

I once read a funny story about a man and his wife in 19<sup>th</sup> century Great Britain. Their marriage was rocky and one day his wife asked him for a divorce. The problem was that in Great Britain during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, you couldn't just get a divorce because you wanted it. There was no such thing as “irreconcilable differences.” There had to be a reason for the divorce before a judge would allow it.

The easiest, most reliable reason was adultery. And so they had to tell the judge that one of them had committed adultery. Of course, being the Victorian Era and all, if they told the judge that the wife committed adultery, she would be disgraced and never be able to remarry. But if a husband committed adultery, it wasn't such a big deal.

So even though it was his wife who wanted the divorce, it was the husband who had to say that he had cheated on her. But the judge in this case was a stickler for following the rules. And he wouldn't allow the divorce to go through unless there was proof of the adultery.

And so the husband, who didn't want the divorce in the first place, had to hire a prostitute, and his wife had to hire a private investigator. And they had to set-up a scenario in which the investigator would “discover” the husband in a hotel room with a prostitute. So that investigator could then go before the judge, testify that he had caught the husband committing adultery, and provide enough evidence for the divorce to finally proceed.

Can you imagine jumping through that many hoops to get a divorce in America today? And yet, once upon a time, it was true here as well. And relatively recently. I imagine there are a few members in our congregation today that might even remember such a time.

What the story describes is called an at-fault divorce. It means that the divorce was caused by a specific action by one of the spouses. Adultery, abuse, abandonment. Those types of things. As opposed to a no-fault divorce. In which neither spouse did anything specific to end the marriage. They've just decided that they don't want to be married anymore.

At-fault divorce has been around forever. Since the time of Jesus. But no-fault divorce has only existed in this country since 1970, when Governor Ronald Reagan signed a bill ratifying it in California. And we've had some version of it in all fifty states since 1985. Just 36 years ago. No-fault divorce is younger than I am.

Up until then, you could not simply cite “irreconcilable differences” when getting a divorce. No, there had to be a reason for it. And usually, it was a Biblical reason, like adultery, abuse, or abandonment.

Why? Well, because up until the states said otherwise, marriage was considered an institution of the church. And the state laws existed to help reinforce the church's teachings on the matter.

Yeah, I know. That's crazy talk! A violation of church and state! Well, probably. But it's how every state in this country handled marriage for roughly 200 years.

Not anymore, obviously. And, to be blunt, you can trace our current legalization of homosexual marriage all the way back to Ronald Reagan signing that first no fault marriage law back in 1970.

Because, honestly, the two issues are inseparable. No fault divorce is just as much a sin as homosexuality is. Which should make us wonder: why hasn't the church rallied against no fault divorce just as loudly as it has rallied against homosexual marriage? Why haven't the last 36 years been filled with lawsuits and protests on the steps of the Supreme Court?

There's clearly a double standard. Homosexuality, premarital sex, pornography... so many other issues surrounding sexual immorality are placed at the forefront of our current culture war. But divorce? It's brushed aside as no big deal.

That's probably because God's people have always had a problem with divorce. Going back to the time of Moses.

We hear in our Gospel lesson today a reference to Moses allowing a man to write a certificate of divorce and send his wife away. And it's true. Deuteronomy 24 allows a man to divorce his wife simply because she has fallen out of favor in his eyes by doing something objectionable to him. That's literally the words that are used there. It is the ancient equivalent of no fault divorce.

And the Pharisees think that maybe they can use this as a way to trap Jesus. Because, after all, if he says that he approves of this law, then it sounds like he's in favor of divorce. And they can attack him on that. On the other hand, if he disapproves of this law, then it sounds like he's denying Scripture. And they can attack him on that as well.

They think they've constructed a no-win situation for Jesus, based on a portion of scripture they themselves clearly do not understand. What they don't realize is that there is no one in all the world who understands marriage and divorce like Jesus.

Which really explains why this is so important to Jesus in the first place. Because what Jesus says is pretty harsh, when you think about it. He is accusing everyone who has gotten a no-fault divorce and remarried of committing adultery. Even though it was permitted in Deuteronomy. Even though Moses said they could, legally, get that divorce.

Why? Well, because according to Jesus, the Law of Moses didn't go far enough. But this shouldn't really surprise us. Because Jesus says over and over again that the Law of Moses doesn't go far enough. Murder isn't just killing a person. It's thinking hateful thoughts about them. Adultery isn't just about sex. It's about lust too. Cleanliness isn't just about washing your hands. It's about the purity of your heart.

Jesus' entire ministry is about saying that the Law of Moses doesn't go far enough. And so, likewise, in God's eyes, marriage is a bond that cannot simply be dissolved with a certificate of divorce. Even if the law says it can.

And yet, it was really God who wrote that law in the first place, not Moses. Which is pretty confusing. But Jesus isn't saying that Deuteronomy 24 is wrong. He's just saying we're misreading it.

The Pharisees looked at Deuteronomy 24 and saw what they thought was a contradiction in God's Law that they could exploit. That divorce both is and is not permissible. But what Jesus says is that that contradiction is actually not a contradiction at all. It's a time when God showed humanity his grace.

Because God knew that his people have hard hearts. That we're stubborn and sinful. And we would find a way to end our marriages even if it meant hiring a prostitute and a private investigator. And so, in his infinite grace, he allowed the Israelites to get a divorce. Even though he hates it with all his righteous being. This wasn't an error in Scripture at all. It was a reflection – a foreshadowing – of exactly why Jesus came to earth: To give us grace in the midst of our stubborn sinfulness.

And that is why Jesus understands marriage so well. Because in the beginning, he took one man and one woman and said, “I am joining you two together in the same way that I will one day be joined to my bride. To the church. And this union of husband and wife, of God and man... it cannot be broken. It cannot be separated. Because God himself has joined it together.”

And when we get a no fault divorce, when we say that there were just too many irreconcilable differences between us and our spouse, we are also implying that there could come a day when there will be too many irreconcilable differences between us and our God. A divorce says that God might one day give up on you. Throw up his hands and say, “I'm sick of this marriage. I'm sick of this sinful church. I want out.”

And that's just not true. When God joins himself to us through baptism, we cannot be separated from him. He is there, with us, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness, and in health, as long as we both shall live. And not even death shall part us.

You cannot get a no fault divorce from God. You can commit adultery on him, sure. You can utterly abandon him. You can marry yourself to the gods of this world. And at some point, yes, he will let you go. And your soul will be lost.

But, short of that ultimate separation from him, he will not give up on you. He will not give up on you when you hate your brother or sister. When you look at a man or woman lustfully. When you have unclean thoughts and words and deeds.

He will not give up on you, even if you've already gotten a no-fault divorce. On that very issue, he showed grace to his people once in the time of Moses. He will show grace to you again. He's not going to divorce you over the fact that you got divorced.

That's not how our God works. He teaches by example. He is faithful even when we are not. He keeps his law even when we don't. He shows us grace so that we can show others grace. He sacrifices himself for the world so that we may sacrifice ourselves for the world.

He shows us marriage by being married to us. Until things like sin and stubbornness and divorce are no more. And we can spend eternity as his bride. Amen.