Union in Marriage
Text: Mark 10:1-12

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**Scriptures:** Genesis 2:18-25; Deuteronomy 24:1-4; Mark 10:1-12

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 145, 455, 127, 313, 513

**Series:** Mark’s Gospel (#31)

**Theme:**  Marriage is designed by God to be a holy purposeful lifelong union between one man and one woman

**Proposition:**  Thank the Lord for His gift of union in marriage

**Introduction**

Glue is used to create a union – a join between two or more things. Almost of all of us will have some experience of this adhesive substance that is used for sticking objects together, whether it be paper, wood, plastic or metal. Did you know that the history of glue goes back to the use of heated birch tree bark by ancient civilisations? 4,000 years ago the Egyptians used glues made from animal hides, hooves and connective tissues. Glues were popular in ancient Greece and Rome where they were used in building construction. Some glues provide a permanent bond which cannot readily be broken. Some glues unite surfaces together, but only for time until they degrade and the bond breaks.

In our text from Mark’s gospel today, Jesus is teaching about a bond – one which is to be permanent during the lives of those united in marriage. Just as marriage is a ‘hot topic’ in our 21st century western world where same-sex unions are now increasingly promoted as acceptable to society and can legally be called marriages, so marriage and divorce had likewise been “in the news” in Israel when Jesus walked this earth. Herod Antipas had recently divorced his first wife because he desired to have Herodias, who had been the wife of his brother Philip. John the Baptist lost his head literally because he said, “*It is not lawful for you to marry her*” (Matt 14:4).

Defending the principles of Biblical marriage can be a life-threatening occupation in a fallen world! As we focus on the teaching of Christ about union in marriage from Mark 10:1-12, we’ll do so under three headings:

1. A holy bond
2. A lasting bond
3. A purposeful bond
4. **A holy bond**

I have been blessed over the years in the Reformed Church of Christchurch in many ways, one of which is the question-and-answer time that we regularly have after our evening services. The congregation is at liberty to ask me any question about anything. In my standard introduction I say that I will either give an answer straight away or go away and think and come back with a response. I have never had any questions which I have thought were designed to trip me up. I have enjoyed the blessing of trust and peaceful relationships in the community of God’s people.

It was not so with everyone who approached Jesus in His public ministry. In the first nine chapters of his gospel, Mark has been recording increasing opposition to Jesus from the Jewish religious authorities (e.g. 2:24, 3:6, 22; 7:5). Here in Mark’s gospel Jesus is on his way south to Jerusalem, passing through the area of Judea to the west of the Jordan river called Perea. The Pharisees came to Jesus with a question carefully designed to test Him, they asked: *“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”* The Pharisees knew the Old Testament Scriptures, here in particular Deut 24:1-4. This Mosaic civil ‘case’ law describes the brokenness of a situation where a man has divorced his wife for “some indecency”, she has been sent out of his home and is then married to a different man. Then her second husband also divorces her and sends her out of his house! In this case the law says that the first husband is not allowed to take her back again to be his wife a second time.

These testy Pharisees would almost certainly have known that various groups of Jewish Rabbis understood the phrase “some indecency” in Deut 24:1 differently. *(For example the school of Hillel taught that any whim of a husband could be a legitimate ground for divorce… including even burning the dinner! Whereas others, like Shammai and his followers, thought that only gross indecency, such as adultery, was a sufficient ground to break the marriage bond).* So this was a loaded question by these religious leaders who had an interest in the dissolving of marriages and who wanted to publicly demonstrate that the teaching of Jesus opposed the law of Moses.

