

# “Fireweed”

Mark 10:1-12 <sup>1</sup>

Well, here we are with another challenging text. Today’s text in Mark is just one of four places where Jesus addressed the question of divorce, and you have these four texts on an insert in your order of worship.

While divorce has become more and more common since World War II, the problems and pain of divorce are nothing new. Divorce was clearly a problem for the Hebrews in the wilderness,<sup>2</sup> and I suspect that this morning, more than 3,000 years later, there are few—if any—of us whose family systems have experienced no divorce.

I once knew a minister in Louisville who refused to perform the marriage ceremony joining his daughter to a man who had been divorced, even though he thought their marriage was a good idea. As I pondered the ambiguities of that situation, I decided years ago that the path of pastoral integrity for me would have to be doing for others what I would do if the persons involved were my own children. And so, the way I’m going to talk about divorce this morning is rather different from what I might have said about it forty years ago.

Although rationalizing sin is an ever-present danger—we humans are extremely skillful in this area—I read the text differently today than I once did. While divorce, like all other sin, leaves a continuing residue of brokenness in our lives, the years have softened my understanding of these matters.<sup>3</sup>

One author noted that “People tend to want black & white answers about divorce and other moral issues until the problems reach themselves or one of their children. Then they want to reap a harvest of compassion and understanding.” I’m going to try to be faithful to the text this morning while also leaning on “compassion and understanding.”

My friend Dan Aleshire once said that “If it were as easy to stay married as it is to get married, we wouldn’t need to make promises about it.” If you’re married, or have ever been married, I suspect that you understand what he meant; and I’ve noticed again and again that some of the most effective leaders in the congregations I’ve served, men and women who serve God with deep passion, are folk with divorce in their histories. By God’s grace, the brokenness in our lives can lead to surprising new growth . . . but I anticipate the story. Let’s look at the text.

Remember that Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem for the last time. Although He was focused on His final teaching with His disciples, Jesus continued to have compassion on the crowds that were always nearby, and He continued to teach them as they went along. As the entourage made their way toward Jerusalem, the Pharisees continued to pester Jesus, trying

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on July 22, 2018. Parallel passages include: Matthew 5:31-32, 19:1-12; Luke 16:18.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*. Digital Version; Williamson, Lamar, Jr., “Mark,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, digital version.

<sup>2</sup> See Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

<sup>3</sup> See John 8:9. It was the older men who were most aware of their own sin.

to trick Him into saying something for which they could prosecute Him once they reached the Capital.

Their question to Jesus in this morning's text was indeed a trick question: "*Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?*"; and Matthew's version of the question is even more interesting: "*Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?*" (Matthew 19:3).

The background to the question was the teaching of Moses in Deuteronomy 24: "*If a man marries a woman, but she becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, he may write her a divorce certificate, hand it to her, and send her away from his house*" (24:1).

Whatever Moses might have meant by this, by the first century, the interpretation of this statement had become extremely lax, such that the Pharisees could inquire about "*any and every reason.*" The fact of the matter was that the Pharisees didn't even agree among themselves about what constituted adequate grounds for divorce, but they did agree that men should be able to divorce their wives. (There was certainly no thought of women divorcing their husbands, which Jesus mentioned in Mark's account.)

The Pharisees were hoping that their question would force Jesus into saying something they could prosecute as contrary to the Law of Moses; but as He often did, Jesus volleyed the question back to them, asking, "*What did Moses command you?*"

When the Pharisees cited Deuteronomy 24, Jesus took the argument back much farther than Moses: "*Moses wrote this command for you because of the hardness of your hearts. But from the beginning of creation God made them male and female. For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and the two will become one flesh. So, they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate*" (Mark 10:5-9).

By going back to Creation rather than merely to Moses, Jesus made it clear that the principle He cited applies to every person, not just to those who are among the covenant people. Jesus made it clear that God's purpose for marriage is, and has always been, that it be a lifelong commitment.

Each of the Synoptic Gospels includes some variation of Jesus' teaching in this encounter, and you have all of these on your handout. Taking these statements together, Jesus indicated that while divorce always involves a failure to achieve God's purposes for marriage, sexual unfaithfulness does provide one acceptable ground for divorce. It's important to know that the word Jesus used for "unfaithfulness" referred more to a lifestyle of unfaithfulness than to a single failure, confessed and repented from; and it's important to notice that while Jesus *permitted* divorce in that situation, He didn't *require* it, even then.

