25</sup> Mark 10:14.

<sup>26</sup> Mark 10:15. See also Luke 18:17.

<sup>27</sup> Along with their mother – hence the connection to divorce.

<sup>28</sup> Or, in the case of Jews, by birthright.