

January 20, 2013

Mark 10:2-9

Divorce and Remarriage

There is probably no subject that engenders more comedy than marital relationships. Some of my favorite jokes are marriage and husband and wife jokes. Of course you know that I like to poke fun at my own relationship, but before I go any further let me say that I hope you all know that I love Gayle with all my heart and cannot even envision what life would be like without her. Thirty-Two years of wedded bliss after Thirty-five years of marriage testifies to that. Well here are some of my favorite marriage jokes.

Ralph was driving home one evening when he suddenly realized that it was his daughter's birthday and he hadn't bought her a present. He drove to the mall, ran to the toy store and said to the shop assistant, "How much is that Barbie in the window?" In a condescending manner, she said "Which Barbie? We have Barbie Goes to the Gym for \$19.95, Barbie Goes to the Ball for \$19.95, Barbie Goes Shopping for \$19.95, Barbie Goes to the Beach for \$19.95, and Divorced Barbie for \$265.00". "Why is the Divorced Barbie \$265.00 when all the others are only \$19.95?" That's obvious, the sales lady said. "Divorced Barbie comes with Ken's house, Ken's car, Ken's boat, Ken's furniture.

A lady inserted an advertisement in the classifieds: "Husband wanted". Next day she received a hundred letters. They all said the same thing: "You can have mine." Father O'Grady was saying his good-byes to the parishioners after his Sunday morning service as he always does when Mary Clancey came up to him in tears. "What's bothering you, dear?" asked Farther O'Grady. "Oh, father, I've got terrible news." Replied Mary. "My husband passed away last night." "Oh, Mary!" said the good father. "That's terrible. Tell

me, Mary, did he have any last requests?" "Yes....," Mary replied sheepishly. "Well?"

"He said, 'Please, Mary, put down the gun.'" Stumpy and his wife Martha went to the State Fair every year. Every year Stumpy would say, "Martha, I'd like to ride in that airplane." And every year Martha would say, "I know, Stumpy, but that airplane ride costs ten dollars, and ten dollars is ten dollars." This one year Stumpy and Martha went to the fair and Stumpy said, "Martha, I'm 71 years old. If I don't ride that airplane this year I may never get another chance." Martha replied, "Stumpy, that airplane ride costs ten dollars, and ten dollars is ten dollars." The pilot overheard them and said, "Folks, I'll make you a deal. I'll take you both up for a ride. If you can stay quiet for the entire ride and not say one word, I won't charge you, but if you say one word it's ten dollars." Stumpy and Martha agreed and up they go. The pilot does all kinds of twists and turns, rolls and dives, but not a word is heard. He does all his tricks over again, but still not a word. They land and the pilot turns to Stumpy, "By golly, I did everything I could think of to get you to yell out, but you didn't." Stumpy replied, "Well, I was gonna say something when Martha fell out, but ten dollars is ten dollars."

One woman accompanied her husband to the doctor for a physical. The doctor asked her for a private conversation before they left the office. 'Your husband,' the doctor said, 'is under great stress and you must devote your life to sheltering him. Don't argue or disagree with him. Get up early each morning and fix his favorite breakfast. Spend the morning cleaning the house, but have a nice lunch ready at noon if he happens to come home. The afternoon you can spend on outside work, but make sure there's a special dinner waiting

for him when he returns. The evening hours may be spent watching a game with him on TV, followed by romance should he be interested. This must be your schedule to help him through this.' The wife left the office, picked up her husband, and drove him home. 'Well,' asked the husband, 'what did the doctor say?' 'He said,' replied the wife, 'that you're going to die.'

But in all seriousness. Marriage, divorce and remarriage are very serious subjects. Jokes seem to always have a hint of truth associated with them. Recently, the magazine, "Christianity Today" had an entire month devoted to marriage and divorce issues. In one article it quoted that a group of small children were asked, "What can men and women do to get along better?" Here are their responses:

(Neil, age 8) "My mom should try ice hockey."

(Chris, age 9) "Girls like to stay clean and healthy and brush their teeth, and boys don't care."

(Jennifer, age 8) "They should just understand that women are more mature than men."

(Julie, age 9) "Men and women shouldn't talk about money."

(Kate, age 8) "They could understand better if they listened better."

Julie and Kate hit the top two reasons cited as causes for divorce in the latest¹

Mark 10

²Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" ³"What did Moses command you?" he replied. ⁴They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away." ⁵"It was because your hearts were hard

that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied. ⁶"But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female. ⁷'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, ⁸and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. ⁹Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

Any time a preacher comes to the part of this text about divorce, people in the pews probably hold their breath and wonder what will come next. They wonder if the preacher will jump in and proceed to shoot all the wounded in the congregation, namely all who have been wounded by divorce. Most people who have been divorced don't need a preacher to tell them that divorce is not God's plan for marriage. Not all divorcees go blithely on from one marriage to the other. Most are fully aware of the painful price of divorce. There is no denying that a failed marriage has fallen short of God's will. The question now is where do I go from here in my life? Having acknowledged my failure and my falling short, will God give me another chance at marriage? I believe that God does.

