

About the Law, Divorce, and Grace Luke 16:16-18

Please take your Bibles this morning and let's turn together to our text in **Luke 16:16-18**.

The passage that we have before us seems out of place in the context, almost as if Luke didn't have any other place to put it, so he inserted here. It's like when you see unannounced company pulling into your driveway and you don't know where to put things in an effort to quickly make the living room presentable so you stuff the bowl of popcorn into the coat closet and close the door. The dirty sweatshirt you just pulled off in the kitchen from working outdoors is tossed into the dishwasher. Anything that is out of place but in sight you find somewhere to put it even if it doesn't belong there. That's what this passage seems like – out of place.

In chapter 15 Jesus told 3 parables to illustrate the joy when someone who is lost is found. His audience comprised sinners and religious leaders and Jesus especially wanted the religious leaders to understand that there is much joy in heaven when even one sinner is saved. The religious leaders didn't share the same enthusiasm. But He also wanted to illustrate that they were just as lost as others, they were just as much a prodigal as those they condemned. Jesus wanted them to know that heaven was just as far away from them if they chose to not repent, but that anyone who repented would be welcomed.

Beginning in chapter 16 Jesus turned his attention to the disciples to discuss the proper use of money. He taught them to consider that all their resources should be used for kingdom purposes.

He taught three principles.

The first was to use our resources to win others to Christ.

The second was to be faithful in using those resources for God.

The third principle is that we cannot serve two

masters. We cannot serve God and money.

We concluded by noting two challenges.

The first challenge is to make an eternal investment.

The second challenge is to have earthly integrity.

Jesus is going to finish the chapter with the account of the rich man and Lazarus. Now as we come to verses 16-18 today if your Bible has paragraph or subject headings as my study Bible does, yours might say something like “additional teachings” implying that the author stuck this in here because Jesus wanted to touch quickly on a couple of things before He moved on. It appears randomly placed and it appears that it has no connection to the rest of the chapter. I hope that I can show you that there is a correlation or connection.

This morning I want to cover three points:

Infallibility of the Law

Infidelity in marriage

Indescribable grace in Christ

I. INFALLIBILITY OF THE LAW – v. 16-17

When it comes to the Bible there are two theological words that are sometimes used interchangeably, but there is a slight difference. They are the words inerrancy and infallibility. As it relates to the Bible, the simple definition of inerrancy is that it is without error. The Bible has no errors.

The word infallibility takes it a step further and means that the Bible is incapable of error.

Combined we mean that the Bible is without error because it cannot err. God is without sin because He cannot sin, so God's Word is without error because it is incapable of error.

Now, I want to leave it right there and consider the value of the Law in relation to what Jesus is saying here and then look at the validity of the Law.

A. The Value of the Law – v. 16

As we look at this passage and wonder why in the world Jesus is going to talk about the Law not passing away and about divorce, let's understand where Jesus is coming from. We need some cultural context. This passage is included here in a section dealing with money because it illustrates precisely what Jesus had just said about the Pharisees justifying themselves. They claimed to adhere to the Law, but Jesus wanted to show them that they were instead circumventing the Law; they were doing everything to get around it. Paul wrote that the Law was a way to show man's sinfulness and need of a Savior, that man could not keep it. The Pharisees all thought and taught that you had to keep the Law to earn eternal life. They claimed Jesus disobeyed the Law and because of that rejected Him. In essence, by rejecting Jesus they were rejecting the Law, so Jesus wanted to show them that they didn't obey the law and gave one example by illustrating it regarding divorce.

It's important to understand where the religious leaders were coming from. As part of their religious education they followed what was called the Torah. It is Judaism's most important text containing the first five books of the Bible, what we call the Pentateuch. This of course also contains the 10 commandments. Included in the Torah are also the 613 commandments which are derived from the original 10. They are explanations of the 10 or what came to be known as the oral law. Around A.D. 200 these oral laws were written down and given further explanation because they felt the oral law alone was insufficient explanation. The commentary on the 613 commandments became known as the Mishna and Gemarrah.

Here's why that's important. The religious leaders believed that the oral law superseded the written law. It's not that the written law wasn't important; it's just that the oral law gave explanation for the written law. It also was a way to justify their

actions and attitudes toward those who did not keep the oral law.

Jesus demonstrated the importance of the written Word through what He said, again, because the religious leaders believed that heaven was attained through keeping the Law. They had missed the point of the Law altogether.

The Law was given to be a guide for the people of Israel to follow in order to maintain a relationship with God. Both when the Law was given and through the prophets we see time and time again that warnings were issued should they disobey. The historical books of the Old Testament were given as a way of showing how and when they disobeyed and then what happened as a result.

