



QUESTIONS FOR JESUS

Studies in Mark

TOGETHER IN FAITH SERIES
Leader Session Guide

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Mark 10:2-16

Leader Session Guide

Focus Statement

Living in a fallen, broken world means divorce happens; families split apart and vows are broken. How can hope and grace be restored when marriages fail?

Key Verse

Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife? Mark 10:2

Focus Image



What Do You Think about Marriage and Divorce?

Session Preparation

Before You Begin . . .

This series begins with a very delicate issue: divorce. There will not be a single person in your group unaffected by divorce either personally or by way of family and friends who have gone through it. You will need to be sensitive to the wide range of emotions lying just below the surface. If done carefully, the shared thoughts and feelings of this first session will set the tone for the rest of the sessions by quickly bonding the group together with a high level of trust.

Session Instructions

1. View the Session Prep Video.
2. Read this Session Guide completely and highlight or underline any portions you wish to emphasize with the group. Note also any Bonus Activities you wish to do.
3. Check to see what materials you'll need, such as a whiteboard or chart paper, for each session. Leaders should have a copy of the marriage rite in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* and other examples of marriage vows. A unity candle, often used in wedding ceremonies, would work well as a focal point.

Session Overview

We live daily under the microscope of performance, in a world where laws, rules, and expectations govern most of our actions. Even Christians who believe that we are saved not by performance but by faith feel obligated to follow certain rules. You shall not steal. You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery. Jesus himself said that he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. Paul wrote that the law is good. The law reveals our sin and deep need for mercy. But as holy and good as God's law is, the gospel is what secures the grace-based relationships we all crave. While this session's text seems to be about the break-up of a relationship, it's more about the make-up of godly relationships.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As it is today, divorce in Jesus' day was a highly controversial issue. When the Pharisees came to Jesus in Mark 10, it was a trap with divorce being the bait. In Mark 10:2-16, some **Pharisees**—who wanted to divide and conquer—put Jesus to the test. Armed with a variety of opinions on divorce, they wanted to force Jesus to

? **Pharisees:**

Literally, “the separate ones.” The Pharisaic movement began in the time between the Old and New Testaments when foreign, ruling countries oppressed and even outlawed Judaism. Beginning as a lay movement, the Pharisees refused to acquiesce to the oppression of the Jews and tenaciously taught and obeyed Jewish teachings in their purity. They began as the defenders of Judaism. However, by the time of Jesus, this movement had become overbearing, self-righteous, and judgmental of those who could not keep their high standards.

? **Torah:**

From the Hebrew word *yaroh*, “to teach.” Though often translated as “law,” it is better understood as “teaching” or “instruction.” While primarily associated with the first five books of the Old Testament, otherwise known as the Books of Moses or the Pentateuch, the word *Torah* is also used in a broader sense in reference to all Hebrew scriptures as well as the oral traditions of the rabbis.

? **Sklerokardia:**

The Greek word that Mark uses here is also used in Mark 16:14 (“stubbornness”). It refers to a stubbornness that refuses to yield to the authority and guidance of God.

take a side, thus alienating him from those who disagreed. Jesus knew better than to step into that trap. He moved them beyond the immediate, knee-jerk response of performance, blame, and rules to the ideals God used to begin with when setting up marriage in Genesis 2.

The justification of divorce varied in early Judaism. At the time there were two main schools of thought: the view of rigid and unpopular Rabbi Shammai and the more relaxed and popular view of Rabbi Hillel. The main point of contention was the definition of *objectionable* (literally “uncleanness”) in Deuteronomy 24:1. On the one side of this debate were teachers who were very strict about divorce, saying that it was forbidden except in the case of adultery. The other side allowed for divorce over anything “objectionable,” even if the wife burned dinner or if the husband found someone more desirable!

The Pharisees tried to get Jesus to choose one side over the other, thus dividing his base of support and making it seem that he either does not take the **Torah** seriously or he is too harsh on those for whom divorce seemed like the only option. Surprisingly, Jesus counters the Pharisees with a matter of justice, pointing out that either way divorce often left women in dire straits with no means of support. They had little recourse, meager resources, and limited restitution. More than just a religious or legal issue, too often divorce was a matter of injustice, resulting in women and children suffering in poverty and isolation.

Certainly there are biblical exceptions to the “no divorce” rule. Matthew 19:9 and 1 Corinthians 7:10-16 are passages that offer some situations in which divorce might be deemed acceptable. However, by quoting from the very text that the Pharisees debated, Jesus went to the heart of the matter, challenging presumptions of self-righteousness and the realities of injustice that continue to plague couples in both marriage and divorce to this day.

