

A Bachelor's View of Marriage and Divorce

Matthew 19:3-12

Preached May 24, 2009

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Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?" He answered, "Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." They said to him, "Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?" He said to them, "It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery." His disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." But he said to them, "Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can." (Matthew 19:3-12)

Introduction. During the Lenten season, I participated in taking communion to some of our shut-ins. During my visits, I was in the home of Tom and Mary Jo Heys. They shared with me that they will celebrate their 70th wedding anniversary this year. How many gathered here have been married over 50 years?

Marriage is one of the most rewarding human relationships, yet it is also the most challenging. There is nothing like the sparkle in the eyes of a couple when the bride starts down the aisle on her wedding day. There is nothing like the pain of

talking with a spouse who comes into my office whose marriage has fallen apart.

Considerations about the meaning and concerns of marriage have long been on the hearts and minds of people, probably dating back to the first marriage. Here in the gospel, we see a glimpse of this matter being raised with Jesus by some of the religious elite. Jesus' interaction with them on this topic gives us great insight into the meaning of marriage.

A Good Question.

The Pharisees came to Jesus with a good question that not only was of interest to them but also is of interest to many today, especially those among the Jesus community: *Is it lawful to get a divorce for any reason?* Today, many have asked the question, "Is it OK to get a divorce?"

The question the Pharisees were asking addressed a real area of concern. Divorce was a significant issue in their time. Among the religious community there was disagreement over what grounds one could dissolve a marriage. Some said adultery, a spouse having an extra-marital affair, was the only reason, while others said nearly any reason could justify divorce. If a wife failed to please her husband, he could divorce her (See Deuteronomy 24:1-4). Unfortunately, divorce was fairly common among the Jewish community.

Today, this question is on the hearts and minds of many in our culture. Between 41-50% of first marriages are expected to end in divorce, second marriage at a rate over 60% and over 70% (www.divorcerate.org). According to Barna Group research, the Christian community has hardly any distinction in terms of the rate of divorce from the general population (www.barna.org/barna-update/article/15-familykids/42-new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released).

While the Pharisees' question was pertinent to both their and our situations, their motivation for the question was skewed. Their question indicated little concern for what constitutes a healthy and meaningful marriage. They were concerned about what was "legal" according to the Torah (The Jewish Law). They wanted to settle their debate of the grounds for divorce.

Legal issues (religious and societal) are important. Even in our culture, laws are needed to protect the interest of spouses

and children. Yet great laws (religious and societal) cannot guarantee good marriages. A marriage built primarily on the "legal" is most likely to yield a fragile marriage.

A farmer walked into an attorney's office wanting to file for a divorce. The attorney asked, "May I help you?" The farmer said, "Yea, I want to get one of those dayvorses." The attorney said, "Well do you have any grounds?" The farmer said, "Yea, I got about 140 acres." The attorney said, "No, you don't understand, do you have a case?" The farmer said, "No, I don't have a Case, but I have a John Deere." The attorney said, "No sir, I mean do you have a suit?" The farmer said, "Yes sir, I got a suit. I wear it to church on Sundays." The exasperated attorney said, "Well sir, does your wife beat you up or anything?" The farmer said, "No sir, we both get up about 4:30." Finally, the attorney says, "Okay, let me put it this way. WHY DO YOU WANT A DIVORCE?" And the farmer says, "Well, I can never have a meaningful conversation with her."

Building the foundation for marriage.

When Jesus responded to the question, he did not attempt to answer what were the grounds for divorce. Instead, he took his audience deeper and led them to consider the foundation and meaning of marriage. Jesus took them back to the beginning – the original intention of marriage. What is the foundation for marriage? Jesus had them consider Genesis 1 and 2 – the stories of human origin. At the heart of these stories is the foundation for marriage.

Jesus began by pointing out that God made human beings as male and female. His first words indicate that this relationship of marriage is God's idea. It is a gift from God. It is part of God's design for those who are created in his image. For those who have a healthy marriage, they can understand the relationship of marriage as a gift. Those with a poor or faltering marriage, often see it as a curse.

Later Jesus clarifies that not every human being will marry or desire to be married. (Jesus was a bachelor himself). He indicated that single people can be whole and that state can be wholesome. One can please God as a single or married person.

Jesus' words about "male and female" build the perspective that Christian

marriage is a covenant relationship between a woman and a man. In our culture there is a great deal of debate about same-sex marriage. Among those who gather here, there would be various opinions regarding the issue and things surrounding this matter. I suspect this debate and political struggles will continue for many years, outliving all of us. There are many issues which are too complex to unwrap here and now.

Jesus was not being political but theological. Jesus' words indicate the high starting point of marriage for those who follow him begin with a woman and a man. (This coming November, this will be one of the issues discussed at our Brian McLaren/Tony Campolo conference.)

The second point Jesus emphasized regarding marriage was his quote of Genesis 2:24: *'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?'* Before we go farther, let's think about the context of these words.

