

Prayers

Opening prayer

We praise You, Almighty Lord, for You take situations which seem unimportant, or perhaps impossible or unsustainable, and You make great things out of them. We praise You for the work of Your Holy Spirit, who sees more than we can see, who understands more than we understand, and who is stronger than any strength we can muster. For great things are done when the Holy Spirit does within us those things You want, Lord God, even if we do not perceive them! AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: BUILDING

1. For yourself

Within your life there are a number of 'small things' that will grow as you live by faith. Pray about them ...

2. For your friends and family

Pray that seeds will be sown within your family that grow spiritual fruits of a hundredfold and more ...

3. For the church and its work

In your church there is an enormous and untapped potential for good. Why is this so? Pray that this will be unleashed to the praise of His Name ...

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Meditation

If my people would listen to me, says the Lord,
Then they would know that I answer their prayers.

If my people would return to me, says the Lord,
Then they would find that I have always loved them.

If my people would read my Word, says the Lord,
Then they would not suffer any lack of knowledge.

If my people would love their neighbours, says the Lord,
Then they would find their own lives would be enriched.

If my people would do what I say, says the Lord,
Then they would discover that I am faithful to my word.

If my people would pursue the truth, says the Lord,
Then they would find themselves with me, in my Kingdom.

Life is a challenge for everyone, says the Lord,
And there is peace for those who respond to my call.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Mark 10:1-12

¹ Jesus left there and went to the region of Judea on the other side of the Jordan. The crowds gathered around Him again, and He taught them once more, as was His custom. ² The Pharisees approached, and in order to test Him they asked,

'Is a man allowed to divorce his wife?'

³ He replied, and said to them,

'What did Moses command you?'

⁴ They said,

'Moses gave permission for a man to write a notice of divorce and then send her away.'

⁵ But Jesus added,

'He wrote this instruction for you because of your hardness of heart. ⁶ However, from the beginning of creation, God

"made them male and female".

⁷ "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, ⁸ and they shall become one flesh."

So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹ So, what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

¹⁰ When they were in the house, the disciples again asked him about this. 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.'

Review

In this reading, Jesus is interrupted by the Pharisees as He continued to teach the disciples, and He takes the opportunity to speak about marriage, and say more than the Pharisees were expecting

The Pharisees were always around, and now for the third time in Mark's Gospel, they challenged Him directly, breaking the flow of His teaching and forcing Him to address their concerns rather than the important things He sought to teach. We must therefore read what Jesus said in reply to the Pharisees as a forced response, similar to that when He dealt with the accusation of being a demon (3:20f.) and also when He had to defend the disciples for not obeying the ritual laws of cleanliness (7:1f.). Jesus' discussion about divorce and His teaching about God's intention for true marriage is not less significant because it was initiated by the Pharisees. We should be aware, however, that this was not His agenda at the time the teaching was given, because He was now set on going to Jerusalem to fulfil His anointing and the mission given Him by the Father (8:31, 9:30,31, 10:33,34).

It is evident in the first verse of our reading that Jesus was pursuing His journey south by travelling on the western side of the Jordan (see below). He continued with what Mark calls 'His custom' (10:1) of ministry and teaching, for although Jesus' early ministry had been dominated by miracles and healing; the emphasis was now on teaching, as He 'taught them once more' (10:1). The Pharisees broke into Jesus' flow of teaching by using a tactic well known by hecklers, which was to change the topic completely, and their chosen subject was divorce. For the Pharisees, this had the advantage of taking the focus away from Jesus Himself and drawing it back to the Law and Moses; the heart of every discussion about true religion, from their point of view.

The question asked of Jesus was tantamount to asking Him whether He agreed with divorce or not. What Moses said in a speech in Deuteronomy about this (see below) was inconclusive, but the Pharisees, as ever, took a rigorist approach to what Moses said. They believed that because divorce was mentioned by Moses as something a man could instigate by a written notice (Deut 24:1,3), this was God's Law on the matter and divorce was allowed. Jesus, however, was more cautious. Nearly all the detailed moral laws recorded by Scripture from Moses' last speech were given to the Israelites because of the sins (or 'stubbornness') of the people of Israel (see Deut 9:6,13 etc), and after asking the Pharisees for their interpretation of Deuteronomy 24, He sweepingly dismissed what they said (10:5), and went straight to the heart of the matter. God had made both man and woman to be together (10:7,8), and because of this, He then gave His own command; 'what God has joined together, let no one separate!' Later, when explaining this to the disciples, He was equally severe (10:10-12). It was not that Jesus forbade divorce, but by explaining its link with the sin of

adultery, He made it impossible. This was new teaching for those days and it remains very challenging, even now.

