

What God Has Joined Together – Mark 10:1-12

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Mark

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Bible Text: Mark 10:1-12
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In this particular passage in Mark 10, we are seeing a major shift in Mark's unfolding for us the ministry of Christ and there are certain things that are key markers here. First of all, Jesus is done with his Galilean ministry. We've seen up until now he's been primarily up in Capernaum and his headquarters has been Peter and Andrew's house and now he's on his way to Jerusalem and he is passing by way of the region, heading towards Jerusalem that the typical pilgrim would take, but it's interesting as one commentator put it and we ought not to miss it, as he passes through here in Mark 10, he's going exactly the same way to the same area that John the Baptist was when he was calling out that there would be one coming after him that was greater than he. He's also entered into a region that is very much involved with the Herodian family and John the Baptist, as you remember, was beheaded by Herod for teaching that Herod's marriage was an illegitimate marriage and when these Pharisees come and they test Jesus, it's not just that they're coming to ask some theological insight, the question, the timing of the question and the location of the question was meant to get Jesus in trouble. They were hoping quite probably that Herod would have the same way with Jesus that he had had with John the Baptist. They are hoping to catch Jesus in a teaching that would ultimately make him be a criticizer of Herod as John the Baptist was and Jesus would have his head taken off as John the Baptist did. So there's a lot going on here.

Secondly, we see in this area that Jesus is not only moving towards Jerusalem, he's moving out of Galilee, he's moving towards the southern part, but he's also increasingly confrontational with the Pharisees and we are seeing this inevitable conflict that will happen in that Passion Week culminating in his death, and in the passage we are invited into Jesus' ministry and we're given some interesting markers of how he would spend his time. It says, "Getting up, He went from there to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan; crowds gathered around Him again, and, according to His custom, He once more began to teach them." It was Jesus' custom to teach. He taught regularly in the synagogue but he taught wherever he could. We often find him on the side of a mountain. Jesus' ministry was, in fact, a teaching ministry. You say, "Well, that's kind of obvious, isn't it?" I'm not so sure it's that obvious to the way we normally think of Jesus. He came to us as the prophet of God to speak the will of God to explain to us the person of the Father and yet today you hear so much about that would suggest the downplaying of teaching. We want to be like Jesus and I mocked earlier in a sermon this one comment about, you

know, preach the Gospel, when all else fails, use words. I made a big deal out of that when Jesus went back to Nazareth and they didn't receive him. But there's this attitude that somehow teaching isn't really Holy Spirit driven. Teaching really isn't compassionate. Teaching isn't really like Jesus. Jesus is going to care for the poor. Well, he did. Jesus is gonna heal the sick and he did. Jesus is gonna be interested in the broken-hearted and he was, but it was his custom to teach and all the compassion in the world without an explanation and proclamation of the person of God and the will of God and the Gospel of God is a pointless needless compassion.

Jesus taught, it was his custom, and then it says in verse 2, "Some Pharisees came up to Jesus, testing Him." As I said, he's moved into that region that was kind of controlled by the Herodian family and they were very interested in seeing if they could trap Jesus into saying something that would get him, in fact, in trouble. He's passing through this area that is controlled by the Herodians and they want to see him in trouble with Herod. They would love to see him say things that were not in agreement with the spirit of the age, and really they want to get Jesus in trouble because they think and they have heard that Jesus' view on divorce is way too narrow. They question, the Pharisees question him not honestly, testing him. The whole area that he's in is, as I said, Herod's territory and one writer put it Herod Antipas' territory is here and Antipas had put John the Baptist to death because John had denounced Antipas' marriage to Herodias. Perhaps the Pharisees hoped that Jesus by his statement on marriage and divorce would get himself in trouble and suffer the same cruel fate as John.

So you see there are all sorts of things going on here so the Pharisees come up and they ask him, "You know, is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" Now at that particular time, there were two schools of thought. There was one school of thought in Israel known as the Shime'i view that had a little more of a stricter view of divorce that would only allow someone to be divorced on the basis of some immoral activity, and then there was the more dominant school, the Hillel school, that interpreted Deuteronomy 24:1 where it says if a man marries a woman and becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, he may write a certificate of divorce. The Hillel school said that meant a man had the freedom to divorce his wife for any reason whatsoever if he became displeased with her. Now I don't know if burning toast is actually an excuse for divorce but several of the commentators that I referred to actually say even if she burned his food. Now I don't know if they're just all quoting each other or whether they're actually citing some type of historical precedent, but the point is the dominant view of the Pharisees at this particular time was that if a husband became displeased with his wife for just about anything, he could get rid of her, and Jesus does not hold that view and they knew it and so they're questioning him.

