

Who Gets the Church?
Matthew 5:31-32; Mark 10:1-10
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One day I received a call in my office at Trinity Baptist Church and an unmistakable voice said, “Hey, Mike. I’ve got a question for you.”

I said, “O.K. What is it?”

“Who gets the church?”

I said, “What?”

He said, “Yeah. Who gets the church? You know we are dividing everything else up and I just want to know which one of us gets the church. Now, if she’ll go, she can have it,” he said.

“You know I was raised in that church, but I don’t mind leaving and going somewhere else if she will stay.”

That was the first time I’d ever been asked that question from someone getting a divorce.

Sometimes the church struggles to minister effectively to couples as they divorce. More times than not, both individuals end up leaving a church and sometimes THE after a divorce.

That may or may not be due to the church’s lack of love and care. Sometimes it is, but sometimes it occurs because a broken relationship with a spouse trickles down and causes damage with friends in the church and it becomes uncomfortable for people to stay.

Sometimes it has a lot to do with our inability to offer grace and understanding to those who need love and understanding from us.

I do find hope in this: many of you have experienced divorce. Thankfully, you have found your way back to the church, or you may have never left, so that tells me that you have found love, grace, and acceptance here. But more importantly, it tells me that you have found love, grace, and acceptance in Jesus Christ.

That is a very important testimony for you to share because there are those who wish to make Jesus’ words on divorce into a new legalism. He said that a man could only divorce his wife in the case of marital unfaithfulness.

We know that Jesus had boundless compassion for people and he spent his ministry binding up the wounded, healing the sick, raising the dead, giving hope to the hopeless, restoring people to their community, loving the poor, and forgiving the sinner.

While you would expect nothing less than for Jesus to hold up the sacredness of marriage, do not think for one minute that there is no grace for those whose marriages have failed?

Now if this small section on divorce from the Sermon on the Mount were all I had in the Bible on this subject, I'd be struggling to offer much grace on this subject.

We must be careful not to reduce our theology or teaching on this subject or any subject to one or two verses.

In addition to Matthew's passage, I want us to look at the Mark perspective of Jesus' same sermon given on the hillside of Galilee.

Also, our ethic on this matter must be consistent with the teachings and life of Jesus, not just one verse from Matthew.

Although I've said this several times in other sermons, I must say it once more.

A Jewish woman was her husband's property and it had been that way all the way back to the time of Moses and perhaps longer.

In fact, Moses established a law that said a man could write a certificate of divorce if his wife became displeasing to him. That's found in Deuteronomy 24:1.

A certificate of divorce gave the woman proof she was no longer a certain man's property. This certificate was her legal statement that allowed her to become the wife or property of another man.

In Jesus' day, the school of Shammai believed she had to do something shameful before her husband could write her a certificate of divorce, but the school of Hillel believed he could divorce her for any reason. If she burned the bread, talked too much, or didn't give him any male children, he could divorce her.

Those who adhered to the school of Hillel obviously created more divorces than the school of Shammai.

One thing is clear: women had no voice, no rights, and no say, unless it was a voice of protest. However, to be unmarried was to be poor and hungry.

The Pharisees came to Jesus to ask him specifically about the Law of Moses. They wanted to know whether it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife.

We also find this question in Mark chapter 10:2. Notice, that verse said they were testing him. In other words, they wanted to get Jesus in trouble.

Now how could they possibly do that? Well, if Jesus contradicted the Law of Moses, that would be one way. The Pharisees and religious leaders didn't take it very well when someone openly contradicted Moses.

However, there was another way they could get Jesus into trouble. They could set a trap and get him to say something against Rome. That would be a delightful trap if they could get Rome after Jesus.

Here's a little background on what was going on in Rome.

First, let's go all the way back to the beginning of Mark's Gospel.

There Mark introduces us to John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus.

We came to know John as a man from the desert who ate food like locusts and wild honey and wore clothes made from camel's hair. He was eccentric even for his day and his messages about Jesus were about hope and repentance.

He began a practice of baptizing people in the Jordan River when they repented of their sins.

Speaking of sins, John wasn't bashful about speaking out on sexual sin and he did so in regards to King Herod Antipas. King Herod was married to the daughter of the King of Artas of Petra.

Once on his way to Rome, he stopped and visited with his half-brother Phillip the Tetrarch. Both men were sons of Herod the Great.

While visiting his half-brother, he had an affair with his brother's wife Herodias. Not only that, he asked her to be his wife. Now that's a bit of a problem if you already have a wife and she already has a husband.

She accepted his proposal. When he returned from Rome, they both divorced their spouses and were married. Of course, this became common knowledge over the entire kingdom.

Remember, Herodias was Greek, not Jewish. She had more rights than a Jewish woman, so she could legally divorce her husband. Jewish women did not have that right.

John the Baptist spoke out against this adulterous relationship. Well, Herodias took great offense that some camel smelling preacher from the desert would go around telling people what she could and could not do.

Herodias complained to her husband and he had John arrested and jailed. That wasn't enough for her. Herodias wanted him killed, but John the Baptist was intriguing to Herod. He liked listening to him.

Herodias waited for an opportunity and she got it on Herod's birthday. Herodias brought her daughter to dance for Herod. Her dancing pleased him.

After he'd had too much to drink, he stood and with an oath to his guests announced that he'd give this young woman whatever she asked for, up to half his kingdom.

So she went and told her mother what had happened and asked her mother what she should ask for. Her mother told her to go and ask for the head of John the Baptist.

So, you don't spit into the wind. You don't tug on Superman's cape. And you don't say anything against Rome, because you might end up like John the Baptist.

