

Biblical Marriage, Biblical Divorce

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Scriptures:

Mark 10:2 --16 (NRSV)

² Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

³ He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" ⁴ They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." ⁵ But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. ⁶ But 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, ⁸ and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹ Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

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

Jesus Blesses Little Children

¹³ People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴ But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is too such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." ¹⁶ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Sermon:

Because of the pervasiveness of divorce in our culture and the seriousness of its emotional, financial, and social consequences, this morning I would like to teach instead of preach. I believe the more we know about Jesus and his world the more clearly, we can apply his teachings to our lives. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to better understand Jesus' and the gospel writer's settings and context.

I also want to remind us that Mark's Gospel was written some 35-40 years after Jesus' death and the resurrection event to a Jesus community comprised mostly of urban Diaspora Jews with possibly some non-Jews in the mix living in Rome. The author, it is believed, draws upon a body of extant oral teachings of Jesus as well as a mixed bag of Ancient Near Eastern Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions as he writes to his Jesus group in Rome shortly after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple.

The author of Mark was not as knowledgeable of the Jewish laws, customs, and practices in Galilee and Judea as was the writer of Matthew. Therefore, some of his explanations regarding Jewish laws and practices are awkward and inaccurate. I would invite you to read Matthew chapter 19, wherein Matthew corrects Mark's lack of Jewish knowledge.

Jesus' position on divorce was taken from the more conservative school of Jewish interpretation of the Mosaic Laws of Rabbi Shammai. The other school of thought was the more liberal school of Rabbi Hillel. The School of Shammai - the hard liners - maintained that only serious transgressions on the part of the wife justified a man divorcing her. The wife's adultery was one of those transgressions.

The School of Hillel, however, allowed a man to divorce for even trivial offenses. However, in both schools of thought a man had to honor his prenuptial contract, except for the case of an adulterous wife, and both schools of thought offered significant protection for women in matters of marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

I want to stress that marriages were arranged by parents, ratified by the fathers, and/or another male family member in the absence of the father. However, the couple had some input and say in the matter. If either party found the other totally odious, then the marriage arrangements could be derailed. In this cultural scheme of marriage, marriage was all about the fusion of two families, primarily for the political and economic benefits of the families as well as for procreation, a continuation of the family and its interests. As such, women became embedded in the honor of their husband and his family.

In addition, in the Jewish culture at the time, most married couples were generally related to one another, usually cousins, nieces, and nephews, preferably on the father of the groom's side. This served to keep wealth and political power within the kin group. Therefore, marriage and divorce were all about family. Divorces, if they occurred, often had to be sorted out carefully to minimize the impact on the family's honor and resources.

I want to add that the ancient sages condemned men for simply divorcing their wives to marry another woman because she was more desirable or her family more prosperous. Also, some sages or rabbis recognized nine legal reasons a woman could seek a divorce from her husband, but the petition for divorce had to be presented and represented by a male relative not by the woman herself. Furthermore, the elders of a village or the courts could even compel the separation and divorce of a man and woman on certain grounds of public policy and public good.

So, a bride, regardless of her family of origin, was "acquired" by the husband's family and moved into the husband's family home. In this scenario, the wife was sort of a second-class family member, even though she may have been a part of her husband's extended family. Her status could only improve if and when she gave birth to a male child.

In the pre-marriage negotiations, the parental parties worked out a contract, called a ketubah. This agreement usually involved promises or deposits of money or other items of wealth on the part of both families. We speak of these marriage assets on the part of the groom's family erroneously as the "bridal wealth or bride price" and as the dowry on the bride's side. Therefore, transfers of wealth, promissory notes, or even liens on future earnings of the husband-to-be on behalf of the wife's ketubah was primarily a source of financial support and security for the wife in case of divorce or the husband's death since she could not inherit.

The ketubah also served to discourage women from straying at the risk of losing their ketubah, their children, especially their sons, and being rejected by their birth families and becoming destitute. It also made husbands think twice about divorcing given their financial obligations to their wife's ketubah.

To our text. What seems to be the issue for Jesus in today's text as he explained to his disciples was not so much divorce but divorce for the purposes of remarrying. We may surmise that in Mark's community in Rome where the laws and customs surrounding divorce were often lax to the point of being ridiculous, divorce and remarriage had become a problem. Therefore, for our purposes today let us see Mark's Jesus community as having one foot in a highly moral and ethical Judaism and the other foot in a less morally conscious pagan culture as they tried to sort out who is in and who is out and why.

Jesus refused to be polarized or made a fool of by the Pharisees. His response was, yes, it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife, but only if she commits adultery - the School of Shammai, which incidentally did not prevail in Jewish thought. The school of Hillel carried the

day. However, regardless of the legal aspects of marriage and divorce, Jesus takes the challenge to a whole other level.

Jesus states that theoretically divorce violates the divine intent and ideals for marriage. The divine intent and ideals for marriage was the existential completeness of man with his female counterpart, the mutual comfort and support of both, and procreation. All these needs and responsibilities were within the context of the family as the basic unit of human existence. And, herein lies a lesson - the disparity between the ideal or theoretical and the real or every day in the human struggle.

Since nothing happened in Jesus' world without God's expressed permission, any couple brought together in marriage through the efforts of their parents was understood as "a marriage made in heaven." Therefore, the Pharisees' question could be seen not only as an honor test of Jesus' knowledge of the law but also as a part of an ongoing theological debate between prevailing Jewish schools of thought. Jesus' response to the Pharisees is also in what we may say is the theoretical; wherein, he lifts the divine ideal of marriage beyond the permitted legalities of this world into the divine mind and intent of God.

Jesus repels the Pharisees' attack by a counter attack and although polarized in the school of Shammai, in keeping with the teachings of many of the Israelite sages, states that the divine intent for marriage lies in the ANE sacred bound of blood relationships and its concomitant loyalties as we read in Gen 2:24.

What I believe is that Jesus, intentionally or unintentionally, is lifting a core principle of divine intent for all human relationships. When one person - a sacred end unto themselves made in the image of God - is in a relationship with another, wherein trust, care, and loyalty are essential to both people's and their families' well-being, it should not be violated. Compound this with the eternal dimension of bringing children into this world and we have sacred compounded with sacred.

In short, the family structures, marriage, male/female relationships today would be totally alien to Jesus, and I think by all indications deemed unnatural by his cultural standards. According to the cultural context of scripture, modern civil or even some so-called religious marriages would definitely not fit the definition of "a marriage made in heaven." So, the best biblical passages, I think, we can use to ultimately define the moral and ethical dimensions of any marriage, modern or ancient, lies in the Golden Rule lifted to its highest level in the Law of Love.

Christians, in marriage or otherwise, should love one another as they love themselves. They should take care of each other as they would themselves; they should not take advantage of or abuse one another mentally, physically or spiritually. And, if their marriage falls apart and divorce is the only way, they must keep a sense of moral and ethical perspective about themselves in that also. But, if the marriage can be mended, do so in love, forgiveness, and respect for the sanctity of the person.

Just because a modern person may have more freedom of self-determination, the law on their side, or even the moral high road, they must not seek vengeance and try to victimize as they may have been victimized. Divorce, if that is the best one can do; but be responsible in matters of property, child support, and parenting. In the Holy Spirit, grieve the loss and learn from one's mistakes, but always, always honor the sacredness of the other, be they saint or sinner, as one would honor one's own sacredness.

As the Apostle Paul says,

⁸ Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is

anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. (Phil. 4:8-9)

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