

Living with Grace

Genesis 1: 27, 2:24
Mark 10: 2-16

Faith Community
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Introduction

Wow, these are harsh words about divorce. Is Jesus laying down the law that no one should ever get divorced, and if they do, they can never remarry? Is it God's law that whoever divorces and remarries commits adultery?

The Pharisees come to Jesus with a question in an attempt to trap him. They are trying to get him to say something that will get him in trouble. Their question is interesting because divorce was allowed in Judaism. In fact, Deuteronomy says a man could give his wife a certificate of divorce if she simply didn't please him. In Jesus' time there was strong debate among Jewish groups over when a man could divorce his wife.

In Jewish law a woman could never divorce her husband. And divorce for a woman often meant disaster. There was no alimony or child support. If a man dismissed his wife, she would have to make it on her own. Often it meant poverty, begging, and a life of degradation. To tighten the rules about divorce was to provide support to many women.

Did you notice? The Pharisees ask what is legal; Jesus responds with what is God's will. They ask about divorce; he answers about marriage. He turns the discussion and makes them deal with more significant issues.

I

The Old Testament prophets, especially Amos and Isaiah, laid down absolutes about what ultimately is the will of God. They know, of course, that there are exceptions and plenty of "What ifs," but they lay out in absolute terms the ideal of what God wants. Sometimes they come across as harsh.

Jesus is talking like that about the ideal for marriage. Like those prophets, Jesus lays down in absolute terms the pure will of God for marriage. He is talking about the ultimate good; he isn't presenting case law for all the special circumstances and different situations that might exist.

He is not talking here about the law but the ideal, not about a legalism but the ultimate will of God, not about special situations and loopholes but God's grace.

II

Jesus' response is really about the importance of marriage. From Jesus' words we can see how seriously Jesus takes marriage, and how important that bond is. The covenant of marriage and the sexual relationship that is part of it have to be highly valued and must be protected. It is important to continually build that relationship and to repair it when necessary so that it remains strong.

A couple sat in my office and the man said, “I met an interesting woman on a flight back from California. We found we had a lot in common. Before the flight was over I had agreed to meet her for lunch later in the week. After we had lunch I realized I was really very attracted to her.” His wife sat beside him in tears. Then he said, “But I don’t want to have an affair. I love my wife and my kids, and I don’t want to mess all that up. I told that woman that I could never see her again, and that I was going to work on my marriage. We want your help to get our relationship back and strong again.”

Usually people who are in solid, healthy marriages don’t have affairs. It’s some difficulty or dissatisfaction that causes problems. So dealing with those issues early is very important.

What Jesus is stressing in his words about marriage is the importance of the qualities that make a strong relationship: loyalty, trustworthiness, compassion, faithfulness, and a commitment to work through problems.

Jesus response to the Pharisees shows how highly he regards the bond of marriage.

III

There is no place for pride or arrogance among those who have remained together in marriage. This passage is not saying that people who stay married are the good people and those who divorce are bad. Anyone who is part of a long marriage knows that isn’t true. In fact, the longer we are married, the more we realize how little it has depended on us and our good actions.

So much of it depends on how fortunate we are. So much of it depends on how understanding and forgiving and tolerant our partner is. If you’ve been married more than five years, you realize how much of it depends on grace, being forgiven, your partner overlooking the stupid things you have said and done.

In premarital counseling I once had a couple ask to change the vows from “as long as we both shall live” to “as long as our love shall last.” I said I didn’t do that kind of wedding, and I hoped they didn’t want that kind of marriage, because in the first year they were going to seriously question whether their love was going to make it.

A great deal of staying together is being able to look beyond the crisis of the moment to the long commitment you have made to each other.

IV

We all live by forgiveness. We all live in the grace of God. In the process of a marriage falling apart, we often say horrible words and do awful things. It is a rare case to go through a divorce and not feel you need to be forgiven for something. Many divorces are ugly and cruel. So getting divorced often requires forgiveness.

Being married also requires forgiveness. Anyone who is married knows that you can’t get by without forgiving and being forgiven. In a marriage you have to be continually asking for forgiveness. Sometimes you need God to forgive you too!

As a pastor I have seen marriages that need to be broken: when there is abuse, both physical and emotional, when there is continual infidelity, when one partner refuses to work at the marriage. Sometimes it is better to be divorced than to be married - it is the lesser of two evils. It's hard for me to believe that Jesus wouldn't support leaving an abusive relationship and going to a good, healthy, faithful one.

V

Remember how Jesus said that Christians should be united and be a witness to the world of God's love and Christ's teaching. Both individually and as a church we fail miserably at Christ's command. Does that mean that we should not take Jesus' words seriously, because we can't live up to them completely? Of course not!

Because we can't fulfill God's ultimate will doesn't mean we don't continually try. We honestly confess where we have failed and move on, trying to live more faithfully. We put behind us what has gone wrong and we move ahead trying to be as faithful as we can. All of us need forgiveness. We all have to live on the grace of God.

Conclusion

I don't think it's a coincidence that right after these difficult words Jesus takes little children and lifts them up into his arms. It is a poignant moment. It seems to me it's a symbolic act that gives comfort to those who have just heard his words.

A child knows what it's like to receive care – a home and food and safety and love – simply because she exists. Children have nothing material to offer, they come without pretensions and without calculations.

They are able to just receive the goodness that is given to them. They don't make any claims that they have earned any of what they are given. They have the wonderful ability to just receive and accept.

That's what it's like for all of us. We don't come to God with what we are owed or what we have earned. We don't proudly hold out our accomplishments or grovel in our defeats. We come to God with our lives, knowing that we are loved and forgiven, and trusting like a child. We accept God's endless grace.

Amen