

Jesus then left that place and went into the region of Judea and across the Jordan. Again crowds of people came to him, and as was his custom, he taught them. ² Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' ³ 'What did Moses command you?' he replied. ⁴ They said, 'Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.' ⁵ 'It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,' Jesus replied. ⁶ 'But at the beginning of creation God "made them male and female" ⁷ "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, ⁸ and the two will become one flesh."⁹ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹ Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

¹⁰ When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. ¹¹ He answered, 'Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. ¹² And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.'

Last week Jesus was pretty direct about those who would cause others to sin: they would be better off being drowned in the sea. He also warned that whatever causes yourself to sin, needed to be cut off, to avoid going to hell. We also had what some commentators found difficult in the New Testament because of their uncertain meaning Mark 9 ⁴⁹ *Everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰ 'Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other.'*

This week we see Jesus travelling outside Galilee and in Judea and across the Jordan, with crowds following him. He had not yet reached Jerusalem, but was moving south. The crowds have been following Jesus for quite a while now, and along with them are the usual bunch of Pharisees trying to trap him by asking questions they knew might have controversial answers. Divorce then was one of the most controversial issues among Jews as it is today among Christians. It seemed then, as now, that once someone you love, whether family or friend, is divorced and remarries, the perspective on divorce changes because of the love you have for those involved. The Old Testament is very clear on matters of chastity, and that wives should be virgins when they marry, and could be sent back to their father if found not to be so. For the 2,000 years before Christ, it was the ideal state for the daughters of Pharisees and other Jews upon marriage, as it is among Christians for the next 2,000 years. However not every marriage was a happy one, and that was why divorce was allowed in certain circumstances. We'll get to this later, but Jesus says *"Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning."* Jesus has overturned some areas of the law of Moses which all Jews presumed were God given rules, and none were supposed to be rules made up by Moses. Naturally Jews had for 2,000 years tried to define the circumstances that allowed divorce and look for loopholes, just as Christians (especially among royal and noble families) have looked for ways to end marriages, so remarriage could take place over the next 2,000 years. In the past 4,000 years it was taken as read that daughters could be given in marriage often with little say in the matter. However, usually they did have some say in the matter, because parents loved their daughters and loving parents wouldn't marry them off if they were unwilling.

Jesus sees where the Pharisees are going and steers the conversation in a different direction. He sets out the covenant relationship made before God, that a husband and a wife become one flesh, and that no man should separate what God has joined together. In Matthew 19:1-12 Jesus explains the same thing, but in more detail as the Pharisees ask another question and the disciples respond with another observation.

19 When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. **2** Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. **3** Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?' **4** 'Haven't you read,' he replied, 'that at the beginning the Creator "made them male and female," **5** and said, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh"? **6** So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.' **7** 'Why then,' they asked, 'did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?' **8** Jesus replied, 'Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. **9** I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.' **10** The disciples said to him, 'If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.' **11** Jesus replied, 'Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. **12** For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others – and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.'

Jesus is quoted in Matthew 5:31-32 saying the same thing he is saying in Matthew 19. Matthew 5: **31** 'It has been said, "Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce."**32** But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Mark's Gospel omits the "except for sexual immorality" which is why many will accept the necessity of divorce, though usually not for just this one reason. I've heard plenty of arguments from ministers to justify remarrying divorced couples, citing Matthew 19, but neither Matthew 19 nor Mark 9 give any justification for remarriage. It is human logic that says if divorce is allowed, its purpose is not simply to put the couple in the same state they were in before marriage, but to enable them to remarry other partners. In Roman times, chastity was as rare then as it is today, and the normal state of affairs was that men and women had sexual activity outside of marriage and that divorce was part of everyday life. Greeks and Romans were quite liberal in modern eyes in the way they treated marriage and divorce. All this changed when the Emperor Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Divorce became harder, and eventually was deemed a matter for the Church by the sixth century, and not a civil legal matter.

In England with the bringing of Christianity, divorce was pretty much non-existent. Up until the Marriage Act 1753, any man and woman living together were deemed to be married, regardless of any ceremony in church... the so-called "common law marriage"... which was invalidated by the Marriage Act. There were no common law divorces because divorces were unheard of, being forbidden by the Church of Rome and Church of England. Henry VIII started the ball rolling on divorce, and employed dodgy reasoning and cajoled the clergy to remarry him with due Church ceremony. After his death, things went back to normal: no divorces allowed, except by an Act of Parliament to make it happen... that is the House of Lords heard the case and decided yes or no! It is only in 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act that enabled the Courts to decide on divorce cases, which needed just cause. Since then we have no-fault divorce and "unreasonable behaviour", whatever that means, as "just cause".

Jews were more flexible than the Church of Rome or Church of England. Men could divorce their wives for petty reasons and so long as they wrote out the certificate of divorce, it was done. Wives had no say in the matter. King Herod had rid himself of his wife to marry another, much like Henry VIII. Obviously this was hard on the wives, and controversial among pious Jews. For example the

Levites (who were often Sadducees) were the only tribes of the twelve tribes of Israel who had to obey special marriage rules. The Levites were only allowed to marry virgins, and could never marry widows or divorced women because they were a holy priesthood (Leviticus 21). They could only marry within their tribe. Peter in his first letter says we are a royal priesthood and holy nation of believers (1 Peter 2:9). With being a holy priesthood there is an implication that the Levitical marriage standards apply... and that being a holy nation, believers married within the community of believers. Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 deals with this as well.

