**What God has joined together** 20/10/24 dkm pm, h md

Read: Genesis 1:26-31, 2:18-25, Mark 10:1-12

Text: Mark 10:1-12

Psalms: 1, 119:9-16, 19:8b-14, 134a

God’s design for human society is that a man leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife for life in a new family unit. This design is perfect, like the rest of God’s creation, but ever since sin entered the world it has been under attack. Men think they know better than God. In the last 50-60 years marriage has been under severe attack in our society. In such a short time, sex outside of marriage and divorce have gone from being scandalous to being almost normal. Not that such things did not happen before, but they were certainly not accepted as they are today. Hardly a family has been escaped the effects of these sins. In the 1960’s we had the sexual revolution which promoted sexual promiscuity. In 1975 our civil law was changed to allow no-fault divorce. This attack upon the institution of marriage, an attack which continues today with homosexual marriage, coincided with attacks upon the Bible and widespread apostasy.

In a society like that of the Jews, which sought to uphold the laws of God, we might have expected the sanctity of marriage to be upheld. But the society into which Jesus was born practised easy divorce. The influential rabbi, Hillel, seized upon the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 24 to teach that a man could put away his wife if she did or said anything that did not please him. He ignored words found in Genesis 2 in a classic case of developing doctrine from just one passage in Scripture. Or maybe he was like modern readers who dismiss the early part of Genesis as being myth.

Chapter 10 is a long chapter and begins a new section in Mark’s gospel. Jesus has moved from Galilee to Judea (10:1), probably in the year AD30. ‘The other side of the Jordan’ points to the region of Perea so maybe ‘the region of Judea’ refers to the wider region. Travelling from Galilee to Jerusalem, Jews often went down the eastern side of the Jordan to avoid hostile Samaritan territory. Great crowds continued to follow Jesus, and he continued healing the sick and teaching the kingdom of God. His reputation had spread across the whole country. He was well known to Herod and the religious leaders; Herod Antipas lived in Perea while the religious leaders were mostly at the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus had already encountered opposition from these leaders, but the opposition will increase as he gets closer to Jerusalem. John the Baptist had, of course, been beheaded by Antipas for condemning his marriage to his brother’s wife.

**1. A test question**

The Pharisees came to Jesus to test him – either local men or leading Pharisees from Jerusalem. Pharisees had tested Jesus before with questions about the Sabbath and about fasting. They hated Jesus because he was not keeping the law as they taught it. He was undermining their authority, and not only that, but drawing huge crowds. The question of divorce was ongoing among the religious leaders, with the liberal school of Hillel, already mentioned, pitted against the conservative school of Shammai. The difference grew out of the term ‘*ervath dabar*’ or ‘indecency’ found in Deuteronomy 24:1. The Hebrew literally means ‘nakedness of the thing’. Shammai saw it as a reference to adultery, while Hillel said it could be anything, including spoiling the husband’s dinner.

The Pharisees were not really interested in finding out the truth from the Son of God. They were not even interested in learning about God’s design for marriage. They wanted to get Jesus to side with one or other party on this question. In this way they hoped to stir up opposition against Jesus. Herod might even take action if Jesus spoke against the way he took his brother’s wife, Herodias.

The Pharisee’s question was not about divorce as such, but about the grounds for divorce. Matthew makes this clear in his report of their question: ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason’ – or ‘for any and every reason’ (10:2, Mat 19:3). They assumed divorce with a certificate was legal, but may have opposed the popular liberal teaching of Hillel (Mat 5:31). Such liberty was no doubt favoured by a lot of men. They could let their lustful hearts run wild, although Jesus had previously condemned such lust as akin to adultery (Mat 5:28).

Women were not permitted to divorce their husband in Jewish society. Moreover, they were usually dependent on their husband for sustenance. The giving of a certificate of divorce was a way of regulating divorce and protecting the woman to some extent. The husband could not keep putting her out and going and taking her back. He had to give her a certificate of divorce, and with this in her hand he could not take her back (Deut 24:4). The law given by Moses offered the woman this protection. Divorce legally ends a marriage. I recently heard of a divorced woman contesting the will of her ex-husband but to no avail. On the other hand, a friend whose father died shortly after her remarriage was surprised to find her new husband got half her father’s estate, because although separated she was not yet divorced, the second time.

