

Mark 10:1–12

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 30 August 2026

Preacher: David Helm

[0:00] And he left there and went into the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. And crowds gathered to him again and again, as was his custom he taught them.

! And Pharisees came up and in order to test him, asked, Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife? He answered them, What did Moses command you?

They said, Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away. And Jesus said to them, Because of your hardness of heart, he wrote you this commandment.

But 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.

[1:14] And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. And he said to them, Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her.

And if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated.

Well, good morning. So glad you're here this morning as we celebrate his presence in our midst and to be led by our youth ministry.

I can't think really of a better day for us to think about the youth and the future of this church in regard to a text that might have placed a little bit of anxiety in you upon the hearing of it.

You know, yesterday I was asked, What's your Saturday hold? What do you want about today? And I said, Well, my day started with all the joy of a premarital counseling appointment.

[2:27] Got to sit with a couple in this church as they are beginning to think about and plan the ceremony. After that, I had a couple of hours where I had to work with a family related to the death of a mother and the planning of a memorial service.

And so my mind went from the premarital work and the celebratory nature to the celebration, in this case, of a life well lived and planning for a funeral.

And then I said, You know, I needed to spend some afternoon between those two worlds on this subject of divorce. You have the beginning of a life together, the end of a life, and you have the hopes of a life here in the middle and the mess, don't we?

We have a mess in the middle. But it's worth looking at and hopefully seeing how the gospel functions actually be a great encouragement to all of us as a result.

As I've looked at this particular text on this week, I've thought of a coin, the kind of coin you place in your pocket.

[3:40] A coin has two sides. It has a front and a back. On one side, there is something to observe, to take in. But on the reverse side, there is more for further reflection.

In fact, this text is very much like a coin. It's a test case on divorce. That's on the front.

Didn't take long for you to see that yourself. But upon further reflection, as the text moves on, it becomes a passage that promotes God's purposes for marriage.

And so what I want to do with us this morning is simply take a look, as his family here, at both sides of the coin, each in turn.

First, divorce. It's the question that the Pharisees ask Jesus, verses 1 to 4. But then the marriage conversation that Jesus wants to have with his followers, verses 5 to 10.

[4:49] It's amazing how he turns the question to a conversation that he would want to have instead. So let's look at one side of the coin.

Let's call this side of the coin divorce. There's a couple of things of interest in the first four verses. There's a question asked of Jesus by the Pharisees.

And then there is a biblical citation. That just means a reference that they're utilizing in reference to the question that was asked.

So let's look at the question, verses 1 and 2. He leaves there. He went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan, and the crowds are gathering to him again and again, as was his custom. He's teaching them. And then the Pharisees come up, verse 2, and in order to test him, asked, is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?

[5 : 50] That's the question. What's behind the question? I mean, I know what it says, but what does it mean?

It says, at least according to Mark here, they were out to test him. Test him in what way? Well, to understand that would require a bit of historical and cultural context.

These words are not in a vacuum. There's a situation and a history behind their question. And we would be helped, unfamiliar as we are with their world in detail, to learn that in the first century, there were two prominent rabbinic schools of interpretation that were vying for preeminence among the populace.

And one institution of learning followed the teachings of a rabbi named Shammai, who argued that the only legitimate ground for divorce was the sexual sin of adultery.

So there's an institution, almost, of learning that is propounding a very narrow and limited view. But down the block was the hanging shingle of another institution, rabbinic traditions, with its faculty members, you might say, and learners and proponents.

[7 : 25] And this one was run by the lead professor named Hillel. And Hillel believed that just causes for divorce extended far beyond adultery, that one could legitimately divorce another under Jewish law for nearly any reason.

So when they're coming with the question, this is behind it. Where are you on this? Rabbi? Teacher? Jesus?

In fact, I scoured a volume in my library this week that doesn't get pulled off the shelf very often. It's something called the Mishnah.

Yeah, you probably are real excited to hear what that is. And it's filled with tractates. I guess I would just think of it as a collection of footnotes that have been gathered over time to outline contemporary religious teaching, in this sense, on the question of divorce.

And what you learn is that these debates on is it lawful to divorce were really heated in the first century.

[8 : 41] From the school of Shammai, we read in the Mishnah, a man may not divorce his wife unless he finds a matter of forbidden sexual intercourse.

And then going on in the Mishnah, and Hillel says he may divorce her even due to a minor issue because she burned over or over-salted his dish.

Watch what you're making tonight. Well, and then there's another one here in these footnotes of collected, in a sense, thoughts.

