

## No Divorce from Gracefulness

**Raise your hand if you like tests?** (probably in the minority:) This doesn't count 'test drives' which are about the only test I seem to look forward to!

For most of us, there is something about tests that make our stomachs churn, our hearts race, and our opinion of ourselves DROP until we seem very, very small.

**And a 'test' is what initiates this whole difficult conversation with Jesus.** The Pharisees, some of the Jewish religious leaders, challenged Jesus with a question that was designed to **test** him. Maybe they wanted to see if he measured up but you could also think of it as an interrogation. They wanted information out of Jesus, but only that information which would be helpful for their cause.

Jesus takes the whole encounter and turns it on its head because Jesus isn't concerned about his own cause. He is concerned about those who are hurting, those who are broken, and that is how we need to hear his words. Already some of us may be feeling very, very small because of the broken relationships in our own lives, but wonderfully (and with gracefulness) all this difficult talk about divorce culminates with a blessing of the 'small' people, the children.

The talk about divorce and the blessing given to children are tied together, both grammatically in the text and consequentially in real life. Here is how I see the relationship. Get a pencil and write this down if you want. We're going to be coming back to it several times, although I won't have a test about it at the end:)

**The Kingdom does not depend on our sinfulness.**

It depends upon GOD's **gracefulness** to embrace us in JESUS.

First let's get to the sinful part. This text is another in a series of very provocative and powerful statements by Jesus on the nature of sin. Last week Jesus said that if hands and eyes and feet are a cause of sin we should amputate them from the body. Today he lays out very high expectations for human relationships and if you think you have somehow escaped unscathed from either of these two readings, next week Jesus will zero in on money and possessions as the cause of our separation from God. Nobody escapes the condition of being 'sinful'. That is one of the big points Jesus makes.

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Because you see the Pharisees and other religious thinkers of the day thought some people could indeed evade 'sinfulness' if they kept the law. A lot of us still fall into that trap today but the "law" often becomes a system rigged in favor of the powerful which leaves others at extreme risk. Let me tell you a little about divorce in the first century. It was almost always a man's prerogative. Seldom, if ever did women divorce their husbands and if you notice, the question put to Jesus is very plainly, "Is it lawful for a MAN to divorce his wife?" Now this was really a trick question from the beginning because everybody knew it was lawful. Moses said so.

The only question (and it was a raging question at the time) was **under what circumstances** can a man divorce his wife? In the first century, there were two schools of Jewish thought on issues like this, each headed by a famous Rabbi. One said a man could divorce his wife only on the grounds of unfaithfulness. The other said literally burning your toast was reason enough to put your wife out of the house- where she would have no means of support, no social status, no security, and no means of taking care of herself or her children. There were a lot of men trying to figure out the minimum requirements for supporting their families.

**Jesus avoids taking sides and goes completely over their heads.** He takes the conversation back to the very beginning. He trumps "law" with "purpose". Humans were created for relationships. The purpose God has in mind for human relationships is one of mutual help and partnership. Relationships, especially life-long, committed relationships, are to be so mutually beneficial that the two become one, with each *belonging* to the other. That is the ideal God had in mind.

**So if "lawful-ness" is defined by God's intentions for the creation, then breaking human relationships is never lawful because that is never what God intends.** Nobody who asked the question expected Jesus to take the conversation to this level. That is evidenced by the disciples who ask Jesus again about the whole thing later. Yet by going back to what God had in mind for us before we messed it all up, Jesus demolishes the self-righteous justification that "following the law" tries to give. The apostle Paul says the law provides no solution for sinfulness. It only shows us how far away from God we really are.

**So here we sit, centuries later, still enduring the pain of broken relationships.** I don't need to tell anyone today that divorce is not what God wants. Divorce is not what anyone really "wants"... and yet we are people who break stuff, many times because we ourselves are broken. Because of this, divorce is filled with sinfulness on all kinds of

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levels --*but a marriage can also be filled with just as much sinfulness.* Jesus equates divorce with adultery but in Matthew's gospel, Jesus equates lustful gazes with adultery too! My friends, judging another ends up incriminating ourselves. We have all failed to live up to God's ideal. Sin is everywhere. We are broken and we cannot fix ourselves ... so now what?

### **Enter the children and the power of gracefulness.**

This is not a detached incident. It is a sign Jesus uses to set God's gracefulness over and above the law. People are bringing children to Jesus. More than likely these are not the kids of the well-off or well-to-do. They were probably kids who knew quite a bit about brokenness. They might very well be children and mothers who were left out on their own by a divorce. They might have been disabled, sick, homeless, dirty, law-breaking street kids for all we know. The point is that we don't know and it doesn't matter. Jesus embraces them all. These little ones, who were at the bottom of the social ladder, the most vulnerable and needy of all, are the ones Jesus welcomes because:

**The Kingdom does not depend on our sinfulness.**

It depends upon GOD's **gracefulness** to embrace us in JESUS.

Brokenness is never what God wants or intends. We should do everything in our power to support healthy relationships of all kinds - for both married and single people. You realize that as a congregation we make a solemn vow to do that at every marriage and every confirmation and every baptism- and there are likely many more ways we need to embody that support.

Yet despite the best efforts of everyone, sometimes relationship break. When that happens, let us remind one another that God is in the business of fixing up broken things and with grace, God is able to create life even out of the most deadly crash. If today you are struggling with brokenness in your life, if guilt and shame are weighing heavy on your heart, God has good news for you. In this place **all are welcome** to receive the embrace of Jesus so that all might be blessed and made new. All are welcome to hear... and eat and drink... the promise of God's unconditional love. And all are welcome to receive the healing that comes with forgiveness so that tomorrow might be brighter than today. Because the truth is this:

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And gracefulness is a lap we can always sit on... and BE LOVED. Amen.

(p.s. see the word cloud on the next page)