In Genesis 2, we have the wonderful story of creation in the Garden of Eden. God forms Adam from dirt and breathes into him the breath of life. He gives him charge of caring for the garden. God sends all the animals past Adam to name. No suitable creature is found to be his companion. So God performs surgery, takes a rib from Adam and creates Eve. When Adam awakes he says, "Wow! This is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh." He was immediately drawn to her and realized a deeper relationship with her was possible because they were made of the same stuff.

Jesus not only quoted Genesis 2:24, he made a comment about it. He said, *"They are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined, let no one separate."* Here Jesus placed emphasis on the bonding that takes place in marriage – two become one.

This idea of the bonding between a wife and husband that creates unity is central to what marriage is. The two becoming one flesh is the "ideal" of marriage; it is the high mark. God intended there to be a unique and deep level of intimacy that would take place in the marriage relationship. That intimacy needs a covenant to guard the special nature. For the Christian community, this covenant is

made in God's presence and is blessed by God.

There is a measure of mystery that is associated with this intimate bond of unity that takes place between a wife and husband. There is to some degree a spiritual and perhaps mystic uniting that transpires. Like the lighting of the unity candle, both the groom and bride tilt their candles into the wick of the center candle. The flame from each lights the new candle, creating a new reality – a flame that had not existed before.

This bond is multi-dimensional. It is physical. In marriage, the joy of sharing one another's bodies in physical intimacy flourishes. Not only can this bond bring great pleasure, it can strengthen the emotional bond between the two lovers. Through marriage, a couple is able to share with each other at deeper emotional levels. They can share their inner-most emotions and thoughts – joys and sorrows – fears and consolations. There can be this deep emotional connection. Even the dullest of emotionally understanding men can often sense his wife's deep stirring of emotion within. (He probably does not know what to do with it, but he is aware of it.)

This bond is deeply social. It is a sharing of life and resources – a house, activities, meals and thoughts. (An older couple was dining at McDonalds. They ordered a hamburger, fries and coke with an extra cup. When they sat at the table, the wife cut the hamburger in two equal parts, sorted the fries in two equal piles and split the coke. The husband proceeded to eat his portion while the wife waited. A person nearby watched and wondered about this ritual and asked them about the sharing and waiting of the wife. To his question, the husband smiled, bearing his teeth and said, "We share everything." The stranger turned to the wife, "What are you waiting for?" She replied with a toothless grin, "The teeth.")

This idea of two becoming one, the intimate bond of unity is God's ideal. Not every couple experiences this. Yet it is our model and goal.

The Greatest Enemy and the Greatest Ally.

It probably is no surprise that Jesus' questioners were not satisfied with his answer. So they pushed him on the subject again. They asked, "Why then did Moses

command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?" Again, this is a good question. If what Jesus described is the ideal, why would the Law permit divorce?

Jesus' response this time addressed their question but also took them to a deeper level. Jesus told them that divorce was permitted because of human hard-heartedness. This is a fatal disease that prevents a healthy and meaningful marriage.

Said in another way, "hard-heartedness" is the greatest enemy of marriage. Divorce flows from the hard heart. In marriage, there are two hearts. When the heart of either spouse hardens toward the other, the marriage is threatened by the disease. At times, both spouses are infected with hard-heartedness and typically the death of the marriage is quickened. Many of these marriages end in divorce. Some end and the couple remain "together" without any bond of unity.

What is hard heartedness? Many of us recognize it when we experience it. In looking through the Bible, aspects of hard heartedness are mentioned in various places. It is sometimes translated as "stiff-necked" or "stubborn." Those who have a hard heart lack patience and trust (Psalm 95:8). The hard heart destroys the ears because those who have it do not listen (Exodus 8:15). (In marriage, it destroys meaningful communication.) Those who have a hard heart are often arrogant and proud (Daniel 5:20). When a person has a hard heart toward another, that person does not believe in the other (Romans 2:5). It takes little thought to understand how these are detrimental to a marriage.

If hard heartedness is the greatest enemy to marriage, could we conclude that the greatest ally to marriage is being tender hearted?

In 1 Peter 3, the apostle shares some insights on marriage and healthy conduct for wives and husbands. At the end of that discussion, he writes: *Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind* (1 Peter 3:8). Peter, who was married, understood the importance of a tender heart in having a healthy and meaningful marriage.

So what are the elements of being tenderhearted? Basically they are the opposite of being hard hearted. A

tenderhearted spouse is humble, believes in the other, listens and is patient. The tender hearted give their spouses the benefit of the doubt. If you are married, you are not responsible for the condition of your spouse's heart but you are responsible for the condition of your own. Be tender hearted.

Conclusion.

From this message, I want you to take home a few simple thoughts. Marriage and singleness are gifts from God. Marriage is a place for the most intimate human bond of unity between a woman and a man. The greatest ally of any marriage is being tender hearted.

Let us take a few moments to pray for those who are married, those considering marriage, those who have come out of damaged marriages, those who are widowed and those who are single.