

## **Why Is Jesus So Harsh Concerning Divorce?**

A man was having lunch with a friend. He said, "You know my wife is a nurse. When we were first married she used to fuss over every little pain or bruise I came home with. But I recently got an indication that that honeymoon was over!"

His friend said, "Really? What happened?"

He said, "Well, I needed to fix the attic fan, but as I lifted myself up from the ladder, I scratched my forehead on a beam. Crawling along the ceiling joists, I got splinters in both hands. Replacing the fan belt, I cut my finger and, climbing back down, I missed the last two rungs and twisted my ankle. Then, as I limped into the kitchen bleeding from my forehead and hand, my wife took one look at me and said, "Are those your good pants?"<sup>i</sup>

Yes, relationships in marriage do change over time and comedians have made a good living making jokes about bad marriages. But if you've ever been in a bad marriage, you know it's no laughing matter. In fact, it's one of the most painful places a person can ever be. So, since Jesus knows all things and since He has made it so clear that when we, His followers, hurt, He feels that hurt then why does He say what He says about divorce? That's our topic for today. For some of you this may be a bumpy ride so I suggest you have your seat belts fastened and be sure your seats and tray tables are in their upright and locked positions. Ready? First, Jesus shows us...

### **I. His Definition of Marriage.**

The context here, as usual, is critical. It says in Mark 10:1 & 2 that:

**Jesus then left that place and went into the region of Judea and across the Jordan... Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"**

Now, as usual, they did this in public and everyone in the crowd knew the answer to this question. The Law of Moses in Deut. 24 says that if a man found something "displeasing" (or another translation says "indecent") in his wife, he could write a certificate of divorce and send her away. The only question was, "What did Moses mean by 'displeasing' or 'indecent'?" The rabbis argued about this all the time. But the Pharisees aren't really asking that question. They're asking if it is lawful AT ALL for a man to divorce his wife. Why are they doing that now? Why are they doing that here in Judea?

The Pharisees are asking that question in Judea because Judea is ruled by Herod Antipas. Herod Antipas is the one who put John the Baptist in jail and eventually had him killed, because he spoke out against Herod's divorcing his wife. The Pharisees think they have Jesus in the perfect trap. If He says, "Yes, it's lawful for a man to divorce his wife" then He's contradicting John the Baptist. If He says, "No, it's not lawful for a man to divorce his wife" then they hope that Herod will likely do to Jesus what he did to John. So, what did Jesus do?

Jesus moves beyond the question of divorce to the purpose of marriage. After affirming that Moses permitted divorce, Jesus then says: (Mk. 10:5)

**It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law.**

In other words, Jesus is saying, “Even thinking about divorce shows that you have completely missed the purpose of marriage.” He then continues by saying:

**But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”**

(Mark 10:6-9)

We need to notice four things in this definition of marriage. *First, marriage was created BEFORE there was sin in the world.* Accommodation for divorce was NOT part of the original design of marriage. The Law of Moses came a full 500 years after Abraham lived, so all the Patriarchs and the whole beginning of the nation of Israel happened without the Law of Moses. Marriage was not designed to live under the law. The law was designed to try to prevent God’s original design from being decimated by sin.

*Secondly, the intention of marriage was that it would provide lifelong companionship for a man and woman.* In other words, this “oneness” was to be for life. In the Patriarchal age, there was no practice among God’s people other than marriage being for life, which brings us to Jesus’ comments to the Sadducees who didn’t believe in heaven or any form of life after death. They used the argument about someone who was married multiple times to try to prove to Jesus that an afterlife violated God’s law about caring for a widow. Jesus points out that their question is based on a false assumption. They were assuming that people would be married in heaven. He states that we won’t. Marriage is for this life only.

Now, for those of you who are happily married, don’t despair! We have a very relational God. If He could create something like marriage that could give you such joy here in a sinful world, don’t you think He will create something to replace it that will be even better in a perfect world?

