

How Jesus Uses the Law on Us

20th Sunday after Pentecost [Proper 22, b]

October 7, 2018

Mark 10:2-16

² And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” ³ He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” ⁴ They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.” ⁵ And Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. ⁶ But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ⁷ ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, ⁸ and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. ⁹ What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” ¹⁰ And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. ¹¹ And he said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, ¹² and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

¹³ And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. ¹⁵ Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” ¹⁶ And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.

In the Name of Jesus.

The Pharisees surround Jesus. They want to trap him.

Jesus had told his disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees. The Pharisees are teachers of the Law, everyone knows that. They had rules for what you could eat, how to treat your wife, how to wash your hands, how to harvest your wheat—once they got going with the Law, there was no stopping.

The leaven of the Pharisees, beware of that, says Jesus. Their leaven is the Law. They drop the Law into the life of a Christian like a baker dropping yeast into dough. And the Law grows, until it overtakes the Christian.

So now the Pharisees look to trap Jesus. The Law is hard and urgent—it demands response. So, anyone

freeing sinners from the Law must be stopped. How will the Pharisees stop Jesus? With the Law. That's the only hammer they have. Mark 10:2:

And Pharisees came up and in order to test [Jesus] asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

That's a good Law question. No Gospel can be fit into that. The Law question demands a Law answer. So, Jesus answers with the Law:

"What did Moses command you?, [said Jesus]."

[Mark 10:3]

The conversation is now about the Law. The pharisees are on comfortable ground.

[The Pharisees] said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away."

So there's our Law answer to how a man can lawfully leave his wife. And Jesus says why. Mark 10:6:

"Because of your hardness of heart," said Jesus, "[Moses] wrote you this commandment. ⁶ But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.'"

To the Pharisees, who wanted to teach the right way to go about a divorce, Jesus explains why Moses even gave laws of divorce. Not because it was good, not because it was god-pleasing, not because a man could keep himself clean by following the law even to the tiniest period and comma, but because of *the hardness of your hearts*.

The Pharisees use the Law to coerce sinners improve, to live clean lives. Jesus uses the Law to expose the hardened heart. The Pharisees are mechanics with the Law, using it to fix problems, to adjust lives, to repair damage. Jesus with the Law is an executioner.

To show how the Law allows no escape, Jesus drives it even further.

[Jesus said,] "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

Jesus gives the teachers of the Law no way out. If the teachers of the Law think they can escape the Law by saying that they themselves have never been divorced, so they have therefore not committed adultery, then they are stung by what Jesus has already said,

“I say to you, anyone who looks at a woman with lustful desire has already committed adultery in his heart.”

[Matthew 5:27]

And if we think that we are safe from the Law, because we, after all, are not like those Pharisees, then Jesus stings us with the Law, too. Matthew 5:15:

“I tell you,” [said Jesus,] “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven.”

Finally, we see how devastating the Law is. No one escapes. Divorce, adultery, lust, evil thoughts, in the way Jesus gives the Law, no one is worthy to be married. To try to live by the Law, the verdict must be heard: Guilty! Guilty in your conscience. Guilty before God in Heaven.

To Jesus, the Law is not half-measures brought to help improve the sinner. To Jesus, the Law is the Word showing sin. It gives the way not to improvement, but to death.

Because, Jesus doesn't want the sinner improved. He wants the sinner justified. Jesus wants, for you and me, resurrection. He desires life for us—eternal life brought to us now—so that we have the joy of knowing that we belong not to the Law and guilt and death, but to grace and forgiveness and life.

Jesus speaks the Law to daily drown our old Adam, our sinful flesh, to death in repentance. This old sinful flesh of ours, we're not about the business of cleaning it up and trying to live in it better. We are about the business of daily putting it to death in repentance.

Because, Jesus came to speak to us his Gospel. To forgive our sin. To free us from the Law. To give life. He came to say that no one enters the kingdom of Heaven by keeping the Law, by being a Pharisee, but you enter the kingdom of Heaven as a little child receiving gifts. Mark 10:14:

[Jesus said,] “Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” And he took them in his arms and blessed them.

Later, when the Church up in Galatia was being tempted by the teachers of the Law, the Apostle Paul wrote to them to call them back to the Gospel. Galatians 3:10:

All who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.” Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us ... so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

Christ, in our place, took the curse of the Law.

Now, it's the blessing. Now, we live not by our life of flesh but our life of faith. Even while we live in this sinful flesh, we daily put it to death in repentance, and daily rise up to live in the righteousness of Christ Jesus. That's the righteousness we were clothed in when the Lord baptized us. That's the righteousness Jesus gives as he gathers us to his Body and Blood. That's the righteousness which is not our own, but is ours by gift, the righteousness he gathers us to in the congregation.

We hear the prayer he prays for us to his Father:

[Father,] I tell of your name to my brothers and sisters,

In the midst of the congregation I sing your praise.

[Hebrews 2:12]

Then Jesus, dwelling in his Body and Blood in the midst of the congregation, says,

Behold, I and the children God has given me.

[Hebrews 2:13]

We now receive all gifts from him as children being given to.

The Law has done its job. Whether adultery, or lust, or divorce, or envy, or pride, or covetousness, no one escapes the Lord's execution of the Law. But he came for the Gospel. He came to bless. He came to gather to himself not those who live by the Law, but those who receive gifts as children. He came to raise to life.

But to be raised to life, you must first be dead. The Law has done its job. For each of us, the old Adam of sin is put to death, the new Adam of righteousness is daily raised up to live before God in the righteousness of Christ Jesus.

In the Name of Jesus.