I was listening to the story of a woman in Iran who wanted to leave an abusive husband. There was no provision in the law of the Islamic regime for her to do so. Whenever she fled to her parents or a friend’s place for safety he would come and take her back. The only way for her to escape was to leave the country, which she did on the last seat of the last flight out. Her husband threatened to cancel her passport the next day.

The Pharisees were clever men- in their own eyes. But Jesus saw behind their question. He knew about the ‘certificate of divorce’ spoken of by Moses just as well as they did. They spent their whole time trying to codify the law, or in some cases trying to find loopholes in the law. They had lost sight of the whole purpose of the law and of God’s wonderful creation. Moreover, their legalism did not allow for matters of the spirit or the heart; this is what legalism does. Their hearts were not moved by the reminder that God instituted marriage, that he instituted for one man and one woman to be joined in love for one another ‘till death do us part’.

Jesus saw that these Pharisees were trying to trap him in their debate about the law given by Moses so went along for the moment, asking them what Moses commanded (10:3). They told him that Moses ‘permitted’ divorce with the writing of a certificate (10:4). What they said was true but the next question was, why did Moses permit them to dismiss their wife. This question is not spoken here in Mark’s account but is in Matthew 19:7. Jesus answered this question saying, ‘Because of the hardness of your heart he wrote this command’ (10:5).

Moses permitted divorce ‘because of the hardness of your hearts’ said Jesus (10:5). God hates divorce (Mal 2:16). Divorce goes against what God created good. God knows the hurt and the heartbreak that comes from divorce. No one ever wins when it comes to divorce. Everyone loses emotionally and financially, and children especially are deeply hurt, indeed sinned against. But when sin came into world what is arguably the peak of God’s good creation did not escape the corruption of sin. God sent his only begotten Son, Jesus, to die on the cross that our sin might be forgiven, and that through the written word and the indwelling Holy Spirit we might stand against sin. In Christ we can stand against the world, the flesh and the devil when they join forces to destroy our marriage.

**2. A creation ordinance**

Jesus was not prepared to answer the question about divorce within the confines of rabbinic teaching or even Mosaic Law. He took his questioners back to the Creator and his design for marriage established in the beginning. Jesus referred the Pharisees to what is written in Genesis 1 and 2. In the beginning, when God made the heavens and the earth and all that exists, he made man in his own image; he ‘made them male and female’ (10:6, Gen 1:27). If the Jews needed to hear this truth how much more we need to hear it today, with the ungodly attacking not just the institution of marriage but gender identity itself. We need to display these words on billboards across the city: ‘God made us male and female’. Those who think they are a woman trapped in man’s body, or vice versa, need to hear these words of God. Can anything be clearer in nature or in the Bible? Not according to Jesus.

The Bible goes on to say, “God blessed them and said, ‘be fruitful and multiply’” (Gen 1:28). But male and female was not just for the purpose of reproduction. He made a ‘helper comparable to him’ (Gen 2:18). God made woman from the rib of the man. Apparently the ‘gender confusers’ want to remove the word ‘man’ from the word ‘woman’. Do be aware of the semantics being pushed by the enemies of God. God created us male and female and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’ (10:7,8). One flesh means sexual union, but it means much more. It means love not lust. It means God’s design is for sex within the confines of marriage, and not for one to be joined to a harlot (1Cor 6:16).

Jesus goes on to declare, ‘Therefore, what God has joined together let not man separate’ (10:9, Mat 19:6). We are familiar with these words because we hear them at most weddings- although less so these days. The words apply to all marriages, not just Christian marriages. Many, even some Christians, do not want to acknowledge God in this way but marriage is a creation ordinance. Marriage applies to believer and unbeliever alike. Just because people do not acknowledge God does not mean God does not exist or does not care. He is the judge of all men and women. We must honour all marriages, not just Christian marriages. Even if a believer marries an unbeliever, contrary to the teaching of the Bible, the marriage must still be honoured. As someone said, ‘We do not make people get married again when they believe’. We simply ask them to get married if they have been living together without being married.

