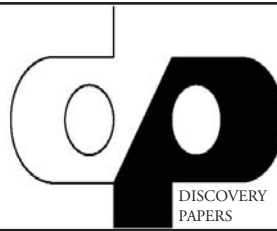


# THE WAY OF THE LORD IN MARRIAGE

**SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING  
JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK**



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In the July 13 cover story of *Time Magazine*, the writer, Caitlin Flanagan lamented the fragile state of marriage in America mostly because of its effect on society. She writes:

*In the past 40 years, the face of the American family has changed profoundly. As sociologist Andrew J. Cherlin observes in a landmark new book called The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today, what is significant about contemporary American families, compared with those of other nations, is their combination of "frequent marriage, frequent divorce" and the high number of "short-term co-habiting relationships." Taken together, these forces "create a great turbulence in American family life, a family flux, a coming and going of partners on a scale seen nowhere else. There are more partners in the personal lives of Americans than in the lives of people of any other Western country."*

*An increasingly fragile construct depending less and less on notions of sacrifice and obligation than on the ephemera of romance and happiness as defined by and for its adult principals, the intact, two-parent family remains our cultural ideal, but it exists under constant assault. It is buffeted by affairs and ennui, subject to the eternal American hope for greater happiness, for changing the hand you dealt yourself. ... Most notably, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in May that births to unmarried women have reached an astonishing 39.7 percent.*

*How much does this matter? More than words can say. There is no other single force causing as much measurable hardship and human misery in this country as the collapse of marriage. It hurts children, it reduces mothers' financial security, and it has landed with particular devastation on those who can bear it least: the nation's underclass. ...*

*Think of it this way: the current generation of children, the one watching commitments between adults snap like dry twigs and observing parents who simply can't be bothered to marry each other and who hence drift in and out of their children's lives—that's the generation who will be taking care of us when we are old.<sup>1</sup>*

Jesus has something to say about marriage. If you're married, if you'd like to be married, if you're frightened of marriage, or if you're divorced, maybe Jesus can help.

Mark 10:1-12:

**<sup>1</sup>Getting up, He went from there to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan; crowds gathered around Him again, and, according to His custom, He once more began to teach them. <sup>2</sup>Some Pharisees came up to Jesus, testing Him, and began to question Him whether it was lawful for a man to divorce a wife. <sup>3</sup>And He answered and said to them, "What did Moses command you?" <sup>4</sup>They said, "Moses permitted a man TO WRITE A CERTIFICATE**

**OF DIVORCE AND SEND her AWAY." <sup>5</sup>But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. <sup>6</sup>But from the beginning of creation, God MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE. <sup>7</sup>FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER, <sup>8</sup>AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH; so they are no longer two, but one flesh. <sup>9</sup>What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate."**

**<sup>10</sup>In the house the disciples began questioning Him about this again. <sup>11</sup>And He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her; <sup>12</sup>and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery."<sup>2</sup>**

## Renewing marriage

As Jesus journeys south, from Galilee to Judea, he is joined by crowds of people, many of whom are probably pilgrims on the way to Jerusalem for the Passover. The location beyond the Jordan River links Jesus with John the Baptist. John, who baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, was later executed by Herod for speaking against his marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife. (Mark 1:9, 6:14-30).

Some Pharisees, part of a religious-political pressure group that opposed Jesus because of his inclusive vision of the kingdom of God, hope to trip him up with a question about divorce, a political hot potato. Herod, for example, executed John for challenging him about his marital practices. Most Jews believed that divorce was permissible under the Mosaic Law; the debate concerned the legal grounds for divorce. But the Pharisees, as Mark reports it, don't ask Jesus a question concerning the grounds for divorce but whether it was allowable at all. The Pharisees, perhaps because of Jesus' connection with John, must have believed that his view on divorce was less accommodating than that of the populace. If Jesus takes a stand against divorce, the Pharisees can make the case that he opposes the law. The Pharisees could only hope that Jesus would take a position similar to that of John and meet with a similar fate at the hands of Herod.

