

Hearing the Whole Story
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Luke 16:14-18

Last year, a group of us studied a book together called "How not to read the Bible". One of the first points that was made is that we shouldn't read a verse of the Bible without context, and without understanding that all the passages of the Bible are part of the story of the whole.

If you are a fan of the Harry Potter novels, you could take a scene like Professor Dumbledore dropping Harry off at his aunt and uncle's house and think that he abandoned Harry and he obviously was a terrible person who was against Harry from the start. But you'd be wrong, and you'd only find out you were wrong if you read the rest of the book.

If you are a fan of Mary Poppins, you could pick a scene towards the end of the story where Mary Poppins insists on taking her afternoon off and won't take care of the children and presume that she wasn't a good nanny at all and didn't care for the family or the children. But you'd be wrong, and you would have to see that scene in context of the whole story to understand how it fits.

So, we are looking at Jesus' teaching about the Law and then specifically his teaching about divorce.

First, about the Law, Jesus is a Jewish Rabbi who came to fulfill the Law, not abolish it. (Matthew 5:17)

The Apostle Paul will come to talk about specific kosher rules and customs of the Jews as being abolished, but that Law of Christ is written on our hearts. The 10 commandments, and the greatest commandment that Jesus talked about, are never set aside or abolished.

Jesus did not set aside the laws of the 10 commandments, but in fact, intensified them.

Jesus said, *"You have heard it said that you shall not commit adultery. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart".* (Matthew 5:27-28)

The passage goes on to say:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:43-48)

I will venture to say that all of us fall short.

Jesus fulfilled the law fully and gave us an example of what it is like to live a perfect life, but He is also on the road to the cross so that all of us who fall short of this mark of being perfect are forgiven in the same Jesus, the Messiah of God.

So how do we understand Jesus' words?

And specifically, how do we understand Jesus' teaching about divorce?

The last several chapters of Luke's gospel have shown how the marginalized, tax collectors, prostitutes, every kind of sinner were loved by God and were welcomed into God's kingdom. No one was disqualified – no one excluded, all are welcomed into the kingdom in Jesus' name.

But this kingdom of God, where we are all welcomed, is also a place of justice and reversal. Everyone is valued, and those of low status, the powerless, the poor, are lifted up.

Divorce is not the same in Jesus' context and day as it is in ours.

Divorce was devastating for women.

There were Rabbi's in Jesus' day who taught that men could divorce their wives for any reason. If a woman displeased her husband in any way, he could divorce her, leaving the woman defenseless, helpless, powerless, impoverished and in crisis.

Jesus stood on the side of the powerless, holding husbands to love and care for their wives. The kingdom of God communities was to love God wholly with all their hearts, souls, minds and strength, and love each other well.

Loving each other well includes not committing adultery – leaving women destitute and betraying one another. Sometimes we miss the ideal, we don't love God fully, or we don't love our neighbour, our spouse, a friend, a family member, or even an enemy, as we should.

What do we do when fail in some way? We seek forgiveness.

What do we do when someone fails us, betrays us, sins against us?
We seek to learn to forgive as we have been forgiven.

Jesus was heading towards Jerusalem. That's part of the context of these words. Jesus has welcomed sinners and eaten with them.

He is journeying towards the cross, to crucify the sin and death that destroy us, and to raise us up to newness of life, so that we might learn a different way, and walking in his footsteps, learning his way together, we might learn to love God, love our neighbours, live justly, lifting up the powerless.

Today we come to our Lord's table, that shows us mostly clearly that we are loved and forgiven and given a new way of living as God's people.

Thanks be to God.