

## **“The Kingdom of God: A Covenant Community”**

### **Mark 10:2-16**

([www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=mark+10:2-16](http://www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=mark+10:2-16))

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### **The Marriage Covenant is a splendid challenge to maintain.**

A four year old girl confided to her aunt one day, “When I grow up, I’m going to marry Danny.” The aunt recognized the name of the boy who lived next door and asked, “Why are you so sure of this already?” “I have to marry him,” the child replied. “I’m not allowed to cross the street where all the other boys live.”

#### ***\*Our motivations to get married come from the strangest of places.***

A little girl in Edith Sommer’s play, *Room Full of Roses*, asks her mother, “Mommy, have you ever considered divorcing Daddy?” The mother is shocked and insists, “No, Never!” Then she thinks for a moment and responds, with a gleam in her eyes, “Murder, yes, but never divorce.”

#### ***\*We stay together in marriage for the strangest of reasons.***

An Archbishop, attending a confirmation in a small parish, watched as the local pastor gave the preparatory questions to a frightened little girl. He asked her to define the state of matrimony, and she answered: “It’s a state of terrible torment which those who enter are compelled to undergo for a time to prepare them for a better world.” “No, no” chided the pastor, “that’s not matrimony. That’s the definition of Purgatory.” “Leave her alone,” said his superior, “Perhaps the child has been shown the light.”

#### ***\*Our experience of marriage is at times a difficult trial.***

Marriage was just a difficult in Jesus day as in our own. Divorce was easier. Women were considered property of the man. They could be disposed of as the man saw fit. The argument between the Jewish scholars of Jesus day was not about divorce, but about the reasons for divorce. The conservative Jewish scholars proposed that adultery was the only true grounds for divorce. The more liberal of the scholars suggested that anything a woman did to displease a man was grounds for divorce. Can you guess which of the scholars the majority of the men agreed with? In Jesus’ day a woman could be divorced for as superfluous a reason as a poorly prepared meal. The man could hand her a writ of divorce and she was required to leave his property. She could return to her father’s house. Or, she could become a prostitute or a beggar. Those were her choices. Jesus did not agree with what was happening to the covenant of marriage or what was happening to women.

Several sermons ago I talked about the challenge of climbing God’s grace mountain. Halfway up the trail we find the legalistic camp. If we look at this passage from their perspective, then we will have a new law to enforce. Divorce will not be acceptable under any circumstances. A person who does divorce and remarries will be living in sin. I say IF we interpret this passage while staying in the legalistic camp. There are other options.

You may remember that living at the same level of the law is another camp called “cheap grace.” This camp will interpret this passage in a different way altogether. If they read it at all, they will say that Jesus was talking for that time only and that it does not apply to today. They will dismiss it and do what they feel like doing.

Either camp will miss Jesus in his discussion of divorce. We need to move to the higher ground of God’s grace to capture the essence of Jesus’ message. First, we must be sure we understand what Jesus is teaching in the appropriate historical context. Second, we need to see what the New Testament says elsewhere about covenant living. Finally, we can affirm that Jesus’ positive challenge to us all, is to live within the confines of God’s amazing covenant.

## **Covenant not contract!**

This passage of Holy Scripture begins as a test put to Jesus by the Pharisees. The Rabbinic scholars believe there is universal agreement amongst all the scholars outside of the Temple compound concerning divorce. If this itinerant Rabbi from the backwater of Nazareth is willing to go against them, then they will get rid of him as they did John the Baptizer. They are asking Jesus a political question at this point. In **Mark 6: 17-19** ([www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=mark+6:17-19](http://www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=mark+6:17-19)) the gospel writer gives us a clue to the political climate concerning divorce. John the Baptist lost his head when he challenged Herod about divorcing his wife and remarrying his brother's wife. This is a deadly game they are playing.

Jesus refuses to get involved in a discussion of Mosaic Law. He appeals to a more ancient understanding. Jesus takes the discussion all the way back to Genesis. There he discusses of contracts and covenants.

