

Semicontinuous
Job 1:1; 2:1–10
Ps. 26

Complementary
Gen. 2:18–24
Ps. 8

Heb. 1:1–4; 2:5–12
Mark 10:2–16

God's Grace and Welcome

Goal for the Session *Examining Jesus' response when pressed about laws concerning divorce, adults will plan ways to exhibit God's grace and welcome.*

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Mark 10:2–16

WHAT is important to know?

— From "Exegetical Perspective," C. Clifton Black

Another text-critical question arises in verse 7: whether Mark continues the quotation with the words "and cleave to his wife" (KJV; "and be joined to his wife," NRSV). That this is Jesus' intent is beyond question: "So they are no longer two, but one flesh" (v. 8b). The point is clear: while dissolution of marriage is permissible, owing to human incompetence in sustaining their vows, God's intent at creation is wholeness, including oneness of flesh. Normatively speaking, *human beings* should not rupture what *God* unites (v. 9).

WHERE is God in these words?

— From "Theological Perspective," James J. Thompson

As presented in Mark, the Pharisees ask Jesus about divorce, not because they truly want to know the answer, but because they want to force him to take a stand on a controversial issue, and therefore offend someone. At one level, his answer may be even more offensive than they anticipated: Jesus claims the authority to supersede even the law of Moses. His demand for purity of heart is more rigorous than Mosaic law; more rigorous, in fact, than seems humanly possible. But, as he notes in the following passage, what is humanly impossible is possible for God (Mark 10:27). How then are we to receive and enter the kingdom of God? Not as those who try to justify ourselves, but as those who accept God's grace, like children who with purity of heart accept the grace of their parents.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From "Pastoral Perspective," David B. Howell

In the larger lectionary passage (10:2–16), the disciples just do not get it: "Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter" (v. 10). The tension continues between Jesus and the disciples. He teaches them about the unfolding of the kingdom, and so often they (and we) just do not get it. Maybe that is why Jesus says in verse 14: "Let the little children come to me . . ." Perhaps Jesus was saying, "In the kingdom it is not about what is permissible but what is ethical . . . Maybe if you receive the kingdom like a child, you will get it."

NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From "Homiletical Perspective," Charles L. Campbell

In the conclusion to Jesus' comments about the children, he affirms, "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (v. 15). Jesus here reminds the disciples that one enters the kingdom only by receiving it in complete dependence on God. One does not enter the kingdom through the fulfillment of any abstract legal principles, including those related to divorce and remarriage. The affirmation in the second pericope thus forestalls any attempt to set up Jesus' earlier teaching as a timeless law, obedience to which is requisite for entering into God's reign.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Mark 10:2–16

Focus on Your Teaching

Many people are taught that the Bible is a set of rules. Lifetimes are spent striving to live up to these rules. Many are left feeling guilty about sin rather than finding joy in the freedom the gospel brings. Today's text touches a subject affecting many adults and offers a chance to look at it from a different angle. Be sensitive to adults experiencing divorce and consider warning them ahead of the session that this will be part of the discussion.

God of grace and mercy, help me to be gracious and sensitive to the varying needs and perspectives of the participants in this study. Grant me understanding to listen and words to speak as I prepare to teach. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- newsprint
- marker
- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for October 11, 2015

For Responding

- option 1: copies of Resource Sheet 1, pens, newsprint, Bibles
- option 2: Bibles
- option 3: Resource Sheet 1, Bibles, paper, pens, newsprint, marker

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, if using option 1 in Responding, write on newsprint the Scripture references concerning divorce from the sidebar. If using option 2 in Responding, invite a pastor or a leader of a divorce-care ministry to address how this text is discussed with those living with divorce. If using option 3 in Responding, write “Open us to your grace and welcome” at the top of a sheet of newsprint.

Greet participants as they arrive and form pairs for discussion. Have each pair discuss what they think the Bible says about divorce. Encourage them to also discuss what they believe your church says about divorce, especially if this differs from their understanding of biblical teaching.

Gather participants into a group and invite responses from their discussions. Tell them that in today's focus scripture Jesus is questioned about divorce and remarriage.

Merciful and loving God, open our eyes, minds, and hearts as we encounter lessons from your Word. May we experience the grace your good news brings. Amen.

EXPLORING

Prepare to read Mark 10:2–16 in the style of a reader's theater. Invite three volunteers to read the parts of a narrator, Pharisees, and Jesus. After the reading, ask participants:

- ✪ How do the Pharisees and Jesus use questions in this scene?
- ✪ Why did the Pharisees ask Jesus a question that everyone knew the answer to?
- ✪ Why did Jesus ask the Pharisees a question about Moses' commandments?

Explain that all parties in this scene were well aware that divorce was legal. The practice of divorce was not fair, especially to women who lost many of their rights when they divorced.

Mark believed God's kingdom was imminent, which gave a sense of urgency to Jesus' followers in spreading the gospel to a wide audience before Jesus' return. Social and political problems will be insignificant when Jesus brings God's ultimate reign.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Mark 10:2–16) and read the “Where?” excerpt. Ask:

- ✧ How was Jesus' answer more offensive than anticipated?
- ✧ How would women have reacted to Jesus' words differently than men?
- ✧ Jesus' response made it pretty impossible to justify divorce. What was his point?

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Divorce and Remarriage). Have participants read the quotes and summarize what these mean to them. Invite brief comments. Ask:

- ✧ What new ideas or perspectives are raised in these quotes?
- ✧ Discuss the ways Mark's text points to the authority of Scripture, tradition, reason, experience, and conscience in addressing complicated social questions.
- ✧ How might Jesus reframe questions regarding divorce, remarriage, or the presence of children in his midst today?