Theirs’s was a question about divorce which Jesus turned around in order to teach about marriage. He then took them back to the creation of the first man and woman and their union together as husband and wife; not as a myth, a legend or a parable or mere poetry but as historical fact. It is worth noting that Christ could readily have made reference to the theory of evolution. This was an idea that was already at least six centuries old when he spoke the words in Mark 10:6-9 in Judea. The Greek philosopher Anaximander of Miletus (611-546 B.C.) had taken up already existing evolutionary ideas and suggested that life first evolved from a pre-biotic soup with the aid of sunlight. Others like Aristotle, Democritus and Epicurius were also evolutionary thinkers more than 2000 years before Charles Darwin

Christ clearly confirms the reality and reliability of the Genesis creation narrative and thereby refutes the theory of the evolution of mankind. The human race began with one man and one woman. Both were created beings, distinct from every other living creature, because they were both made in the image of God. The man was formed from the dust of the ground and God breathed into him the breath of life. The woman was created differently; she was fashioned from a part of the man’s flesh. God then brought the woman to the man.

They had a different origin, a somewhat different anatomy, but they were similar, as the man could clearly see when he said: *“This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh”* v23. As Adam declared these words before God, the first marriage bond was formed. Remember that there was no other human being who could have been the wedding celebrant that day! Jesus then quoted from the following verse in Gen 2:24: “*For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.”* This is a definition of this a God-ordained bond - the joining together of two people into one flesh without loss of individual personality.

In marriage God sets apart a husband and his wife as being bonded together in a holy, honourable (Heb 13:4) union. Marriage is far from just being ‘flatmates with benefits’. In His words affirming marriage, Christ refers to what is often called “leaving and cleaving”. When a man and a woman come together in holy matrimony they form a new entity, a new unit, separate and distinct from their former families. Difficulties arise in wider family life when a husband, his wife, or their parent or parents do not understand the God-ordained change in relationships that should occur when a man and a woman marry, leave and cleave, and form their own family unit. The truth is that marriage is a holy union, a joining together under God’s ultimate authority of two people of different genders to become one new entity.

In contrast, the 2013 New Zealand Marriage (Definition of Marriage) Amendment Act states that: “marriage *means the union of two people, regardless of their sex, sexual orientation, or gender identity*”. This civil law is not only an attack on marriage but also an attack on the authority of Scripture and therefore an attack on God Himself. The promotion of homosexual lifestyles and unions between two people of the same sex is described by God as “impurity” (Rom 1:24), a degrading of the body with one another and an exchanging of the truth of God for a lie (Rom 1:25). How then are we to respond to unholy unions? As the ‘homophobic intolerant bigots’ that Christians are so often labelled today?

It is helpful to seek an answer to the question ‘what would Jesus do?’ We know that Jesus understood the Scripture in Genesis to reveal marriage to be a very good bond between one man and one woman, made before sin entered the world. Would Jesus hang around with, perhaps share meals with, Lesbians, Gays, Bisexual and Transgender people – men who are bonded to men or women who are bonded to women? It is reasonable to think Jesus would readily associate with such people. He did with lepers, tax collectors, prostitutes and other marginalised groups. In that sense he was ‘inclusive’. He loved them enough, and was interested in them enough to reach out in compassion, but He never endorsed their sin.

There’s a pattern for us here to imitate Christ (ref. 1 Cor 11:1). A pattern for us to fully affirm the holiness of marriage, but to minister to the brokenness, unholiness and confusion that is at least as widespread today as it was when Jesus walked this earth. Today, same sex unions do undermine God’s good institution of marriage which is a holy bond made by God. However, divorce is an older threat to marriage; one which the Lord Jesus Christ addresses in our text, which brings us to our second point.

1. **A lasting bond**

I have a number of old boots and shoes which have started to split and come apart because the glue used in their manufacture has failed to keep holding the different pieces together. Similarly, the relational ‘glue’ that holds couples together can fail over time. Did you know that the average length of time that couples remain married in New Zealand is 13.6 years? Divorce law in New Zealand was fundamentally altered when Parliament passed the Family Proceedings Act in 1980. Until that time there was a legal divorce process concerned with finding out who was at fault in any marriage difficulties. The new law focused instead on helping those in failing marriages and, from 2005, civil unions, to sort out their difficulties and move on. From 1990 a dissolution order (as divorce became officially known) did not require a hearing in front of a judge. Irreconcilable breakdown of marriage became the only basis on which divorces were granted. No one was blamed. Living apart for two years was deemed to be sufficient proof of irreconcilable differences.