Rabbi Akiva says he may divorce her even if he found another woman who is better looking than her and wants to marry her. So this is what's underneath the question.

People who are trying to live out life under Jewish law are considering, how do I get out of this?

[9 : 47] See, Jesus can kind of read this subtle underpinning. They're not so much interested in marriage. Remember, he's going to turn the coin to do what he wants.

They're interested in, what's the way to find myself out of this? Our day's not really any different, is it?

Yeah, it's interesting to me. You go all the way back to the first century to learn something about its situation, and you go, wow, I guess we could have fit in pretty well right there, or they could have fit in right here.

By the time you get to the New Testament world, you find yourself in your own city, in your own church, in your own denominational way of thinking.

In our day, the debates raged until really recently about the need people had to state some legitimate grounds for divorce to be acceptable, even in the court of law.

[10 : 51] I wonder, I'm going to ask you a question, see if you know the answer. Can you guess the year that New York became the last state of the 50 to surrender the requirement that one would file finding fault, a charge, before they would be recognized for the dissolution of their marriage?

In other words, when does, I don't have to do reasons anymore, I can just say we're done, and the state says we're good. I started thinking, when was that?

New York was the last, California was the first. The first was in, I think, the fall of, the summer of 1970.

New York doesn't institute no-fault divorce until the year 2010. That's only 16 years ago.

In other words, even in our own culture, in our own country, you would need to have some reason stated that was legitimized by the state as acceptable for dissolution.

[12:06] So in testing Jesus, they're attempting then, I think, to embroil him in their own rabbinic debate over the reasons one might appeal to to legitimize divorce.

Let me get it as simple as I can. He's quite aware that what's in their mind is simply this, please tell me, how can I get out of it? Okay. So he's aware of this.

He knows they want to trap him into a conversation, but not the one that he wants to have. So rather than get into a debate on how many ways there are, it's really fascinating to see what he does.

Can you see it there? It moves from their question in verses 1 and 2 to his response, which leads to a biblical citation. Verses 3 and 4.

It moves from and says, what's behind this to what does the Bible have to say about this? Just take a look with me again, 3 and 4.

[13:16] Put your eyes on it. He answered them, what did Moses command you? Notice he's not answering. He's going to ask another question. He wants to ferret their own thinking out further. They said, Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.

In other words, we're pretty sure you can get out. What's the significance of that citation? Do we even know together this morning where it comes from?

Where does Moses indicate, yes, it is permissible on occasion for someone to file or remit for divorce, which God would say is legitimate.

It actually comes from Deuteronomy 24. Deuteronomy 24. In that source, there are words that are translated that divorce is permissible when uncleanness has been present in one or the other spouse.

Uncleanness. It's translated in the King James as some uncleanness or in the NIV as something indecent. And now you can begin to see why one school says this is sexual adultery only and the other says, I see a lot of room here for more.

[14:44] I could call a lot of things unclean, including the cooking. It's commonly translated nakedness. It's used in the Old Testament to indicate shameful exposure, indecency, improper behavior related to one's sexual relations.

And the other word that's connected in Deuteronomy 4 is simply translated like something. So an uncleanness of some kind of thing. A nakedness of a thing.

Our own passage that we're looking at, chapter 10 verses 11 or 10 through 12, you can see Jesus himself using a word like adultery.

And adultery, even from Matthew chapter 19, has this meaning, well you're going to understand where this word is coming from, porneia.

Porneia, this sexual uncleanness is a reason legitimized in Moses and by Jesus as authenticating one's capability to file for divorce.

[16:07] But porneia, it means a lot more than simply, oh he had an affair, she had an affair. Porneia is kind of an elastic term in the Bible.

there's almost like, well there's a palette of sexual perversions such as polygamy, bestiality, zoophilia, pedophilia, homosexuality, incest, all these things are under this term.

So, when the, when the, when the sexual union of a monogamous couple is broken in, in regard to adultery or uncleanness, this is, this is a purview.

And to these texts in regard to biblical grounds, we should have one more. It's not in the text for the week, but for some of you I'm sure your mind is wondering, is that it then?

Is, is that it? 1 Corinthians 7, Paul is writing, interestingly, just after a chapter on sexual purity, about marriage itself, and he states something complimentary to adultery, namely, willful desertion as a legitimate means to file for divorce.

[17:28] Let me read just one sentence of it. He says, but if an unbelieving partner, spouse, separates, that is, abandons this relationship, let it be so.