Clearly in that particular day, everyone in Israel believed that there were grounds for divorce and clearly the dominant view of that day held that the grounds for divorce were given to them by Moses. The issue really revolved around how are we to understand the word "indecent." But Jesus, if you notice, rarely answers a question directly. Jesus answers the question with a question knowing what the teaching is of the day. In fact, one writer put it this way, he said quoting from the Jewish writer Josephus, Josephus himself

says, "At that time, I divorced my wife not liking her behavior." Oh, back when men were men, huh? No alimony. No child support. No attorney's fees. Nothing. The husband had pretty much carte blanche. All the husband had to do was claim indecency.

Well, Jesus doesn't answer them directly, he simply asks them a question. He says, verse 3, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away." Jesus said to them, "Because of the hardness of your heart, he wrote you this commandment but from the beginning of creation God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother 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." What we have here is Jesus taking their authority, Moses, and using it against them. They had thought that Moses was saying any man could get a divorce for any reason, but Jesus lets them know right out of the blocks that it was only because of the hardness of their heart that that was there. In other words, divorce is always a result of sin. Divorce is grounded in the hardness of men's hearts and whatever the provision in the law was, it was not because it's what God's desire was. We are told in Malachi that God hates divorce. It is only an accommodation to the human weakness. In fact, one commentator suggested that even the way Moses writes it, actually was writing it for the protection of women. If a man wanted to divorce his wife for whatever reason, legitimate reason he might have, he had to write a certificate, some type of document that could be a lasting document with ink that would stand up to the test of time, and he was not free to go back and remarry her. He could not be impulsive and just willy-nilly come and go and say you're in, you're out. The woman had the right to have a certificate saying, "Yes, I have been freed and I have the freedom to remarry. I am not an adulterer. I am not somebody who is second-class and here is the legal document to prove it."

It's only because of the hardness of men's hearts God had to even do this because from the beginning of creation God made them male and female. Notice Jesus is fully accepting the historic veracity of Genesis 1 and 2. Jesus doesn't see it as mythology or story and notice that he fully accepts the Mosaic authorship of the first five books. He says from the beginning of creation God made them male and female for this reason, a man shall leave his father and his mother and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two but one. Jesus is really radical here. We don't see it because we have come to embrace a Christian view of marriage in so many ways and for so many centuries in our culture, but as one writer put it, Jewish marriage was not a contract between equals. Biblical marriage, it is. Remember in Genesis 1, "Let us make man in Our image. In the image of God He made man. Male and female He created them." We are equals. We both share the image of God. But in Jewish marriage, it was not a contract between equals. One writer put it, a woman did not marry, she was given. But here Jesus is confronting that attitude by simply saying, "Wait a minute, you who are testing me, thinking that somehow you can get me in trouble, what did Moses actually write?" Moses did not write the law of divorce in order to give men the freedom to do whatever men wanted to do and discard women. He protected the rights and dignity of women and he required that men fulfill certain obligations to that woman and it was always concession to the hardness of someone's heart.

Now, I said that divorce is always because of sin. I do not necessarily mean therefore that all divorce is sinful but clearly from the text, we must understand it is God's will that marriage be permanent. Notice it says in verse 9, "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." I believe I've said to you before and I look forward to doing weddings. I haven't done many here recently and I think we need to have a rash of weddings. It's about time. All you single guys, get at it. But one of the things I always like to start a wedding ceremony with is a reminder that we are about to witness a mystery, two people from two distinct families, backgrounds, identities, are going to come as two and leave as one, and that oneness is nothing that the state of North Dakota can produce by offering a license, and it's nothing that I as a minister of the Gospel can actually perform either. That which God has joined together. Marriage is a miracle. Marriage is a supernatural event and to go down the path of divorce is to go against God and his way and his plan.

