

THE DIVORCE DILEMMA

by Steve Zeisler

I was filling out a form recently, and one line of it asked the question "Are you married?" followed by boxes to check either yes or no. Such questions will disappear before long. We live in a world in which "Are you married?" is less and less an obviously yes-or-no question. I have heard discussions in recent years on all of the following subjects: common-law marriages, serial marriages, same-sex marriages, open marriages, bi-coastal marriages, domestic partnerships, marriages of convenience, arranged marriages, group marriages, celibate marriages, and many others. All of them claim equal status and demand to be treated with equal respect.

The question of the nature of marriage is before us in this passage from the Sermon on the Mount. There is a series of six discussions of the Law that Jesus enters into in the last part of Matthew 5. The first two concern anger and adultery, which we studied in the previous message. All of these discussions follow roughly the same formula. Jesus says, "You have heard" ...a particular saying, a way in which the rabbis and the ancient commentators have tried to make the law understood, "...but I say to you...." Thus he distinguishes his teaching from the common way of understanding these issues. The third discussion of the Law is now before us in verses 31-32:

"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."

This is a cryptic statement, and in a moment we're going to look at Mark 10, which will give us further understanding what Jesus means here. He was speaking amidst confusion that existed in his own day. There were various schools of thought in the first century even among Jews as to what marriage was and whether divorce should easily be granted or not.

Marriage is significant

I'm sure our Lord was aware, as we must be aware, that this is very painful material to discuss. In every time and place there are people who long to be married and are not, and that is a source of struggle for them. There are people who have brokenness in their past that they hate to be reminded of. There are some now in the midst of marriages that are very difficult, and thus the whole subject of marriage is one that they would prefer to avoid.

In the account of the creation of heaven and earth in Genesis 1, there is a series of statements describing the creative acts of God, separating light from darkness, separating land from sea, and so on. And in all of these activities God evaluates what he has done and says, "It is good," or "It is very good." Then we come to a statement in chapter 2: "It is not good for the man to be alone." For the first time, the witness of Scripture is that something is not good, and God intervenes to overcome human loneliness by creating marriage. We should not be surprised to encounter strong feelings in this area. Loneliness is hard, and it is not God's intention that we live in loneliness. (Of course, marriage is not the only way to deal with loneliness.)

So before we proceed any further in this discussion I want to acknowledge that the church needs to be a community of encouragement and understanding, not self-righteousness. People who suffer in relationships, suffer greatly. God is merciful, and we must be merciful as well. But it is also important to say what is true. There is no value in merely acknowledging suffering and leaving it at that. We must at the same time ask about God's purpose for us. What does Jesus say to us here?

In the previous paragraph Jesus discovers adultery in people who had let themselves out from under the searchlight of the word of God. He says, "If you have a rich fantasy life about sexual liaison with someone you're not married to, you have committed adultery as surely as your neighbor who has acted on those thoughts." The word of God drives us to our knees. Folks who assumed that they had risen above sinful experience find that they are sinners as well, that they need the grace of God, that they are poor in spirit.

The same thing happens here. Jesus discovers adultery among people who might have believed that they were not guilty of it. The man or woman who has a series of partnerships, punctuated by legal divorce at various stages along the way, is no different from someone who is married once and has clandestine relationships with others. Jesus uses the term adultery for both of those things.

Three concerns

There are three points for us to consider in Matthew 5:31, 32: First, Jesus is distinguishing himself from people who were teaching a misunderstanding of what God had in mind when he inspired Moses to write Deuteronomy 24, which contains instruction about the legal process of divorce. Second, Jesus says that there is an exception to the general rule that it is wrong for God's people to divorce and remarry. The exception regards husbands and wives who find themselves victimized because their partner has chosen unfaithfulness. Third, the word divorce as Jesus is using it here necessarily implies remarriage or some kind of re-coupling; divorce hasn't happened from heaven's perspective until one or the other partner has attached themselves to someone else.

We need to understand what Jesus believed about marriage as the first step toward trying to make sense of what he is saying here about divorce. Let's read Mark 10:2-9 and observe some additional points that are important to Jesus:

Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

"What did Moses command you?" he replied.

They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away."