In such cases, the brother or sister is not enslaved. They're not held to that relationship. They're free, in a sense, from that bond.

So, really then, when we're looking at the side of the coin on divorce, to adultery, we join willful desertion.

our own Westminster Confession of Faith. If you're not familiar with Christ Church Chicago, or you're just coming onto it and wondering, what kind of church am I walking into?

There's an ancient document. Well, it seems kind of ancient, not so much, 1600s. Some of you'd be like, yeah, that's ancient. Some of you are like, no, that sounds like yesterday to me.

[18:29] The Westminster Confession of Faith, which we hold as a church, puts forward these two reasons as justifiably legitimate causes for divorce.

Let me just read it. Although the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments unduly to put asunder those who have joined together in marriage, and they're like, we can talk a lot about how to get out of it, the Westminster Confession and it says, yet nothing but adultery or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the church or the civil magistrate is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage.

And then it goes on, very interestingly, and reads, wherein a public and orderly course of proceeding is to be observed and the persons concerned in it not left to their own wills and discretion in their own case.

That's really kind of interesting. Two reasons. And it's not up to ourselves to say that mine is legitimate.

I'm supposed to be involved in a church with leadership that helps me think through the complexity of my own situation rather than acting independently on the question itself.

[19:50] So we've looked at the question, we've looked at the citation. Let me just say on this side of the coin before we turn it, what does that mean for us in our congregation?

What does that mean for us? Christ Church Chicago, a family, a family of families and individuals, a family filled with young people who are considering, do I want to enter into marriage and what should I be thinking about?

All of these things, there are three things. It says something to our congregation about divorce itself. There are legitimate grounds, but there are two.

Sexual immorality and willful desertion. Both of these break the physical bond. They are both a tearing away of the union.

And notice, for people in the church, according to the confession, we don't get to decide these things on our own. We need to enlist the help of brothers and sisters in Christ so that we're not just trying to determine I'm good and I'm moving on.

[20:59] And so it's important, even this kind of public nature, there's not a sense here of trying to, the church is here to air your dirty laundry. No, that's not really it. What the church needs to do is to speak to things in a way that clarify the mess of life, that keep the church from confusion regarding someone else's practice in this life.

actually, to do it in ways that can provide comfort to the one who's innocent, having undergone some really difficult things, so that the church isn't wondering, oh, there's another second-class citizen.

Why would they be a second-class citizen? I'm reminded of Paul in the Corinth where he's got another issue in mind and he says, look, you're supposed to welcome this person back. I've forgiven them. They've repented.

And don't keep hanging it over them. I mean, unless there's a certain level of public awareness, the leadership of the church could never say, we've been in this with you.

We've walked in this. And we have made the following judgment, that your divorce was legitimate.

And then the separate question, which we'll get to, what does it mean even in regard to remarriage?

[22:25] But we know this, a divorce should never occur in the faith family of Christ Church Chicago without the counsel and care of those who love you in the Lord and are placed here to walk with you.

We're here for you. And that's because I know how much pain is involved in these situations. You know, if all of us are probably only one degree of separation away from divorce, either in our own life, our experience, our family, or our siblings, or, I mean, it's, this is good that we're looking at this.

And we need to unearth it and say, the church is the place for you to have those confidential conversations in regard to your own life.

So, what does this mean for us, this side of the coin? It's very practical. Let's walk through our lives together in the mess.

Secondly, what does it mean on remarriage? In the case of adultery after marriage, that's what the Westminster Confession would say, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce and after the divorce to marry another as if the offending party were dead.

[23 : 53] You remember the Corinthian comment on not enslaved anymore. You treat the person as dead in a sense. you're not under the, it's not just that you're not under the bonds of that relationship, you are free, you're not enslaved, you are free to marry if you are indeed the innocent person in the event as thought through by those who are loving you well together.

what if both parties claim to be Christian and there's a divorce? This is where the leadership of your church spends a lot of time on these issues occasionally, thank God, not weekly, where you're trying to think through what's really going on here and it takes a lot of thought and a lot of prayer and a lot of conversation.

William Perkins who preceded the Westminster Confession of Faith by about 40 years says this, desertion is when one of the married folks upon a willful and obstinate mind of their own departeth from the other without a just and necessary cause.

For he that upon malice flyeth away from his mate is to be holden in the same terms as with an unbeliever who departs upon the detestation of religion and the service of God.

