

IS IT LAWFUL?

The tenth chapter of Mark's Gospel tells the story of three or four days in the life of our Lord Jesus as he heads toward Jerusalem for the last time before his crucifixion. He has with him the Twelve disciples, and it seems, a large contingent of others who are headed to Jerusalem for the upcoming Passover celebration. The events recorded by Mark are spell binding. People, some with genuine need and others with evil intent, come to the Master. And they come with questions – some direct questions and others implied.

This Sunday, and the next three, we will hear those questions and consider their meaning for us. Most of all, we will listen carefully to our Master, Jesus, and what he has to say to these questions. Some of the episodes leave us with a degree of pain, while others will lift our spirits. But through all of them we will be comforted as we hear the Good News of the Gospel from the heart and mouth of Jesus, who comes to seek and save the lost. And that would be us! Lost, but found – found in our Lord Jesus Christ, and thus safe, secure, and His forever.

“Is it lawful?” This is a good question for us because it brings to mind the quality of life and the values we all hold dear. It's good for us to ask that question once in a while. Is this good? Is this right? Is this legal? The Law was first written on people's hearts. We call it a conscience, this sort of innate sense of right and wrong. Obviously sin has rendered the human heart an unreliable judge of right and wrong. It seems that some today have no conscience, no sense of right and wrong and common decency. For that reason God gave us the Ten Commandments, the ultimate expression of the Law which was inscribed in stone by the finger of God and given through Moses to Israel. The Law can be defined simply as God's will; what he desires. So, is it lawful is certainly a good question.

The question is even addressed to the right person; to Jesus the Master. He's the One who understands the Law of God perfectly. By his perfect, sinless life he fulfilled the Law for us. As the second person of the Trinity, he knows the mind of God. He is God! So, good for the people who brought the question to Jesus! They came to the right person.

However, those who brought this question to Jesus came with bad hearts. And I don't mean they had high blood pressure or they needed bypass surgery or a heart transplant. They came to Jesus with evil intent. They didn't really care about the will of God, what God wants. They came to test Jesus, to trip him up with words. They were hoping to give him a test that would make him fail and fall. They wanted to humiliate Jesus in the eyes of his followers. They wanted people to stop following this new teacher and stop believing his words. The Pharisees and teachers of the Law felt like they were losing control. People were abandoning their style of Law keeping and following Jesus who talked about freedom and forgiveness.

Keeping the Law was serious business for the Pharisees. They devoted their lives to that quest and somehow thought they were acceptable to God, right with God, a part of God's kingdom, because of their Law keeping. For the Pharisees, the Law was a tool for condemning the guilty or taking pride in one's own accomplishments. But Jesus' ultimate goal was not to heap more guilt upon the guilty nor to congratulate the self-righteous. Jesus severely criticized the Pharisee's way of life. He even called them white-washed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of death and decay. You've heard the phrase “Beauty is skin deep.” For the Pharisees, their goodness was only skin deep. They looked good on the outside. But they weren't good on the inside. Their hearts were in the wrong place. The Pharisees realized that if Jesus continues to preach and teach this way, he might persuade the people to condemn them as the guilty ones. And they were bound and determined to stop that from happening.

So trap Jesus. Show him to be a fool. Do something that will make the crowds turn away from him, shake their heads and mutter as they go, “He's not as smart as we hoped. I guess he's not the leader we thought he was.”

The Pharisees attach the question of lawfulness to the problem of divorce. "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" If they knew the Scriptures, they already knew the answer to that question. Divorce was not part of God's original plan. In the beginning God made one man and one woman and He brought them together as husband and wife. Think about that. One man and one woman. This is maybe a different subject for a different time, but you hear a lot about same sex unions these days, different states legalizing same sex marriages. That's just not biblical. It's not part of God's will or God's plan.

Like everything else that has gone wrong in the world God created, divorce came about because of sin. Because of Israel's repeated sinning, God through Moses had allowed a provision for divorce which made it legal in the narrowest sense of the term.

