

Take a Divorce Together!

A Reflection on Marriage as Covenant

Reflections Family, Discipleship and the Christian Life The Scroll, August 2018

Mark 10:6-9

Ephesians 5:31-32

Being married is a happy state in the lives of people, and if people stay married, I would say it is rather prudent to let them be. What calls for deeper consideration is the eventuality of a divorce. We will, therefore, look at the subject of marriage from the perspective of why the married should remain married, thus honouring God and glorifying Him continually, as the marriage vow goes, 'until death us do part.' We will steer clear of all the controversial topics, such as live-in relationships, same-sex marriage, triple talaq and so on, which are gaining currency and are being hotly debated in our society these days.

The first assertion I wish to make is that marriage is nothing but God's showcase of covenant-keeping grace. The most foundational thing one can say about marriage is that it is the doing of God, and the most ultimate thing one can say about marriage is that it is for the display, or the manifestation, of God's covenant grace. Jesus makes this point very emphatically. In Mark 10:6–9 we read:

"But from the beginning of the creation God made them male and female. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife; and they twain shall be one flesh: so then they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." (Mark 10:6–9)

This is the clearest statement in the Bible that marriage is not merely a human doing. The words 'God hath joined together' mean that it is God's doing.

Paul wrote, echoing Genesis 2:24, in Ephesians 5:31–32:

"For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church." (Ephesians 5:31–32)

In other words, the covenant involved in leaving mother and father, and holding fast to a spouse and becoming one flesh, is a portrayal of the covenant between Christ and His church. When we accept this precept, the meaning of marriage becomes such that human beings cannot legitimately break it, but should honour marriage the way Jesus honours His covenant with His bride, the church.

Therefore, if Christ ever abandoned and discarded His church, then a man might divorce his wife. And if the blood-bought church, under the new covenant, ever ceased to be the bride of Christ, then a wife might legitimately divorce her husband. But as long as Christ keeps His covenant with His bride, the church, and as long as the church, by the sustaining grace of God, remains the chosen people of Jesus Christ, then

the very meaning of marriage will include this: what God has joined, only God can separate, not man. Human marriages are meant to showcase the new-covenant grace, and the way they showcase it is by resting in the experience of God's grace, and replicating it out from a vertical experience with God into a horizontal experience with one's spouse. In other words, in marriage, one lives hour by hour in glad dependence on God's forgiveness and justification and promised continued grace, and we replicate that experience towards our spouses, hour by hour, till death separates us. In simple terms, the model of the relationship between Jesus and the church is the model we should adopt in our married lives.

In our text in Mark 10:2–12, the Pharisees came to Jesus and asked Him:

"Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife?" (Mark 10:2)

Whatever might have been their motives, they did ask the question. But today, people do not even ask the question. It is assumed that, just as tying the knot is natural to marriage, so is obtaining a divorce. In our times it is not only lawful, but easy and cheap. One has only to search the word 'divorce' to find step-by-step, do-it-yourself instructions for obtaining one. Let me say responsibly, cautiously and seriously that those who scorn the design of God and the glory of Christ, and build their lives and businesses around making divorce cheap and easy, are under the wrath of God, and need to repent and seek His forgiveness through Christ before it is too late.

Jesus knew that the Pharisees, in general, were an adulterous generation (Matthew 12:39). He knew how they defended their divorces. So He leads them to that very place, and asks them:

"What did Moses command you?" (Mark 10:3)

He takes them to Moses. But they should have been careful here. Moses did not only write Deuteronomy, which they are about to quote; he also wrote Genesis.

"And they said, Moses suffered to write a bill of divorcement, and to put her away." (Mark 10:4)

That is true. It is a reference to Deuteronomy 24:1. Then we read Jesus telling them:

"For the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept." (Mark 10:5)

This is remarkable. It implies, in other words, that there are laws in the Old Testament that are not expressions of God's will for all time, but expressions of how best to manage sin in a particular society, at a particular time, in certain instances. Divorce is never commanded, and never instituted, in the Old Testament. But it was permitted and regulated, just as polygamy was permitted and regulated, and certain kinds of slavery were permitted and regulated. And Jesus says here that this permission was not a reflection of God's will for His people; it was a reflection of the hardness of the human heart.

The disciples were confused. So, when the Pharisees had gone, Jesus put the matter more bluntly and more radically:

"Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery." (Mark 10:11–12)

It may appear that Jesus is speaking about the sanctity and holiness of marriage and of divorce in the same breath. If one feels confused, let me offer an illustration.

One day, a man came into his pastor's office and said that he was sick and tired of his marriage. He said he did not love his wife, and that he wanted a divorce. The pastor listened, and simply replied, 'Good!' The man was, understandably, shocked at his pastor's immediate response. He had dreaded coming to his pastor, knowing that his pastor upheld marriage very highly, and would never approve of divorce. Then the pastor said something remarkable: 'You know, if you feel that way about your marriage, I wonder whether your wife might also feel that way.' That struck the man hard, because he had had no consideration for his wife's feelings, and had not thought of them as worthwhile for a long time. Then the pastor challenged this man to join with his wife in getting a divorce, not from one another, but from the kind of marriage into which the two of them had fallen. In simple terms, he wanted the two of them jointly to take a closer look at the mess they had made of their marriage. The pastor asked, 'What would it mean for the two of you to divorce yourselves from that kind of messy marriage, and to start building a new one?' The choice this man faced was which kind of love he would choose: love of self, a sinful divorce, or love from God and for his wife, a divorce from a self-centred life. This is the message behind this illustration. Every married couple should divorce themselves from the sinful love of self, whenever they face rough weather in their marriage, and rebuild their marriage on the foundation of the life-giving love of God.

In closing, I want to emphasise that what Jesus says here in Mark 10:10–12 is incredibly good news, even to those who have been divorced and are remarried. Here is why. Jesus says, in effect: do not divorce your spouse and marry someone else; if you do, you have committed adultery. Why is it adultery? Ultimately, it is adultery because it betrays the truth about Christ that marriage is meant to showcase. Jesus never does that to His bride, the church. He never forsakes her. He never abandons her. He never abuses her. He always loves her. He always takes her back when she wanders. He always is patient with her. He always cares for her, and provides for her, and protects her, and, wonder of wonders, delights in her. And all of us who are married once, married more than once, or never married, if we repent and trust Christ, and receive Him as the treasure who bore our punishment and became our righteousness, are His bride. And that is how He relates to us. And that is how He wills us to relate to one another in marriage. Amen.

Anandkumar Peter