He's quoting 1 Timothy 5 8 where if you're not taking care of your own household you're to be considered worse than an unbeliever and so when there are two parties where this is occurring and we've seen this have we not?

[25 : 41] You've seen it I've seen it where the wisdom of plurality of leadership watches one outwardly professing Christian become obstinate recalcitrant and continually moving until the divorce is final while the other outwardly professing Christian becomes humble open to repair even correction and advice and patient waiting and in such cases the one who is patient and learning and listening and staying and abiding and waiting and holding well we treat the other as an unbeliever they might have outward signs but there's no fruit on the vine they might tell me they're a branch on the tree but I'm not we're not seeing collectively any faith that says yeah I'm really with you so it says something to us about divorce it says something to us about remarriage

I want to say it also says something to us in regard to remarriage when a spouse dies of course free to remarry when adultery occurs they're under no bondage when desertion is judged by the church to be unrepentant actions of one considered to be a believer we treat them as an unbeliever and free the other partner from it and for our session complex situations and they're all complex complex situations require careful consideration so that biblical provision is given to the innocent and protection is provided not only to them but to the church as a whole without confusion but it also says something about the gospel can I can I say this because there's so much pain there's encouragement here for Christians in the gospel even if you or someone you love goes to bed at night and says wow from what

I hear this morning I kind of got caught up in the dissolution of my marriage in ways that no way approximate those two narrowly constrained thoughts can I just say to you as your pastor I want you to know that adultery and divorce are not the unforgivable sin I want that to wash over you in your own regret I want you to hear from this pulpit that there is a reckless love of God that finds me that runs after me there's no shadow that he can't get behind to locate me there's no mountain too high that he can't come to you there's no balm of forgiveness that can't be applied to you it can be applied to you the gospel functions in our family for those who repent as a balm and as as Paul would say a re-welcoming into this family and let us continue to walk together wonderful thing when you think of it that way what should be the church's response this place should be known for the gentle use of pastoral oversight that asks difficult parties in a marriage to seek

God's gracious forgiveness to repent of past sins to rededicate their life to Christ in the confidence that he does forgive and that he does accept that he looks upon you grace if you see him running after you and the shame is there and you're like oh my gosh I'm not even sure I can walk into a church anymore let alone walk into a conversation with God on my own anymore the gospel is so big so big I want you to know that on divorce now the thing transitions at verse five doesn't it and Jesus said to them now he's going to have the conversation he wants he's done with them trying to

figure out how to get out he wants to lay down what God intended when he put it in in other words at verse five you can just write the little picture on the side the coin is turned over the observation we made on the question the

Pharisees asked him about divorce now gives way to the conversation he wants on marriage in other words it's flipped from how can I get out of this to tell me again what was God's intention for this good for all of us to know especially those in our midst today who feel like wow mine is tough in verses five to twelve it's important to remember that Jesus is not trying to say everything he could about marriage or divorce even that last little phrase in eleven whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery we've already seen in Corinthians and other places that there are exceptions he's really trying to drive into his disciples don't become like them when he gets them in private don't start asking those questions so when we look at this from the side of marriage let's just ask the same three questions what's behind not the question but his conversation here's what I've decided he is simply here underlining

[32 : 25] God's foremost intention for marriage in the context of some who were looking to get out of it so more than anything he turns the Pharisees question on the dissolution of marriage into an opportunity to provide us his own definition of marriage as well as to outline God's intention for marriage that's what he does in a very short space let me see if I can get it quickly the citations are interesting he now appeals not to Deuteronomy 24 but take a look verse 6 he goes but takes them all the way back to the beginning Genesis 1 he says let me bring you some more text God made them male and female then he brings in Genesis 2 in verses 7 and 8 therefore man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife and the two shall become one flesh they're no longer two but one flesh and then after bringing in

Genesis 1 and in Genesis 2 he now makes his summary of the whole in verse 9 what therefore God has joined together let not man separate he's like let me tell you what I thought God was doing with marriage let me see if I can put it to you quickly by way of definition he says there early it's one man and one woman the terms in Genesis 1 are male and female that's a simple reference to biological sex but by those words in Genesis 1 you can take them as just the reproductive equipment that you were given by God at birth when he starts to talk about marriage he starts there but then he goes to Genesis 2 not by way of intention but by illustration one flesh and there he picks up the languages of man and a woman now the woman and the man in chapter 2 is something different than simply your biological sex it's what we refer to as gender so in the Bible although today these terms are rather fluid according to

