

Rev. Kurt Cockran, Risen Savior Lutheran Church (Basehor, KS), 19th Sunday in Advent after Pentecost (Proper 22), October 3rd, 2021

Marriage and Divorce

Mark 10:2-16

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

Divorce. Morally neutral, or morally negative? Depends on who you ask. Some who have gone through it might even look back and see what they believe to have been their wretched spouse that no one should ever be with, and even say divorce is even a moral good. The Pharisees wanted to know what Jesus thought. The Pharisees were worldly in many ways, but they wanted to at least *look* the part. They needed to know how the community of scholars viewed marriage and divorce so that they could look the part in following it. So, Jesus, you public figure now influencing thousands, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

But first before we get Jesus’ answer, how much do you yourselves ask this question of Jesus, or really even of each other in the church for your own marriage? Quite frankly, not a lot. The modus operandi of our world is simply, “do whatever feels right. If he’s not treating you like you think you deserve and you think you can have better, go for it.” And so we seek out those who tell us what we want to hear, not what we need to hear. And... we’re the worse off for it.

Jesus, though, tells us what we need to hear, if we only dare to ask him. Today, we do dare to ask Him. And Jesus dares us back, challenging us and our preconceptions in our day. He *destabilizes* us, in a very good way. His teaching challenges the world, of course. But it also challenges us, the Church. To think biblically about marriage and divorce is to actually hear the Bible, since television and pop culture and probably your own grandparents won’t give you what the Bible gives you about this topic. And, quite frankly, so much of us hear so much more of pop culture that we don’t tend to even remember what the Bible says about marriage and divorce, if

we've ever even encountered it. Yet here we have just one part for our consideration. And it's a doozy.

So, Jesus. "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" Can it be done in the case of infidelity? What if she just can't cook, or is just a hard woman to be with? What say you, Jesus?

Jesus answers the question with a question. "What did Moses command you?" That is, the books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. What is said there? "Well this one's easy, Jesus. Moses allowed. He *permitted* the husband to draw up the papers and put his wife away! Just a matter of paperwork! Easy as could be! Game, set, and match Jesus!"

They're talking about Deut 24. And the grammar is worth taking a particular closer look. Trace the command. God says there, "*When* a man writes a certificate of divorce (note that... *when* a man... not a man *shall* write a certificate of divorce. But God's setting the context). *When a man* writes a certificate of divorce. God has said nothing about divorce being permissible. Mankind essentially made up this word and concept of "divorce." So, *when* a man does this and puts it in his wife's hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, and *when* the second man hates her and *when he* writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house...then her former husband, who sent her away, *shall* not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the Lord."

The Pharisees read this text and say that this text allows me the Pharisee to write a certificate of divorce for really any reason. But they missed the point, the command. What God is doing here is recognizing that this evil thing that they're doing which originates from the sinful nature – a certificate of divorce – needs to have a particular boundary if Israel is going to have

any sense of order at all. If a man divorces his wife, and she gets remarried to another man, then there's no going back to the first husband! This is damage control on God's part. God's taking something humanity has broken and keeping it from becoming even worse. Disaster mitigation. That when that pipe bursts in your home, your first inclination isn't to call the emergency plumber to fix the root of the problem ASAP, but to get the most valuable possessions away from the waters. God in Deut 24 is doing this same thing: you wretched hard-hearted humanity have warped and twisted my good gift of marriage. *You've* created adultery. *I* am the one saying "you shall not commit adultery." *You've* created divorce. Now I am the one here to defend women from such callous and cold treatment by he who says: "I don't want her anymore! Here, you can have her! And when you're tired of her, just send her back my way!" No, a woman is not a commodity. She is very precious to the Lord and must be protected! This is God removing the million dollar painting away from the burst pipe before calling in the plumber to fix the root of the problem.

And Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment, [this rule to mitigate the damage]. Jesus goes to the heart of the matter, the hard heart. He turns the question back on them. It is because of *your* hardness of heart. Divorce is a matter of the heart and not a mere legal formality. A hardened heart is a seared conscience, calloused against the spouse and against the Lord. It's an unbelieving heart, one that looks for loopholes instead of what honors God and the spouse.

And Jesus pulls from Moses, but at an unlikely spot. He 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.'** Boom. Genesis. The creation of man and woman and marriage itself. One man, one woman. For life. Before sin

entered the world! Back when all was the way God intended for humanity to be. When God looked at the two He made and declared such marriage not just good, but “very good!” Back when He instituted the holy estate for all future generations, **“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”** Back when Adam sang that love song to his bride, likely the first song humanity ever heard. **“This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”** Jesus continues, **“So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”**

Marriage is a precious gift. Thanks be to God that this congregation sees a good number of weddings, ample time to hear more about this gift, about how holy marriage is the only right context for intimate love, to be naked and unashamed, for they have the true one flesh union of the God-ordained, government-regulated public commitment solemn declaration of marriage.

