



**WESTLAKE HILLS**  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## "The Dilemma of Divorce" Sermon Series: "The Way of Jesus #30"

Mark 10:1-7

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### **Mark 10:1-7 Divorce**

(New International Version)

<sup>1</sup>Jesus then left that place and went into the region of Judea and across the Jordan. Again crowds of people came to him, and as was his custom, he taught them.

<sup>2</sup>Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

<sup>3</sup>"What did Moses command you?" he replied.

<sup>4</sup>They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away."

<sup>5</sup>"It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied. <sup>6</sup>"But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.'<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>7</sup>"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife,<sup>[b]</sup>

#### **Footnotes:**

a. [Mark 10:6](#) Gen. 1:27

b. [Mark 10:7](#) Some early manuscripts do not have and be united to his wife.

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### **Introduction.**

Anne Caughran was a student at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary several years ago. When she was a student here in Austin, she wrote the following: "After 22 years of marriage, he walked out the door saying, 'I love you, of course, but I have to leave.' Two years later, we divorced. Divorce was not in my vocabulary. No one in my family had been divorced, and I was devastated. I had no idea how to cope.

"I was immediately plunged into the grieving process, although at first, I did not recognize it as such. I was grieving the loss of my partner, my financial security, my family structure, my self-esteem, my emotional foundation, my spiritual stability, and more. Looking back on the experience now, I think that, most of all, I was grieving the loss of my identity. I did not know who I was any longer."<sup>i</sup>

Anne's story is all too common these days. Divorce touches the lives of most people in America in some way or another, and all of us have felt the effects. Stop for a moment, and reflect on how many of your family and friends have walked in these shoes. In my own family, both of my older brothers have been divorced, though they are both happily remarried now.

What does the Bible have to say about all this? How are we as followers of Jesus to deal with the difficult reality of divorce? The Bible has a great deal to say about the subject, and we consider one text that touches on the matter this morning. But before we look at the passage, let's consider divorce in our society today.

### **I. Divorce in our Society.**

The statistics are alarming. Half of all marriages end in divorce today, and 1 out of every 4 children growing up will eventually enter a step-family. According to one survey, nearly half of all children in step-parent families will see their parents divorce again by the time they reach their teens. In the postwar generation, my generation, more than 80 percent of children grew up in a family with two biological parents who were married to each other. However, by 1980, only 50 percent could expect to spend their entire childhood in an intact family. If current trends continue, less than half of all the children born today will live continuously with their own mother and father throughout childhood.<sup>ii</sup>

For the last few decades, the popular belief has been that children are resilient and they can bounce back after divorce or remarriage, but the research indicates otherwise.

- Children in single-parent families are 6 times as likely to be poor.



- They are more likely to drop out of high school, get pregnant as teenagers, abuse drugs, and be in trouble with the law.

- They are at a much higher risk for physical and sexual abuse than kids in intact families.

- A survey by the National Center for Health Statistics found that children in single-parent families are 2 to 3 times as likely as children in two-parent families to have emotional and behavioral problems.<sup>iii</sup>

As the divorce rate has climbed over the last 30 years, "child well-being" has declined. Juvenile crime has increased six fold. Teen suicide has tripled. Drug abuse, eating disorders, and depression among youth have soared while SAT scores have dropped 80 points. Reports of neglect and abuse have quintupled in the last 30 years.<sup>iv</sup> Not all of this can be attributed to the effects of divorce, but it has certainly contributed to the problem in some measure.

Divorce not only impacts children. It takes a significant toll on adults as well. Philip Yancey, citing the research of David Larson, writes that "divorce dramatically increases the likelihood of early death from stroke, hypertension, (lung) cancer, and intestinal cancer. Astonishingly, being divorced and a non-smoker is only slightly less dangerous than smoking a pack or more a day and staying married! ...The suicide rate for white males goes up by a factor of 4 with divorce, and they have 10 times the probability of needing psychiatric care."<sup>v</sup>

That's a lot of statistics. Pat Conway takes these statistics and puts flesh on them when he writes about his own divorce.

"Every divorce is the death of a small civilization. Two people declare war on each other, and their screams and tears infect their entire world with the bacilli of their pain. The greatest fury comes from the wound where love once issued forth.

"I find it hard to believe how many people now get divorced, how many submit to such extraordinary pain. For there are no clean divorces. Divorces should be conducted in surgical wards. In my own case, I think it would have been easier if Barbara had died. I would have been gallant at her funeral and shed real tears -- far easier than staring across a table, telling each other it was over.

"When I went through my divorce I saw it as a country, and it was treeless, airless; there were no furloughs and no holidays. I entered without passport, without directions and absolutely alone. Insanity and hopelessness grew in that land like vast orchards of malignant fruit. I do not know the precise day that I arrived in that country. Nor am I certain that you can ever renounce your citizenship there....

