

## Mark 10:2-16

<sup>2</sup>Some Pharisees came to test him and asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

<sup>3</sup>He replied, “What did Moses command you?”

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

<sup>5</sup>But Jesus told them, “He wrote this command for you because of your hard hearts. <sup>6</sup>But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. <sup>7</sup>For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, <sup>8</sup>and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two but one flesh. <sup>9</sup>Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

<sup>10</sup>In the house his disciples asked him about this again. <sup>11</sup>He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. <sup>12</sup>If she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

<sup>13</sup>Some people began bringing little children to Jesus so that he would touch them. But the disciples rebuked them. <sup>14</sup>When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said, “Let the little children come to me! Do not hinder them, because the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. <sup>15</sup>Amen I tell you: Whoever will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” <sup>16</sup>And he took the little children in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

## Is it Lawful?

### I.

There was a famous man—perhaps he could better be described as infamous—who divorced his wife for the sole purpose of having a relationship with his brother’s former wife.

It sounds like a TMZ story. If you pay close attention to news stories, perhaps you can think of a relative of a famous politician today who had a situation like this.

The infamous individual described was Herod Antipas. The woman he had divorced his wife for was Herodias. As mentioned, she was his brother’s ex-wife. In fact, historical information says that Herod and his brother each divorced their own first wives specifically so that each might marry the wife of the other.

John the Baptist had told Herod: “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife” (Mark 6:18, EHV). Herodias instructed her daughter to ask for the head of John the Baptist to be delivered to her.

The whole story would have been juicy gossip for the likes of TMZ.

Mark chapter 10 tells about a few days in the life of Jesus as he headed toward Jerusalem for the last time in his earthly ministry. He was going there to celebrate the Passover with his disciples before he would complete the mission of paying for the sins of the world. It was a time when the attacks of Jesus’ enemies were coming fast and furiously.

The first verse of Mark 10 says: “Jesus got up and went to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan” (Mark 10:1, EHV). Judea beyond the Jordan was the territory of Herod Antipas. The whole story about Herod and Herodias was the perfect setup to create the perfect storm. Another attack of Jesus was in order.

“Some Pharisees came to test him and asked, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’” (Mark 10:2, EHV). A carefully crafted, deceptively simple, question if ever there was one.

The Pharisees were careful followers of the Law of Moses; they devoted their whole lives to it. Using the law they could bludgeon those who seemed less dedicated than they and condemn them for their lack of commitment to God. At the same time, if they carefully followed the law themselves, they could boast about their own accomplishments and their own righteousness.

With this particular question the Pharisees hoped to humiliate and discredit Jesus. The question seemed like a no-win. Jesus couldn’t say “no,” because Moses had made a provision for divorce in Deuteronomy 24. But if Jesus were to say “yes,” he would fall into immorality.

Beyond this obvious moral and ethical dilemma with which they hoped to entangle Jesus, there was a debate among the various sects of the Pharisees. One group insisted that divorce for any reason was acceptable, including if a man just got tired of his wife. That seems similar to the attitude of much of society today. The other sect taught that divorce was permissible only in the case of infidelity—if one spouse was cheating on the other.

## II.

Pastors and even ordinary Christians are routinely put into this same spot. Moral questions are often asked seemingly only to humiliate and discredit the Christian. Sometimes the person asking the question has an ulterior motive: validation for their own particular choice in an ethical dilemma.

How does one answer?

With Scripture itself, of course. “What did Moses command you?” (Mark 10:3, EHV). Jesus does not give them a sermon or a Bible study from the Old Testament. Instead, he turns the table and asks *them* a question.

“They said, ‘Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away’” (Mark 10:4, EHV).

In today’s first reading we heard about God’s institution of marriage. God made Eve from Adam specifically to be his counterpart. She was to be his helper and suitable partner. Adam was to be the suitable partner for Eve. That reading from Genesis concluded: “For this reason a man will leave his father and his mother and will remain united with his wife, and they will become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24, EHV).