John the Baptist, however, condemned Herod Antipas, who divorced his wife and married his brother's ex. That condemnation cost John his head. The test for Jesus was this: If Jesus says "no" then he falls into the trap of what Moses says in Deuteronomy 24:1. If he says "yes" then he falls into immorality. Either way, Jesus would lose – and the Pharisees would win. In order to avoid this trap, Jesus takes the Pharisees to the words of Genesis and lets Scripture interpret Scripture.

Jesus answers the question with a question. "What did Moses command you?" When they answer that he allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and divorce her, Jesus quickly notes that God permitted this law to come into existence because of sin and selfishness. "It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law." And then the Master goes to the original blueprint for any "laws" about the marriage relationship by reminding them and us that "at the beginning of creation God made them male and female . . . and the two become one flesh . . . Therefore what God has joined together let no one separate." By sharing these words of Genesis with the Pharisees, our Lord clearly shows them that God intends for a marriage to last. God's plan, God's original design, is for a man and woman to remain married for a lifetime.

And you might ask, "Then why do so many marriages end in divorce?" The simple answer is sin. We don't keep God's Law perfectly. We can't keep God's Law perfectly. Jesus was the only One who never sinned. He fulfilled the Law of God for us. Only Jesus could do that. Everyone else fails. Even those who sincerely try to keep the commandments fail, and fail miserably. It's beyond the capacity of mere mortals. Unholy people cannot keep holy things holy. Not even close.

That's true of the holy estate of marriage. Divorce is a sin, period. When a marriage ends in divorce, someone has sinned. We know there are some valid biblical reasons for divorce – unfaithfulness or desertion. Sometimes a marriage ends because of these sinful actions by either husband or wife. Sometimes there are other reasons such as physical abuse or emotional abuse. Sometimes people fail to live according to their marriage vows.

Before we point the finger at divorced people, remember that we all sin. At times we have all done things and said things that hurt other people. We have failed to love others as we love ourselves. So often we put our own needs before the needs and desires of others.

The message today is not -- If you are divorced there's no hope for you, you are bad, you're going straight to hell, do not pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars.

The message is this - God's love and grace is so big and so great that it can forgive any sin. The blood of Christ was shed, the price was paid, for any and all sins, including those sins that lead to broken relationships.

In just a few weeks we'll celebrate the Reformation and we'll remember again Martin Luther, the great Reformer. For years Luther despaired over his sins. He tried to keep God's Law but couldn't. His sin and failure to keep God's Law perfectly tormented him. But then the Lord graciously opened up the Word to Martin Luther and he came to understand that God is merciful and loving. God sent His Son Jesus to do what we are unable to do. Christ Jesus

fulfilled the Law for us and now through faith in Jesus, God's righteousness is given to us a gift. God forgives us and restores us for Jesus' sake.

Jesus did it for us! He kept the Law perfectly for us. Holy Jesus gave us his righteousness as a free gift. In Him, connected to Him, like a branch to a vine, we become "law keepers." Again, not because we have kept it, but because he kept it for us so that we may have forgiveness for our failure to keep it perfectly. On the cross Jesus dealt with our lawlessness. As St. Paul writes in Second Corinthians, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21).

That's amazing . . . and it's true.

Holiness does not come to us through the Law. That's the mistake the Pharisees made . . . and a mistake many people make today. We are not made right with God by doing the right thing all the time and keeping all the commandments all the time, because that's impossible for us. And yet we love to point out all the flaws and mistakes of others. We are made holy, right with God, by grace through faith in Jesus. It's a gift that God gives us. Therefore we rejoice that we are now free from the condemnation of the Law, for the freedom that comes through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We have been loved much and forgiven much by God. And then we are to go out and love others and forgive others much.

After telling the story of the Pharisees and their question for Jesus, Mark takes us to the tender scene of Jesus and the little children. Here again we find the legalists, this time the disciples, with their negative thinking and critical comments. They wanted to send the children away. The Master doesn't have time for us. But Jesus had different ideas. He said, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them . . . for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mark 10:14).

And the Master will give to all who have a childlike faith that gift of acceptance, that robe or righteousness, a crown of life a love for God and all humankind. And these gifts will be used, not to belittle or cajole others, but to serve the cause of the Gospel through love for neighbor, and thus to give glory to the One, the only One, who truly lived the Law, and did it for us. Amen.