

What God Has Joined Together

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Date: 29 January 2006

Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] I must write myself a note not to wear a grey shirt on a humid day because it shows up when you're sweating but anyway and the reason for this rigmarole here is the other microphone and so on is at 10 o'clock it's an all-age service so we're taping this one that's why we've got to have the extra lines out and we're continuing our sermon series in Mark we've looked through Mark chapter 9 through the first four weeks of the year and today we get to the beginning of chapter 10 and let's pray not an easy passage at least by application today so let's pray as we come to God's word God our Father speak to us from your word this morning open our hearts and minds not only to understand it but to obey it so that we may bring glory and honour to you and to the Lord Jesus Christ in our lives in our marriages in our relationships we pray this for his sake amen well it affects almost everybody I doubt that there's there's more than one or two people in this church this morning who are not affected by it from the royal family to my parents from some sitting here to our children to our friends hardly anybody in our country these days has escaped in some way the effects of divorce since about 1974 and Lionel Murphy I think it was his sort of easier divorce type law the rate of divorce in our country has skyrocketed and over 40 percent heading towards 50 percent of marriages in this country fail it affects of course not only the husband and the wife whose relationship breaks down and they divorce it affects their children often deeply even when divorce is amicable it affects their friends it affects all sorts of relationships that are often suddenly and permanently fractured and broken divorce is not just a relational problem of course it is a general social problem in our society it is one of the biggest economic problems in our society it affects mental health it's a domestic problem it's a legal problem it's a psychological problem it's an emotional problem it's an emotional problem and on top of that for

Christians it is also a spiritual problem it's only in relatively recent years that in the Anglican Church in at least this diocese and generally around Australia that divorcees can remarry in church it's still only exceptional in the church of England hence the dilemma about Charles and Camilla in Melbourne for a divorcee to be remarried in a church building we need to get the bishop's permission in the diocese of Sydney I'm not sure that they're allowed to remarry at all but if they are certainly those who are vicars are not allowed to be divorcees in the diocese of Sydney the dilemma for Christians over the issue of divorce is not a new one for centuries both before and after Jesus for the people of God in both Old Testament and in the New and after the New Testament divorce was an issue of debate and dispute and so the Pharisees in today's passage come to test

Jesus on this issue we've got to bear in mind that they're coming to test him on this issue not primarily because they're driven by the issue but because primarily they're driven to test and trap Jesus and so they're picking a thorny issue for the sake of trying to test Jesus so we need to keep that broader perspective in mind yes it was a thorny issue it was an issue of contention and debate in the society of Jesus' day in Jewish law amongst Jewish leaders and their interpretations of the Old Testament but primarily the Pharisees are not there trying to clarify the dispute they're there to test and trap Jesus that's their driving force as they ask him about this issue chapter 10 begins that Jesus left that place up in Galilee and went to the region of Judea that's south the region around Jerusalem in broad sense and beyond the Jordan and probably what that means is that he's now heading to Jerusalem ultimately to die he's leaving Galilee his home in the north for the last time he's headed down south and then he's crossed over the Jordan River into the area called Perea out of Judea back into the territory ruled by Herod Antipas one of the sons of Herod the Great crowds again gathered around him and as was his custom he again taught them and some Pharisees came they're the particularly devout religious ruling party in some respects and they came to him to test him we're told that explicitly we know their motive from what we're told here in Mark's Gospel and they asked him is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife now on this issue

Jewish tradition was divided nowhere in the Old Testament law is it explicitly said that divorce is permitted perhaps the closest we get it is in Deuteronomy part of the Pentateuch law of the first five books of the Old Testament and let me read you the paragraph because it's important to understand the paragraph says this suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her and so he writes her a certificate of divorce puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man's wife then suppose the second man dislikes her writes a bill of divorce puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house or the second man who marries her dies her first husband who sent her away is not permitted to take her again to be his wife after she's been defiled for that would be abhorrent to the Lord and you shall not bring guilt on the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession now those four verses at the beginning of Deuteronomy 24 are in some senses the closest that the law of the Old Testament gets on the issue of divorce but it's in a very abused passage in Jesus' day in particular amongst Jewish tradition there was debate in the translation here about what it means to find something objectionable about her or in other translations some indecency about her and the strict Jewish tradition of Jesus' day the Rabbi Shammai's school if you like argued that that was only to do with unchastity or some significant severe act of immorality but the more liberal school under Rabbi Hillel and his followers argued that no it was broader than that so that something objectionable using our translation means anything that the man doesn't like about her and they gave some examples for example if she ruined his meal once not regularly well he could write a certificate of divorce and off she would go or if he found a more beautiful woman somewhere or if she spoke too loudly well you can imagine the list would go on and on and on the trouble with both those interpretations though is that they misread this passage

