

What About Family Life?

Mark 10:2-16

² Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" ³ He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" ⁴ They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." ⁵ But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. ⁶ But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, ⁸ and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹ Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

¹⁰ Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. ¹¹ He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; ¹² and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

¹³ People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴ But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." ¹⁶ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

According to WomenintheAncientWorld.com: The Ancient Hebrew law code outlined in the Bible unfortunately lacks the detail that can be found in other ancient legal systems such as the Babylonian and Roman, but we can at least summarize the general principles.

1. Marriage was called "taking a wife"
2. It involved sexual intercourse
3. While there was no death penalty in Hebrew law for property crimes, adultery was a capital offence for both participants.
4. Marriage and children were necessary to have a fulfilled life. A childless woman could call herself a mother by giving her maid-servant to her husband as a second wife (assuming, of course, the maid-servant did indeed produce a child).
5. A widow had the right to marry her husband's brother if he lived in the same town.
6. Polygyny was permitted but uncommon.
7. Divorce was easy for a man and impossible for a woman.

8. Childlessness was the most common reason for divorce
9. The woman moved to the husband's home and family
10. While the husband was clearly the boss, each expected love from the other and a wife had the legal right to support.

According to *DIVORCES BY JEWISH WOMEN IN THE FIRST CENTURY*,

Compiled by David McKee:

- Only a man could enact a divorce, but this did not mean that women could not get a divorce. If they could show a court of rabbis that they had sufficient grounds for a divorce, the court could persuade her husband to divorce her.
- The principle that divorce could only be enacted by a man was based on the law which said that a man should write out the divorce certificate (Deut. 24:1). This resulted in the principle that a man had to enter into divorce voluntarily, but a woman could be divorced against her will, as stated in the maxim:
 - The man who divorces his wife is not equivalent to a woman who receives a divorce, for a woman goes forth willingly or unwillingly, but a man puts his wife away only willingly. (mYeb.14:1)
- However, it came to be recognized that a woman could force a man to divorce her if he broke his marriage vows or other obligations in the marriage contract. The marriage contract enshrined both the grounds and the authority for a woman to get a divorce. If the terms of the contract were broken, the injured party, man or woman, were within their rights to terminate the contract with a divorce. The promises spoken and implied in the marriage contract thereby became the grounds for divorce. The rabbinic court would make sure that the woman could be released from the marriage contract if the husband broke any of its terms.

As for children, for all practical purposes, a young person did not become a full-fledged member of the community until he was much older than age thirteen or she was at least age twelve. The precise age at which this occurred varied according to time and

place. Furthermore, in many communities, unmarried men regardless of age were not eligible for certain synagogue honors. Marriage by itself could not definitively confer adult status, however, in part because child marriages were still prevalent in the early modern period.

Our passages raise theological questions on at least three levels. First, they raise the question of our proper understanding and teaching about marriage, children, and divorce. Second, because this question is set in the context of the Pharisees' "test" of Jesus, it raises the further question of who or what has the proper authority to answer our questions. Should we appeal to Scripture, tradition, reason, experience, or conscience? Third, Jesus' answer raises the question of the kingdom of God and the proper attitude of those who are to receive and enter into it. These three sets of questions are interrelated, and tells us about family life as part of the church of Jesus Christ. By indicating that the proper attitude of those who are to receive and enter into the kingdom is reliance on and gratitude for God's grace, Jesus escaped the Pharisees' trap and provides a positive answer to the question of marriage, children, and divorce that is both uncompromisingly rigorous and an appeal to God's mercy.

The context of the discussion is one of many in the Gospels in which various authorities try to trap Jesus by asking him a question that they know has no good answer. Often these questions reflect ongoing controversies among competing factions or schools of thought, so any answer was likely to offend someone. If a woman successively marries seven brothers, whose wife will she be in heaven? (Mark 12:23) Should we pay taxes to the emperor? (Mark 12:14) Here, the question concerns divorce. As indicated in the Pharisees' response to Jesus, they already knew the scriptural answer: Moses allowed a man to divorce his wife. The debate concerned the legitimate grounds for the divorce. Was divorce justified only in cases of sexual impurity, or could a man legitimately divorce his wife for any fault, including perhaps the "fault" of simply being less appealing than another woman?

