

“CAN DEATH OR DIVORCE DISSOLVE A MARRIAGE?”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Mk. 10:1-9

This wasn't the first time the enemies of Jesus had tried to trap him. You will remember that on another occasion they tried to force him into a philosophical corner from which there was no escape, by confronting him with a woman taken in adultery.

In *this* passage, we are told of a second attempt on their part to trick Jesus into taking an indefensible position on another of the great issues of his day, so the Pharisees could legally destroy him.

Their age, like ours, favored easy divorce. And yet, there was a sharp division of opinion among the Jews. One group, the school of Hillel, took a very liberal view. They proclaimed the doctrine that since man was clearly the dominant member of society and woman was subservient to him, should a wife fall into disfavor with her husband, he was free to divorce her at will.

This idea of male supremacy is even reflected in the phraseology of the question put to Jesus:

“Can a *man* divorce his wife?” (Mark 10:2).

It never even occurred to his questioners that a woman would have the right of divorce.

A second group, the followers of Shammai, were very stringent. They considered adultery to be the only legitimate cause for divorce. To further complicate the situation, Herod had divorced his wife to marry Herodius. So, if Jesus took a strict position opposing a divorce it would offend Herod and place his life in jeopardy. On the other hand, if he took a lenient view, he would be at odds with the followers of Shammai and would be accused of laxity in his moral code, and his ability to lead the people would be undermined.

Either way, the Pharisees had him whipped. They were gleeful in their confidence that they had put Jesus in a philosophical trap from which he could not escape.

Before we see how he handled the situation, let's pause for a moment to look at the historical and sociological situation in which Jesus found himself.

The Place of Women

To begin with, it was a time in history when a woman was little more than chattel. She had no personal or legal rights. She was first of all the possession of her father. Should he die, she became the possession of her eldest brother. Should she have no brothers, she became the possession of an uncle.

At marriage she was given over to her husband and became his property. Should he die, it was the custom that she was to be taken into the household of his brother, to be owned by him and to bear children in her dead husband's name. She was, therefore, always the possession of some man from the moment she was born until the day that she died.

However, when her husband rejected her by divorce, she became the property of no man *and therefore, every man*. This is pointed out very clearly in the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus says, “Whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, *causeth* her to commit adultery . . .” (MT. 5:32) . The point being, that if extramarital sex were involved, she was already an adulteress.

Jesus was declaring an inescapable truth. For, remember, a woman had no legal status in her own right. She always belonged to someone else. But, when the man to whom she belonged, rejected her, she was cast out. She had no standing in society. No means of support. No place to live. No schools to get training to become a secretary, a bank teller or a supermarket checkout clerk. She literally became a woman of the street and was “made an adulteress” as her only possible way of eking out a life.

The moment she ceased to be the property of one man -- her father, brother, husband or uncle -- she became the prey of all men. It was a vicious and evil sociological setting and I might add, substantially different from our own.

The Nature of Divorce

Furthermore, the nature of divorce in Jesus' day was quite different from that which we know today. Again, a woman had no rights. All her husband needed to do to be rid of her was to issue a bill of divorcement for any reason and at any time.

The old Jewish history books which record the mores of Jesus' day gave instances of wives being divorced because they burned the toast, or were getting grey, or were growing feeble or perhaps fell sick.

The reasons for divorce were that flimsy. And, should a wife displease her husband for any reason, he only needed to write out a bill of divorcement and the marriage was dissolved. The woman, while free to remarry, in most cases became a woman of the street, and if caught in the act of prostitution to support herself, was stoned to death.

Meanwhile, the former husband could marry or divorce as many wives as he chose. And, as a result, there developed a kind of legalized adultery in which a man would marry a woman -- and they had no exchanging of vows such as we do, it was just a matter of mutual willingness to consummate the physical marriage act -- a man could “marry” a woman for his own pleasure, and when tired of her, put her out on the street. It was barbaric to say the least, and it was against this setting that Jesus issued his pronouncement. How did he avoid the trap the Pharisees set for him? Well, first of all, instead of taking either the strict or lenient view, he headed for --

:The Higher Ground of Eternal Principal

Instead of arguing with the Pharisees on which view of divorce was correct, he directed them

back to God's original intention for marriage when he made man (neuter gender) in his image.

“Know ye not that (verse 6) from the beginning of creation God made them male and female. And for this cause shall a man leave his father and mother and cleave unto his wife; and they twain shall be one flesh.”

