

Armagh Baptist Church: Sunday 24th February 2019

Issues Facing Christians Today – Part 2

Marriage & Divorce in the Gospels

(Mark 10:2-12, Luke 16:18, Matthew 5:31-32, 19:3-12, John 4:16-18, 8:1-11)

Introduction

We are currently going through a series of questions that were raised by our members under the broad heading: **Issues Facing Christians Today**.

So as we continue to answer questions around Marriage, Divorce & Remarriage, tonight we're going to be looking at Marriage & Divorce in the Gospels of the N.T.

Tonight we're going to see what Jesus said about marriage, divorce & remarriage, and we'll see how he treated two people who had fallen in some of these areas.

As well as looking at passages in Matthew, Mark & Luke that deal with divorce, we will also close by looking at the Woman at the well in John ch.4 and the Woman who was caught in the act of adultery in John ch.8.

So let's take a Survey of what the Gospels have to say about marriage...

1. The First mention of Divorce in the N.T. (Matthew 1:18-25)

Believe it or not, the first mention of divorce in the N.T. is actually in the Christmas story – on the very first page – in Matthew ch.1. It's the account of Joseph finding out that his fiancée Mary was expecting. But he knew that he hadn't slept with her. So, he jumped to the conclusion that she must have been unfaithful to him during their engagement – the year before they were to get married. During engagement in Middle Eastern cultures, the woman was already regarded as the man's 'wife'. She was to keep herself pure, waiting for their marriage to be consummated on their wedding night. But if she was found to have been unfaithful to him during their betrothal, then it actually took a divorce to break the relationship.

It's in that context that Joseph (because he was a righteous man) had in mind to 'divorce' Mary quietly (v.19) rather than to expose her to public disgrace. That's strange, because in our minds, having been brought up in a culture where divorce was frowned upon, we would have thought the opposite! Divorcing Mary in our culture would have exposed her to public disgrace, and Joseph would not have been seen as very 'righteous' because he had initiated the divorce! Isn't it strange how culture changes perceptions of what's right and what's wrong?

Had it not been for the fact that Mary was pregnant because of a miracle of the Holy Spirit, and that she was going to give birth to the Son of God as a virgin, the sin that Mary would have been guilty of here, would have been fornication – sex

before marriage with someone other than her husband. It wouldn't have been adultery; she was unmarried at the time. Obviously this was legitimate grounds for divorce at that time. A husband could divorce his wife-to-be, if he found she had been unfaithful before marriage (fornication).

But come with me now to look at two passages in the New Testament that seem to prohibit divorce altogether. Here we have...

2. The Absolute Position (Mark 10:2-12 & Luke 16:18)

Both Mark and Luke record Jesus as saying very similar things here:

'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.'
(Mk 10:11-12)

'Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.'
(Luke 16:18).

First of all, I want you to notice the context of these two passages.

In Luke 16:14-17, Jesus is speaking against the Pharisees, who were always trying to justify themselves in terms of God's Law in the Old Testament. However some of them would actually have been divorced!

So Jesus is taking the Law, like a spirit level, like an absolute perfect standard, and he's holding it up against their lives, to show them just how much 'off-plumb' their lives actually were. To show them how far *even they* fell short of God's standard. He was trying to show them their sin, so that they could acknowledge it, and repent; trusting in him for salvation. To do that, he had to state the Law in its absolute form, as he does in Luke 16:18:

'Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery.'

Notice, it's not the getting divorced that is the committing of adultery, it is the marrying another woman which is the committing of adultery, in this absolute case. Likewise, because he is speaking to male Pharisees, he goes on to say:

'And he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.'

Now come back with me to Mark 10:2-12 and let's see what the context is there. Jesus is again dealing with the Pharisees, but this time, *they* have come up to him with a question (v.2): ***'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?'***

So they are asking him a question about the Law. What does the Law say? Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife? This is an absolute question, which requires an absolute answer. But Jesus begins by putting the question back to them: *'What did Moses **command** you?'* (v.3)

The Pharisees reply by going back to Deuteronomy 24:1-4 (which we looked at last time) - *'Moses **allowed** a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.'* (v.4). So they don't refer to any possible reasons for divorce, as to why Moses might have introduced this certificate of divorce, they simply state that Moses *permitted* us to divorce our wives, as long as we put it in writing before we send her away from our home. So that's OK.