I believe one of the strongest reasons that divorce is not the unforgivable sin that the church made it for countless generations is because nowhere in God's word does it indicate that divorce is unforgivable. When you look at the earliest of God's words documented in scripture we see this progression, First God spoke His words of creation. Secondly, He gave His pronouncement about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. His third subject was about relationships. He said in Genesis 2:18, "It is not good for man to be alone." Before there was marriage and even before the creation of Eve, he expressed that it was not good for people to be alone. He pronounced all of his creation "very

good.” What he says is not good, is to be alone. It is still not good for people to be alone. If it is not good in the second week of the creation account it is no better in the third week of January 2013.

We as Christians need to develop a clear understanding of what the Bible teaches on this topic. In dealing with this issue, it seems that people are prone to make one of two mistakes. The first is to ignore what the Bible teaches. There are some folks who claim the biblical attitude toward divorce is too harsh, and that we need to develop more compassionate guidelines to deal with these situations. I think that is silly. We must also follow what the scriptures teach about Grace and Forgiveness. If we are not going to listen to what the Bible says about divorce, we really don't believe in the authority of Scripture. If we reject the Bible as God's Word for us, we are in a religious and moral wasteland with no way of knowing what is true, right or good. The second mistake I see Christians making is to oversimplify and distort the biblical teaching. I know some Christians who say, "God hates divorce. No one should ever get divorced. If you do divorce, you must never remarry. End of discussion."

I have not come to my views based on an effort to accommodate divorced people, but out of the desire to correctly apply what God teaches in His Word to our current situation. If you disagree with my understanding of this passage, I would love to discuss that with you. But, please don't make this an issue that will cause division between you and those who disagree. It is tragic that divorce has not only caused great pain in the lives of many individuals, but also has become such a difficult issue for the church to handle. My prayer

is that God would give us a unity in understanding and applying His Word regarding this difficult topic.

I want to spend the rest of our time exploring how I think the biblical teaching on marriage, divorce and remarriage works out in practical terms and try to answer some of the questions many people ask me. I am going to pick out four names to use in our illustrations: Tom, Susan, John and Betty. Any similarities these names have to any real people is totally coincidental.

Question #1: Is it OK for someone to remarry if the divorce happened before that person became a Christian? The answer is: It depends. Let me explain. Let's say that after being married for three years, Tom and Susan get a divorce. A year later, Tom becomes a Christian, a believer in Jesus Christ. He also becomes very good friends with Betty who is also a believer. Is it OK, morally right, for Tom and Betty to get married? It depends on what has happened with Susan. As a Christian, Tom should go to Susan and seek to be reconciled with her. Though they may have a piece of paper which says they are divorced, she is still his wife, according to scripture. If Susan rejects Tom's appeal for reconciliation then, based upon what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 7: 10-16, Tom is no longer bound to his original marriage and is free to pursue this relationship with Betty and marry her. Also, if Susan has already gotten married to someone else, then it frees Tom from any duty to seek reconciliation and also frees him to marry Betty. The key issue is not whether the divorce happened before someone became a Christian. Rather, the question is this: Is

reconciliation with the original spouse possible? If not, I believe that the divorced person is free to remarry.

Question #2: Keeping in mind what I just said, is: Is the guilty party sometimes free to remarry? I think so. Let's go back to Tom and Susan. Tom is a real Jerk. He's had a number of affairs, and he is just tired of being married, so he files for divorce. Susan wants to keep their marriage together, but there is nothing she can do; the divorce is final. Two years later, Tom comes to his senses. He confesses his sin to the Lord and really wants to make things right. What should he do? Well, he should ask Susan to forgive him, and if she is still single, he should seek to be reconciled with her. Remember, however, that I believe Susan clearly has the right to remarry. So what if, by the time Tom comes to his senses, Susan has already married John? The Bible is clear, in Deuteronomy, that it would be wrong for Susan to leave her current spouse, John, to go back to Tom. Tom should not ask her to do that. So what should he do? Must Tom remain single and chaste for the rest of his life? I don't think so. Now, I don't have any specific Bible passage to point to, but I think this is the implication of what Paul teaches here in 1 Corinthians 7 and also of what Jesus teaches. Tom's marriage to Susan ended when she married John. She was free to do that because of what Tom had done. Because his marriage to Susan is over, even though he was a jerk, my understanding is that Tom is free to remarry.

Question #3: Is there a situation when it is wrong for a person who is divorced to remarry? Yes, whenever it is possible to be reconciled to the former spouse, one should not marry someone else. For Tom to just leave Susan and go marry Betty is clearly wrong.

