

Title: Looking for Loopholes, but Discovering Grace

Subtitle: Finding Fulfillment in God's Redeeming Grace

The brilliant comedian and movie actor W. C. Fields led an unrestrained showbiz life, displaying a fondness for alcohol and mistresses. One of his closest friends said about him, “No man ever worked so patiently at wrecking his soul and body as did this prince of comedians. But as his death approached, he began to read the Bible. When a friend asked about this newfound interest, he humorously explained, “I’m looking for loopholes.”

In our Gospel today, Jesus argues that Moses’ temporary provision for divorce was not intended as a loophole to excuse divorce ***“for any cause.”***¹

The context reveals that the divorce question was posed as “a test.” The Pharisees were hoping Jesus would surely alienate someone with its “no-win” setup. And if Herod got wind of his answer, it might even cost him his life.

Therefore, instead of directly answering their question, Jesus turns it back to them and asks, ***“What did Moses command you?”***² The Pharisees’ question only dealt with what God permitted and not what God commanded. Therefore, Jesus uses their choice of words to address the divorce question from a different perspective.

Moses’ temporary provision for divorce was never meant to be the norm. Jesus said, ***“For your hardness of heart, he wrote you this commandment.”***³ Matthew Gospel adds, ***“But from the beginning, it was not so.”***⁴ Therefore, the permission for divorce was only a compassionate accommodation.

¹ Matthew 19:3b

² Mark 10:3

³ Mark 10:5

⁴ Matthew 19:8

Like the Ten Commandments, the law can never give us the power to do what God commands. The law defines what our relationship with God and others should be. But in doing so, it inadvertently condemns us by showing us our sins and the evil that lies close at hand. However, when faced with this reality, God always offers a solution, for our dilemma shows us our need for a Savior.

Therefore, in a society where just over 50% of all marriages end in divorce, we need something much better than loopholes. We need tangible help mixed with compassion.

We understand that relationships do break down and become what we call “irreparable.” We all know of abusive situations that have caused deep and abiding emotional harm, and we are all too familiar with deep-seated anger, which can cause eruptions of physical violence and harmful behaviors. And, in some situations, the people of God cannot afford to be ignorant of the need for separation and closure so that the couple can move on with their individual lives and find forgiveness for themselves and each other.

When such tragedies happen, we, as a church family, are here to provide a sanctuary for healing and reconciliation. The church can’t always prevent a divorce. But it does represent God’s hope for wholeness through grace. So, over and over, God gives us a chance to begin anew— hopefully, to learn from past mistakes and see them as an opportunity for growth. Therefore, those who come through it the healthiest are often those willing to admit their part in the breakdown and accept God’s offer of forgiveness.

Our New Testament lesson from the Book of Hebrews describes our new relationship with God built not on the covenant of law but grace. And seeing that we have a God who has come to us and shared fully in our human experience, we can now boldly

approach the throne of grace with the confidence to find mercy and understanding—the kind of tangible help corresponding to our deepest needs. God’s resources are now available to us in ways hitherto unknown—not because God has changed, but because our image of Him has. God is for us, our ally in every struggle. Now, we have access to a God who understands and intercedes for us as our great high priest.

John, the apostle of love, put it this way: ***“If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the perfect offering for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world.”***⁵

In the New Covenant, we are promised to be united with Christ forever as his bride. The flow of the Gospel is always from sin to reconciliation. In both Matthew and Mark’s narratives, the account that immediately follows features Jesus saying, ***“Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them. For to such belongs the kingdom of God.”***⁶

Jacob Smith, an Episcopal priest from New York, believes that the children in these verses become a living answer to the question behind the question of divorce. In his sermon entitled “The Question Behind the Question,” he said, “Children are needy. Children don’t have a resumé to try and justify themselves. They are a living illustration of receiving grace from God, entirely as a gift, not earned or found in a loophole.”⁷

So, as children with nothing to hide and nothing to earn, let us come to Jesus to feel his touch and receive his blessing. We are all in need of what he offers. Therefore, let us come boldly into his presence to receive the fullness of his love, grace, and forgiveness. Amen.

⁵ | John 2:1-2

⁶ Mark 10:14 and Matthew 19:14

⁷ Sermons that Work, 2024, Jacob Smith’s sermon “Behind the Question”