"It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied. "But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

What Moses really said

The Pharisees' answer to Jesus' question is interesting, because Moses wrote all five books of the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These men come to Jesus wanting to discuss divorce, and he asks them generally what Moses' commands and teachings are. They immediately jump to the discussion about how to execute a divorce in Deuteronomy 24. But Jesus goes back to Moses' account of the creation of marriage in Genesis. Jesus is adding his authority to the authority of the created order, and he wants us to understand very clearly what marriage is before we talk about the legal documentation that goes along with divorce.

Jesus acknowledges that in Deuteronomy 24 there is a discussion about divorce, but his interpretation of the passage is not that God is advocating divorce. God's word acknowledges divorce as inevitable in a sin-filled society. And divorces happen, Jesus says, because hearts are hard. Since they happen, the word of God provides a safety net, primarily for women. In ancient times women's lot was worse than it is today. What God forbade was for a man to grow angry with his wife at a whim, throw her out in the street, and say, "I'm done with you, the marriage is over---get out of here," leaving her defenseless, without any explanation of her status. So Moses wrote that the man had to file a legal document stating his reasoning, and at least give her the protection of being able to say, "My marriage has ended, and I can prove it."

A second point made in Deuteronomy 24 forbade a man from divorcing his wife, seeing her marry another, and then taking her back again. This was to forbid treating wives as slaves, allowing a man to take a wife, hand her off to someone else to be used for whatever purpose, and bring her back again. The law insisted that if you ended your marriage, you had to say good-bye forever to the relationship. That would, it was to be hoped, have the chilling effect of making men much less inclined to choose the avenue of divorce. So the laws that are referred to here are not advocating divorce. They are in fact a way of limiting it and strengthening the cause of the women who were involved and who would have been left defenseless otherwise.

In this vein, I read an account of an Albanian gambler who bet his wife on a World Cup match. He lost the bet, and his wife went off with the man with whom he had gambled. The words of Deuteronomy that are quoted here were intended to raise the view of marriage above such behavior.

The God-given life of a marriage

However, instead of discussing at great length the paperwork involved in divorce, what Jesus does is go back to the creation of marriage itself. What did God intend? As our Lord tells us, marriage is a creative act of God. There are two, and then the two are joined together, not ultimately by their own decision-making and their own creative relationship-building, but by God himself. The two become one. Something new has entered the created world that never existed before. The marriage itself has a life of its own, one that is valued by God.

Consider how human life comes into being. There are two gametes, two sets of chromosomes that are brought together in a woman's womb. The two become one, and a new life is established by a creative act of God. God cares about that life; a human being made in his image means everything to him. In the Old Testament, both adultery and murder were capital offenses, and it was for the same reason: When God creates a life that didn't exist before, when he takes two and makes them one, the new oneness has his stamp on it and his heart in it. And it is a terrible offense to kill what matters to him. Adultery is the taking of a life in a sense very similar to that in which murder of a human being is the taking of a life. Malachi 2:16 records the words of God: "I hate divorce," says the LORD God...."

Marriage, we are told in Ephesians 5:31-32, is a great mystery. It is an extraordinary thing, and we will never plumb its depth. It involves the joining of our spirit to someone else's. It involves the intertwining of our emotional life with theirs. It involves physical intimacy, taking on life together, and raising a family together (if God allows children to be born). What God has joined, man cannot separate without having to answer to God for that choice.

We are very foolish, even if we have good motives, to endorse the trivialization of marriage; to say that, because people are lonely and frustrated and life is hard, every sort of relationship---every sort of sexual adventure, partnering, breaking up and grouping together, coupling and uncoupling---is equally valid. We are very foolish to say that leaving behind a mate you don't like, venturing on to someone else, leaving them, and so forth, can be considered as moral as a man and woman's choosing to grow together for a lifetime. We don't promote happiness in that. Shallow relationships don't really alleviate loneliness.

Getting Serious

I came to college as a freshman before most of the freshman class, in order to play football. In 1967 we had freshman football teams (now they integrate the freshmen into the varsity team right away). On the first day, our freshman team had met with our coaches, and ran through a few drills. They put together a make-shift defense and then we lined up against the varsity. I was a lineman opposite George Buehler, who later went on to be a Pro Bowl player for the Raiders. The varsity began to scrimmage against this ragtag defense, and we were like chaff in the wind, getting blown all over the field. At the end of practice they had us run wind-sprints. I have never been so tired, sore, or sick in my life. I had come to school thinking that I was in shape. I had been a high school player before that, so I had trained all summer, and I was ready to play---but only at the high school level. I was not at all ready play at the college level. The demands being made were beyond my experience.

