Hardness of Heart

On Marriage, Divorce, and the New Eve From the Side of the New Adam

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Why I Don't Preach Topically

If you have been around this assembly for more than about three weeks, you know I am not a topical preacher. The reason is simple: topical preaching tends to *overemphasize* a particular subject. If you take any single biblical theme (the blood of Jesus, sin, marriage, anything) and isolate it from the surrounding chapters, you can land in a place where the emphasis is *out of proportion to the way Scripture itself frames it*.

Some people have told me, *Rob, you don't preach on sin*. The truth is I do not preach on sin *topically*. But when I get to a place in Scripture where sin is at the heart of the passage, I preach what is there. We have been going through Matthew for the better part of a year. We finished Matthew 18 last week. Matthew 19 opens directly with marriage and divorce and remarriage.

And if you think I am excited about preaching on this subject this morning, you are wrong. I did not wake up this morning saying, *Oh, look what I get to do today*. But what we miss when we treat marriage as an isolated *topic* is exactly what we *gain* when we let Matthew 18 frame Matthew 19. Jesus has just spent a whole chapter teaching the disciples how this new community of faith is supposed to operate in the world. You've seen the miracles. You've heard about the rule of God alive in the world. You've heard about the new creation, the church that

the gates of hell will not prevail against. Now here is what it is going to look like, different from what you've seen in the past.

Matthew 18 walks us through stumbling blocks, the lost sheep, forgiveness *seventy-seven times*, the unforgiving servant who owed ten thousand talents, *ten thousand lifetimes of labor*, and yet refused to forgive a fellow servant who owed three months' wages. The frame Jesus sets in Matthew 18 is *unlimited forgiveness within the community of faith*. We are not to feel that anyone in our community is *judging* us. (The challenge is that *we judge ourselves*. We are sometimes the most unforgiving toward our own selves. Relieve yourself of those talents of indebtedness against yourself; do not hold them one more day.)

Hold that frame as we step into Matthew 19. If we do not bring Matthew 18 with us, we will read Matthew 19 wrong.

The Pharisees Want to Know If Jesus Will End up Like John

Look at the geographical detail Matthew gives in the first verse:

"Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these sayings, that He departed from Galilee and came to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan" (Matthew 19:1).

Beyond the Jordan. That is *not* random information. The region beyond the Jordan was ruled by Herod Antipas, the same Herod Antipas who had beheaded John the Baptist *for telling him it was not lawful for him to have his brother's wife* (cf. Matthew 14:3–12). Herod had put away his own wife, taken his brother's wife Herodias, and Herodias had pressured Herod into having John executed for the offense of naming the impropriety.

So Jesus walks into Herod's territory. And Herod has already been wondering whether Jesus is *John the Baptist raised from the dead* (cf. Matthew 14:1–2): He has spies in the crowds, he is monitoring this Jesus movement, and now Jesus is in his backyard.

And what is the first question the Pharisees ask?

"The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?'" (Matthew 19:3).

If Jesus says the wrong thing about divorce, particularly about *Herod's kind* of divorce, Jesus ends up like John. The question is not innocent. It is a setup. *Testing Him*. And at this point in Matthew, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem to fulfill everything God has commissioned him to do. The gloves are off. He answers them straight.

From the Beginning

Watch how Jesus answers. He does not go to *Deuteronomy 24*: the divorce-certificate passage. He goes to *Genesis 1 and 2*:

> And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He 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 then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate." (Matthew 19:4–6)

The Pharisees come back with Moses:

> They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?" He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so." (Matthew 19:7–8)

From the beginning it was not so. That is the critical phrase. Jesus is making a move the rabbinic schools of his day were not making. He is saying that the Mosaic divorce certificate was an accommodation to hardness of heart, not the original ideal.

The Deuteronomy Text and What the Rabbis Were Debating

Let me show you what the Pharisees were actually quoting. Deuteronomy 24:1:

> When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house . . . (Deuteronomy 24:1)

Two things to notice. First, *the man has the prerogative to divorce his wife, not vice versa*. That asymmetry is itself an indicator that something is broken, broken from the very moment Genesis 3 introduces the curse. Second, the phrase *some uncleanness* (or in some translations *some indecency*) was hotly debated among the rabbis in Jesus' day. There were two schools.

