

WHAT ABOUT DIVORCE?

by Ray C. Stedman

In the tenth chapter of Mark we have the account of a new journey our Lord took with his disciples, leaving Galilee for the last time. The first verse sets the scene:

And he left there and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan, and crowds gathered to him again; and again, as his custom was, he taught them. {Mark 10:1 RSV}

This verse summarizes a rather extensive ministry our Lord had after he left Galilee. It took him into Samaria and northern Judea. During it he sent out seventy disciples, as earlier he had sent out the twelve, to go into all the villages and preach the gospel. Also, as John tells us in his tenth chapter, he made a quick trip to Jerusalem in the dead of winter and appeared at the Feast of Dedication. Having spoken at that feast, he left Jerusalem and came with his disciples now into the area on the eastern side of the Jordan River -- beyond the Jordan. Here, in the region called Perea, he was ministering. "Crowds gathered to him; and again, as his custom was, he taught them." During this time some Pharisees came to him, as Mark goes on to tell us:

And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" {Mark 10:2 RSV}

Mark is careful to point out the motive which brought them. They came in order to test him. The Greek word used here suggests that they were probing him, jabbing at him verbally, trying to stir up trouble, to catch him saying something which would allow them to provoke a crisis. Their hostility against him has intensified, and they are determined to put him to death. So they select a very controversial question, one which was bound to draw considerable interest on the part of the people -- the eternal issue of divorce.

It is evident that they are trying to get him to make a choice between the two views which were widely held in that day, represented by two main schools of thought in Israel. One was the teaching of the great rabbi, Hillel. Moses, in Deuteronomy 24, had said that a man could divorce his wife if he found any indecency in her. Hillel interpreted that to mean anything which displeased the husband. If the wife made bad coffee, he could divorce her. If she did not keep the house clean, if she got angry or argumentative, or whatever, she could be divorced. This was the easy school of divorce of that day. Opposed to that was the school of Shammai, another great Hebrew rabbi, who taught that divorce was to be strictly limited, that only under certain rigidly defined conditions could divorce ever be granted. So the nation was split between these two schools of thought.

You will recognize that we have exactly the same problem today. Perhaps no issue arouses more antagonism or controversy than divorce. Here in our own church we feel pressured both ways. What to do about divorce? Is it something rather insignificant, to be taken lightly, and to be granted because of incompatibility alone? Or is it something very serious, to be granted only under extremely limited conditions? Well, that is the issue, and our Lord is confronted with this question.

In his answer he develops two very important arguments. He takes them back first to Moses, and discusses divorce as Moses handled it; then, as we will see, he goes back even further -- to the time of creation. Let us look first at what he says about Moses.

He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to put her away." But Jesus said to them, "For your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment." {Mark 10:5 RSV}

Notice that Jesus did not simply answer these Pharisees immediately out of his own authority. He sent them back to Moses first. In other words, he upheld the authority of the Scriptures. Jesus always did. He always

referred to the Old Testament as a book that has the answers, as a book that is an authority on life. It is delightful to see that he never superseded that word. He frequently quoted, "It is written..." and sent them back to Moses and the law. Even in the Sermon on the Mount he said that he came not to destroy the Law but to fulfill it, and warned against anyone who attempted to destroy the Law or change what it said. This is why he sent these Pharisees back to Moses for the answer.

But he did not stop there. He went on to clarify the Law. This is what he is doing on this occasion. He is interpreting the word of Moses for them, and revealing to us something that the Law itself does not tell us. He is giving us the motive, the reason why Moses permitted divorce. This reason is a very significant and insightful statement, one we want to examine very closely. Our Lord goes behind the written statement of Deuteronomy 24, and says, "Moses gave this because of the hardness of your heart." It was because men's hearts were hardened that Moses allowed divorce.

What does that mean? Well, it is pointing out very clearly that a divorce could occur, in order to reveal in public what has been going on in private in that marriage: the hardness of heart. This is what the Law always does. The Law is given to reveal sin. "By the law is the knowledge of sin," {Rom 3:20b KJV}. So it is perfectly in line with his role as lawgiver that Moses, in giving the laws concerning marriage, should also give permission for divorce, in order to make visible what is going on in a family. What was going on in Israel was evidently hardness of heart. Hearts were being hardened, and that is why divorce came in.

