

**“JESUS AND DIVORCE (Mark 35)”**  
***Mark 10:1-12***

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. We have passed the halfway point in this account of his life and Mark’s story now moves on as Jesus sets his face towards his destiny. He has proclaimed the good tidings of the new Kingdom of God by his preaching and by his acts of healing and exorcism, his miracles and his parables, and now he continues his journey towards the earth-shattering event that has to happen before the Kingdom can really start to develop.

As Jesus has gathered around him those who want to know more about him and those who are actually to be involved in his continuing mission, he has offered glimpses of what this Kingdom might look like – a Kingdom in which men and women are able to live as God wants them to, in which creation is wholly under God’s sovereign will and the powers of evil are left impotent and defeated. But he has also begun to spell out the implications of all this for those who really do want to take him and his message seriously. Following Jesus is no easy ride. It is not for the faint-hearted and uncommitted. If you want to get the best out of it, it means giving your best, giving your all. Jesus has said that as he has challenged people to “*take up their cross*” and follow him. Now he starts to earth it in some kind of specific situations.

In this next chapter, the one from which we’ve read this morning, Jesus teaches about how the people of his Kingdom will deal with money, sex and power. We will read the story of the rich man who wanted to follow Jesus but found his desire to follow compromised by his love of wealth. We will see next week just how important the powerless are to the Kingdom of God, as Jesus welcomes the children to him. And this morning we look at what he had to say on the thorny subject of divorce. Of course, there are what appear to be pretty straightforward commands in all these things, but there are also underlying principles which apply well beyond the specific contexts in which Jesus is acting, and we’ll note those as we go along.

Once again, what Jesus has to say seems to have been provoked by questioning from those who were apparently out to get him. These Pharisees, these guardians and upholders of the letter of the Law, who were always trying to see just how closely Jesus fitted into their structures of dogma and tradition, come to Jesus to try and catch him out again. They ask a seemingly simple question: “*Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?*” They know the answer. Everyone knows the answer. It’s clearly set out in the Law that they so jealously uphold. They are not looking for advice or for information – that’s not needed. They are simply using it as a smokescreen to hide their true motives for asking. But it’s a trick that is still in common currency. We come with our questions, asking for help or advice, but knowing full well what we want to hear and having already made up our minds.

It’s very possible that these Pharisees were trying to get Jesus to incriminate himself. Mark has told us that he is now in “*the region of Judea*”, the territory under the jurisdiction of Herod. It was Herod, you may recall, who had imprisoned and then executed John the Baptist because he had had the temerity to criticise his divorce and remarriage. If Jesus gave the wrong answer here, then he too might end up feeling the wrath of Herod, which would greatly have pleased these religious opponents.

But Jesus simply asks them what the Law says – what did Moses say? There’s your answer. In *Deuteronomy 24:1-4*, Moses sets out the Law in regard to this and it is very clear that a man can indeed divorce his wife. The answer to the Pharisees’ question is a simple “yes”. But the issue is more complicated than that. Behind this question is a long history of dispute over the grounds for divorce. Moses’ Law allows a certificate of divorce to be written if the woman becomes “*displeasing*” to her husband because “*he finds something indecent about her*”. There were two distinct schools of thought about this – as well as many other minor variations on the theme. Rabbi Hillel had ruled that “*something indecent*” was basically anything that the man did not like, including such things as burning his food.

Rabbi Shammai, on the other hand, restricted the indecency to committing adultery, having an affair with someone who was himself still married.

Jesus then, as he so often does, goes beyond the letter of the Law and takes these people back to first principles. There are reasons for this law being as it is and reasons for God's own pronouncements on the subject. Here, as in so many other areas of our lives we see **Gods' Ideal, Human Weakness** and **God's Generosity**. Let's look at them one at a time.

