

A Heart for Marriage

Mark 10:1-12

Pastor Bryan Clark

In ancient China, the people desired security from the barbaric hordes to the north. So they built the Great Wall of China. It was too high to climb over, too thick to break down and too long to go around. Security achieved!

The only problem was that during the first hundred years of the wall's existence, China was invaded three times. Was the wall a failure? Not really—for not once did the barbaric hordes climb over the wall, break it down, or go around it.

How then did they get into China? The answer lies in human nature. They simply bribed the gate keeper and then marched right in through the gate. The fatal flaw in the Chinese defense was placing too much reliance on a wall and not putting enough effort into building character into the gatekeeper.

- Quoted in *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, Edited by Michael P. Green, Baker Books, 1996, p. 204

Just in case you were sleeping through that last line, I'm going to read it again—recognizing that this is not just the problem that the Chinese had; this has been a problem in the church for two thousand years. “The fatal flaw in the Chinese defense was placing too much reliance on a wall and not putting enough effort into building character into the gatekeeper.” I believe this is a problem that we as parents and we as the church struggle with often: too much emphasis on building walls, fences, rules, regulations and policies, and not nearly enough time and energy poured into cultivating character in the gatekeeper.

Now, there are a lot of problems with this way of thinking. One of the problems is that we are by nature edge dwellers. Did you ever notice how it seems like all of God's creatures are edge dwellers? Drive out in the country and look at a herd of cattle. They don't stand in the middle of the pasture; they stand on the edge. You go fishing and you find the fish on the edges of drop-offs or structures. If you go pheasant hunting, you find the birds on the edge of the field. They're just creatures of the edge, and certainly we as people are like that. If this is the policy manual and we draw the line here, then we'll go to that line. If the line is out there, we'll go out to there. Wherever the line is, wherever the edge is, we seem to find our way there.

If I speak to a group of teenagers on the subject of sexual purity, inevitably the question always comes up: How far can we go? And do you hear what the question really is? *Tell me where the line is so I can go right up to it and be technically okay, but not go over it.*

When I was going to Bible college in the late 70s, there were rules governing the length of men's hair. Your hair could not touch the top of your ear. Now if you think about hair styles in the late 70s, that was a bit of a problem. So we had what we called the “Moody salute” (it was the Moody Bible Institute). We grew hair that was longer than regulation, but when we saw one of the hair police coming we did the “Moody salute” and tucked it behind the ears. Technically then, it was not touching the top of your ear.

When we talk about giving, inevitably someone will ask, “Well, if we're going to tithe, give ten percent, is that on the gross or the net, before or after taxes?” And I always have the same answer: You're missing the point. It's not the letter of the law to see how I can fulfill the law and still give as little as possible. But that is how we tend to operate if we're going on the basis of policy: *Tell me where the line is, and I'll get as close to it as I can without stepping over it.*

Remember several years ago when the incident between President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky was in the news, and there was much discussion about what constitutes adultery: technically did he have relations with her? They had clergymen on many talk shows, talking about technically what is and is not adultery. And I sat there watching, thinking, *That's not the point. We need to be concerned with the character of the gatekeeper.*

The Pharisees were experts in this whole area of rule-driven, policy-oriented living. Many times they got in these discussions with Jesus where they would wave their policy manual at Jesus and say, "Hey, wait a minute. You're violating the policy!" And Jesus would look them back in the eye and say, "You people have a bad heart."

Well, that discussion comes up again in Mark chapter 10, as Jesus and the Pharisees discuss a very sensitive subject: the subject of divorce and remarriage. I understand this is a very emotional subject. And I also understand that when we talk about emotionally charged subjects, often people are prone to react, rather than processing it with thoughtful consideration. So what I'm asking is for all of us to just take a deep breath and see if we can process this subject thoughtfully and try to understand what it is Jesus is saying and what the point is that Mark is wanting to make.

Mark 10:1:

Getting up, He went from there to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan; crowds gathered around Him again, and, according to His custom, He once more began to teach them. (*NASB)

So Jesus is moving from the north in Capernaum down south into Judea. He is actually en route to Jerusalem. When we begin chapter 11, we begin the last week of the life of Jesus, so we are getting very close to the cross.

