

The Freedom of God's Word Jesus Christ
based on Mark 2:1-12 and Galatians 5:1-6, David Jahnke, 8/9/15

I was at a meeting of a congregation who was leaving our presbytery because of the recent decisions by the national church. The church is this wonderful combination of Korean, Latino and white Presbyterians. We will so miss having this type of church in our presbytery. I mentioned at the meeting that this church is a wonderful reflection of the church universal and the way worship will look in heaven. As we listened to them explain their reasoning for leaving, a recurring point was how God's Word was clear and unchanging and some even quoted Revelation in which John says no words should be added or taken away from his vision and applied this to the Bible generally.

I agree that the canon is set and we should not add or take books away from the Bible or be careless about adding or taking away from translations or in our interpretations. The Bible is the foundation of our knowledge of God and humanity and beauty and morals and values. But it is obviously not the end of our knowledge of any of these subjects. Thanks be to God for theology and anthropology and art and science and philosophy and ethics in and through which God also reveals His truth and beauty and love and other Ways.

The Bible is the written Word of God; but remember that the Word of God is Jesus Christ who was with God and has been God since the beginning of time. That's the beginning of the gospel of John. Now let me repeat something from the end of the gospel of John that I paraphrased last week, "If everything Jesus did were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written." So the Word of God is much more than a few verses set in stone that prove your point; it is much more even than this wonderful book.

Now to my second point regarding Jesus and the idea of an absolute unchanging Law or Word of God. Jesus said this in his sermon on the mount, "Truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not even one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished." The reason Jesus had to make this clear was because he himself *would* change the Law of God. His life, death and resurrection *would* accomplish everything the Law required, and no longer would there be one absolute set of rules that applied to all times and all places and all peoples and which condemned those who did not follow it.

And remember that the Law came directly from God to Moses. So this change regarding the OT Law was scandalous. But isn't Jesus setting up an even harsher Law when he forbids divorce, saying that Moses only allowed it because people's hearts were hard?

Jesus' reasoning for Moses' allowing it—that people's hearts were hard—this points to where he was coming from with his new commandment. Jesus is coming from the Kingdom of Heaven where there *is no* hardness of heart; no brokenness or estrangement or violence in our relationships. He alludes to Adam and Eve in the Garden where things were ideal, brand new, heavenly. And yes God made husbands and wives to be one in body, mind and spirit...just as he made all the peoples of the earth to be one in his love, sharing everything that is. But that's not the fallen world we live in.

Jesus inhabited the Kingdom. From his heavenly worldview, he saw that husband and wife were meant to be one flesh so he forbade divorce. He also saw that everyone had enough in the Kingdom and that all sins were judged, redeemed and forgiven in the Kingdom of God. That is how he could give endlessly and forgive seventy times seven times and ask the same of those who would follow him; that is why he could demand that we give our shirt to a thief after he steals our jacket; that we go an extra mile when our oppressor commands us to carry his stuff for just one.

Jesus saw what God is doing from the beginning to the end. But we cannot so we do not live up to Jesus' commands. So thanks be to God that the seemingly impossible Law of Christ was fulfilled by him and on behalf of all of humanity.

After Jesus fulfilled the Law, Peter and Paul revised it by removing dietary restrictions and circumcision for historical-cultural reasons. The gospel writers themselves added and took away from the oral and written traditions they had received for pastoral and theological and social reasons and in order to speak to and draw their particular community into believing the gospel of God.

We see a perfect example of that when we compare Mark's version of Jesus' teaching on divorce to Matthew's. In Mark, Jesus does not allow divorce, period. This is probably the historical Jesus' position because it was a radical and scandalous position which the church would not have maintained or created had it not come from Jesus himself. The author of Matthew could not accept its absoluteness and he reshaped the Markan tradition he had received. For whereas in Mark's gospel, Jesus says that anyone who divorces his or her spouse and marries another person commits adultery, in Matthew, Jesus reverses this and says that if your spouse commits adultery, you may divorce them.

So the Word of God is not some immutable Law. The Word is not an absolute set of rules that sits dead up above us somewhere, waiting for people to obey it. That sort of Word or Law condemns and kills according to Paul. Instead, God's Word goes to and meets His people right where they are and speaks whatever they need to hear to be drawn closer to God.

How would this living, free Word of God apply to differing commandments in scripture regarding divorce? Imagine someone going through another very difficult time with their spouse and who might be tempted to give up and give into our divorce-ridden culture. They may need to hear from Mark's gospel that divorce is not God's plan; that God will get them through this dark patch. I am guessing most couples need to hear this Word from God over and over again.

Another person may have just learned that her spouse has been cheating on her—and this is the pinnacle of faithless behavior patterns. God's Word to her from Matthew might be that God is calling her to divorce and be free from a faithless and unloving husband.

A third is really struggling and feeling broken and like a failure following her divorce. Jesus wants to assure her that he knows exactly how she feels. Because he came to wed himself to creation and he did so but he was rejected and crucified. He would conclude with hope reminding her that he overcame that great divorce and rose up into new and eternal life. And so will she...

I hope you are not surprised that God's Word can speak about the same subject in different ways to different people at differing stages of life or in different places with regards to that subject. I hope you are living by God's graceful free Word instead of the Old Testament Law. And if you yourself are under free grace rather than the Law, I am sure you want the same for everyone else out there. You have matured with Paul to the point of knowing that keeping or not keeping particular parts of the Law does not count; that "the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."

Now all of this does not mean that there is not universal right and wrong and good and bad. There is a Universal Love, a Universal Faith, a Universal Law...and he has a name-- Jesus Christ. He is the Love, the Faith, the Law whose ways and thoughts are beyond all our ways and thoughts and always stretching us to love more.

I was having breakfast with colleagues Friday morning and we were talking about a variety of subjects with one coming from left theologically and politically and the other from the right and me in the muddling middle. The question of Sunday school came up and one of them brought up an educator who thought we should do away with Sunday School which presents children with simple black and white answers to all kinds of things that grow grayer and grayer as they grow up.

I said that a lot of things are black and white, that some things need to be presented simply to children and that we obviously need to nurture our kids in the faith of Jesus and the question is how do we present Him. I brought up the cosmic Christ of the gospel of John and Ephesians and Colossians who fills all in all and my friend nodded his head and said, "It's like what the Quakers say about Jesus. He is not an island to be discovered but an ocean to explore."

I would change it to: "Let's enjoy the island of Jesus we have discovered and which we are familiar with, like the kids in the video*. But let's not presume that our island of comfort is all there is to him. He is the ocean surrounding the island as well. And we need to go swimming."

There are all kinds of issues that the church needs to work its way through—divorce, gay marriage, interfaith relations, a growingly secular world, the great divide between the rich and the poor. We need to explore and apply the breadth and depth of God's ocean of love to these and many more matters. Let's do it individually and in groups of two or three or more gathered around the Word and in the Spirit of grace, peace, humility and love. May we remember that God's Word and Spirit meet every individual right where we are in order to draw us into the wondrous and majestic Way, Truth and Life of Jesus Christ...whose grace calls us all to eternal union with Him and to whom belongs all the power and the glory, now and forevermore. And God's people say...

**I had shown the children a portion of Prince Caspian in which the children long to return to Narnia and are suddenly transported from a railroad station to an island that looks like Narnia.*

