

Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce

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[0 : 00] I'm always pleased to come and share God's word with people. Sometimes though I wish Dave! didn't go on holiday when passages like this came up. It's never easy to talk about broken relationships.

! It's never what you want to come and do. And I think though the problem in the church of late and maybe over the last 50 or 60 years, is we don't talk about these things. I don't know how many times those of you who have been regulars in church for 40 or 50 years have heard divorce preached about from the front of the church. It's probably very few. It's easy just to skip over this and head to the really nice bit where it talks about the children coming to Jesus.

But today we're going to try and unpack a little bit of what was going on in this reading. My hope is to be tender but truthful about this topic.

To acknowledge the fact that each one of us potentially sits here knowing the pain of broken relationships. knowing whether that be in our life or in the lives of those whom we love that divorce and broken relationships is something that is normal in our modern day society.

So where are we in Mark chapter 10? Well, we're kind of midway through Mark in a book and so therefore Jesus is more well known than he was at the beginning.

[1 : 42] He has started his ministry. He has started saying things and he started to be, for the Jewish population, and probably for our culture, controversial.

He starts to put marker points down and saying where he believes wrong and right exist. And today's reading is no different.

So we see there we have this little bit of narration that helps us feel where he is. Jesus then left that place and went into a region of Judea across the Jordan.

So he was on travels towards Jerusalem and he was teaching and preaching as he went. And again, crowds of people came to see him.

So we know that this is a point where people know who Jesus is and they're looking for his teaching. And as was his custom, he taught them. So they came looking for teaching and he wanted to do that.

[2 : 39] But then we hear the bit of a challenge that comes in this section. Some Pharisees came and tested him. So they weren't coming for teaching. They weren't coming to hear what Jesus had to say.

They were coming to see, was he Jewish enough? Did he know the laws of Moses? Does he understand what some of the Hadiths of the day were saying about different subjects?

Could they get him into hot water? And so they ask a question. What is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife? And what I love about Jesus is that he gets to get away with things that I don't with my wife.

So if I try this with my wife, if she asks me a question and I answer it with another question, that gets me into problems. But the Pharisees aren't as wise as my wife.

They don't see what happens. And so Jesus responds with a question. What did Moses command you?

[3 : 50] And that's what unpacks the beginning of our reading. These people who have come not to be taught, who have come to trap Jesus. And instead Jesus reverses the tables and begins teaching on a subject that they're not expecting.

Because the Pharisees of that day were all about the law and loopholes. How do we batten down the law so that we control the people, but have just enough loopholes that we can still go about our lives and do the things we want to do?

And this continues often in the way that the law is taught. And there's some interesting phenomenons in the Jewish world. In an area of New York, there is a single line of cord that goes around a block where Jewish people live.

So that they call anything within that line of wire home. And it means that the Jewish people on the Sabbath can continue to operate on the Sabbath because they're not leaving home.

So the loophole has been set that allows them to follow the law whilst exist in the culture. So where does that take us?

[5 : 11] Well, the thing that Jesus does is that he wants to teach them about not laws and loopholes, but about God's design for marriage.

So why is marriage important? Not as a legal entity, but as a design of God. And he takes them all the way back to Genesis.

And he says, at the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. That's a direct quote from Genesis.

That's right back to the very beginning of a book that they'd have known so well. And then he expands on that teaching and says, this is what God wants for people. This is God's idea, part of creation's goodness.

For this reason, man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife and the two will become one flesh. Will become one flesh.

[6 : 12] The sense there of a thing we would call covenant. Covenant is a posh word for an ongoing, lasting, unbreakable agreement that we see God make throughout time.

In our world, some of you might live in a house that has a covenant on it. In my neighbourhood, our houses have a covenant that means you're not allowed to operate a business out of your house or garage.

I'm not sure where I exist in that covenant. As someone who makes business phone calls from my office, maybe I'm exempt because I'm not making money. There's a loophole.

But a covenant means that when somebody who wanted to move in and open a hairdressing salon from the garage was told very forcefully that he would not be allowed to operate that business from the garage of the house next door to me.

Because covenants are forever. And there's no way of getting around that. That is a covenant. And in the Bible, we see God establish covenant time and time again and remind his people that it is forever and not just a singular thing.

[7 : 29] We're also reminded in this statement of to become one flesh that marriage is both intimate and permanent. And by that, it is important.

When I lead a marriage service, one of the last things I do is I hold the couple's hand and I raise it aloft.

And I remind people that what God has put together, let no one put asunder. Or here, let no one separate. If you are married, you will have possibly, probably, more likely, a wedding ring.