His point here is that neither man nor woman is a complete unity apart from each other. Man is not the full or perfect image of God and neither is woman. There are elements in each which reflect a Divine Likeness, and only through a union of the two is there any real unveiling of the mystery and greatness of God. As G. Campbell Morgan put it,

“God is not only father, he is mother, too.”

There are, in the male, certain qualities which are expressive of God and, there are in the female certain qualities which are God-like. Neither is complete alone. Man is a hemisphere and woman is a hemisphere and only by joining the two hemispheres is human personality completed. And so, Jesus said, (verse 7)

“For this cause” -- that is the completion of human personality and a fuller unveiling of the majesty of God -- shall a man leave father and mother and cleave unto his wife.”

Jesus instructed both male and female to forsake the nearest and dearest relationship which exists outside of marriage, the relationship of parent to child, and cleave unto each other in that relationship which is nearest and dearest of all. So that, in the majestic language of holy scripture “these two shall be one.” When that happens, Jesus said, “What God hath joined together let not man put asunder.”

A Wedding Is Not A Marriage

Nor did Jesus mean divorce is forbidden under all circumstances. A quick reading would *seem* to say that, but more thoughtful reflection remind us there is a difference between a wedding and a

marriage.

The distinction was illustrated most clearly by a young man of limited means who was about to be married and could not afford an elaborate ceremony. Sensing the disappointment of his fiance' he took her in his arms, and looking deep into her heart through eyes of love said,

“Honey, it won’t be much of a wedding, but it will be a wonderful marriage.”

I am sure Jesus knew that not every man and woman living together in a civil relationship is married in the sight of heaven. There is a difference between a wedding and a marriage.

A Hollywood newspaper columnist wrote the following --

“A former Follies beauty, widow of a wealthy publisher, who is married to a Hollywood star, is being sued by the wife of a businessman on the charge of alienation of affection and is engaged to marry an actor as soon as the courts call off her second marriage, and the actor’s second wife divorces him: while her husband, a picture star, will marry her after his divorce from a famous model, is reportedly engaged to a Vaudeville headliner, whom he will marry as soon as she divorces her husband, a broker, who divorced a society girl who eloped with her.”

Well, of course, this sort of tragic, even idiotic behavior is reprehensible. And, the Christian church cries out against it. There is no place in the teachings of Jesus for that kind of “progressive adultery.” Jesus placed a very high value on the meaning of marriage, and there is no suggestion in his gospel of the modern divorce philosophy, “money back if not completely satisfied.”

And yet, having said that, you know and I know and God knows there are many dear hearts and gentle people whose hearts have been broken because the one to whom they gave their heart has been unwilling to work at the job of making a marriage. And I can’t believe that Jesus intended us to take a rigid position against all divorce or all remarriage after divorce. There are three

factors that lead me to that conclusion.

Jesus Was Not A Legalist

First of all, we must remember that Jesus was not a legalist. He spent his whole life fighting the attempts of people to confine him and his teachings to mere statutory regulation. Often he said to his disciples,

“Have I been with you so long and yet you do not know me!”

Jesus was not the super-Pharisee, the scribe of all scribes, enacting a new ironclad code.

His teaching was in broad strokes. His main interest was not to lay down a long list of exceptions, but to show his antagonists the real meaning of marriage so that a man and a woman would never again enter into it inadvisably.

He was attacking the problem at its base. For the real issue then, and the real issue now, was not easy divorce, but easy marriage. Jesus wanted people to see that marriage is not a matter of convenience or pleasure, but of God’s holy purpose. That marriage is a spiritual as well as a physical union of man and woman. That marriage does not carry a “money back guarantee,” nor can it be entered into on a “thirty-day trial” basis. Such a cheap, low, inadequate view of marriage destroys its true meaning and potential. And, Jesus wanted to face the people of his day -- *and ours* -- with the august solemnity of this union so people would not enter into it lightly or indiscreetly.

The answer Jesus gave to the great social evil of his day -- and the answer he gives to the great social evil of our day, when one out of three American marriages ends in divorce -- was not a legalistic, ironclad code which did not take individual circumstances into account. It was a new, high, holy concept of marriage, so that, as a man and a woman were joined together in the bonds of holy matrimony, they became one in such a fashion that no one could possibly put them asunder!

In the words of Professor O. T. Brinkley of Eastern Baptist's Seminary,

“If this (Mt. 19:32) is a hard and fast rule (allowing divorce only because of adultery) and makes no exceptions or allowances for individual circumstances, then it is the only place in the Bible in which Jesus gave such an utterance.”