Jesus responds to the question with a question of his own: "What did Moses command you?" The Pharisees, alluding to Deuteronomy 24:1-4, respond that Moses, in God's law, allowed for divorce. The Pharisees believe that it's lawful for a man to divorce his wife. How about Jesus? Both his life and his mission may hinge on the answer.

Jesus says that Moses allowed for divorce because of Israel's "hardness of heart." God created humans to worship him, but they rebelled against him, falling victim to Satan, sin, and death. God then called Israel as his prototypical nation. But the Israelites, like the first humans, hardened their hearts against God. The case law

concerning divorce in Deuteronomy, and other laws like it, was a concession to the obstinacy of Israel. With such laws, Moses in a sense was trouble-shooting so that Israel could continue as God's people until the day when he would renew their hearts (Deuteronomy 30:6, Jeremiah 31:33, Ezekiel 36:26-27). From Jesus' perspective, the law invoked by the Pharisees was part of a necessary but temporary phase in the story of Israel.

When Jesus asked the Pharisees what Moses commanded them, they invoked Deuteronomy. Jesus answers his own question by invoking Genesis, also believed to be authored by Moses. In the days before sin entered the world, in the days before God created Israel, God "made them male and female." In those days, there was no hardness of heart. What did Moses command? He commanded that a man leave his parents so that he and a woman might become "one flesh" in marriage. The image of God is most fully reflected in both male and female (Genesis 1:27). Therefore, a marriage between a man and a woman uniquely reflects the image of God into the world.

Based on the creation account in Genesis 1-2, Jesus concludes, "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." Jesus affirms what is only hinted at in the Genesis account: yes, a man joins himself to a woman in marriage, but God himself does the joining. If God fuses together a man and a woman in marriage, then it is not humanity's prerogative to separate the union.

Did Jesus answer the Pharisees' question about divorce? Not exactly. Earlier, when opposition to his vision of the kingdom of God first surfaced, Jesus began speaking in parables, in part to conceal both his identity and the nature of his mission from the likes of the Pharisees, who wanted to destroy him (Mark 3:6, 4:10-12). Since then, he's kept the Pharisees off balance, lest they get a fix on him and mount an effective campaign against him. The time is coming for Jesus to be straightforward with his enemies, to give them all they want and more (Mark 14:53-65). Until then, they can do little more than scratch their heads in puzzlement.

Jesus offered no interpretation concerning divorce from Deuteronomy 24. Instead, he offered an interpretation concerning marriage from Genesis 1-2. Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife? Of course it's lawful. Jesus, in a roundabout way, conceded that it's lawful. The law allowed for divorce. However, by invoking Genesis 1-2 and by attributing divorce to hardness of heart, Jesus in his day is looking to both the past and the future.

In the past, in Eden, there was no need for divorce laws, because men and women had not yet hardened their hearts against God. Outside Eden, in the wilderness of Sinai, hardness of heart threatened to destroy Israel. Therefore, God, in making his covenant with his people, gave them divorce laws. However, he also said he would make a new covenant with them to soften their hearts. The expected new covenant was bound together with the expected new creation. If we therefore hear both creation and heart language on the lips of Jesus, we might conclude that he believes the new covenant to be imminent. In fact, right from the start, Jesus said that the advent of the kingdom of God, which included the new covenant, was at hand (Mark 1:15). Not surprisingly, then, in the future, we will hear Jesus tell his disciples, in an upper room in Jerusalem,

"This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many" (Mark 14:24). In the new covenant, the Holy Spirit writes the law of God on the hearts of his people, making a deeper obedience possible, in anticipation of his renewal of creation (Romans 8:18-25, 2 Corinthians 3:3, Hebrews 8:10).

Jesus is not speaking against the law; therefore, the Pharisees can't trap him. Instead, he is saying—albeit obliquely, lest the Pharisees connect the dots and recognize his implicit messianic claim—that the reason for divorce laws (hardness of heart) is fading away. In the new covenant, God not only restores his people, he also restores his intention for them in marriage. He saves people; he also saves marriage. God made them male and female "from the beginning" that they might become one flesh in marriage. In the person of Jesus, a new beginning is in the offing, complete with life-enhancing marriage that reflects the image of God into the world. In the new covenant, as in the beginning, God fuses together a man and woman in marriage, and it is not humanity's prerogative to separate the union.

