I will say a little about divorce, or divorce and remarriage, but lets first start with an issue that we all deal with, because this is the main problem we face today in this text. Divorce is a problem, no doubt about that, but the main problem in this text is with what we call legalism. The Pharisees come with the question, “Is it lawful?”. They want to know what is legal. So they are in the legalistic frame of mind. That’s the real issue. So let’s see if each one of us can find the legalistic part of our character today. That’s where we need to start. What is legalism?

It’s so common that is hard to find words for in a way. But let’s say your driving down the highway and the speed limit is 65. And you get pulled over for doing 66. And the policeman says to you as he or she is writing the ticket. The law is the law. The rule is rule. It says 65, not 66. You’ve just encountered the legalist. But legalism also works like this. Let’s say you’re driving 75 in a 65 and you get pulled over. You’re legalistic mind will also say, “But officer, there was no traffic, it’s a bright day and I’m in a hurry to get to class”. It’s really OK, and you weren’t really breaking the law at all. You’re at Walmart going through the lane that says 10 items or less. And you

’re very carefully watching that person in front of you, and yup, they had 12 items. And you’re so offended. That’s the legalist. Or you take 30 items of the same thing through that line, but you tell yourself, hey it’s just one thing. Do you recognize this mind game in yourself? It’s this way of working the rules to your advantage. This is why we need umpires even to have a baseball games, or judges. He was safe! No he wasn’t totally out! Laying the law to your own advantage. You should be able to recognize that person or that thought process within yourself.

Legalism brought to bear on Scripture or the spiritual life is quite damaging. Jesus said it, so you do it. When all else fails, read the instructions. So let’s take a Scripture like Luke 14:12-13. “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return and you would be repaid. But when you give a dinner, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind”. So if you’re going to have a dinner this afternoon, do not invite your family or friends. Ok? It’s what Jesus said. It’s what the Bible says. Sorry, Jesus said it you do it. How about Luke 6:25, “Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep”. So it’s wrong to laugh? Jesus said it. Don’t you believe the Bible? And then when Jesus says to love your enemies, the legalistic mind will go to work right away and come up with something like, “iwell I can love them without liking them. See, I’m OK. This is the legalist mind at work

Do we really want to go down this road when it comes to our faith? But people do it all the time. Watch for your legalistic mind and when it surfaces. Next week Jesus will tell a rich young ruler that along with following the 10 commandments we need to sell all that we have and give it to the poor. Uh oh. Right into the legalistic mind. Some will get real strict and says it says what it says. And someone else will say. Well, I’m not a rich young ruler so it doesn’t apply to me. When this starts happening it’s just the end of anything helpful. Even our law enforcement will give us 5 miles an hour or so. A little flexibility. A little Grace. But the legalist won’t. It says what it says. And then the big argument about what it actually says and everyone has their own opinion. It’s awful really, when you find yourself playing this legal game.

So this should help us get into our lesson today a little more easily. Jesus is travelling along and some Pharisees come to test him and they ask, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”. (Now if you’re a woman you see the sexist issue right away.) But you should also be able to see how instantly we are in the legalistic mind. Your off on the wrong foot. So Jesus asks them what Moses commanded them. For us that would be, what does the Bible say? And in reply, they say, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her. They are exactly right. The Bible says in Deuteronomy that it’s Ok to divorce. I mean it’s settled law.

But here’s the law as it is written in Deuteronomy. Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man’s wife. Then suppose the second man, writes her a bill of divorce, her first husband is not permitted to take her again to be his wife. Pretty easy to see that divorce is permitted under the law of Moses.

But it didn’t settle things at all. Because here came the legalistic mind of the scholars. And the question was this. What does “objectionable” mean? Does it mean anything objectionable? If my wife burns my food, or disagrees with me on something can I divorce her? Some scholars settled on that. Yup, anything at all. She looks at me funny, she’s gone. Hear the legalism in that? It says what it says. Divorce is fine for any reason. But then on the other hand there were other scholars who just couldn’t buy that. So they said, that adultery, or having an affair was what objectionable meant. And like everthing else in the law, it turned into a big argument about what the standard was for “objectionable”. Can you recognize when you’re getting into these kinds of converstaions.