But there was—and is—a long history of people misusing God’s gift of marriage. Centuries before God gave Moses the law on Mt. Sinai there were abuses of marriage: polygamy, unfaithfulness, concubines, family dissensions, fights, murder, and bloodshed. All that had been going on for thousands of years before the Pharisees approached Jesus with their question.

“Jesus told them, ‘He wrote this command for you because of your hard hearts’” (Mark 10:5, EHV). God permitted the law to come into existence because of the evil of all generations. These laws did not command divorce, or even approve of divorce; they simply regulated it.

“But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. <sup>7</sup>For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, <sup>8</sup>and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two but one flesh. <sup>9</sup>Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Mark 10:6-9, EHV).

Jesus allows Scripture to interpret Scripture, just as we should always do. The law given to Moses in Deuteronomy did not change God’s original blueprint for marriage. God intended marriage to last and last and last.

In verses 7-8 Jesus is quoting Genesis 2:24. The word “joined,” both in the Hebrew from the Old Testament and the Greek translation of the Old Testament Jesus used, means “glued together.” The word brings to mind the concept of glueing together a cutting board or a tabletop; one can see the seam, but the bond is so tight it cannot be easily severed. After being glued together, the two pieces become one piece, even stronger than either one separately.

Jesus explains the tightness of that bond yet again when he says: “What God has joined together, let no one separate.” This time when Jesus says “joined together” he uses a word that means “yoked together.” Like a team of oxen or horses, husband and wife are yoked together and therefore pull together as a family unit.

## III.

“In the house his disciples asked him about this again” (Mark 10:10, EHV).

“Did you really mean what you said back there, Jesus? Did you really mean that divorce only exists because of the hard hearts of people?”

“He said to them, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against

her. <sup>12</sup>If she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery” (Mark 10:11-12, EHV). Jesus didn’t compromise. Divorce and remarriage is contrary to the will of God expressed in the Sixth Commandment. God intends all human sexuality to be in the context of one man and one woman united for life in marriage. Anything else is adultery.

In the case of the Sixth Commandment, as well as all the other commandments, no human being has kept them perfectly other than Jesus—the God-man. Even those Christians who have been married to the same spouse for their whole adult lives have violated this commandment in thought or word, even if they haven’t broken it in their actions.

Something had to be done. This was why Jesus was on the road to Jerusalem. He wasn’t going just to celebrate the Passover with his disciples, but to walk the so-called Via Dolorosa, or way of sorrows or suffering. Jesus kept God’s whole moral law perfectly in our place so that he could walk that way of suffering to the cross to pay for every time we have broken God’s moral law. On the cross, Jesus dealt with our lawlessness. He gives us the free gift of his perfection so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

#### IV.

After telling us the story of the Pharisees and their question designed to entrap Jesus, Mark takes us to the tender scene of Jesus and the little children. The disciples thought it was beneath Jesus to deal with a bunch of children. Perhaps they thought it took all Jesus’ time and energy to deal with weighty matters such as divorce.

“When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said, ‘Let the little children come to me! Do not hinder them, because the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. <sup>15</sup>Amen I tell you: Whoever will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Mark 10:14-15, EHV).

Children are one of the reasons husband and wife are to be yoked together. They are to pull together to raise children to be not just children of the world, but children of God.

Too many Christians think that little children don’t believe; apparently they think they don’t matter. Faith is not something that comes by a person’s own will, but is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Faith is something that is given to little children, too.

Sometimes parents think they will give their children the choice of religions when they grow up. That isn’t what Jesus thinks when he says: “Let the little children come to me! Do not hinder them.”

Bring them. Now. The Holy Spirit will do as he intends—create faith in baptism. Keep bringing them—week after week to church and Sunday School. Faith must be fed so that it continues to grow, just as the body needs to be fed to grow from an infant to an adult.

“And he took the little children in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them” (Mark 10:16, EHV). Perhaps Jesus used the blessing we usually use at the end of a service: The Lord bless you and keep you; The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; The Lord look on you with favor and give you peace.

Come as a child. Receive God’s blessing as a child, trusting fully that Jesus has forgiven all your sins and gives you eternal life. Come without the questions trying to trap Jesus. Come simply to listen to him and receive his blessing. Amen.