## Restoring the dignity of marriage

When Jesus began teaching in parables, he spoke cryptically in public to throw off his enemies but openly in private to instruct his disciples (Mark 4:33-34). Similarly, after he publicly responded to the Pharisees' question, he answered his disciples' questions in private (Mark 7:1-23). Once again, the disciples question Jesus privately about his puzzling public remarks, and, once again, Jesus is more forthcoming with them. Unlike the Pharisees, the disciples aren't trying to trap Jesus, so he can be more open with them.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 not only allowed for divorce, it also allowed for remarriage. Now, Jesus upstages the law and even equates the combination of divorce and remarriage with a violation of one of the Ten Commandments: "You shall not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14). Jesus probably links divorce with remarriage because divorce, as in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, all but implied remarriage. At this point, Jesus can't be open with such remarks. If he were, the Pharisees could accuse him of opposing the law and precipitate his premature demise. Furthermore, Herod and Herodius were involved with divorce and remarriage and would likely see to it that Jesus meet with the same fate as the last prophet who spoke against their ways.<sup>3</sup>

Under the Mosaic Law, divorce and remarriage, though regrettable, are allowable. From Jesus' perspective, the combination of divorce and remarriage constitutes adultery. Divorce and remarriage are more serious matters for Jesus than for Moses. Who's right: Moses or Jesus? Well, both. Moses was right for his age, just as Jesus is right for his age. The new covenant, mediated by Jesus, supersedes the old covenant, mediated by Moses. In equating divorce and remarriage with adultery, Jesus is restoring the dignity of marriage. If God is renewing both his people and their marriages, then divorce, particularly divorce with a view to remarriage, is quite clearly a more serious matter in the new covenant. God says to his people in the new covenant, "I'm doing something new." Those who separate what God has joined are saying to him, "No you're not." To kill a marriage is to deny the efficacy of the Holy Spirit to work

at the deepest levels of the human heart.

Even in the old covenant, marriage represented God's love for his people. To worship other gods was to commit adultery. The divine husband watched his people spurn his love time and time again in favor of other gods. Finally, because of their recalcitrant idolatry, he sent them into exile, a sort of divorce, but with a view toward restoring them by renewing his covenant with them. The full extent of his love, therefore, remained unknown until he gave his Son, who through his shed blood enacted the new covenant. Now, collectively, God's people are the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:25-32, Revelation 19:7-9). The new covenant therefore enhances the significance of marriage. Marriage is now a holy stage in which God's people dramatize the story of his love for them in his Son. To separate what God has joined together is to deny a couple the holy privilege and responsibility of together representing God's love to the world, the angels, and the demons. No wonder Jesus says divorce and remarriage is tantamount to adultery.

When I was on sabbatical two years ago, my family rented a house next door to a house that was up for sale. The real estate agent who was trying to sell the house was coming and going constantly. Turns out she was watching us. She told us how wonderful it was to see such a loving family, a rare sight in her world. That gave us the opportunity to tell her about Jesus. Next thing I knew she was perusing the web page of our church on her laptop. Marriage is an opportunity for a couple to reflect God's love into the world.

Jesus' teaching on marriage in Mark 10:1-12 is embedded in "the way" section of the gospel. Jesus, in journeying from Galilee to Jerusalem, is teaching his disciples "the way of the Lord." In short, the way of the Lord is the way of self-giving love, which is the way of servanthood (Mark 8:31-38, 9:35, 10:42-45). When husband and wife sacrifice for the sake of each other, as empowered by the Holy Spirit in the new covenant, they are preserving and enhancing their marriage.