And for those of you who are UN-happily married, be careful how you display your unhappiness! Jesus also said that before you enter heaven, you will have to give an account for “*every careless word you have spoken.*” (Matt. 12:36) So, be careful.

*Thirdly, this “oneness” also referred to the way a family would be created.* The original design for children, before there was sin and disease and death, was that there would be one mother and one father. We should do everything within our power to provide that design for every child in this broken world.

*Finally, people did not create marriage, God did.* If you’re the creator of something, then you’re the only one who has the right to adjust it, amend it or undo it. We talk about the day “we got married.” That’s not true! That was the day “God joined you in marriage.” You have no right to dissolve what happened on that day because you didn’t create it! That’s what Jesus is so strongly affirming in verse 9:

**Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.**

So, Jesus’ definition of marriage is this: *Marriage was created by God to last for a lifetime, provide companionship for a man and woman and create families.*

But, we still must ask...

## II. What, Then, Is the Purpose of Divorce?

In short, the purpose of divorce in both the Law of Moses and in Jesus' teaching is this:

*The purpose of divorce is to protect as much of God's original design as possible from the savagery of a vow breaker.*

Why does Jesus speak so strongly about divorce? Because His larger purpose is to protect marriage as His Father created it! The glue of marriage is meant to be your vow. Fulfilling your vows in the Old Testament was a big deal. If you didn't keep your vow, there were huge consequences. In Jeremiah 3, God likens Israel's disobedience as a nation to breaking the vow of marriage. God says:

**"But like a woman unfaithful to her husband, So you have been unfaithful to me, O house of Israel," declares the LORD. ...Therefore the showers have been withheld, and no spring rains have fallen. (Jer. 3:20, 3)**

Read all of Jeremiah, read all of the book of Hosea; when God gives the reasons why He is cutting off His relationship with the nation of Israel and sending them into exile, the number one reason is spiritual adultery. And what does Jesus say is the number one reason for allowing divorce to take place? Matthew quotes Jesus in his parallel passage to Mark 10 as saying: (Matt. 19:9)

**I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.**

The Greek word for "unfaithfulness" is *porneia*, which specifically means physical sexual intercourse.

Pastor Chuck Swindoll points out that in I Cor. 7 we find one other biblical reason for dissolving a marriage through divorce. Here, it is speaking of a marriage between a Christian and a non-Christian. And it says: (I Cor. 7:15)

**But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.**

When it says that the believing man or woman "is not bound," this means that they are free to remarry. They are not bound by Jesus' restriction of being able to remarry only if their partner is unfaithful.

But friends, listen to me carefully. These are the only two biblical reasons to divorce. To put it simply, if you are a Christian, don't break your vow! If the other person breaks their vow of marriage, then you are free to divorce, but you are not free to do so for any other reason.

Now, I know what some of you are thinking. You're thinking, "But pastor, what if my spouse is verbally abusive or is unethical with money or is physically abusive. Are you saying that I must stay in that marriage and be abused or be in jeopardy of going to jail?"

Listen to me carefully – each circumstance is unique. Abusive and unethical behavior is sin. Sin comes in many varieties and many levels of severity. Severe or dangerous sin will probably require that you remove yourself and your children from the danger zone for a period of time, but hear me now – your spouse's sin, other than unfaithfulness or desertion, is no reason for you to break your marriage vow! Sin is not grounds for divorce! If it were, then all our spouses would have grounds for divorce because we all sin!

So, if you're a Christian and while you were a Christian you initiated a divorce for some reason other than infidelity or abandonment, you're probably asking yourself right now, "Then, where am I with God? Does He hate me?"

No, God doesn't hate sinners. He loves sinners. But He hates what you did. So, what should you do? You should do two things. First, you should ask God to forgive you. What you did was not in His will. You need to confess that to Him.

And secondly, you should ask the one you divorced to forgive you. Yes, that will be hard. Yes, you'll have a thousand reasons why you can't do it, like the fact that they might not have been unfaithful but they sure did sin against you. But Jesus said this:

**For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matt. 6:14-15)**

That statement by Jesus is either true or false. What do you believe?