"I began to develop the old habits of the very lonely. I turned the stereo on as soon as I entered my apartment. I drank to the point of not caring. I cooked elaborate meals for myself, then could not eat them.

"I had entered the dark country of divorce, and for a year I was one of its ruined citizens. I suffered. I survived. I studied myself on the edge, and introduced myself to the stranger who lived within."<sup>vi</sup>

## II. Divorce in the Bible.

What does the Bible have to say about all this? What does God think about it all? The Bible speaks to the subject of divorce in several places. For example, the Old Testament had specific regulations about the practice, and God stated clearly, in the Law and the prophets, that divorce was not His best desire for His people, and it broke His heart as well as His Law.

Jesus also spoke to the matter in the gospels, and we find part of His teaching here in Mark 10. In Jesus' day, there were two schools of thought on divorce among the Jewish rabbis: the liberal school of Hillel, which permitted divorce for any cause, and the conservative school of Shammai, which permitted divorce only for sexual infidelity.

Instead of siding with the current views on divorce, Jesus went back to the original institution of marriage, and He showed that God never intended that there be divorce, that it was God's desire for marriage be a life-long commitment. However, the Lord allowed divorce because of the hardness of the human heart, because of fallen human nature. Jesus also added the "exception clause", as it is known, that a person could divorce and remarry if a person's spouse was sexually unfaithful.

Finally, in his letters to early Christians in Corinth and Rome the apostle Paul echoed Jesus' words concerning the matter, but he added abandonment by an unbelieving spouse to the biblical grounds for divorce.

Divorce is nowhere commanded or even encouraged in Scripture, and it is always presented as less than God's best for a person. And yet in His mercy God allowed for divorce as a concession to and provision for dealing with our broken relationships.



Some have wondered why the Bible is so strict in its teaching about divorce. I think one of the reasons is because Scripture presents marriage as a reflection of the love of Jesus Christ, the bridegroom, for His bride, the Church. Every Christian marriage is intended by God to be a picture to a watching world of God's love for the church, and every time a follower of Jesus divorces, it shatters that reflection and makes the love of God just a bit more unbelievable, just a bit more difficult to comprehend and embrace.

Divorce is not just two people going their separate ways because they can't make a life together. Rather, it is spiritual surgery which has a lasting impact. "What God has joined together let no one separate" is what we say at weddings. C.S. Lewis put it well in his book *Mere Christianity*:

"Churches all...regard divorce as something like cutting up a living body, as a kind of surgical operation. Some of them think the operation so violent that it can't be done at all; others admit it as a desperate remedy in extreme cases. They all agree that it is more like having both legs cut off than it is like dissolving a business partnership or even deserting a regiment. What they all disagree with is the modern view that it is a simple readjustment of partners, to be made whenever people feel they are no longer in love with one another, or when either of them falls in love with someone else."<sup>vii</sup>

How do we interpret and apply the strong words of Scripture concerning divorce to our lives today? It is clear in Scripture that divorce is a serious sin and less than God's best for us. You can't get around that fact if you take seriously the teaching of the Bible. Nevertheless, divorce in the Bible is not the unforgivable sin in the eyes of God. It breaks His heart, but so do all the other things you and I do which are not in keeping with His will, whether it is the sin of gossip or lust or shading the truth in order to make ourselves look better than we are.

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* is one of our doctrinal guides in the Presbyterian Church. It gently offers the following advice:

"It is the divine intention that persons entering the marriage covenant become inseparably united, thus allowing for no dissolution save that caused by death of either husband or wife. However, the weaknesses of one or both partners may lead to gross and persistent denial of the marriage vows so that marriage **dies at the heart** and the union becomes intolerable; yet only in extreme cases...should separation or divorce be considered."<sup>viii</sup>

This counsel from our Presbyterian confessional heritage provides a pastoral guideline and offers some latitude in interpreting and applying the strong words of Scripture. And yet, it is clear that only extreme cases should ever qualify. That it seems to me is what the Bible teaches.

### **III. Divorce in our Lives and in the Church.**

Where do we go from here? What does all this mean for you and me today? The Bible is a record of God's dealings with broken people. It clearly communicates His expectations for holiness and right-living, but it also tells of His loving-kindness, His forgiveness, and His grace. In John 1:14, it says Jesus was full of two things: Grace and Truth. I think the Church should be as well. These two biblical principles are held in tension throughout the pages of Scripture, and the teaching of God's Word drives a wedge between both casuistic legalism and grace without obedience.

I want to offer the following suggestions for you to consider as we all seek to follow Jesus in these challenging days. **First**, to those of you who are married and who are experiencing difficulties in your marriage, I want to say, "Hang in there! You're not alone. Don't give up." It is tough to make a marriage work these days, and there are many pressures that weigh against us. But anything worth having in life is worth fighting for. You may feel like there is no hope. You may feel like throwing in the towel. But I want to remind you that with Christ all things are possible! We just celebrated Easter last month. God brought life out of death back then, and He can do it for you again.

