

DIVORCE AND DISCIPLESHIP  
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church  
Columbia, Tennessee  
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Mark 10:1-16

I called down to the courthouse to get some statistics on marriage and divorce. In Maury County in the first eight months of this year, 420 marriage licenses were issued. In the same period, 274 divorces were filed in the office of Clerk and Master—65% of the marriage number. So this year, at least, we are quite a bit ahead of the national average of one divorce for every two marriages.

I want to take an informal poll here. If you have been divorced, or if someone in your family has been divorced—your parents, a brother or sister, one of your children—I want you to raise your hand. I raise my hand because I am a part of that group. There are few families in our world that are unaffected by divorce.

What shall we say about divorce? We need some way of understanding this issue. We need some insight that will allow us to think about divorce with compassion that helps us to get through these difficult times.

But compassion is exactly what we do not seem to get with Jesus. Here the usually compassionate and loving Jesus speaks words which by any measure seem harsh and judgmental and uncompromising: “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” How do we come to grips with a harsh saying like that?

A little background information might help: In Jesus’ day, as in ours, divorce was a hotly debated issue. The law of Moses said that adultery was not permitted except in cases of “indecency.”<sup>1</sup> But what constituted indecency? There were two opposing interpretations. One group said: “We don’t think divorce should be allowed unless it can

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 24:1.

definitely be proved that one partner or other has committed adultery. After all, that's what the commandment says."

"Nonsense," replied the other group, "divorce has to be allowed for more than that. Why, a man ought to be able to divorce his wife if she cooks him a bad meal, or if she's a bad housekeeper, or even if he sees Angelina Jolie walking down the street and decides he'd like to trade in the old model for a new one."

So when Jesus came along, they put the question to him: Tell us, Jesus, what constitutes a legal divorce? Do you side with the liberals or the conservatives? It says they asked this to "test" Jesus, to trap him. Which ever way he answered, he'd make someone mad.

Jesus would have none of it. Here as always, Jesus had a way of being able to cut through the fluff of the debate and get right to the heart of the matter. Here he dismisses their question altogether. The issue, Jesus says, is not in trying to discover loopholes which allow for divorce. Rather, we are to ask: What is the will of God?

He quotes from Genesis: "God made them male and female." "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." And Jesus adds his own words: "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

Jesus comes across here as one who does not approve of divorce, period. And that sounds harsh, until we think: We don't approve of divorce, either. Who of us can say we approve of divorce? None of us do, not even those—or especially those—who have gone through the pain of such a separation.

When Jesus says that the one who divorces and remarries is committing adultery, he is not announcing a harsh new law. Instead, Jesus is telling it the way it is. A divorce decree may sever the legal relationship, but it can never completely sever the ties of life. Emotional and personal ties remain which cannot be settled by legal pronouncements. What God has joined together in marriage, human beings cannot rend asunder even by the legal means of divorce.

A heard a comedian say one time that the best gift he got when he got married was a home movie of the ceremony. He said that later when he and his wife would get into an argument, he would go off by himself and run that movie backwards and walk out a free man!

Sometimes we might wish we could do that: Run our lives backwards to the point that past mistakes had never happened. But we know it cannot be. The past is real, and continues to affect our lives in the present and into the future. When a marriage fails for whatever reason, the divorce decree may be issued, but the emotional and personal ties remain. As someone has said: “Husband and wife may be estranged, but they can never be strangers.”<sup>2</sup>

The Pharisees were trying to put limits on marriage. At what point, they wondered, can I break it off?

But Jesus understood that God intends no such limits. Jesus invites us to seek, not what is legally permitted, but what is intended by God. And God’s will for us is love and community and companionship.

We’re all in favor of that. But divorce still exists, despite all our efforts to overcome it. The usual reason that is given is that, well, people don’t take their wedding vows seriously anymore. They put more thought into buying a refrigerator at Loews than into whom they will marry.

I have to say that while that is surely true for some couples, it has not been my experience. What I more often see is couples who take their vows with enormous seriousness, who struggle to make marriages work, who spend time and money to go to counselors. And yet divorces continue, even among those who passionately wish it were otherwise.

Divorce is painful because divorce is a failure. But it is not just a failure of the couple. It is a failure of all of us, who should have supported the couple but did not, who put unreal expectations on them that they could not live up to.

One minister friend puts it this way:

Every time I speak the marriage vows and ask the couple to repeat after me, the cast of participants—the bride, the groom, me as the minister [and we might add: the bridesmaids, the ushers, the invited guests]—we are all sinners. And because of our sinfulness we sometimes fail to keep our promises. Sometimes, in spite of

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<sup>2</sup> William Willimon, “The Risk of Divorce.” *The Christian Century*, June 20, 1979.

our highest hopes and intentions, we simply fail. Sometimes—through abuse or infidelity or just plain selfishness—the marriage relationship melts down.<sup>3</sup>

Even within marriage, Jesus' words help us to see that those who stay married do so because of God's grace, and not because married people are somehow better than those who divorce. One of the prayers of the marriage service says: "Give them courage, when [not *if*] they hurt each other . . . to seek your forgiveness and to forgive each other."<sup>4</sup>

Our Lord knows that, in marriage and out, while the past cannot be undone, it can be forgiven and new life be offered. "The past is finished and gone, everything is fresh and new." That is the new possibility offered to us in Jesus Christ.

As a minister in the church of Jesus Christ, I have officiated in many second marriages. It has been my privilege to do so. Here are two people who come to be married, who have been wounded in past relationships, who know well the pitfalls of marriage. Yet with our Lord they see marriage is a gift of God. Our task as the church is not to stand in judgment of them, for "if the Lord kept track of our sins, who of us could stand?" Rather, we celebrate the forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ, and affirm the newness that Jesus offers us.

One final word: The first verse of this passage tells us that Jesus spoke these words on his way to Jerusalem, the way to the cross. To those of us who would be disciples of Jesus, it reminds us that the nature of discipleship is twofold: On the one hand it calls us to rigorous discipleship, of taking up our cross and following, of sacrificing all if need be in the service of our Lord. Following our Lord is demanding business, and we all know how we have failed, not only in marriage, but in other areas of life, to meet that demand. Lord have mercy upon us.

But that same cross is also about forgiveness. The failure is ours, but he has paid the price for it. "The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." Jesus' words remind us that in our marriages and in our divorces, all of us fail. But it is the same Lord who forgives our failures, and calls us again to follow in his way.

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<sup>3</sup> Chuck Williamson, in his sermon of July 2, 2006 at Philadelphia Presbyterian Church, Charlotte NC.

<sup>4</sup> *Book of Common Worship* (Westminster/John Knox Press 1993), p. 848.

We know that Jesus is right: Life at its best doesn't get any better than being in healthy, loving relationships—the relationship of a good marriage, the relationship of good friends together. That is God's good intention for us.

When those relationships fail, it must surely be God's heart which is the first to be broken. And it is also that same God who has sent his son to offer forgiveness and new life. When we fail, we can only pray: Lord Jesus, have mercy on us. And the miracle is—he does. †