

Mark 10:2-16

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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Joined Together

The Word of the Lord from Mark 10:9: Jesus said, "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Pharisees ask Jesus, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" The answer is that, yes, the law permits divorce under certain circumstances: Deuteronomy 24:1 says that a man may divorce his wife if he finds "some indecency" in her. The Pharisees' follow-up question, however, is going to be a doozy: it's going to be, "What do You, Jesus, think to be 'some indecency' that justifies divorce?" See, there are rabbis at the time who say it means that a man may only divorce his wife if she commits adultery; but there's another popular school of rabbis who teach that a man may divorce his wife if she does something "indecent" like, oh, burn dinner or look less attractive than another woman. However Jesus answers their follow-up question, there's gonna be trouble for him – and that's what they want.

You'll note that Jesus doesn't let them ask their follow-up question. He answers their first by including a couple of verses from Genesis 1 and 2, saying, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh." Then the Lord adds something more to His holy Word. He says, "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

Before we continue, let me say this: I don't like preaching about divorce. It's an emotional, gut-wrenching issue. Every case is different and painful, and so it's difficult to speak about it to a general audience. However, it's one of the most effective killers of faith. The devil will use the trauma with malice. He may try to get you to believe that divorce is an unforgivable sin, and so Jesus has no compassion for you; or he might goad you to work hard to justify your decision so that you convince yourself that you've done nothing wrong, or assume that your pain is penance and there's no need for repentance. But even if you were married to the worst monster in the world, you do not escape sinless. You'll experience anger, you'll struggle to forgive, and you'll wonder why the Lord let all this happen to you. You'll want to change God's Word because the law is hard to hear. Far from being a simple change in relationship status, the damage ripples for a lifetime into the lives of friends, parents and children. As C. S. Lewis memorably said, it's not a broken contract. It's an amputation.

On top of it, people think that the Church's only response is a judgmental look and the obvious news that "divorce is bad." You don't need the Church to know that divorce is bad, though, and we have far better things to say. So ... let's talk about divorce. If you're affected, some of this law is really tough to hear; but I pray that you will endure so that you might find great consolation in the Gospel afterwards.

Jesus begins by defining marriage. He stipulates that it's between a male and female, and then He quotes Genesis 2:24: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." That's what makes marriage to be marriage: the man leaves his parents to make a new family with his wife. He holds fast to her – serving and honoring her all his days. Finally, they become one flesh – physically, but in a lifelong labor of uniting in heart and mind too.

All of that is true for the woman too, but the Lord puts the emphasis on the man. We find out why in Ephesians 5: there, St. Paul quotes the same verse (Genesis 2:24) yet again: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." Then he

adds an astonishing statement: "This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:31-32).

Did you catch it? God instituted marriage in order to point to Jesus and His bride, the Church. Jesus left His Father and His mother: He left His Father in heaven to become flesh, born of Mary. He left His mother, entrusting her to St. John at the cross before He died. He died on that cross to hold fast to His bride, sacrificing Himself on that cross to save her. Risen again, He joins His bride – His people – to Himself. He unites you to Himself in your baptism. He gives you His very body and blood at the Lord's Supper. He says, "Abide in Me, and I in you." (Jn. 15:4). So Christ loves His bride. So Christ loves you.

Marriage is to be a picture of the gospel. A husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the Church, caring for her sacrificially. A wife is supposed to serve her husband, putting his wellbeing above her own. When husbands and wives work hard at this, marriages are strong; *and* they give a tiny illustration of the gospel. By watching them, their children can have an inkling of God's love for them long before they're old enough to sit still and listen to a sermon.

The problem is that marriages involves sinners. Sometimes, they even fail and end in divorce. The two who became one are split apart, rent asunder. They're alone, disunited. They're damaged, injured, corrupted. In a very traditional sense of the word, they are *adulterated*: they are less than what they were intended to be.

This *partially* explains Jesus' words to the disciples later: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." Those are difficult words to hear: if you've suffered the trauma of divorce already, it seems like Jesus is really piling on. However, with Genesis 2:24 in mind, let's expand His words to say this: "Remember, I instituted marriage to point to the Gospel. The love of a husband and wife for each other is to illustrate My love for My people and their love for Me. When a husband divorces his wife and marries another, he distorts the illustration and teaches that I might forsake My people for others, and *I will never forsake My people*. When a wife divorces her husband and marries another, she distorts the illustration and teaches that it is acceptable to turn to another savior (who is no savior at all!)."

If marriage illustrates the Gospel, divorce distorts and obscures the Gospel in the minds of all. If you're tempted to think that this aspect would only bother theologians, look at what divorce normally does to the future church attendance of those who separate. Even more tragically, look at what it does to the future church attendance of their children.

No wonder Jesus also says, "What God has joined together, let not man separate."

I pray that no one hears this sermon and thinks that I'm seeking to drive them away. I will even grant the following, though I'm wary of how easily it can be misheard and misused: there *might* be some times in life where divorce is the best of bad options, the lesser of two evils. I have in mind, however, extreme cases like physical abuse or where the lives of children are in danger. Often, though, that's not the case, and marriages end when they need not: it is common for couples to call it quits just because one or both say, "I've had enough and I'm not happy." In that case, I would gently note: as Christians, we are to imitate Christ's love to others. Which illustrates His love for us more: ending a marriage because it is difficult, or sacrificing to love one another when it isn't easy? I think the answer is evident, because you seek to follow the One who, while we were still sinners, died for us.