But notice what Jesus goes on to say in v.5. *'**Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment.***' It's because of the hardness of the human heart that a divorce law had to be introduced. Not just because of sinful human hearts, but because of hard human hearts. Unbelievers can sometimes find a way around their marriage problems. Even the unsaved can find a way of forgiving their marriage partners and of working through whatever difficult times their marriages are passing through, but ultimately it is hardness of heart that results in a divorce. Someone has become obstinate, someone has dug their heels in, someone has said, *'I can't take anymore!'* and that's what results in a divorce: an unwillingness, or an inability to forgive, or to work at it anymore. 'I've had enough!' And of course sometimes the person is right to say that – they just can't take any more of their behaviour. Maybe they're showing no signs of changing. They can't take any more, they've had enough, and they feel it's time to get a divorce.

But notice what Jesus goes on to say in vs.6-9, publicly to these Pharisees:

'But from the beginning of creation "God made them male and female". Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.'

Do you see what Jesus has just done here?

The Pharisees were content just to go back as far as Deuteronomy 24, to get evidence for their right to divorce their wives. But Jesus goes back even further, to Genesis 2:24-25, to remind them how God sees their marriage.

Jesus reiterates God's ideal for marriage: He created us male and female, and His original intention was that marriage should be between one man and one woman united together in a one-flesh union, for life.

In God's eyes they are no longer two but one, therefore, Jesus says...

'What therefore God has joined together, let man not separate.'

So you might **look to Moses** for permission to divorce your wives, but you should **look to God** who put you together in the first place. In God's eyes you are no longer two, but one, and if God has joined you together, you should not separate, otherwise you have broken the one-flesh covenant union between you.

And that was the end of the public discussion with the Pharisees. It was only when they came inside the house, that the disciples quizzed Jesus further about what he had just said, *and it is to them*, that he states the absolute position very clearly:

'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.'
(Mark 10:11-12)

So let's be clear, it is the remarriage after a divorce that is the committing of adultery. The divorce, in and of itself, is not the adultery. It is the remarriage of a divorcee that is the adultery, when another one-flesh union takes place.

Jesus has stated these matters in their absolute form in both Mark & Luke, in both cases against the backdrop of the hypocritical Pharisees, who prided themselves for keeping the OT Law, even though many of them had actually been divorced and remarried, based on Deut 24:1-4!

They were putting the emphasis on **'the get-out clause'** of Deut 24, when all the while, as Jesus points out, they should have been putting the emphasis on **God's original intention for marriage** back in Genesis 2:24-25. It was supposed to be a one-flesh union, for life. A marriage is two people joined together by God, for life. So what God has joined together, man should not separate.

But having said all that, as you know, there is an exception to every rule. And this is what Matthew brings out for us, in two places in his Gospel.

3. The Exception Clause (Matthew 5:31-32 & Matthew 19:3-12)

Look at Matthew 5:31-32 first of all. Here Jesus is preaching as part of the Sermon on the Mount. He is addressing his disciples, with other would-be disciples listening on in the background (Matt 5:1-2a).

He has already made the point in the previous verses (vs.27-30) that you can commit adultery spiritually and mentally, in your heart and in your mind, by looking at a woman lustfully, before you ever commit adultery physically with your body.

N.B. The sin of adultery begins in your thoughts, before it ever becomes an action.

Notice the formula of words that Jesus used again and again in the Sermon on the Mount: 'You have heard that it was said...' (v.27) which he usually followed up with, '**But I say to you...**' (v.28) giving us his authoritative teaching on the subject.

But in v.31 he begins by saying '**It was also said...**' because this is referring to something written in the Word of God in Deuteronomy 24:1-4:

'It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' And then comes Jesus authoritative teaching on the subject:

'But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife (and here it is) except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.' (v.32).

So we saw the absolute position of the Law in Mark & Luke telling us that any divorcee that got remarried, or anyone who married a divorcee, was actually committing adultery, because it violated a previous one-flesh union with someone else – two people whom God had previously joined together.

But here we have the exception to that rule. And what is the exception? The exception is if the original one-flesh union has already been broken by sin.