But it’s not quite as appropriate at weddings to talk about divorce. It’s a hard talk. But any couple married for any decent length of time know it’s an important talk. This world and life and the devil even brings the conversation to the fore. Living in holy marriage may look easy, but is the hardest of works. It takes immeasurable forgiveness, patience, prayer, patience, and trusting of God and His Word. The devil might whisper in your ear, “I’m God, and I’m telling you you need to find a new wife,” but it takes faith in the Lord’s actual words to say back, “I’m a Christian, so I know you’re not God speaking to me, because God says in His Scripture to stick with her. Period. No matter what.” Marriage, dear saints, is not to be entered into inadvisedly or lightly. Choose carefully. Ask your parents, your family, yes, even your church family. Your faith is worth marrying for. If you will share the same bed and flesh, then you should want to

first be able to pray together, worship and commune together at the same altar. You need such help when the going gets rough in the marriage.

Then once you enter the union, it is God Himself who joins the man and woman by *His* Word. He permits them to then engage in the one flesh union. Let not man separate.

“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.’”

Committing divorce, dear saints, *is* adultery *is* sin. Period. Jesus makes this quite plain. In Matthew’s Gospel he does permit only one exception, sexual immorality. The marriage bed defiled by another. Adultery in and of itself shreds into pieces the one flesh union.

But divorce even without the adultery likewise demolishes what God has joined together. Make no mistake. God hates divorce. And unrepented divorce makes you who have committed it liable to the hell of fire.

Now it’s worth stating an important distinction. There is the sinful act of *committing* a divorce and the non-sinful passive reality of *suffering* a divorce. To commit divorce is to take your one flesh union, and actively sever it right down the middle with adultery. Or, to commit a divorce is to forsake and abandon your spouse, to file the paperwork without your spouse having cheated on you, *or*...to file the paperwork without him having left your home for months or even years, *or*...if *you* have left the home for your own physical protection, that you proceeded to *quickly* file the paperwork without first imploring him or her to counseling and allowing time for the Lord to soften his heart; that is, you had given up hope for reconciliation too quickly. Malachi even calls such a hasty divorce itself an act of violence.¹ To commit a divorce is even

¹ Mal 2:16

saying “Sounds good to me” when your spouse first says those terrible words, “I want a divorce.”

If this describes you, if you have committed the divorce rather than suffered the divorce, then it *is* black and white. Repent. Doesn't matter how long ago it was and what's happened since then. Repent. Place your sin to the foot of the cross, lay it all bear. He is there to assume your adultery. For He on the cross reconciles the whole world back to God through His flesh, making propitiation to the Father for all of your sins and the sins of every person and in every marriage. He puts your broken sinful flesh back together to the pure flesh of Christ. And, if you have not already remarried, and if your former spouse has not already remarried, He is there on that cross to *actually* reconcile you back together *here* and *now*. Don't delay. Dear divorcers, Christ forgives you. Repent to the one you have wronged. To God, and to your spouse. Before it's too late.

And if you're considering divorce now, or ever have considered it, it's not worth it. Because hell is not worth it. And I don't just mean hell on earth. But yes, it *is* also hell on earth, especially for your loved ones. Those who say their lives are much better after divorce aren't telling you the whole story. The pain is visceral, for it rips asunder what God had joined together. This is a pain suffered, I'm sure, by many in here, and a pain perhaps some of you formerly have caused but have since repented, but too much time has now passed to turn back the clock. The scars remain.

So here we are. All sinners. Among us, divorce happens, yes even in many God-fearing congregations. The temptation of the world is strong. Sin and hard hearts destroy our marriages. We often hurt more than we help. What are we to do? What do we do at this time?

It's time...to repent. It's time to confess our sin, all of our sin, every last bleeding sin from the knife of harsh words and actions that we use against our spouses. Jesus is there to take that knife into Himself, to die the death of divorce and assume our 1:00 AM wrath that we pulverize each other with. All we have left to do is to take our cue from the little child, say, the little child when he breaks something so valuable. He picks up the pieces with tears in eyes, with those crocodile tears pouring down his cheeks. When there's nothing left to do but to simply cry out to Mom and Dad: "I broke it. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I was careless. I'm sorry."

Bring your troubles to him. Let Jesus mend what you've broken. Don't hold your sin outside his forgiveness, for He is ready to hear, ready to forgive. He's ready to put your marriage back together. Don't bottle it in. Seek help. The Church is ready. Her pastors are ready. Don't delay until it's too late. Get ahead of any brewing conflict.

Fight the good fight. Resist the devil and temptations, and he will flee from you. God be gracious to you and strengthen your faith, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus, I forgive you all of your sin in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.