

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church  
Shobonier, Illinois  
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Mark 10:2-16

### The Danger of a Hard Heart

Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" (Mark 10:2 ESV)

In the name of Jesus, the only Savior of the world,

In the days of this national election cycle, it's all the rage to try to catch someone in his words. Interviewers, debate moderators, even the candidates themselves do their best to trap a candidate into saying something that is unpopular or can otherwise be used against him. A savvy candidate will see through the deception, though, deflect it, and turn to the real question, or at least a topic he really wants to talk about.

Such were the Pharisees. They were testing Jesus trying to trap Him in His own words. And while the hot topics today are the economy, illegal immigration, and abortion, they asked Jesus, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

Now, in those days there were two popular rabbinic opinions. One said a man could only divorce his wife because of marital unfaithfulness. The other, more liberal opinion said a man could divorce for any reason, even because of a burnt dinner meal. So, which side would Jesus take. No matter what He said, someone would be angry.

But Jesus, divine Wisdom Incarnate, responded with a question of His own, "What did Moses command you?" They answered, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away." Well, that answer needs to be fact checked. Deuteronomy 24(:1-4) actually says that if a man marries but then finds some indecency in his wife, or she loses his favor, and he divorces her, and if she remarried someone else who later divorced her or died, the first husband could not then remarry her.

So Moses, by God's direction, was regulating divorce and remarriage, not allowing it. But the Pharisees often looked for loopholes, lawful ways to get rid of their wives without God getting in the way.

But Jesus didn't play their game. He went straight for the heart, "Moses wrote this commandment for you because of the hardness of your hearts." Hardness of heart made that

law necessary. And a hardened heart is another way of saying an uncircumcised heart, which no Pharisee believed he had. And hardened hearts quickly become calloused hearts--hardened against one's spouse and, in turn, God. Hardened hearts are also unbelieving hearts, refusing God's gifts, looking for loopholes to rationalize sin.

Hardened hearts need the Law to curb and contain them. And that's what God's Law did. It kept men from treating women like cattle, trading them back and forth to suit their fancy. For God wants us to treat all people with dignity and respect; after all, were we not all originally created in His image? We recognize that reality as we properly serve one another, whether as husband or wife.

Jesus then took them back to creation and God's Word where we learn that marriage is a gift from God. And so "a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." God intended marriage to be the closest communion that can exist between two people. It's a complete and committed joining of a man and woman into a physical, emotional, and spiritual communion. No one is to drive a wedge between a husband and wife. The only closer communion that is to exist is the communion between Christ and the Church, between Christ and the believer.

So, while the Pharisees looked for loopholes to justify divorce, Jesus held up the gift of God and His will for marriage for both husband and wife. They are to be one flesh by God's Word. And anyone who dares to get between them, or separate them, must answer to God.

Jesus' disciples heard this, but they had lingering questions. So, they waited until they were alone with Jesus. And this time, Jesus delivered what He said even more sharply: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery."

Those are hard words, especially in this day of multiple marriages, divorces, living together, and homosexual relationships. But God's law doesn't have loopholes. He wants the one-flesh union of husband and wife to last "until death us do part." What falls short of that falls short of God's intent. What falls short of that needs repentance and forgiveness, just like the other sins in our lives.

Thus, marriage is a holy estate instituted by God. That's why God hates divorce. It separates what God had joined together. That's why it's so often painful. Yet, divorce happens. For we are sinners living in a fallen world. Sin and death have had their way with the world, with us, and even our marriages. We live in a divorce-oriented world. If the car breaks down, we get another one. If the house begins to have problems, we move. If the congregation has problems, we try to write the pastor a certificate of divorce and send him away, or we leave and

go to another congregation. If the marriage is broken, we leave. Divorce has become an accepted part of life. Divorce does happen--and it happens to Christians.

If this has happened to you, repent. Repent for whatever you contributed to the breakup of the marriage. Confess your sin and receive God's forgiveness. For with every divorce sin is in the thick of it. If sins weren't at play between the husband and wife, divorce would die its own death. But hardened hearts that twist and defy God's will easily become calloused toward God. Loopholes in the Law don't help either--they simply continue the hardening of someone's heart.

Now, if what Jesus says troubles you, don't change or ignore what Jesus says. Instead, bring your sins to Jesus. That's what God calls us to do with the brokenness of our lives. We gather the broken pieces and put them at the feet of our heavenly Father and humbly say: "I broke it. I'm sorry. Please forgive me." Forget excuses, finger pointing, and loopholes in God's Law. Confess your sins to God and bury them in Jesus' death. Drown them in baptism and receive Christ's forgiveness. Live as one whom the blood of Jesus has made clean. For those with repentant hearts, God will rest His hand on your head and say, "I forgive you because of my Son."

And if you have been sinned against, rest in Jesus' mercy and forgiveness. For His death paid for those sins too. And while you may suffer from it, you don't need to bear those sins. Jesus has already done that for you. For Jesus gave His life for everyone: those married, single, divorced, even little children. He reached out in mercy to a Samaritan woman, who had been married five times and was then living with some man who wasn't her husband. Jesus defended a woman caught in adultery from her stone-throwing accusers and then absolved her. He bore our adulteries on the cross. He became the adulterer in our place so, in Him, we might become the righteousness of God.

If you are married, let Jesus live in the middle of your marriage. He is the Source of forgiveness. He must work between husband and wife, softening their hearts, sweeping their sins away, and reviving them to live as one flesh. For as Jesus mediates between God and us, so He must mediate between and among us, bringing His harmony and peace. For it's only through Jesus that we can forgive one another as God forgives. It's only through Jesus that husbands and wives can receive each other as gifts from God. It's only through Jesus that two can become one flesh.

And while divorce gets most of the press in this text, Jesus also addresses the hardness of His disciples' hearts in forbidding children to come to Him, even as He explains how we can receive Him and all He has to offer.

People were bringing little children, even infants, to Jesus for Him to touch and bless. But the disciples, having hardened hearts of their own, became annoyed and tried to keep the children from Jesus. But Jesus rebuffed His disciples in order to soften their hearts and teach them. You see, the children didn't come to Jesus looking for loopholes. They didn't try to trap Him. They didn't quibble with the hardness of His teaching. They didn't come boasting about their commandment-keeping. In truth, they couldn't even come to Jesus: They had to be brought, as a baby is brought to baptism. And Jesus says, "Look at these little ones. That's the way of the kingdom of God."

How so? Because they are so innocent? No. Rather, it's because they simply receive. So, when we receive as a little child, an infant, does, we receive everything as a gift from God. We receive the saving bath of holy baptism, the forgiving words of absolution, and the body and blood of Jesus in His Supper. We receive eternal life, salvation, forgiveness, and peace. And in the same childlike trust in God, who lavishes His saving gifts on His children, we receive the gift of our spouses, those with whom we are of one flesh. We receive them "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us to part." God grant it, in Jesus' name. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

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