

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

In today's Gospel, we find Jesus addressing a subject that affected not one, but two vulnerable groups in first-century society: women and children. In the male-dominant culture of first century Palestine, women were not on equal footing with men. While we have come a long way toward gender equality, the issue persists today.

According to one report from 2013, in the United States women are paid, on average, 79 percent of a man's salary for the same job. This means that when the only difference between two employees is their gender, the woman is often paid 21 percent less.

As wrong as that is, in Jesus' day it was far worse. Women then had very little opportunity. They were rarely employed, hardly ever landowners and seldom named as heirs to the family's estate. The usual order of things was for a woman to be provided for by a man.

This is why we read of those strange-to-us laws about marriage. If the husband died, the woman then married her brother-in-law. As objectionable as that may seem to many of us, this was not an arrangement that had anything to do with love or attraction. It was solely intended to provide for the woman.

Marrying her husband's brother meant she and her children would have what they needed to survive. While widows had it difficult, things were even harder for divorced women. In addition to social stigma, divorce often meant a life sentence of poverty for the woman.

The Pharisees, sticklers for the law, test Jesus on his understanding of the rules regarding divorce. As translated into English, they ask Jesus, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" but the underlying Greek word for "lawful" also has the meanings of "proper" and "permissible."

So the Pharisees are asking about more than mere legality; they're asking Jesus to comment on whether divorcing his wife is the right thing for a man to do. In his reply, Jesus addresses a broader issue. He reminds the men that it is not acceptable to devastate the woman in their life, even if they do it according to the book.

While Jesus is commenting about divorce, his words have application regarding all vulnerable members of society. So a broader question to be considered is not whether what we do is permissible, but how our actions affect others.

For example, when we buy our clothes, we ought to consider whether those sewing them are old enough to be working.

We buy our coffee and chocolate from reputable companies, but we need to be aware of whether or not those working the coffee and cocoa fields are receiving a livable wage.

We ought to recycle our electronics so the harmful chemicals in the circuitry don't contaminate someone else's water supply. We need to be mindful of how our lives affect the most vulnerable in the world around us. This is Jesus' larger point, but he does share difficult words we need to consider about divorce and remarriage.

Many people who have had a wedding have also had a divorce. While we would like to believe that fact is primarily about those who don't go to church, we know that the divorce rate for Christians and non-Christians is similar.

Additionally, some who know the sting of divorce also discover that their second marriage can be a blessing – the best thing that ever happened to them, some say.

So what do we do with Jesus' words about the second marriage being adultery? First, we need to understand his words culturally. The issue behind the Pharisees' question is different from the question we have with divorce today.

In Jesus' day, the conversation around this issue was about the grounds for divorce.

One school of thought held that divorce was only permissible if the wife was unfaithful. The other held that divorce was permissible if the man was “displeased” with his wife for any reason.

As one theologian writes, “According to one rabbinic source, ‘burning her husband's toast’” was reason enough. Jesus' answer clearly sides with the group that takes the marriage covenant far more seriously.

Jesus then makes two surprising moves. One: he elevates the role of women by talking about marriage as a partnership, referencing Genesis — “and the two shall become one flesh.” Two: he empowers women by addressing the possibility of a woman divorcing her husband.

Maybe like the Pharisees, we want Jesus to give us black-and-white absolutes about divorce. Instead, he reminds us that this is not a hypothetical issue, but one that affects vulnerable people.

Here are a couple of things we need to hear today. First, if you are being physically or emotionally harmed in your marriage, staying in the relationship is not the “right thing to do.”

Protect yourself, and if necessary get out. Much of Jesus' ministry was about health and wholeness. He wants you to be well. But secondly, Jesus is also saying that we need to take our marriages seriously.

If your marriage is going through a rough spot, it is not okay to bail. It may be legal, but it is not right. We need to exhaust every possible means of reconciliation – short of getting hurt – before we walk away.

Finally, Jesus' larger point is about how we treat others, including our exes. Today divorce still makes life difficult for those involved. So when divorce becomes a reality, we should treat one another with respect, pay the alimony and child support, and work together for child custody and visitation.

Children are sometimes the forgotten victims in divorce. In Jesus' day, they were even more vulnerable. As Jesus is finishing up this conversation on divorce, there is a disturbance. People are bringing children to him, but the disciples are blocking the way. While this seems like an interruption to the narrative, a theme is being developed.

Children were not necessarily valued by everyone in first-century society. Not only could they not yet contribute, but they were needy of time, attention, and the basic necessities of life. And in a society with many poor people, children were a drain on resources.

We should not assume that people back then loved their children any less than we love ours, but in terms of cultural attitudes, children were not encouraged to interrupt adult interactions.

Again, Jesus does the surprising thing. Other teachers would have congratulated their disciples for keeping the children at a distance. Jesus instead turns our attention again toward those who are vulnerable.

He receives the children, and he teaches that it is the children, and those who are like them, who will inherit the kingdom of God. Jesus embraces their weakness, vulnerability, and utter dependence on others for their survival.

This is Jesus' larger message throughout this passage: Those who think they are powerful because of what they can do, those who think they have power on their side, ought to beware. The kingdom of God belongs to those who are vulnerable and those who care for them.

Most of us want to be anything but vulnerable. We have been taught to be independent, to take care of ourselves. Many have spent years building walls of protection to keep others at a safe distance emotionally.

While our society may be vastly different from that of the first century, internally many of us still believe we are worth what we contribute or earn. Men especially are likely to define themselves in terms of job and income.

But for you, it may not be money earned that counts toward your sense of self-worth. Maybe it's the number of compliments you get on how you look or how you dress.

Maybe for you it's the title you have at work, or in a volunteer organization. Maybe your self-worth is tied to your parenting, or your marriage.

Jesus says we have that completely backwards. Your worth comes not from what you can do yourself. Your value comes from what God has already done for you in Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.

We are all valued because we belong to God. We need to treat ourselves, our spouses, our children, and everyone else as people of infinite value. This is implied in Jesus' answer to the Pharisees' question.

As far as Jesus is concerned, we're part of God's family by grace through faith if we want to be, and so are others. We can choose not to be in God's family, of course, but assuming that's where we want to be, let us follow Jesus' example and welcome others into his presence. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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