

SERMON NOTES

Second Sunday of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

Synaxis Gospel
Mark 10:1-12

JESUS' TEACHING ON DIVORCE

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to the question of divorce, there are two very different schools of thought. One approach reflects our treasured ancient background; the other mirrors the new freedoms of the American way of life. In the old days, divorce was considered something foreign to our Armenian traditions. On the rare occasions that an Armenian couple divorced, it was looked upon as a shameful thing. Armenians did not divorce! Today, we in America live in a different cultural world, a world that accepts divorce. More and more we are seeing Armenian couples deciding to end their unhappy marriages by divorce.

A similar situation existed in the days of Jesus. The people were divided on the issue of divorce. Those who were more conservative followed the teaching of a famous religious teacher, Rabbi Shammai. Those who were more pragmatic, or found the sophisticated new ideas of the Greek and Roman world appealing, followed the teaching of an equally famous rabbi, Hillel. Today, the name Hillel is still held in high esteem by Jewish university students, while Shammai's is known mostly to those who are scholars in the history of the Jewish people. Hillel's popularity stems from the fact that most Jews felt (and still feel) that the divine law was too idealistic for the imperfect world in which mankind lives. Hillel's rulings represented a very relaxed interpretation of the law and were far less strict than those of Shammai.

Both Shammai and Hillel lived in the first century and while they both agreed that divorce was possible under the Mosaic Law, and that only the husband could initiate it, they were in opposition to each other about the grounds for divorce. Shammai taught that the *only* grounds were immorality on the part of the wife. Hillel permitted a man to divorce his wife for as small a thing (in our day) as 'burning the toast.'

It was into this controversy that the Pharisees hoped to draw Jesus and thereby reduce His popularity among the crowds. Perhaps, they hoped that Jesus' answers might even cause the ill-will of King Herod. (King Herod had recently executed John the Baptist because of John's criticism of the Queen's divorce from her first husband in order to marry Herod.)

SYNTAXIS READING

Mark 10:1-12

And rising up, He went from there to the region of Judea, and beyond the Jordan;

and crowds gathered around Him again, and, according to His custom, He once more began to teach them.

And some Pharisees came up to Him, testing Him, and began to question Him whether it was lawful for a man to divorce a wife.

And He answered and said to them, "What did Moses command you?"

And they said, "Moses permitted a man to WRITE A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE AND SEND HER AWAY."

But 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. FOR THIS CAUSE A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH;

"consequently, they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together let no man separate."

And in the house the disciples began questioning Him about this again.

And He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery."

NOTES

And rising up, He went from there to the region of Judea, and beyond the Jordan; and crowds gathered around Him again, and, according to His custom, He once more began to teach them.

Recorded in the previous chapter of Mark, Jesus had been teaching in Capernaum, His home base in the region of Galilee. Just before going to Capernaum, Jesus had been transfigured in the presence of Moses and the prophet Elijah on a high mountain, revealing His glory. When Peter

had suggested that equal honor could be rendered to Moses, Elijah, and Jesus, the Father corrected the disciple and pointed out the superiority of “My beloved Son.” It was to Jesus that Peter should listen. It was Jesus Who should be obeyed. Later on in the chapter, in various ways, Jesus warned that the life of those who follow Him will be one of humble service and self-sacrifice. The path would not be easy. Moreover, loyalty to Him was the key to peace with each other.

In our passage, Jesus is setting out on His last trip to Jerusalem. His route took Him to the part of Judea that lay on the Eastern side of the river Jordan.

And some Pharisees came up to Him, testing Him, and began to question Him whether it was lawful for a man to divorce a wife.

The Pharisees were the teachers of the law. They were trying to trip Jesus up and chose this controversial question hoping Jesus would alienate some of His following. Notice that the question is whether it is lawful for a *man* to divorce a wife. Both of the great rabbis of the day taught that the law permitted a *man* to divorce his wife. But *women* did not have this right. Even today, in modern Israel, it is the man who divorces the woman.

And He answered and said to them, “What did Moses command you?”

Not Shammai nor Hillel, but *Moses*, who wrote the law, should be the point of reference.

And they said, “Moses permitted a man to WRITE A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE AND SEND HER AWAY.”

