

## Looking for Loopholes

God hates divorce! That's the bottom line. He always has and he always will. He hated it in the world of the Old Testament and he hated it in the world of the New Testament and he hates it today. But why? Divorce has always been around. It is commonplace in our culture. Why is it that God hates it?

For many reasons. Divorce is the breaking of a covenant between God and the couple. God takes promises seriously. He expects promises to be kept. When divorce occurs a covenantal bond is broken. God also hates divorce because it runs counter to his goal for humankind, to live in loving, harmonious relationship with one another. Jesus' prayer before his death was that all who heard and believed his message would be one. Divorce causes disunity, discord, unhappiness, and pain. It is counter to what God wants for us.

In today's reading the tension must have been palpable as Jesus and the Pharisees discussed divorce. The motive of the Pharisees was to trap him. They knew that there were two prevailing thoughts about divorce among the scholars of their day. The school of Shammai was extremely strict. The only reason for divorce could be adultery. The school of Hillel was much less strict. When they interpreted the Law in Deuteronomy 24, they explained it in the broadest terms. Divorce could be lawful, they claimed, if the wife spoiled the food, or if she talked to a man on a public street, or if she was disrespectful to her husband in public. When they asked Jesus about the lawfulness of divorce, he turned the question back on them. "What do you think?" They replied that Moses had given permission, but Jesus replied that the permission was only granted because of hard hearts. God never intended for people to divorce – ever!

So, instead of playing their game, Jesus trumped their argument. "What God has joined together, let no man separate." God does not like divorce under any circumstances. Even though Jesus gave an exception in Matthew 19, his point here is clear. People need to stop trivializing marriage. Marriage is a serious commitment between a man and a woman. It was probably in direct response to the followers of Hillel that Jesus said that when people divorce and marry other people, they commit adultery. God does permit remarriage under certain conditions, but Jesus is not concerned about that in this instance. He wants these people to know that marriage is to be held in high regard and honored. No more games. No more loopholes. One man, one woman – for life!

### Questions:

1. How do you explain the difference between today's passage and Matthew 19:1-9? Is there an exception that allows divorce or is there not?
2. Read Deuteronomy 24:1-4. What does the word "indecent" mean?
3. What is a major lesson that may be learned from this passage?

## Bring on the Children!

Can you blame the disciples? Jesus was so busy. With people to heal and teach and all the constant demands on his time, he did not have time for people to bring their children to him for blessing. The people were pressing, the disciples were rebuking, and Jesus was indignant that the disciples would rebuke these mothers.

“Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them.” You get the feeling that Jesus is not only concerned about his present audience. He was making a strong statement to everyone who would hear his words. Adults must pave the way for children to come to Jesus. No stumbling block is ever to be put in their way. We pave the way for children by teaching them about the Master. We pave the way by allowing our children to witness strong faith. We pave the way by coming to Jesus ourselves. This means that new priorities have to be set. Lifestyles will have to be brought into line. Adults will have to get serious about their faith!

Incidentally, this passage tells us a lot about Jesus. He was the kind of person who cared deeply for children and children cared about him. I doubt he was stern and joyless. There must have been a sense of receptivity about him. He must have been kind and one of those people who smile easily. He must have been fun to be around and it was probably a person who could enjoy a good laugh. One commentator asked, “Can you believe in a man’s Christianity if children are never to be found around the door?” Jesus encouraged his disciples to learn from these little ones. “The Kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” What was there about children that Jesus liked and valued so much?

1. Their humility. Children do not think in terms of pride, prestige and prominence. They seem to have a natural humility about them that allows them to associate with almost anyone.
2. Their obedience. Even though a child is sometimes disobedient, the natural instinct of children is to obey. He wants to please those he loves.
3. Their trust. Children seem to accept authority and they are willing to follow the lead of those they trust, sometimes wanting to do everything exactly like their mom or dad.
4. Their short memory. A child has not yet learned to hold a grudge or nourish bitterness in their hearts. They forgive completely and go on.

Of such is the Kingdom!