## Other New Testament voices

In Mark, Jesus articulates no grounds for divorce. In Matthew, he lessens the significance of divorce and remarriage if the divorce is for the cause of "immorality." However, the word "immorality" is open to different interpretations. Furthermore, Jesus in Matthew does not specifically allow for divorce and remarriage; he simply says that the combination of immorality-caused divorce and remarriage does not constitute adultery (Matthew 19:9). At any rate, Jesus' point, even in Matthew, is not to say when divorce is allowable but to demonstrate the significance of marriage in the new covenant. It is so sacred—and so pregnant with possibility with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit—that divorce and remarriage is tantamount to adultery.

Outside the gospels, the Apostle Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 7 also come into play when divorce is discussed. However, Paul's singular focus is on marriage between believers and unbelievers, and he does not address the issue of remarriage. Therefore, scholar Gordon Fee concludes, in reference to 1 Corinthians 7:10-16: "This issue [divorce and remarriage] is so complex, and the

individual cases so diverse, that this text with its singular focus on maintaining mixed marriages (but allowing them to dissolve if the pagan initiates the action) does not offer much help."<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, we can derive from both 1 Corinthians 7 and Ephesians 5 that Paul's views concerning marriage, divorce, and remarriage are consistent with those of Jesus.

If Jesus equates divorce and remarriage with adultery, we should also note how he treated those who were touched by divorce, remarriage, and adultery. In this light, his interactions with the woman at the well and with the woman caught in adultery instruct us. First, by the time she met Jesus, the woman at the well had already had five husbands and was at that time involved with a man who wasn't her husband. Jesus addressed the sin and pain in her life by offering her living water, the Holy Spirit of the new covenant, and she brought the whole city out to meet him (John 4:1-30, 7:37-39). Second, Jesus observed that the accusers of the woman caught in adultery had faded away and told her, "Neither do I condemn you; go your way; from now on sin no more" (John 8:1-11). In one case involving divorce and remarriage and in another case involving adultery, Jesus offered not condemnation but hope.

## How do I love?

It is important to note that Jesus, in Mark 10:1-12, is talking about marriage, not divorce. He's speaking in favor of marriage, not against divorce. Insofar as he speaks against divorce, he speaks to renew marriage. He's not talking about what's permitted because of sin; he's talking about what's possible because of the Holy Spirit. He's not talking about what's lawful; he's talking about what's profitable. When we orient ourselves toward what's permitted and what's lawful, we usually do so not for the sake of honoring God but in order to determine what we can get away with. We preoccupy ourselves with determining where the line is not for the sake of honoring God but in order to move as close to it as possible. In the middle of an unsatisfying marriage, instead of asking what's permitted or what's lawful, ask what's possible and what's profitable.

So, is divorce sin? Of course it's sin. Coupled with remarriage, it's tantamount to adultery. But if you hate the spouse you want to divorce, that's tantamount to murder, according to the Scriptures (Matthew 5:21-22, 1 John 3:15). Which is worse: adultery or murder? Why ask whether divorce is sin in the middle of a marriage that is drowning in it?

The question, in the middle of such a marriage—or any marriage, for that matter—is not, "How do I not sin?" but, "How do I love?" If you're in the middle of a turbulent marriage, you're probably sinning in spades. Yes, how do you love? That's the question of the way of the Lord, the way of the cross, the way of self-giving love. After all, Jesus loved those who crucified him. He loved us, his bride, who crucified him. How do you, say, love an adulterous spouse who abuses you both emotionally and physically? The answer to that question, in the context of careful consideration of the Scriptures and wise counsel from the people of God, may—or may not—lead you in the end, probably after many dark nights, to divorce. If you



camp on the question, “How can I get out of this?” you’ll tangle yourself up in complicated legal codes in search of an escape clause. If, on the other hand, you camp on the question, “How do I love?” you’re in the company of the Holy Spirit. With the help of the Spirit, you’ll transcend what’s lawful and do what’s possible and what’s profitable. You will, from the perspective of the way of the Lord, serve your spouse.

If you’re married, don’t go it alone. Get connected to some group within the church. The Couples Class, which meets at 10 a.m. Sunday mornings in Fellowship Hall, is a good place to start. As pastors and elders at this church, we are committed to listening to the individual stories of couples who need help. Our counsel varies from couple to couple, because each story is unique. If you feel stuck in your marriage, and especially if you’re contemplating separation or divorce, we urge you to meet with one of our pastors or elders.