We should also remember that Jesus had previously taught that "*everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart*" (Matthew 5:28). I suspect that Jesus meant for that statement to apply to women as well as to men, and in that light, I suspect that few of us are completely innocent. Do I have your attention yet?

Taking all this together, It seems to me that if we look carefully at the texts you have in your hands, Jesus gave us three basic principles related to divorce and remarriage:

1. Jesus taught that because sin is "missing the mark," and because God's purpose for marriage is lifelong commitment and unity, divorce is a "sinful" thing to do. Divorce falls short of God's plan for our marriage relationships.

2. Jesus taught that remarriage after divorce involves adultery, or unfaithfulness, to the previous marital bond, with just one possible exception; and
3. Jesus taught that marrying a person who has been divorced involves adultery, with just one possible exception.

It's hard to dodge or to escape these conclusions, given the texts before us, and this was a MUCH more stringent position than anything the Pharisees had *ever* considered, causing the disciples to exclaim, in Matthew's account, "*If the relationship of a man with his wife is like this, it's better not to marry!*" (Matthew 19:10). I expect that most of us can appreciate their discomfort.

Jesus' response to their protest (in Matthew) seems puzzling at first: "*Not everyone can accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given*" (Matthew 19:11). So, what was that about? After giving such a strict teaching, did Jesus immediately walk it back and undo it? I don't think so. It seems to me that the exceptions Jesus noted after this statement suggest that He was assuming that most people will become married and that He intended this teaching to apply to all who do marry.<sup>4</sup> So this is a stringent teaching indeed.

Well, there you have it. What are we to make of all this? This is probably more uncomfortable than the difficult text we looked at last week.

As we ponder what Jesus taught about divorce, we need to also remember the relevant principles and teachings found in the rest of Scripture, especially the New Testament. As we do, we remember that Jesus also told us to "*Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.'* For ***I didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners***" (Matthew 9:13). We need to remember that Jesus spent most of His time with people whose lives were a mess, and that He was gentle with them, healing most and forgiving many.

We need to remember how Jesus forgave and reinstated Peter, who had blatantly denied Jesus not once, not twice, but three times (Luke 22:31-34; John 21:15-19). And we need to remember that Paul told us to "*be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ*" (Ephesians 4:32).

Remembering God's readiness to forgive, to heal, and to restore brings us back to a more encouraging place. The fact of the matter is, of course, that, divorced or not, we are sinners all (Romans 3:23, 6:23). Sin is sin, and the ground is level at the foot of the Cross.

My friends, we're all in the same boat here. Divorced or not, every one of us stands in need of forgiveness at this very moment, probably for sins of which we are quite aware, and perhaps for things of which we are not aware. None of us has any place for pride; and many of us can testify to the grace-filled ways in which God has blessed our lives after divorce and through remarriage. So, it seems to me that we need to ask two crucial questions at this point in our consideration:

1. Does 1 John 1:9 apply to divorce, or is divorce excluded?<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Some understand Jesus to mean that these teachings about divorce apply to Christians only, but Jesus' previous appeal to the order of creation suggests that this is a mistaken idea. Others believe that Jesus' wording focused only on those who divorce in order to marry someone else with whom they are already involved. While Jesus' teaching would certainly prohibit such divorce, it seems to me that Jesus clearly intended a broader application.

<sup>5</sup> "*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*"

2. Has Jesus secured salvation for ALL of our Sin, or has He only secured salvation for *some* of our sins?<sup>6</sup>

Happily, the New Testament's answer to both of these questions is a resounding "YES!!!" The clear message of the Gospel is that no matter where we've been, what we've done, what we have failed to do, or what has been done to us, God's forgiveness is available to us if we admit our need and ask God for that healing. And that, my friends, is GOOD NEWS!!!

The message of the Gospel is that **our past does not determine our future. God's grace determines our future**, if we will allow it.

I like the way my friend and teacher, Wayne Oates, put it: "The church is responsible for the rehabilitation of divorced and remarried couples in ways that neither compromise the integrity of the Christian ideal of marriage as a permanent covenant between two Christians nor consider the remarried persons as being sinners in a way that is either unpardonable or unique as contrasted with the other sinners in the fellowship of the forgiven."<sup>7</sup>

My friends, we are broken vessels, everyone. Yet because of God's mercy, God's redemption, and God's forgiveness, we can be grateful even for our cracks, because that's how God's Light gets in . . . and out again, so that the world is transformed, and God's Kingdom comes (Matthew 5:14-16; 2 Corinthians 4:7)

Well, as we get ready to wrap this up, some of you are wondering what in the world the title of this message has to do with what you've heard so far. I'm glad you asked.