Bible in Genesis 1 and 2 there's a corresponding relationship between your gender and your biological sex a man was simply an adult male nobody would have understood this in any other way a woman was simply an adult female one's biological sex a fixed matter of science at birth corresponded directly to one's designated gender now I'm aware that in the world in which you and I live this is a hotly debated subject gender has become a social construct but that said I'm just asking you to listen open your mind for a moment we all are trying to to what Jesus is here saying he's trying to connect our lives regarding marriage to more closely approximate God's design at creation in other words to put it this way he holds to what would have been considered a traditional view of marriage one biological male one biological female one man one woman one flesh and then that last verse 9 for life for life let me get it this way according to Jesus what God created is what he intended and what he intended he doesn't want to see broken that's how he defines it so taken together he says then that the law of Moses basically comes into existence after all of this to mitigate some more approximation to God's intent in fact

Calvin would say that all those provisions in Deuteronomy 24 that God institutes for the provision for divorce were as a protection to the woman who was being cast out of marriage and on her own for nearly any cause by men so God is God is putting his sheltering wing over the one most likely to find themselves under the harsh treatment of another let me let me just put it this way marriage by way of intention is exclusive by design it's an expression of the unity of the personhood of God and by way of gospel connection it's meant to be an enduring unbreakable union that points to the relationship between

Christ and the church we know this from Ephesians 5 Paul himself references back to Genesis 2 again and he says do you want to know what really is going on back at creation God brings Adam and Eve together certainly in a marriage but in the mind of God with the intention that one day they will see Christ in the church and they will see a groom that never gave up on his bride and they will

see a bride who runs willingly to the embrace and love of her husband so again the gospel here functions your marriage functions in God's design as what he hopes will be an unbreakable union that shows the whole world something about God and Jesus and his love can you imagine Jesus divorcing us what we sang about it oh the reckless love of

[38:42] God he keeps running he's running he's running and this is what he wants from us in our marriages let me shut it down what does it mean for our congregation this side of the coin well Hebrews 13:4 let marriage be held in honor by all we should have a high view of marriage here should be celebrated not feared I'm thinking of all the young people here given what I heard today I'm not walking into this well you could be walking into something that God is going to use to actually help other people see how good he is and marriage becomes a sanctifier for those of us who end up in that state Lisa my wife of now 42 years if you asked her today what has

God used in your life to sanctify you for first thing my marriage now that's not necessarily a compliment on me my marriage staying involved in ministry like staying in the life of the local church and motherhood see God uses these things as we teach one another so let marriage be held honorably may as a church family may we lament right may we lament the loosening of what marriage has become it's okay to lament how far we are I don't mean the culture the culture will come and go with what it does I'm talking about in the church let us lament lament that the things which drew us together in marriage sometimes weren't strong enough to hold us together we can at least acknowledge that we can look to the gospel to pick us up off the ground from it again another thing we should celebrate those in our midst who are planning to get married we should also work hard at our marriages just work hard we should look those of you who are married should be able to look!

another in the eye and say can we ask ourselves what tangibly is going on in this relationship that someone else might actually see a picture of Jesus and his bride I mean am I doing anything tangibly to help other people see now some of you might say yeah I'll tell you what I'm doing tangibly I'm staying in a marriage where my husband would give me permit I have permissive grounds for divorce but I'm not necessarily mandatorily going to take it I mean there's lots of ways that you need to personally think it through for yourself and in the context of one another but let's work hard at our marriages!

hard things are hard work hard young people seek and choose wisely in the Lord but that's your best chance at being in a larger family that will lend itself to supporting you along the way I don't know where you sit today please hear hear the heart underneath my heart divorce is really like ripped you apart or your family or your part of the wake of the divorce of parents I want you to know that we love you that God loves you that we want to walk with you in that pain if you're in the midst of it in the throes of it yourself I want you to know that the gospel is good that God's design is clear if you're trying to move on and not feel like a second class citizen here

I want you to know that there are no second class citizens when the family is functioning in ways to give you confidence and strength and validation for all the difficult things that you have endured well what a morning huh a test case on divorce that Jesus says come on now let's let's be done talking about how many ways you can get out of this let me take it into a conversation on marriage so that Jesus can be seen in our midst our heavenly father we thank you for this word from Mark rather frightening word to hear it read out but we do pray Lord that even with all the anxiety and the pain that you would use this sermon to help restore secure uphold safeguard our desire desire here to to more fully approximate what you want from us in

[44:13] Jesus name amen to to to to to to to to!