The Pharisees’ answer was a quotation, out of context, from the fifth book of Moses, Deuteronomy 24:1. According to Moses, if the husband found “some indecency” in his wife, and if he then writes her a bill of divorce, and sends her away, he cannot have her back if she marries another who divorces her as well (this was the law, even if the second husband dies!). This “indecency” cannot be that she had lied about her virginity when they married, or that she had committed adultery, because in both of those cases she would not simply be divorced by her husband, she would be stoned to death.¹ In fact, the bill of divorce protected her against these charges. The husband had divorced her for some other non-capital “indecency.”

But Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment.

Moses wrote this law, not because it was the right thing to divorce a wife, but because of their attitude. A hard heart is determined to have its own way. It is not a kind and loving heart; it is not a forgiving heart. There is no way a marriage can thrive in such an atmosphere. Misery is the result. Therefore, though divorce was not God’s preferred way² of handling the “indecency” situation within the marriage, Moses recognized that men would divorce their wives for this cause. If a man was determined to take this action, Moses required that he write a bill of divorce for the wife. Only then could the man send her away, but he could *never* have her back if she remarried. The thrust of the Deuteronomy passage is not to authorize divorce, but to legislate concerning remarriage if a man divorces.

But from the beginning of creation, God MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE. FOR THIS CAUSE A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER. AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH;

In support of his answer, Jesus quoted from the first book of Moses, Genesis 1:27 and 2:24. God’s intention for marriage is that it be permanent until the death of one of the partners. The marriage

¹Deuteronomy 22:13-22

² In fact, Malachi 2:16 states that “God hates divorce.”

bond is stronger even than that of a parent and child. So, the marriage bond takes preeminence over even the couple's bond with their parents.

Consequently, they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together let no man separate.”

Marriage is a mystery of joining. In the process, the couple will become one unit. God Himself accomplishes this mystery; therefore, Jesus commands us not to undo what God has done. Jesus has taken his adversaries' question out of the debate between Shammai and Hillel concerning **grounds** for divorce and turned it instead to God's good intention for the institution of marriage.

And in the house the disciples began questioning Him about this again.

In private, away from the ears of Jesus' enemies, the disciples wanted to hear more about this topic.

And He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman, commits adultery against her.

Jesus indicates that once a man divorces his wife, he must not remarry. It seems from this statement that although the divorced couple can be separated in the eyes of society, in the eyes of God they can belong only to each other without sin.

And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery.”

Contrary to Jewish custom, in the Roman world, women could initiate divorce. Herodias, the wife of King Herod, had divorced her husband to marry King Herod. John the Baptist had condemned her new marriage and for that he had been executed. With this statement, Jesus, too, equates the remarriage of divorcees, including Herodias' new liaison, as adultery.

Is Jesus saying that there are no grounds for divorce? In this passage, He only speaks of the grounds for marriage and the consequences of exchanging one partner for another. When Matthew reports Jesus' statement on divorce in 5:31-32, it is phrased as follows:

“And it was said, ‘WHOEVER DIVORCES HIS WIFE, LET HIM GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DISMISSAL’; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery.”

In Matthew's passage,³ parallel with our reading in Mark, the Pharisees' question has an added clause. The question reads: “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife **for any cause?**” This clause pinpoints the argument between Shammai and Hillel. Shammai taught that the only ground for divorce was adultery on the wife's part; Hillel taught that a man could divorce a wife for even the most trivial reason.

The answer Jesus gives in Matthew is similar to that quoted in Mark, but it also has an added clause. Jesus is quoted as saying, “And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, **except for immorality**, and marries another woman commits adultery.” The problem with understanding what Jesus was referring to is the meaning of the Greek word *πορνεία* (*porneia*,) translated “immorality” in the exception clause.⁴ The Greek has a different word, *μοιχεία* (*moicheia*) for

³ Matt 19:7

⁴ Scholars are not in agreement in the definition of *porneia*. Some hold that it is synonymous with adultery. This is probably not the case since the two terms are often in the same list of sins. Another view is that it refers to fornication as discussed above. The third view is that it refers in Matthew, as it does in 1 Corinthians 5:1, to incest. A man might discover that he is in an incestuous relationship when he finds that his wife is a near relative. For a discussion that favors the view that *porneia* is tantamount to adultery, see

adultery, the sin of sexual unfaithfulness after a marriage has been consummated. *Porneia* is usually translated *fornication* which indicates sexual relations between an unmarried person and another person.