LITERARY CONTEXT

Divorce breaks a vow, shatters lives, and destroys communities. Divorce, like all sin, is the result of what Jesus calls a **hard heart**. Medically speaking, the hardening of any tissue, organ, or cells is referred to as *sclerosis*. When it happens to the heart, the arteries constrict the blood flow, leading to chest pains, heart attacks, and even death. Spiritually speaking, sclerosis of the heart is just as deadly. Jesus refers to Deuteronomy 24:1-4, explaining that

it was because of these hardened hearts that Moses allowed for divorce. In other words, the root sin was not the divorce but a heart that sought to destroy community and overthrow covenant.

The concept of a hard heart appears frequently in Scripture. It invokes the wrath of God (Romans 2:5), deafens our ear to the will of God (Exodus 7:13), and dulls our understanding (Mark 8:17). What are the symptoms and effects of a hard heart? How does this hardened heart constrict understanding, truth, compassion, and mercy? Passages like Deuteronomy 15:7-11 and Ephesians 4:17-19 describe some of the symptoms of a hard heart, but take heart—there are solutions! Ezekiel 36:24-27 in the Old Testament and Ephesians 4:20-32 in the New Testament both describe the hardened heart as a treatable disease. The treatment consists of a liberal application of God's grace. Christians find grace in the way Ezekiel prefigures the promises of Pentecost and Holy Baptism, while Ephesians looks to Jesus as the ultimate balm for our hearts.

LUTHERAN CONTEXT

When we turn our attention to divorce, our first inclination moves us to react with performance-based attitudes: Whose fault was it? Under what reasons is it permissible? Have I followed all the rules? Everyone reading this has been impacted by divorce whether personally or with a neighbor, friend, sibling, or parent. And no doubt each of us reacted out of performance, trying to decide who was to blame.

God calls us to obedience to his Word. However, that obedience moves beyond performance-based rules to a new life of mercy in which we become Jesus' instruments of grace and healing for a broken, hardened world. The challenge that Jesus presents to us in Mark 10:2-16 is not figuring out who is to blame and what rules must be followed, but discerning how we will live in a fallen community in which divorce shatters lives, breaks apart families, and isolates people. As fellow sinners, we all live in the shadow of the cross daily—the divorced, the impatient, the angry, the liar, the gossip, the jealous, and the proud. As fellow saints, we share that same mercy, grace, and forgiveness that we have received and for which we are thankful.

Much of your conversation about marriage and divorce will depend on the religious backgrounds of your learners. For those coming from a Catholic background, divorce brings with it a greater level of sin, guilt, shame, and possibly excommunication.

? Sacraments:

Sacred acts or rites that convey God's blessings. The reformers looked specifically for Christ's institution of these acts, the promise of forgiving grace, and a visible means such as water, bread, and wine by which that grace is conveyed in their definition of "sacrament."

? Excommunication:

A process of church discipline in which members are formally prohibited from taking communion, and are thereby excluded from God's grace in the sacrament of Holy Communion and the community of the church.

The Catholic church identifies seven **sacraments**, with marriage being included as one. During the Reformation in the 1500s, Luther narrowed that list down to two—baptism and communion. These two, Luther taught, were commanded by Jesus and were the means of conveying God's grace to individuals with a promise of new life. Luther and the reformers wanted to uphold the importance and sanctity of marriage without elevating it to the level of baptism and communion. They acknowledged that there were legitimate reasons for divorce that may be unfortunate and irreversible but do not warrant **excommunication**.

DEVOTIONAL CONTEXT

We have all heard the current statistic that 50 percent of all marriages end in divorce. The way that that number is derived is by dividing the total number of marriages in a given year by the total number of divorces. However, upon further study of the numbers, we find that that percentage is misleading. According to The Barna Group, an organization that studies churches and trends that are of concern to the church, "among adults who have been married . . . one-third (33 percent) have experienced at least one divorce." That is, 67 percent of those who have been married have remained married in their first marriage (www.barna.org). Marriage still works! In Mark 10:6-8, Jesus addresses God's ideals for a healthy marriage. The Old Testament text Jesus quotes has served as a blueprint for marriage that continues to speak in significant ways to couples today. According to Genesis 2:24-25, there are four components to marriage as envisioned in the Bible:

1. Separation: "Man leaves his father and mother."

- Encourage the group to think of examples in which the extended family was too enmeshed to allow for the new marriage to have room for healthy growth. Almost any episode from the TV sitcom *Everyone Loves Raymond* (HBO Home Video) would provide an illustration of a man who did not "leave" his father and mother, thereby creating an unhealthy, dysfunctional relationship not only with the in-laws but also within the marriage.
- On the other hand, those who completely sever that relationship do equal damage. Today we have problems of isolation, with families scattered throughout the country, grandchildren strangers to grandparents, and a lack of stability within the extended family.