

“When the Gold Becomes Dim”
The Gospel According to Mark 10:1-12
July 15th, 2018

In their book, *Moments Together for Couples: Devotions for Drawing Near to God and One Another*, Dennis and Barbara Rainey share a letter of one father’s legacy to his son:

Dear Dan:

Before I start this letter to you I must tell you that I love you and none of what has happened or is going to happen is in any way your fault. If I had been as good a father as you are a son there would be no need for me to write to you now.

Over the years I have been unfaithful to your mother in thoughts as well as in deeds. Because your mother had complete trust in me, I was able to cover up by lying to her. Last May I met a woman in Sacramento. Her name is Susan. I am going to leave your mother and go live with her.

What I have done is morally wrong and I hope you will not follow in my ways. When you meet the right woman make a lifelong commitment to her. I was never able to do this and it has caused much sorrow.

Please do not allow this to change your feelings about your mother and me. We love you very much and both need your love now even more than before. We will always be your family and will be here for you even though we will be living apart.

I love you, Dad.

That is a man who knows the difference between right and wrong, and chooses to do wrong. Sadly, he’s not alone – by a long shot.

Jan and I talked recently about the divorces in our two immediate families – those of our parents and our siblings. Of the 11 marriages (including ours), 6 of them have ended in divorce to this point – more than half. Take our marriage out of the equation, and we’re at a 60% divorce rate in our closest marital relationships. According to the American Psychological Association, Dietmeier’s and Hachmeister’s divorce at a rate higher than the national average, which is somewhere between 40 & 50%. This is not something for which I’m proud. (Incidentally, the divorce rate among those who remarry is even higher).

As we continue in our weekly study of Mark’s gospel account, we return this morning to the 10th chapter, having begun our study of the first 9 verses last Sunday. If you haven’t heard/read last Sunday’s message, you must take today’s message in context with last week’s. It’s on our church website. Last Sunday, we looked at God’s intent for marriage – that it is a permanent arrangement, or at least until one spouse buries the other spouse. The reasons are spelled out in **Mark 10:6-9** – God created marriage to last. A second reason for the permanence of marriage is that two separate humans become one, and a third reason is that only God can dissolve a marriage.

We add three verses of the Scripture for our consideration today, **Mark 10:10-12**, and the emphasis shifts from the permanence of marriage to the dissolution of marriage between husband and wife. I asked many of you to be in prayer for me as I prepared and address these verses of sacred Scripture last week and today. This is heavy lifting because so many people have been affected in negative ways as their marriages crumbled and broke. I’ve asked God to burden my heart for you in this very area. I am well aware that many of you have experienced divorce and some are in the throes of crumbling marriages, and none of these have been pleasant, easy, or

desirable. Let's just put it on the table - divorce stinks – for the couple; for their children, if they have any; for their parents and siblings; and for those who are believers in Christ, for their churches.

Dear ones – if not for the grace of God and an incredibly faithful wife, my own marriage could have ended many years ago. Jan and I were 20 years old when we married, and I was simply not ready to be married, let alone be a responsible husband. I remember the first time we returned home from Wyoming after we were married, I planned to take Jan to her parents' house to stay and I would stay in my room at my parents' place, just like we did before we married. How silly! But, it was more than that. I didn't realize that if I wanted to hang out with the guys like I had before we were married; I needed to take Jan into consideration. Of course, it only took one time of me being inconsiderate for her to confront me. I could go on, but this ain't about me. God has been so very gracious to me, at one time a real pig of a man (and still sometimes prone to be that way if left to my sinful nature).

The Gospel According to Mark 10:1-12:

“Then He (Jesus) arose from there (Capernaum) and came to the region of Judea by the other side of the Jordan. And multitudes gathered to Him again, and as He was accustomed, He taught them again.

² The Pharisees came and asked Him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce *his* wife?” testing Him.

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 to dismiss *her*.”

⁵ And Jesus answered and said to them, “Because of the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept. ⁶ But from the beginning of the creation, God ‘made them male and female.’ ⁷ ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, ⁸ and the two shall become one flesh’; so then they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹ Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.”

¹⁰ In the house His disciples also asked Him again about the same *matter*. ¹¹ So He said to them “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. ¹² And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

Having covered verses 1-4 last Sunday, as well as verses 6-9, I begin today examining Jesus' response to the Pharisees answer in verse 4 to a question He posed to them in verse 3. Verse 5 again reads, “Because of the hardness of your heart he (Moses) wrote you this precept.”

