

"1 Getting up, He *went from there to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan; crowds *gathered around Him again, and, according to His custom, He once more began to teach them. 2 Some Pharisees came up to Jesus, testing Him, and began to question Him whether it was lawful for a man to divorce a wife. 3 And He answered and said to them, "What did Moses command you?" 4 They said, "Moses permitted a man TO WRITE A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE AND SEND her AWAY." 5 But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. 6 "But from the beginning of creation, God MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE. 7 "FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER, 8 AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH; so they are no longer two, but one flesh. 9 "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." 10 In the house the disciples began questioning Him about this again. 11 And He *said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her; 12 and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery.'" Mark 10:1-12, NAS95.

NOTE:

10:2. Matthew's wording is closer to the exact wording Pharisees would normally have used at that time; the issue was the grounds for divorce, not whether divorce was ever valid. Because Moses had assumed the practice of divorce (Deut 24:1), Jewish interpreters debated only the grounds for divorce; to ask whether Jesus thinks divorce is permissible at all is to ask whether he knows or agrees with Moses' law.

10:3-5. Rabbis distinguished between what Scripture commanded and what it allowed as a concession; by asking what Moses "commanded" Jesus forces them to recognize that Moses explicitly only "permitted," not "commanded," divorce, on any grounds.

10:6-9. Jewish interpreters commonly appealed to one clear text of Scripture to show that another text could not mean what its interpreters claimed that it meant. Some interpreters, like the scribes who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls, appealed to the creation narrative to show God's original plan for marriage. These interpreters used Genesis 1-2 to argue against polygamy; Jesus uses it to argue against divorce. (Reflecting Greek custom against polygamy, the Septuagint had substituted "two" for the original Hebrew "they" in Gen 2:24.)

The Pharisees themselves debated the grounds for divorce implied in Deuteronomy 24:1-4: the school of Shammai, predominant in Jesus' day, argued that the passage allowed divorce only if one's spouse was unfaithful; the school of Hillel, which eventually won out, said that a man could divorce his wife if she burned the toast (a later rabbi of

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this school added, "Or if you find someone more attractive"!"). This approach of
testing a teacher was common.

10:10. Disciples often sought more detailed explanations from their teachers privately.

10:11. Like many wisdom sayings of ancient Jewish teachers, this saying is a general rule; Matthew (Mt 5:32) and Paul (1 Cor 7:15) give exceptions (on behalf of the innocent party divorced against his or her will). The saying is hyperbolic -that is, it has exaggerated, intensified force: because God does not accept divorce as valid, any man who divorces his wife is not really divorced, and if he marries someone else, he commits adultery. No one else in antiquity spoke of divorce in such strong terms. (Because most Jewish teachers allowed polygamy, they would not have seen marrying a second wife as adultery, even if they had agreed that the man was still married to the first wife. But Jesus eliminates the double standard; a man consorting with two women is as adulterous as a woman consorting with two men. Jesus' point is to advocate fidelity to one's first wife, not to break up existing polygamous unions.)

10:12. Unlike Roman law, Palestinian Jewish law did not permit a woman to divorce her husband (although under extreme circumstances she could request that the court force him to divorce her). The only Jewish women who flouted this law were aristocrats like Herodias (6:17), who paid more attention to Greek custom than to Jewish custom. Mark, who writes for readers living where wives could divorce their husbands, brings out the implications of Jesus' teaching for them too. (Like modern preachers, ancient writers had the liberty to paraphrase sayings to bring out their meanings.)NOTE

The cost of the kingdom is great, even in the area of the closest of human relationships. Moses may have allowed divorce because of human hardness of heart (failure to understand God's purpose in marriage), but Jesus made it plain that the kingdom of God demands lifelong faithfulness to one partner and he saw this as involved in God's plan of creation. This is so costly that, according to Matthew, the disciples said that it would be better to remain unmarried than face it. But both here and in Matthew, Jesus called remarriage after divorce (whether by husband or wife)

plain adultery from the point of view of God's kingdom (11-12). We can imagine how radical a saying like this would have sounded in the lax moral atmosphere of Rome, as indeed it sounds in the lax moral atmosphere of our day when old moral conventions are breaking down. It is true that in Matthew there seems to be an exception in the case of unfaithfulness, but Mark gives the saying in its starkest form. Perhaps that was what was needed in Gentile Rome the primary audience for Gospel.

10:1. Most teachers who taught in public did so in specific localities. Only figures popular with the masses drew such crowds as Jesus did wherever they went, and these popular teachers would naturally arouse the envy of many local professional scholars and the discomfort of the authorities.