And why do we give and receive wedding rings if you pay attention in my wedding services? It's because they symbolise an ongoing relationship. There's no beginning and end to my ring.

There is only one continual loop. It symbolises that kind of idea that this thing will never, ever end.

[8 : 40] However, next June, I will be married 20 years. I've had this wedding ring for 20 years. And if you look at it closely, it's no longer perfect.

When I got this wedding ring, it was pristine. It was beautiful. And then I went to work for B&Q.; It got lost in the warehouse for a while. Then it was rediscovered.

Hurrah. It's gone climbing over rocks on Dartmoor. It's been on the beach. It's been part of my life. And much like any marriage, it means that it's changed.

It's got bits where there have been damage and bits where things haven't quite worked out in the way that you'd want it to. And I would be ridiculous to tell you that because I'm a vicar and I'm married to a Christian, that our marriage has been perfect.

That it still remains like a wedding ring that is untouched. No, our marriage has changed and has been different because this doesn't symbolise perfection.

[9 : 54] It just merely symbolises permanence. It's a reminder that marriage is meant to reflect God's faithful love for us. A thing that goes on and on and on.

So the first thing I want to say is that we are called to honour marriage. Marriage should not be a thing that is entered into lightly. It's another word I say to couples as they get married.

Or selfishly. It should be something that is done not just for a party on a singular day, but because you want to make something special for the rest of your life.

Because it is holy. And that word holy means set apart. It has a special place in society. God joins lives together by his own hands.

However, we see in this reading, don't we, that we are a fallen group of people. I gave you a time at the beginning of this service where we all joined together in public confession, where we recognise that there are times when we don't get the law right, where we don't do what God wants us to do.

[11:09] We don't love him with all our heart, our mind, our body and our souls. We don't love our neighbours, we love ourselves. And so here, when that question is asked in verse 3, what did Moses command of you?

He replied, they say Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away. They think they're being clever. This is what Moses thought.

Do you teach the same thing? And Jesus points out a problem that we have as human beings. He says it was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law.

Moses knew that as he journeyed with the people across the lands, across the wilderness, and into the promised land, as he went through that phase, heading towards that promised land, he would have seen relationships grow and break down.

Times when people didn't fulfil what they should have fulfilled. And there's all sorts of reasons why relationships break down, isn't there? All sorts of reasons. And Moses knew that to be true.

[12:22] And so he said, I'm going to write a law that allows you to give a certificate of divorce. Interestingly, it was male-focused. You couldn't, as a woman, write a certificate of divorce back then.

And we know this is still happening in Jesus' time. How do we know that? Well, if you pay attention to the nativity story, at the point where Jesus discovers that Mary is pregnant, there's a section which asks the question, and Joseph was deciding whether he should divorce her quietly.

And that would have been right in one of these certificates, because they were betrothed, and in Jewish understanding, once you're betrothed to be married, you're as good as married, you just haven't gone through all the ceremonies yet.

He would have written her a letter and said, quietly, I'm going to divorce you, because you've clearly been sleeping around. And that's a broken relationship. So this idea was still prevalent.

It's not just a thing of the Old Testament. It's a thing of the New Testament that Jesus is talking about. The relationships were breaking down even 2,000 years ago. And I think sometimes we live in this world, don't we, where we think, oh, back in the 30s, back in the 1800s, back then, marriage went on forever and ever and ever, didn't it?

[13:46] No. It didn't, relationships weren't good back then. They were, we just had different ways of dealing with it. And so God knows that the world has breakdowns because of our human hearts.

None of us are perfect. None of us get it right. And like I said at the beginning, some of you have lived through the pain of divorce.

And I want you to know today that what I'm not doing is pointing a finger. I'm not about to stride up into the pulpit and bang my fist on the side and tell you that if you are divorced or going through this or if you've been through it or if you know people who have, that you are bad people and you need to sort your lives out.

because I believe in a God who doesn't just point the finger at you and say, sort your life out, but rather he opens his arms to you and says, I know that things don't go well. And we know that the good news of Jesus Christ doesn't condemn the wounded, but it brings healing.

So what is it that we're called to do when relationships go bad? What is the plan? Well, I think we're to be people who seek reconciliation, practice forgiveness, and uphold the truth.

[15:10] Because the gospel is a pattern of faithful love. That's what it's all about. And this is why when Jesus makes a really hard saying at the end, 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. He wants to say, we should live in faithful love.

And it's why choosing the person you're going to be with, if you are a young person here today and you want to know what it is to choose your loved one, think about what does it look like to grow old with this person?

What does it look like to go through times of difficulty with this person? What does it look like if everything of our lives was shaken up and was different? How would that relationship cope? What would it be like? Take some time to learn from people who have gone through marriages that are difficult, that are challenging, before you decide to settle for the one who is perfect now.