## The transcendent perspective

A marriage relationship transcends the two people who are involved in it. It uniquely reflects God’s image into the world, it anticipates the renewal of creation, and it builds a holy stage in which God’s people dramatize the story of his love for them in his Son. To understand the transcendent nature of marriage is to be in awe. If you realize that marriage is awesome, so awesome that you can’t begin to explain it, you begin to see the issues you encounter in it, be they pleasant, mundane, or tortuous, in a different light. You’re not just enjoying a romantic dinner together. You’re not just doing the laundry. You’re not just beating each other to an emotional pulp. You are connecting with something much larger than yourselves—something mysterious, something holy, something awesome. The transcendent perspective puts the bubbles in the champagne of marriage. Occasionally, when doing mundane tasks in the context of serving my wife, I spice them up by consciously recognizing that more is going on here than I can begin to know.

The sexual relationship illustrates the transcendent perspective. Physiologists can explain what happens in a sexual intercourse. What happens emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually is the prerogative of poets, but even the best of them falls short. Words can’t explain sex. The poetry of the Proverbs doesn’t even try to explain the male-female relationship; it just marvels (Proverbs 30:18-19). Let us weep for how our world has removed sex, with all its potency, from the sacred exclusivity of marriage, God’s transcendent stage.

When we recognize the transcendence of marriage, we can understand why Jesus treats marriage so seriously. His words challenge us, both as partners in a marriage or as those with influence over a marriage, to think once, twice—yea, verily, a thousand times—before pursuing a course of action that trivializes, injures, or kills a marriage.

## The new covenant

In the new covenant, God has given our marriages a great gift: the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit nurtures relationship with God, working at the deepest level of the

human heart, crying out for, and prompting us to cry out for, intimacy with God (Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:6). If you believe in Jesus, then the Holy Spirit resides in you. If you listen carefully to your heart, you will hear its cry for intimacy—its cry to know and be known, to love and be loved. What’s your heart doing? It’s crying for a relationship that can’t be satisfied in the human realm, because no human fully knows and loves you, flaws and all, or fully accepts your brave but feeble attempts to know and love. The Spirit helps us hear our heart’s cry for intimacy and he helps satisfy that cry in our relationship with God, albeit always in a partial way this side of the new creation.

In the context of our relationship with God, the Spirit softens our hearts toward God and others, especially, if we’re married, toward our spouses. In order to soften our hearts, the Spirit, in concert with the Spirit-inspired Scriptures and the Spirit-indwelt people of God, first diagnoses hardness of heart: hardness toward God, hardness toward others, hardness toward a spouse. The Spirit diagnoses hardness of heart in order to soften a heart. He softens a heart not least by illuminating God’s love for us in Christ, hard hearts and all. If you are married, let the Spirit have his way with you. Let him speak to you through the Scriptures, through his people, and through the events of your life to diagnose hardness of heart, to soften your heart toward God and toward your spouse, and to lead you in the road less traveled by: the way of self-giving love, which entails being a servant. What do you think would happen in a marriage if each of the partners, by the power of the Holy Spirit, made serving his or her spouse the highest priority in the marriage? Others might ask, “What are those people drinking?”

Marriage, in the words of Steve Zeisler, one of our pastors, is “a school for hard hearts.” Until I got married, I thought I was a pretty good guy. After I got married, I downgraded my estimation of myself. Turns out I was a lot more selfish than I had thought. Then I had kids and ... well, that’s a different sermon. But, the Spirit is working with me—deep within me, in ways I can’t begin to understand.

## Hope, not condemnation

Although God has sent his Holy Spirit to renew his people and to renew their marriages, in anticipation of the renewal of all things, we still live in a sin-ravished world. One of the fallouts is marriage. Divorce is one of the consequences, sometimes despite the best efforts of one of the partners to yield to the Holy Spirit. Many divorced folks in the church struggle mightily with thoughts about how God perceives them and how others perceive them. Inspired by the way Jesus treated both the woman caught in adultery and the woman at the well, we offer hope, not condemnation. We might add, however, that the new covenant doesn’t end with the end of a marriage. The Holy Spirit still wants to soften one’s heart toward an ex-spouse, even an adulterous or abusive one.

