

Focusing on the letter of the law sometimes makes it all too easy to ignore why laws were enacted in the first place.

When I was much younger, I overheard the older, Muslim-- husband to the mother of my boyfriend-- tell a table of younger men that women needed to be kept subservient, because according to Muslim law, all a man had to do to divorce a woman for – say – crossing her legs in the presence of another man, or burning the toast—was to say, “I divorce thee” three times.

We might think this is a barbaric law, and bemoan how the Muslims have no respect for women—but I’ll give you three guesses where that law originated: with the ancient Jews. Yes: Jesus’ Jews. This is why Jesus was having this conversation.

Men were routinely “divorcing” their wives for ridiculous things. Because they could. Because men wielded the power in that patriarchal society. And – unlike today where a woman could take her husband to court for such frivolous behavior, the world wasn’t as kind to women back in Jesus’ day. If a woman had the misfortune to be “divorced” by her husband then, it was often a death sentence.

A woman was not allowed to work, would often be reduced to begging—or worse—and her family—of course-- would never take her back after she had dishonored them by being divorced—for whatever reason-- by her husband.

Adultery could be grounds to divorce a wife – and a man could accuse his wife of adultery for something as minor as talking to someone who was not her husband or crossing her legs in front of another man--as we saw from my modern day example.

Crossing one’s legs was considered a come on to another man by the husband. My boyfriend’s husband had warned her not to do it—no matter HER upbringing. He beat her later, by the way for that indiscreet crossing of the legs.

This is a little background so that we can perhaps understand the minefield Jesus was stepping into when questioned by the Pharisees about marriage.

Jesus knew full well that most men did not respect women. Jesus’ ministry involved several women—some of whom scholars think funded much of his ministry. Jesus wouldn’t let Mary Magdalene be badgered by the disciples—to their surprise, and Jesus even talked to unfamiliar women—like the Syrophenician woman and the

woman at the well. And he listened to what they had to say—as if they were as important as men. This shocked his disciples.

Jesus didn't seem to see females as property—some disposable asset that males could boss around, terrorize and wield enormous power over. But he was not fooled by the Pharisees or even the disciples when they questioned him. The Pharisees were speaking to the finer points of property law, but Jesus answered with an explanation of the higher laws, written on our hearts.

Married people were SUPPOSED to hold the heart of each other, want the best for each other, always help the other. That was the original design of marriage.

Marriage meant that in every battle a spouse faced, there would be someone else who was equally committed to the outcome and cared as much about the family.

Marriage meant that one person would not betray the other—and that's what adultery is at its root—a betrayal of love.

Marriage-- at its best---means each partner in the marriage is as important as the other, and each is afforded dignity and respect by the other.

But this was not happening.

People make poor choices. Betrayal happened too frequently. And respect of a spouse gave way to power over a spouse.

And so Moses gave the people a way out. But it's not the ideal. Ask anyone who has gone through a divorce and they will probably affirm that it is far from the ideal. But the world isn't ideal. Not yet.

And so Jesus looks at a child, and seems to change the subject. "Unless one enters the kingdom of heaven like a child does, they'll never enter it."

Oh, I know it says "Unless one enters the kingdom of heaven as a child, they will never enter it." But this doesn't mean "unless one enters the kingdom of heaven when one is a child" – it's being used metaphorically-- "as"—in this case--means "As if" or "like a child".

Watch a very small child. Yes—they can lose their tempers, yes, they can yell. Even Jesus did those things.

But they love with all of their souls and bodies. They don't hide their concern about things and people. And they don't betray the people they love. And—unless they are taught NOT to—they love & respect everyone, no matter what they look like, or what gender they are, or what their IQ is. They don't judge between a CEO or garbage collector. They don't care if someone drives a Porche or a Ford. And they couldn't tell a dime from a million dollars. They don't care. They haven't learned to make judgments based on those things yet.

But we have—we adults. So maybe we need to UNLEARN those things. Why? Because the kingdom can never be built on betrayal, or inequity, or lack of respect, or lack of love.

And to unlearn those behaviors, we first we have to learn **why** we hurt and betray and disrespect others.

And that's what Jesus is saying. We will need the law until we learn to live—until we learn to love without it.

Maybe it's really as simple as a child would see it: share what you have, be kind, say you're sorry if you hurt someone, don't hit, play fair, respect everyone.

Jesus understands that it's not about divorce or marriage. It's not about guarding what is ours, and using the Law to gain advantage. It will never be about that. It's about our hearts. And realizing God is in each other.

Amen.