What is a hardened heart? Well, what would the opposite be? A heart that is softened, mellowed, gentle, and open. There are many occurrences in the Scriptures of the phrase, "hardness of heart." We are warned again and again against hardening our hearts. There is that story in the Old Testament of when Moses was sent to Pharaoh and told to deliver the message of God: "Let my people go." When Pharaoh heard that word, he "hardened his heart," {Exod 8:15, 8:32, 9:34, 10:1}. What does that mean? That he determined to handle it his own way He determined to respond to the natural inclination of his flesh, to do what he felt like doing in the situation, to handle it himself, and to ignore God. This is hardening of the heart. When you determine that you are going to handle something yourself, and not pay any attention to what God reveals about it, you are hardening your heart. This is what was going on in the marriages in Israel.

You can see why. According to Moses, a husband (he looked at it only from the standpoint of the husband) could see some uncleanness in his wife, some indecency. He did not specify what it must be -- evidently just something displeasing to the husband, something in his wife that he did not like. And Moses said that because of it, in order to make clear what the husband's attitude was, a divorce was to be permitted.

Now, what would this reveal about the husband's attitude? Well, it would be the attitude we all would naturally feel. We all can identify with this, because we know how we feel when we find something offensive in someone else. What do we want to do? We want to criticize and complain, even attack, or avoid and reject that person. This is the natural feeling of the heart when we find something offensive in someone else. We object to it, protest it, criticize it, put it down, disparage it in some way and we reject the person because of it. This is what was going on in these marriages. Husbands were treating their wives with contempt, because of something they found in them that they did not like.

What should a husband do when he finds something in his wife that he does not like? According to the further revelation of the New Testament in this regard, a husband ought to understand why his wife is like this. This is the word of Peter to husbands: "Husbands, dwell with your wives according to knowledge," {1 Pet 3:7 KJV}. That is, do not merely react to them; understand why they are acting the way they are. Dwell with them according to knowledge: give affection to them, honor them, share yourself with them, understand them, restore them, love them. This is what a husband ought to do. This is what a marriage is for -- to provide opportunity, as we will soon see, to work out the problem areas, the difficulties, the offensive occasions which arise.

But Moses granted divorce, Jesus said, in order to make clear the hardening of hearts that was going on.

What does the softening of the heart involve? A heart is always soft when it recognizes its inability to handle a situation, and relies upon the wisdom and power of God. This is always what keeps the heart tender, mellow,

malleable, reasonable -- a recognition of not having what it takes, a reliance upon the wisdom and love of God, and an obedience to him. This keeps the heart tender and soft.

This is what should have been happening in these marriages. But instead, marriages were getting worse and worse. Women were being downgraded and mistreated, treated with contempt and cruelty and harshness. So, in order to make it all clear and visible, Moses granted permission for divorce. It released the women from what may have become almost a hell on earth for them.

It also would tend to open the eyes of the husband. Many people have come to me, and said, "I never understood what I was doing to my mate until after the divorce. Somehow this opened my eyes, and I began to see that the problem was with me more than with her (or him)." So many men and women have had their eyes opened because of a divorce. They have learned something about themselves, and have gone on to another marriage, or to a restoration of the previous one, on a quite different basis. That open break made them begin to see themselves for the first time. After the earlier service this morning a young man came up to me and, with tears, told me how he and his wife had gone through a divorce, and how he had been hard of heart toward her. But the divorce opened his eyes to the fact that he was the problem. And whatever comes of that marriage -- whether it is restored, or another one follows in the course of time -- he will be a different man because of this.

So this is why Moses granted divorce. It would tend to make public what had been going on in private, so that the world would see the difficulties which were being hidden within the confines of the home.

