

Oct. 4

Was Jesus Tough or Tender?

Mark 10:2-16

Today is trucker day across the land. Today we honor drivers of the big rigs. Today is a 10-4 good buddy. In honor of this day, instead of saying "amen" you should say, 10-4 preacher man. You did see my tongue in my cheek didn't you?

My wife taught this verse to me:

***To keep your marriage brimming,
With love in the loving cup,
Whenever you're wrong admit it;
Whenever you're right shut up.***

Another philosopher wrote: ***I think men who have a pierced ear are better prepared for marriage. They've experienced pain and bought jewelry.***

Socrates once said, ***My advice to you is to get married. If you find a good wife, you'll be happy; if not, you'll become a philosopher.*** And now you know where he really got that poison he drank.

There is a world of wisdom about marriage and divorce and in our text today, Jesus jumps into this highly emotional and spiritual topic. Turn to Mark 10.

Had a deacon back at Calvary church that would make a Pharisee look soft. He knew all the sins in the bible and felt that it was his job to keep our church on the straight and narrow. When our deacon body was deliberating about allowing divorced persons to be deacons, he was primed and ready to keep us from going down that path of disobedience.

He frequently recited that verse from Malachi 2, ***God hates divorce.*** Sadly this verse has been misrepresented by many to uphold their view of divorce. Malachi 2 isn't about marriage between a man and a woman. The prophets often used the marriage metaphor to speak about the covenant between Israel and God. This is what Malachi said prior to the oft quoted God hates divorce. ***A detestable thing has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem: Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the LORD loves, by marrying the daughter of a foreign god.*** In other words, Israel has divorced God and married a foreign god. It is the divorce between God and Israel that God hates.

God still hates divorce, the deacon protested. ***And if someone divorces and remarries, that person is living in adultery with the new spouse. As such, they are disqualified from serving as a deacon.*** Our text today was used to make this point.

The conversation about changing our policy regarding deacons continued for months and during that time there was a tragic turning point. That deacon's daughter divorced her husband. I fully expected him to stick to his guns, turning his back on his sinner daughter. But I was wrong. He opened his home to the daughter and grandchild. He and his wife kept the child so the daughter could go back to work. Our church was very attentive to the daughter and child.

About 6 months later, when the deacon matter came up for vote, there was pro and con for a few minutes and then this deacon stood up and said to everyone present, ***you all know what I've said about divorce, and you know my daughter is now divorced. I tell you for sure, she's a stronger Christian and a better servant now than she was a year ago. I see what God is doing in her life and I think one day, she will make a fine deacon. So I'm going to support this change.***

That deacon represented a shift in Baptist life. In earlier days, divorce was the unpardonable sin. Instead of the scarlet letter A, we put a scarlet D on the divorced, excluding them from any reclamation of life and service. With over half of marriages ending in divorce,

we have all been touched by it. And feeling the pain can melt the heart of stone and change the mind. But have we moved away from the teaching of Jesus in this?

Our text today illustrates how difficult it is to get one view from Scripture. In this text, Jesus gives two quite different statements about divorce. In vv 2-9, Jesus seems to acknowledge the chasm between the reality of human failure and the ideal for marriage. Listen to it again (v. 2): *‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’ Jesus answered them, ‘What did Moses command you?’ They said, ‘Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.’ But Jesus said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, “God made them male and female.” “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.*

This is the old “yes, but” argument. Yes, God gave Moses permission to allow for divorce. Jesus did not dispute this or call for an end to this law. But, he held up the ideal, which was given by God to Adam and Eve in the garden. God intended marriage to be a life-long relationship, but alas, we no longer live in the garden. We are broken and sinful creatures.

When I moved to Denver just before my 20th birthday, I stayed for awhile with a former pastor of my church in Beaumont. He had been dismissed due to his divorce. He divorced his wife because both of them were overwhelmed by her progressive mental illness. She was whispering lies about her husband and was becoming violent. This had been coming on for years and he had tried to manage it with her doctors. But it was the late 60s and his only option seemed to be to have her committed, which her family protested. So her family took her and he took the children. He knew that our church would fire him. He told how desperate he was in those days. And he acknowledged his failures.

Why did God and Moses permit divorce? Mark uses the word, *sklērokardia*, which is sometimes translated *hard-hearted*. You recognize the Greek *kardios* or *heart*. The word *sklēros* can mean *hard, harsh, fierce or violent*. It describes a state of mind and emotion that is set in harsh, fierce or violent opposition to something or someone. It does not describe *fatigue or lack of commitment*. It does not describe a heart that is *attracted to another*.

God allowed divorce because some husbands and wives get to a place where their hearts are set against each other and their marriage. Rather than have two such persons perpetuating a terminal and toxic marriage, God allowed them to take different paths, to make a new life.

Another complicated phrase is found in v. 9, *“what God has joined together.”* Most of us have assumed that if we chose to be married, God would join us together. Scripture is filled with the actions of humans that God does not endorse or recognize. Is it possible for two people to be married in the eyes of the state, but not God? If you get married in a church or by a minister, does that mean God is obligated to give his blessing?

But then the tone suddenly changes. We go from Jesus acknowledging the chasm between the real tragedy of divorce and the ideal, to a hard-line statement on remarriage.

vv. 10-12. *Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.* The translators rode the fence on this one, using the phrase *commits adultery*. The term is in the present tense, which implies ongoing action. They wanted to use a phrase that could mean “keeps committing adultery” or could be understood as a limited action. The language leans toward describing a permanent state of sin: perpetual adultery. In other words, this text implies that if you divorce, you can never remarry without living in sin.

The tone is so different between the two sections. First, we have Jesus sad but resigned to the reality of toxic marriages while holding up the ideal. Then we move to a harsh treatment of anyone who divorces by depriving them of a new relationship.

Many scholars have concluded that vv. 2-9 represent the authentic teaching of Jesus according to Mark, whereas vv. 10-12 represent a latter addition by an editor or a community that wanted to dissuade people from divorce. That interpretation may see beyond the pale, but let me remind you that there is almost universal agreement that the last portion of Mark's gospel is a late addition made by someone other than Mark. Even conservative evangelicals consider the longer ending a spurious text.

Jesus is the lord of new life and by his forgiveness, new beginnings. This latter section doesn't seem to fit the character of Jesus who was merciful to the woman caught in adultery and to the woman at the well who had jumped from husband to husband. By doing this was Jesus condoning sin, or was he illustrating the nature of his kingdom, which is one of forgiveness and new life?

Some of the finest Christians I have known have come through broken marriages into a life of mature faith and service.

There was a woman in my former church who had been divorced for almost 10 years. She had a PhD and a very successful career. But the guilt she felt over her divorce was stifling. Her faith and religious life were nothing more than intense guilt and an obsession with atoning for her sins. Her sense of unworthiness was warped and intense. She would not accept any place of service because she believed her divorce disqualified her. She had grown up hearing preachers say that divorce was the unpardonable sin. Her faith was paralyzed and crippled.

Thankfully, another divorced woman in our church, remarried and active on many levels, befriended this bright but burdened woman. That friendship was used by God to transform guilt into grace--failure into a future.

After this section on divorce, Mark leads us to the place Jesus wants this to go. Jesus takes up children in his arms and blesses them. He calls all of us to be like these children, **eager and open to the life that is ahead of them rather than the life that is behind them**. When we become like children, open to the loving arms of Jesus, we discover grace that is greater than all our sins.

Grace, grace, God's grace; grace that will pardon and cleanse within; Grace, grace, God's grace; grace that is greater than all our sin.