Verse 5 teaches us that divorce is permitted because of hard hearts; Sin-hardened hearts. What began as a happy occasion for the dreamy-eyed couple coming together in wedded bliss has ended in a broken tragedy that leaves much fall out for many people, as well as unfulfilled dreams. We live in a fallen, broken world, and those suffering divorce know that reality.

Let's establish a couple of points of agreement before we move on:

1 - All Bible-believing Christians agree that divorce is contrary to God's design for marriage. Divorce is the death of a marriage. And, it is also true that all divorce is due to sin, though the blame may not be equally assigned between husband and wife. To that end, there is no fully innocent party in a divorce. Both spouses contribute to the end of their marriages.

2 - The marriage covenant is taken far too lightly in our culture. Marriage has become a thing that can be easily disposed of through “no fault divorce.” Up until the 1960's, couples seeking to divorce had to give evidence in court of their reasons for divorce. Not so anymore. Someone

has noted, “Fifty years ago parents were apt to have a lot of kids. Nowadays kids are apt to have a lot of parents.” We should also be troubled by the extent to which professing Christians are being influenced by worldly ideas. Some professing Christians pursue invalid, unbiblical grounds to end their marriages; but those whom God has brought to saving faith do not march to the beat of culture. Our marching orders, Church, come from Holy Scripture. And, the Bible says that God hates divorce (**Malachi 2:14-16**).

Have you ever stopped to consider why God hates divorce? Well, for one, God holds men and women accountable to their marriage vows. He expects us to be a people of our word. Here’s what God says in **Ecclesiastes 5:4-5**, “When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. ⁵ It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfill it.” (NIV) So, divorce causes people to go back on their word; to bear false witness.

Another reason God hates divorce is that it breaks a covenant before Him. **Malachi 2:14** reads, “...the LORD has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, with whom you have dealt treacherously; yet she is your companion and your wife by covenant.” Marriage is a covenant between husband and wife; it is not merely a contract. And a covenant such as marriage is struck before God Himself. “A willful breach of the marriage covenant is a sin not just against one’s spouse, but against God, who serves as the enforcer of the covenant. Thus, a covenant breaker invites His wrath.” (Newheiser, 185)

There is good news, however. Although we cannot willfully defy God and come out ahead in the long run, we can turn to Him for help in keeping our covenant promises and to rebuild what seems to be hopelessly broken. He delights to help His people do what is good and right.

God also hates divorce because of what it does to children (it’s not a coincidence that in the verses immediately following this discussion about divorce Jesus speaks of ministering to children). The majority of divorces in America today involve children. Children’s hearts are broken as they see their parents split up. They feel pressure to take sides when their parents are in conflict. Sometimes they wonder whether their parents’ breakup was somehow their fault. Life with broken and blended families becomes quite complicated and painful for children as they are passed back and forth between their parents.

My parents divorced when I was 22, some 5 years *after* I left home. I moved out as soon as I could (just 5 weeks after high school graduation I was in basic military training). I couldn’t wait to leave because of the incredible tension between my parents. I experienced some unforgettable sights and fights between two people who said they loved me. My parent’s words and actions didn’t match up. Even today, I find it difficult to confront others because I want them to like me. My sister Gwen vowed never to have children of her own because she couldn’t see bringing them into such a trouble-filled world; my sister Cathy struggled with depression and endured a break-down in high school. My brother Jeff to this day remains largely aloof to the rest of us; we don’t see him very often.

One of the most devastating realities about divorce, whether or not it is valid, is that parents are motivated by their interests and what is best for them; they tack on the children as an afterthought. They say their primary interest is for the good of the children. Yet, living in a home with both father and mother is best for kids – it’s God’s design. If parents want to do what’s best for their children they won’t get divorced until after they’ve tried everything they can

to keep it together. Nothing that happens in a typical divorce is really for the good of the children (unless of course they're being removed from an abusive or neglectful situation).

Two specific reasons are given in sacred Scripture to allow for divorce between a husband and wife: sexual unfaithfulness (addressed primarily in **Matthew Chapters 5 & 19** and **Mark Chapter 10**) and physical desertion by a husband or wife who is not a Christian, and they have left their marriage to their Christian spouses. That's detailed in **I Corinthians 7:10-16**.

I would also direct your attention to the *Westminster Confession of Faith's* teaching, which you'll find on pages 862 and 863 of the *Trinity Hymnal*.

Matthew's gospel account adds a clause to what Mark shares in verses 11 & 12 of today's text. This is **Matthew 19:9**, "...whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery." These circumstances come on the heels of Jesus' teaching that God has a high view of marriage. Yet, they also reveal that Jesus has compassion for the spouse sinned against. A spouse who's been sinned against sexually or deserted by his/her unbelieving spouse is free to pursue a divorce and marry again (but only in the LORD.)