Some Pharisees came up to Jesus, testing Him, and began to question Him whether it was lawful for a man to divorce a wife. And he answered and said to them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses permitted a man TO WRITE A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE AND SEND HER AWAY." But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, GOD MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE. FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." (vs. 2- 9)

One of the things we need to understand as we go into this text is that Jesus was not giving an exhaustive teaching on the subject of divorce and remarriage. Jesus didn't initiate this; the Pharisees did. And Jesus was responding to a very specific question in a very specific situation with a very specific group of people. We know, for example, in Matthew 5 and Matthew 19 Jesus had more to say on this subject. So with that in mind, it's very important that we identify what the context is here that precipitates Jesus' answer.

We know that the Pharisees have asked a question. As a matter of fact, the verb tenses would indicate that they were continually asking this question. You can read between the lines and conclude that they were asking this question, and Jesus was by and large ignoring them. Jesus was teaching something else. But they just kept coming and asking, and they kept pestering until finally He had to respond to their question.

We would also want to ask the question: Was this a legitimate question, in the sense did they *really* want to know? We don't have to guess at that. The text tells us the answer is no; this was a test. It was a temptation. It was a trap. So they really didn't want to know what Jesus had to say on this subject. They were hoping to entrap Him. Their motives were wrong. Jesus knows that, and that will affect the way He answers the question.

They ask the question, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" In a Jewish culture, only the husband could divorce the wife, so the question is framed that way. But in the first century, literally everyone believed it was lawful. There were just two different camps as to what were the grounds. There was one camp of rabbis that believed divorce could take place for any reason. They even specified if the wife burned the supper, that was grounds for divorce. On the other end of the scale, it was adultery only. And those were the two camps that were entrenched.

So they asked the question, hoping to entrap Jesus. Now, what were they hoping would happen here? We don't really know. In the first century, the subject was every bit as emotionally charged as it is today, so maybe they hoped that with Jesus' answer, the crowd would react and He would lose public opinion. Maybe they hoped He would say something that seemed to contradict what Moses said, and they could call Him for being contrary to the Law.

You have to remember, too, this is down in the south under the jurisdiction of Herod the king. You remember Herod divorced his wife and married his sister-in-law. John the Baptist confronted him, and because of that John the Baptist's head was cut off. So maybe they were hoping that Jesus would say something that would upset Herod, and Herod would execute Jesus. Whatever their plan, they were hoping to tempt Him into saying something that would destroy Him.

Jesus knows what is going on, and He goes immediately to Moses—because He knows that is where they're going to go.

And He answered and said to them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses permitted a man TO WRITE A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE AND SEND HER AWAY." (vs. 3-4)

Now, what are they talking about? In Deuteronomy 24, in the first four verses we have this discussion on the Law: that when a man divorced his wife on the basis of indecency, he had to give her what was called a certificate of divorce. The issue there was if a man divorced his wife and she had no way to verify what the situation was. Then no other Jewish man who was Orthodox could marry her, because he didn't know what her story was; he didn't know if marrying her was a violation of the Law or not. So these divorced women often would remain single; and to remain single in an ancient culture was to have little or no chance for survival. It was a very different world than the world in which we live.

The idea was that if you were going to divorce your wife, you had to give her this legal document that says she is legally divorced and therefore she can remarry. So if a Jewish man wanted to know if he could remarry this woman, he would see the certificate and he would know that under the Law it was permissible to marry this woman. That was the certificate of divorce.

However, what the Pharisees were saying was, *Okay, this is our policy manual. There is where the line is drawn. We're going to go up as close to it as we can without stepping over.* And they were involved in a practice that some have termed serial monogamy. That meant if they were married and they looked around and saw another woman that they wanted, they would not

commit adultery—because they knew that was over the line. So they would divorce their wife, give her a certificate of divorcement, and marry that woman. When they tired of that woman, then they would divorce her, give her a certificate of divorcement, and marry another woman. It was this serial monogamy. In their mind, they were right before God because they kept the technicalities of the Law. So that is what’s behind their statement and what they’re referring to here.

Jesus responds to that:

But Jesus said to them, “Because of the hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, God made them MALE AND FEMALE.” (v. 5)

In other words, Jesus is saying that the only reason that is in the Law is because God understands that people are sinful and selfish and have hard hearts, and He is trying to minimize the damage. But that is not God’s plan. That is not God’s desire. That is not what God wants.

