

Hard Hearts vs. Open Hearts

In the name of him who receives little children into his arms and blesses them, dear friends in Christ: In this morning's Gospel we find the Pharisees playing one of their favorite games: Get Jesus to trip up in an answer to a theological question.

They thought they had it figured out. The Pharisees, meticulous experts in the Law that they were, knew there were two major schools of thought on the matter of what constituted acceptable grounds for divorce. There was, on one hand, the school of the great Rabbi Shammai. They held that a husband whose wife did something "shameful" was justified under the Law of Moses to send her away with a certificate of divorce. The term "shameful", however, was not clearly defined. It didn't mean "commit adultery" because that was punishable by death, not divorce. So, it more likely it meant committing some other criminal act like theft, or public drunkenness or nudity or both. It had to be something scandalous. The school of Rabbi Hillel, on the other hand, taught that a man could legitimately send his wife away for pretty much anything that caused him embarrassment or annoyance. She talks too much. She snores too loudly. Her cooking is lousy. Whatever. Send her packing and know that the Lord is still smiling on you. "Splendid job, man! Keep up the good work!"

The thing is that the Pharisees were roughly equally divided on the issue. Some argued one way, some the other. And boy did they love to argue over every little nitpicky detail of the Law *and* their endless traditions that had grown out of their nitpicky disputes about the Law. It's what the Pharisees did. So they knew that both sides of the argument could be defended. Get Jesus to pick one and the other side could tear him apart. That's what they hoped for.

But as we heard, that's not what they got. Yes, Jesus told them, the Law of Moses did make allowance for divorce – but that was only because of the hardness of your hearts. It was never the will of God. People are sinners. As such they defy God and his will. Thus they break the sacred promises they make to one another to love, to honor, and to cherish until death. They refuse to forgive. They refuse to be reconciled. They rebel against God's will for them to live together in harmony as husband and wife. And when one or both of them are entrenched in such rebellion, the marriage ends in divorce. And God's Law made allowance for that. But it is never God's will. It's the result of sin.

God designed the institution of marriage for our good. He wants us to keep it whole and undefiled. He wants couples to keep their promises and be faithful to one another. He wants children to grow up in stable, loving homes where parents model godly behavior. Divorce destroys all of that. It hurts people – especially children. That's never the will of God. God hates divorce. But in a fallen world, because people are sinners, it must be allowed for.

Two quick correctives lest I be misunderstood: first, that while there is no one without sin, it sometimes happens that there is a comparatively "innocent party" in a divorce. A spouse who has been faithful, who wants to reconcile, who is opposed to the divorce and wants to go on living with his or her partner can't do that if the other refuses. It takes two to make a marriage. And when one of them bails out, the whole thing is over. But never without casualties and pain and loss as too many people well know. Second, that divorce and all that leads up to it are not unforgivable sins. Where there is sorrow for sin and repentance, when a person recognizes his or her own part in bringing about the divorce, God's sure word of

forgiveness for Christ's sake is granted. Jesus died for those sins too. But recognize that God's forgiveness is not the same as his approval of sin.

This is the bigger issue in today's Gospel lesson. It's the spirit of hardheartedness that underlies the question the Pharisees put to Jesus. As I stated before, they were legal experts with minds like cunning lawyers always seeking loopholes and little quirks in the law that could be exploited and twisted to their advantage. They wanted to use the law against itself to justify themselves, so that they could violate the will of God without being accused of breaking his law. Their question was essentially this: forget about what's right and wrong in God's sight, what can I get away with and still claim to be innocent?

They presumed that because the Lord made allowance for divorce, he must be okay with it. Jesus told them they were as wrong as they could be about that. But what I want you to see is that this same spirit of hardheartedness that drove the Pharisees' thinking can be used against any of the laws of God – not just those that have to do with marriage and divorce. And we all engage in this.

Take the second commandment, which has to do with the proper use of God's name. The common Pharisaical trick here is to substitute a sound alike word like gosh for God or cripes for Christ or jeez for Jesus and then use them to curse and swear. And then claim, "Oh no, I didn't misuse God's name."