This is what divorce did then, and, I submit to you, this is what it is doing in our own day. We are living in an age, as you well know, when one out of three marriages ends in divorce in this country. That frightening statistic is making people take a different look at marriage. The very fact of the enormous breakdown of the home, which dismays us, and marks the deterioration of our society, is also driving us to understand that something else is wrong, that somehow we do not know what we ought to know about marriage. Men do not know how to act as men, and women do not know how to act as women. Something is precipitating such an enormous breakdown that we are forced to look at this problem seriously and earnestly, and there is much healing beginning to take place in our day.

This is what law is all about. It is given to unveil sin, and to drive us to grace. Law can never heal the problem; it simply points it out. And the Law of Moses, by permitting divorce, simply unfolded a private problem and made it a public predicament, so that everyone became aware of the tendency in this direction. This is why God permitted it. It is perfectly in line with the purposes of law.

But our Lord does not stop even there. He now goes on to show us a far deeper and more important matter. Though he has put his finger on the reason why marriages fail -- because of hardness of heart -- he goes on now to show us how they can be cured, by revealing to us the purpose of marriage, Verses 6-9:

"But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one.' So they are no longer two but one. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder." {Mark 10:6-9 RSV}

You recognize those words. They are quoted at every wedding -- and yet are singularly disregarded afterward. Jesus goes back now beyond the Pharisees, beyond Moses, beyond the Law, beyond the whole Hebrew economy, and takes us right back to the dawn of creation, the very beginning of the human race, and points out to us that what happened there is the determinative factor, not what happened with Moses and the Law. The Law came in only to show us the problem that existed. The real issue, the real question, is not how to get a divorce; the real question is: Why maintain a marriage? This is what we ought to know.

To answer this question Jesus focuses on three important factors:

- First, the actions of God;
- Second, the desires of God; and
- Third, the warning of God.

This outline will help us as we look together at Jesus' words.

First, the actions of God: "From the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.'" He made them to be distinct and different sexes. This was no afterthought. The whole creative process, beginning with the very first day of creation, was aimed at that one great fact. God intended to have a race of humans that was divided into two recognizable sexes -- male and female. And everything he did, from the first verse of Genesis right on through that whole creative sequence until man appeared on the scene, was aimed at that one great event. This is how important it was to God. He made them male and female, made them biologically and psychologically different one from the other. This is what he wanted.

Man is a three-fold creature, consisting of body, soul, and spirit. In body, men and women are different -- visibly and notably, even notoriously different. In the soul, the psyche, they are different as well. This is what the modern feminist movement is denying. It is telling us, in effect, that men and women are no different psychologically. And it is even implying that biologically there is no difference either, that it is only in the matter of child-bearing that there is any difference. This is one of the main weaknesses of this movement. It has corrected a number of abuses, but it is also creating a tremendous number of problems, while propounding absurd solutions to these problems.

The demand for equality in sports is a case in point. Some leaders in sports are now telling us that if what the feminist movement seems to be insisting upon is actually carried out, it will mean the absolute end to commercial sports as we know them in this country. This is an attempt to disregard the biological differences between men and women, which is absurd. The so-called "right" of abortion is an example of the end of this kind of thinking. The proponents claim that a woman has a right to end the life of a baby which started in her womb simply because she does not choose to go on, does not want her body "used" for that purpose. That whole syndrome is a result of this kind of twisted thinking about humanity -- ignoring the fact that God made them male and female, and that psychologically and biologically men and women are different, and are intended to be. The abolition of what we once called "chivalry," i.e., the courteous attentions men gave to women, the little recognitions of their need for protection and shelter and help in various ways, which has lent so much of beauty and color to life -- all of this is being denied and attempted to be demolished by the women's rights movement. It is all a recognition of the failure to understand this basic fact that Jesus declares. I would suggest that you read George Gilder's fine book, *Sexual Suicide*, if you want to see where this loss of the distinctions between the sexes is taking us, and what harm it is doing already to our society and to all that God has in mind for humanity.

Well, the point Jesus makes is that God has done it. He has made the distinctions, they are different, they do not react the same.

But spiritually men and women are identical. There is no difference. And therein lies their equality before God. It is absolutely true that they are equal persons before God and man.