So you see, the Pharisees were laying a great trap for Jesus. If Jesus spoke against the Law of Moses, he would be in trouble with the Jews.

If Jesus sounded like John the Baptist, perhaps he would end up like John the Baptist. The Pharisees could only hope.

When they asked Jesus if it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife, notice how Jesus responded.

He told them the reason for Moses' law. He said Moses gave the law because their hearts were hard. He did not comment on whether divorce was right or wrong in one situation or another. He just said, "Moses permitted divorce because your hearts were hard."

In other words, Moses was trying to help them end what was already an unloving, unkind, and perhaps even abusive relationships.

The hearts of these men were so hard, Moses set up a way they could end the relationship.

More times than not, when two people come and sit in my office and they say the word "divorce," their hearts are already hardened to the point they don't change. They have waited way too long to come see me.

When their hearts were softer and they were willing to work on their marriage would have been a better time. The harder a heart becomes, the more difficult it becomes to save a relationship.

Instead of debating the Pharisees on the merits of whether the Law of Moses was right or wrong, Jesus went back to the beginning of time when God made established the union of man and woman.

"But God made them male and female from the beginning of creation. This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one. Since they are no longer two but one, let no one split apart what God has joined together." Mark 10:6-8 NLT.

With these words, Jesus had some news for the men of his day.

1) Women were not property. God did not make a woman as a man's property. From the beginning, God made a woman as a man's equal, to share life with him.

Jesus called the coming together of a man and a woman in partnership a one-flesh relationship. When you are one flesh, you cannot flippantly set your wife aside for any reason you choose.

2) The Pharisees were into legalism. Jesus was not. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that a man could divorce his wife only if she had committed adultery. This is sometimes referred to as the "exception clause." Some people will say that this is the only moral reason for a divorce. However, remember, if we are legalistic about these words, Jesus gave women no option to divorce husbands for the same offense.

Jesus' instructions are given to men only, not to women in Matthew. Jesus' instructions fit the culture in which he was living. He was addressing a problem that was out of hand, where women were being abused by a system of men setting them aside for any reason.

3) Jesus' goal was to return people back to respect marriage, respect women, and respect the purposes for which God made marriage. Jesus wanted people to respect the sanctity of sexuality so that any time people slept with one another, they understood that in the eyes of God, they were considered married people.

This is an important sexual ethic that can be extracted from what Jesus is teaching from the book of Genesis.

We also see this in Paul's writing to the church at Corinth.

He writes: "There's more to sex than mere skin on skin. Sex is as much spiritual mystery as physical fact. As written in Scripture, 'The two become one.' Since we want to become spiritually one with the Master, we must not pursue the kind of sex that avoids commitment and intimacy, leaving us more lonely than ever—the kind of sex that can never 'become one.' There is a sense in which sexual sins are different from all others. In sexual sin we violate the sacredness of our own bodies, these bodies that were made for God-given and God-modeled love, for 'becoming one' with another. Or didn't you realize that your body is a sacred place, the place of the Holy Spirit? Don't you see that you can't live however you please? (I Cor. 6:16-20 The Message).

So if you are a Pharisee, if you are someone who is very judgmental of those whose marriages have failed, let me share a bit of news that few pastors have ever shared with you. Technically, if you did not marry the first person you slept with, a consensual relationship, you have committed adultery.

You must also remember that Jesus said if a man lusts after a woman in his heart, he's committed adultery with her in his heart. I think we understand that the same thing is true for women who lust after men.

So that can't leave too many people that haven't broken the seventh commandment.

Now may I share the gospel with you?

As Christians, God set up marriage where He can be loved, honored, served and obeyed as we learn to love, serve, honor and mutually submit to one another.

Yet in Jesus' day, marriage was not working that way in many Jewish marriages, or in Gentile ones either. Jesus was trying to put an end to that.

We can be certain that the Pharisees had the most famous divorce of their time in mind when they came to Jesus with all this discussion about divorce. When the disciples asked Jesus again about the matter, Jesus responded in a way that tells us he was thinking about it as well.

“Whoever divorces his wife and marries someone else commits adultery against her.¹² And if a woman divorces her husband and marries someone else, she commits adultery.” Mark 10:11-12

Jesus was speaking specifically about Herod Antipas and Herodias. In both cases, these people set aside their spouses to marry another person. Jesus seemed to be making it very clear, like John the Baptist, that this is wrong.

Whenever we are destroying ourselves and each other, Jesus is going to say, “That’s wrong. That should not be done.”

However, once we become broken, estranged from others and from community, once we have been abused and harmed, once we have felt shame and abandonment, once we have become estranged from God by our sin, Jesus reaches out to us in love, compassion, and care.

Jesus stands with us, like he did with the woman caught in the act of adultery and thrown at his feet by any accusing group of men.

The church has a problem when we are ready to throw rocks at those who need us to offer grace. Because the truth is, we all need grace.

Many of us are still trying to determine who gets the church.

Throughout our history we have drawn circles around people of different colors, economic groups, of various backgrounds, and different lifestyles, and we have said, “God’s grace does not apply to you. This church is not for you.”

If we are that church, if you are that person, we are the ones that need to be seeking God’s forgiveness. We need to drop our rocks.

Yes, we need to recognize sin as Jesus did. We need to be able to say, “That is not right when people are hurting and abusing one another.”

We need to be people who stand up for those that are being abused and wounded.

We also need to make room for anyone who seeks community with us, who is seeking God's forgiveness, and who wants to worship a God who loves, forgives, and offers His grace to all.

Who gets the church? I hope you get it, but I also hope you share it. Hurting people need to know that Jesus loves us, even when we have fallen short of the standards God has set for us.

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