So when they come to Jesus today and ask him if it is right for a man to divorce his wife, as the text itself says, they’re testing him, it’s actually more like trapping him. If he says no, he is violating what the Bible says and he’ll be rejected for that. And if he says yes, then they’ll say, “On what grounds?”. For anything, or just for adultery? And notice what has happened. In the legal wrangling, there will be no conversation at all, about what divorce actually is. And what it’s like. No conversation at all about what it means when a marriage comes to an end. No talk about the real people involved. You’re so busy trying to make it right under the law, and argue about what’s right, so you miss entirely what divorce is like in reality. What God had in mind for a man and a woman never comes up under the law. In the obsession over legality you miss completely reality. Ever been through a divorce? See, the law can’t really touch that can it? You have to go somewhere else to get real about this subject, as many other subjects. Is it lawful? It is OK? It is a sin? Seriously? Whether it’s right or not, or a sin or not, makes no difference at all to what a divorce actually is for real people. And we won’t get anywhere on this subject until we get there.

That’s why Jesus doesn’t answer the question, “Is it lawful?”. Doesn’t even try. Your off on the wrong foot the minute you ask it. And it doesn’t help today either. Divorced people in our recent past were the subject of special shame I think. It was looked upon as one of those special kinds of sins that made you look especially bad, that brought shame to your family. It wasn’t that long ago that a pastor who got a divorce, well, that was the end. There was a legalistic wrong given about divorce. And so people stayed in marraiges that were terrible, and just suffered through, to keep up appearances. Well, they were following the law. Till death do us part. Is that right? Stay in the abuse? I’ll following the law. That’s just awful. But what if you say divorce is right? That doesn’t work either. In some cases, it probably is, but yhat’s messed up too. It’s all avoiding the reality of divorce. Do you see how you just can’t get anywhere under the law? That’s the hardness of heart. The legalistic mind. You have to go somewhere else.

And that’s exactly what Jesus does. Notice how leaves the law behind completely and goes to the beginning of creation. He goes not to the law, but to God’s intention. From the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no long two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate. You want to think about Divorce? Look at what God intended, not at the law. And its not an ideal, or some Hallmark card. But it is a beautiful thing, a gracious gift that God intended for a man and a woman, and I think you have say that divorce was not a part of the plan. But that doesn’t mean that every divorce is wrong in the real world, or that every marriage that stays together is right. Because we’re dealing with real people here, not ideals. God can bring good out of anything, even a divorce. And our God of course is a God of Grace not law.

This should really be helpful in dealing with what follows next. Jesus says to his disciples, “Whoever divorced his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery. This text has been used legalistically to say that divorce and remarriage is immoral, period. Now I ask you. Are you really going into your legalistic mind again? Bible says it, Jesus says it, so that’s it. Really, after all of this, we’re going to get real black and white again? This seems to the true hardness of heart. We cannot get to what Jesus is after with the legalistic mind. You cannot turn this into a rigid Bible says law.

What Jesus is doing here is protecting real people. These men were destroying their wives lives by arguing over what was objectionable about them. What grounds do I have for dismissing this person, writing them off, to get something better? It’s legal they were saying. But Jesus with his new teaching is telling his disciples that it might be legal, but it isn’t right. And if you knew me, Jesus is saying, if you knew who I am, you would know that. For if you knew the Word, you know that there is nothing that you are, or have done, that God will reject you for. I will never leave you, or forsake you. It’s a wedding vow, from God to you. That opens up what marriage is meant to be. A lifelong commitment to one another, that is a reflection of the same commitment God has made to you. That’s what God had in mind from the beginning and we seek to protect. Amen.