The Pharisees asked Jesus about the law: ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’(10:2). Jesus pointed them beyond Moses and the law, to God himself. It is before God, not just the law, that people get married. It is God who joins a man and a woman in marriage. The law, with its prohibition on adultery, came later. The law came because of sin. Sin affected marriage more than anything else in creation- apart from bringing death to all. Sin corrupted our relationship with God, and it corrupted our relationships with other people, especially the most intimate and holy of all human relationships, that of marriage.

**3. Adultery**

The Pharisees were silenced by the answer Jesus gave; their test question did not work. But moving into the house, his disciples asked him again about the same matter (10:10). They would have been aware of Moses’ command concerning a certificate of divorce and of the ongoing debate among the theologians, and probably as surprised by Jesus’ answer as the Pharisees were. Jesus did not speak against Moses; he said Moses permitted divorce because of hard and sinful hearts. The original command given by Moses was, ‘You shall not commit adultery’ (Exod 20:14).

The permission Moses gave for a man to divorce his wife did not change the seventh commandment: ‘You shall not commit adultery’. For a man to put away his lawful wife, even with a certificate of divorce, meant he would commit adultery, and he was making her do the same (10:11). The understanding is that she will need to remarry, and that he will also remarry- probably his intention from the start. If it is the woman who divorces her husband to marry another man, it is the same; she is committing adultery (10:12). While there was no provision in Jewish law for a woman to divorce her husband, it does not mean this did not happen; Josephus indicates that Herodias deserted Philip to marry Antipas. Besides, Gentile law was different to Jewish law.

Remarriage by husband or wife after divorce means committing adultery, unless the divorce is legitimate according to God’s word. Jesus did not see the giving of a certificate of divorce as overriding the command regarding adultery. Unlike many today, the Pharisees wanted to avoid adultery. Adultery, as in sex outside marriage, is sin. Some divorced people do not remarry for this reason.

Is there such a thing a legitimate divorce according to God’s word, divorce that does not bring the charge of adultery? The parallel passage in Matthew’s gospel has just what Mark records but an additional phrase often called the exception clause. This clause is found in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9; namely, except for fornication or sexual immorality. We dare not say that Matthew was adding to what Jesus said, or that Mark takes priority; we might consider their focus on a different audience, but this does not help our understanding. We must consider is the text itself.

‘Fornication’ or ‘sexual immorality’ translates the Greek word ‘*porneia*’ in Matthew 19:9. Because Jesus used this word and not the word for adultery, some say Jesus was not referring to adultery. They remind us that adultery carried the death penalty in that day; although Jospeh only spoke of making Mary a ‘public example’ if he put her away (Mat 1:19), and the woman caught in adultery was not sentenced to death but forgiven by Jesus (John 8:11). Other scholars go back to Deuteronomy 24 trying to determine the nature of the ‘indecency’ that Moses spoke about. ‘*Porneia’* however, is a broad term for sexual immorality which can include adultery. It includes what happened to a friend of mine whose wife became a lesbian.

Jesus permitted a man to divorce his wife for sexual immorality, but he did not command it- any more than he commanded the death penalty for adultery. Jesus proclaims forgiveness to those who repent. And he makes it possible for us to forgive those who sin against us.

The apostle Paul referred to another matter, that of a mixed marriage between a believer and unbeliever. He said that if the unbelieving spouse of a believer wants to depart them, let that person leave the marriage, but do not encourage them (1Cor 7:15).

Marriage, as in one man and one woman being joined together as one flesh, as one entity, is a divine institution. Marriage was designed by God as an exclusive life-long relationship. When sin entered the world this relationship, like all human relationships, came under attack. But Jesus defeated sin at the cross. In Christ we can live together as husband and wife as God intended. And in the common grace of God unbelievers can also be faithful in marriage. Let us be in prayer for all marriages, that God in his grace will preserve them to the benefit all involved, and to the glory of God. ‘What God has joined together let not man separate’.