The real problem many people have is that because Jesus spoke in such a strong way about the consequences of divorce, the Church has traditionally refused to condone divorce, not wanting to be seen as complicit in attempting to undo what God has 'joined together' (10:9). With some care and understanding, and by looking carefully at what Jesus does and does not say in this passage, it is quite possible to believe in the sanctity of marriage and also have a loving and godly approach to the observable fact that marriages do fall apart, even between Christians. However, we cannot walk this careful pastoral tightrope unless we begin, as Jesus did in this passage, by recognising the very important part that sex plays in marriage. For Jesus specifically condemned adultery, not divorce itself.

Going Deeper

If we are to dig deeper with this text, then we must look extensively at the background to marriage and divorce in Israel. This will enable us to see more clearly what Jesus says, and although the response of the disciples and others in Jesus' day was one of shock (see Matthew 19:1f.), it is important that we make a substantial response to the whole issue of marriage and divorce raised by this text.

The Jewish position on divorce

In order to study this passage more carefully, we must look at the history of 'divorce' in Israel. The ancient traditions reflected by Moses in Deuteronomy are not derived from any of God's 'laws' revealed in the Ten Commandments, but from the general practices of ancient times in which a man could dispense with a wife if he felt he had any reason to complain about her. In practice, 'complaint' about a wife could usually be defined as one thing; inability to bear children, or perhaps male children, as heirs and future family leaders.

Moses spoke about divorce only in one place in the law, which is in the first few verses of chapter 24. The passage is rather obscure, and what Moses describes is the situation in which a man divorces a woman and sends her away (24:1,2); the woman then marries again and the second husband also divorces her and sends her away (24:2,3). The command which Moses gives is that in these circumstances, the first husband is not allowed to take back again the woman he had previously divorced (24:4). Now you can see that Moses does not really say anything about divorce apart from accepting that it takes place, and the target of his command is the man who takes back a previous wife. It is typical of an over-zealous approach to Scripture that the Pharisees were prepared to read this as Scriptural justification of divorce.

In addition to this, it is not insignificant that there are a number of places in the Old Testament where God forbids His own people to marry those of other religious beliefs in the nations around Israel (e.g. Gen 28:1,6, Josh 23:12, etc.). As a consequence, when people like Nehemiah (13:23) and Malachi (2:11) discovered that large numbers of Israelites of their day had married women who were not Israelite and actively worshipped other gods, they were horrified. Nehemiah instigated what can only be termed 'mass divorce' proceedings (Nehemiah 13:23f.), and Malachi prophesied strongly against the profaning of Israel because of the foreign gods brought into Israel by marriage (2:10-16). When he prophesied 'I hate divorce, says the Lord', he meant that the Lord hated the fact that divorce had become necessary in order for the people of Israel to be made pure and free from false religious practice brought into Israel by their foreign wives!

For all these reasons, the Pharisees were quite comfortable with the idea of divorce. However, because they knew as Jesus did that God had 'made them male and female' (Genesis 1:27) and that marriage was given by God (Genesis 2:24), they did debate what the proper circumstances were for a divorce to be granted. The Old Testament simply did not address this specific moral issue, so this is what they put to Jesus in order to find out what He would say. In previous confrontations between them, the Pharisees had held a fixed and rigid view (e.g. of the hand-washing issue in 7:1f.) and Jesus was more open. Now they placed before Jesus a more open issue and doubtless to their surprise, they found Him far more strict than they!

What Jesus said about divorce

To begin with, Jesus did not challenge the Pharisees' reading of the law of Moses, He merely confirmed the general view of Scripture that the laws were given to control Israel because of their stubbornness (10:4). In other words, Jesus knew full well that divorce was a consequence of the sins of humanity, and as such, divorce was not an issue that would go away. Today, our reasons for divorce are different from those of ancient times, and hopefully, men's and women's rights are held as equal. However, divorce is indeed a fact of life, even amongst God's people.

Jesus went on to quote Genesis 5:2, saying that God 'made them male and female' (10:6). This text from Genesis summarises the creative intention of God to fill the world with His greatest creation, 'man' and 'woman', who together, are made in His image (Gen 1:27). By referring to these passages about the origins of man and woman and their purpose in God's plan, Jesus refocused the debate about marriage. If you read

these great texts from Genesis and include Genesis 2:22-25, you will quickly see that God intends a man to be united with a woman, and a woman with a man; moreover, this union is sexual. In this way, people are 'fruitful' so that the world can be populated according to God's purposes (1:28). All of this lies behind what Jesus said in verses 6 to 9 of our passage in which He quoted some of these texts and then declared the great marriage blessing; 'what God has joined together, let no one separate.' (10:9). What He said is the highest possible statement of marriage, and it identifies marriage as being at the very heart and purpose of God's plan for men and women.