The school of Shammai read *some uncleanness* narrowly: it referred to sexual misconduct. The school of Hillel read it broadly: it could mean almost anything, even, in the most-quoted example, *she burned the biscuits one too many times*. Most Jews of Jesus' day followed Hillel; Josephus and others write as though a *broad* reading of the divorce permission was the cultural default. *Divorce for any reason* was simply *how things worked*.

And the reason the broad reading prevailed had a peculiar logic. *If a woman had committed adultery,* Mosaic law called for her to be stoned. A dead woman did not need a certificate of divorce. So the certificate of divorce *had* to be for some lesser offense, *which the broad school then expanded to mean almost any offense at all*. That is the legal context Jesus is stepping into.

And Jesus' answer is to bypass the debate entirely. *Moses permitted this because of the hardness of your hearts. But from the beginning it was not so.* He is going behind Moses, all the way back to creation.

The Hardened Heart, From Pharaoh to the Husband

Think for a moment about that word *hardness*. When Moses went to Pharaoh to say *let my people go*, what did Pharaoh do? *He hardened his heart*. The Hebrew people had originally entered Egypt as *equals*: Joseph was second only to Pharaoh, and Israel was given the choice land of Goshen. But over four hundred and thirty years, Pharaoh's heart became hardened toward the descendants of those original equals, and they became *subjugated* to him. Power that had been mutual became domination over time.

Now hear Jesus' diagnosis in Matthew 19. Your hearts toward your wives have become hardened, just like Pharaoh's heart toward the Hebrew people. What had originally been mutual (male and female created He them, and He gave them dominion) had hardened into the man rules over the woman as Pharaoh ruled over Israel. The Mosaic divorce certificate was a grudging accommodation to that hardness, intended to protect the woman in a situation that should never have arisen in the first place.

Without the certificate, what happens to a discarded wife? Unless she has a living father or grown sons, she is in serious trouble. Moses' certificate at least preserved her standing: said publicly that *there was no impropriety on her side*, that she was *free to remarry*, that her social position was not destroyed by being put away. The certificate was a small protection inside a much larger injustice. Jesus is not commending it. He is *naming what it was*.

Any time a person rules over another with domination and force from a position of power, sin is involved. That is not how God intended things from the beginning.

"In the Beginning It Was Not So"

So let's go back to *the beginning*. Listen to how Genesis 1 frames it:

> Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it . . .” (Genesis 1:26–28)

Let them have dominion. Plural. Male and female. Both bearing the image. Both given dominion. The original picture is big-us doing the work of God together, not big-me, little-you.

Then Genesis 2 zooms in on the moment when Adam discovers he needs a counterpart:

“So Adam gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper comparable to him” (Genesis 2:20).

The Hebrew word for *helper*, *ezer*, does not carry the connotation of subordinate that English often gives it. *Ezer* is used overwhelmingly in the Old Testament as a name for *God himself, the Lord is my helper* (cf. Psalm 30:10; Psalm 54:4). When God describes Eve as Adam’s *ezer*, the image is not *boss and assistant*. It is the same kind of help Israel received from God in their time of need: *an ezer who comes alongside and supplies what is lacking*. Adam had deficiencies when he was alone. He needed augmentation. He could not do the work God had called him to do without his counterpart.

The Deep Sleep and the Side

And then watch what happens:

> And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. Then the rib which the Lord God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man. (Genesis 2:21–22)

Now let me fast-forward for a moment, because I cannot help showing you what John does with this. When Jesus (*the second Man, the last Adam* (1 Corinthians 15:45–47)) *falls asleep* on the cross, what happens? *It is finished*, he says. He breathes his last. And the Roman soldier comes by and pierces his side with a spear:

"But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out" (John 19:34).

John alone among the Gospel writers records this detail. And John alone among the Gospel writers also records in chapter 3 that *unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God* (John 3:5). *Blood and water* are John's signature pair. They flow from the pierced side of the new Adam asleep on the cross. And from that pierced side, *the new Eve is fashioned*: the bride of Christ, the church, born of water and blood.

That is what is happening when we are washed with the water, when we are cleansed by the blood. The stony heart is taken out and the heart of flesh put in (Ezekiel 36:26). The new Eve rises up from the side of the new Adam to work alongside him in the field of the new creation. Adam from heaven and Eve on earth, *together*, are completing the dominion that was given *to them*, plural, *in the beginning*.