To transition to Responding, have a volunteer read aloud verses 13–16. Discuss:

- ✧ How does receiving the kingdom of God as a little child differ from living strictly by the law?

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Christians Respond** Participants will prepare responses to those who say that the Bible teaches against divorce. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 and pens. Have participants form groups of three. Tell groups that they are to prepare a response to a person who says that the Bible clearly says no one should get divorced. Before participants begin to formulate their response, call their attention to the newsprint listing Scripture passages concerning divorce. They may want to read one or all of these passages as they formulate their responses. Also, have each group read the “What?” excerpt before their discussion.

Gather participants after they complete their work. Invite each group to tell their responses. Invite brief comments or questions. Plan a way to communicate your response to others, using both words and actions. Remind them that even if we have an enlightened view, we should always practice pastoral concern for others with whom we disagree.

- 2. The Church Responds** Participants will have a conversation with a church leader and plan ways to extend God's grace to those living with divorce. Invite a pastor or a leader of a divorce-care ministry to visit during the session. To set context for group conversation, invite a volunteer to read aloud Mark 10:2–16. Summarize the Exploring activities participants have completed. Invite the guest leader to address how this text is discussed with those living with divorce.

Inquire about ways that those who have been divorced are welcomed into the church. Ask what people in the church can do to show God's grace and welcome. As a group, plan concrete ways for participants to show welcome to these persons.

EASY PREP

Jesus' references about marriage come from Genesis 1:27 and 2:24, and Moses' commandments regarding divorce come from Deuteronomy 24:1–4. Additional Scripture concerning divorce: Jeremiah 3:1, Malachi 2:13–16, Matthew 5:31–32, Matthew 19:3–12, Luke 16:18, 1 Corinthians 7:10–16.

- 3. Litany for Divorced Persons** Participants will consider the meaning of a childlike dependence on God, and develop a group litany for people who are divorcing to use in Closing. Invite a volunteer to read the “Now What?” excerpt in Resource Sheet 1 aloud. Invite the group to name and discuss examples of “timeless laws” the church has enforced that have also been considered requisites for entering into God’s reign. Examples might include that women be subservient to men or slaves obey their masters.

Ask:

- ✪ What good news does Jesus’ comments about receiving the kingdom of God as a child imply for people who are divorcing?

Create a litany that might be used in worship or individually with divorced persons. As a group, name some of the difficult feelings divorced persons may experience, especially those related to feeling judged by other Christians. Write these feelings on the board or newsprint. Then agree on a common response for a prayer after each feeling is named. One example: “Receive the kingdom as a child. You are blessed as you are.”

Enter into a time of prayer and invite persons to name one of the feelings listed. For example, they might say, “For those who feel judged by others . . .” After each one, lead the group in the prepared response. At the end of the prayer, conclude by saying, “Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.”

CLOSING

Invite participants to recall their responses from Gathering about what the Bible and the church say about divorce. Ask if anyone believes differently or would modify their initial response after studying the issue. Allow brief comments.

If you chose option 3 in Responding, use the litany developed by participants for a closing prayer. Or you may offer this prayer in closing:

Holy God, your good news is new every morning. So many people in this world need to know your grace and welcome. As we leave this place, help us to offer your blessing and hospitality to one another and to the least of your children. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for October 11, 2015, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

Focus on Mark 10:2–16

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Divorce and Remarriage

By indicating that the proper attitude of those who are to receive and enter into the kingdom is reliance on and gratitude for God's grace, Jesus escapes the Pharisees' trap and provides a positive answer to the question of marriage, children, and divorce that is both uncompromisingly rigorous and an appeal to God's mercy.

—From James J. Thompson, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 140.

Divorce remains a live issue, but most Protestant churches have concluded that respect for marriage and the institution of marriage means that some particular marriages should end. Divorce is tragic, but not the worst evil. Today, however, we might imagine someone (or a group of latter-day Pharisees) asking Jesus about sexual intercourse outside of marriage, or about marriage between members of the same sex. Is it permissible? If we learn anything from this text, it is that we must be cautious about attempting to justify ourselves. Jesus claims the authority to supersede even the law of Moses, but we are not Jesus. How might he reframe the question, turn it to its roots, and demand full purity of heart?

—*Ibid.*, 144.

The great temptation of this text is to turn Jesus' teaching into a new "law" about divorce and remarriage. But Jesus' words are not meant to be a rigid, legal principle. Such a move, in fact, runs directly counter to Jesus' underlying theological emphasis. Jesus actually seeks to move beyond a legalistic approach to questions of divorce (the approach of his adversaries) toward a theological affirmation about God's purposes for marriage in the context of God's inbreaking reign. In making this move, Jesus actually uses Scripture against Scripture, rejecting the legal text cited by the Pharisees (Deut. 24:1-4) in favor of the theological affirmations present in the earlier creation stories in Genesis (Gen. 1:27; 2:24). Jesus definitely speaks some strong words about remarriage following divorce. (Notice that divorce itself is *not* the issue, but rather remarriage.) But the context is Jesus' respect for the deep bond of marriage — and possibly his sensitivity to the great pain caused by divorce — not his attempt to establish a new law.

—From Charles L. Campbell, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 143.

Jesus was declaring the beginning of a new era in which relationships could work if each party approached the other with mutual respect and concern. It was now possible to go beyond what was just permissible to what was kingdom enhanced.

—From David B. Howell, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 144.

