

## **Introduction**

Not long ago, a distraught Christian wife, not from our church, asked me this, **“Does God ever allow divorce?”** That’s a critical question that I’m going to answer today. The Bible addresses divorce in the following passages: Deuteronomy 24:1-4; Malachi 2:16; Matthew 5:31-32; Matthew 19:3-12; Mark 10:1-12; Luke 16:18; and 1 Corinthians 7:10-16. Does God ever allow divorce? Let’s examine one of these passages, Mark 10:1-12, and find out.

## **The Issue**

The first thing we learn from it is that people have been divorcing as long as they have been marrying, and still are. The Barna Research Group conducted a poll about divorce. It found that 11% of adult Americans are currently divorced and that 25% have been divorced at least once. It also found that the 25% figure is roughly the same for churched people. Approximately 1 in 4 have been divorced. Those are the facts.

Verse 2 reveals the issue. The Pharisees, who hated Jesus, tried to discredit Him by asking Him about one of the most hotly contested issues of His day, and ours. Is it lawful to divorce? That is, does God ever allow it? That’s the question first century Jews asked, and Christians are still asking it today. Is it always a sin to divorce or does God sometimes allow it? If He does sometimes allow it, when is that? And if it isn’t a sin to divorce, is it a sin to remarry? Many Christians have asked me those three questions over the years.

## **Two Views**

Most studied Biblical Christians hold one of two views about them.

One view, based on Matthew 19:9, is that if we divorce because of our spouse’s sexual immorality, it isn’t a sin. Consequently, we’re free

to remarry. But if we divorce for any other reason, no matter what, it is a sin. If we remarry, therefore, we're committing another sin, continuing adultery with our new spouse. And based on Matthew 5:32 and Luke 16:18, our new spouse is committing adultery as well.

There is a second widely held view, based on two of the verses we read, 11-12. Unlike the first view, we can divorce for any reason and it isn't a sin. If that reason is our spouse's sexual immorality, we're free to remarry. But if it isn't, then we aren't. Our new spouse and we are committing adultery, just as in the first view, if we do. The sin isn't the divorce but the remarriage.

The wife of a husband I knew in Akron had a one time sexual relationship with one of their church's elders. It was sexual immorality. According to both views, therefore, he was free to divorce and remarry.

A domestic relations client of mine was married to a mean and angry man. He was constantly raging around the house and verbally assaulting her. He got so mad at her one night that he actually held a gun to her head. It wasn't sexual immorality. So, according to the first view, she wasn't free to divorce him. According to the second view, she was free to divorce him but not to remarry. Her pastor, who held the second view, told her just that. If she divorced him, she could never marry again.

Most studied Biblical Christians hold one of those two views.

## **My View**

But I don't. Three weeks ago, I preached about several rules for interpreting the Bible. Remember one of those. We must sometimes bridge cultural gaps to interpret a text correctly. Well, that's the case here in Mark 10 and in other texts that address divorce.

The cultural gap in them is between the divorce laws of the ancient world and our own. Because of those laws, divorce wasn't a practical option for women in the worlds of either Moses or Jesus. No harm was done to the man. He could go on making a living just as he did before. His material life was hardly affected at all. But divorce was a brutal and

devastating thing for women. It literally ruined their lives. Society considered them abject personal failures and no professions or jobs were open to them except one, prostitution. That is in fact why 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish culture tolerated prostitution. It was the only way most divorced women had of surviving. That's probably what Jesus is referring to in Matthew 5:32, **"Everyone who divorces his wife makes her commit adultery,"** that is, consigns her to a life of prostitution.

But if that's true, why didn't God protect women by just prohibiting divorce in the first place? Jesus tells us in verses 3-5. He explains why God allowed husbands to divorce their wives in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. It was because of the hardness of their hearts. He knew what husbands who wanted to get rid of their wives but couldn't would do – brutalize them. As bad as divorce was for women, it was better than their husbands verbally and physically assaulting them on a regular basis. Which reveals the primary aim Jesus sought to achieve in His teachings on divorce. It was to protect wives from being brutalized.

That aim of His implies that there is one and only one ground for divorce. It's hard-heartedness. In my opinion, that's what Jesus is saying. The Biblical ground for divorce is hard-heartedness. One spouse makes life unbearable for the other spouse and won't change. Richard Foster states it differently but the meaning is the same. In his book *The Challenge of the Disciplined Life*, he writes: **"When it is clear that the continuation of the marriage is substantially more destructive than a divorce, then the marriage should end."** There are two controlling words here, **"clear,"** and **"substantially."** Divorce is not a sin when it is *clear* that continuing the marriage is *substantially* more destructive than ending it. When that is the case, a spouse is free to divorce and then marry again.