Take the Third Commandment, which has to do with gladly hearing God's Word and holding it sacred – with seeing it for what it is: the fount and source of life eternal. The hard heart asks here: what's the bare minimum? How little do I need just to scrape by? It's like sitting down at a mouthwatering Thanksgiving feast and saying, "I'll just have a small spoonful of peas and a crust of bread, hold the butter, thank you. That's enough for me."

The Fourth Commandment has to do with honoring and obeying parents and other authorities. Examples of hardheartedness abound here. You have on the young side the child who only half-heartedly and unsatisfactorily performs an assigned chore, grumbling the whole while about the injustice of involuntary servitude and parental tyranny, who then, when asked, says, "Yes, I did it. Got it all done." And you have the adult who mocks, belittles, and slanders duly elected leaders and thinks it's okay because, after all, they're from the opposing political party.

Under the Fifth Commandment, the Lord demands not only that we not physically hurt or harm anyone, but that we also help and assist them in their bodily needs as we are able. It's in that second part that the Pharisee in us is most successful in playing with words and justifying the neglect of others' needs.

The Sixth Commandment requires of us sexual purity. That means keeping all sexual acts to the confines of marriage where they belong. Here the best example is the question I get when teaching Confirmation. It goes like this: "So, me and my dating partner are alone together sitting on the sofa pretending to watch TV. How far is too far? Where exactly is the line?" The answer is that if you're asking, you've already gone too far at least in your mind if not with your hands (or other body parts). The question itself reveals the hardness of your heart to what God demands of you.

The Seventh Commandment protects personal property. Here the hardhearted Pharisee in us justifies him or herself with the phrase, "Well, I'm not exactly stealing if ... (and here you may fill in the blank with any of a thousand excuses).

The Eighth Commandment requires that we protect the reputation of others. Here the Pharisee asks, "How much negative information about someone can I imply without really saying in order that it will pique your curiosity so that you'll find someone else who will tell you what I feel the urge to say but know that it would be a sin to tell you."

These are just a few of the ways that we use pharisaical verbal contortions and mental gymnastics to convince ourselves that we are obedient to the letter of God's Law even while violating its spirit, which is love – love that is patient, that is kind; that does not envy or boast; that is not arrogant or rude; that forgives, keeping no record of wrongs; that does not insist on its own way; that is not irritable or resentful; that rejoices in the truth; that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. The Pharisees showed themselves to be too clever by half, trying to use their sophistry and supposedly superior intellects to outwit the Lord and the Law he gave for our good. We play the same games. It doesn't work. You can't outwit the Lord Jesus. By engaging in such games we only reveal the hardness of our hearts.

We need open hearts – hearts open to the Lord's Word, hearts that receive it as it is in its purity and simplicity. That's how God's kingdom comes to us. The kingdom comes in his Word well and properly received. No surprise then that Jesus uses as his example for this a little child.

Maybe I shouldn't tell you this story because you might draw the wrong lesson from it, but properly understood it makes the point. When my girls were little I would on occasion regale them with bedtime stories. Some were swashbuckling tales of my former life as pirate sailing the high seas in pursuit of treasure. I'd tell these stories in my best pirate voice using all the appropriate nautical jargon and piratical exclamations. "Ahrr! Avast and belay, ye scurvy dogs!" You get the idea. It was all good fun. Or so I thought. It happened when my youngest was in first grade that the topic of pirates came up in her classroom at school. Her little hand shoots up. She tells the teacher, "My dad used to be a pirate!" The teacher scolded her, "Your father is a seminary student. He was never a pirate." My daughter protested, "No, really, he was a pirate!" She got in trouble for lying. I think she ended up missing a recess. And I feel bad about that.

My point is not that we should tell our children tall tales and get them into trouble (even inadvertently); but rather that we should receive God's Word – which is never false, but is always true and right and good – with that same trusting open-heartedness. No questioning, no twisting, no testing the limits, no trying to outwit the Lord in our attempts to justify ourselves and see what we can get away with.

With respect to God's Word, we need to be like little children. Then the Word of God's Law that condemns us will do its job. We will see our guilt, fear his wrath, and recognize our need for a Savior as great as the one God sent us in his Son. And we will equally receive his sure Word of forgiveness and, by his Spirit and grace, live as his children according to his Law of love. May the Lord make us such open-hearted children. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!