In the Jewish culture of Jesus' day, when a man and woman became engaged, they were considered married except that the marriage was not consummated until the wedding. If the engaged *wife* was unfaithful during this period, her sin would be one of *porneia*, or fornication. The man could then lawfully divorce his *wife* and marry another woman because he and his first wife had not yet become "one flesh" through consummation of the marriage. (Joseph was considering this option after he discovered that Mary was pregnant.) Under the Law of Moses, an engaged woman who had been forcibly raped was not subject to stoning, but since she was no longer a virgin, it is possible that her fiancé could send her back to her father's house. The Mosaic Law does not touch upon the betrothed man's options, but apparently the customs reflected in the New Testament show that divorce was up to the fiancé. What Jesus may be saying is: a man can divorce his fiancée and can, without sin, freely marry another woman, but only *if* his fiancée has been defiled by *porneia* (fornication).

However the exception clause is interpreted, from the disciples' response to Jesus' statement in Matthew, it is obvious that they understood that Jesus was underscoring the permanence of marriage in God's eyes.⁵

APPLICATION

In the Armenian Church, when a man and woman exchange their marriage vows before the altar, the best man holds the cross upon their touching bowed heads. This symbolizes that it is Jesus Christ who is joining the bride and groom to each other and that He will be present with them in their new life together. When Christ is in the center of a Christian marriage, when both seek God's perfect will in their lives, there can be no question of a hard heart. Difficult days will certainly come, but He teaches us to love each other in a self-sacrificing way, just as He has loved us. As He has forgiven us, we must forgive each other.

Our American culture encourages us to stand up for our rights as an individual. *God* teaches us to sacrifice our legitimate rights for the sake of others. In the marriage context this means that the husband so loves and cares for his wife that what is beneficial for her is more important to him than his own needs and desires. The husband's example in this is Christ Himself,⁶ Who loved us and gave Himself for us. The example for the wife is the Church, the Bride of Christ. She sacrifices herself in order to be a helper to her husband in life, united to him as his own flesh. Her goal in the marriage is her husband's good, success, and happiness. Reflecting Christ's love, the two of them submit to each other with devotion and respect.

But, you say, Hillel was right, we live in an imperfect world, and we are imperfect people! How can we possibly live up to the lofty ideal of marriage you are describing? The answer is twofold. 1) Marriage is not to be entered into lightly. There is far more to

Louis Chung Lee, *The Meaning of Porneia in the Matthean Exception Clauses* (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1979).

⁵ John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, New Testament Edition (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983), p. 64.

⁶ For the symbolism of marriage see Ephesians 5:21-33.

marriage than ‘falling in love.’ In the self-centered culture that surrounds us, almost half of all marriages will end in divorce. For our marriages to survive, both parties must be first of all committed to God and to His rule in their lives. Therefore, keeping that requirement in mind, choose your partner wisely. 2) On our own we could never achieve God’s ideal. However, the Holy Spirit will empower the couple that is committed to serving God. He will enable them to serve one another and help one another to become more and more like our Lord. Moreover, such marriages will then reflect the mysterious but magnificent relationship between Christ and His Church.

For those who find themselves already in a marriage with a partner who is not committed to the rule of Christ in his or her life, the situation can be extremely difficult, but not hopeless. St. Paul has these words of advice:

But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled with her husband), and that the husband should not send his wife away.

But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, let him not send her away. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, let her not send her husband away.

For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.

Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister [the Christian spouse] is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace.

For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband: Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?

Only in extreme situations (for instance where there are safety issues for the Christian and/ or the children), Paul seems to recognize that a Christian will leave the offending spouse, but that in such cases marriage to another is not an option. God will help us to be wise and strong as we seek His perfect will.

In God’s eyes, there are no ‘grounds for divorce,’ only opportunities for repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The laws of Moses were good, but, as on the Mount of Transfiguration, the Father has called us to listen to His beloved Son. He will lift us up to more than we can be.