## 1. GOD'S IDEAL

It always starts here. Back to the beginning. God created a perfect world and into it put man and woman. His ideal was that a man and a woman should leave their own families and commit themselves to each other to the extent that they became as one. In that way they would provide companionship for one another and would, through their sexual activity, ensure the survival of humanity as new humans were born. It seems clear from the early chapters of *Genesis* that that is the ideal, that's what God wanted to happen. And however you read that account of creation, there seems little doubt that the principle behind it all is one man with one woman, and Jesus emphasises the monogamous and enduring nature of that relationship by saying, as we do in our wedding ceremonies, "*What God has joined together, let no-one separate*".

God has his ideal. He sets the pattern and the standard for that to which all humanity should aspire. As human beings, let alone as followers of Jesus Christ, the goal for those in a loving relationship is as Jesus sets it out here – life-long, monogamous, heterosexual marriage. Now there are various other issues there which could take us off down different avenues, but in the context of this passage this morning we are concerned with the inseparability of that marriage bond.

## 2. HUMAN WEAKNESS

As we also know, though, God's perfect creation did not stay perfect for long. Evil entered it and it wasn't long before men and women, faced with the choices that evil now offered, started making wrong decisions and had to start living with the consequences of it all. If you want the correct theological term for that, it's **sin**. And sin affects every part of our lives, as well as having an indirect effect on the rest of creation. In many places throughout the Bible, we find the effect of sin on humanity described as Jesus does here – "*hard hearts*". It gets into everything and messes up God's ideal. And it isn't, unfortunately, something that we can always see at work in direct ways. Particular things may go wrong in our lives as a consequence of our own wrong choices, but they may also go wrong as a consequence of someone else's wrong choices.

Whatever the reason, our "*hard hearts*" do not always respond to God and his ideals as he would like – or, indeed, as we would like. And this area of marriage is just one such part of life that gets messed up, one area where we can easily miss the ideal. Marriages go wrong: let's make no bones about that. Things happen which threaten to blow apart that ideal, monogamous, lifelong bond. Things happen to Christian couples just as much as they happen to non-Christians. At this point in many sermons on divorce, the preacher trots out a list of statistics about marriage break-up and divorce rates and so on. You don't need that, because for many of you here this morning you know what it's like close up. You have seen it happening among your own family members and close friends. You have sat up at night talking and listening to the stories. You have had to cope with the fall out and help to share the burden. And some of you here this morning have struggled with it, or are struggling with it yourselves. You don't need statistics to convince you of the pain of it all, to bring home to you the reality of it all. It's not an easy option, a quick release to make things better. It hurts and it's not what you want – just as it's not what God wants. But God does not sit up there in heaven (or however you picture him) in splendid

isolation, just waiting to zap anyone who fails to live up to his high ideals. Yes, he wants us to aspire to them as far as we possibly can, but when there's a failure to do that, he is loving enough to provide us with an alternative.

### 3. GOD'S GENEROSITY

As so often, God provides a way out. Because of what was happening – even in Moses' day – God allowed an exit for those who were trapped in situations that were intolerable. It wasn't his first option. It wasn't – and isn't – what he wants from his people. And because he sees the hardness of our hearts, there's a Plan B. But it has to be done properly. There has to be a good reason, for a start. The problem with that – as was the case in Moses' day, as was the case for Rabbis Hillel and Shammai, as has been the case down through the centuries – is that no-one really agrees on what is a good reason. Even if you get all the books that have been written on the subject by Christian scholars and pastors and teachers, you'll still find a huge spectrum of opinion. And I'm not going to offer one now. Each case is different, and what is written in the theological college essay or preached from the pulpit can often fail to take account of the fact that the church is made up of real people, each one different and unique. When I was at college I wrote the definitive essay on this subject. I had it all worked out and it was all about as biblical as you can get. I knew exactly what I was going to do about those in my congregation who were divorced or thinking about it. Then I started in ministry and met them – two divorcees on my first diaconate. And they didn't quite fit into my neat scheme.