Mosaic Law, Jesus says was God's compromise with God's people at that time. The Mosaic writ of divorce plan was not God's original plan. This is a contractual way of thinking. A **contract** is a legal document that specifies what each party will do. The Latin words "quid pro quo" or "I'll do for you what you do for me" fit into contract language. Contracts are important. But, contracts are not the sole basis for a relationship. I better have a contract if I buy an automobile. Whether I know or like the salesperson is immaterial because I have a written contract that stipulates what I will do and what the company will do. Jesus is saying that a marriage contract is not enough. Just thinking contract language for marriage is not God's ultimate desire.

Jesus takes the discussion back to Genesis where he points out that God desires that married couples live in **covenant** with each other. **A covenant is a relationship built upon trust for the purpose of growing in God's love.** Jesus teaches that God's desire for marriage is a covenant relationship. Sure there are contractual parts to living together. Sure we say to each other, I'll do this and you can do that. But, the basis, the root, the foundation, the absolute truth of a covenant relationship is mutual trust growing with God's love. A covenant cannot be dissolved with a piece of paper.

Note please that in verse 10 the disciples are confused and ask questions in private. They are shocked at Jesus' response to the Pharisees. They too are in contract language. Jesus takes their thinking and pushes it to the logical conclusion. In effect, Jesus says, "If you want to think that relationships can be defined by contracts alone then you only have one chance for a contract. If you want to break that contract, then you will be living in sin."

## **Forgiveness is available when covenants are broken.**

When we are on God's grace level, we will honor Jesus' interpretation of God's important law concerning covenant keeping while at the same time we can understand God's mercy and forgiving love. We can safely assume that Jesus' very strict statement here is not the only way He taught. In **Matthew 19:9**, ([www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=matthew+19:9](http://www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=matthew+19:9)) Jesus makes unchastity a reason for divorce. In **I Corinthians 7:15**, ([www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=i+corinthians+7:15](http://www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=i+corinthians+7:15)) the Apostle Paul adds that divorce is acceptable when a Christian is married to a non-believer. Surely in the early Church persons understood the reality of divorce, but held out the standard of a life-long covenant.

Was divorce an unforgivable sin? Absolutely not! Scripture teaches us that there is only one unforgivable sin: the continuing, over a long period of time rejection of the Holy Spirit.

Did divorce occur in the early Church. Yes it did. Persons did experience the pain, the frustration, the feelings of loss, failure, guilt, and shame.

Can a divorced person be forgiven, redeemed, restored, and accepted by God and by another partner. Yes, indeed.

God's teaching of a life long covenant relationship will continue to be the standard for everyone. Every teacher can understand what is happening with this subject. A high standard is set for every student. Some students will live up to that standard. Other students will come up short. The teacher will not lower the standard. Rather, the good teacher will seek to help the student to come up to the standard no matter how many times, or how long it takes.

## God's amazing covenant is for you!

God's amazing covenant is the standard for us all. Last week I challenged us to create a "Shalom Zone" here at Chilson Hills. I challenged us to so live with Christ that God's peace will reign in our hearts and our church. Such a "Shalom Zone" is based in a covenant relationship.

Our primary covenant is with God. God in Christ redeemed us. The breath of life is from the Creator of the universe. The gift of grace is from Christ. The power of creative living is from the Spirit of God. As we seek to understand God we see that God lives in a covenant community. Through no work of our own we are invited into community by God. The basis of this covenant is trust. The results of living in God's covenant is a creative and abundant life.

As we imagine overlaying covenant relationships, our next covenant is with our marriage partner. The Apostle Paul uses the metaphor of marriage to describe the Church's relationship with Christ in **Ephesians 5:22-33** ([www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=ephesians+5:22-33](http://www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=ephesians+5:22-33)). Such a covenant is based upon Christ like living within a bond of trust. Agape love abounds as each partner seeks to give of themselves for the other.

The next overlay covenant is the Church. God's covenant community is challenged to live as a positive, creative force in the world. We are called to witness to God's peace by the way we relate to each other and to the stranger among us. We are challenged to live a sacrificial life style by living the Christ like life. We are invited into abundant, blessed living through the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit.

With God's help, we can build a "Shalom Zone" here at Chilson Hills. We commit ourselves to covenant living as we gather around Christ's table to celebrate our covenant with the Lord.