The Lord Jesus submitted to baptism in the river Jordan by John the Baptist. Christ totally identified himself with John's message calling the nation to repentance and summoning the people to turn from sin to God. John's ministry had centered on this particular region of Judea and across the Jordan. It was to this area that people from all over the nation had traveled to hear John preach, and Mark is now telling us that it is to this same region that Jesus chose to go. So, just as vast crowds had once gathered there to hear John they gathered there now in the same Judean wilderness to meet with Jesus, and as was his custom the Savior taught them. He had been doing this for two years, and now as he nears the cross he doesn't start to move away from a word-centred ministry. As his ministry is drawing to a close Jesus doesn't begin to build altars, or set up a table with bread and wine as if to show his apostles that this was the future and the mature way ahead. No! He began his ministry with a message that the kingdom of God had come, and they needed to repent and believe the gospel, and at the close of his earthly ministry the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus is doing the same. He goes through the Scriptures and he preaches the word to two disciples. Jesus Christ is the last prophet whom God has sent to the world, and when he walked this earth his people wanted to hear what he had to say. They still do. There is no mention that he ever gathered crowds around him to sing. Not once. His custom was to teach, and they came to him to be taught. That is why they were drawn to him, by his

Let's recall how John's ministry suddenly come to an end? He was arrested by King Herod Antipas for having the nerve to criticize this king for taking his brother Philip's wife, Herodias, and marrying her. The issue of divorce and remarriage was red hot; a year after his death John's disciples would feel this question was the test of the true religion. Their own blessed teacher had lost his life because he preached from the word of God that it was wrong for a woman to leave her husband to marry someone else. This was a live issue in the land. That is one of the reasons that the Pharisees came and tested Jesus there in the wilderness across the Jordan. Mark tells us that they asked him, " 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?'" (v.2). Could the Pharisees get Jesus to say something treasonable? What would Christ do? Would he back down on John's position? Would he say that he wasn't going to judge other people's actions, and that everybody had to make up their own minds about relationships, and what might be wrong for one person could be all right for another? Is this the sort of Lord from heaven you want? Would Jesus be silent? No. Jesus will make his answer clear.

There are some teachers who specialize in just certain limited themes from the Scriptures, but the Lord Jesus Christ spoke about everything and whatever he said he spoke infallibly. The Son of God spoke about the end of the world; he spoke about the nature of God, and worship, and who is my neighbor. He spoke about oaths, and the law, and creation. Never had a teacher spoken with such authority.

Marriage for many is an absolute disaster, even for Christians.

Some Christians have certain doctrinal priorities, and they will judge another ministry or church by their particular first doctrine. Some of them have certain views on divorce. Maurice Roberts once wrote these words, "Beyond a certain point of common biblical agreement there are views of doctrine which good men may choose to hold or not, according as they are persuaded. The temptation is that some men feel conscience bound to crusade for their shades of opinion. Overlooking the ninety-eight per cent of agreement held in common with good men almost everywhere we can develop a

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mentality of striving always over that small fraction of truth which is peculiar to our
own group" (Maurice Roberts, "Great God of Wonders," Banner of Truth, Edinburgh,
2003, p.83). Divorce is one of those issues.

What we need to see in this text is Christ's purpose in the context of His ministry.

This text alone is not all Scripture has to say about this subject and our purpose is not
to address this topic as if we were attending a week long seminar about this issue.

So these Pharisees came to Jesus and they did not come with a question about
marriage. In fact they did not mention marriage at all, they spoke about divorce. These
men had the privilege of gathering around the incarnate God, but they didn't ask him,
"Can you tell me how I can fulfill God's goal for myself to become a better husband?
How can I be a holier man and live more to God's glory in my home? How can I
strengthen my marriage?" They were not interested in that. They were interested in
divorce, in the degree of license God gave them to end their marriages and put away
their wives. "Can we get out of marriage? Am I bound to my wife for the rest of my
life?" That was their concern. You have it today in the question, "May a Christian make
a prenuptial agreement before marrying someone?" Anyone who has known the pain of
divorce will know that they cannot enter another marriage with the slightest thought
that this one might end in divorce.

You see that the Lord Jesus characteristically replied by asking them a question in
return, "What did Moses command you?" (v.3) The Pharisees immediately replied by
referring to the opening verses of Deuteronomy 24. Let me remind you that Moses
wrote the first five books of the Scripture, but these Pharisees didn't go to the book of
Genesis, they went to Deuteronomy. In other words, they didn't go to the great
foundational creation passage that describes the institution of marriage. They went to
Israel's civil legislation, many of whose regulations applied particularly to the people of
God under the Mosaic covenant. Indeed, these Pharisees went to a passage in the Bible
that has a certain ambiguity. They didn't go to the passages at the opening of Genesis
that are about marriage. They referred to Deuteronomy 24 which begins like this, "If a

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man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce . . ." and so on. That is not easy to understand. What is all this about, this thing, we are told, that displeases the husband? And what is this next reference, to something that he finds indecent in her? The rabbis debated Deuteronomy 24 at length. Some, like the followers of a famous teacher named Hillel, were pretty permissive in their interpretation. They said that if there was anything at all that displeased a man about his wife he could divorce her. Others, the school of Shammai, restricted divorce to adultery and to adultery alone - even if a woman was behaving like Jezebel.