Jill and I had a next-door neighbor in Barberton who drank more than he should and verbally abused his wife and children. It was awful but she stayed with him over the years for the children's sake, hoping he would change. He never did though and finally, it got so bad that she

divorced him. Six years later, I talked with two of the children, now teenagers, both of whom said the same thing, **“Mom divorcing dad was the best thing she ever did for us.”** That’s how hard this man’s heart was. Even his children couldn’t bear him. Anyway, in my view, his wife divorcing him wasn’t a sin and she was free to marry again.

### **The Last Resort**

The bottom line is that Jesus does give us a ground for divorce. But He also qualifies it. Don’t do it too soon. We see that in verses 6-9. He quotes Genesis 2:24, **“and the two shall become one flesh.”** A man and woman getting married and then consummating it creates a unique one-flesh bond. Marriage and consummation are life-uniting acts. The whole self of the husband touches the whole self of the wife and vice versa. The result is a profound bond that reaches deep into the spirit of each one. That bond is so penetrating and strong that it can’t be disrupted without damaging the individuals involved.

That makes divorce like an amputation. C.S. Lewis used that very analogy in fact to describe it in his book *Mere Christianity*. He writes that divorce is: **“Like cutting up a living body, as a kind of surgical operation . . . It is more like having both your legs cut off than it is like dissolving a business partnership or even deserting a regiment.”** Lewis wasn’t overstating the case. Our culture often presents divorce as a simple readjustment of partners. But Lewis and more importantly Jesus here make clear that it is far more than that. It’s a devastating psychological experience instead. No matter how right a divorce is, it still hurts in the depths of people’s souls and to one degree or another always will.

That means, absent hard-heartedness, marriage is for life. We shouldn’t get divorced just because we’re having trouble in our marriage. We also shouldn’t get divorced until we have used every possible resource and tried every possible way to heal our marriage. In Malachi 2:16, God says, **“I hate divorce.”** The reason God hates it is because it’s so

destructive to others and us. So, we never do it casually or too soon. Chuck Swindoll articulates it well, **“Two processes should never be entered into prematurely: embalming and divorce.”** Divorce should be the last resort to which we turn.

Even if our spouse commits adultery. Many disagree with me but think about it. Jesus never says that we have to divorce our spouse if he or she commits adultery. On the contrary, He implies that we shouldn't unless his or her heart is hard as I defined it. It's better to forgive an adulterous but repentant spouse than it is to divorce him or her. Divorce is a last resort against a spouse whose heart is hard, who makes life unbearable and won't change.

After a young couple got married, the husband turned into a clod. He selfishly disregarded the wife for several years. So she decided to leave him, whereupon he immediately repented and begged her to stay. He told her he'd do anything, including going to a counselor of her choice. She refused his pleas though, contending her hurts were too deep, and divorced him.

In my view, that wife violated the teachings of Jesus. She didn't exhaust every possible resource before divorcing. Yes, her hurts were deep and understandably so. But divorce is always a last resort to which we shouldn't casually and quickly turn.

### **The First Resort**

That raises a question. If divorce is the last resort, what is the first? I'll tell you. It's love. Richard Foster captures the essence of Jesus' teachings on divorce better than anyone I've read. He writes: **“Jesus was not trying to set down a legalistic set of rules to determine when divorce was allowable. He was striking at the spirit in which people live with each other.”** He's exactly right. Jesus was striking at the spirit in which people live with each other.

We see that in verses 11-12. He talks about a husband divorcing his wife in verse 11 and for the first and only time a wife divorcing her

husband in verse 12. In both verses, the Greek word translated “**divorce**” means literally “**throw away.**” His message is clear. Kingdom people don’t throw anyone away, especially their spouses. They love and cherish them instead.

Remember when we got married. We were likely what we call “**in love.**” G.K. Chesterton shared a penetrating insight about that. He observed that love songs all over the world are filled with promises. That illustrates, he said, that people in love are naturally inclined to bind themselves to each other with promises. Which is exactly what our spouse and we did on our wedding day. We bound ourselves together with a public promise - to love and cherish each other until the day we die. That explains the teachings of Jesus. He’s only calling us to do something that our own passion compelled us to promise years ago – love and cherish our spouse for as long as we live.

But how do we do that? C.S. Lewis tells us. Referring to marital love, he writes: “**It is a deep unity, maintained by the will and deliberately strengthened by habit; reinforced by the grace that both (husband and wife) ask, and receive, from God.**” He’s right. We will to love our spouse and act habitually to do so, in the context of engaging God and His kingdom at hand.

But suppose you’ve already divorced. You probably can’t undo that now. But you can repent and move forward in the mercy and forgiveness of God. Do two things. First, love and respect your ex-spouse. Desire his or her well-being and joy and seek it as you’re able. And second, if you’re remarried, love and cherish your new spouse as you promised to.

## **Conclusion**

What I’ve preached today challenges us all. If we’re married, resort to love. If we’re single or divorced, choose rightly whom to marry and resort to love after we do. Why? An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Is it lawful to divorce? There’s something better than answering that correctly. It’s not having to ask it in the first place.