Remember, a basic law of Bible interpretation is that a given text must jibe with the total teaching and spirit of the scripture. And, if you will go back and study the pronouncements of Jesus, you will discover that he never legalized his teachings and he was not legalizing here, when he issued this pronouncement regarding divorce. He was fighting a totally different sociological problem than the one we face today, and his words must be studied in the light of that setting. Jesus was not a legalist.

The Character of Jesus

Secondly, remember the character of Jesus. Remember his boundless sympathy for people. His ready love for the hurt and bruised of society. His infinite compassion for those who were heartsick and heartbroken. He was incredibly tender.

We mangle Jesus out of his true shape when we make him an inflexible legalist who refuses to allow any relief:

When cruelty and brutality have blighted a home.

When evil motives have nullified any honest hope of a marriage ever becoming recognized as made in heaven.

When the sinful actions of a parent threatens the future life and character of little children.

When one partner has proved himself unfaithful in every possible way (short of actual adultery) and, using Jesus' interpretation of that word, is even guilty of that.

That sort of Jesus -- rigid, aloof, unfeeling -- that sort of Jesus is not the Jesus of the New Testament. It is a distortion of every picture of the Son of God that we have, and utterly violates the life and spirit of him who speaks to us through the pages of this Book.

The third factor which must govern the church's attitude toward divorce and remarriage is that --

The Gospel of Forgiveness Is Unlimited

We cannot confine the forgiveness of God to certain sins. It is unthinkable that a murderer can be forgiven and, perhaps, even become a minister of the gospel, while concluding that the innocent party in a divorce cannot be forgiven the sin of immaturity, or for that matter, even the guilty party, as was true in the case of King David.

If two people have genuinely repented -- and I want to emphasize the words *genuinely repented* of their past sins and long to build a Christian home -- and I want to emphasize a *Christian home* -- and come to the church for its blessing on their union and are refused, it seems to me the church has committed a grievous error, for it has lost all hope in helping them in their future life.

Divorce is always tragic. It is always frustrating. It is like surgery. It must be the last resort. Remarriage is always difficult. It is always complicated. But, having said that, the church must try to be consistent with the spirit and life of Jesus who said, “Why do you not judge for yourself what you should do?” Or, to put it another way, “Institutions were made for people and not people for institutions.”

Death

Quickly then, can death divorce a marriage? If you will turn over to the twelfth chapter of Mark, you will find another instance in which the enemies of Jesus tried to trick him into a statement about the position of a woman of the next world who, here on this earth, had been successfully married to seven brothers. In Mark 12:23, the question is posed --

“Who's wife would she be in the resurrection?”

It was not a new question. It was one which, on a higher, nobler plane, still troubles widows and

widowers today, as they are bewildered about the status of marriage in the hereafter.

Once again, Jesus refused to be entangled by human practices. Instead, he turned their thinking into the plan and program of God. Mark 12:24 --

“You err because you do not know the scriptures,” he said. “In heaven you will be as angels and there will be neither marriage nor giving in marriage there.”

Did he mean we will no longer love those we loved on earth? Oh no, for we are told, “Love never fails.” And, for the Christian, death simply lifts love to a new and loftier plane. Did he mean that one who has lost his partner is therefore doomed to a life of loneliness until death knocks a second time at his door? No, for it was God who said, “It is not good that man (or woman) should live alone.” And, when in his providence God sees fit to take home one life partner, he sometimes leads his broken-hearted child to another.

Or, if it pleases him, he does something better. He provides a companionship that is not of this earth, a peace which the world cannot give or take away, a love which goes on bridging the span of an eternity and a hope in the glad and eternal promise that there will come a time when we shall see our loved ones again, shall be known as we are known, shall love as we are loved, shall dwell forever in that place where there is no sorrow, no sickness and no death.

There is a sense in which love is so deep, so high, so broad it can never be fathomed within the confines of one lifetime. We must have eternity to really comprehend love’s true meaning. Perhaps that is what Paul was getting at when he said,

“When I was a child I spoke as a child, I thought as a child, I reasoned as a child. But, when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. Now we see through a glass dimly, but then face to face.”

And then, to change a word or two,

“Now I *love* in part, but then I shall *love* fully, even as I (*have been loved*).”

Thank God, we can count on the afterwards. The best is yet to be. Thank God, in his time and in his way, we shall enter into what the poet calls,

“The rest of life for which the first was made.”

“For now abideth faith, hope and love, these three, but the greatest of these is love.”