We're not told anything about in the text how the Pharisees responded to this but we are told something about the disciples. In verse 10, the disciples take Jesus aside and they began questioning him about it. Apparently they were shocked. "In the house the disciples began questioning Him about this again. And He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her.'" Not only is every divorce a result of sin, divorce can actually lead to additional sin. As a pastor, I've had to wrestle with that. I'll make a comment in a few minutes about are there grounds for divorce and remarriage, but just because someone's divorced doesn't mean they have the right to remarry and there are some remarriages that are, in fact, in themselves sinful and that produces a whole bunch of complications.

But it cuts both ways. He says in verse 12, "if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery." And again, here a true countercultural statement. He just put the woman on the same platform, the same level, the same footing before God as the man. The woman has no more right to get a divorce and to leave her husband than the man does. Divorce is contrary, one writer put it, divorce is contrary to the divine institution and contrary to the nature of marriage, contrary to the divine action by which union is affected. Did you hear that? Divorce is contrary to the divine institution and contrary to the nature of marriage and contrary to the divine action by which the union is affected. It is precisely here that this wickedness is most singularly apparent. It is the sundering of man, it's the sundering by man of a union that God has constituted. Divorce is the breaking of a seal which has been engraved by the hand of God. We need to own that kind of language.

Jesus makes it very clear to us that God has a very high standard of marriage. Marriage is not an institution that was arrived at by culture. Isn't that what we're told today in America? It's just a cultural convenience, a cultural contract. It is not. It's tied to the creation order and that's why all sex outside of marriage, before marriage, or sex outside the context of marriage in adultery is an affront to God. Those of you who have read through your Bibles and continue to do so, just stop and think right now, just do a quick survey in your mind of how often the sin of sex is brought up. If I preached as often as

God writes against sexual sin, I would be needing to be preaching about it on multiple Sundays throughout the month. Just read through the book of Proverbs, how many chapters are given to making reference to the sinfulness of illegitimate sexual behavior. Look to the Apostle Paul in his writings, how often he will as he talks about things, bring up even as we saw this morning in 1 Corinthians 6. There is no place in the kingdom of God for the fornicator and the adulterer and the homosexual. Sexual sin is a serious issue and God speaks about it often. Sex is not a problem, sex is not evil, sex is a gift of God given by God to a husband and to a wife for their pleasure, for their participation in the union, a creaturely expression of the union of the Godhead, and for procreation and for the fulfillment of the calling of God in the subduing of the earth with image-bearers that would call upon the name of the Lord, and when we enter into illegitimate sex, we defile the very image of God on this earth. If we preached against sexual sin, not sex which is a gift of God, but sexual sin as often as God writes about it, we'd have to preach about a whole lot more than we do.

Even the disciples are stumped. The standard is high. Verse 11 and 12, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her." That's a very harsh statement. That's a universal category, isn't it? And some have concluded on the basis of this that there is no possible basis of remarriage at all for anyone who's divorced because Jesus makes a categorical universal statement, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery." No qualifications. No exceptions.

Well, I think that before we totally dismiss that, we must come to understand something of the fact that we need to have a very high view of marriage. Those who have not been married yet, then what you need to be understanding is that before you pursue marriage, that you understand that it is God's will that if you marry, that you are married to that person forever. You do not go into marriage with the possibility of divorce. You do not go into marriage with the idea that if it doesn't work out for me, I can get out of it. And do not ever show up in my office and say, "Well, I just don't love her anymore." I might have to beat you up and then ask your apology and give you some pastoral counseling. Of course I'm not going to beat you up, I just said that for effect. But it's not okay but isn't that kind of, "Ah, I just don't love them anymore." And this is one of the reasons why living together and casually dating all sorts of people in some type of progressive way sets you up for failure to begin with. Why do people live together? "Well, we want to try it out." No, you don't try it out, you make a commitment up front. It is God's will if I marry that I do not turn back and if I'm not prepared for that, then don't get in the relationship.

In Matthew 19, Jesus gives essentially the same teaching but he adds some provisions. I'd ask you to join me there in Matthew 19. In verse 8, he just got done saying the very same things, in verse 8 he says, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery." Jesus puts in a parenthetical statement. Let's read verse 9 again and I'm gonna drop it out, "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery." Is that not exactly what he taught over in the Gospel of Mark? Yes.

