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Mark 10:1-12
...LET NO ONE SEPARATE

I'll be candid with you. Preaching on today's Gospel Lesson where Jesus speaks of divorce feels precarious, like tiptoeing through a minefield. Our natural inclination whenever the topic of divorce arises is to react, "But what if... but what if... but what if..." Some may in their minds skirt what God says about it while others may walk away with an unnecessary burden of guilt weighing on them.

Times haven't changed. The topic of divorce was just as confusing and emotionally charged in Jesus' day. Among the scholarly circles of Jerusalem there were two schools of thought regarding divorce based on a single passage written by Moses in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. One school of thought was that a husband could divorce his wife for any reason at all - even for burning the food she cooked, or if he just happened to see another woman he liked better. The

other school of thought was stricter. Divorce was still readily granted to whoever wanted it, but it should be more difficult to obtain.

Listen again to Mark 10: *Some Pharisees came and tested Jesus by asking, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” “What did Moses command you?” he replied. They said, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.”*

They had Him! If Jesus went with the school of thought that was lax they could criticize Him for His moral laxity and for the women and children who were left destitute as a result. If Jesus went with the strict understanding, they could point out how His words didn't match His deeds because He regularly associated with “sinners.” If Jesus didn't engage at all, it would be in their minds tantamount to being anti- Moses, even disavowing the Jewish faith itself.

Jesus masterfully drew them into their own trap. “What did Moses command you? You want to talk about what Moses wrote? Moses also wrote the book of Genesis where the divine institution of marriage is recorded.” God is the author, but Moses wrote the words. Listen again to Mark 10: *[Jesus said] “It was because your*

hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law, but at the beginning of creation God made them male and female. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.

Moses provided stipulations concerning divorce not because God condones divorce. But divorce is a reality in a sinful world and rulers who governed Israel needed civil legislation to deal with it.

So the place for us to start is not: what does the divorce court say about divorce. The place to start is not even: what does Bible say about divorce. The place to start is: how can I give God glory with my marriage. For in truth marriage does not belong to me or to society or to the supreme court. Marriage belongs to God.

By God's design, marriage is to be the lifelong union of one man and one woman. Here in Mark 10, Jesus quoted Genesis chapter two, verse twenty four as the basis of marriage. Genesis chapter two, verse twenty four: *For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will*

become one flesh. Here's a truth shocking to our American ears: marriage is not based on love. Love does not make a marriage. That doesn't mean love is not important. But just because you feel like you don't love a person anymore doesn't mean you're no longer married to them.

The basis of marriage is a promise, an unconditional promise of commitment made by the bride and by the groom. *For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife.* When they have made the promise God joins them together as one flesh. Jesus declared, *What God has joined together, let no one separate.*

When a person willfully seeks to end their marriage in divorce they are directly opposing God's will. Jesus calls it adultery. Mark 10 tells us: *When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. He answered, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.* Jesus isn't addressing exceptions here like when a person who is a victim of their spouse's infidelity decides to seek a divorce because the marriage bond has already been broken.

Rather, He is stating God's decree to counter the popular approach to divorce in Jerusalem: I'm going to dump you for another woman. Our approach to marriage is to be: how can I give God glory with my marriage. Therefore, our attitude about divorce is to be: *What God has joined together, let no one separate.*

At this point it would be easy for someone who has never been divorced to feel pretty righteous, to cheer on the pastor, "You, tell 'em, Pastor!" But anyone who has suffered divorce or been connected with a divorce in any way knows how devastating it is.

Besides, divorced or not, not one of us in this room has truly honored God with our marriages for the sacred institution that it is. To the contrary, we've each contributed to the harm and demise of our marriages. The young wife is unhappy and begins to harp on her husband. He doesn't respond so she doubles down letting him know how unhappy she is. He clams up. He disengages. She starts to blame him for their marriage problems. She doesn't realize if she would go against her instincts, if she would always greet him with a smile and a kiss, it would completely turn around the dynamic of her marriage. But it would require grace and forgiveness on her part even when she perceives

her husband least deserves it. That is something she is not ready to give.

Her husband doesn't realize if he would sit and give her his full attention for just ten minutes while she speaks, while she unloads about her day, if he wouldn't try to fix anything but just respond with, "I can see how you'd feel that way," it would be such an emotional cleansing for her that he would become her absolute hero. Instead, he hears her say how sick and tired she is of that drippy faucet, or of the fact that she has to go to a job she hates. He feels like he's being attacked. He gets defensive. A shouting match ensues. He storms out leaving her feeling hurt and confused.

She withholds physical intimacy until he treats her better -a doomed strategy that blesses no one. He fails ever to be the spiritual leader -to be the one to say, "I'm sorry," or "Let's go to the 10:30 service tomorrow," or, "Let's read the 'Meditations' together before we fall asleep."

Every married person in this room is guilty at one time or another of seeing someone else's spouse and thinking, "I wonder..."

We have failed to honor God with our marriages. We've treated our marriages as shabbily as what the Pharisees were proposing to Jesus. This is sin. The scary part is that sin divorces us from God.

So God calls on us to repent of our failure to give Him glory with our marriages. God wishes to be reconciled to you and me. He sent His Son Jesus to make that happen. Jesus took the blame and the punishment for our sin, took it away from us, when He suffered and died on the cross. Through faith in Jesus we are declared holy by God. God sees not a flaw in you. There is no more divorce between you and God, no more separation. From His standpoint, your relationship with Him has not even cooled. Because of Jesus' death on the cross, God is one hundred percent on fire for you, one hundred percent committed to you. Now take that faithful backing from God and use it to love your spouse with mercy and faithfulness in the same way.

Perhaps you are someone who has suffered a divorce, blindsided by circumstances you would never wish on anyone. Know that your Lord Jesus will never divorce Himself from you.

When you were baptized, God married Himself to you. He vowed His fidelity and loyalty to you. Every time you receive the Lord's Supper, God renews His vow of forgiveness, peace, mercy, love and salvation to you.

Perhaps you were the cause of a divorce. Don't be afraid. Turn to Jesus. Join the rest of us who are real sinners and need His real forgiveness. Trust that He is much larger than the greatest mess you could create. He erases it all and makes it disappear in His blood. He gives you today a fresh start, a new lease on life free from being under a cloud of disapproval. Take that new freedom now, and as far as it is in your power, make amends with anyone you might have hurt.

As God's redeemed people, we no longer need to live by stipulations, no longer by, "What if... what it... what if..." We have been freed from that kind of existence by God's forgiveness in Christ. Now we are free to approach everything in our life by asking, "What gives glory to God?" Let us live our faith in Christ by giving glory to God in our marriages.