We might think of it as a sign on the wall of a store that reads "shoplifters will be prosecuted". We are warned of the consequences that will take place if we practice that behavior.

Parents might issue a warning to the son or daughter when borrowing the family car, indicating certain privileges will be revoked if there is a violation to the arrangements.

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Let's be clear that the Law and the prophets both proclaimed the coming Messiah, both proclaimed the coming Kingdom of God. Both either explicitly or implicitly called for repentance and holy living. John was the bridge between the Old and the New covenants. He was the last Old Testament prophet and the only prophet to meet the coming Christ. He was the one who prepared the way for the physical coming of Christ, the one crying in the wilderness to make straight the way for the Lord. He was the one calling for another generation of Jews to repent and prepare their hearts of the coming Messiah. Since the time of John, Jesus had been proclaiming the kingdom.

John 1:23-27, 29

Just as the old covenant was solemnized by the blood of a sacrificial animal so the new covenant would be solemnized by the blood of Christ. **One writer concludes that “the new covenant does not abolish the old but supersedes it in the sense that through the new covenant the old is fulfilled and its purpose achieved.”**

The kingdom of God was being preached and Jesus went on to say that many were forcing their way into it.

Scholars differ on what Jesus meant here. The Greek is unclear. Some suggest that it means there were people at the time of Jesus who were earnestly seeking the Kingdom of God. They suggest that salvation is a difficult struggle referring to the believers need to die to self.

Other scholars believe it means that there were many who, like the Pharisees, were trying to earn their way into heaven through being good, adhering to the Law. Jesus came on the teaching scene and began to teach forgiveness and grace. But to the Pharisees, grace didn't mix with the Law. They were more concerned about the external observance of the Law rather than internal obedience.

Romans 8:1-3a

I believe that it is speaking about those who were earnestly seeking Jesus to hear Him, who were willing to accept His message concerning the kingdom of God. I think Jesus wanted to point out the value of the Law, just not how the religious leaders taught it.

He also speaks of the validity of the Law.

B. The Validity of the Law – v. 17

How do we know the validity of the Law? I think Jesus succinctly explains it in this verse. The religious leaders wanted to modify the Law to their own benefit and we'll see that in a moment with the

issue of divorce. They did it as a way of justifying their actions. In that regard the Law then isn't absolute, but relative. Let's change it to suit our own ideas or thoughts. You don't like it? Change it.

I think it's pretty evident today don't you?

Some people didn't like prayer or the Bible in schools so they changed the law to make it sound like what the forefathers of this country actually meant was that the church and the state shouldn't mix. That's why today you have a town in Texas that won't allow you to run for office if you are a Christian.

That's why chaplains in the military are being censured if they use the name of Jesus.

That's why a marine is being court-martialed for refusing to remove a Bible verse she had displayed on her desk.

Some people think abortion is okay and so the court decided that it should be legal. Since that landmark decision in 1973 over 55 million abortions have been performed.

And now our highest court will bring a ruling in just a couple of weeks on whether same-sex marriage will be recognized in America.

Making something legal through the alteration of the law doesn't make it right.

Jesus said that when it came to the Law, it would be easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one pen stroke of the Law to be altered. Think for a moment of our own alphabet. It is just the slightest stroke that makes a Q from an O, or an E from an F, or an L from an I or a B from an R.

It would be easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for the slightest, most insignificant part of the law to fail.

The religious leaders didn't have a problem with making a slight change here or there out of convenience. Though man may change it, God's Law stands forever the same in heaven. One such example is in regard to divorce.

Jesus began this section speaking about the infallibility of the Law. He will now speak about infidelity in marriage.

II. INFIDELITY IN MARRIAGE – v. 18

This is a topic that comes with some fear and trepidation. No matter what I have to say you may either love me or hate me. Some of you may go away angry, others of you may feel sorry for me. Some may think I'm a heretic. This is perhaps one of the most if not THE most divisive issues in Churches today. Families, churches, even denominations have split over it.

A pastor friend of mine shared that when he was in seminary one of his professors stated to the class that if they didn't have a position on this issue they needed to because it would come up in ministry. I am of course speaking about divorce.

Now, I want to assure you that I did not strategically plan this message to coincide with vacation as if I'm skipping town to let the Deacons handle the fall out. After today some of you may want me out of town, tar and feathers included.

It is not an easy topic and I won't have time to deal with all the nuances of it. There are godly men who have done scholarly exegesis who hold different views on a very difficult topic.

With that said let me give some background that I think is important to this topic because it was just as relevant then as it is today. Keep in mind what Jesus just said regarding the Law. I think that is important for helping to understand what He is about to say regarding divorce.