Then he begins to define God’s value of marriage by going back to Genesis. The wording here is very important: “But from the beginning of creation...” Jesus is establishing that God is the Creator; therefore He is the designer and definer of marriage. Marriage is not something that has just evolved over time as some sociological function, but God as the Creator had a very specific design and purpose.

And God defines marriage as male and female. We live in a culture where we are struggling to come up with a definition of marriage. But God defines it male and female. He goes on:

“FOR THIS REASON, A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH SO THAT THEY ARE NO LONGER TWO, BUT ONE FLESH. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.” (vs. 7-9)

Jesus goes back to Genesis 2. God’s plan is that a man and woman would leave their families of origin and they would be united together. The Hebrew word is a word that means *glued together* “...in order that the two of them might become one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no man separate.”

What is being said here is that marriage is not just a legal contract, but there is a God thing going on that many people do not know. They do not understand, but it doesn’t make it any less true that when a man and a woman come together and covenant together in a marriage relationship, they are sealed together in some way by the hand of God, that the two of them might become one. Anyone who has been through a divorce knows this is true. It is not merely the eradicating of a legal contract. It is the tearing apart of two people who had become one, and there is tremendous pain and suffering with that.

The idea that the “two shall become one flesh” is really a statement of the sexual union and reminds us why sex cannot be a recreational sport. God never intended it that way. It’s two people coming together in a covenant relationship before God, sealed for a lifetime. Therefore, what God has sealed, don’t try to separate—because the devastation will be tremendous.

What’s happening here is Jesus is raising the value of marriage way up. The Pharisees, in their minds, were technically keeping the Law, but their value of marriage was very low. And Jesus is saying, “Just because you’ve kept the technicalities of the Law doesn’t mean what you’re doing

is pleasing to God. This was not God's plan. God's plan is one man, one woman, the coming together to be one for a lifetime." So Jesus puts the value of marriage back where it belongs.

You are aware of the fact that we live in a culture that struggles to value marriage. Even back in the 80s, there was a book written, *Divorce: The How and When to Let Go*. The writers state this:

Your marriage can wear out. People change their values and lifestyles. People want to experience new things. Change is a part of life. Change and personal growth are traits for you to be proud of, indicative of a vital searching mind. You must accept the reality that in today's multifaceted world, it is especially easy for two persons to grow apart. Letting go of your marriage—if it is no longer fulfilling—can be the most successful thing you have ever done. Getting a divorce can be a positive, problem-solving, growth-oriented step. It can be a personal triumph.

- from *Mark, Volume Two* by Kent Hughes, Good News Publishers, 1989, p. 43, as quoted by John R. W. Stott in *Issues Facing Christians Today*.

I have to tell you, Jesus could not disagree with that statement more! Divorce in the eyes of God is not a growth-oriented step. It is not a personal triumph. It is a tragedy in the mind of God. It grieves the heart of God. Even if it's on the technicalities of the Law, it still grieves the heart of God.

Jesus is raising the value of marriage, and I'm guessing these words were quite shocking to the disciples. So when they have a moment alone with Jesus, they bring it back up again. They say, "Jesus, it was kind of loud out there and the crowd was kind of noisy. We're not quite sure we heard this right. Could you repeat what You said?"

In the house the disciples began questioning Him about this again. And He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her; and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery." (vs. 10-12)

We talked about the fact that Mark has written to a Gentile audience, and the Roman women could divorce their husbands. Jesus' statement reflects that; it doesn't matter which way it goes. If someone has a heart to bail out of the marriage and remarry, and bail out and remarry, just because that is granted by the technicalities of the Law doesn't mean it is granted by God. And if God hasn't granted the divorce, then the subsequent relationships are adulterous. These are pretty strong words here.

Now again, remember that Jesus is not saying everything there is to be said on this subject. He is dealing with a very specific issue. Matthew 5 and Matthew 19 include what is often referred to as the "exception clause" or the biblical grounds for divorce. But it would make absolutely no sense for Jesus to bring that up here, because the issue at hand is not the technicality of the Law. The issue at hand is the Pharisees' hearts and their devaluing of marriage. So Jesus is staying on that point and saying, "God values marriage. Make it work." Jesus is going for the heart. The Pharisees want to talk about the technicalities of the Law.

