

Divorce Mal 2:10-16 & Mt 19:1-12

Tim Anderson 20/1/2018

The topics in this series just keep on getting harder.  
I'm painfully aware  
that many members of our congregation have been divorced.  
And I haven't met a divorced person yet  
who doesn't find that a painful chapter in their life.  
I met a lady last year whose marriage lasted for one day.  
She was married at All Saints Tyabb about 40 years ago.  
And her husband left her for another woman  
the day after their wedding.  
And 40 years later compiling a family history,  
she was wanting to find out the exact date of the wedding  
from the marriage records held at the church.  
Not surprisingly, she had put the date out of her mind a long time ago.  
Who would want to be reminded every year?  
But you could tell that it was a very painful memory for her,  
even though the marriage lasted such a short time.  
How much more for those who invest years of their life in a relationship  
only to see it not last the distance.  
It's a very painful thing to happen to anyone.

And over the years,  
the church has often been complicit in making it more painful.  
In particular, the Roman Catholic church's practice over many years  
of not giving communion to divorced people  
has been the source of great pain.  
And not something  
that there is a shred of justification for in the Scriptures.

But God is kind,  
and the passages in the Bible about divorce  
hold great comfort for the divorced person.  
They let us know that God hates your divorce as much as you do.  
But God loves divorcees.  
He is a redeemer.

He rescues what seems lost.  
And that includes putting back together  
the lives of those who have been divorced.  
But divorce is never God's ideal.  
Just like it is not the ideal of anyone who gets married.  
Everyone goes into marriage hoping for it to last.  
Well most people anyway.

The key passage in the old Testament about human divorce  
is Malachi 2.

There are lots of passages about God getting a divorce -  
a divorce from his unfaithful people.  
But Malachi 2 is the most significant passage  
about divorce amongst God's people.

Here's what was happening.  
Some of the men of Israel  
were divorcing their Jewish wives,  
and instead taking wives  
from the young women of the surrounding nations.  
It's a play straight out of the Rupert Murdoch playbook.  
You're feeling like you are getting old.  
You want to convince the rest of the world you're not past it.  
So you divorce the woman you married when you were both young,  
the woman who has brought up your children with you,  
the woman with whom you have decades of shared memories.  
And you marry some young beautiful woman.  
And you somehow convince yourself  
that if you've got a young pretty thing hanging off your arm,  
that must mean you are young again yourself.  
It's called self delusion on a grand scale.

What does God think of it?

One word.

'Unfaithful.'

Verse 10.

"Why do we profane the covenant of our ancestors

by becoming unfaithful to one another."

Verse 11.

"Judah has been unfaithful."

Verse 14.

"You have been unfaithful to her,  
though she is your partner,  
the wife of your marriage covenant."

Verse 15.

"So be on your guard,  
and do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth."

Verse 16.

"So be on your guard,  
and do not be unfaithful."

Unfaithful, unfaithful, unfaithful, unfaithful, unfaithful.

Do you get the picture?

God thinks they are being unfaithful.

Now if you were here last week,  
you will remember the story of King David.

He was caught out being unfaithful.

Stole another man's wife and then had him murdered.

But these guys in Malachi

are doing it by the socially acceptable method.

It's all above board.

The get a legal divorce

and they don't sleep with the young pretty thing until it's all official.

The divorce papers are through

and they have been legally married to their new wife.

How can God call them unfaithful?

The point is that they are breaking trust.

They have promised lifelong faithfulness to one woman.

She's the one who they have made promises to.

God is a promise keeping God.

He expects his people to be promise keeping people.

He doesn't expect his people to looking for legal loop holes

so they can justify breaking trust to do whatever is convenient.

And there's a bigger issue at play.  
These wives are foreign wives.  
Let's be clear.  
There is no racism here.  
The colour of their skin is not the problem.  
It's the gods they worship.  
Verse 11 spells it out.  
"Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the Lord loves  
by marrying women who worship a foreign God."  
God has no issue with foreigners,  
if they convert to worshipping him.  
Ruth is welcomed into the people of God.  
In Ezra 6, foreigners who convert are welcomed to share the Passover.  
But God is not OK with foreigners  
who bring the worship of their gods amongst his people.  
And he's definitely not OK  
with his people marrying them.  
Why not?  
Well it's about the children.  
God wants the worship of his people not to be corrupted.  
And that pure worship has to carry on from one generation to the next.  
If the baton gets dropped in one generation,  
then the whole nation goes down the tube.  
Verse 15 spells it out.  
"What does the one God seek?  
Godly offspring."  
If you go and marry foreign women who worship their foreign gods,  
the children will grow up worshipping foreign gods.  
Or the children will grow up  
trying to worship the one true God and the foreign gods.  
God is not OK with that.  
He demands exclusive worship.  
We worship him and him alone.  
Anything else is to be unfaithful to our creator.

