



# LIBERTY TO LEAVE OR FREED TO LOVE

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Mark 10:1-12

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We celebrate our country's 223rd birthday on this Fourth of July day. In 1776, our nation was born in a celebration of freedom from tyranny and a willingness to risk life to preserve that freedom for future generations. More than two centuries later, we are still willing to put our sons' lives in harm's way to preserve these same freedoms even in other nations. Freedom is a precious commodity. It is hard won and must be tenaciously preserved.

So far so good. But if we take a closer look into the soul of our nation on our national holiday, we sense great sadness when we recognize how far we have drifted in the last hundred years. While our forefathers wisely recognized that a nation's citizens could not enjoy freedom without exercising responsibility, today we have become a people who live for our personal freedoms but show little concern for our responsibilities toward God, family, or community. The result is that we live under the tyranny of sin.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the home. In 1910, the national divorce rate was one divorce for every ten marriages. Today it is one in two. Here in Silicon Valley, there are twice as many divorces as marriages. Marriage as an institution is held in such low regard that cohabitation has replaced courtship. Multi-billion dollar industries promote infidelity, fornication and adultery, and their financial success grows exponentially and unchallenged. And the cost? One in four females and one in five males are sexually abused as children. We have become a nation that exercises freedom without restraint. The private lives of many look more like Sodom and Gomorrah than "America the Beautiful."

Speaking of Israel many centuries ago, the prophet Jeremiah said,

***"Were they ashamed because of the abomination they have done?"***

***They were not even ashamed at all;***

***They did not even know how to blush."*** (Jer 6:15)

In America today, we don't blush either. We parade our shame on talk show television, and America applauds. It's a miracle that our nation holds together at all.

But, lest we despair, let us remember that it was in times like these that the kingdom of God was born. Israel's reigning king divorced one wife for an incestuous relationship, and when challenged by a prophet, he received that prophet's head on a platter. The religious es-

tablishment had made divorce an easy out for husbands, leaving many wives destitute, so that "the whole Greek way of life made companionship between man and wife next to impossible" (Barclay). An ancient proverb put it this way:

*We have harlots for our pleasure,  
concubines for daily physical use,  
wives to bring up legitimate children  
and to be faithful stewards in household matters.*

(4th century B.C. quote by Demosthenes)

It was in that sea of moral chaos that Jesus instructed his disciples in a different way—the way to be fully human. It is the way of the kingdom, the way of the cross. We pick up our story in the gospel of Mark at a critical juncture, when Jesus is about to take his first steps towards his destiny in Jerusalem.

## I. Marriage and the Kingdom (10:1-12)

### A. A Question about Divorce (10:1-2)

**And rising up, He went from there to the region of Judea, and beyond the Jordan; and crowds gathered around Him again, and, according to His custom, He once more began to teach them.** (Mark 10:1, NASB)

Jesus now leaves Peter's home in Capernaum and begins his final pilgrimage to Judea by way of the Transjordan, the very route which pilgrims took to make their way to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. Mention of Judea brings our Lord's predictions of his passion into view and raises extreme interest on the events to follow. Even out on the pilgrim's highway, Jesus attracts huge crowds. As was his custom, he takes time to give them what they needed most: teaching—wondrous, captivating teaching on the kingdom of God. This is a reminder to us of what we need most on our pilgrimage to the New Jerusalem, and that is a constant, steady diet of the word of God. Nothing else will quench the thirst of our parched souls.

In the midst of this setting now a number of Pharisees question Jesus on "a point of Torah where he was thought to be suspect, and where some political pressure could be applied or threatened" (Tom Wright). These men raise a topic of heated controversy among the Jews, centered around a man's right to divorce his wife. Verse 2:

**And some Pharisees came up to Him, testing Him, and began to question Him whether it was lawful for a man to divorce a wife.**

“In view of Herod’s incestuous marriage to his sister-in-law Herodias, the question had a sharp political edge.”<sup>1</sup> After all, the last person to challenge Herod’s divorce was beheaded. As Edersheim suggests, the purpose of the test at this particular juncture was so that “by getting Christ to commit Himself against divorce in Perea—the territory of Herod—they might enlist against him, as formerly against the Baptist, the implacable hatred of Herodias.”<sup>2</sup> No matter what answer Jesus gave it was inevitable that it would create enemies, for the issue of divorce was hotly contested even among the Jews. All permitted divorce; the only question that remained was, on what grounds was divorce justified? Matthew’s account adds the phrase, “for any cause at all,” thereby identifying the point of contention in the rabbinical debate.