Now let's think about that for a minute. In Matthew 5 (often referred to as the "exception clause") Jesus says, "Divorce is set for the cause of immorality" (NASB says "unchastity"). People often say that the grounds for divorce there is adultery, but it is very important to understand that is not the term that is used. The term that is used is *porneia*, from which we get our English word pornography. It includes adultery but is not limited to it. And we would ask the question: Then what else is included in there? It is very vague terminology. As a matter of

fact, if Jesus meant adultery, there is a very specific Greek word for that which Jesus used just a couple of verses before in Matthew 5. If He meant adultery, He would have said adultery. But what He chose was a very vague term that leaves us asking the question: What are the grounds?

If you go back to the Deuteronomy passage, the Hebrew word there is translated “indecency.” What does that mean? Some would say that is referring to adultery. But it’s not that, because in Deuteronomy 22 the Law already laid out what was to happen to an adulteress. That was a capital offense; they were to be put to death. So that couldn’t be what is referred to in chapter 24 under indecency. So again, we’re left with the question: What does that term mean? What qualifies as indecent?

Then in 1 Corinthians 7 you get into this passage about abandonment, and we’re left with the same vagueness: What does that mean? What constitutes abandonment of the relationship?

A couple of years ago, we as a board wrestled through all of these texts trying to understand, *God, what is Your heart on this whole subject?* And one of the things we concluded is that the terms are all very vague. Most church policies are much more black and white than the Scriptures, and in our minds that is the problem. We really ask the question: *God, why? Why so vague?* I’ve concluded over the years that where God is unclear, He is unclear for a reason. It is not because God lacked the skill to make it more clear. I think God is unclear on this whole subject of divorce and remarriage because He doesn’t want us to do with it what we often do—come up with a neat, tidy, black and white policy statement—rather than looking at the hearts of the individuals involved.

I’ve had many people come into my office and ask the question, “What is the church’s policy on divorce and remarriage?” What they are asking is, *What are the loopholes?* And then they will go back and manipulate their circumstances in such a way that they believe they hit a loophole, so that before God it is okay. There are many people walking around who believe in their mind everything is fine with them and God because they hit a loophole, when the reality is they had a bad heart.

Our conclusion as a board is we moved away from a policy statement and moved to a philosophy statement. The essence of the philosophy is we’re not going to get caught up in trying to figure out if somebody hits a loophole or not. What we are going to try to assess is the heart of the person involved, because that is what God cares about.

That is the essence of this discussion with Jesus and the Pharisees. They want to talk about the technicalities of the Law. Jesus wants to talk about their heart, because that is what matters to God.

What do we do with this? How do we bring this down to application? Let me give you a couple of things to think about. Number one, for those of us who are married, we need to understand that God’s value of marriage is way up high, and the reflection of a right heart before God is that we will do absolutely everything in our power to make our marriage thrive.

I’m sure there are some of you whose marriage is coming unraveled, and you’re starting to think about whether or not it is time to get out. Perhaps you’ve been wondering, *What are the loopholes, and does this fit?* I would encourage you to reorient your thinking. Stop blaming your spouse. Stop keeping score. Stop pointing fingers and pour energy into cultivating a right heart before God. Because no matter how bad your marriage is, this one thing we know: If both partners will cultivate a right heart with God, any marriage can be healed and restored.

Second of all, for those of you who have been through a divorce, there is nothing gained by wallowing in the past: the hurt, the pain, the guilt. The past is past. It's over. But one of the assessments you need to make is: In the process of the demise of that marriage, what was the condition of your heart? I know some of you have had a right heart before God and have done absolutely everything in your power to make a marriage work, and your partner simply would not respond. You know that. God knows that. Move on.

But for some of you, when you look back you would have to admit, *One of the reasons why this marriage fell apart was because I had a bad heart.* If that is true, I would ask you to prayerfully consider whether God would desire you to go back to the people affected and hurt by that and acknowledge to them, "At least in part, I contributed to the demise of this marriage because I had a bad heart. Will you forgive me?"

First of all, that brings closure to you. At that point, you have done what you could. Move on. Let it go. But it also could bring remarkable healing to people who have been deeply wounded in that situation. I would just ask you to consider that.

For all of us, we need to understand that divorce is not the unpardonable sin. Let us not be so arrogant as to think somebody else's sin is greater than our own. We are all sinners saved by grace. Some of you that have been through a divorce feel like you have a big red "D" on your forehead and you feel like it will never go away. I want you to know something. If your desire is to cultivate a heart for God, you are more than welcome here. More than that, we would count it a privilege to join you hand in hand in cultivating a right heart with God, because we are all sinners saved by grace.