What does this passage have to tell us  
about divorce in our modern world?

The answer is, not as much as we might hope.  
It probably tells us as much  
about choosing our spouse carefully in the first place.  
God wants godly offspring.  
That is as true now as it was then.  
So we choose to marry a person  
with whom we can bring up godly offspring.  
When it comes to divorce,  
this passage tells us that God considers it unfaithfulness  
to divorce your spouse because you are on the hunt for someone better.  
But there are an awful lot of situations not covered by that.  
What if your spouse has been unfaithful?  
Are you expected to work for reconciliation of the relationship?  
Or are you free to leave them?  
If you do leave them,  
are you free to remarry?  
If they leave you,  
are you free to remarry?  
What if your spouse has not been unfaithful but is violent?  
What if your spouse is not violent but you are just fighting all time?  
Those are tricky questions  
and our passage is about a situation  
where men were treating their marriage vows as of little consequence  
and engaging a course of action  
that was going to be spiritually disastrous for the nation.  
This passage doesn't bear on these questions.

Thankfully we have another passage  
that can help us out.  
I'm not going to get into the remarriage questions.  
It would take a whole sermon to deal with that.  
But Mt 19 helps us  
because Jesus gives some direct teaching on the subject of divorce.  
Notice the context again.  
This is not Jesus dealing with the difficult questions  
we often face today.  
Like 450 years earlier in the time of Malachi,

Jesus lived in a culture where only men could initiate divorce.  
And so the people who approached him to ask him about it were men.  
And the reason they approached him,  
was because they were looking for an easy way  
to get out of being faithful to their wives.  
They wanted easy access to divorce.  
There it is in verse 3.

"Some Pharisees came to him to test him.  
They asked,  
"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?""  
No doubt about it.  
What was lying behind their question was not,  
"Isn't it terrible that some blokes in our community  
are taking their marriage vows lightly?  
Jesus please tell us something to make them stop."  
No. They were looking for a justification  
for breaking the covenant of marriage with their wives.

So Jesus directs them back to marriage at the creation.  
The story of Adam and Eve that we looked at three weeks ago.  
And basically he tells them,  
"God has made them one flesh.  
God has joined them together.  
So if God joins them together,  
people shouldn't pull them apart."  
Marriage is something God designed.  
God put it there.  
So if you go about pulling it apart,  
you are fighting against God.

But does that apply to any and every circumstance?  
If God has joined them together,  
then you must not separate them in any and every circumstance?  
Are there no circumstances where it's OK to get divorced?  
Well no.  
Jesus is giving a general principal.  
The principal is that marriage should be honoured because God made it.

But when they push back at him,  
Jesus does tell them one circumstance where it's OK to get a divorce.  
It's there in verse 9.

"I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife,  
except for sexual immorality,  
and marries another woman commits adultery."

So in the case of sexual immorality,  
Jesus gives permission to get a divorce.

And I think in our culture,  
where women as well as men can initiate a divorce,  
then it goes the other way too.

If a husband is sexually immoral,  
then his wife can divorce him and remarry.  
Notice that it is permission not a command.

If the person who has been sinned against  
chooses to work through the issue with their spouse,  
and their spouse is ready to repent,  
then they are taking a difficult road.

They will probably have difficulty ever trusting their spouse fully again.  
But if they choose to show grace and forgiveness,  
then no one will tell them they are doing the wrong thing.

But if they choose to leave,  
no one will tell them they are doing the wrong thing either.  
They are the one who has been violated,  
it's their choice how to proceed.

And we the church will try to support them  
in whatever choice they make.

When I've been called on to talk with someone making that choice,  
what I've done is to outline the advantages and disadvantages for them.

If you work through it,  
then you get to keep the shared history,  
you get to be together for your children.

If you leave,  
you get to make a new start.

You take away the risk that your trust is going to be violated again.

Is sexual immorality the only valid reason for a divorce?

No it's not.

In 1 Cor 7,

Paul tells people who have become Christians,  
that if their spouse chooses to leave them  
because they don't want to be married to a Christian,  
then let them go.