### Questions:

1. Can you understand the viewpoint of the disciples? Why was Jesus indignant?
2. Can you think of some more characteristics of children that should inform the way we live our lives?
3. How do you think the disciples were changed after this experience?

## He Loved Him!

I can imagine that people were a bit wary of Jesus. They heard words they had never heard before and they were confronted by his miracles and his love. I think most folks didn't exactly know what to do with him. They probably kept their distance and were cautious about seeming too eager to follow. That's what makes the account of the Rich Young Man so compelling. Luke tells us that this man was a ruler (maybe of the Synagogue or an official from the King's court) and Matthew tells us that he was young. Mark only records that he was a man. He ran up to Jesus and fell on his knees before him. He had seen enough and had heard enough. It was time to take action. Whatever it took, this young man wanted to inherit eternal life. It strikes me that this is a bit curious for a *young* man. Older people are often consumed with the afterlife but rarely do the young spend much time thinking about the end of their lives. This young man seems caught up in the emotion of the moment.

Jesus immediately slowed him down. "Why do you call me good?" Of course Jesus is good, but he tried to make the young man think. Don't blindly follow leaders supposing that they are good. All human beings have faults (except Jesus) and with all we much be careful. The young man should not just assume that any human being is good – only God is good!

Jesus then turned to his question about inheriting eternal life. "Keep the commandments." The young man replied, "I have kept them all my life." Then Mark gives us an insight that the other gospels do not. Jesus looked at the young man and loved him. What did he see when he looked at him? Maybe he saw the man's eagerness. This young man came running. He was ready to find out what to do. He wanted to go to heaven. It could be that Jesus was impressed with the humility of this rich young ruler. He already, at his young age had position, money and authority, yet here he is kneeling at the feet of Jesus, searching for answers.

Whatever it was, Jesus lovingly challenged the man at the point of his that that was not surrendered to God – his riches. "Sell everything, give it to the poor, and come follow me." The man's face fell and he went away, unable to let go of his riches. One can only wonder if the man had answered Jesus in a positive way and said, "I will sell all I have and liquidate all my assets. Meet me here tomorrow and I will give it all to the poor." It might be that Jesus would have said, "That's alright, keep your money. I only wanted to know if you loved your money more than you love me." How sad that he didn't.

### Questions:

1. Look a couple of chapter back. What do you think impressed the young man about Jesus?
2. What makes it so hard for the young man to let go of his riches to follow Jesus? How does his command affect you?

## A Hundred Times as Much!

As the rich man was walking away Jesus turned to his disciples and said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God!” The words were shocking to the disciples but it is easy to understand why he said them. Riches are not the problem; it is how the rich view their riches.

Some see riches as their security. They cannot imagine their world without their things. If they ever do lose their money and possessions they believe they have lost everything. Others use their riches to boost their self-esteem. They believe that if you have more money you are worth more. It is so sad when some people lose money and possessions because so much of who they are is tied up in their possessions. There are still others who don't understand why they have been blessed with riches. They think that they have been blessed so that they can live more extravagant lifestyles or hoard their wealth. They do not understand that God blesses us so that we can be a blessing to other people. We actually own nothing. We are the Lord's servants and our job is to take care of his possessions and use them in a way that honors him.

The disciples were amazed when Jesus told them that a camel could more easily move through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. What an incredible statement! A person has to let go of everything in order to be a part of the Kingdom. Who can be saved then, they asked him. Who can really give up everything? Who can let go of all he has? No one can do that.

They were right. No one can and that's Jesus' point. For man, this is an impossibility, but with God, all things are possible. Entry into the Kingdom comes not on the merits of any work or sacrifice a person can make. Salvation comes through grace. It is available because of what God has done. No sacrifice could ever be great enough.

Jesus must have shaken his head in disbelief when Peter chimed in. We have left everything, he said. Jesus told Peter not to worry. Anyone who has sacrificed for me in this life will receive a hundred times back what he sacrificed and in the age to come, eternal life. But be careful Peter. Don't be prideful because you have given up so much. No one could understand sacrifice enough.