Getting a divorce is not difficult now in New Zealand, and similarly it was generally easy for a Jewish husband to divorce his wife in Bible times. The Pharisees knew the Scripture that Jesus quoted from Genesis 2:24, that when a man is joined to his wife in marriage they become ‘one flesh’. The question they had tested Jesus with was effectively “*why did the law of Moses permit dissolving of this one flesh bond by allowing a husband to give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?*”

Masterfully, Christ turns a somewhat abstract theological discussion into a searing admonition. He perfectly pin-pointed the real issue which was a persistent refusal to hear and obey the word of God. He said, "*Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment*” (v5). The Old Testament divorce law was a concession to the sinfulness of man, not a commandto weaken the marriage bond. (Just as the Old Testament polygamy law in Deut 21:15-17 sought to regulate just inheritance rights where the sinfulness of man had led him to into taking more than one wife). Before the fall there would have been no need for such civil laws which addressed situations resulting from sinful actions.

From the words of Christ in Mark 10, it might seem that there are no legitimate grounds for divorce that would allow a divorced man or woman to remarry. Jesus says privately to His disciples when they ask him further about this topic: “*Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery*”. As an aside, in the parallel account of our text in Matthew’s gospel, the disciples respond to these words of Jesus by effectively saying *“If the marriage bond is so binding, it is better to remain single”.* To which Jesus replied, *‘not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given’ (v11).*

The gift of singleness is given to some, but not to all. Some choose singleness in order to be able to serve the Lord with less distraction. Christ never married, neither did the Apostle Paul (1 Cor 7:7-8). Singleness is God’s design for some, but not for many. Singleness should never be an option chosen because the lifelong commitment of the lasting bond of marriage is feared. Singleness is the state for the widows, widowers and those who are divorced and not remarried in our congregation. Sunday can be the loneliest day for some who are single. When was the last time you invited a widow/widower home for lunch (they generally don’t eat too much!)

However, as recorded in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus does reveal a legitimate (Biblical) ground for divorce: ‘*sexual immorality*’ (Matt 5:32; 19:9). The Greek word translated ‘sexual immorality’ is ‘pornea’ from which the English word ‘pornography’ is derived. When adultery occurs in marriage this is a Biblical groundfor divorce; although through forgiveness and reconciliation, even such sinfulness can be overcome, and a marriage restored in Christ.

The only other Biblical ground for divorce is termed ‘wilful desertion’ – when a husband or wife leaves and does not seek to return. This is the situation Paul refers to in 1 Cor 7:15. *“if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances”.* This verse applies directly to an unbelieving spouse, but also to a sinful believing spouse who acts in a way consistent with unbelief.

Let me be clear. Sexual immorality or wilful desertion do not mean a marriage **must** end in divorce. Almost all troubled marriages are recoverable with forgiveness, patience, and trust in the Lord. As Christians we understand that marriage is a holy union and we are all called to take very seriously Christ’s words ‘*What God has joined together, let not man separate*’ (Mark 10:9). Marriage between a sinful man and a sinful wife is not always easy, even when both are fully committed to the Lord. In some Christian marriages when there is conflict, misunderstanding, grievances and pain, it can be tempting just to give up, separate and then even divorce.

It has been very helpful for many Christian couples to go back (sometimes repeatedly over the years) to the vows that they made before God and His people, along the lines of: “*for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, and be faithful to you as long as we both shall live*”. These vows helpfully reflect the truth that God has designed marriage to be a **lasting bond** between one man and one woman. As with everything that God has creatively designed, He has done so with good purposes, which brings us to our third point:

1. **A purposeful bond**

Marriage, as defined by God, is designed to be good, not only for husbands and wives, but also for children, for the covenant community of the church, and for wider society. In the words of WCF 24:2 “*Marriage was ordained for the mutual help of husband and wife, for the increase of mankind with legitimate offspring and of the church with godly children, and for the prevention of sexual immorality*”. In our text, Jesus grounds His teaching in the creative work of God as revealed in the book of Genesis. Here we find two pre-fall reasons for the bond of marriage: having children and companionship.

