

TEACHING ABOUT DIVORCE

Mark 10:1-12

The ministry of Christ was drawing toward a close. The approaching Passover in Jerusalem would mark the termination of His earthly mission. Multitudes were on their way to the Passover. Christ and His party were journeying together. On the way south, crowds gathered around the Lord Jesus and, as was His custom, "He taught them."

In one of those teaching situations the Pharisees, who were never present to help or bless, raised the knotty question of whether or not it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife. Their question was legitimate, but their motive for asking it was wrong. It was not wrong to ask questions, but it was wrong to make traps of them.

The Pharisees were not desiring information or seeking for truth. They wanted to ensnare Christ, to discredit Him as a teacher, or to influence Him to speak contrary to their Law. Perhaps they were anxious to involve Him in enmity with Herod who had divorced his wife and married another. Doubtless they wanted to hear Christ contradict the law of Moses, so that they could formulate a charge of heresy against Him.

The Pharisees thought that Christ would be trapped however He answered their inquiry. If He said that it was lawful to put away a wife, He would be chargeable with sanctioning a low morality; and if He said that it was not lawful, He would be in opposition to the people in general, and to Herod in particular. But "yes" and "no" are not the only possible answers to a question.

In theory nothing could have been higher than the Jewish ideal of marriage. Chastity was held to be the greatest of all the virtues. The Jews recorded various statements like the ones which I now quote. "We find that God is long-suffering to every sin except the sin of unchastity." "Unchastity causes the glory of God to depart." "Every Jew must surrender his life rather than commit idolatry, murder or adultery." "The very altar sheds tears when a man divorces the wife of his youth." The ideal was there but practice fell far short of it.

The basic fact that vitiated the whole situation was that in Jewish law a woman was regarded only as a thing. She had no legal rights whatever. She was at the complete disposal of the male head of the family. The result was that a man could divorce his wife on almost any grounds, while there were very few grounds on which a woman could seek a divorce. At best she could only ask her husband to divorce her. "A woman may be divorced with or without her will, but a man only with his will." The only grounds on which a woman could claim a divorce were if her husband became a leper, if he engaged in a disgusting trade such as that of a tanner, if he molested a virgin, or if he falsely accused her of pre-nuptial sin.

Our Lord avoided their snare, and laid down a principle fundamental to the stability of human society. He answered them saying, "What did Moses command you?" By referring them to Moses Christ turned the point of the attack. The question was related to the interpretation of the Law upon which they themselves were divided. Among the rabbis or religious leaders

there were two schools of thought on this subject. Some taught that divorce was lawful only on the ground of unfaithfulness. Others taught that it was lawful for various causes, even for dislike.

With emphasis on the "lawful" Christ had them cite the law on the subject, and then took them to creation to show that man and wife are one flesh, and that "mere formal divorce does not annul actual marriage consummated by the physical union. Breaking that bond does annul it."

The Old Testament message on the matter is recorded in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. "When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house. And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife. And if the latter husband hate her, and write her a bill of divorcement, and giveth it in her hand, and sendeth her out of his house; or if the latter husband die, which took her to be his wife; her former husband, which sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after that she is defiled; for that is abomination before the Lord: and thou shalt not cause the land to sin, which the Lord thy God giveth thee for an inheritance."

Christ boldly declared that the Mosaic allowance was by no means ideal, but the ideal was God's intention revealed at the beginning of human history. "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Genesis 2:24).

No human relation is so sacred as that of a husband and wife to one another, and Christ taught that for one reason and cause only should it be dissolved, namely conjugal unfaithfulness on the part of one or the other. Marriage is a divine institution, so that to loosen or destroy its bond is to oppose the will of God, which no man or woman can do with impunity. The marriage tie cannot be broken except by unfaithfulness to the marriage vow. "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." Marriage is not to be entered into lightly or unadvisedly, nor can the bond be loosed on grounds of incompatibility of temper, disagreeable habits, or loss of love. The tie is one which only death or sin can break. As long as a couple lives, marriage is indissoluble except for one cause. Once the sin of adultery has been committed the unity is destroyed. Divorce may or may not take place. In many cases it is better not to obtain divorcees.

Our Lord said, "And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whosomarieth her which is put away doth commit adultery" (Matthew 19:9). "And he saith unto them, Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery" (Mark 10:11-12). What Christ says ought to settle the matter for every Christian.

Christ taught that divorce is permissible, but not obligatory. He also made it plain that divorce is permissible on one ground only, namely, fornication. Separation is permissible for other reasons. The separated parties must remain unmarried or be reconciled.

Is remarriage permissible? Since divorce is not permissible on any ground except that of fornication, certainly remarriage is not permissible without a divorce. Remarriage is not permissible for the guilty party, else there would be sanction of adultery. Divorce without fornication becomes adultery at remarriage. For the innocent party remarriage is possibly permissible but certainly not positively so stated. In Romans 7:2 we read, "For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead (not "if he be dead or divorced for fornication), she is loosed from the law of her husband." Because of the sanctity of marriage we must not magnify personal desire or human sentiment above divine design.