### Questions:

1. How do you define rich? How do you think your neighbor defines rich? How do Christians in Ukraine define rich? Which definition is correct?
2. Do you think that it is absolutely certain that if you sacrifice what you have for the Lord now you will receive a hundred times back? Explain.
3. Why did Jesus throw in “persecutions” in the list of blessings in verse 30?

## So Hard to Believe

It is sometimes so hard to understand why the apostles have such a hard time understanding. They were still having a terrible time understanding who Jesus really was. They could say the words “Son of God” but they really did not understand the real meaning of those words.

Jesus had already informed the disciples that he would go to the city of Jerusalem and there he would die, be buried and be raised again on the third day. Now they were on their way to Jerusalem with Jesus leading the way and they were absolutely amazed! Some were even afraid. I think they understood the part about dying but not the part of the resurrection from the dead. Why does he want to go all the way to Jerusalem if he knows he will die there? It just didn’t make sense to them.

Jesus once again gently explained what would happen. He will be betrayed and condemned to death. He will be mocked, flogged, spat upon, and eventually killed. Then three days later he will rise again. But did they really understand this time? Probably not. They will be among those who seem the most amazed at the events that are about to transpire.

Lest we are too hard on these disciples, present day disciples have the same problem. “I will be with you always,” the Master said, but then we go through tremendous suffering and our first words are, “Where is my God?” Did we not understand? Has there not been incredible evidence in our lives that our God keeps his promises. What is the problem with us then? Is it so hard to truly believe? Yes! We read about grace in our Bibles and how it is free to all who accept it through faith in Jesus, but then we face the end of our lives and we have this nagging fear, “I wonder if I have done enough?” Don’t we believe in grace? Don’t we understand what it means? What is the problem? It is incredibly hard to believe. The list could go on and on but the point is this, we are not so different from those disciples who followed Jesus. We struggle with our faith like they did and we have to be assured over and over again. But isn’t it wonderful that God gives us room to grow? He doesn’t force our spiritual maturity. He waits and helps, encourages and blesses until we are able to face any trial and know that he is right beside us. We know that we are saved, not because we are so good but because he has loved us so much. We stand in awe more than we stand in fear. It is hard to believe. God help us to trust Him more.

### Questions:

1. Look back in Mark and remind yourself of the first time Jesus told his disciples that he was going to die. Why are they so fearful now that he is going to Jerusalem?
2. Why were the apostles having such a difficult time accepting what Jesus was saying about his death and resurrection from the dead? What was their hangup?

## Who's On First?

James and John must have been natural born leaders. They always seem to be out front and they seemed to be among the closest to Jesus. It is not really very surprising then that they came to Jesus with the request that they be given the most important, prominent places in the Kingdom. They wanted to be first, the foremost of all the followers of Jesus. How would that announce James and John? “And now, ladies and gentlemen, the great servants of Jesus, James and John!” “Great” and “servant” just don't seem to go together do they? In fact, can a servant really be great and can a great person really be a servant?

There are several things these two disciples do not understand.

1. They do not really comprehend what is about to happen to Jesus. He is going to suffer and die. Are they really ready to face the same “baptism” with him? Do they know what the future truly brings? They are thinking it will be King Jesus on a throne in a palace in Jerusalem. They do not understand.
2. They did not understand the discord their desires would bring. The rest of the disciples were indignant. They could not believe that these friends of theirs were so power grabbing and so insensitive.
3. They did not understand what real leadership is in the Kingdom. It is not the same as it was among the Gentiles. The Gentiles lord it over others compelling them to do the will of the master, but in the Kingdom of God, leaders are the ones who are the best servers. They are leaders by virtue of the fact that they serve the most.

What a concept! The last first and the first last. The leader is the best servant of all. The one who gives the most, loves the most, serves the most – this is the one who is truly great in the Kingdom. They are to be like their Master. He did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom. To serve and to give, what a wonderful motto for all Christians to live by. So, who's on first? You might be surprised!

### Questions:

1. Why did James and John ask this question now? Where was Peter when all this was happening?
2. Why do you think the other disciples were indignant? Do you think they might have wanted the same positions that James and John did?
3. What was the “baptism” to which Jesus was referring?

