

“It Is Not Good...”

Genesis 2:18-24 • Psalm 8 • Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12 • Mark 10:2-6

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We’ve got some heavy lifting to do with this morning’s Gospel passage, which primarily has to do with the question “what does the Bible say about marriage and divorce?” – a question that impacts many of us very directly. But before we go there, let’s take a look at the passage from the epistle to the Hebrews. We don’t know who wrote this magnificent letter – which is more of a *sermon* than a *letter*. Over the centuries, many people have supposed that the letter had been written by the apostle Paul, despite the fact that the writing style is much more polished, and nowhere does the letter tell us who wrote it, as all of Paul’s other letters do. By the fourth century, Christian scholars doubted that the letter was written by Paul. Nowadays you can find some commentators still saying that Paul wrote it, as if that’s a proven fact; you need to know that it’s not; in fact, most biblical scholars think it’s *extremely* unlikely that Paul was the author. No, this was a beautiful creation by someone whose identity has been lost to history. It’s generally considered to be the most eloquent book in the entire New Testament. Some parts are so beautiful they are worth reading aloud, again and again: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.” [Repeat.] Isn’t that magnificent? It continues: “He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.” [Repeat.] Beautiful! This book is more focused on Jesus’ *divinity* than his *humanity*. The Gospels emphasize the *ministry* of Jesus; the book of Hebrews emphasizes the *majesty* of Jesus. Hebrews invites us to *look up*, to contemplate the wonders of the universe, which were created *through* Jesus and are sustained *by* Jesus. When we look up at the sun, the moon, the stars, all the bodies of the heavens, we see a reflection of *Jesus*. And the book goes on from there ... this is just the beginning. We’ll hear more from Hebrews over the course of the next six weeks.

Now, let’s get to the main business of the day. “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” That question leads to the heart of the matter: is divorce *ever* permissible? The first thing that must be said is that *context matters*. Whenever we are interpreting the Bible, context matters. That is all the more true when we are dealing with sensitive matters that have a direct bearing on the lives of *real people*. We need to be mindful of *two* contexts. The first is the context in the Gospel narrative itself: what are the circumstances that lead to this discussion? The second is the broader historical context: what was, or was not, allowed in first-century Judaism? How much of what Jesus says was directed to a *particular time and place* that none of us live in? How much is *timeless* and intended for all future generations?

The first question: What are the circumstances that lead to this discussion? The passage says: “Some, testing him, asked, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’” This is a *test*. Some of the Jewish religious leaders wanted to *challenge* him. This is not a *friendly* question coming from someone seeking

guidance about their personal life. No, people are trying to *trap* Jesus, to *catch* him saying something contrary to their laws, so that they could have a *charge* to file against him. Jesus had *opponents*, people who perceived him as a threat to society, or to their personal power and prestige. *This is not an innocent question.* This is not a faithful follower asking for wisdom or guidance. Nor is this a matter that Jesus put at the *core* of his teaching. This isn't the Sermon on the Mount, for example. This is not one of the *essential* points Jesus was trying to get across. Granted, Jesus knows there's a crowd following him, listening to him, and some of the people in that crowd might be wondering what he thinks about these matters, and he certainly doesn't say anything he wouldn't *want* them to hear, but he also must be guarded and careful with his answer because of the people monitoring and judging his every word.

The second question: What was, and was not, allowed in first-century Judaism? "What did Moses command you?" asks Jesus. They reply: "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." That is true. Deuteronomy 24:1-4 outlines a situation in which "a man enters into marriage with a woman but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house." So the Law of Moses granted *men* the power to divorce their wives for *any reason whatsoever*. All he had to do was "find something objectionable about her." That could be *anything*. Her appearance. Some habit he finds annoying. Maybe he just doesn't *like* her anymore. Maybe he's found some other woman. He could "write her a certificate of divorce, put it in her hand, and send her out of his house." Boom. Just like that. For even the most *trivial* of matters. *Women did not have that right.* If she found something objectionable about her husband – his appearance, some annoying habit, maybe she doesn't like him anymore, maybe there's another man she would rather be with, or maybe he's *mistreating* her, being *abusive* to her – tough. *The woman had no legal way of escaping from an unhappy marriage.* The *man* had all the power. He could dismiss her whenever he wanted, for any reason. What would happen to *her*? In that society, without a man's protection, without a man's *income*, she could find herself in dire straits. There was no such thing as *alimony*. If she couldn't find some man to take her in, she could end up on the streets. An unknown – but probably large – number of divorced women became prostitutes, because that was the *only* thing they could do to bring in sufficient income to survive. To put it bluntly: *the Law of Moses was heavily biased in favor of men.* Women had *very few* legal rights or protections.

