

Rules are Rules!

November 4, 2018

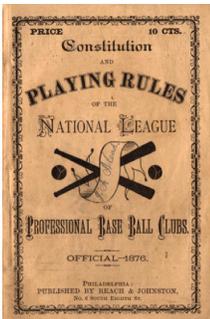
Mark 10:1-12

The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights

Pastor Dave Carver

*To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit
<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2018/11/sermon11-04-2018.mp3>*

As we begin the sermon this morning, I'd like to test your baseball knowledge. Let's say that I'm the starting centerfielder for the Pittsburgh Pirates (yes, I'm still dreaming...). I'm up to bat, and Jon Lester of the Cubs throws two fastballs right past me. I'm in the hole. But somehow, I manage to stay alive and have an at-bat for the ages. He throws me 17 more pitches, and I foul off 14 of them while three are for balls. Now, it's full count, and I'm on the verge of breaking the MLB record for the longest at-bat ever. On the 20th pitch to me, I swing awkwardly, and I manage to foul off yet another pitch, but in so doing I wrench my back horribly. After laying in the dirt a few moments, it's obvious I can't play any further. Clint Hurdle comes out and helps me off the field and you come in to replace me. Lester eyes you up and throws a change-up – a grapefruit – right down the middle of the plate. You watch it go by for strike 3.



When the records of this game are finalized, who has to carry that strikeout on his record? Me. According to Rule #10.17(b), “ When the batter leaves the game with two strikes against him, and the substitute batter completes a strikeout, charge the strikeout and the time at bat to the first batter.”

But let's say that you DON'T do that. Let's say that you come in and you take a pitch that is so, so close – but you let it go by for ball 4, and you head down to first base. In this instance, even though I've endured the first 20 pitches of the at-bat, *you* get credit for the base on balls. The same rule that makes me liable for the negative result gives you credit for the

positive one – even though our actions are unchanged. It doesn't seem right.

Rules are rules. Most of the time, we want them. We need them to guide us. We rely on them to help us keep things straight.

Sometimes, we ignore them. Sometimes, we twist them to get what we want. Oftentimes, we wish they were different.

Rules are rules.



¹Our reading from Mark invites us to overhear a conversation between Jesus and some members of the Pharisees. Although they have a bit of a bad reputation nowadays, I suspect that most of the Pharisees were good people, and I further suspect that Jesus had more respect for most Pharisees than he did for other religious groups in his day. He argued a lot with them, but I think that's because he thought that they were on to something – they were *almost* there – but they couldn't quite see where Jesus was going.

More than anyone else, the Pharisees sought to codify what it meant to be faithful to God. Do this. Don't do that.

So these very religious folks come to Jesus and they have a question about the rules. It seems like a pretty easy yes/no question: is a man allowed to divorce his wife? That seems like a pretty cut and dried question.

However, a closer reading of the text would indicate that they were not interested in merely acquiring knowledge. Mark says that they asked him this question in order to test him. I suspect that they are looking for a way to put Jesus in a bad spot. He has come through the Galilee into Judea as he is walking toward his death in Jerusalem, and they interrupt this pilgrimage by asking about divorce. In King Herod's back yard. You may

¹ *The Pharisees and Sadducees Come to Tempt Jesus*, James Tissot (between 1886-1894)

recall that the last time we read about divorce in Mark, it was when John the Baptist was beheaded for being critical of the fact that the ruler of Galilee, Herod Antipas, had divorced his first wife in order to marry his brother's wife. I suspect that in asking this question at this time, the Pharisees are hoping that Jesus might say something that would attract Herod's attention in such a way as to induce the monarch to attempt to silence the Rabbi.

Moreover, at that time there was a significant disagreement within the community about the ethics of divorce. As the Pharisees rightly pointed out, the rules (aka the commandments of God) allowed for divorce, but only a) if it is initiated by the man and b) if "she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her" (Deuteronomy 24:1)



Most of the faithful in that time agreed that divorce was possible. There was conflict, though, as folks disagreed about what "uncleanness" meant. A very influential teacher named Shammai said that when the Law allowed for divorce, the only acceptable form of "uncleanness" was infidelity. Adultery was the only permissible reason for a man to send his wife away.

Not long after that, another teacher by the name of Hillel said that "uncleanness" could cover a multitude of offenses, such as if the wife spilled food on her husband, or if she spoke ill of his family, or even if he saw someone who was more attractive to him than wife #1. Any of these reasons, and a hundred more, were sufficient cause, according to Hillel, to dissolve a marriage.



I'll give you one guess whose views were more popular amongst the men in that region at that time. Hillel's teaching was carrying the day, and divorce was rampant.

"Hey, Jesus? Can we get a divorce? Moses said we could! Rules are rules, right?"



²And I can hear Jesus sigh and say, “Yeah, Moses said that because he knew that you were a bunch of knuckleheads.” He then offers a teaching that takes the discussion to a whole new level.