As usual, Jesus reframed the debate. He turned the question from the grounds for divorce to the grounds for marriage. God has created man and woman for each other. They should not be set apart. In the intervening years, the church has elaborated extensively on the grounds for marriage. In the traditional English wedding ceremony, the liturgy indicates three primary ends of the marriage between a man and woman. First, it provides for companionship and covenantal union between two people, husband and wife. Second, it provides a context for procreation and the raising of children. Third, it provides a legitimate outlet for sexual desire. Over time, the emphasis in many churches has shifted from procreation and channeling of passion to covenantal union.

Changing views of marriage lead to changing views of divorce. The Pharisees' question to Jesus assumes the practice of divorce. The question is whether it is legitimate, lawful, or justifiable. As we have seen, Jesus turned the question to marriage, and, as was typical for him, radicalized it. Moses's permission of divorce is a concession to the hardness of the human heart. Ideally, for Jesus, there would be no divorce. The marriage union would be permanent. He continued and reinforced this criticism in his private teaching with the disciples. Whoever divorces and remarries commits adultery. Contrary to traditional Jewish law but in accord with Roman thought, the demand applied equally to men and women—a man can commit adultery against his wife as well as a woman against her husband. Jesus thus shifted the question from what is legally permissible (and therefore justifiable) to a radical demand for absolute purity of heart.

But here is the difficulty: Jesus' demand for radical purity of heart appears to be an impossible ideal. Recall his claim that whoever looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart ([Matt. 5:28](#)) and his similar injunction, just prior to our passage, that if our eye offends us, we should tear it out ([Mark 9:47](#)). As the disciples soon asked, "Who then can be saved?" ([Mark 10:26](#)). What are we to make of Jesus' claim, not only that we should not divorce and remarry, but also that we should never look at another with desire ([Matt. 5:28](#))?

These questions lead us back to the other levels in the text. Who is the proper authority? How are we to enter the kingdom of God? As presented in Mark, the Pharisees asked Jesus about divorce, not because they truly want to know the answer, but because they wanted to force him to take a stand on a controversial issue, and therefore offend someone. At one level, his answer may be even more offensive than they anticipated: Jesus claimed the authority to supersede even the law of Moses. His demand for purity of heart is more rigorous than Mosaic law; more rigorous, in fact, than seems humanly possible. But, as he noted in the following passage, what is humanly impossible is possible for God (Mark 10:27). How then are we to receive and enter the kingdom of God? Not as those who try to justify ourselves, but as those who accept God's grace, like children who with purity of heart accept the grace of their parents. **James J. Thompson**

Jesus was declaring the beginning of a new era in which relationships could work if each party approached the other with mutual respect and concern. It is now possible to go beyond what is just permissible to what is kingdom enhanced. Unfortunately, then and now, not everyone chooses to live out the ethics of God's kingdom. Abuse and neglect are substituted for respect and concern. As Professor William B. Oglesby once said in a pastoral-care class, "They say some marriages are made in heaven, but it appears to me that some are born in hell!" In a broken world, divorce is sometimes necessary.

In our scripture, the disciples just do not get it: "Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter" (v. 10). The tension continued between Jesus and the disciples. He taught them about the unfolding of the kingdom, and so often they (and we) just do not get it. Maybe that is why Jesus said in verse 14: "Let the little children come to me..." Perhaps Jesus was saying, "In the kingdom it is not about what is permissible but what is ethical.... Maybe if you receive the kingdom like a child, you will get it."

David B. Howell

Divorce remains a live issue, but most Protestant churches have concluded that respect for marriage and the institution of marriage means that some particular marriages should

end. Divorce is tragic, but not the worst evil. If we learn anything from this text, it is that we must be cautious about attempting to justify ourselves. Jesus claimed the authority to supersede even the law of Moses, but we are not Jesus. How might he reframe the questions that our society presents about marriage today, turn it to its roots, and demand full purity of heart? How would he tell us to respond with gratitude towards God's grace? Might he ask whether the human was created for marriage and family, or marriage and family for the human? **James J. Thompson**

Jesus redefines relationships and how we treat one another in our journey toward wholeness. All of us are important and have roles to play in this wonderful church!

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