I believe with all my heart that divorce does not disqualify anyone from any role in the church. What God cares about is your heart. And if you desire to have a heart for God, God can use you in remarkable ways to build His kingdom. There is no such thing as a second-class citizen in the kingdom of God. And because God cares about your heart, then we need to care about your heart.

Our Father, we are thankful that You are a gracious, loving, forgiving God. Lord, forgive us for the times when we've convinced ourselves under the technicality of the law that we are okay—when in reality our heart grieves You. Lord, help us to orient our lives not around a policy manual but around a right heart for You. If we have a right heart, the outflow of our lives will always be right. Lord, I want to pray especially for those whose marriages are coming unraveled. Give them the courage to seek after You and cultivate a right heart. Lord, for those who have been through divorce and they know the pain, and for many the pain is very intense this very day, remind them of Your healing grace, of Your forgiveness. Lord, remind them that they still have a useful place in Your kingdom. May this be a place of grace. Lord, we commit this to you in Jesus' name, Amen.

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Study Questions

The Good News About Jesus According to Mark

A Heart For Marriage

Mark 10:1-12

Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. What is the difference between orienting our Christian lives around a set of rules and policies versus around a heart for God? Which is easier? Which is more effective?
2. Are we ever guilty of seeing how close to the line we can get without stepping over, versus really asking, *What does God want?* Is it possible to keep the rules or stay within the policy but have a bad heart? What would matter most to God?
3. As a group write a definition of marriage. How might your definition differ from the culture's view of marriage? In what way does our definition of marriage affect our commitment to marriage?

Bible Study

1. Read Mark 10:1-12. It is critical to understand that Jesus is not giving an exhaustive teaching on the subject of divorce and remarriage in this text. He was addressing a very specific issue related to a very specific audience.

Read Matthew 5:27-32 and Matthew 19:1-12 to confirm that Jesus is not seeking to be exhaustive on the subject of divorce in our text from Mark.

2. Since Jesus has more to say about this subject in other contexts, it is very important to identify the context found in Mark 10:1-12.
 - Who asks the question?
 - Is it a sincere question?
 - What is the motive behind the question?
 - What is Jesus seeking to accomplish by His answer?
3. Read Deuteronomy 24:1-4 to get a background on the text Jesus quotes from Moses. In Deuteronomy 22 adultery is punishable by death. Therefore, "indecent" in Deuteronomy 24:1 could not mean adultery. What does it mean? Why is this word so vague?
4. In Matthew 5 and 19 people often refer to the "exception clause" (unchastity) as adultery. However, that's not the Greek word used. It's *porneia* from which we get our English word pornography. In Matthew 5 the word for adultery is used in verses 28 and 32. If Jesus meant to limit the exception to adultery, why didn't He use the specific word? *Porneia* is a more general term that would include adultery but is not limited to it. What else did Jesus intend besides adultery in this "exception clause?"

Again, why are the terms so general or vague?

5. Read Mark 10:1-12 again. According to Jesus, why did Moses write the commandment in Deuteronomy 24? Does that necessarily represent God's desire?
6. What is God's design for marriage according to Jesus?
7. Is Jesus more concerned about the technicalities of the Law or the heart of the people?

Put this together with the vagueness of the language in Deuteronomy 24 and Matthew 5. Is it possible that God was very intentional in not wanting us to define rigid policies for loopholes, but rather wants us to focus on people's hearts?

Is it possible to feel justified in a divorce on the basis of a technicality (loophole) but still have a bad heart before God?

What will be the outflow of a right heart before God?

Application

1. What does it take to have a right heart before God? Is there any problem in a marriage that cannot be resolved by two people who have right hearts before God?
2. For those of you who have been divorced, you cannot change the past. There is nothing gained by wallowing in the pain and suffering of past failures. However, with a right heart today, there may be something you need to do to make something right from the past with a former spouse, children, etc. Perhaps your LifeGroup could help you process whether there's anything you need to do or not.
3. Let's all embrace the wonder of God's amazing grace that forgives our sins and once again makes us useful to Him in Christ. There is no sin from the past that disqualifies anyone from serving God effectively today. If you have done what you can to make the past right, put the past behind you and pursue by faith what great thing God has for you to do for Him today.