

Sermon: **Bound by Grace**

Text: Mark 10:2-16

Reverend James R. Henry

The Elijah Kellogg Congregational Church

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I was fresh out of seminary and the District Superintendent of the Church denomination I was then to serve sent me to interview with the pastoral search committee in Port Chester, New York. We weren't very far into the interview when I realized that this would not be a good match for me or for them. An older gentleman whose opinions seemed to carry a lot of weight with this group said, "I have just one question. Are you a Calvinist or an Arminian?" That's what he asked. It was a simple, straightforward, either-or question. Which is it, Calvinist or Arminian?

Now for those who may not know about all this, Calvinism is a school of theological thought after the name of John Calvin, a major figure in the Protestant Reformation. It emphasizes a doctrine of election, insisting that God chooses us and draws us irresistibly by his grace. The Arminians are those after the name of Jacobus Arminius, who disagree with Calvin, and emphasize human free will, insisting that we choose God by deciding to become believers.

Good people have fussed over this since the 1500s. If you want to join the argument, you can find plenty of proof-text verses in the Bible to support either position. Frankly, I'm pretty sure that if John Calvin knew what is being attributed to his name, he would turn over in his grave... make that revolve like a rotisserie on high speed. I'm equally sure that Jacobus Arminian would be revolving in his grave. Of course he would be rotating in the opposite direction.

The question put to me was, "Are you a Calvinist or Arminian?... a question that seems to be a simple, straightforward either-or question. But it was loaded. There was a lot going on behind the question. Every eye in the room was focused intently on me and it was clear that my answer would have weighty consequence. There was obvious discord among them over this issue. Though not stated, the real question was, whose side are you on? Will you be a champion for this, or for that group?

Well, you know how your mind begins to spin when you're on the spot with a loaded question. You want be sure your mind is ahead of your mouth. My first thought was, "Are you kidding? You have just one question you want to ask, and this is it? My second thought was, "If these folks are fussing about this, I don't think I want to come here."

So I'm thinking... if I say I'm a Calvinist, a certain bunch of them won't want me to come. If I say I'm an Arminian, another bunch of them won't want me to come. But there was a third option. If I tell them that I don't think this is an important issue, probably none of them will want me to come and this interview will end more quickly and we can all get home a little earlier.

I chose the third option, not as a strategy but as my honest response. "I can't be labeled either Calvinist or Arminian, because I don't think we can fix the working of God's Spirit in our lives in such a patterned and determined way. God's ways are more mysterious and majestic."

The marvelous and gracious work of God's salvation... the purpose of God in sending his gift of Jesus Christ to reconcile a lost humanity and restore a broken world... the call of Christ on our lives to follow him... is the real point of the Good News of Christ and the heart of our message and the core of our lives. We shouldn't get side-tracked, let alone be divided over pedantic systems of thinking and living, as though we can confidently, and dogmatically explain God's ways.

Long story short... we all got home that night in pretty good time.

I tell you all this because this is exactly what was going on in this "interview" of Jesus by the Pharisees "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" they ask. It's would seem to be a very simple, straightforward, yes-or-no question. But it is in fact, an attempt to bait Jesus with a very loaded question. Let me explain a bit of what was behind this question.

Instead of the schools of Calvin or Arminius, it was the schools of Shammai and Hillel, two prominent Rabbis in the Jewish tradition. These and other teachers established very defined positions on things and there was an ongoing debate on the legal issues of divorce, and precisely what was meant by the term, "something objectionable". In the Jewish writings,

(Deuteronomy 24) it is stated, "If a man enters into marriage with a woman but she does not please him because he finds *something objectionable* about her, he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house." The school of Shammai placed a narrow interpretation on "something objectionable", meaning it could mean only infidelity. The school of Hillel assumed a looser interpretation, meaning that most any trivial thing might be considered objectionable

So the Pharisees are hoping to get Jesus to position himself on one side of the other and thereby offend one group or the other. It's all framed against Jesus.