God knows we are all different. He knows that we try and we fail – all of us. And some of us fail in this area, just as others fail in the area of money or ambition or jealousy or violence. So he puts into place a way to make the best of a bad job, if you like. There are provisions made for formal separation, for written undertakings, for the protection of the vulnerable. Ultimately, his Plan B took Jesus to the cross. Because of our hardness of heart, our wrong choices and sinful attitudes, we are unable to attain to God's ideals for our lives, for his world, so Jesus died to provide a way in which we could eventually attain to and enjoy that ideal, so that we could participate in the life of his Kingdom, so that we could know forgiveness and peace.

After Jesus has finished his discussion with the Pharisees, we read that he continues his conversation with his disciples. And here he seems to show even greater generosity than that provided in Moses' Law. You might not have noticed this if you don't know the background to the Law and you're so used to our attempts at inclusive language today. Under the Law of the people of Israel, which was still very much in place in Jesus' time, a woman committed adultery against her husband if she had an affair. If a man had an affair, he committed adultery against the husband of the woman he was having the affair with. A woman could not get a divorce. She was stuck with an adulterous husband. Notice here that Jesus first acknowledges that a man can commit adultery against the **woman**. And he also mentions the possibility of a woman divorcing her husband. He recognises the vulnerability of both parties and the hurt that both can experience in all of this. Jesus is there for everyone.

So what have we got here? What does this say to us in our contemporary culture in which, whatever else we may have said, the incidence of divorce is growing, and growing just as fast within the Christian community as outside it? Well, it says the same as it says about all God's will for us. Firstly, we are to strive for the ideal. With the support of each other and the help of the Holy Spirit, we are to try and live up to the ideals that God has set for us. It is hard – it can be extremely hard. In marriage as in everything else we need to make a conscious effort to work at it when things don't automatically go the way we want them to, but it is usually worth it.

But there are times when, despite all the work, all the prayer, all the advice and counsel and support, when every avenue has been explored and every opportunity exhausted, it just goes wrong and everything falls apart. It's not easy to cope with. It's not pleasant – and those who are looking on from the outside

need to be very wary of saying things like “It’s the easy way out”. But it happens. It’s part of our human condition which we cannot escape from – just as other people struggle to cope with their covetousness or their delight in gossip or their own secret but lustful thoughts.

And we need to accept that. We cannot run away from it or try to deny it. As a Christian community we need to help those who are trying to keep to the ideal – to offer support and encouragement. But we also need to help those who have tried and tried but can try no longer. We must ensure that those who are hurting find support, that everything is sorted out in a right and proper way, that those who have been caught up in it all (especially the children) are protected and helped. They are things that perhaps, as a church, we have been perceived as not being very good at doing in the past. But this is not an issue that will go away within the lifetime of any of us here.

And we need to move on, knowing that in this, as in every other area of our lives, God offers his forgiveness. It may be something that has further-reaching implications than some of the other things we do. It may have consequences that last longer, that affect more people, than many of our so-called less serious weaknesses, but, as we’ve said before, there are far more pronouncements against greed, gossip and covetousness in the Bible than against this. God is there for you at all times. And so should his people be. It is in the way that we deal with issues such as the issue of divorce that we advertise our Christian commitment – both in trying as hard as we can to avoid it and stick to God’s ideal, and in doing all that we can to pick up the pieces when the ideal proves to be beyond our reach. Just remember, though, that you are never beyond God’s reach!

### **Questions for discussion**

1. Why was the Pharisees’ question a testing one for Jesus?
2. What does Jesus mean by “*your hearts were hard*”?
3. What principles can you discover about what God intended for marriage in vv6-9? How would you communicate them to today’s culture?
4. In *Matthew 5:31,32 & 19:9*, Jesus introduces an exception to the rule he states here? Why do you think there are the two different accounts?
5. How far should the Church pursue a no-divorce rule? Is it any different for Church leaders?
6. In what ways can we help those whose lives have been affected by divorce?