Throughout history going back into ancient civilizations, divorce was practiced. Dr. John Barnett writes: **“In ancient times, outside of the nation of Israel, divorce was easy, cruel, rampant, and horrendously oppressive to women and children. He continues: Apparently because of its widespread practice and acceptance, the Old Testament law permitted divorce as a concession for God's people. However it never condoned it but rather strictly regulated it to minimize the cruel inequality and abuse. Jesus taught that permission to divorce was a concession because of the hardness of their hearts, but that from the beginning this was not God's plan.”**

A little more background is in order. Israel, at its inception, was surrounded by a culture that thought of marriage with little regard. That sounds a lot like the culture we live in today. Because marriage was viewed as a contract, women were treated as a piece of property to which anything could be done. A man had a wife in order to have a family and raise the children. Consequently, it was common in pagan cultures to use their slave girls for the purpose of sexual fulfillment and if they wanted companionship, the husband didn't get it from his wife or wives in some cases, but from a prostitute. That is still practiced in some cultures today. **Many years ago I worked with someone who grew up in Venezuela who said that it was a common practice for married men to hire a prostitute and keep her on a retainer for sexual pleasure.**

That is the backdrop of the culture in which the Law was given. It was much the same under Rome.

Now, turn to **Deuteronomy 24:1-4**. Keep in mind the rabid culture surrounding Israel at the time the Law was given.

The religious leaders debated that passage on exactly what it meant that the wife was displeasing to the husband who found something indecent about her. There were two groups that interpreted this

passage differently. One such group was led by the teachings of Shammai. He held a very conservative view of divorce from this passage. He believed and taught that if the man married a woman with the understanding that she was a virgin and found out after they were married that prior to their marriage she had a sexual relationship with another man then he had legitimate reason to divorce her. This view hinged on the word “indecent.”

The other interpretation came through the teachings of Hillel. He was very liberal in his interpretation and went much following the view of the surrounding culture. He taught that if the husband found anything whatsoever that was displeasing to him, he could divorce his wife. Scholars have found records from that time period indicating that if the wife was a bad cook, he could divorce her. If she failed to produce a son, he could divorce her. If he found another woman who was more attractive, he could divorce her.

As a matter of fact, because of the teaching of Hillel any and every reason was sufficient to divorce if the husband found that she displeased him in anyway. This view hinged on the word “displeasure.”

She failed to have dinner on time.

She scrambled the wrong egg.

She didn't cook like his mother.

She didn't get his clothes clean enough.

All he had to do was say “I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you” and it was a done deal. Divorce, even among the Jews, was relatively easy if you followed the teaching of Hillel. It became a blank permission slip to freely divorce.

If we go back and look at Deuteronomy the reason for divorce cannot be for marital unfaithfulness because under the Law such an act was punishable by death. If you committed adultery, you died. Somewhere along the way the Law of death was replaced by grace. Remember on one occasion they brought a woman to Jesus who had supposedly been caught in the very act of adultery and they asked Jesus what He thought should be done to her

because the Law said she should be stoned. Jesus said that the person who was without sin could cast the first stone. Jesus extended grace not condemnation.

When the Law was given it appears that the permission to divorce had to do with something else the husband found offensive. The Law was meant to regulate divorce rather than permit it at will. Divorce among the Hebrews was then regulated in a culture where divorce was rampant.

Let me see if I can say it this way and hope you will not misunderstand. This passage is not a license to go out and get a divorce, especially for any and all reasons. God permitted divorce with certain regulations because He knew that there would be those who would go out and get divorced anyway, so He set some restrictions to it. It acknowledged that divorce happened and there was a need to have some divine regulations around it so that it wouldn't get out of hand. Additionally, the husband couldn't just announce that he was divorcing the wife, he had to go through a legal process and produce a writ of divorcement. This brought accountability to the husband that it was for a legitimate reason, not just because he was tired of the wife and wanted a change.

Jesus was showing the religious leaders that even in this area they did not follow the Law. They had changed the Law out of expediency. Jesus was exposing the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, regarding the Law illustrated by divorce.

According to the Law in what we just read in Deuteronomy it was permitted. So why did God allow it. Let's look at two passages from the New Testament that hopefully can shed some light.

Matthew 5:31-32

Matthew 19:3-9

In the first passage Jesus identified marital infidelity as the only reason for divorce. So again, we see

that somewhere there was a transition from the Law regarding adultery that moved away from the death sentence to grace. When we read the account of Jesus' conception we read that when Joseph found out Mary was pregnant, he thought she had been unfaithful and sought to divorce her.

Marital infidelity in itself is a sticky wicket because, like the teaching of Hillel, there are many interpretations of what that means.

Some hold that having a one night stand is sufficient grounds for divorce.

Others will say that it means the person had a long lasting affair.