The only legitimate grounds for this man in Matt 5:32 to divorce his wife, was if he had found her guilty of adultery with another man. He could legitimately divorce his wife in those circumstances. But if he divorced her for any other reason – just because he had lost interest in her, or couldn't live with her anymore, but she had done nothing wrong – if he divorced her for anything less than her own adultery, then he was actually causing her to become an adulteress, and the man who remarried her in such circumstances was also committing adultery. N.B. Unless the first one-flesh union had been broken by adultery, then there were no grounds for divorce or remarriage without causing someone else to commit adultery.

Now let's turn over to the second place where Matthew deals with this issue. **It's in Matthew 19:1-12.**

Now from vs.1-2 it would seem that this is the same occasion as Mark recorded for us in his Gospel. The Context is the same – across the Jordan from Galilee, large crowds following Jesus.

The Context is the same, but the Question is different.

The Pharisees came to him in v.3 and in order to try to test him, asked:
'Is it lawful to divorce one's wife – for any cause?'

Do you see the difference?

Jesus was asked an absolute question in Mark 10, so he replied giving an absolute answer in Mark 10.

But in Matthew 19 Jesus was asked a tricky question, and so he gave a qualified answer in Matthew 19.

The question in Matthew 19 belied the fact that the Pharisees were actually divided over this matter themselves. How should they interpret the clause in Deut 24:1 when it talks about a man taking a wife and marrying her, but '*she then finds no favour in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her...*' What did that mean?

As I said last week, this was a vague statement in Deuteronomy 24. It left the door open for various interpretations, and that's exactly what had happened by the time of Jesus. There were 2 schools of thought among the Jewish Rabbis in Jesus' day

The disciples of **Rabbi Shammai** believed that the offence had to be something of a sexually immoral nature, that stopped short of adultery, whilst the followers of...

Rabbi Hillel were much less strict and believed that grounds for divorce included poor cooking, being quarrelsome, if you didn't like your mother-in-law, or if you found a more beautiful woman! There were two sides to the issue.

So when the Pharisees asked Jesus the question in Matthew 19:3, in order to test him, Jesus would have known exactly what they were up to. They were trying to get him to side with one or other of their Rabbis, so they could have him.

At first Jesus does exactly the same here as he did in Mark's Gospel. He takes them back, not to Deuteronomy 24 in their thinking, but to the Creation of man and woman in Genesis 2:24-25 and the first mention of marriage. Again he was emphasizing that a one-flesh marriage union, that God has joined together, should not be separated by man.

So the Pharisees come with their follow-up question, based on Deut 24...

*'Why then, did Moses **command** one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?'* (v.7)

To which Jesus replied:

*'Because of your hardness of heart Moses **allowed** you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife* (and here's the exception clause again, as in Matt 5)

except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.'

So again notice that it is the remarriage of someone, who has been divorced for something other than sexual immorality; that causes the parties to the new marriage to actually commit adultery.

The question is, what is meant by sexual immorality? (Gk: *porneia*)

Well it seems to be a broad term, broad enough to include sex before marriage, **and** sex outside of marriage, but it could also include prostitution, homosexuality, etc - anything of a sexual nature that shows unfaithfulness to their original marriage vows.

This would of course include the situation for which Joseph thought he would have to divorce Mary back in Matt ch.1. He thought she had been guilty of having sexual relations with another man, before they had come together in marriage, even though she was committed to him as his betrothed wife. If he had gone ahead and got such a divorce, he would still have been '*a righteous man*' because it was legitimate for him to do so, under this interpretation of the Law.

But before we leave this passage in Matthew 19, I want you to notice the reaction of the disciples in v.10 to what they have just heard from Jesus:

'If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.'

And they were absolutely right! They had got the message. Once a marriage has been contracted in God's eyes, there is no way out of that marriage. You are to stay together for life. The only exception is if you find your spouse guilty of committing adultery – having sex with someone else outside of your marriage relationship - which is not something you want to happen at all!

So be sure, before you get married, that you are marrying someone that you can spend the rest of your life with! This is the whole point of this passage, and the disciples got the message clearly!

But we live in a day and generation when many think it would be '*better not to marry*' – 'Why can't we just live together instead?' That's the attitude of the world in which we live today. Co-habitation is running at about 13% in N.I. for 16-59 yr olds. In Great Britain it is more like 26% (2006 figures).

