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“Whoever can accept this ought to accept it” (Matt 19:12).

If the Pharisees quizzed Jesus about divorce, we know that it must have been a controversial issue. They rarely asked him a question that was not a trap. If he supported divorce, they would have called him lax; if he was against divorce, they would have pitted him against Moses, who allowed divorce.

Jesus supports the ideal of the indissolubility of a true marriage by going back to Genesis, where God made the union of husband and wife a sign of the full image and likeness of God. Their unity in love revealed them to be not two, but one creation. Their union was also the basis for the sign of covenant love between God and his people, like bridegroom and bride bound with an everlasting love.

Jesus’ response to the Pharisees goes much deeper than the question, and when they make their counter argument that Moses had allowed divorce, Jesus scolds them again with the truth that Moses’ concession was only because of “the hardness of men’s hearts.” Was this the position the Pharisees wanted to be seen defending? Jesus traps them in their own trap.

The ideal of indissoluble marriage shocked even Jesus’ own disciples. If a man has to be faithful to one wife, then “maybe it is better not to marry,” they said. Their notion of divorce with a simple writ of dismissal revealed a social standard that clearly favored men, while Jesus’ support for mutual fidelity was a radical stance that must have resonated with women.

The Gospel passage ends with a real window into Jesus' own time. The hard reality was that some people were born unable to marry, others rendered that way by cruelty. Voluntary celibacy is praised when it was for the sake of the Kingdom, to free someone to serve or to make them more available to the community. Jesus notes that not everyone is able to do this.

This is a difficult passage of scripture, and when dropped into our modern context, it continues to be controversial and a matter of interpretation. How each person deals with the ideal and the reality of their own relationships and sexual maturity is a deeply personal journey that has its own trials and graces. One thing we can be sure of, that Jesus accompanies us all as we work it out.

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