

MARK 10:2-16

Divorce We might begin by considering our congregation. Allowing a vast generalization, our congregation will be made up of at least three perspectives on this text. Those divorced or friends of divorced people who were driven out of the church or threatened with expulsion for being divorced. They hear the judgement of the church. For them, we must overcome their hatred of the text. Secondly, we have those who think of the decline and deterioration of family life and the chaos that divorce has caused in our society. They are looking for an attack on divorce. Thirdly, we have those who are "modern" and for whom this text is an anachronism, and think of marriage and divorce as actions done when convenient, and who look to the gospel of "what is right for me." They are bored by the text.

A sermon of cheap grace (to reassure the first group), a sermon of fire and brimstone (for the second group) or a sermon that dodges the issue (for the third) will all go astray with the other two groups.

Can we preach this text as both law and gospel? Perhaps approaching it as law and gospel is the way beyond these three groups.

The text is law. Not just law as in "da rules," but law because easy entry and exit from ultimate relationships both cheapens the possibility for them, and causes pain and suffering to the couple, to any children, and to close friends. A divorce is not just between two people. It is law because leaving a relationship without understanding and dealing with the reasons for the breakup or the consequences to the breakup will come back to haunt you for years. Those in the first group will need this explanation and reminder of the cost of divorce.

But there is gospel. The gospel is always the same: repent and be forgiven. Before divorce: repent and renew your relationship. If one or both, in recognition of human weakness can, before God, see that they cannot humanly do the repentance necessary, then divorce rather than sin by destroying each other. But divorce is still a sin, and repentance for that must be done.

We all know couples who make the process of divorce an even grater sin by tearing each other apart financially and mentally, by pitting children against each other and so on.

To remarry without repenting of the divorce will be to be in adultery. But, only the sin against the Holy Spirit cannot be forgiven. A divorce can be repented of, and then people can remarry in good conscience. The people in the second group need to hear that what we are about is not to be a pure people, untouched by human failing, but to be a repentant and forgiven people. In any case it has seemed odd that this one command of Jesus would be regarded as an absolute when we so readily allow repentance and forgiveness for other violations of Jesus' commands.

Perhaps the third group can be made to see the wisdom of this text and the gospel message.

The Children You could combine both points in a sermon: by talking of how cheap grace and self-indulgent divorce keeps children from coming to God. Of course it must also be said that an abusive marriage is hardly good training ground for faith either. Clearly faith is taught in the home as much or more than in church. But, rather than forcing a connection, it might be better either not to talk about this passage, if you are preaching on divorce, or to preach only on this passage.

Why did the disciples object? Cute biographical details such as the tiredness of Jesus are not usually present in the Bible, usually people do things for questions of principle or to illustrate a principle. (so D. E. Nineham) What reason of principle would the disciples have for their action? Would it be questions of status and right to be near the great man?

Do not "stop" the children. Dropping children off at Sunday School is almost enough to stop them from coming to Jesus.

"Receive like a child" What is this? One author says: dependence, receptivity, spontaneity. Another (Rawlenson) points to unselfconscious, receptive, dependent. The kingdom is a gift and should be taken as such.

Some take this story as authorization for infant baptism.

Sources: Bratcher and Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of Mark*, D. E. Nineham, *Saint Mark*, The Interpreter's Bible.