I also think that if Tom and Susan split up just because they are not getting along, it would be wrong for either one of them to remarry until it is clear that reconciliation is not going to happen. Now, of course, when one of them goes off with someone else, that brings freedom to the other partner. If Tom gets married to Betty, Susan's marriage to him is over, and she is free to remarry. So what about Tom's new marriage to Betty? Whether he ran off with her, or married her when reconciliation with Susan was possible, Tom has sinned. According to what Jesus teaches, Betty has sinned too. She married Susan's husband. They both need to confess that sin to the Lord. If they genuinely do, however, God will forgive them. I believe that God will recognize their marriage as valid. Betty is really Tom's new wife. It would be wrong for him to leave her and go back to Susan. I don't think, as some suggest, that Tom and Betty will be living in a perpetual state of adultery for the next thirty years. How they entered the marriage was wrong. They need to deal with God about that. But, the marriage they are now a part of is not necessarily wrong. I believe the Lord calls Tom to love Betty the way Christ loved the church. And He had better do a better job of that than he did with Susan. Even if Betty happens to be his fifth or sixth wife, she is still the wife that God calls him to love today.

Question #4: Are there reasons a divorced person should stay single, even if it's morally OK to remarry? Yes, indeed. Later in 1 Corinthians Paul wrote that he preferred that all unmarried people remain single, because of what he called in Verse 26 "the present crisis," which we said was probably a famine. Dr. Laura says that a divorced parent should remain single as long as the children are at home, because he or she does not have time to be dating and looking for a spouse. She also points to studies which say that children are in

most cases better off with a single mom, than with a mom who marries a step-dad. On the other hand, the tradition in the Bible and through much of the last 2000 years was that a widow or widower would often remarry shortly after losing a spouse, partly so that they could have help in raising a family. I'm not sure which is best. My point would be that a divorced person should never remarry just to prove a point; only remarry if you believe it is what God is calling you to do.

So many questions. If you disagree with some of what I have said, don't get mad. I am simply trying to apply what I understand the Bible teaches on this subject. Let us as scripture says, "reason together" on this topic, give me a call. I have been wrong before.

I close with two thoughts. First, the church, including Southport Baptist Church, needs to make sure it treats those who are going through divorce, or have been divorced, with compassion. In many ways, having a spouse die can be easier than losing a spouse through divorce. Listen to what one divorced Christian woman wrote: I have lost my husband, but I am not supposed to mourn. I have lost my children; they don't know to whom they belong. I have lost my relatives; they do not approve. I have lost his relatives; they blame me. I have lost my friends; they don't know how to act. I feel I have lost my church; do they think I have sinned too much? I am afraid of the future, I am ashamed of the past, I am confused about the present. I am so alone. Friends, I'm not suggesting we lower our standards. We always need to remind folks that marriage is intended to be a "till death do us part" commitment, but we also need to remember that another one of our standards that must not be lowered is a commitment to love and help people who are hurting, even if they

are partially or mostly responsible for the situation they are in. Remember, Southport Baptist Church is not a country club for saints, but a hospital for sinners, and divorced sinners are welcome here just like married sinners.

Secondly, when it comes to divorce, an ounce of prevention is not worth a pound of cure, but a whole ton of cure. Divorce takes a terrible toll on women, men, children, pastors and churches. I beg you, if you are married, or if you get married in the future, to do everything you can to keep those marriage vows and make that marriage work. Work at it. Don't assume that your problems could never escalate to the point of divorce. Deal with your conflicts and tensions when they are small. Communicate with each other about your concerns and frustrations. Ask the Lord to rekindle the love which is at the heart of your relationship. Seek God's help and wisdom for being the best husband or wife you can be. Go home and read Ephesians 5:22, and following verses, and strive to fulfill the responsibilities that God has given you in your marriage. Yes, when divorce occurs, we have to deal with it. By God's grace we will deal with it in a way that is consistent with what the Bible teaches and in a way that brings healing to those involved.

"I read where one wife plans to divorce her husband as soon as she can find a way to do so without making him happy." Marriage is tough, and maybe your marriage has developed huge cracks that threaten its very existence. Let me make these suggestions to those of you who are struggling in marriage: Take a long look at Jesus' teachings on marriage and divorce. Divorce brings him no honor, and it is unlikely to bring you happiness or freedom either. When Gayle and I married, we chose to take the word "divorce" out of our vocabulary. But as Gayle said several years ago, "We did keep

murder” in our dictionary. Another thing I encourage you to do is to ask for help. Don’t wait until the house has already crashed down around your ears before you call for help in shoring it up. There is no shame in saying “We want to stay together, we want to work it out, but we’re in trouble.” Help is out there, but you’ve got to reach out for it.

A final word I would give to those who struggle in marriage is to rediscover the church. I don’t mean come to Sunday AM worship. Statistics show almost no difference in the divorce rates of attenders and non-attenders, but they show an incredible difference in the lives of couples who pray together, read their Bibles together, serve together.