Observing that, coaches could have said, "You know, we can lower the standard for these freshmen. More people will come out for football that way. They won't be so unhappy and sore, and they'll think better of us if we don't call for as serious an effort from them." But you would never win a football game. Of course, what actually happened is that the next year I showed up with much different expectations. I was in much better shape than I had been the year before. I had learned to take seriously what the coaches intended for us. I had changed my whole mind-set about what we were attempting. College-level football is not high-school-level football.

In the same way, what we are hearing in the words of Jesus are the ethical big leagues, if you will. The Lord is saying that this is the way the Creator made humanity to function best; this is what male and femaleness are for. What God has joined, man must not separate. All the human efforts to change that---endorse temporary sexual coupling, to establish relationships at something less than this level---are not doing anyone any good in the long run. Similarly, lowering the standards concerning the destruction of human life is costing our culture an awful price. We are fools if we sell short what God has said is very valuable indeed.

How a marriage can be killed

The second point the Lord makes is that there is an exception clause. (He reiterates this in Matthew 19.) He acknowledges here that there are people who, having entered a marriage, discover themselves to be a victim of their partner's choices. Marriages can be killed. The one-flesh which God brought into being and which matters greatly to him, can be destroyed. There are two tests mentioned in the New Testament to discover if a marriage has been killed. One regards marriage to a non-Christian who is stiff-necked and running from God and wants nothing to do with the Sovereign whom they must meet every day in the life of a Christian spouse. If that person leaves and wants nothing more to do with you, don't chase them and attempt to enforce unity. (See 1 Corinthians 7:12-16.)

The other way to discover that a marriage has been executed, as Jesus says here, is unfaithfulness. If one partner de-couples themselves from the marriage and attaches themselves to someone else, they have given evidence that they have destroyed the oneness that existed. Forgiveness is always possible and is often the best thing even then. But there are times when a husband or wife can conclude, just as a widow or widower would, that a death has taken place. It is a very tragic thing that this death should take place. There is deep mourning over the loss of the life God created. But remarriage for the abandoned partner can be honorable and entered into without any lingering feeling of disobedience or second class citizenship.

Jesus does not, however, say that hardness of heart is a valid reason to divorce. I remember Ray Stedman once saying that irreconcilable differences are not a good reason for divorce, they're a good reason for marriage. All of us have hard hearts. All of us have stubborn areas that are going to drive us crazy when we attempt real intimacy with our marriage partner. All of us will discover that there are issues in the life of our beloved that we resent and find difficult. Hardness of heart should be repented of when it is discovered. It should be taken to the Lord. Hardness of heart should be the very thing that we find ourselves on our knees together praying about with our partner: "Lord, help us with this! Marriage is hard work. It's difficult and demanding." Difficulties, harsh words spoken at times, deep wells of bad communication, and not knowing how to get along in marriage are all the places where the Lord intends to step in and make us new. Mere difficulty in marriage is not, for Jesus' followers, grounds for divorce.

Divorce---not just separation but re-coupling

The last point in Matthew 5:32 is that divorce is by definition accomplished only when remarriage or a re-coupling of some kind takes place. The Lord in heaven is not particularly interested in the laws of the state we live in. Whatever legal status exists between marriage partners---whether there is some legal separation of assets, responsibilities, and liabilities, etc.---do not matter ultimately to God. The central vow made when a man and woman get married is, "I will be faithful to you alone." The central vow is not, "I will be completely, unutterably happy in your presence at every moment of our married life."

There have been times when I have counseled married couples to therapeutically separate from one another for awhile. There was so much anger, tension, threat, and difficulty that they could not survive trying to live under

the same roof. What each of them needed to do, if they cared at all about what mattered to God, was to spend time separate from one another and deal with the hardness-of-heart issues in their lives, to be remade by God, and then to build the bridges back again toward an intimate relationship. But they also needed to remain faithful to each other, even in the difficult times.

God assigns couples to be apart from one another because of war, illness, natural disasters, and economic upheaval, and for other reasons including deep anguish and struggle in the relationship itself. It may be that though they long for intimacy, some couples will spend fifty years of married life aiming at it instead of achieving it with any deep degree of success. But divorce hasn't happened as long as they adhere to the central vow: "I will be faithful to you alone." It is only when one or the other decides, "Enough is enough. I'm going to choose another mate," that the marriage is broken.