## I Want to See!

The end of the road was approaching for Jesus. By the time he comes into the historic city of Jericho he is only about 15 miles from Jerusalem. Most of the nearly 20,000 Priests and Levites who served in the Temple by turns lived in Jericho. It is easy to imagine how crowded the streets would have been and how many people would be pressing in around Jesus. I'm not sure how many friendly faces there would be in that crowd. Most of the Jewish leaders were convinced that Jesus was out to destroy Judaism. A couple of Passovers earlier, he had thrown the money changers out of the Temple court yards. I am sure there were some curious onlookers but not many who were real believers.

A blind beggar sat at the northern gate of the city and as he heard the uproar of the crowd draw near he started yelling at the top of his lungs for Jesus to have mercy on him. Those around the man tried to shut him up but there was no way that this man who had suffered so long was going to miss this opportunity. He kept yelling and yelling until Jesus stopped and called for him. The procession stopped and he was brought to Jesus.

There are so many things that are notable about Bartimaeus. First is his persistence. He would not listen to reason from those around him. He was determined not to stop until he was face to face with Jesus. In his mind this man is the only one who can help him. He needed Jesus! It was a desperate desire that would not diminish.

Bartimaeus' response to Jesus' call was immediate and swift. The second that Jesus called, the blind man was on his feet throwing his cloak aside and headed towards Jesus. He responded immediately. He would find some way to get to Jesus.

Bartimaeus knew exactly what he wanted. He wanted to see. Nothing more or less, just his sight. He didn't beat around the bush. He got right to the point. "I want to see!" He was desperate and he was not afraid to ask.

Finally, Bartimaeus had faith that Jesus could heal him. Although he had an inadequate view of Jesus (Rabbi), he had faith that this man Jesus was able to heal him. He had no doubts. When Jesus granted his request, he told the man that his faith had saved him.

### Questions:

1. Why did the people around Bartimaeus rebuke him when he began to shout?
2. Why did Bartimaeus call Jesus Rabbi? Didn't he know who Jesus really was?
3. What did Bartimaeus do after Jesus healed him? Does this surprise you? Did Jesus ask him to do what he did?

## The Coming of the King!

This event is really the beginning of the end for Jesus' earthly ministry. He had spent a lot of time in Galilee healing the sick and withdrawing to places to teach his disciples and to prepare himself for this moment. Now he comes to Jerusalem for one last time. He had been there often before, at many of the feast days, so he was no stranger to the city, but he had never come to Jerusalem like this. The huge crowds were pressing around him. In three short years of ministry he had touched so many, he had healed so many, he had taught so much, but now the time has come. The King is coming into the city in peace.

The donkey was a noble animal to the Jews and so were horses, but there was a distinction made between the two. Kings rode horses when they went to battle but they rode donkeys in times of peace. The words of Zechariah the prophet were coming true in front of the people's eyes. "Rejoice, O daughter of Zion. Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem. Lo, your King comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, and riding on a donkey." (Zechariah 9:9)

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem that day it was like an announcement, a trumpet blast! I am here! Your King has arrived! And oh, how the people responded. They spread their cloaks on the road and they raised palm branches to shade him on his way. They ran ahead and shouted at the top of their lungs, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming Kingdom of our father David!" The fortunes of God's chosen ones are about to be restored. They had envisioned a new King in a palace on a throne in the city, but little did they know that a much greater Kingdom and a much more powerful throne was at hand.

In that one moment Jesus announced loudly to the world how he is. I am the King! I am the Savior! I am the one that the prophets announced would come. I am the Messiah. I am the victorious one. I am the King of Peace. I am the one!

We can only imagine what must have been going through the minds of the Romans and the Jewish leaders. Amazement? Fear? Anger? The whole world seemed to be going after him. What would the next few days bring? Could this be the one? Could this be Messiah? His statement is clear – "I am the Christ, the Son of the Living God!"

### Questions:

1. What does the word "Hosanna" mean? Why did the people use this word?
2. Can you find a Psalm that predicts the coming of the Messiah? A prophecy?
3. Why was the triumphal entry necessary? What did his entry cause?

