

MALE, FEMALE, OR WHAT?

Mark 10:2-16

This is probably for many of you before your time, but a revolutionary show on TV was “All in the Family.” It was about an older couple in New York, Archie and Edith Bunker. They began each show with them singing a song, “Those Were the Days.” The song included the line: “Girls were girls and men were men.” In the 1970’s traditional people bemoaned how men wore long hair and girls dressed in slacks.

In 1998 the rock group “Metallica” covered the Bob Seger song, “Turn the Page,” which includes the lines about being on the road and going into a restaurant:

Yeah, most times you can't hear 'em talk
Other times you can
All the same old clichés
Is it woman? Is it man?
And you always seem outnumbered
You don't dare make a stand
Make your stand.

The reference in the song to comments about being a woman or a man made sense when Seger wrote the song in 1972 (the same time as “All in the Family”), but by 1998 men having long hair was no issue and many men had returned to wearing short hair.

But today Archie’s and Edith’s world has gotten a lot more complicated. It isn’t just a matter of how you look, but what it means today to be “male” and “female. We have known that there are rare cases of people who are physically both male and female. But studies show that other people have different levels of “femaleness” or “maleness” in their hormones. Science shows us that we are in some respects all female until hormones kick in and make males male. But beyond those scientific claims today are all the people who feel that they are deep down a man or woman or both or neither. There is a whole new vocabulary with words like “cis” and “trans,” and a whole new array of personal pronouns to describe that. Here are some statements that people make in light of this:

“Men and women are not different.”
“A man can be trapped in a woman’s body.”
“A person can be both male and female.”
“There are five sexes.”
“Some people are neither male nor female.”
“There are an infinite number of ‘genders’ or ‘gender identities.’”
“You may have an infinite number of genders inside you.”
“People may choose their own gender.”
“Gender is fluid.”
“Gender is purely a social construct.”

So what does it mean to be “male” and “female?”

What can drive that questioning is the emphasis we have in our culture on freedom. I do not want to get into an argument about whether or not we should wear face masks, but realize government edicts that demand wearing them are not questioned in most countries. You do what you are told to do. But in our world there is so much put into what “feels” right to us. So shouldn’t what we feel determine who we are?

In contrast to that we have the words of Genesis about the creation of humans which was quoted by Jesus: “But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’”

As we join together for worship it can be easy for us to see what is going on in the world as the evil of this world, which we are not a part of and be satisfied that we are “above” all of that. But when Jesus spoke, he was not speaking to a group of pagans who had very little constraints about sexuality. They felt men were men, and women were women, but that was because they lived in a male dominated world where men could do what they want, have sex with anyone male or female as long as it wasn’t another man’s wife. Jesus was speaking to devout Jews who convinced themselves they were above all that evil. They did not allow any kind of sexual relations except between men and women in marriage, but men were free to have more than one wife and to “throw away” unwanted wives by divorce. In light of that Jesus says bluntly asks them:

“What did Moses command you?” They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.” And Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. And he said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery.” against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.

Jesus was not speaking to the “world out there,” but to the people who claimed to be God’s. They had taken God’s Word which was given to guide people into the loving relationship of marriage and twisted to do what “felt” right to them without having to feel guilty about it.

It can be easy for us to put on a pedestal the homosexuality and emphasis on the freedom to change gender identity, because for so many of us those aren’t temptations. I can easily point to how bad people who embrace those things are and make ourselves look good at the same time. That’s what the Pharisees were so good at. So can we be.

By comparison do we emphasize lying or gossip or the thoughts we have of jealousy or contempt. Those are things that can easily tempt us. Those are not the kinds of sins we want to point out because “I” become the one who looks bad. “I’m” the evil one.

So what do we do? Do we change what God created? When Jesus said, “God made them male and female,” He was quoting the Old Testament. We do not follow the laws of the Old Testament about what to eat, festivals to celebrate, sacrifices, “cleanness” and “uncleanness,” and all of that. So why not just accept that we are what we want to be, what we “feel” we are?

I can jump off a cliff and say, “I don’t feel like falling,” That doesn’t keep me from falling. I can dive into deep water without knowing how to swim and say, “I don’t feel like sinking,” but that won’t keep me from drowning. The ideas about basic morality—no lying, no stealing, no cheating, no adultery, no murder, being male and female—are found throughout the world and have been there at least since it was first recorded by history. Those are not optional, up to us to determine, but the way the world was created just as surely as the laws of physics. Why? Because as Jesus reminds us, “But from the beginning of creation.” God made this world and us; He ought to know how best for us to live.

So what do we do? Try to live a perfect life following all His commands? Even apart from what God says, people within all cultures and in all times fail to do the good they know they should do and do the evil they know they should not do. Only if we act like the Pharisees spending so much time showing the sins of others so they could look so good can we pretend that we are perfect. But if we live using what we “feel” is good, then we are also just pretending we are okay, when we are not.

That is why we need to remember who was speaking in our lesson and who said, “But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’” Jesus doesn’t let us off by saying we are okay or saying that we are better than others. No one spoke more in the Bible about the suffering of hell that sinners deserve more than Jesus. Instead Jesus gives us forgiveness. He doesn’t say “You’re okay,” but “Your sins are forgiven.” Look at the people Jesus accepted. They were like the woman caught in adultery, the Canaanite woman who asked Jesus to heal her daughter, or the tax collector Zacchaeus. They knew full well they were not “okay.” And in that forgiveness they were freed to live not according to what felt “good” to them, but in terms of loving God and others, like Zacchaeus who paid back all those he had cheated.

“God created them male and female.” Jesus is affirming that humanity can never be just male or female. It is not humanity unless there are both. He said that in a world in which women were often thought of as property. He is affirming that “maleness” and “femaleness” are good, because He made us that way, and as I saw years ago in a poster around here, “God doesn’t make junk.” That is also not simple because we live in a world infested with sin. It is the world that convinces us that we know better than God. It is also a world in which we are tempted to try to control God by making others look worse and us look better. But the answer to that fallen world is not to put it over there and say we don’t live in it or to say it is better to just accept it. The answer is to go to the cross of Jesus, let Him forgive us of that sin, then be freed to live with what He has given us as men and women, as tall and short, as Caucasian, Hispanic, African, or Asian. Even though we face the effects of sin which give us disabilities, sickness, and aging, we can rejoice in who we are as the people who have been made and “remade” through forgiveness by God.