Yet, both Matthew and Mark concede here that sometimes divorce takes place that may not fall into those 2 categories of infidelity and desertion. The gospel writers teach that the person who divorces in such cases *AND* remarries another commits adultery. Paul's teaching agrees. These are his words in **I Corinthians 7:10 & 11** – "Now to the married I command, *yet* not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from *her* husband. ¹¹ But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to *her* husband. And a husband is not to divorce *his* wife." Even if a marriage ends in ways not clearly supported by Scripture, hope is not lost. The divorced spouses are to remain unmarried to others, and should seek to reconcile with their divorced husband or wife. I've seen this happen on multiple occasions. God is able to restore what is broken!

Because we live in a fallen, **Genesis 3** world, other difficult marital situations arise; no two divorces are the same. *What do we do about the situation where a father is abusing his child? Since that's not mentioned in Scripture, should the church tell the child's mother she has to stay in the marriage? And what about severe physical abuse, severe emotional abuse?* Each case is unique and must be considered on the specifics of the case by church leadership.

Dear ones, most of us have experienced the negative impact of divorce. Awful things happen to us, and we do things that we deeply regret. Divorce impacts people like death. Divorce is such a horror. It's such a tearing. It's such a loss. In that context, the last thing people need is to feel further shame. We need the good news—that in that dark night of the soul, God will meet us. God will take great evil and bring great good. And so the Christian story is a story of resurrection. Death was there, but life came.

PCA pastor and radio host Steve Brown often stresses that the only people who get better are those who know that, if they don't get better, Jesus will love them anyway.

Friend, if you've been divorced, even multiple times, you are not a freak! You are not a second-class citizen merely because you've divorced! The local church should be the place that

people hurting from divorce run to. But, grievously, many of them are rightfully afraid of being judged there. Oh, Church – please reach out to each other in love and not condemnation! Those who have been through divorce, value the marriage institution. They're not "damaged goods" in a gospel-oriented community.

Another application is something I've mentioned a time or two in the past. All of us attend marriages of family members, friends, and loved ones. *Do you realize the importance of your attendance at your loved ones' marriage ceremony?* You are a witness to the vows that they make to each other and before God! As an attendee at a wedding, you take on the responsibility to help that couple keep the vows that they make to each other. Two sinful humans bring all their sin baggage into their marriage, and it typically doesn't take long for conflict to arise. Stay in touch with those couples you witness coming together as husband and wife, and be prepared to lovingly confront sin and encourage them to be faithful to their word and each other.

Finally, dear ones, I'd point out something about sinful human nature. Actually, the Westminster divines, the Godly men who wrote the *Confession of Faith* have pointed this out in conjunction with marriage and divorce. I refer to paragraph 6 of Chapter 24, *Of Marriage and Divorce*. Here's what they say, "the corruption of man (is) such (that we are) apt to study arguments unduly to put asunder those whom God has joined together in marriage:" In other words, our sinful inclination is to try to find loopholes to get out of our marital commitments. Instead, we should give first priority to finding ways to work things out when our marriages hit dry patches or begin to crumble. All too often, couples divorce and they haven't attempted everything they could have – sometimes that could be physical separation for a time (with Session oversight); it could also be crisis marriage counseling in-residence.

Hope delivers us from the despair that nothing we do matters, and enables us to pray for any situation with vigor. A story is told of a B-17 bomber that flew a bombing mission over Germany in the latter days of World War II. The plane was hit several times by shells and flak, with some of the hits directly in the plane's fuel tank. Miraculously, the bomber did not explode!

When the plane landed, 11 unexploded 20 millimeter shells were taken out of the fuel tank! The shells were dismantled, and to the amazement of everyone, all were empty of explosives. Inside of one shell was a note written in Czech. Translated, it read – "This is all we can do for you now." A member of the Czech underground, working in a German munitions factory, had omitted explosives in at least 11 of the 20 millimeter shells on his assembly line.

That worker must have wondered often if the quiet work he was doing to subvert the Nazi war effort was going to make any difference whatsoever to the outcome of the war.

I close with the wisdom of Bishop JC Ryle. In his *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, he observes, "It is a mournful fact that unhappy marriages are one great cause of misery and sorrow of which there is so much in the world. People find out too late that they have made a mistake, and go in bitterness all their days. Happy are they, who in the matter of marriage observe 3 rules. The first is to marry only in the Lord, and after prayer for God's approval and blessing. The second is not to expect too much from their partners, and to remember that marriage is, after all, the union of two sinners, and not of two angels. The third rule is to strive first and foremost for one another's sanctification. The more holy married people are, the happier they are." (Ryle, 200)