

What Did Jesus Say About Divorce?

A Sermon Preached by
Jeffrey W. Gibelius, Pastor
Second Presbyterian Church,
Carlisle, Pennsylvania

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Let us pray: Open our minds and hearts, dear Lord. Open our eyes and ears, too. Speak in these pages for your servants are listening. Amen.

Moses didn't just lead the people out of slavery in Egypt, he helped to create a whole new society. It was his responsibility to adjudicate disputes and help people to live together in very difficult circumstances as they wandered for 40 years through the Sinai Desert. He taught on many subjects. One of them was divorce. Listen for the Word of God as we find it in the 24th chapter of Deuteronomy:

Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man's wife. Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house (or the second man who married her dies); her first husband, who sent her away, is not permitted to take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that would be abhorrent to the LORD, and you shall not bring guilt on the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a possession.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 NRSV

Last week we looked together at a pretty obscure practice of the ancient Hebrews – ritual animal sacrifice – and upon close examination found that it bears a lot of resemblance to our modern practice of inviting the neighbors over for a barbecue. This week we're going to look together at a familiar practice – divorce – and a familiar Bible passage on divorce – the one I'm about to read. Once again, if we look closely enough I think we'll find God speaking to us in fresh ways about a painfully familiar subject.

[Jesus] left that place and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. And crowds again gathered around him; and, as was his custom, he again taught them. Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her."

But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. 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, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

Mark 10:1-12 NRSV

Today I want to correct what I think are some painful misconceptions about Jesus' position on divorce and help us to see what he really valued.

I'm not here to throw stones. Many of you know that I have experienced divorce—and remarriage. I'm not here to justify my past; I don't need to do that—nor do you—it's God alone who judges and God alone who justifies. Going through divorce is hard enough. We don't need people jumping to conclusions without knowing our circumstances or really considering deeply what Jesus taught.

After the first service today a retired couple in our congregation explained to me that they had both been divorced before they married. As newlyweds they looked for a church they could call home. The first one they went to turned them away, saying – I kid you not -- “You're going to hell!” But they didn't go to hell: they went to Second Pres instead! That congregation's loss is our gain.

Be careful whenever someone tells you about any issue, “The Bible clearly says....” The Bible is not some kind of cosmic Wikipedia; it wasn't given to us to answer our every question under convenient headings. It was inspired by God to point us to Jesus. In so doing, the Bible speaks on several subjects and not always with one voice. In fact, there are several teachings on divorce in the Bible. It is discussed at some length in the Law of Moses as you heard in our first lesson. Three of the Gospels touch on it, and Paul's letters expand these themes. Today

we're looking only at what *Jesus* said about divorce, and only what he said in *Mark's* Gospel.

My hope is that by sharing with you how one particularly hard passage can be approached and understood you will be better equipped to look at other difficult Bible teachings and interpret them for yourselves.

The setting for our passage is the Judean wilderness east of the Jordan River. Jesus is teaching a crowd of people when some Pharisees, probably from Jerusalem, seek to test *and trap him*. They ask Jesus a question dealing with what was, at that time, a hot topic of debate: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" [Mark 10:2] They want to trip him up.

Typically, Jesus responds to their question with another question.

"What did Moses command you?"

They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her."

They were referring to our first lesson and passages like it in which Moses prescribed the manner and circumstances under which a lawful divorce could occur: the husband must go to a judge, make his case, and get a certificate of divorce.

But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart [Moses] wrote this commandment for you."

Prior to Moses' time a husband could divorce his wife for any reason – even if she simply “displeased” him -- at any time with no third party involved. [Note: At the time, wives did not have the same privilege; divorce was not an option for them.] Moses' law afforded some protection to women. If husbands divorced without a certificate, it was illegal, and the husband had to return his wife's dowry to her and her family so that she could provide for herself.

By Jesus' day, two thousand years later, it seems that it was quite easy to obtain these certificates. A first century divorce certificate was found at Wadi Muraba'at. Translated and paraphrased, it reads:



I, Joseph, son of Naqsan, residing at Masada, today divorce and release of my own free will, you Miran, daughter of Janathan from Hanablata, residing on Masada, who had been my wife before this time. [Y]ou are free on your part to go and become the wife of any Jewish man that you wish.

It's shocking and sad to read this certificate. This husband and wife live on the tiny mountain fortress of Masada, likely trapped there during the year-long Roman siege that made Masada famous. Even there, under those dire circumstances, Joseph feels compelled to divorce his wife. Almost 2000 years later I can still feel the pain that Mirian must have felt. What was Joseph thinking? Unless we could stand in his place and see the marriage through his eyes, we can't know. And we can't judge.

Different schools of rabbis debated whether any grounds for divorce were required, and, if so which ones were sufficient. The school of Hillel argued that any reason at all was sufficient; the school of Shammai argued that there must be at least a claim of infidelity. In an age of quickie divorces some rabbis wondered if perhaps Moses had made things too easy. The Pharisees were trying to see if they could get Jesus to contradict Moses.

But Jesus will have none of their games. Instead of getting into a debate about divorce, he appeals to God's design—and dream—for marriage: permanent oneness between a husband and wife. Looked at from this perspective, their question about *when* divorce should be allowed is absurd. Hence Jesus' comment:

"... what God has joined together, let no one separate."