The controversy sprang from different interpretations of Deut 24:1, which states:

**“When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some *indecent* in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house, and she leaves...”**

This law provided legal protection for a wife’s release from the authority of her husband once she was divorced. With a legal document in her hand her former husband could not reclaim her, thus she was free to marry another. The point at issue for the rabbis concerned what constituted an “unseemly thing.” According to Emil Shürer,

The more rigorous house of Shammai expounded the vague phrase literally as a ‘thing of nakedness’, i.e., some form of immorality. But the general understanding was that any kind of marriage breakdown qualified a husband to divorce his wife. [There was, and still is, no question in Jewish law of a woman divorcing her husband.] The school of Hillel even went so far as to define [the indecency] as a spoiled dinner. And Rabbi Akiba taught that a man was justified in putting away his wife if he had found another, prettier woman. In fact, divorce was relatively easy in those days and the Pharisees and rabbis intended to keep it so.<sup>3</sup>

The question is, Where would Jesus stand in the controversy? Would he ally himself with Akiba, Hillel, or Shammai? Or would he risk death and take his stand with John the Baptist, placing himself under the wrath of Herod?

### **B. The Answer Focused on Creation (10:3-9)**

**And He answered and said to them, “What did Moses command you?” And they said, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.” (10:3-4)**

Posing the question, “What did Moses command you?” Jesus drives the Pharisees right back to Moses’ stricture. In response, they promptly quote the text in

question from Deuteronomy, but give no explanation of the term “indecent.” Perhaps they are hoping Jesus will amplify it and thus commit himself.

And commit himself he does, but on entirely different grounds. Verse 5:

**But Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and the two shall become one flesh; consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.” (10:5-9)**

Jesus changes the focus of the question from “what?” to “why?”—a question the rabbis never thought to ask. Why did Moses give such a commandment? Jesus asks. The answer is that Moses permitted divorce because of the hardness of their hearts. Better to live in peace in isolation than together in a war zone. But clearly, this was not God’s original intention, as is evident in what Moses commanded concerning marriage in the creation account. Pressing the boundaries of divorce caused the rabbis to lose sight of the greater picture and purpose of marriage. As Cranfield carefully delineates:

A distinction has to be made between that which sets forth the absolute will of God, and those provisions which take account of men’s actual sinfulness and are designed to limit and control its consequences. [In contrast to the ten commandments,] Deut 24:1 is a divine provision to deal with situations brought about by men’s [hardness of heart] and to protect from its worst effects those who would suffer as a result of it ...The error of the Rabbis’ interpretation lay in their losing sight of this distinction and so imagining that Deut 24:1 meant that God allowed divorce, in the sense that it had his approval...When our sinfulness traps us in a position in which the choices still open to us are evil, we are to choose that which is least evil, asking for God’s forgiveness and comforted by it, but not pretending that the evil is good.<sup>4</sup>

As Jesus is about to inaugurate the kingdom of God on earth he insists that he will not focus on what is permitted due to sin, but on what God is creating in the midst of life. Viewed in that light, marriage is the process of two becoming one: a man leaving his father and mother and cleaving to his wife. Marriage is the only human relationship that constitutes “one flesh.” Governed by these irrevocable vows, marriage, for better or worse, is for all time, “until death do us part.” Most important of all, having yoked two into one in marriage, God is at work, sanctifying and conforming them to his image. “Therefore what God has joined let not man separate.”

What a turnaround! The Pharisees asked Jesus for his view of divorce and he gives them his view of marriage. Marriage, says Jesus, is to be highly esteemed, exalted, and tenaciously guarded. If divorce occurs as the terri-

ble choice of a lesser evil, let us weep until we have no more tears, because of the hardness of heart and the devastation that divorce leaves in its wake.