So back to the text. Jesus says what the law of Moses is, but points to a better way. In his day there were two schools of thought on what constituted a matter of indecency (Deuteronomy 24:1-4) which were grounds for a man (and only a man) to write out a certificate of divorce. One extreme was "indecency" meant adultery... and then that wouldn't end in divorce but the wife being stoned to death along with the man involved. At the other extreme, being a bit ugly or a poor cook or talking to other men, were justifiable reasons for divorce. Jesus was standing up for women who had a raw deal when it came to divorce. He was saying that men had to honour the vows they made before God, because husband and wife are one flesh. What God has joined together let no man separate. Jesus brings God into the relationship as the one who has done the joining of a man and woman in marriage, and once He is involved, only He would be able to be the one to do the undoing. Writing out a certificate of divorce didn't involve God at all: it merely stated that the wife was released from the marriage and was free to remarry.

The disciples weren't satisfied with the answer Jesus gave the Pharisees. Jesus appeared to have sided with those who held the view that divorce was only permissible for sexual indecency – i.e. adultery... and as has been said already, the strict interpretation of the law would have resulted in the death of adulterous couple... avoiding divorce altogether. How does this fit in with John 8: 1-11 when Jesus does not condemn the woman taken in adultery? Jesus knew the law of Moses. To stone to death adulterers, both the man and woman involved had to be killed. There had to be at least two witnesses, and they had to cast the first stones. In making an accusation, the witnesses had to be willing to carry out the sentence the law demanded as well. This tended to put off false accusations because that would be actual murder (see Judith and the elders in the Apocrypha). Anyone else throwing the stones would be guilty of abetting murder someone without the witnesses being willing to enforce the sentence that was necessary because of their testimony. Obviously in this episode, the man wasn't there, the witnesses were probably not there, or were unwilling to start proceedings (under Roman rule, executions were only to be enforced by Romans, and anyone taking the law into their own hands would themselves be executed for exceeding their authority), and so there was no one without sin who could stone the woman taken in adultery.

The modern approach to divorce for some is that Jesus is able to forgive, regardless of what we do. But as we saw last week, if some part of you wants to sin, Jesus says cut it off. Giving in to temptation may well be forgivable if we repent afterwards and try to do better, but is that the better way? To be sinning over and over because we enjoy the sin seems to be testing God's patience. Better to avoid sin, than knowingly sin hoping that we can repent later to put things right with God. That is dangerous as we may die tomorrow unexpectedly without having repented.

Divorce then is one step that could be taken after a marriage breaks down. Jesus wasn't advocating re-marriage though, was he? Remarriage would make the couple adulterers and adultery is a sin. Asking for God's blessing on a remarriage seems to me to be asking Him to bless what will inevitably be sinful. I'm sure very few remarried couples lead celibate lives to avoid committing adultery. I've never heard of any who have promised to do so during such a marriage

ceremony. If a previously divorced couple who fall in love with each other are to live as brother and sister, then to be honest, why marry? The only advantage of marriage would be to clock up a higher inheritance tax allowance given to married couples.

Matthew 19:10-12 ¹⁰ *The disciples said to him, 'If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.'* ¹¹ *Jesus replied, 'Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given.'* ¹² *For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others – and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.'*

Jesus understands man's weakness, and says that not everyone can accept what he is saying. Later Paul says the same thing, that to be close to God, it is perhaps better not to marry (1 Corinthians 7:10), but this is only for those who can accept it.

Divorce is a thorny subject. On a lighter note, about 30 years ago, I was asked to lead a house group of six old ladies, and one of the old ladies' husband. They were all at least 30 years older than I was. Jonathan was a baby and Johanna wasn't yet born. Old ladies love babies and these were all very sweet and had been Christians for most of their lives. We had material given for house groups, and on the second or third week of leading them, the subject of divorce came up. I had only been at St Andrew's about three years and I didn't really know that much about them, other than that there were two sisters, one lady who was separated (she sat next to me for months when I first came to church as a single man), and the other three were married. We came to the bit in Mark we looked at today, and I said that God didn't intend people to get divorced. There were two sisters who lived together... they looked at each other and then at me. The first one said, "I'm divorced" and then the second one said "I'm divorced too" and then the third lady said "I'm separated from my husband but I won't divorce him". Then the old man who was married to the fourth old lady in the group said "My wife left me, I've never understood why, but we got divorced", to which his wife added "I'm the adulterer who married him". That left two married old ladies who had said nothing... then one said "my husband isn't a Christian... I suppose I shouldn't have married him according to 1 Corinthians 7". Then, one of the sisters said, "I'm glad we got this all out in the open... you weren't to know." We didn't do the other questions in the material but sang some songs and said some prayers. Divorce was never mentioned in the housegroup that ran for many years happily, especially as they loved coming to our house to see Jonathan and Johanna. The children knew what week it was at our house because the Hoover came out. Johanna would ask, "are the Jesus people coming today?" History repeats itself, because Johanna leads a housegroup, and she hoovers before they come!

God sets a high standard for us all, that most of us, if not all of us, cannot reach without the help of Holy Spirit. We thank God for Jesus and his willingness to continue to forgive us when we sin and ask for forgiveness.