

"God's Ideal"

Mark 10:2-12

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL

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Pharisees come to Jesus asking if it is legal for a *man* to divorce his wife.

As is Jesus' custom, he answers the question by turning it upside down. Notice that Jesus changes the focus from divorce to God's ideal of marriage. God's ideal of marriage is that a couple will live in harmony and trust, where justice-love, and loving-kindness will prevail; where both partners are safe to be themselves, where there is a sense of mutuality and respect. Jesus describes this unity as two people becoming one flesh, and he's quoting from the creation story in Genesis. When Jesus discusses marriage, he has in mind an ideal relationship. He shifts the conversation from divorce to God's *ideal* of marriage and to the reality of God's perfect love.

Jesus takes the conversation about divorce from a set of legal principles (what the law of Moses does and does not allow), and points, instead, towards something higher: a theological affirmation. God's ideal of marriage is worthy, holy, joyous, good.

In the first century, however, not all marriages were worthy, holy, joyous, or good. That's true for the 21st century, also. There are couples nowadays who don't live in harmony, but in constant discord. Not all couples are able to love with justice or kindness. Relationships can become brittle and can break. The air can go out of marriages. Despair, disdain, destruction can fill the space where love once did. The ties that bind us can break. We know this. We've seen this. We've experienced this. This reality hurts us. It grieves us. It grieves us all.

Jesus (gently) points us away from this pain to possibility. And this possibility gives us hope.

I want to be clear: If you are divorced or divorcing, if somebody you love is divorced, if you're thinking about divorce, or afraid of divorce, or if your parents are divorced or divorcing, I want you to walk away today feeling encouraged, hopeful—and most of all, loved.

There are times we know when divorce seems to be the best answer. There are times when love's best answer is "no." No, I won't put up with this any longer; no, I won't live like this. No, we both deserve something better. Divorce is not ideal, it's not our goal or our hope, but sometimes divorce is necessary. Divorce sometimes *just happens*. Sometimes it is foisted upon us due to no fault of our own. Sometimes for all sorts of complicated reasons people can't (or don't) stay married.

The Pharisees are right. Moses' law does make provision for divorce. In the first century, both Jewish and Roman understandings of the marriage contract allowed for divorce.

But notice, again, how Jesus elevates the conversation from a conversation about the difficulties and legalities of divorce to God's ideal of what human relations are meant to be.

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It's likely that this is just another trick question for Jesus—from a line of trick questions. If a woman is widowed and re-married seven times on earth, who is her husband in heaven? Should we or should we not pay taxes to Caesar? Who is my neighbor? And now: is divorce legal? Jesus can't answer any of these questions without offending somebody. The Pharisees probably are less interested in getting guidance on a sticky issue and more interested in hanging Jesus upon the horns of this dilemma.

Maybe that's why Jesus changes the question. Jesus wants to change the conversation from the reality of divorce and tragedy of broken relations to the possibility of wholeness and to the ideal of godly love.

People are built for unity and community. God intends for people, for tribes, and for nations to get along. Sure, the dissolution of marriage is permissible, and in a broken world, even, at times, necessary. But God's intention for human relations is wholeness, justice, kindness, mutual protection, love. In the story of creation in Genesis, God conceived the world in God's perfect love, and from the very beginning of human time, God invites us into the mystery and joy of that love. That's good news for everybody.

Jesus blows the doors off of the Pharisees' trick question and makes a narrow-minded pop-quiz into a universal reason to be glad.

This is the good news: the ministry of Jesus—his life, death, and resurrection—reminds us that while our love for each other and for God is limited, sometimes weak, and always imperfect, God's love for us is not. God's love is not limited; God's love is not imperfect. We can't fully or always depend on our love for each other. Marriages often falter and sometimes fail. But God's promises with us are dependable, and we can fully and always rely on God's love for us.

This is the love we are invited to experience. This is the love we are invited to share. This is the love we are invited to trust. This is the love upon which we can stake our lives. This is the love to which, by the grace of God, we always aspire.

God helps us.

Thank God.

AMEN.

Mark 10:2-12 2Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" 3He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" 4They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." 5But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. 6But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 7'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, 8and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. 9Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

10Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. 11He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; 12and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."