Whenever people ask Lorie and me about our marriage, I usually respond, "I wouldn't say we have a great marriage, but I think we have a really good one. And it's because we work very hard at it. It hasn't been easy and we have our problems just like every couple, but our commitment to Christ keeps us committed to each other.

There have been seasons when I've been head-over-heels in love with Lorie, but there have also been other seasons when we made each other so angry that I wondered if we were going to make it. In the times Lorie and I have struggled, I remember my vows when I said, "I Peter take you Lorie to be my wedded wife. And I do promise and covenant before



God and these witnesses to be your loving and faithful husband, to have and to hold from this day forward. And by God's grace I will live with you and honor you for better or for worse, in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish until we are parted by death. This is my solemn vow." Each time I've wanted to give up but instead decided to hang in there and live out my vows, God has reassured me with a fundamental belief that He is the One who called Lorie and me together and He will see us through. And He has now for over 31 years, by the grace of God. And I'm as in love with her today as I've ever been. Don't give up, friend. God will see you through.

**Second**, I want to say to those of you who have been divorced, take your pain to the cross of Christ. Take it to the throne of God's grace, and let Him meet you in your time of need. You may feel like you have wandered so far from God that you wonder if you'll ever find your way back. But God is waiting for you with His arms wide open. Don't try to go it alone. There are others who want to make this journey with you. Seek professional help. There is life after divorce. I promise you that. Divorce is not the unforgiveable sin, and in Christ you can have a new beginning.

And **third**, I want to say the church is called to help those who are divorced, as well as the children of divorce. Kerry and Diane Pollard of our congregation have been an amazing blessing to our church as they have led our Divorce Recovery Ministry for a number of years, and they've helped scores of people who have been wounded by the pain of divorce. All of us need to fold our arms of love around those who have been touched by this pain and assure them that they have a place in our midst.

When you get divorced, no one brings a casserole, no one sends flowers. The divorced person is usually left alone to struggle by themselves. This is to our shame, my friends. Christ entered into the brokenness of the world, and He came near people who needed Him the most. What are some tangible ways you can help a friend who has suffered the pain of divorce, and what will you do in the coming week to reach out to them?

I would also urge you to think about how you can personally minister to a divorced person and their children. Invite a single-parent family over for dinner. Take a child of a single-parent along with your kids on your next family outing. It will mean the world to them.

### **Conclusion.**

I began this message telling you about Anne Caughran, the student at Austin Seminary. As we close I want to share with you a few more of her reflections, for it was through the pain of the experience of her divorce that God came near to her. Listen to her words.

"Into the wasteland of this existence, the Spirit breathed life, through the pastoral care of my minister who persisted in bringing the message of God's grace to me. It is difficult to express the feeling when one day I realized that my main identity is and always will be that of a beloved child of God. I could give up ideas of perfection, I could give up ideas of unforgivable failure, and I could live a life of reality in a continuous flow of grace and forgiveness, and this reality encompassed my relationship with God, with others and with myself. God gave me back my sense of worth and along with it came joy, peace, love and healing. No facet of my life remained untouched, and the desert still blooms."<sup>ix</sup>

Here's a poem Anne wrote:

In the past  
I have given lip service  
to the premise  
that God love me.  
But yesterday,  
as if for the first time  
I realized  
that I am not  
Anne divorced  
Anne rejected  
I am Anne  
beloved of God.



I know my failure  
and I know forgiveness  
so I don't say this  
with any sense of boasting  
or with any undue pride  
but as an accepted fact  
I am...  
Anne beloved of God  
and nothing else  
has true significance.<sup>x</sup>

May God grant us grace to uphold His Word in the midst of a broken world – a word that calls us higher to strive for His best, but also a word that invites us into grace to find healing in the midst of our brokenness.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Anne Caughran, “The Crisis of Divorce” in *Windows*, a publication of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, May 1993, p. 18.

<sup>ii</sup> Pat Conway in Focus on the Family’s newsletter, June 1991.

<sup>iii</sup> Pat Conway, *Op. Cit.*

<sup>iv</sup> Karen L. Maudlin, “The Fall and Rise of Marriage”, *Christianity Today*, May 15, 1995, p. 14.

<sup>v</sup> Philip Yancey, *Christianity Today*, date unknown.

<sup>vi</sup> Pat Conway, *Op. Cit.*

<sup>vii</sup> C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*, p. unknown.

<sup>viii</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 6.137.

<sup>ix</sup> Anne Caughran, *Op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>x</sup> Ann Caughran, *Op. cit.*, p. 19.