That is the standard. That is God's will. You get married, you stay married. You get divorced and you remarry, you commit adultery and therefore you have compounded your sin. But here Jesus introduces an exception clause, except for not uncleanness, some type of vague way, "Did you burn his toast this morning?" But for immorality. Literally for fornication, for some type of sexual sin. That is the grounds for divorce. I won't take time to look at it but Paul adds one other in 1 Corinthians 7 and that would be desertion.

Marriage is a covenant. It's not an agreement, it's a covenant. It's called a covenant. Malachi tells us that you've been unfaithful to the wife by covenant, your wife from your youth, a covenant can be broken and when a covenant is broken, all the obligations of the covenant are null and void. You enter into a contract and covenants all the time, don't you? You enter into a contract with somebody to do some work for you. They don't show up to do the work. Are you still obligated to pay them? You say, "Of course not. Contract has been broken." Now we have all sorts of laws and lawyers to dicker over whether or not a contract has actually been broken or not, but we accept the fact that a contract can be so violated that the terms no longer need to be fulfilled. This should not be taken lightly. It should not be taken as an easy way out. What we ought to hear with this exception clause is how radically, violently opposed God is to all sexual sin. It is his will that the two become one flesh and image him in this world. It is his will that that marriage be permanent, fixed, certain. He seals it by his own divine activity making the two one flesh and sexual sin is so corrosive, so evil that it can be a basis for dissolving that which God has intended to be indissoluble. If you look at that as a means of escape, then you, like the Pharisees, have missed the entire point. It's only the hardness of your heart. Divorce is there because God understands that the basis of covenant marriage has been so racked, so violated, so challenged, so undermined by an act of immorality that in his graciousness he allows the so-called innocent party to move on. He doesn't require that but permits it because sexual sin is absolutely that vile and that's what we ought to hear. Not a loophole but a high standard.

Sadly, we live in a day and age that is way over-sexed. Friday I had the opportunity to be sharing the Gospel with an unbeliever and we were talking and he says he doesn't watch a lot of tv but his children do and he was mentioning certain tv shows that were on, most of them which I had never heard of, and he says he sits in the other room doing his work and he, one of them is about something, I think the context is a medical show, a hospital show, they're at some hospital, he says he sits in the other room and all he hears coming from the other room is sex talk and he finally concluded that the show really isn't about a hospital and doctors and nurses, it's about sex that happens in a hospital between doctors and nurses and we call that entertainment. There are a lot of people who have spoken evil against or spoken against the evil of pornography on the internet and it should be spoken, there's a lot of pornography that's on tv, and we ought to feel uncomfortable. I feel uncomfortable every time these Viagra commercials come on. I'm sitting there watching them with my children and I'm kind of going, "Why are my children needing to be subjected to this kind of garbage?" We've created a whole industry around a mythological medical issue.

God hates divorce. God hates sexual sin. God hates the consequences that sexual sin brings because ultimately it is an affront to the very character and nature of the one God in three persons and we need to take away from this passage a warning that God, though he may accommodate our fallenness and hardness of heart, his will stands fixed and it is his pleasure, it is his glory that a man would love a woman and a woman would love a man and that they would live in this world expressing the glory of one God in three persons in intimacy at every level, not just sexual, mental, emotional, relational.

So what do we take from this passage? We take from this passage that marriage is grounded in the male and female constitution as to its nature; it's a reflection of the very character and will of God; that sexual sin is a violation of the creation; to be engaged in sexual sin is to be contrary to the very fiber of creation. Did you hear that? It's not just that it's displeasing, it's contrary to the very warp and woof of creation. It's to live contrary. You wouldn't jump off the top of a high building because you know to do so is to try to live contrary to the law of creation. You don't try unless you're a college student in the last week before finals, plan to stay up all night without any rest for days on end because you are living contra the rules and laws of creation. You don't try to go days on end without food or water because you're living contrary to the rules and laws that govern creation. You do not violate the Sabbath day because it's part of the created order. And sexual sin is just as much a violation of not only the will of God but the laws of creation itself.

And Jesus does not back off from his generation. He's not intimidated by these pesky Pharisees who think that somehow they might trap him. He's not worried about some second-rate illegitimate king of Israel because he understands his life and his destiny are in the hands of his Father. He's on his way to Jerusalem to die on behalf of our sins and he's willing as is his custom to teach openly, freely, clearly, and contrarily to the generation that he dwells in to herald the will of God.