[16:19] As I go back to our marriage service, one of the big things I have to remind couples is when I ask them to make their declarations, they're to respond to me, I will, not I do.

That thing of I do is constantly used in American movies and TV, and I do says today, now. I will says, I will live this life from today forever. And so the first thing I want to say to those of you who are younger, who are looking at relationships, trying to make a decision about what relationships look like, choose somebody who is an I will forever person, not an I do now person. That's the really important part of love. Also, I want to say very clearly that sometimes in the church we hold marriage as being the gold standard of what you're supposed to achieve. And as we look at divorce and marriage, I want to say, do not get married because you think it's expected of you, because you think it might complete you, because it might make everything all right if I just get married.

[17:35] It is perfectly okay, and in some parts of the Bible extolled that singleness is a good way of life.

It is not a failure in relationship, being single. I want you to know that today as we talk about marriage and divorce, that it's not me saying the vicar, go and get a good husband or wife, but rather make a choice that is sensible.

The choice is to say, I'm going to live a life as being a single person. Then God will bless and honour you in that, and that's okay. If you do live in a relationship, if you do come to be married, there's some really, really important things that we should do as Christians if we're going to be married.

The first thing to do is to recognise we don't do it alone. There's a great reading in Ecclesiastes chapter 4 that talks about if two people lie down together, they can keep warm.

If one falls over, the other can pick them up. That two people get more return for their life when they live it together. But then it does this curious thing at the back end of chapter 4 and it says, and a cord of three strands is not easily broken.

[18:58] So we have two, two, two, and then we hit a cord of three strands. And it reminds us that relationships are about inviting God into them to feed those times of difficulty and support us when life gets hard.

That it's only through God's love that unending, unconditional love that comes into our life that we can do life together well.

And we as a church need to do supporting couples well. We need to do supporting marriage well. One last thing from our marriage service. I ask the friends and families, will they continue to support and uphold the couple in their marriage and in their life to come?

And the congregation should respond passionately and ardently. We will. And that's important for us as Christians. We should be people who are doing everything we can to encourage people to enter into relationships that are going to be positive for them, not relationships that are for the here and now.

[20:19] And then when they enter into those relationships, do everything we can to support them in that relationship. If you are here as somebody who has a son or a daughter who is going to be married or is married and you struggle with this idea of they have left you and you are always calling them back to you for Sunday lunches or for Christmas or for Easter because it's important that they come back to you because you miss them, can I encourage you to think about how you can support their marriage, their new life together so that it can be good because the call here from Jesus is to remind you as mothers and fathers for this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife and the two will become one.

We as the church need to be better at honouring that, not calling people back to us or making them do great journeys because on Christmas day we want to see them. We need to be people who say, you go and live your life, go and do your thing and I'm going to celebrate your relationship and not put challenges in the way.

So, as I come in to finish, for the married, guard your covenant marriage with grace, humility and prayer.

Make sure God is entwined in that marriage and if you haven't been good at that recently, get good at it. Start praying together, start working together, start reading God's word together, start doing life together that makes a difference.

Make your marriage the number one thing and I mean that even if you've got children. Make your marriage the number one thing because if you make your marriage the number one thing, your children will see a great relationship and they will want that.

[22 : 17] They won't resent you for having a date night, they won't resent you for doing stuff together, they will say, I love the fact that I've got a positive role model of love. So make your marriage the foundation of your family.

for the divorced, know that I truly believe in a God where there is no divorce from God's love. God reaches out to you now and says, I want to hold you in this brokenness knowing that we all struggle and sin and just because I stand here with an almost 20 year marriage before you just means that the sins that I commit are not so visible and God holds me in those sins in the same way that he holds those who are divorced.

God's love doesn't slip away from you so seek it and ask him to come into that brokenness. And for us, the church, corporately, we should be a community that supports marriage, supports singleness and gently restores the broken.

Let's just take a moment. I'm just going to give you an opportunity. We're going to be quiet. I'm just going to give you an opportunity to allow some of those thoughts to sink in and where there's pain, allow God to come to work.

Where maybe you're discovering a difficulty in a relationship to seek God in that. maybe you've been chasing relationships because you think they're going to make you whole but you know they've never been good.

[24 : 07] Maybe today is a time to re-evaluate that and ask God to come and guide your life more closely. Lord Jesus, you are faithful even when we are not.

Lord, we ask that you heal today what is broken. Forgive us where we have failed. Help us today to change our lives to reflect your covenant of love in our relationships, in our families and in our church.

Amen.