There have been four divorces in our immediate family, leaving many victims in their wake and decades of ramifications to follow: children who never recovered and found solace in drugs; three nervous breakdowns; immeasurable hurt in spouses and a painful relapse into alcoholism that led to a premature death at the age of 38. So Jesus reminds us, “What God has yoked together, let not man separate.”

Jesus’ refusal to bend the created order and even discuss what Moses permitted is a bit of a shock to the disciples. Later, they question him to make sure they heard him correctly.

### C. In the House with the Disciples (10:10-12)

**And in the house the disciples began questioning Him about this again. And He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her; and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery.”**

The disciples are astounded by what Jesus has just said. They know themselves and are aware of how difficult it is to live in close proximity with someone for any length of time. As I was getting off an airplane recently, I asked a man who was holding two dozen roses, “Are you getting married?” “Married?” he said. “Are you crazy?” That’s the way society thinks today, and why living together has practically replaced marriage. We know we are incapable of maintaining soft, tender and sensitive hearts. We say “being in love” is an infatuation that will soon die once the reality of day to day living sets in. This is why Hollywood is so preoccupied with sex that is void of commitment and pornography that offers sex without relationship. Deep down we know we are incapable of long-term, lasting relationships, so why not at least indulge ourselves in a little animalistic pleasure along our painful paths? Before I got married, I worked in a construction job in downtown Los Angeles. When my co-laborers heard I was getting married, practically everyone, to a man, took me aside privately to encourage me to reconsider. Some even told me to experiment with sex, with no restraint, and I would discover it wasn’t worth getting married for. I wasn’t sorry to disappoint them.

But Jesus reaffirms that the disciples heard him correctly. He refuses to yield an inch of ground lest he compromise the divine order. Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. You may divorce her, but you will never remove that mystery of divine oneness. She is still a spouse, and the act of remarriage constitutes adultery. The same holds true if a woman divorces a man and marries another. So while the Pharisees quibble over what constitutes “indecency” in a woman, Jesus condemns them as adulterers.

Pressed against the wall of ethical purity, Matthew records the disciples’ reaction. Their words are a revealing echo of our own hearts: “If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry” (Matt 19:10). They were saying, “If there is no way out, we don’t want in!”

## II. Ethics and Eschatology

But there is something deeper here than our Lord’s upholding holy standards which leave us all in a state of condemnation. By focusing on “creation,” and speaking of “hardness of heart,” Jesus is hinting that there is more involved in marriage than ethics and a dogged determination to maintain them. No, with the coming of the kingdom of God, Jesus is inaugurating a “new creation” that will remove that dreaded “hardness of heart.” Therefore the issue is much larger than the individual and his or her marriage vows. It has to do with eschatology.<sup>5</sup> Jesus is the culmination of the love story of God and his people.

The Old Testament describes God’s relationship with his people, using the metaphor of marriage and utilizing three different terms for love, which drives God’s heart. The first term, the Hebrew word *ahavah* (love), speaks of God’s affections which he placed on Israel for no reason, causing him to *choose* that nation out of all the nations of the earth, and leading to a life-long commitment sealed by a covenant (Deut 7:6-10). Once that covenant was in place, the term for love changed from *ahavah* to *hesed*,<sup>6</sup> which is best translated “loyal-love.” This word speaks of God’s ardent desire to cultivate loyalty, kindness and grace, all because he has taken an oath. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once exhorted a couple he was marrying, “From this day forth, it is not love which makes your commitment strong, it is commitment that makes your love strong.”

But tragically, though God remained loyal to his people, they were continually hardhearted and faithless. Israel became an adulteress, going after multitudes of lovers. After centuries of apostasy which brought warnings from the prophets, God was forced to write a *certificate of divorce* and send her into exile. But even then, with Israel in forced solitude and depraved servitude, God’s affections stirred. He could not let go of his *compassion* for her, so the prophets wrote of a new day when he would seek and find her. He would wash her with the purest of water and make her clean (Ezek 36:25; John 3:5), and there in the wilderness they would re-enact their wedding vows (Isa 54:4-10). But this time it would be all new, for he would remove her heart of stone and give her a heart of flesh. He would even place his very Spirit inside her (Ezek 36:26-27). With this covenant renewal their marriage would outlast history.