Firstly having children: God said to Adam and Eve ‘*be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth*’ (Gen 1:28). The one-flesh union of marriage is a physical, sexual, union with the purposes both of offspring and mutual pleasure. This does not mean that physical relations somehow constitute being “married in the eyes of the Lord”. That would make marriage unions out of rapes, prostitution, and much recreational dating today. Marriage is founded on a vow: a solemn commitment to mutual faithfulness. Not only for the well-being of husband and wife, but also for any children they are blessed with.

After God had created the man Adam, as part of His very good creation, the LORD God said, "*It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him*." (Gen 2:18). Friendship and fellowship are vital for human health as many people have understood more clearly in light of the detrimental effects of isolation resulting from COVID-19 responses in recent years. Companionship is a pre-fall reason for marriage. The husband’s best friend should be his wife, and her best friend her husband. The two becoming one flesh (v8) includes much more than a physical union, it is a joining of hearts, minds, and souls with shared plans and purposes.

After the fall, one of the areas in which men and women have sinned is in sexual activity outside of marriage. God has designed sexual union to be exclusively within marriage. This holy, lifelong and purposeful bond is to be mutual and for the benefit and pleasure of the other as the Apostle Paul explains to the Corinthians: “*because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.*” (1 Cor 7:2).

Here we see a redemptive/preservative purpose for the marriage bond. This is part of a wider redemptive/restorative purpose of sanctification. Just as living closely with others in the covenantal community of the church is a relational environment in which the Lord is pleased to grow us in Christlikeness, so, even more in the bond of marriage. Sometimes I have heard husbands and wives exclaim to me ‘why is my marriage so difficult?’ Well, because growing in godliness is often difficult for us. The development of Christlike character often comes through periods of pain, suffering and disappointment. We are often very slow learners when it comes to godliness.

In marriage, as in other human relationships, our natural tendency is to see fault in the other person, rather than in ourselves. Jesus knew this and wisely asked “*Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?*” (Matt 7:3). Here is a recipe for a troublesome marriage: focus on what **your spouse** needs to do to improve themselves. Here is a recipe for a peaceful marriage: focus on what **you** need to do to become more godly.

Marriage has redemptive purposes for husbands and wives, but also for the wider covenant community because it portrays the intimate and faithful relationship between Christ and His church. Like Christ in our text, the Apostle Paul quotes from Genesis 2:24, and then the Lord reveals through him, that the cleaving of a man to his wife so that the two become one flesh is a living image of the bond between Christ and the church (Eph 5:31-32).

This gospel purpose of marriage as a living picture of Christ and the church can only be fulfilled when both husband and wife are in the Lord. This is one of the reasons why the Scriptures clearly teach that Christians, disciples of Christ, ‘*must only marry in the Lord*’ (e.g. 1 Cor 7:39). **Just as** the bond between a husband and his wife is to be holy **so** the relationship between Christ and God’s people is a holy union (e.g. John 15:1-5). **Just as** the bond between a husband and his wife is to be lasting **so** the union between Christ and God’s people cannot be broken (e.g. John 10:29). **Just as** the bond between a husband and his wife has God-given purposes, **so** the union between Christ and his church does also.

Like a faithful husband, Christ gave himself up for His bride. He sanctifies His bride, the church ‘*by the washing of water with the word*’ (Eph 5:26). Staying glued together closely in the bond of marriage takes lots of work! Sanctification always does! We work out what God has worked in! (Phil 2:12-13) Marriage in the Lord is glorious, blessed, a taste of paradise when the marriage bond is holy, lasting and purposeful. The ‘glue’ that binds husbands and wives together reflects the stronger adhesive that bonds Christ to those He died for.

As the church, we are betrothed to Christ our bridegroom. “*Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends, if you do what I command you” (John 15:13-14).* In our text Jesus commands us **not** to separate what God has joined together: a husband and his wife ‘glued’ together in the holy, lasting, purposeful bond of marriage. Thank the Lord for His gift of union in marriage. AMEN.