

## THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE - Part seventeen

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Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

### SLAVERY, POLYGAMY, DIVORCE, AND THE STRANGE GRACE OF GOD

**Mark 10:1-12** - "And he left there and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan, and crowds gathered to him again. And again, as was his custom, he taught them. [2] And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" [3] He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" [4] They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away." [5] And Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. [6] But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' [7] 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, [8] and they shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. [9] What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." [10] And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. [11] And he said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, [12] and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

Tonight's teaching is about divorce and remarriage, but only indirectly. We will have another full teaching on that next Sunday night. The subject tonight is about a *category of regulations* in the Bible that don't seem to fit with the kind of God we worship. There are regulations about divorce when we have already seen that it is God's will that man "*not separate*" what God has put together - **Matthew 19:6** - "**So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.**"

On top of this is the apparent sexist treatment of women in the issue of divorce. As a rule, only men were in charge of the divorce procedures. The woman had no say whatsoever. And divorce is only one example of this category of regulations in the Bible. There are God-given rules about *polygamy*. This is the case even though we know that God designed marriage as a bond between *one* husband and *one* wife. And there are laws about *slavery* even though we know that God created all of us equally in His image.

And then you have the accounts of men and women throughout the Biblical text who seem to know and love God and enjoy His presence and blessing in different ways, this in spite of the fact that they have several wives (sometimes many), carry on with concubines, and openly buy and trade slaves.

This is the general issue we want to look into tonight. Where is God in all of this? Why doesn't He stop it? And how can He issue rules and regulations seemingly catering to those who practice these things? For many people these are deal-breakers in their consideration of God. They can't imagine anyone worshiping a God who turns a blind eye to these obvious injustices (though we don't have as much a problem with an equitable divorce anymore).

Let's consider some broad principles before we look specifically at divorce and remarriage next week:

#### 1) NOT ALL REGULATIONS IN THE BIBLE CARRY EQUAL WEIGHT FOR THE CHURCH, AND WE NEED TO BE CAREFUL TO DISCERN THE DIFFERENCE

I chose our opening text because it contains such a clear example of this important principle. The Pharisees came to Jesus with a question not many would even ask today - "**And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?'**" (**Mark 10:2**). Most don't even *ask* about the lawfulness of divorce anymore. Our world *assumes* the lawfulness of divorce. People rarely think they need worry about God's approval.

What these Pharisees didn't realize was while they thought they were testing Jesus, He was actually testing them. "**What did Moses write about divorce?**" Jesus asked them. And they replied to the effect that Moses required a certificate of divorce and then he could send her away (**10:4**). It all seemed so simple.

But it *wasn't* that simple at all. When Jesus referred them back to Moses He was testing them to see *where* in the writings of Moses they would turn. And they never even glanced at the *first* thing Moses wrote about marriage in **Genesis 1:27** and **2:24**. But, as Jesus reminded them, Moses didn't just write **Deuteronomy 24**. He also wrote **Genesis 1 and 2**.

So we're witnessing something really fascinating in Jesus' run-in with the Pharisees. They want to talk about one

law from Moses and Jesus wants to talk about another. They want to talk about getting a divorce and Jesus wants to talk about two people becoming one flesh and **“holding fast”** to each other in marriage. So which law counts? Which way is Jesus going on this subject?

I think Jesus is teaching a lesson in this text. And it's more than a lesson on divorce or remarriage. He's giving another lesson **first**. And it's a point that doesn't get discussed nearly as often as it should. Jesus is nailing down the hard fact that there are different **kinds of laws** in the Scriptures. He's showing the Pharisees - and us as well - that there are laws God gave to present His eternal will for his people for all times and places, and there are laws - divine laws none the less - but laws given to **restrain particular sins** in hard hearts in specific rebellious situations:

**Mark 10:5-9** - **“And Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. [6] But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' [7] 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, [8] and they shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. [9] What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”**

The two important words in those verses are the **“Because”** at the beginning of **verse 6** and the **“But”** at the beginning of **verse 7**. In those two contrasting words Jesus recognizes two different situations and two different applications of authority. In other words, there are laws given to express God's divine **creative plan**, and there are laws given in order to **manage sin** and limit mankind's self-destruction.