"This One Finally"

Now back to Genesis 2. Adam wakes up from the deep sleep. He sees what God has formed. And he breaks into the first poem in the Bible:

> And Adam said: "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. (Genesis 2:23–24)

"*This one, finally.*" That is the tone in the Hebrew. Out of all of creation, *this one finally* is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. The word translated *bone* carries the connotation of *strength and stability*. (Why do archaeologists find the bones of our ancestors when nothing else of them remains? Because the bones are the strength. They are what gives stability.) *Bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh* is *covenant language*. It is what gets said at many weddings, *for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health; for better, for worse*. The covenant says: *In the strong times and in the fleshly weak times, we are together. We are better together*.

In one famous Hollywood movie a man says to a woman, You make me want to be a better man. Doesn't every wife want to hear that from her husband? And doesn't every husband want to hear from his wife, You are my strength; bone of my bones; you are it; you are amazing; go out and slay dragons; run into the dark when bad things are happening, and I'll stay with the children?

And once, this really happened, when our oldest three children were very small, I was awakened in the middle of the night by what I can only describe as the *pressure in the house dropping*. There was a storm outside, and the pressure differential between the inside and the outside of the house had shifted in a way you can feel before your conscious mind catches up. My wife and I sat up at exactly the same moment: *Somebody is in the house*. I would have loved to say, *Honey, would you go check on it? Walk down that dark hallway into the kitchen and see what's going on.* But I would have been *shamed*: the way I had been shamed earlier in our marriage when I had asked her, eight months pregnant with our first daughter, to kill a spider. (We will not revisit *that* hall of shame.) So I got up, grabbed a baseball bat, and went into the dark to see what was happening. *Usually it is not as bad as it seems in the dark.*

This one finally, bone of my bones, my strength. That does not sound like a dominant relationship over a passive one. That sounds like strength meeting strength, life meeting life.

The Sound of Ish and Ishah

And notice the language Moses uses:

"She shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man" (Genesis 2:23).

In Hebrew, *man* is *ish* and *woman* is *ishah*. Moses could have used entirely different words for the two sexes: words that *sounded* different from each other, marking the sexes as distinct categories. Instead he uses words that sound almost identical, just like our English *man* and *woman* (and *male/female*, *gentleman/lady*). The phonetic resonance carries a theological claim: *before the fall, they together had dominion*. It was not *big me, little you*. It was *big us*, doing the work of God together. The sounds of the names reflect the sound of the original equality.

And the Serpent Was More Crafty

Then comes Genesis 3. The serpent is more crafty than any beast of the field. The fruit is taken. The covering is sewn. The hiding begins. And God walks through the garden:

"Then the Lord God called to Adam and said to him, 'Where are you?'" (Genesis 3:9).

God *pursues*. He does not abandon them in the bushes. He calls them out. He hears their confession (though it comes out as blame). And then he pronounces the consequences of the fall. Listen carefully to what he says to the woman:

"To the woman He said: 'I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in pain you shall bring forth children; your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you'" (Genesis 3:16).

And he shall rule over you. The church has often read this as *the mandate from God for male rule*. But notice the Hebrew word: *rule*. It is the same word used in Genesis 1:26–28, where *male and female together were given dominion over the creation*. The very word that originally described their *shared* rule over the earth is now used to describe the man's *contested* rule over the woman. That is not a divine endorsement; that is a divine *diagnosis*. *This is what the fall does.* The shared dominion fractures into a power struggle, and the stronger party wins the struggle. The curse is not a blueprint for ongoing marital order; it is the *symptom report* of the disorder that the kingdom is intended to heal.

The Curse Reversed

And what does the rest of the chapter promise?

"And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel" (Genesis 3:15).

The head of the serpent will be crushed. The power of the fall will be broken. And what the kingdom of God brings, when Jesus comes, is the *reversal* of every effect of the curse. *He has obliterated the distinctions that the curse imposed.* Hear Paul:

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

And Peter:

"Likewise you husbands, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life . . " (1 Peter 3:7).

Heirs together. Not heir and servant. Not boss and assistant. *Joint heirs of the grace of life.* The new creation is not the *continuation* of the curse but its *undoing*. The kingdom restores

the *plural dominion* of Genesis 1, lived out as the *covenant strength* of Genesis 2, on this side of the cross.