I'll read the first verse of it again suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her and so he writes her a certificate of divorce puts it in her hand sends her on his way on her way the interpretation that both those schools in effect ended up with was it is allowable if you find something objectionable to write a certificate of divorce to send her on her way but that's actually not the point of that paragraph it's all still the presupposition and the whole command of that paragraph was not write a certificate send her on her way that's okay it's lawful legal and okay but rather that the first husband cannot take her back if she goes and remarries and that marriage for whatever reason later ends that is the law is here framed as a case study if this marriage breaks down and ends in divorce then she goes and marries and that breaks down the command is she can't go back to her first husband and resume the marriage the interpretation was taken well this is okay to find something objectionable and send her on her way and of course the debate was what is objectionable that makes it valid for divorce both of those interpretations have lost sight of the law that divorce here is not actually condoned or permitted or lawful it happens and in that case then there is a command what not to do in that particular case it's a bit like elsewhere in the Old Testament law in Deuteronomy for example you get a law that says something like if a man kills another person and then goes to a city of refuge he cannot be dragged out and stoned without a fair trial in no way does that condone or make permissible or lawful murder but the structure of that law is exactly the same as this if this happens not saying what happens is good then here is the command for what follows it's called case law in effect casuistic law and most of the Old Testament is in that form of a legal statement well the Pharisees of Jesus' day like the schools of Rabbi Shammai and Hillel misunderstand that and they quote back to Jesus when they go to him and ask about this question of divorce

[11 : 09] Jesus replies to them what did Moses command you and they quote from that passage in Deuteronomy 24 when they say to him Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her that's an astonishing quote because they don't even limit in their quote the permissive divorce by saying there must be something objectionable they simply say it's okay for a man to write a certificate of divorce and send his wife on her way so they're actually misquoting and misunderstanding the law of Deuteronomy chapter 24 they interpret it as permitting divorce indeed it seems quite liberally well we need to bear in mind here that the real issue is the testing of Jesus they're trying to trap him we've already seen that earlier in Mark's gospel because back in chapter 1 of Mark Jesus is tested and he's tested by Satan the same word is used here by the Pharisees but I think it's meant to deliberately echo the testing of Satan and show in a sense the if you like the diabolical underhandedness behind it all

Jesus is being tested by a false interpretation of scripture and he doesn't fall for the trap as we see what it also shows us is that as he's now beginning to approach Jerusalem ultimately to die the opposition is building and becoming more and more nasty and insidious and moreover there's probably another background here Jesus we're told has crossed over beyond the Jordan that's the territory of Herod Antipas under the rule of Herod Antipas and it was Herod Antipas who in chapter 6 of Mark put to death John the Baptist why was John the Baptist put to death because he voiced his complaint to Herod and his wife Herodias at their divorce and leaving their spouses and their marriage of each other etc so here is another test perhaps the Pharisees are deliberately trying to trap Jesus so that he might go the way of John the Baptist well Jesus in response to their quote or misquote from Deuteronomy 24 lifts the whole debate to a higher level and shows how they've misunderstood the scriptures on this issue firstly he says about the context for understanding

Deuteronomy 24 and then he goes to another passage from Moses in verse 5 Jesus says because of your hardness of heart Moses wrote this commandment for you or he even could be God but here probably Moses but comes from God that is what Jesus is saying in verse 5 is that that command in Deuteronomy 24 if a man divorces and she goes off and marries someone and that marriage ends that is it presupposes a fallen state it presupposes failure it doesn't condone it permit it or allow it but it acknowledges that it exists and the reason then for that law being there Jesus is saying is because of human hardness of heart the very expression that's used earlier in Deuteronomy chapter 10 to describe the sinful state of Israel and God's people that is much of the law of the

Old Testament acknowledges that God's people fail it acknowledges that we're sinners and so one of the functions of Old Testament and New Testament law is to actually control or limit or restrict sin and its consequences it doesn't condone it but it acknowledges that we live in a fallen world we live after the Garden of Eden and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden so that's one of the functions of law is to restrict wrongdoing to limit its consequences yes this this has happened it's wrong but in that case you shall or shall not do such and such is how much of Old Testament law works Jesus is not overturning Moses law in Deuteronomy 24 here he's not saying well that's wrong or I've come to do away with it he's saying in its proper place understood it is in a fallen world it's not the ideal you've got to understand that law in its context but not only does the law of the Old