## 2) NOT EVERYTHING REGULATED BY GOD IS APPROVED BY GOD

This is revealed in the incident in our Mark 10 divorce confrontation. The Pharisees come with a question about **divorce** and Jesus gives an answer about **marriage**. The Pharisees assume the ongoing endorsement of divorce and Jesus asserts the divine intention in marriage of our Creator God in the beginning. So it seems that at least this much is clear - just because some practice is **regulated** by divine law doesn't mean it passes the standard of **God's will** for His redeemed people, wanting to please and glorify their Lord.

Another way of illustrating this point is to consider some of the regulations regarding the treatment of slaves in the Bible - particularly, though not exclusively, in the Old Testament. Consider this passage:

**Exodus 21:2-6** - **“When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing. [3] If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. [4] If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's, and he shall go out alone. [5] But if the slave plainly says, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,' [6] then his master shall bring him to God, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave forever.”**

Now, here's the important question. Doesn't God care about slavery? He doesn't tell them to **stop** it. He seems to tell the people how to **do** it. Is this God's endorsement of the practice of slavery? No, it isn't. This is God involving Himself in the curbing the hardness of men's hearts to prevent total anarchy in these fallen systems. Slaves are to be properly provided for. They are to be allowed chance for freedom and proper care. They have the right to marriage and children. And if they were ever restored to their ancestral land - after either 7 or 50 years - they were to be provided with enough material goods for a fresh start.

But none of this is God's **endorsement** of slavery. It is simply the **fencing in** of what would otherwise be the anarchistic results of hardened hearts without gracious restraint. Outside of wiping out the human race, what is God to do with people **wired** in the opposite direction of God's laws? Without the re-creating redemptive work of Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit, restraining regulations against the full effects of indwelling sin are the only tools grace has left.

So the laws and regulations of Scripture must all be read with an understanding of **when** they were given and **what** they were designed to do. This is the point Jesus was making with the religious Pharisees in the debate regarding Moses and divorce.

## 3) WHY DOES GOD REGULATE THE CONTINUANCE OF ACTIVITIES THAT AREN'T EXPRESSIONS OF HIS HOLY WILL?

Why can't He make Himself clear? There doesn't appear to be a single command in the Bible **against** slavery. God sits in heaven in silence while the patriarchs collect concubines and wives. Moses writes out provisions for the practice of divorce. God doesn't even give any of these a slap on the wrist. What is going on here?

And what I want to say is there's a lot more going on than many Christians notice. Only you have to look a bit under the surface to see it. Paul tells us **one** of the ways the justice of God unfolds in the ebbs and flows of a fallen, God-ignoring culture. Even when people profess faith in God and follow Him in many areas of their lives, they can, under the influence of the blind common practices of their culture, fail to honor God in some of the most basic areas of life.

We all have the capacity to be just like John Newton, sitting in the hull of his great ship, penning the words, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me," while the slaves are packed in that ship on route for a profitable sale. It was **years** after his great conversion that John Newton finally gave up the slave trade. Because of the common practice of a fallen culture he was unable to see what he was doing as **sinful**.

So what does God **do** in such situations? He does more than just bark out commands. There are a couple of starting principles:

- a) ***First, He provides us with a faithful revelation in the Scriptures giving witness to both the attractive and repulsive sides of human character.***

We should be eternally grateful that the Bible is such a **realistic** book. If *I* were, in some biased way, wanting to collect tales that would show people in their pursuit of God I would include Joshua marching around Jericho and Daniel in the lion's den. I **wouldn't** include Abraham selling off his wife into a king's harem just to save his own skin. And I wouldn't include Solomon taking so many godless wives that his heart was eventually turned from the living God.