What did Jesus have to say about this situation? That it's not right. "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you," he says. He's talking about how *stubborn* we men can often be. Men have a long history of creating laws that favor men and devalue women. Jesus invites us to come at this from a different angle. Instead of considering what's *legal*, he wants us to consider what's *ideal*. He lifts up a couple verses from *much* earlier in the Jewish scriptures, *before* the Law of Moses, from the creation stories in the first two chapters of Genesis. From Genesis 1:27: "So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Both groups – male *and female* – were created in the image of God. Jesus quotes this verse to demonstrate that the law in Deuteronomy did not reflect God's *original design*; it did not affirm that women, too, are made in the image of God, and are therefore worthy of as much *respect* as men. The second verse Jesus lifts up is from Genesis 2:24: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh." In this creation story, God creates *one* human, then all the animals, and finally the woman. God had concluded that "it is not good that the man should be alone," and that the man needed a *helper* and a *partner*. In the original Hebrew it's clear that this second human isn't intended to be *subservient* to the first, but rather *complementary* to the first; she is similar but different,

and there is a *mutuality* and a *partnership* here. More than a hundred years ago – *many decades* before the women’s liberation movement, and even before women gained the right to vote – Hebrew-English dictionaries were using the word “equal” to describe what this Hebrew word was getting at. That equality got obscured in many translations of the Bible; the better ones nowadays make it clear that *partnership* is intended. A marriage isn’t really a *marriage* if one party is *lording it over* the other.

So Jesus used the Jewish scriptures to point out what was *wrong* with the Jewish law. A marriage in which the husband has the power to divorce his wife for any reason whatsoever and leave her to fend for herself, vulnerable, in a world with few economic opportunities, *isn’t marriage the way God intended it*. Jesus is saying that *husbands should not have that kind of power*. He says, “So they are no longer two but one flesh,” which is to say, *marriage deserves to be treated with more respect than that*. You can’t treat your wife like an *object*, a *possession*, to be discarded and abandoned as you will. *That’s not a marriage*. Jesus also says: “Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate,” and that verse has been used – unjustly – to force many women to stay in very unhappy marriages. That is not what Jesus intended; he’s trying to *protect* woman by making it harder for their husbands to dismiss them.

Later, when Jesus is alone with his disciples, they ask him for more clarity. He says: “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” Jesus implies that *women should have the ability to divorce their husbands* – “if she divorces her husband.” If a man has the ability to divorce his wife, a woman should also have the ability to divorce her husband. Jesus *equalizes* things. He rejects the traditional understanding in favor of the *partnership* and *equality* that was in God’s original design. A wife should be on *equal footing* with her husband. But Jesus is also saying people shouldn’t be divorcing their spouse for just *any reason whatsoever*. “They are no longer two but one flesh.” There is a *unity* that has been created, a sacred *bond* between these two individuals that is to be honored and not taken lightly.

These passages are a good reminder to all of us who are married to *keep paying attention to our marriage vows* long after the wedding is over. Those of you who are married, I would encourage you to dust off those vows and look at them again – not to find fault with your partner, but to see where you are falling short. How are you failing to live up to the promises you made to this *vital*ly important person in your life? It’s *your* responsibility to do everything you can to live up to the promises *you* made, and it’s your *partner’s* responsibility to do everything *they* can to live up to the promises *they* made. This could lead to a conversation with one another in which you freely confess, in all sincerity and faithfulness, where you think you are falling short, apologize for your failings, and begin to make amends.

There’s also the possibility that *one* of you, in a marital relationship, might be sincerely trying to keep your marital vows, while the *other* one is showing absolutely no interest in doing so. One of you is “all in” and the other has “checked out.” If that’s the case, then your marriage is not what God intended. If it’s no longer a *partnership*, if you are being hurt or taken for granted, if there doesn’t appear to be any hope that it could ever be a loving and trusting relationship between equals, if you have sincerely tried to work things out, if your partner isn’t willing to talk about the issues that concern you, then I believe Jesus would support you if you concluded it was time to walk away. I don’t believe it was ever his intent for people to be *stuck* in an unhappy marriage where they aren’t being treated with respect, where they aren’t being honored like the beloved child of God – *made in the image of God* – that all of you truly are.

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