## On being single

For single folks who are considering marriage, the clear implication of Mark 10:1-12 is that they should marry someone who is indwelt by, and is yielding to, the Holy Spirit. Responsiveness to the Holy Spirit is not the only

criterion, of course, but it is the primary one. (For other criteria, see my message “Boy Meets Girl”: [www.pbc.org/files/messages/9994/4870.html](http://www.pbc.org/files/messages/9994/4870.html).) If the Holy Spirit is not present in a potential spouse, the person is not yet a potential spouse. It’s in your best interest to marry someone who confronts his or her hard-heartedness with the power of the Holy Spirit. How can you tell whether a person is responsive to the Holy Spirit? First, watch for how he/she talks about Jesus. Second, watch for how he/she treats you and others. Third, watch if he/she confronts his/her hard-heartedness.

Some single folks in the church fear marriage, seeing too few examples of a healthy, lasting marriage and knowing that the Scriptures treat marriage as a till-death-do-you-part relationship. To confront such fears, consider as incentives first the God-ordained transcendence of marriage and second the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit to enliven marriage. When two followers of the Lord Jesus Christ enter a marriage relationship, they enter a holy sphere along with the Holy Spirit.

For single folks whose desires for marriage have been thwarted, my basic advice, coming from one who didn’t get married until he was 42 years old, is to walk through that furnace of desire with the Lord. (For more reflections on singleness, see my message “What I Learned from Being Single All These Years”: [www.pbc.org/files/messages/12329/BeingSingle.pdf](http://www.pbc.org/files/messages/12329/BeingSingle.pdf).)

## What we teach

The transcendent perspective tells us that marriage uniquely reflects God’s image into the world, anticipates the renewal of creation, and builds a holy stage in which God’s people dramatize the story of his love for them in his Son. The new covenant tells us that the Holy Spirit is working at the deepest levels of our beings to soften our hearts toward God and toward our spouses. The transcendent perspective, which inspires us, and the new covenant, which empowers us, help us walk in the way of the Lord, the way of the cross, the way of self-giving love, the way of serving our spouses.

In the *Time Magazine* article, Caitlin Flanagan observes that, while the divorce culture has become a fact of life over the past twenty-five years, the middle class has turned weddings into “overwrought exercises in consumer spending, as if by just plunking down enough cash for the flower girls’ dresses and tissue-lined envelopes for the RSVP cards, we can somehow improve our chance of going the distance.” In our culture, marriage means less, but we spend more on our weddings. Go figure.

Flanagan concludes with these ominous words about the future of our country: “What we teach about the true meaning of marriage will determine a great deal about our fate.”<sup>5</sup>

The way of the Lord: let’s teach that.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Caitlin Flanagan, “Unfaithfully Yours,” *Time Magazine* (July 13, 2009), 45-49.
- <sup>2</sup> Literary structure:
  - A Crowds gathered around him again; Pharisees questioned Jesus about divorce (1-2)
    - B Jesus answered, “What God has joined together, let no man separate.” (3-9)
  - A’ Disciples questioned Jesus about divorce again (10)
    - B’ Jesus answered, “Whoever/If she divorces... commits adultery.” (11-12)
- <sup>3</sup> Implicit in Jesus’ remarks to his disciples is that neither the Pharisees, with their interpretation of the law, nor Herod, with his infidelities, is fit for leadership in the kingdom of God. It is important that his disciples understand this, because any way but the way of Jesus will be appealing when he meets his destiny in Jerusalem. Don’t follow the Pharisees. Don’t follow Herod. Follow me, Jesus says, even if it means denying yourself, taking up your cross, and watching all your dreams of the kingdom of God crash around you.,
- <sup>4</sup> Gordon Fee. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 306
- <sup>5</sup> Flanagan, 45-49.