Why does the Spirit of God include these accounts? The answer leads into the second general principle:

- b) ***God shows, over time, the consequences of ignoring His will, even when He issues no additional command condemning that action.***

The apostle Paul gives us a very specific principle dealing with this issue - **Romans 1:18, 24, 28** - "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth....1:24....Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves....And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done."

Now, we need to read carefully here. Paul **isn't** saying God **never** judges our sin directly. He's not saying God sits in heaven and just ordains for sin to be its own judgment. No. God is **involved** in the process. There are times when He intervenes very specifically. And He certainly will **personally** judge all sin and unrighteousness at the end of the age.

But Paul says there are times when God's justice is manifested **through** the events of history. They don't appear - at least to us time-captured creatures - to **break in from the outside**. They **are** from the hand of God. But they don't have the **appearance** of being so to the casual glance.

You have to read the Bible **deeply** and **carefully** to see this. And that's intentional on God's part. He forces us to **study** the **effects** of sin in a way we'd never see merely glancing over a list of endless rules and regulations. There's a pattern to the justice of God unfolding in some of the most unlikely places. Time only permits a few random examples:

You can peer back right into the primordial world of the creation. In verses that have been analyzed to death, we find the cryptic description of the immorality between the sons and God and the daughters of men. In the debating of the meaning of this description we often overlook the fact that it is in the context of this strange event recorded in **Genesis 6** that God shortens human life on the earth. In other words, though it's never stated again as the judgment of God, at least **one** of the reasons you don't live to be 900 years of age is mankind's ignoring of the sexually undefiled union of one husband/one wife for life rule laid

down in **Genesis 1 and 2.**

On to Abraham and Sarah. Not trusting God to keep his promise of a child in their advanced age, Abraham and Sarah agree with the taking on of Hagar as a second wife. God doesn't stop the process. But what follows is a sad record of jealousy, cruelty, a huge quarrel about children, and finally the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael. Hardly a happy, healthy home.

Then Isaac's and Rebekah's lives are made bitter by Esau's marriages to two Hittite woman, Judith and Basemath. Rebekah's favoritism toward Jacob causes a rift in the family that will last for years, pushing Jacob into forced exile. She and Jacob, in one of the best known accounts in the Bible trick old Isaac into giving Esau's blessing to Jacob.

And Jacob seems to get away with the deception. But not really. Years later, in a twist of irony too great to be a coincidence, Jacob works for an unwanted wife. He's tricked. And when he takes on a second wife, Rachel, jealousy erupts along with a competition to produce more children for Jacob. Into this competition are dragged the maids Bilhah and Zilpah as auxiliary wives.

Again, God doesn't put a forced stop to the madness, but later we read how Rueben, the eldest son, had an illicit sexual relation to the concubine Bilhah. And when his father heard about it, it led to Rueben's exclusion from a place of acceptance among the twelve sons.

And so it goes - on and on. The justice of God unfolding, while people roll on with their own lives on their own terms. People make a dreadful mistake when they assume that just because God is *silent*, He is *inactive*. Hardness of heart needs to be brought to its only remedy, the cross of Christ. We need, and are offered *new creation* in Christ Jesus.

We need to see God's grace in these sordid Old Testament accounts ( and New Testament too). Sometimes the blindness of our culture makes a whole generation of Christians hard-hearted to *certain* common sins. So God gives us more than just a set of rules to follow. He allows us to see the fruit of a hard heart literally *cropping up* in the lives of people who could and should have known better - **Romans 15:4** - "**For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.**"

These are amazing words. God allows the continuance of certain practices, not because He approves of them, but because it expands the depth to which I will embrace His grace when I read about the destructive work of a hard heart. This should breed caution and thoroughness in my own repentance. It makes me long for a deeper work of the Holy Spirit in my life - one that will alert me to my own blind spots. And God works all of these things together for my good.

More specifically on divorce and remarriage next week.