But that is only in the spirit. Psychologically and biologically they are different. When we understand that difference, we can say, with the French, *Vive la difference!* Thank God for it! They do not contribute the same things to life, and are not intended to. Men think differently than women; men feel differently than women. That is why they band together in clubs and unions, whereas women do not. That is why men are concerned primarily with work, while women are more concerned with people and relationships. Each respond instinctively in these ways. Men can be more cold and hard and offensively objective than women can -- usually. This is why they do not answer questions in the same way. Ask a woman a question, and usually she will answer according to something she has read into what you asked -- either good or bad.

I remember a friend of mine speaking publicly once on the difference between men and women. He said, "Women take things more personally than men do." A woman came up to him at the close of the meeting, and said angrily, "I just want you to know that's not true! I didn't take that personally at all!"

Well, there are differences, and our Lord stresses this fact. God made them male and female. This is what he likes, and this is what makes for richness in humanity.

We move on from the actions of God to the desires of God: "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one.' So they are no longer two but one." "For this reason" -- what reason? Why, because they are male and female. That is what they were made male and female for -- in order that ultimately they might be joined together and become one. This is what God had in mind in making them male and female in the beginning.

There are a great many implications in this simple statement. First, you recognize that it does away with all such notions as "homosexual marriages." There are no such things -- not true marriages. These pathetic misrepresentations you read about from time to time, of people of the same sex trying to be married, are but a poignant commentary upon the twisted, distorted ideas that prevail in society today. It takes a man and a woman to be married. There are no homosexual marriages. And there are no polygamous marriages. You notice Jesus did not say, "God made them male and females," or "males and female." Marriage is one man and one woman, and it always has been, from the very beginning.

But what our Lord makes clear is that this relationship is the highest relationship possible in life. Notice that it takes priority over all others. Closer even than the ties of blood is that of marriage, in the mind and heart of God. "A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife." It is a closer relationship than that to any children who follow. People are to become husbands and wives before they become fathers and mothers. This indicates a priority of relationship. A man is closer to his wife, and a wife to her husband, than they will ever be to their children. Though we may not feel that way, nevertheless it is the truth. That is the way it would ultimately work out best. And, of course, this prior relationship of husband and wife is before friendships, and all other possible relationships with others. It is the goal he had in mind when God made man and woman in the beginning.

What then is the purpose in marriage? It is to become one, as Jesus said. This is what marriages are for, what they are all about. Two people, who are disparate, distinct, and different individuals, with different personalities, different gifts, blending their lives so together that through the process of the years they become one flesh -- that is what marriage is. Now, it is not something that happens instantaneously when you get married. The wedding service does not make you one. The first act of sex after marriage does not make you one. It begins the process, but it does not finish it. It takes the whole marriage to accomplish this. Marriage is the process of two people becoming one.

Therefore they are not to live together as roommates. Marriage is not going your separate ways, and having your separate careers, and merely sharing a house and a bed together. Nor are they to split up over every problem or difficulty that arises between them; they are to work them out. They are not to separate; they are to choose to be together, to spend the rest of their lives together, in order that they might merge their lives together. Therefore they stop being rivals and start to become partners. A successful marriage, therefore, is not one without problems; it is one where the problems are being worked out, where the husband and wife do not split but stick together, face up to their problems, discover the hardness of heart that is there, and learn how God can soften it. In other words, it is a process, not a single production. It is a pilgrimage, not a six weeks' performance. It is intended to be a public portrayal, not a private predicament. It is life-long contract, not a renegotiable franchise, as many presume today.

So our Lord concludes here with a word of warning, Verses 9-12:

"What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder."

**And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter [his last statement]. And he said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."
{Mark 10:9-12 RSV}**

There are some very important principles:

Notice that Jesus lifts the whole matter far beyond the prevailing Jewish view of marriage. The Jewish view,

as reflected in the Law, was that the initiative was always with the husband. It was only the husband who could divorce his wife. But in our Lord's words here, they are on an equal basis. The man can commit adultery against the wife, and the woman can commit adultery against the husband.