This is why Paul can say *if anyone is in Christ, new creation* (2 Corinthians 5:17). *We have been given an opportunity to rule together.* Peter calls husbands and wives *joint heirs*. The hierarchy of the fall is undone in Christ.

The Heart of the Matter Is the Heart

So with that whole framework in place, what does Jesus' word in Matthew 19 actually mean for us?

The problem is unforgiveness. The problem is hardness of heart. If we will take care of *hardness of heart*, we do not need marriage laws. We do not need laws for how to treat children (which is the next passage in Matthew 19, *let the little children come unto Me*). We do not need laws about leadership (which is the chapter after, where the mother of James and John asks for the right and left seats and Jesus says, *it shall not be so among you*). All the laws in the world cannot fix a hard heart, and a soft heart does not need most of the laws.

Ezekiel saw this with extraordinary clarity:

> Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. (Ezekiel 36:25–27)

A new heart. A new spirit. The heart of stone replaced by a heart of flesh. Jeremiah, in the parallel passage, puts it this way: I will put My law in their inward parts, and write it on their hearts (Jeremiah 31:33). That is what Jesus brought. The law moves from stone to flesh; from

outside to inside; from coerced compliance to inner inclination. And when that has happened in a person, the marriage laws are no longer the primary instrument.

When researchers actually survey couples and ask *how many fights do you have per week?*, the numbers for couples who eventually divorce are not significantly different from the numbers for couples who do not. *The difference is not the frequency of conflict. The difference is whether the wound gets cleaned and closed.* In any long marriage you will have ups and downs. The work is the cleaning out, the forgiveness, the press toward each other after the moment of conflict, and *that* work depends on the heart, not on the rulebook.

And so the call is simple to state, even if it is not always simple to live: *be the kind of person whose heart God has softened*. Show mercy. Show grace. Outdo your spouse in forgiveness. Outdo your children in honor. Be in your home what Matthew 18 calls us to be in the church.

What About the Hard Cases?

And then someone says, *Rob, can I get a divorce?* My answer is: *Check your heart. Ask God.* If you are seeking God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, God will give you the answers to your complex life. Paul, writing to the Corinthian church (which was operating in a Greco-Roman cultural context entirely unlike Jesus' Jewish audience), addresses *believing wives married to unbelieving husbands* and *believing husbands married to unbelieving wives*:

"But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace" (1 Corinthians 7:15).

Notice how Paul handles the same general subject in a different concrete situation. Jesus is talking to Jews in the territory of Herod Antipas. Paul is writing to Corinthians in a city where, two chapters earlier, he had to address men in the church visiting temple prostitutes (1

Corinthians 6:15–16). Different cultures. Different sins. Different specific pastoral responses. *Same underlying issue: the heart.*

This is what Matthew 18 has been preparing us for. *Whatsoever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven* (Matthew 18:18). The church has been given the responsibility to discern wisely in concrete situations. There is grace in Corinth. There is grace in Judea. There is grace in the particular marriage you are sitting in right now. *And in cases of real, irreconcilable damage, there is also mercy, seventy times seven worth of mercy, for those whose marriages have not held*. That mercy does not collapse the ideal Jesus named in Matthew 19. It simply means that those who fall short of the ideal, and all of us fall short of *some* ideal, are not excluded from the community of grace.

Paul will write elsewhere that *husbands love your wives* and *wives respect your husbands* (cf. Ephesians 5:33). Some have read that as a deeply unequal command. But notice what it actually claims: *both spouses are commanded to give the thing the other particularly needs*. Women generally hunger to be *loved*; men generally hunger to be *respected*. There are unlovable women and unrespectable men, and for those situations we *pray*. But if two people are both genuinely reaching for the Lord, *reconciliation through softened hearts is not just possible, it is inevitable*. The only marriages that finally cannot be reconciled are the ones in which one or both parties have stopped reaching.

If you think the message this morning was too soft, or if you think it was too hard, please come and talk to me. These situations are deeply nuanced. What I want us to walk away with is not a checklist but the same posture Jesus called us to in Matthew 18: *the soft-hearted, gracious, forgiving people God has called us to be in the kingdom of God*. When we are that with our

spouses, with our children, with our parents, with our friends, with our brothers and sisters in the body, *it is a beautiful thing*.