So, now do you see where we are? Now, we're at the most critical question that every married or unmarried and wish-they-were married person must ask, "How do I live with another sinner?"

Ann Voskamp, by writing about her own marriage, gives voice to all of our struggle. She writes:

I think we were standing outside the back door, out by the white pickup under the Big Dipper, when I turned and said it. Said I hated him. The dark can make you brave. Or a fool. But when you're 22 and think you know everything, panic can tear up your chest like this howl that has to rip free. "I hate it when you stand there all quiet."

He kicks the ground with the toe of his boot, drives his hands deep into his Wranglers. Does he hear me at all?

"Hate how you just pull away. Hate how you always think I'm the problem and it's never you. Hate it, Hate it – hate y..."

There. There it is, spewn sick over everything. And the moment that ugliness wrenches free, I feel released – and wretched.

I want to fling that wedding band encircling my finger and everything. And I want to somehow hold on tight. **I want him to hold me tight.**

He turns his back.

**How in the world did we get here and so fast and isn't this the mad dance that drives the wedded wild?** For the first two years after our vows, it's the only dance we knew. I thought I'd married the wrong man...

I do know how the dance went... **I'd discuss and he'd distance. I'd rage and he'd disengage. I'd escalate and he'd escape.** Then the icy silence sets in – all this continental distance between us shifting past each other cold in the kitchen.

He'd say he had a migraine and go to bed right after dinner. I'd cry over the sink with the water running. **I didn't know the first law of love is to listen – listen to the ache under the anger.**

No English teacher ever taught me what nearly 18 years of marriage now give credence to: *Anxiety and anger, they come from the same root word...*

Under everything, that's what we're all terrified of: being left and abandoned. **We're all desperate for connection and God made us for communion, for *koinonia*.**

And whether I'm frustrated that he didn't take the garbage out or... hang up his coat, whether this is about paying attention or spending money or time with the kids – **no matter what words, or volume or tone I use, what my words are stammering to say (is),**

**"Can I really count on you? Are we connected? Do I matter to you? Will you love me?"**

...That's what good relationships are: safe havens in the world, this base that makes us brave to venture out into the world – *and safe to come home.*

**That's what He [God] made love to be:** "for love bears all things." I Cor. 13  
The Greek word for "bears" is *stego* – "a thatched roof"

**...That's what real love always is: I become a roof for you, a wing for you, a shelter in your storm.**

...I had once choked it out in this wild desperation: **"Are women really like ambulances? When we are most in need of tender care, we're these screaming sirens? And that's why men pull far away – getting out of the way and off the road?"**

He had looked over at me. Looked into me. For a moment, we'd stood there, searching each other – waiting for someone to open a door and be a roof.  
*"Can I count on you? Do I matter to you?"*

He shook his head, chuckled softly – and reached over, grabbed my hand and pulled me right into him.

**"So when you're angry – it's really this alarm? That you need care?"** He tilts my chin [and says] *"What if God bound us together – to help us bind up each other's wounds?"*

I nod slowly.

"And what you really need is ER – an emotional response?" He leans his forehead against mine.

I close my eyes.

In this dark, I'm the wild fool who is safe.

And I nod and he holds me tight, his arms enfolding, these trusses all around, and together we stand under this expanse of love, fears flung far away... <sup>ii</sup>

What do you say to that? Some of you are saying, "I can't, I just can't risk reaching out one more time!"

Yes, yes you can! You can because you did not make your marriage and in the end, you will not save your marriage. Just before Jesus raised a girl back to life who was dead, he said to her father:

**...Don't be afraid; just believe.** (Mark 5:36)

You can do that. You can! Let's pray...

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<sup>i</sup> Michael Hodgkin, *1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) p. 195

<sup>ii</sup> Ann Voskamp, "What You're Trying to Tell Him When You're Angry," [www.incourage.me/2012/02/5-ways-to-fight-through-to-a-loving-marriage.html](http://www.incourage.me/2012/02/5-ways-to-fight-through-to-a-loving-marriage.html)