And he indicates that adultery, sexual infidelity, destroys the work God has been doing by building oneness in a marriage. You see, the phrase, "What God has joined together" does not refer to a wedding service; it refers to what has been going on in the marriage. God has been blending two people -- sometimes against their wishes, sometimes with great pain and trouble -- but he has been putting their lives together. He has been doing it. That is why he has taken them through the trials and conflicts they have gone through. He has been using one against the other to break down their resistance, and reveal the hard places in their hearts, and to soften them, and make them into the people he intended them to be. God has been at work in the marriage. Every couple, when they move into their first apartment or their first home, ought to put up a sign: "Caution: God at work!" Because that is what he is doing. He is building a oneness. He is, if you like, creating an ecstasy. This is what marriage is all about -- the creation of an ecstasy. It takes a long time, and it involves many steps, but he is producing something of beauty.

This is why marriage involves sex, and why sex is such an important part of it. Sex is the visible picture of what a marriage ought to be. This is why God reserves sex for marriage. What he is really saying by this (in the beautiful language of symbolism that God uses with us), is that every marriage ought to follow the natural course of the act of sexual union. It ought to begin with some uncertainty, some degree of separation and difference, proceed through a time of increasing relationship and enjoyment which mounts to a tremendous sense of climax and of oneness, and concludes at last in a period of restful response and contentment, and a sense of peace. This is what a marriage ought to be. This is what is pictured for us by every act of sex in marriage, in order that we might understand what God has in mind. He is building a miracle, he is making a union out of two, as a picture of what he wants to do for all of humanity. This is why adultery, sexual infidelity, breaks that work of God, brings it to an end. God either has to begin it again, or it ends completely, though perhaps it will begin again in a new relationship.

I know that when I am addressing an audience this large, some in it will have gone through divorce, perhaps with adultery involved. I do not intend to impose a sense of condemnation on anyone. But I do want to make clear what Jesus said -- that divorce is sin -- no if's, and's, or but's about it. Divorce is a violation of God's intention for marriage. It always is, and it always involves some form of sin. But thank God, although that is what the Law says, grace comes in to tell us that sin can be forgiven. There is the possibility of restoration, of healing, of God's beginning again the work of creating oneness -- either with the same couple, or perhaps as each goes on to a different union, they will have learned lessons which will facilitate the beauty of relationship that God has in mind.

But I also want to make clear that though there is this way for forgiveness and restoration, we ought to understand that God's way of restoration involves repentance. I have heard Christians say, "If you do not like your present mate, divorce him or her, and get married again. Even if it is wrong, God will forgive you if you ask him to, and you can just go on and enjoy the new union." Well, that bothers me greatly -- first, because it takes lightly what God takes very seriously, and second, because it is not true that Scripture teaches that all you need to do is ask God for forgiveness, and you are forgiven.

What the Scriptures say is that when you come to the place of repentance, you are forgiven. Repentance means the understanding of the awful danger you have put others in, the injury you have caused others and yourself, a sense of shame for that, and a willingness to let it come to an end and exist no more in your life, to turn your back on it and walk with God in his forgiveness and restoration into a new life which leads in a new direction. That is repentance, and only then is the forgiveness of God available to us.

This is why Jesus speaks so plainly and yet so graciously in these matters. Adultery does end the marriage, yes; but it does not mean that forgiveness cannot come in and make it over into a new and fresh experience, in which God can begin again the work of creating that miracle of oneness which he intends for us. This is what marriage is all about. It is God's way of putting two lives together to produce a oneness that will be a testimony to the whole world of the grace and the power of God to change human lives. He can soften hearts, and remove hardness, and change people into what they ought to be. This is what marriages are for.

Prayer:

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for these plain and clear words from your lips which help us understand what we are involved in when we choose a wife or husband, what your purpose is in it, and what will produce blessing and glory in our lives. Help us now, Lord, to walk in these ways. We have all sinned; we have all done wrongful and hurtful things to one another -- in our marriages as well as outside them. Lord, we thank you for your cleansing, for your forgiveness, for your willingness to put it all back together, to heal us and draw us together, and to make each husband and wife to be what we ought to be -- before you and before the watching world. In your name we ask it, Amen.

Title: What about Divorce
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: The Ruler who Serves
Scripture: Mark 10:1-12
Message No: 4
Catalog No: 3318
Date: March 9, 1975

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