About ten years ago some members of our church returned from a trip to Alaska and kindly brought me a DVD of paintings in the Norman Lowell Gallery in the town of Anchor Point. As I viewed the paintings, I was struck by how often Mr. Lowell had painted a lovely lavender wildflower called "Fireweed,"<sup>8</sup> and I became curious about it.

I discovered that Fireweed has many healing and nourishing properties. Its blossoms can be made into a tea that's good for upset stomachs, coughs, and asthma, and they can be used to treat bites, cuts, and eczema. Fireweed blossoms can also be used for food, being sometimes used to make jelly and honey.

Fireweed is the state flower of the Yukon Territory in Canada, and it can be found throughout North America. It gets its name because it is the first plant to bloom after a forest fire. When the smoke clears and the earth cools, Fireweed emerges from the blackened earth, covering the landscape like a stunning quilt, trading "beauty for ashes" (Isaiah 61:3).

It seems to me that when all is said and done, when we ask ourselves what is most truly good in the world, what seems most worthwhile, what most surely turns our struggles into joy, and what brings the deepest sense of harmony with the purposes of God, then surely Christian marriage—even after divorce—must be a central part of our answer. Marriage is not the only way in which God graces the relationships in our lives—there are many, many others—but for many of us Christian marriage is the vehicle for God's most precious gifts of grace.

Yes, there is pain in marriage, for sure and certain; but the Good News is that most of the pain is birth pain, if we have eyes to see it. The unseen factor in the enterprise of

<sup>6</sup> "He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross" (Colossians 2:13b-14).

<sup>7</sup> Wayne Oates, *The Christian Pastor* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), p. 26.

<sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chamaenerion\\_angustifolium](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chamaenerion_angustifolium)

*Christian* marriage is the work of the Spirit of God, the Midwife of Eternity, who lends us divine strength to hold fast to our commitments, who bandages our bruises, who heals our sorrows, and who gives us Hope to keep on keeping on.

And so, my friends, when your life's hopes come tumbling down and your plans crash and burn, anchor your life in God's faithfulness and lean forward into God's forgiveness. Listen for God's still, small Voice of Love. And as the smoke clears and the earth cools, watch for the Fireweed.

Amen, and Amen.

### **Matthew 5:31-32**

<sup>31</sup> *It was also said, Whoever divorces his wife must give her a written notice of divorce.* <sup>32</sup> **But I tell you, everyone who divorces his wife, except in a case of sexual immorality, causes her to commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.**

### **Matthew 19:1-12**

<sup>1</sup> *When Jesus had finished saying these things, he departed from Galilee and went to the region of Judea across the Jordan.*

<sup>2</sup> *Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.*

<sup>3</sup> *Some Pharisees approached him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife on any grounds??"*

<sup>4</sup> *"Haven't you read," he replied, "that he who created them in the beginning made them male and female,"* <sup>5</sup> *and he also said, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh?"* <sup>6</sup> *So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate."*

<sup>7</sup> *"Why then," they asked him, "did Moses command us to give divorce papers and to send her away??"*

<sup>8</sup> *He told them, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because of the hardness of your hearts, but it was not like that from the beginning."* <sup>9</sup> **I tell you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another commits adultery."**

<sup>10</sup> **His disciples said to him, "If the relationship of a man with his wife is like this, it's better not to marry."**

<sup>11</sup> **He responded, "Not everyone can accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given."** <sup>12</sup> *For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb, there are eunuchs who were made by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves that way because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who is able to accept it should accept it."*

### **Mark 10:1-12**

<sup>1</sup> *He set out from there and went to the region of Judea and across the Jordan. Then crowds converged on him again, and as was his custom he taught them again.*

<sup>2</sup> *Some Pharisees came to test him, asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife??"*

<sup>3</sup> *He replied to them, "What did Moses command you??"*

<sup>4</sup> *They said, "Moses permitted us to write divorce papers and send her away."*

<sup>5</sup> *But Jesus told them, "He wrote this command for you because of the hardness of your hearts."* <sup>6</sup> *But from the beginning of creation God made them male and female.*

<sup>7</sup> *For this reason a man will leave his father and mother* <sup>8</sup> *and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh.* <sup>9</sup> *Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."*

<sup>10</sup> *When they were in the house again, the disciples questioned him about this matter.*

<sup>11</sup> *He said to them, "**Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her.** <sup>12</sup> **Also, if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.**"*

### **Luke 16:18**

<sup>18</sup> **"Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and everyone who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery."**

Jesus on  
Divorce