Testament have the function of limiting wrongdoing and sin it also has a function of describing and directing the people of God to the ideal and so Jesus now directs the Pharisees to another passage in Moses that helps them better to understand the issue of divorce remember Moses is attributed with writing all of the first five books of the Old Testament they're regarded as the books of Moses and even though much of those five books is not in one sense law in the legal sense that we might say do this or don't do that nonetheless even the stories in Genesis through to Deuteronomy are regarded as Torah law or way of life and so Jesus directs his listeners the Pharisees to the first two chapters of the whole of the Old Testament to Genesis 1 and 2 from the hand of Moses he quotes from

[16 : 53] Genesis 1 verse 27 and chapter 2 verse 24 well-known words I think see what he says in verse 6 onwards words that still we say in the preface to the wedding service in the Anglican wedding liturgy Jesus is directing the Pharisees to Moses to what Moses really says and in order to understand divorce you need to understand of course marriage and the point that he's making in those two quotes from Genesis 1 and 2 primarily is that marriage is one flesh marriage it's an indissoluble union in effect is what

Jesus is saying and no one is to separate what God has joined together notice then that marriage is more than the decision of a man and a woman yes at a marriage service in a sense I ask the groom and the bride will you have this person to be your husband and wife etc and they make their vows and there's an element in which humanly speaking it's two people making a decision but theologically it's actually more than that we are not to separate what God has joined together so in marriage it's not just a husband and wife joining each other together together so that divorce by implication undoes God's joining work divorce you see is never the ideal in God's economy the initial question to trap

Jesus was is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife and Jesus by quoting this part of Moses law is implying no it's not because marriage is one flesh and what God has joined together let nobody separate that is divorce is never the ideal never in a sense right in God's eyes indeed as we heard in the first Bible reading from Malachi the prophet in a slightly different context God hates divorce now as often happens with Jesus he goes on and the disciples quiz him further about what they've heard in public verse 10 we're told that they go to the house or that in the house whatever house that is staying on their way the disciples asked him again about this matter and he said to them whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her and if she divorces her husband and marries another she commits adultery it's a striking reply because it puts on an equivalent level male and female something that Jewish law did not totally do although in Roman law pagan law if you like it was allowable for a woman to divorce her wife and certainly it seems probably that in

Jesus day even in some Jewish context women actually did in practice divorce their husbands but generally the law was regarded as giving a man the ability to divorce his wife not vice versa although as I say the practice had probably become more liberal by the time of Jesus day it seems there's some contention about exactly what was allowable for a woman in Jesus day to do with regard to divorce Jesus is probably just covering both bases but notice how he makes it absolutely equivalent if a man divorces his wife and remarries that's adultery if a woman divorces her husband remarries that's also adultery the presupposition here is that divorce leads to remarriage although of course not in every case is that so there are no exceptions here in what Jesus says he doesn't say like he's quoted in Matthew 19 of saying except for the issue of unchastity here there's no limit no restriction being given here in one sense to get the whole picture of divorce we do need to look at other passages in scripture but on the other hand Mark I think is making it clear from Jesus quotes of Genesis that never is divorce the ideal in God's eyes the mention of adultery in verses 11 and 12 is in one sense obvious but it draws us to another passage of Moses the 10 commandments Exodus 20

Deuteronomy 5 which quotes them again do not commit adultery so here clearly this divorce leading to remarriage at least is breaking one of the 10 commandments well what are the lessons to learn from this passage it's a very thorny issue it's a thorny pastoral issue as well as a theological issue firstly we must never diminish the importance of marriage marriage as it is in God's eyes it is not merely a human institution it's not merely a social institution it is not to be entered into lightly or carelessly but with serious and reverent respect for those purposes for which it was ordained by God words again that are used in the Anglican service and that is why we encourage wedding couples to take seriously their wedding preparation to take seriously the issues they need to resolve they don't always do that sadly and certainly even in the 10 years I've been here I know of many weddings that I've conducted here that have already ended in divorce it's why we encourage marriage married couples to work at strengthening their marriages why we're running the marriage course that Rod and