I did say that the law of this sermon would be hard to bear, and I am simply repeating what Jesus says. My prayer is that God would grant tender hearts that nod and say, "No matter how I wish it otherwise, I acknowledge that these are consequences of a failed marriage." It is so, so difficult to confess, "The stakes could not have been higher ... and I failed." Difficult, but necessary: until a wound is

fully cleaned out, the healing can't take place; and as long as you downplay the sin, you will not be looking for sufficient forgiveness.

But there is forgiveness! There is more-than-sufficient forgiveness – even if it was all, entirely, completely your fault. This too is in our text for today, and I point you to the words, "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." If it applies to marriage, we can also apply it to the Gospel.

God has joined you to Himself. He became flesh to do so, to die your death and rise again, to make you part of His bride, to join you to Himself by means of His Word and Sacraments. He has a flawless track record of loving His bride, even when His bride has been a runaway. The Scriptures say plainly, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." There is no asterisk to a footnote that says, "Except, of course, for those whose marriages fall apart." Divorce is not an unforgivable sin: no one goes to hell for getting a divorce. Only unbelief – rejecting forgiveness – condemns; and that is what the devil is going for. Remember that the devil will use that trauma either to make you believe you can't be forgiven, or to justify your decision so that you convince yourself you don't need forgiveness. If you go down either of those routes, you are rejecting grace and separating yourself from the Lord who shed His blood to join you to Himself. But what God has joined together, do not separate: for in Him, and only in Him, is life.

The Lord has joined you to Himself. He has forgiveness for you. He has consolation and healing for even the deepest of wounds. He has made you His own: you are part of His Church, His bride, forgiven and holy and without blemish. He has died to make it so. He will not forsake you now.

As part of the bride of Christ, you're a child of God. You'll disobey and sin and you'll bring consequences on yourself. Sometimes you'll stumble and fall and get hurt. Sometimes the fall is a big one, and there are few hurts bigger than a failed marriage. But do not doubt the Father's love for you, and know that the Father leads His love for you *with forgiveness*. Examine yourself, confess your sins and count on His grace like a little child counts on his parents' love. You are not forsaken. You are not unforgivable. Christ is always the faithful Bridegroom, and He's shed His blood to make you part of His bride. He has joined you to Himself. Don't separate! Don't run away wounded! His kingdom is yours!

A couple of final thoughts as we draw this sermon to a close.

When it comes to working through the topic of divorce, people tend to focus on the so-called exceptions that Scripture provides: namely, the Lord says in Matthew 19:9 and 1 Corinthians 7:15 that marriages end because of adultery and desertion. There are great dangers to making these texts the basis for the discussion. For one, people tend to regard them as escape routes, as opportunities to get out of a difficult marriage. The devil has a field-day with this: pretty soon, he will have you thinking like the Pharisees of Jesus' time, parsing definitions until you decide that the porn-link in your husband's browser history constitutes *adultery* meriting divorce; or that an insult constitutes emotional *desertion*, and therefore you've found your way out. Thus the evil one wedges you away from Jesus in favor of temporary relief. Please note: Jesus Himself says that these are in the law because of the hardness of your heart: even in cases of adultery and desertion, He still prefers reconciliation – does reconciliation at such a time not illustrate the Gospel?! But even if a marriage falls apart because of manifest adultery or desertion, you will find no comfort for your soul in that law, because the law provides no comfort. You'll find comfort and rest for your soul in the forgiveness that Christ has for you.

If you would like to speak with me about divorce individually, I welcome that. It is important to do so, because – as I said near the start – this has great potential to destroy your faith. So that you need not be afraid, this what to expect: I will listen, I will help you articulate your griefs and worries, I will probably hurt with you, and I will tell you what God's Word says. If the divorce has not taken place, I will pray with you that God will grant you the strength to endure and love through difficult times: almost always, remaining and working to improve a difficult marriage is far better for your soul, and I do not

want you to do greater harm to your soul. If a divorce has taken place, I will help you examine yourself, face your sins and get them forgiven so that your soul doesn't wither and your conscience isn't suffocated. But for your own good, I won't spend much time creating an argument as to how justified a divorce might be, because your soul does not find rest by saying, "I had a good reason!" Your soul finds rest *in Christ* by saying, "I am forgiven."

And while care of your soul may seem less vital than care for body, mind and heart at such a time, I can assure you that a cleansed soul will have a profound effect on body, mind and heart.

One other quick note: is remarriage possible? That's a whole sermon in itself. The answer is a guarded yes. The one who is divorced may in fact remarry with a good conscience if they have sufficiently recovered, and *if* that recovery includes honest reflection, deep self-examination and confession of sins that led to the death of the first marriage. This is not an easy task, but it can be done by the work of the Holy Spirit; and if anyone is in Christ, he – or she – is a new creation.

Above all, remember this: you are God's holy people, redeemed by the blood of Christ. Together, you are His Church, His bride. Where His bride wanders and sins, she confesses; and He is faithful and just to forgive all sins and cleanse her of all unrighteousness. He left father and mother to go to the cross in order to hold fast to you, to join you to Himself; and what God has joined together, let not man separate. Cling to Christ, and you live with the assurance that you are His, joined together to Him, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen