

WHAT DID MOSES COMMAND?

SERIES: QUESTIONS JESUS ASKED

by Steve Zeisler

In this series, we have been learning that very often Jesus asks questions to help people understand themselves and God in a new way. The passage we are going to study now concerns divorce and marriage, and the question that Jesus asks is, "What did Moses command?" Through this question, we will learn much of God's own heart on the subject of marriage.

I recently saw a newspaper cartoon of a mother reading a bedtime story to her little, curly-haired daughter. The book was called *Grim Reality Fairy Tales*, and the text read, "and the prince kissed her and they fell in love, dated a while and moved in together, broke up, got back together, got married, got a baby, got separated, got back together again, broke up, got divorced, spent time alone rediscovering themselves, met someone new, fell in love and repeated the pattern habitually ever after."

This worldview is sad, hopeless, and far from what God intended. More than ever, our children wonder what marriage is and what they might hope for in a relationship. In this message, we will consider God's clear intent for marriage.

Let's look at Mark 10:1-16:

Jesus then left that place and went into the region of Judea and across the Jordan. Again crowds of people came to him, and as was his custom, he taught them.

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."

When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. He answered, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery."

People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.

Jesus taught in public settings throughout Judea, and many people came to learn from him. Others, however, came only to challenge or test him. The test in this case concerned what was lawful in terms of divorce. This was an important debate among Jews of that day. One popular rabbi, Hillel, taught that divorce should be a simple option, while another popular rabbi, Shammai, argued that marriage should be highly protected. Because each of these rabbis had such a strong following, the Pharisees knew that if they could align Jesus with one camp or another, a large segment of the population would be upset with him. Matthew 22:17-22 tells us of a similar incident. The Pharisees sent their disciples to ask Jesus a question about paying taxes hoping that his answer would be unacceptable to either the Romans or the Jews. Jesus' brilliant strategy in both cases was to ask a question in return and redirect attention toward God's heart and purpose.

It is worth noting that the Pharisees' questions concerned lawfulness. They didn't ask what was wise, true, holy, or honorable in the question of divorce or marriage. They didn't ask about God's heart in this matter. They wanted to know the legal particulars. Where is the fine line? What technicalities make divorce permissible? What is lawful?

Jesus asked, "What did Moses command?" Referring to Deuteronomy 24:1-4, the Pharisees responded, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away." Now, this passage in Deuteronomy does not advocate divorce; it acknowledges that divorce happens, and it regulates the circumstances under which divorce can take place. The primary importance of this regulation is to protect the wife. Moses insisted that if a man were to divorce his wife, he had to document the choice he made so that she would not be abandoned with her status ambiguous. In addition, if a man divorced his wife and she married someone else, the first husband could never take her back

again. This provision was to discourage wife-swapping and other forms of marital abuse. You may recall the famous "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth" law, which limits the amount of revenge but does not mandate revenge. Similarly, Deuteronomy 24 merely places limits on divorce without advocating it.

We should notice, too, that Deuteronomy 24 is only one part of Moses' instruction on divorce and marriage. The Pharisees did not turn first to Genesis (also authored by Moses). Jesus did. Their choice of a passage that centers on the way to get divorced instead of the work of God in establishing a marriage says much about the condition of their hearts.

The Pharisees tried to test Jesus by quoting from Deuteronomy 24. Jesus agreed that Moses did make such allowances, but then he turned their attention to Genesis 2. He reminded his listeners of God's creation plan for marriage, and he told them that the reason people divorce is because their hearts are hard.

Our Lord's words here deserve some consideration on our part. Both the Old and New Testament allow for divorce. It is not the unforgivable sin. There is honest recognition in Jesus' words that marriages are often tragic. Marriages create intimacy, and intimacy carries with it great power. The person who can bless you the most can also hurt you the most. In a marriage where there is hardness of heart, the possibility for pain is very great. Lives become intertwined when there is physical closeness, emotional joining, shared living space, common economic responsibilities, parenting together, for better or worse, in sickness and health, for richer or poorer. Hardness of heart is a core of selfishness, a refusal to listen and understand. It is stunted emotions, feelings, and appetites that make unreasonable demands. It is the assumption that my needs are more important than yours. It is the cause for divorce.

Thinking in terms of the gospel, what can be done about it? Marriages cannot succeed in a vacuum. They require the love, support, and insight of a community, a church in which to grow and thrive. All marriages experience stress and confusion. We need people who have been there before; who can come alongside and offer encouragement, who can tell us how they got through it. When our energy is depleted and the pain is unspeakable, we need people who can be strong for us and remind us that nothing is impossible for God.

What happens when everything falls apart and people make an impossible hash of their marriage and family? Scripture gives us a worst-case scenario in John 8. A woman caught in the act of adultery was dragged from the scene and brought before a crowd in total humiliation. Jesus did three specific things that ministered to her in her failure and shame. First, he removed the public stigma. "Those of you who haven't sinned, you throw the first stone." One by one, starting with the eldest, her accusers lay down their stones and left. Second, he told her, "Neither do I condemn you." God has not rejected you for what you have done. This is not the unforgivable sin.

Restoration is possible. Third, he gave her a righteous alternative: "Go and sin no more." You can live your life in a way that honors God. You can choose to change and start over. Hardness of heart can lead to the most awful set of circumstances in marriage, but when we come to Christ, no matter what the circumstances, he removes the isolation and the stigma, and then he sets us on our feet to do it right.

The New Testament allows for the fact that some are victims of their partner's choices. Some have been abandoned, left for another. Jesus knows the hardness of our hearts, and he invites us to bring our struggles, failures, and needs to him.

In verse 6, Jesus reminded the Pharisees that "at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.'" The culture of today tells us that there is no such thing as maleness and femaleness, that sexual identity is a personal choice. Jesus completely contradicts that notion. God made us male and female to compliment each other. Marriage brings complimentary elements together and takes us to the heart of what it means to be a man or a woman. It is a delightful thing to discover.

In verses 7-9, Jesus continued, "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." Jesus clearly states that God makes marriages. He makes us male and female. He fits us for one another. He not only makes us who we are but also brings us together. The joining together is not a one-time thing. It begins on the day when public vows are made, when sexual intercourse and oneness in that sense takes place, but it takes a lifetime to join people together. We grow together through laughter and struggles, through sorrow and thanksgiving. What God has joined together, no one should separate.

Marriage can be tough. It involves living with a person who is a different gender, who has a different way of looking at things, who comes from a family that does things differently. The beautiful thing is that God takes people who do not automatically connect and teaches them to draw one another out. You will never understand yourself better than when you see yourself through the eyes of someone who loves you intimately, who probes, asks tough questions, and cares about stuff we don't even see in ourselves. It is an extraordinary thing, and it requires faith. Marriage is a school for faith; we learn that we need God in order to accomplish this drawing together of one to another.

God is committed to marriage. It is wonderfully important to him. Those of you who are married wake up each day to someone who looks goofy first thing in the morning, who has odd quirks, who is sometimes wonderful, sometimes not. Your relationship has a marvelous integrity even though there are times when it is weak or silly. This is God's creative masterwork accomplished over and over again, and what God has joined, no one should separate.

When they returned to the house (verse 10), the disciples asked Jesus about the things he had said. Jesus answered that anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her and vice versa. Why did he say this? He was destroying euphemism. If a marriage is viable and you choose to leave a partner who is willing to stay with you, you are committing adultery. There is no good language for it, no pleasant way to say it. People use euphemism to excuse their choices, saying, "I'm starting a new chapter in my life. I'm leaving a bad thing behind. We are closing the past and moving on." Jesus rejected the euphemism and called it by its real name: adultery.

Again, I want to be clear that this is not the unforgivable sin. Restoration is possible. However, what God joins together, no one should separate; if you do, you will live with the consequences. Name it for what it is. Euphemisms do no one any good.

Let's look now at verses 13-16. Most commentators put a major break between verses 12 and 13. The language of the text does not make it clear if the two passages are linked by time or place, but there is a thematic link. Who suffers the most when marriages break up? Children do. In this passage, people are rebuked for bringing little children to Jesus, but Jesus said, "Do not forbid them. Bring them to me." He held them in his arms, he touched them, and he blessed them. This should be very encouraging if you are a child from a divorced home or if you know of a child who is going through those circumstances. Jesus insisted that the little children be brought to him. They belong to him, and he wants to bless them. It is a tremendous word of hope. There is nothing that the healing power of Jesus cannot fix. There is no loss or failure that cannot be restored by his touch. Jesus said that anybody who comes to him must come like a child, with simplicity and humility. We can picture Jesus with his arms around these little ones who needed him. Now picture yourself with his arms around you. Receive his embrace, his touch, his blessing.

We live in a world of strident voices telling us there is no purpose in maleness and femaleness, that relationships don't need spiritual depth, that every possible human experience is equal in value to any other one. Our sexuality, it is claimed, is not the purposeful gift of a loving Creator. Yet most people want to know that God cares. They want to know that it is possible to share life with another person and receive God's blessing, to grow through problems instead of being destroyed by them. They want to know that there is a community that will help if there are problems. They want to know what we, the Body of Christ, take for granted. The Lord said that we are a city set on a hill. People are wandering in the wilderness looking for a way home. Where are they going to find light? Where are they going to find peace? Lost people want very much to know what is right and true. We offer life to people who need it.

This is the hopeful ministry of Jesus. He knows the terrible consequences that result from hearts that are hard, but he wants us to know that those who experience those painful consequences can come to him for his embrace, his healing touch, and his blessing.

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Steve Zeisler
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