[23 : 36] Cheryl are leading and why I'd encourage others of you to do that course later in the year when we do a second round of it because we have to work hard if we honour the marriage union which God himself has ordained from the beginning of creation we're not to diminish the importance of marriage because it is an indissoluble union ordained by God but more than that even it models God's love for us in a firm faithful unrelenting love and commitment to God's people that association is made not least in Ephesians chapter 5 so that in the love of a husband for wife and vice versa the gospel is actually modeled and so divorce in a sense breaks down the modeling of the gospel itself it's a gospel issue divorce it's not a secondary matter and if we treat marriage lightly then we actually show disdain for the commitment of love that God gives us in his son Jesus Christ but this lesson of not diminishing the importance of marriage is not just something for married people to apply that is it's a lesson for me and others who are single whether always single or divorced or widowed that is we also as single people need to uphold the importance or sanctity even of marriage that is to encourage our friends in marriage not to seek to undermine marriages by our own desires and so on we must honour and never resent those who are married so that's the first thing we're to hold marriage as a high in high esteem because that's how God holds it to secondly we must never think that divorce is an easy way out you see what's going on with the traditions of

Jesus day voiced in some sense by the Pharisees is well how easy can it be to get out of marriage that is what is permissible how would we define something objectionable to use the expression back in Deuteronomy 24 verse 1 that in a sense in that example means a man might issue a certificate of divorce to his wife you see the question's wrong as we heard last week with a different issue when Andy Pritot was preaching the question is not how far can I go or how little does she need to do so that I can dismiss her as my wife you know is a is one ruined meal enough sort of thing rather the the we can't twist scripture to try and give us an easy way out there is no easy way out divorce is not the ideal in any circumstance in God's eyes it's never in a sense absolutely right and though there are a couple of concessions in other parts of the New

Testament when a spouse is unchaste or there is an unbelieving spouse they are not concessions that were to push or broaden to twist to enable us an easy way out either it's not a they're not commands to divorce they're not easy ways out although there are those couple of concessions Jewish debate was when can a man get rid of his wife but the question ought to be what should the man be doing to sustain and strengthen the marriage or as Jesus makes it equivalent what should the woman be doing to sustain and strengthen the marriage as well and so often in Christian debate it's the same sort of pharisaical question what what gives me permission to have a divorce is the sort of question that sometimes people ask at least in their heads if not in their their mouths it's the wrong question not looking for ways out but rather looking for ways to strengthen staying in a marriage that God has joined together but third point though is that we do live in a fallen world divorce does happen relationships do break down that's what

Deuteronomy 24 acknowledges Jesus doesn't overturn that although he makes it clear that it's not a permission for divorce that law is actually about something else what happens after divorce has occurred but it acknowledges hard-heartedness as verse 5 of Mark 10 said it acknowledges that we live in a sinful world so therefore when divorce does happen we as Christians especially are to model compassion forgiveness mercy reconciliation love all those Christian virtues of the gospel because we're all fallen people we're not to be exclusive of those whose marriages fail fourthly though I think there is also a lesson here about remarriage it is costly sometimes to follow God and certainly when it is the case that divorces do happen marriages break down but I think almost the consistent voice of the New Testament on this matter is that remarriage is not an open option for anybody who ends up in divorce so often personal happiness pleasure satisfaction becomes the goal of the person rather than costly discipleship of Jesus Christ divorce may happen person should still be welcomed and loved in Christian fellowship and by God of course but it doesn't open the way or justify an absolute freedom to remarry as Jesus warns warnings at the end of this section make clear the man divorces and remarries that's adultery and the same for the woman and finally a lesson though in the whole context of this passage it's out to test Jesus by twisting scripture by looking at it out of context and failing to see its big picture and often Christians not only on this issue but various others are guilty of doing the same sort of thing of trying to distort texts or weaken one text in the light of another to justify a behaviour that they prefer to maintain that's what the Pharisees are doing with Deuteronomy 24 to what Christians do with all sorts of passages in a sense to ask the wrong question how far can I go rather than to ask the right question how can I honour God follow Jesus and serve the gospel within my marriage working to do what I can to sustain it and strengthen it despite its weaknesses let's pray

God our Father we pray that you will strengthen your people especially in married life where marriages are rocky and hard resolve their commitment to work to deal with issues to communicate to build strong foundations to love as you loved us to model the gospel in marriage and not be fooled into thinking that divorce is an easy way out Lord our God we acknowledge your own extraordinary love for us that though we fail you time and again yet you extend ongoing mercy and forgiveness to us through the gospel of Jesus Christ may we model that same gospel in all our relationships not least in marriage that despite failures and sin marriages are sustained and model your forgiveness mercy and love for the glory and sake of Jesus

[32 : 03] I love him thank you thank you thank you