You aren't bound to the marriage in that situation.

But if they want to stay married,

then treat that marriage as two people that God has joined together.

Don't separate them.

Who knows?

The non Christian partner may be won over to the Lord Jesus  
by their spouse.

OK so we have two valid reasons for divorce in the Bible.

Is that it?

Is there no other time that it's OK for a Christian to get divorced?

Some Christian teachers would say,

"Yes. That's it.

Those are the only allowable exceptions.

they are the only ones spelled out in the Bible."

I have to say, I'm not convinced by that.

Both Jesus and Paul were addressing specific situations.

They weren't trying to spell out a general policy about divorce  
to cover every possible circumstance.

Jesus had been approached by a group of men

who were looking for a loophole

to let them get an easy divorce.

So Jesus underlines for them,

the importance of the promises,

the importance of God joining the two together.

But what if Jesus had been approached by a group of women

who were victims of domestic violence,

would his answer have been different?

Yes I'm sure it would have been.

But what would he have said?

Well to tell you that,



I'd need to be the Son of God.

You may well have noticed that I am not the Son of God.

But domestic violence is such an issue  
and a growing issue in our community,  
I feel like I need to have something to say.

So this is what I would say to a woman experiencing domestic violence.  
Honour your marriage.

It's not to be abandoned lightly.

It would be good to make a significant effort to pray for your husband.

Pray for him and for your relationship.

Pray that God would enable you to love him despite what he's done.

But what your husband is doing is not right and he needs to repent.

It would be good for some men from the church  
to talk with him about that.

If you feel unsafe,

you might need to separate for a period of time,

to give your husband an opportunity to realise that the issue is serious  
and that he needs to repent.

If you feel really unsafe, like your life might be in danger.

Then there are agencies that can help you disappear  
so that your husband can't find you.

Let me help you contact one.

In that situation, I would say,

note this is Tim not the Bible,

that kind of violence is unfaithfulness

just as much as sexual immorality is unfaithfulness,

and I would say that divorce is permissible.

OK there's another issue we need to talk about  
while we are on the subject of divorce.

We've had easy divorce in Australia for pretty much my entire life.

The law was passed in 1975.

What that means is that we live in a community  
ravaged by the effects of divorce.

When I was a kid,

there was one or two kids in my class whose parents were divorced.

At the local primary school today,  
there are only a few kids in each class  
who are living with a married mum and dad  
who are their biological parents.  
Families and relationships are a mess in our community.  
And if we want to be genuinely reaching  
the members of our community with the gospel of Jesus,  
then we have to make people welcome in the church  
whose lives are deeply affected by the mess.  
This is not a club for people  
who've managed to live their whole lives on the straight and narrow.  
This is a rescue boat ready to take on board  
people whose lives are a mess.  
Take them on board,  
welcome them and fully accept them.  
So we will have people in the church who are divorced.  
Some maybe divorced more than once.  
Some may have got divorced  
due to situations where they were the person who was unfaithful.  
Some have experienced domestic violence.  
Some have committed domestic violence.  
Some might be living together and not married.  
Some might have caused someone else to get divorced.  
We can't be a church where certain categories of sinner are unwelcome.  
Jesus died for the sins of the world.  
That's all of the sins of the world.  
It's not up to us to say,  
"sorry your sin is such that you are not welcome around here."  
Whether we say that in words or by our actions.  
The one thing we ask of people,  
is to live from now on  
as a response to Jesus' death on the cross for them.  
You can't change what happened in the past.  
But from now on,  
your relationships need to be characterised by faithfulness  
because God has been faithful to you.  
There might be some repentance you need to do

because of what you've done in the past.  
That repentance will be more than just saying sorry to God  
in the confession time at church.  
It will be being honest and open  
to the people who have been hurt by your actions.  
Where possible you may try to make amends.  
But at the end of the day,  
we are all in the same boat.  
We all stand forgiven before the Lord Jesus  
only because of his kindness.  
And our job as Christians  
is to live today and every day in the light of that.  
There's one great miracle about divorce.  
It's that God doesn't divorce us.  
He remains faithful to us,  
even when we are deeply unfaithful to him.  
It would be easy to look at the church and shake your head.  
If I were God,  
I'd give up on that mob.  
They just keep failing again and again.  
But he doesn't give up on us.  
Let's take the example of the faithfulness that has been shown to us,  
and try to live it out in our relationships.  
Today and every day.