In discussing the issue of divorce with the disciples, Jesus did in fact accept that divorce took place, but His comments raised the issue of sex to the very top of the agenda. He seems to say that although it is possible for a man to dispense with the services of a wife according to Jewish law, according to God's law, a union has been formed which is not in fact broken merely by the 'notice of divorce'. Consequent marriage with another is therefore equivalent to adultery in God's eyes (10:11,12). The dilemma which then faced the disciples was too much for them. In Matthew's Gospel, they complained 'if such is the case of a man with a wife, then it is better not to marry!' (Matt 19:10).

What Jesus said is clearly a severe blow to the idea that people can marry, and when it goes wrong, they can put everything to one side and marry again. Certainly, the church in recent times has been split over whether it is right to help people who find themselves in this position to be remarried in church. How can we uphold a high view of marriage, but one that recognises the complex and difficult situations in which people live their lives today?

Discipleship

Application

If we are going to answer this question, then we must try and obtain a clearer picture of Christian marriage, and the more you look into what marriage means today, the muddier the waters become! Let me say from the start that I do believe that the blessed state of a godly union between a man and a woman does indeed reflect God's purpose for both sexes. Indeed, a man is truly fulfilled when bound to a woman, and a woman is truly fulfilled when bound to a man. This is a fundamentally Christian doctrine derived from Genesis, advocated without exception by the church and experienced as truth by millions; but it is not the way of life for many in our secular world today. However, I believe that what Jesus said leaves room for us to be generous in Christian love to the many people who are married today who either have no real understanding of God's purpose for marriage, and / or, whose lives have been blighted by the kind of horror stories many of us have heard about and which lie behind many divorces.

It is my belief that Jesus spoke strongly about marriage because of the supreme importance of what He said for everyone in principle, but specifically for God's people. In His own day, Jesus had to stand against the loose attitudes towards marriage and the exercise of discriminatory male power which lay behind the practice of divorce within Judaism. In the sinful world in which we live, the state of marriage is confused, because in most countries, there exists both 'Christian' marriage and 'civil' marriage, and people commonly recognise little difference. There is in fact a huge difference, because only one of these is a union which seeks the blessing of God and identifies with the Christian spiritual heritage of the church. We cannot expect those who have civil marriages to know this, even though God will always seek to bless those who try to do what is right even when they do not know Him. There are also many people who are married in church, but have little understanding of marriage beyond civil marriage. Altogether, there are plenty of opportunities for misunderstanding, and the devil will use every possible means to create the tensions and mistrust in practical and sexual affairs which end up in divorce proceedings and the break-up of marriage.

Now, the church can either turn its back on such people when they find new partners, or try to deal with the theological questions raised by Jesus' tough words about adultery (10:11,12). It is my belief that although Jesus said that 'no-one' should seek to separate a husband and wife, the 'no-one' referred to means another person. So God Himself is the only one who can possibly have the authority to take apart what He has created. So, the only circumstances in which divorced people should be re-married in church is where they have quite specifically placed themselves and their circumstances in God's hands, willing for Him to deal with their past and make them worthy of their future. In terms of Christian ministry, an experienced person can prayerfully ask the Lord to break those ties which have existed between men and woman in marriage, and it is only by God's grace and with great repentance on our part, that such things are done.

Personally, because of the high view of marriage Jesus spoke about in this passage of Scripture, I would only feel comfortable (as a minister) with helping someone who was divorced, if they were willing to submit themselves in penitence to the Lord. Only He can deal with the complex nature of the spiritual ties formed in

marriage, and only His Word can save us from the just condemnation which Jesus speaks of at the end of this passage.

Questions for groups

1. Discuss the position on divorce taken by your church; and if you do not know it, find out what it is.
2. What do you imagine would be the response of the Pharisees to what Jesus said?
3. Is it right for the Christian church to condemn all those who are divorced outside of the church as adulterers, based on this text?

Discipleship challenges

- *Look carefully at this passage of scripture and come to your own mind about whether it is right to have an absolute ban on divorce within the church. The subject may well be affected by your own experience, so if possible, speak to someone who has a very different experience of this than you in order to try and gain a fuller understanding of this subject.,*
- *Pray for those who are enduring the horrors of divorce at the moment. Pray that God will bless them and help them to find out what is right, and especially how to forgive.*

Final Prayer

Lord God, and Master of all; make us worthy of our call, and willing to stand firm in the midst of chaos as well as persist through times when nothing seems to happen. May we be happy when Your Spirit moves in power, and content to maintain our spiritual nerve through difficult times. Glory be to You, Lord God and Master of all! AMEN.