God wants us to be morally pure and upright. Not only is there no place in heaven for those who are sexually immoral, the Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians that this is the will of God, that we would abstain from sexual immorality. God does not want us to be immoral. 1 Thessalonians 4:3, "This is the will of God, your sanctification, that you abstain from sexual immorality." Notice he does not say abstain from sex but that you abstain from sexual immorality, "that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion like the Gentiles who do not know God, and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in this matter because the Lord is the avenger. In all these things as we told you before and solemnly warned you, God has not called you for the purpose of impurity but sanctification and he who rejects this is not rejecting man but God who gives his Holy Spirit to you."

Now let me make a couple comments. First of all, if you have been divorced and you are the so-called innocent person, then I would like to remind you that the grace of God is sufficient for you to do several things. First of all, the grace of God is sufficient for you to be able to move on, forgetting what lies behind, but also the grace of God is sufficient for you to forgive and probably one of the hardest things I've seen people who are the so-

called innocent person member deal with is the whole issue of forgiveness. And as a pastor, what I've done on the occasions where I've had someone who's divorced that I believe had grounds for remarriage and they've come and they wanted to be remarried, one of the things I try to spend time with them on is, "Have you really forgiven? Have you done whatever is necessary to be reconciled, even if reconciliation does not mean remarriage? There is a last thing you need to do if your new marriage, is to bring in bitterness and resentment and a spirit of unforgiveness."

Maybe you are the so-called guilty person. The grace of God is sufficient for you as well. Divorce is not the unpardonable sin. The blood of Jesus Christ can cover it. But the grace of God is also sufficient for you to be reconciled and that may or may not mean saving the marriage but you may need to go and seek forgiveness of a lot of people and admit that you were wrong. And how many families and people could have really been helped by the so-called guilty person going and saying, "I was wrong and there's no defense and no excuse and I need you to forgive me"? The grace of God is sufficient to cover both the sin of the guilty person, his or her need to be reconciled to spouse, children, neighbors, and also reconciled to God. Whether or not that person who is the so-called guilty party ever has the freedom to remarry, at this particular point in my understanding of the Bible I have no clear answer. My understanding is no, but I don't know if that's of the Lord or not and I honestly admit that. But I do know that there are no grounds for remarriage outside of adultery and desertion of the so-called innocent person.

Does that sound like a high standard? In our age it is. It's not as high as some people put it, some have taught that there is no grounds for remarriage under any circumstance whatsoever, but I don't know how you can do honesty to the text of Matthew 19:9 where Jesus gives clearly an exception clause, and 1 Corinthians. While their motive is good to want to protect marriage, it is equally wrong to say more than what God has said than to say less. Do we need to tighten up our expectation of sexual purity in marriage? Yes, we do, but we always need to remind each one of us starting with ourselves and with one another, the grace of God is sufficient to cover all of our sins.

Sexual sin is prevalent and it's not just amongst unbelievers. According to some of the research, even in the area of sex, there is no real statistical difference anymore between the church and the unchurched and that breaks the heart of God. But his grace is sufficient to cover that but we must confess our sins and repent and submit to his way, his word. And Paul I think would have us understand in 1 Corinthians 6 that we are not to allow anyone to continue to name the name of Christ as Lord and Savior who willfully, deliberately, intentionally, with forethought and malice, rejects the will of God in this area.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we humbly admit that we are sinful people all the way down to the very core of our sexual being. We confess, Lord, that too often we have not only permitted sexual sin to be in the midst of the people of God, but in some cases we have defended it, sanctioned it, and we know this is contrary to Your will. Lord, we confess that there has

been untold hurt and damage done by our unwillingness to submit our minds and hearts to Your will in the context of sex and marriage and divorce and remarriage. We ask, Lord, that You would forgive us of our sins, cleanse us by the blood of Christ, clothe us afresh with his righteousness, and grant us the grace that we need to walk humbly before You in purity and in holiness, helping each other, strengthening one another, forgiving one another and helping one another move on that we might fulfill Your will in our lives, marriages that are permanent, sealed by Your grace, and moral purity and sanctification for all. In Christ we pray. Amen.