So here was a national hot topic because of Herodias leaving her husband and marrying his brother. John had denounced the king and queen's behavior and had been executed for what he'd said. Would the Lord Jesus denounce their divorce and marriage too? Here was one of the burning issues of the day because the people of God were themselves divided over the meaning of this civil law of the Old Covenant. So marriage was made the theme by which Christ was tested.

How does the Lord answer these Pharisees? What is very significant is that he deals with them by appealing to Scripture and explaining the word of God to them. We take that for granted. Why do I bother to mention that? Because it underlines the unchallengeable authority which Scripture had in the heart and mind of the Son of God. Jesus did not say, "Verily, verily I say unto you . . ." and make some pronouncement. Here were the Pharisees who prided themselves in their knowledge of the Scriptures. They could tell you the number of verses in any and every chapter in the entire Bible. They could tell you the number of letters in every chapter. They could tell you what was the middle word in every chapter, and what was the middle letter in each chapter. The Pharisees elevated the Scripture to be the very Word of God. If they were wrong in this the Lord had many opportunities to correct them, but Jesus never tells them that they have a wrong doctrine of biblical infallibility. He told them clearly on other occasions when they had a wrong interpretation of the law of God, and making oaths, and praying, and fasting, and giving. He corrected their views of those matters and

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their abuse of the Temple, but he never once said to them that their view of Scripture was too high. He viewed Scripture as highly as they did, but the difference was this, that he understood it better and obeyed it perfectly. Jesus is here appealing to the opening chapters of Genesis, and he's not saying that they are myths and that we don't have to take them as true. "At the beginning of creation God made them male and female" - those are the Lord Jesus' words, and if you worship him as your God and Lord then you are under a theological and moral obligation to believe that to be the case because for us Jesus can say nothing wrong. For us a thing is true when the one who said, "I am the truth," said it. Then the Savior goes on to explain Deuteronomy 24. "It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied (v.5). What happened was this, that God had set a divine and unchangeable standard for marriage from the very beginning. It was a holy, just and good standard, but the people were taking the precious gift of marriage and they were exploiting and abusing it. Weren't they an extraordinarily stubborn people? How long were they out of Egypt before they were making a golden calf and falling down and worshipping that idol? "Behold your god O Israel!" That was just some months after their deliverance from Egypt. If they could dismiss the Lord himself then they certainly weren't afraid of throwing out their wives. So God instructed Moses to write those words in Deuteronomy 24. You understand that those words don't change the validity and obligation of the original divine institution of marriage. The problem was not with the abiding sanctity of marriage; the problem was with the people's hearts, their inability to control their lust and impatience and hatred.

So God was saying words like these to them, "You really are a hardhearted people, but I am going to make sure that your wives get some protection. If there is a divorce I require that you men must solemnly certify in writing that you are leaving your wives." That is the purpose of Deuteronomy 24, to give some protection to wives from the contempt of hardhearted husbands. The legislation was designed to restrain this sin of the abuse of women and children. It made it impossible for a man impetuously, after another spat with his wife, to shout in anger at her, "I divorce you. Get out!" he had to

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sin down and fill out a certificate of divorce which would be acknowledged in the community. So divorce was being tolerated by God and suffered by him because of the hardness of men's hearts, but divorce didn't have the divine sanction. It was no part of God's original purpose. Deuteronomy 24 says that if the wife was guilty of some unspecified shameful and offensive behavior - not something slight and trivial - then the husband could choose to divorce his wife. Deuteronomy 24 also goes on to prohibit the husband moving back in with his ex if she's moved on and married someone else (Deut. 24:4). In other words, you don't lend your partner to another. If some authoritarian husband dismissed his wife and then he took her back when the next man had finished with her then such conduct would not only degrade the woman, it degrades marriage itself. The Bible is always protecting the dignity of women. God always forbids his people to treat women like chattel. God prohibits them playing fast and loose with their marriage vows.

So the Lord Jesus appeals to Genesis one and two, to the divine origin of mankind, of man and then of woman. Now we know those great words of John about Christ, that without him was not anything made that was made whether it was powers or authorities, he made them. In other words, Jehovah-Jesus made Adam and Eve, and marriage, and Jesus explains the nature of marriage to us. Now that again is something that these Pharisees never grasped, that the divine designer of marriage and the creator of man and woman was actually telling them all about it there that day in the region of Judea.