What a love story! In this account in Mark, Jesus knows that that day has dawned in himself—a time when hard hearts will be a thing of the past. The new covenant restores God’s original intentions in creation and elevates and magnifies them to new dimensions.

This is why Jesus dismisses the passage which the Pharisees quoted. Tom Wright explains that it was “part of a temporary phase in the purposes of YHWH. It was necessary because of the ambiguous situation, in which Israel was called to be the people of God, but was still a people with hard hearts.”<sup>7</sup> But now the last days have dawned, and with them a renewal of the covenant and a renewal of hearts. So Jesus’ refusal of Moses’ permission indicates that hard heartedness has been dealt with and henceforth the law will be written on the hearts of Yahweh’s people. As God’s elect we are now freed from sin that hardens, and are empowered to love like God loves.

### III. Marriage and the New Creation

All of this has significant implications for marriage. Paul writes that marriage is a holy stage where a couple acts out the love story of God and his people (Eph 5:22-33). Affections are stirred, and they culminate in an irrevocable commitment which drives the marriage for better or worse. When wrong creeps in and creates emotional damage, forgiveness and compassion redirect, cleanse and heal. After twenty-seven years of marriage, I have found over and over again how easy it is to give in to a hard heart, but, on the other hand, with the presence of the Holy Spirit in our marriage, how just one word from the other partner can unlock it and melt our hearts with just an ounce of compassion. Paul did permit divorce and remarriage if a Christian was married to an unbeliever and the unbeliever wanted to leave. Christians partners were allowed to separate but not to divorce to marry another (1 Cor 7:10-16). To those who have been divorced, we must remember the apostle’s inspired words, “if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Cor 5:17).

The apostles so caught on to this concept of renewed hearts they expected their earliest converts to show tenderness and affection even in the most evil circumstances. In Acts, Paul and Silas, wrongly accused, were thrown into prison for their faith. Their limbs were shackled, their backs bloodied raw. Instead of crying out for vengeance, however, they sang hymns of thanksgiving. And when God answered with an earthquake, and the walls of the prison tumbled down, instead of rejoicing over a jailer’s potential suicide, they allowed God’s compassion to overflow, and the bloody victims offered the gift of salvation to their captor. Later, safe under his roof, they loved him with an unrestrained love as he washed their wounds in his tears (Acts 16:19-34).

If that is the kind of love our new hearts produce—a love that breaks through the walls of our enemies—how much more ought it overflow with the wife of our youth! Let us repent of our hard-heartedness. Let us

stop grieving the Holy Spirit and allow the “new creation,” which is driven by affection, loyal-love and compassion, to continue unhindered.

In light of this text, I thought it would be appropriate to renew my own wedding vows to my wife Emily.

June 17, 1992

Emily,

*Since you are so precious in my sight,  
since you are honored and I love you,  
since my delight is in you and I rejoice in you,  
I will pour my life into you.*

*I will give you a title of honor as the equal heir of grace.*

*I will be patient and understanding, loving you as the weaker vessel in and out of season, basing my love not on circumstances or emotion, but out of obedience to Christ, laying hold of His resources to love you.*

*I promise to be a leader and to gird you in His truth with an everlasting salvation, satisfying your needs as a woman with good things, to present you holy and blameless before Him.*

*And even to your graying years will I love you, and bear you, and carry you, and deliver you, never to depart from you, that all flesh will know that I, Brian, am your husband, and you, Emily, are my wife. Amen.*

And so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity (Col 3:12-14).

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1. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 284

2. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 2:332.

3. Emil Shürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.–A.D. 135)* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979) 2:486.

4. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St Mark* (Cambridge University Press, 1959) 319-320.

5. Eschatology is the study of last things. The NT teaches that Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of God on earth, and thus the last days began at Pentecost (Acts 2:17) and continue until his glorious return (2 Tim 3:1; Heb 1:2; Jas 5:3; 1 Pet 1:20; 4:7ff; 2 Pet 3:3).

6. *Hesed* is the most important theological term in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is this wonderful attribute in God that drives salvation history to its faithful climax. Even when all of life falls apart, it is this quality that Jeremiah looks to in Lamentations as the key that will rebuild Israel’s future out of the ruins (Lam 3:22-23).

7. Wright, 285.