I have a lot of respect for husbands and wives who experience very little of the warmth, intimacy, laughter, love, and happiness that a healthy marriage has, for whatever reason, and yet remain faithful to their vows and faithful to the Lord who has created the marriage. I know of a man who is married to a woman who has been in a coma for years. There has been no conversation, friendship, touching, planning, or rejoicing in that marriage; and yet he is faithful to his wife. I have known of individuals who came to this country from Southeast Asia, South America, Mexico, and other places, who had to leave their families behind for economic reasons. They wished they could be reunited with their families. Months, even years go by as efforts are made to create a base that would allow for the family to be reunited. Yet both partners adhere to the central vow: "I will be faithful to you alone." Those of us who are fortunate enough to have been given the gift of a happy marriage ought to respect people who get very little emotional advantage from their marriage and yet obey the Lord in the midst of it. He is teaching them some very great lessons.

Caring believers making a difference

Let me offer some pastoral advice that flows from the recognition that not all marriages will be happy marriages. First, I don't see how anyone can succeed as husband and wife without being in a church, without a community of people who care for each other. We need the maturity of those who have gone before us. Recent studies of communication styles say that men and women communicate with each other as if they were from Mars and Venus; men speak one kind of language and women another. When they are newly married, young couples may drive themselves crazy with the differences in communication. It feels like a trauma that they are the first ones to go through. But, in a healthy church an older generation can say, "No, it's completely normal. We've gone through everything that you're going through. God is in the midst of it. Learning to understand one another and communicate will happen. Don't panic."

There may be times when the older saints let you know you're pouting when you thought it was righteous indignation. Or they'll tell you that you're being a foolish martyr, suffering silently when you need to speak up and let the person you're living with know what you're going through. The older saints in the assembly can teach life skills to those who are just beginning, such as how to raise children at a young age and how to prepare for adolescence so they don't get blind-sided by that when it comes. They can teach about the seasons of life.

A second reason marriages ought to be lived out in the context of a church is that a church allows for honesty, when otherwise there would be lies and denial. One of the observations that has come out of the recent events in the O.J. Simpson murder case in Los Angeles is how many families live with abuse, anger, violence, and hate-filled speech. The police come, but the one being battered doesn't press charges, so nothing happens. The neighbors next door hear it all, but never do anything. Everyone pretends that nothing is going on. A healthy church at least allows for the possibility that we can be honest and say what is true; denial doesn't have to go on. Denial exists because of the great fear that if these things come out in the open, all will be lost. Living in a community of people who really care for each other is the antidote to fear, because bringing hard realities into the light does not mean all will be lost. The power of God is available for forgiveness and renewal. We don't have to lie anymore.

Lastly, accountability is an important part of this. A married couple may squarely face some difficult problem they have and decide to make changes: "We will start down another road, we will act in new ways, we will

build new patterns." A week later they want to quit because change is hard, and they easily fall back into the old and familiar ways of denying, lying, manipulating, or covering up. But in a community of people who care about them, someone can say, "Okay, we hear what you say. You're committed to being different. We're going to come back next week and ask if you are. Then we'll be back the week after that, and we'll be in this as long as it takes for you to learn to relate to one another differently." Churches all fall short of being the kind of community they ought to be. But an awkward community is much better than none at all as a place for couples to learn to succeed as husband and wife.

Seek godliness

Since Jesus was questioned about divorce, we can assume that marriages in his day were as unhappy as modern ones. And marital unhappiness can be extreme unhappiness. The problem is that most of us don't know what makes us happy. When we admit that we are miserable, what we would do on our own to make ourselves happy is likely to make us even more miserable.

The wise course amidst marital unhappiness is not to try to achieve happiness, but to seek godliness. Happiness comes in surprising places. The Sermon on the Mount is the clearest expression of this that I know. Blessed, or happy, are those who mourn, those who are persecuted, those who are poor in spirit. It is only when we attempt godliness; when we choose to let the Lord guide us and lead us, to follow the patterns he has built into this world, to be empowered by his Spirit to live; that we will discover happiness along the way. There is no denying the existence of pain and struggle in marriage. But rather than taking the apparently easy and natural paths to relief, the best choice for us is to let our Maker and Redeemer guide us.

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