Still others will say that it doesn't even have to be a physical relationship, but could be addicted to pornography or x-rated movies. They site that Jesus Himself said that adultery means even looking at another with lustful thoughts. In that regard even Jimmy Carter was guilty admitting that he had lusted in his heart in the past.

As I studied this passage, and there are various sides to the issue, it seems that the consensus is that the person who has committed adultery is unrepentant and hard-hearted and has no intention of stopping. If you recall the words of Jesus in Matthew 19, divorce in that case was permitted under the Law because of the hardness of the heart. And isn't that what sin is? Isn't it rebelliousness, isn't sin hardness of the heart, an unrepentant spirit? Paul adds that we shouldn't continue in sin just so grace can abound.

Matthew 19 points out another important truth. The Pharisees who came with a question around divorce wanted to know which side of the issue Jesus took. Could a man divorce for any reason or was there certain restrictions that needed to be adhered to? But Jesus didn't take them to what the Law had to say about divorce. Instead He took them back to the original institution of marriage. "You want to know about what the Law has to say about divorce? Let's go back before the Law and talk about the beginning. Divorce wasn't in God's original plan.

Let's talk about marriage as an institution ordained by God, something that is a unique relationship where two people become one in the eyes of God. You ask about divorce, I want to remind you about marriage."

We know all too well about the fight today for traditional marriage. Many abandon it as outmoded and archaic. They choose to live together out of the context of the union that God ordained. Many want to alter it to say that anyone can marry anyone. Two men or two women can marry. In 2004 a woman was given an unofficial marriage license when she married her two cats, stating that no human could bring her more happiness than them. The landscape of marriage is being altered before our very eyes. Some States want to do away with marriage licenses altogether. Some States have no fault divorce. Some States require counseling before a divorce is granted.

Because of such lax views on divorce, it is occurring at about the same percentage for Christians as it is for non-Christians. It ought to be a wakeup call to the church to do all it can to put a finger in the dike and stop the spread in a culture that thinks so little of marriage. God set strict regulations to keep Israel from becoming like the surrounding nations.

Jesus includes in our text that when divorce and remarriage occurs they are committing adultery. Again, keep in mind that we need to consider all of what Scripture is teaching. In the context of what Jesus is teaching here, I think He wants it to be plain to the religious leaders that they were blatantly ignoring the Law when it came to divorce and were divorcing at will and remarrying without consideration for the Law. If that is the case then repentance is necessary. But let's also be reminded that the Law in general was given because of the hardness of man's heart; sin is still sin and all sin needs to be repented of. I want to be very clear that divorce and remarriage are not the unpardonable sin

that some made it to be in the past. It was targeted while other sins like gossip, bitterness, unforgiveness, and others were ignored.

This has been a hard message to preach because there are those here who have for various reasons gone through a divorce and may be remarried. I want to end hopefully on a positive note. Far too long the church has viewed the divorcee as a second class citizen. They have been marginalized and isolated, made to feel like they have some communicable disease. Many think that such persons shouldn't be given any responsibility in the church except maybe passing out bulletins or sweeping the basement. So I end with this important point, a point that we all need to be aware of because in one way or another we all need it because without it we are all doomed.

III. INDESCRIBABLE GRACE OF CHRIST

First, let me remind you again from **John 8:1-11** when Jesus was confronted by the Pharisees with the woman caught in the act of adultery. He said that the person who was without sin could cast the first stone. Notice that the only one who legitimately fit that description did not pick up a stone to pommel her and therefore neither should we. BUT He told the woman to go and stop sinning. Since Christ offered forgiveness through His grace we should as well.

Second, I want to remind you of **I John 1:9** that by confessing our sin, we are forgiven. Jesus is clear if divorce and remarriage takes place through something other than what constitutes a legitimate reason, adultery has been committed. Maybe you didn't know that there was such strong teaching on this matter. If, after hearing the words of Jesus, you find that repentance is in order know that confession brings forgiveness. Once again we see that Christ offers forgiveness through His grace and we should as well.

Finally, I want to remind you from **Romans 5:20** that where sin abounds grace abounds even more. If the Lord is extending grace to us, then we should do no less to others. If we cannot offer to others the same grace God offers to us then we are being just as judgmental and unforgiving as the Pharisees. His grace is abundant.

Romans 6:1-2, 14 “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?...For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.”

Jesus has some important words to say about the infallibility of the Law. It is without error and it does not change.

He has some important words about infidelity in marriage when it comes to divorce.

He talks about both in order to confront the religious leaders with the truth so that they will repent.

Like Jesus, our response needs to be one of forgiveness offering His grace. Let's be careful that we are not acting like the Pharisees. God's grace is indescribable.