Jesus’ teaching about divorce makes the most sense in, and speaks most plainly to, a culture in which divorce is an issue of justice for the marginalized, rather than a straightforward legal procedure between two equals. When a man sought to “send his wife away”, he was often condemning her to poverty, to shame, and to alienation. Divorce in Jesus’ day was overwhelmingly an injustice to the woman, who was most frequently thought of as a “thing”, one who was subject to the whims of the male head of her family.

In this context, the Pharisees ask Jesus about divorce, and he talks to them about marriage. They were looking at problems. He was looking at the plan, and reminds them of the creational intent for human relationships as found not in Deuteronomy, but further back, in Genesis.

Then, Jesus takes the disciples aside and elaborates. “If a man divorces his wife,” says Jesus, “he commits adultery. And if a woman divorces her husband”, which was virtually impossible in that day and age, “she commits adultery.” Rules are rules.

But people are people. I think that what Jesus was saying to the people in the room is that if a man attempts to discredit, disempower, or disenfranchise his wife (or injure his family) based on his own whims, then he becomes the one who is unclean or impure. Humans matter. Relationships of intimacy are important – important for those who share them as well as for those who bear witness to them and who find their lives shaped by them.

So how do we read this in 21st Century America? What about divorce now?

² *Christ and the Pharisees*, Ernst Zimmerman (1870 – 1944)

Before I say anything, I want to recognize and claim the fact that I am speaking from a certain position. I enjoy a number of privileges: I am white. I am male. I am heterosexual, and have participated in one marriage. Compared to many in this room, and many in the room with Jesus two thousand years ago, my life has been easy and uncomplicated. I have to admit that if I had not committed to preaching my way through the Gospel of Mark, I'd probably have skipped this passage.

But here we are, listening to a first-century Rabbi try to encounter this difficult question in his day and age, and not only that, but seeking to draw some ultimate meaning and truth from it.

Here's what I think: in answering a question about Moses with a scripture about creation, Jesus is indicating that relationships are a part of our creational identity, and therefore an invitation to practice godliness in everyday life. In pointing to the way things were at the beginning, he is affirming that the ways that we treat each other (and ourselves) matter. And he is pointing out that breaking truth with each other – practicing faithlessness – has consequences.

However, I would further suggest that Jesus does not allow any of us to be in a position to be sanctimonious or judgmental. In some traditions, participation in a divorce, no matter what the cause, excludes people from full participation in the life of the community.

I had a friend who felt this way. She was married at a young age to a man who seemed so much more sophisticated than she. They had a quick courtship and they were married. He betrayed their vows *on their wedding night!* She was heartbroken, and eventually he filed for a divorce (which she did not contest).

Not only did she never marry or seek a meaningful intimate relationship again, she spent the rest of her life feeling guilty at having divorced. She was a hard-liner, and she was a hard-liner

on herself as well as anyone else. She saw her divorce as a great stain on her life, a sin that prevented her from full participation in the life for which God made her.

And there are those who might say, “Of course! How could she do otherwise? Look at the scripture! Jesus says that those who are involved in divorce are equivalent to adulterers.”

Maybe. But if you’re going to say that, you’ve got to be ready to take a look at how Jesus treated adulterers. The most well-known of the stories involving Jesus and one accused of adultery ended with Jesus speaking words of compassion, grace, and encouragement to the woman who lay before him.

My hunch is that most of my friends who are younger than me have a hard time understanding the perspective of my friend who felt stained by divorce. For many in our culture, divorce is not a deal-breaker. It happens, they say.

These people, if they claim faith in Christ, are able to see Jesus in this passage as pointing toward the Divine intent of using our relationships to honor the other, and to set up truth and beauty and integrity and faithfulness as hallmarks with which we are to treat each other.

I am certain that Jesus is *not* trying to beat up anyone in this teaching, and I would caution that anyone who would use this passage for that reason does so at their own peril.

What is the take-away that we can glean from this conversation? That life and relationships are given as a gift. We ought to seek to honor other people every chance we get. We are called to treasure and esteem and value others in ways that reflect the creational norms. We must resist every temptation to use, abuse, or commodify the other.

We are not free – in fact we are called to avoid – the use of the rulebook in order to beat someone else up.

This includes the one who has wronged you.

This includes the one who is different from you.

This includes the one whom you have judged to be “unclean”.

When it comes to the rules, I think that Jesus is saying, look first at yourself, and then at Jesus, and only through the eyes of Jesus at everyone else.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

Because there were a number of visitors to the congregation, I felt obliged to explain why I chose to have the congregation sing "Good, Good Father" after the sermon. You might also be interested in hearing my two-minute commentary linking the song and the sermon. In fact, if you and I have not met, or if there is any chance that you feel "beaten up" by my use of the rulebook in the sermon above, I'd ask you to please listen to the comments by clicking on the link below.

<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2018/11/sermon11-04-2018post-sermoncomments.mp3>