Well turn with me to John ch.4 to see what Jesus thought about that...

4. Living Together is not the same as Marriage (John 4:16-18)

In John ch.4 Jesus meets a woman at a well in Samaria at mid-day.

Now we wouldn't have known anything about this woman's marital status, until Jesus asked her simply in v.16 to '*Go, call [her] husband and come back.*'

But with great honesty the woman of Samaria confessed to Jesus:

'I have no husband' (v.17).

To which Jesus, who knew this already, said...

*"You are right in saying 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and **the one you now have is not your husband.** What you have said is true." (v.18)*

This woman had been married 5 times! So either she had been through 5 bereavements, or 5 divorces. More likely a combination of both death and divorce had ended her previous marriages. Maybe she had got fed up with all the heartache that had caused her, so she was now just living with a man. And Jesus very clearly states that this man was not her husband.

So we have no grounds for regarding a couple '*living together*' as married. And we should not in any way encourage young couples to try living together first, before they decide whether or not to get married later. All that causes is an even greater mess, if children come along, and there is no prior commitment to each other by the mother and father.

Having said that, the story of the woman at the well in John 4 shows how graciously and carefully Jesus himself dealt with this woman in such a position. He didn't condemn her for her immorality. He lovingly drew her to himself, revealing to her more clearly than to anyone else in Scripture exactly who he was – the Messiah: '*I who speak to you am he.*' (v.26) And after she had believed in him as her Lord and Saviour, she became the instrument in God's hand to win half her village to the Lord as well! (vs.39-42)

John 4 is a picture of God's grace to those who have experienced marital breakdown. We should show such mercy and grace in our day too, regardless of what has happened in the past. We need to take people from where we find them, and try to lead them to where God wants them to be. And finally...

5. Should adultery still carry the death penalty? (John 8:1-11)

You will remember that last time, we saw from Deuteronomy 22, that the normal punishment for adultery in the Old Testament was death by stoning, so divorce wasn't really the issue when adultery was involved.

Well, we need to ask the question, now that we are in New Testament times, should adultery still be punished by stoning?

N.B. Sharia Law in Islamic countries would still stone adulterers to death today!

Well, in John ch.8 we have an example of a woman who has been caught in the act of adultery, now being dragged before Jesus by the Pharisees (v.3).

We're immediately left wondering – where is the man, who was also caught in the same act of adultery?

It just shows how one-sided the Pharisees' thinking was: men got off scot-free; but women were punished!

In v.6 we see that Jesus knows this is another trick question to try to trap him.

So he just bends down and begins to write in the sand.

Many people think he was actually writing out the Ten Commandments while they all stood around him watching. After a while he got up and said (v.7):

'Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.'

And again he stooped down and continued writing on the ground.

As the on-lookers began to search their hearts, they realised - from the oldest of them to the youngest, that none of them was without sin, so they couldn't pick up a stone and throw it at her. So very soon only Jesus and the woman are left.

So he asks her:

'Woman, where are they? Has no-one condemned you?'

'No-one, Lord' she said.

'Neither do I condemn you: Go, and from now on sin no more.'

And though it may at times be easier said than done, that's the attitude that we are meant to have towards those who have fallen morally. We are not to condemn them, but we are to call them to leave their sin, and turn to Jesus.

Conclusion

So tonight, as we have looked at the Gospel accounts, we have seen both Jesus' **teaching**, and his **attitude** towards marriage, divorce, remarriage, living together and adultery. So what can we conclude from all of this?

(i) We've seen God's ideal for marriage reiterated by Jesus:

One man, faithful to one woman, in a one-flesh union, for life.

(ii) We've seen God's absolute for divorce restated:

Any divorce breaks God's ideal for marriage (See Mark & Luke).

(iii) We've seen Moses' concession repeated:

Because of the hardness of sinful hearts, divorce can be permitted on certain grounds: It must be in writing, but divorce should only be granted on the grounds of adultery (*porneia*, marital unfaithfulness) by a previous marriage partner.

(iv) We've seen Jesus' compassion in real-life situations:

We've seen how Jesus dealt with those who had fallen: whether those who were living together, or those who had divorce and remarriage in their background, or those who had been found guilty of adultery. Jesus treated them with mercy, love and grace. Therefore so should we - as the Church of Jesus Christ today.