But notice how Jesus reframes the whole discussion, shifting it from the legalities of divorce to the positive purpose marriage; from "What does the law allow?" to "What does God desire?" Now you think about that. That's the way we should be thinking and living in every aspect of our lives.

Jesus asks, "So what does the law say... What did Moses command?" They respond, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate and divorce her." Jesus replied, "Yes, but Moses allowed it as a concession to your human failings. Divorce is clearly not the ideal... not what God would desire." These were necessary regulations to insure a safer environment for these women who were too easily discarded and left to beg or prostitute themselves to survive. Ideally, there would be no divorce and marriage would be permanent. But we live in and are part of a broken world. Because of our human weakness and failings, divorce becomes a reasonable concession to our brokenness.

Jesus reframes the whole discussion from "What are the legal grounds for divorce", to "What is the idea and purpose of marriage?" Jesus is saying something like this... "Let's look at this whole issue by appealing to what God really intends... what God desires. From the beginning of creation, God intended that a man and a woman would be joined together and become one. No longer two but one. This is God's intention. What God has joined together, let's not separate.

Clearly the issues of marriage and divorce were important issues then and now. But I see something much bigger here than the subject of divorce or even marriage. Jesus reframes this discussion just as he wants to reframe our lives from legalities to God's purposes. Recall how Jesus said that he had come not to nullify the law but to fulfill it, such that it should not be words engraved on stone tablets, but reality engraved in our hearts and embodied in our living.

Don't you find it so, as we mature in our relationship and walk with Christ, that we are less and less regulated by external rules, and more and more moved and motivated by the law of love, even as Jesus summarized it? Living not in the chains of law, but in the bonds of God's grace.

What kind of religion is it if our relationship and walk with Christ is simply held in check by laws? What's permissible? What can I get away with? Where's the legal line on transgression and trespass? Rather, Jesus Christ has given himself sacrificially to establish a new creation... a new birth to a new life and new relationships in the bond of his grace, motivated and deepened in his love. This brings true freedom and deep joy!

That's God's intention for us!

So Jesus says to these Pharisees who are so caught up in the chains of law, "Wait a minute. What's the point of those laws really? What is the real purpose of God for us after all?"

Jesus is echoing everything he said in the Sermon on the Mount about how he had come to fulfill the law, to bring it to its completion as the rule of our hearts to be lived out in our lives.

Referring to the law, he said, "You have heard it said 'You shall not murder'. That's a good restraint. But I say to you, Don't be angry in your heart.

The law says, 'You shall not commit adultery' but I say, don't lust in your heart.

The law says, 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. That keeps it in proportion. But I say if someone smacks you on the cheek give him the other cheek. If someone takes your coat, offer him your cloak as well. If someone forces you to walk a mile, walk willingly two miles.

The law says 'love your neighbor and hate your enemy'. That may be equitable. But I say love your enemies and do good to those who hate you.

Get past what is simply fair and equitable to protect yourself, and live in my grace... live out my love."

I feel sorry for people who become so hung up on rules that they miss the heart of Jesus, be it Pharisees, search committees, or any of us. Get past the outward legal stuff and let Christ work transformation in your heart. Quit thinking about how much you can get away with or what you must do to win God's favor, and start praying, What, O God, is your desires for me? What are your purposes for me? How would you have me live?

After all, Jesus said that we receive the Kingdom of God without claim, without title, status, property, rights, or any other qualification... just like one of these little children. We are received into the Kingdom of God not by justifying ourselves by keeping laws, but as we are accepted in God's grace, just like children.

And that's how we come to this table... not by legal sanction or self-righteous merit or accomplishment, but in complete thanksgiving and dependence on God's grace.

The fullness of God's grace is shown and brought to completion in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord who says, "Take eat, this is my body broken for you. Drink of this cup. This is my blood shed for you.

Let us gather at his table in his name.

Amen.