In Jesus' non-answer to the Pharisees' question has Jesus contradicted the Law of Moses? No. He's explaining the original intent of Moses' law. By requiring a certificate Moses was hoping to make divorce *harder*, not *easier*. His

goal was to preserve marriages and protect women who were often the victims of divorce.

Jesus wants to take things even further but taking a step back to basics, all the way back to Genesis. And surely he knew what the prophet Malachi had said about divorce a few hundred years earlier:

[D]o not let anyone be faithless to the wife of his youth. For I hate divorce, says the LORD...

Malachi 2:16

We hate divorce, too, don't we? I've never known a couple who divorced casually, the way they did in Jesus' day. In fact, I'm not sure that what we call divorce is the same thing they experienced. Today it is much more involved, with legal protections for everyone, especially any children involved. Nevertheless, divorce is still incredibly painful and costly to individuals and to society as a whole. No one is *for* divorce, least of all the God who brought husband and wife together in the first place.

Surprisingly, in this passage Jesus doesn't specifically say that divorce is illegal. Jesus doesn't say when divorce is permissible and when it is not. *He doesn't want to have that discussion.* Hence his conclusion: "What God has joined together let no one separate."

Jesus didn't stop there. Later on, in a private conversation with his disciples, they press him again on particular situations and they get Jesus to say, plainly

"Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her..."

The literal meaning of Jesus' words is that a husband who divorces his wife *for any reason at all* and then re-marries commits adultery and *visa versa*. Jesus allows no exceptions for affairs, beatings, abandonment, addiction, abuse, etc. Do we really think this is what Jesus meant, that there are *no* cases in which a person could divorce his or her spouse and re-marry with God's blessing? I don't think so.

Here's why. Consider that just before saying this, Jesus had said to his disciples,

If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the

unquenchable fire. ... And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell.

Mark 9:43, 47 NRSV

Does anyone think Jesus meant for his disciples to follow this teaching literally--that we should cut off our hands and pluck out our eyes, without exception?

And consider that in Matthew's Gospel Jesus says:

"You have heard that it was said [in the Law of Moses], 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Matthew 5:27-28 NRSV

Like many first-century rabbis Jesus often used hyperbole to make his point. In these passages he's saying that sin needs to be taken very seriously—it could cost you more than an arm and a leg. And he says that adultery is as much a matter of the head as the bed; don't pretend that just because you haven't slept with a person other than your spouse that you haven't ever been unfaithful.

Does Jesus think that there are some situations in which divorce and remarriage is wrong. Sure. I also think that he didn't intend his answer to be taken literally. He would have allowed exceptions under certain circumstances. The disciples understood this implicitly.

Matthew's Gospel – based on Mark's Gospel and some other writings written a little later, clarifies this. Matthew *explicitly* includes in Jesus' teaching on divorce an exception for infidelity. It seems that in Matthew's community some people were taking Jesus' words literally, so Matthew clarified what he knew to be Jesus' intent.

I think that it would be wrong to take away from this passage the conclusion that Jesus taught an absolute prohibition against divorce or re-marriage after divorce. It would be equally wrong to conclude that Jesus saw divorce as anything less than a tragic concession to human frailty, sin, and "hard-heartedness."

What we *can* conclude from this passage is that Jesus was much more interested in preserving marriages than in discussing divorce. This passage tells us that God cares deeply about every marriage. It reminds us that the pain of divorce is felt most acutely in Heaven.

Sometimes when we go to the Bible with questions we find that God isn't interested in answering our particular question but would rather lead us to think about the issue in a new way. One conclusion from all this, based on Jesus' answer, is that if we want to prevent divorce, we shouldn't simply concentrate on making divorce harder (as Moses did) we should work on making marriages stronger.

I want to continue this series next Sunday by looking at an issue facing our nation, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and our own families: human sexuality, specifically homosexuality. You may have heard that the PC (USA) recently passed an amendment to our constitution that allows the possibility that gay men, lesbians, and people living together outside of marriage might be ordained as pastors, elders, or deacons. True to the spirit of this series, however, I'm not going to tell you what to think about this issue. It's more helpful when you draw your own conclusions under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. I'm not even going to try to lay out the arguments of each side in the debate. That is better done in a Bible study rather than a sermon. And in many ways the time for debate is over; the decision has been made; the time for discussion has begun: "How will we move forward?" I would like to try to offer a way forward for our congregation based on humility and what we used to call in the church "mutual forbearance." The sermon I have in mind is much less about sexuality than it is about preserving unity despite our differences. It's about respecting and understanding. Every July 4th weekend I am reminded of our nation's history and our struggle to become "a more perfect union." This year that celebration coincides with the 148th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg. That tragic event reminds me how our nation knows something about the pain of division and the necessity of healing. I think we as a church and as a congregation can learn something really faithful and important from those lessons. I hope you'll come. Amen.

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Jeff Gibelius, Pastor

Second Presbyterian Church
528 Garland Dr.
Carlisle, PA 17013
www.GrowWithSecond.org
717-243-4571

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