

“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

Wow, let's just tackle that question, shall we? Because I'm super-well qualified to do so. And I'm sure it's what you were hoping I'd pick to talk about.

But, it is an issue that affects probably most of us in some way or another, and it's something Jesus addressed. That in itself is reason enough, but in addition, I think we can see, in the forcefulness of Jesus' words, what God's hopes for us are relationally and what we're meant to be to each other.

When you're listening to this passage, did you notice who Jesus was speaking to when he got all upset about this? The questioner is not someone in the middle of a painful crisis, sincerely needing and seeking guidance and help. No, who we have here are the Pharisees coming up “to test Jesus” and this is where they're coming from when they ask “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

Now, these men spend most of their day every day studying the law; they know what the law says about divorce.

So Jesus answers their question with another question: “What did Moses command you?”

By tradition, Moses was the one who gave Israel the Torah – the Law – one passage in the Torah related to the issue of divorce is in Deuteronomy.

Here's what it says:

“Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man's wife. Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house (or the second man who married her dies); her first husband, who sent her away, is not permitted to take her again to be his wife...”

(Deut 24:1-4)

So the Pharisees answered, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.”

Jesus comes back at them – “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male

and female.’ ‘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 they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

Strong words.

Later, when they were back at the house, the disciples asked Jesus about it again, and he framed the situation from both sides – if the husband divorces his wife and remarries, it’s adultery; if the wife divorces her husband and remarries, it’s adultery. Even stronger words.

Now, I don’t know this, but I’m imagining that possibly some walls are going up right now if they weren’t already up just at the reading of this Gospel. Please try to keep listening.

For one thing, remember the point at the beginning: who is he talking to? People who are asking for a generic ruling on a generic subject, looking for loopholes, justifications. And he gets mad.

Contrast that with the way he treated the woman who was caught in adultery, when everybody wanted to stone her. Here’s a specific situation, with specific people. If the question was about the law, the law was clearly broken. But what did Jesus do? He pointed out that no one was without sin, so no one can rely on the law to justify themselves. We all depend on God’s mercy to forgive us and restore us to right relationships with God and with each other.

I think one point Jesus was making with the Pharisees and with the disciples in speaking so forcefully about divorce is that divorce destroys relationships and creates distance, not only between people (those directly and indirectly affected), but also between us and God. It’s not about what’s *lawful*, what people are *allowed* or *permitted* to do; it’s not primarily about the *law* at all. It’s about *people*. It’s about what God intended for us and wants for us in our relationships with each other and with God.

The Pharisees’ question was framed from the perspective of someone looking at divorce from outside of it. The question is generic, hypothetical: “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

You want a rule? You already have a rule – what does it say? “It says we can divorce.” Okay, so there’s your rule. But the rule is because you’re hard-hearted; when you use it for your own convenience or to hurt the other person, you’ve missed the point of what this relationship of marriage was created to be.

Marriage is a relationship between people, specific, individual people, not generic/hypothetical people. Don’t reduce the relationship to rules and loopholes. Marriage was meant to put people together to make them something new, in themselves and in relation to the community.

Marriage is sacramental: it’s a vehicle through which Christ offers grace to both people, and to others around them, including children – what is the gift of life itself if not a supreme grace from God? If you’re married, you yourself are one manifestation of God’s grace to your spouse. In the covenant of marriage, you love and serve your husband, your wife, as Christ loves and serves the church. You are an image of Christ, potentially the clearest image your spouse sees of who Christ is. If your wife had only you to judge from, what would she think Christ is like? If your husband had only you to judge from, what would he think Christ is like?

One of the most powerful witnesses of our Christian belief in Christ’s incarnation, for those who are married, is that, when Christ’s grace is at work in your marriage, you can see him in each other. *This* is the point, at least part of the point of Jesus getting so upset with the Pharisees for trying to find justification and permission for divorce. The point is not what’s permissible under the law – what can we legally get away with in our dealings with each other. The point is that, in our relationships with each other we can come to know God in ways that we can’t know him on our own. Our relationships, particularly the bond of marriage, are avenues of God’s grace – that’s why marriage is a sacrament – that’s why the community of the church itself, as a body, is a sacramental thing and why just being here together for the purpose of worshipping God is beneficial to us - it’s a way God is tangibly at work in us, visible to us. God is present to us through each other. Those of you who are married not only offer God’s grace to your spouse in your relationship, but you also spread it to your family and

everyone who knows you, including your church family. Marriage is a gift to the church, and the church has a responsibility to support people in their marriages; when people are married in the church, in fact, we all promise to “do all in our power to uphold these two persons in their marriage.”

Sometimes things in a marriage go haywire and become destructive. God created marriage, and marriage is a good thing, but it can be warped into something awful to the point that, in comparison, divorce is better. If one or the other or both people don't want to change their destructive relationship, divorce might be necessary to save the people. This doesn't mean that divorce is good. I have never heard anyone say, “I love getting divorced – I hope it will always be this way!”

No matter what the precipitating situations were, divorce is a terrible loss. It's a loss of relationship, and also a loss of identity, because of what we heard Jesus quote from Genesis – when two people marry, they aren't two separate individuals anymore; they're one.

Have you ever super-glued your thumb and finger together? What happens if you pull them apart? I've been told that divorce is like that.

Divorce laws exist because individual people are of infinite value and shouldn't be destroyed, even by marriage. But divorce was never anybody's plan or goal, least of all God's. The plan for a sacramental relationship between two people is marriage. So the point is not to find legal justifications for divorce but to understand what the intent of marriage is.

What does God want to do in you that he can best do through your marriage? Many things, probably. This would be a good question to take up with him – you can also take it up with your wife or with your husband, because, if you will recall what I said a minute ago, your marriage is an avenue of God's grace – it's one of the ways God speaks to you.