## Leaves are not Enough

What a strange story. Some folks think it is so strange that they think it could not be true. It doesn't sound like Jesus does it? It is the next day, after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Jesus is hungry and he sees a strange sight. He sees a fig tree that is in full leaf. This would be rare that time of the year. But they time all the leaves are on a fig tree it will usually have some figs on it, but not this tree. It was full of promise but no figs.

Mark makes it clear to us that it was not the season for figs so that helps us to understand that Jesus is not really angry at the tree. He is using the tree as an object lesson for the Jews. Judgment is coming and it does not matter if the tree looks good and is full of leaves, if there is no fruit. Fruit trees are meant to bear fruit. God's people are meant to bear the fruits of righteousness. Looking good is not enough. They must bear fruit.

To impress this upon the disciples the swift and sure nature of the judgment that is coming, Jesus cursed the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." The disciples heard his words and remembered them as they passed the fig tree the next day. Overnight the tree had withered. The judgment of Jesus was true and swift. No fruit, no reason for existence. What powerful lessons from this story.

First, we learn that Jesus will not accept promise without fulfillment. All along Israel had shown promise, but because of her stubborn nature she never did live up to the promise she had. Lots of leaves, no fruit! Promise is not enough. God expects fruit.

Jesus also condemns profession without practice. The tree professed something that was not really there. Full leaves professed that there was fruit on the tree, but there was not reality to the profession. Jesus said during his ministry, "By their fruit you shall know them" and "Bear the fruits of repentance." Unless a person's profession of faith makes him a better person, unless it causes him to be a better husband and father, unless it changes his priorities in life, then what good is profession? "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father in Heaven." We had better live what we profess.

### Questions:

1. What would be some of the reasons that Jesus would use an object lesson to make his point about living what you profess? In your opinion, how powerful are object lessons?
2. Some commentators have trouble believing that this event really happened. Some think it is only a parable. What do u think?

## Stop It!

Sandwiched in between the accounts of the fruitless fig tree, Jesus strikes out in fury against those who were abusing the Temple. It is hard sometimes for us to imagine our Savior being furious. In addition, this is not the first time that Jesus has lashed out against those making money in the Temple courtyard. The Gospel of John records that the first time Jesus drove out the money changers was early in his ministry. One has to wonder if he did it every time he was in Jerusalem for the Passover. It was just too much for him. He could not just sit idly by and allow people to so abuse something that was to be for the honor and the glory of God. To have extortionists charging their high prices and making their unequal monetary trades taking over the Temple courts provoked Jesus in ways that few things did. He drove them out. He turned over their tables. And he stood guard, as it were, to prevent anyone else from setting up business in that place of worship.

There is one more thing about this event that we sometimes miss. Did you notice the quotation from Isaiah 56? The Temple is to be a place of prayer for **all nations**. Jesus' concern is not just for the Jews. The very place that the money changers set up their tables was the only place that Gentile believers could come to pray on the Temple mount. They were not allowed to enter the inner courts, but the outer courtyard where all the commerce was taking place was the only place where a Gentile could come to pray. These robbers had kept the Gentiles who wanted to pray from praying! No wonder Jesus was so angry! How could they be so thoughtless, so callous? They were not glorifying God – they were there to make money!

The two reactions to Jesus' action are very interesting. The Chief Priest and scribes wanted to find a way to kill him. Isn't that amazing? You would think that they would applaud his efforts to "sanctify" the Temple. Maybe they were skimming some of the profits from the money changers. Or maybe they didn't want someone coming in and changing things. Whatever the reason, Jesus had to go! They were afraid of him. They had never encountered anyone so holy.

The reaction of the people was just the opposite. They were spellbound by his teaching. They could not get enough of it. How refreshing! Someone finally stood up to these robbers. Maybe the Temple could once again become a place to glorify God.

### Questions:

1. Why did commerce in the Temple make Jesus so angry?
2. What were the Priests and Scribes so afraid of?
3. For additional study – Look up "Temple" in a Bible Dictionary and notice the different parts of the Temple area, what they were for and who could enter them.