

“Let the Little Children Come to Me”

The Thirtieth in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 10:1-16; Deuteronomy 24:1-4

There are two very important things going on in Mark chapter 10. The first is that when challenged by the Pharisees, Jesus responds to them by contrasting the clear teaching of Scripture with the actual practices of first century Judaism as advocated by the Pharisees.¹ As Jesus will soon make clear, the oral tradition of the scribes and Pharisees demonstrates an utter disregard for the clear teaching of Scripture and is nothing but rules taught by men. The second other thing going on in this chapter is the geographical shift away from the region around the Sea of Galilee, as Jesus begins an increasingly tense and seemingly inevitable journey to Jerusalem.² Like a snowball rolling downhill, picking up speed and mass, so too, Jesus is at long last heading toward Jerusalem and the great climax of his messianic mission. A sense of inevitability now surfaces in this Gospel. Jesus must do these things to fulfill the will of God.

We are continuing our series on the Gospel of Mark. In our thirtieth sermon from this Gospel, we have come to Mark chapter 10, where Jesus addresses two closely related topics, marriage and divorce, and the place of children within the kingdom of God. Unlike the previous chapter in which Jesus instructs his disciples in private, in this chapter Jesus returns to teaching the crowds and making public pronouncements as he passes through the region. Just as we saw in chapter 7, Jesus returns to the pattern of explaining to the disciples in private, the meaning of his public pronouncements. As Jesus begins teaching the crowds, Jesus is again challenged by the Pharisees who see Jesus as a threat and who seem to be tracking his every move. Jesus responds to these challenges by demonstrating that the oral tradition of the scribes and Pharisees, which, although widely accepted throughout Israel, amounts to an end-run around the clear teaching of Scripture. Jesus uses these confrontations to illustrate to his disciples the contrast between the kingdom of God and the false teaching of Israel’s religious leaders.

Recall that in the previous chapter, Jesus made a number of important and dramatic statements about the character of discipleship. According to Jesus, true disciples must deny themselves and follow their master all the way to the cross. True disciples must renounce their own righteousness and seek for the forgiveness of their sins through faith in Jesus. The disciples reveal how little they understood about Jesus’ teaching on self-denial, when Jesus overheard them bickering about who was going to be the greatest in the kingdom. Instead, the disciples must see themselves as among the least (that is, of low standing). They must not be concerned with prestige or status, as were so many of the people of that age. The disciples are to see themselves like children—not because children are naive or innocent, but because children have no legal standing and are entrusted to the custody of their parents.

Jesus then went on to instruct the disciples that they are not to draw the circle of discipleship too narrowly. When the disciples saw a man casting out demons in Jesus’ name, the disciples forbade him from doing so because he was not one of them. When Jesus heard that they had done this, he told them that if this man is casting out demons in his name, then the man might not be an enemy, in fact, he might

¹ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 385-386.

² Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 352.

even be an ally. As Jesus tells them, “those who are not against us are for us.”

Then Jesus warned the disciples that those who cause another disciple to stumble, risk coming into condemnation themselves. Says Jesus, it would be better for people to be drowned before they could do so, rather than cause the stumbling of one of Christ’s little ones. Furthermore, Jesus went to say that the disciples must also be on guard against anything which may cause them to stumble. As Jesus tells them, it would be better to go through life maimed—missing a hand, or a foot, or an eye—rather than to allow parts of our bodies to cause us to stumble and thereby fall away from Christ. Of course, Jesus did not mean that we are to cut off body parts should they cause us to sin. Rather he was using vivid language to make the point that we cannot shirk blame when we sin. When we sin, it is our fault. Jesus’ point is simply that anything which could potentially cause us to stumble, is to be immediately cast away, before it brings us to the point of interfering with our relationship with Christ.

As we move into Mark chapter 10, we see a change in the location where the scene takes place, and once again Jesus directly challenges the authority of the oral tradition and teaching of the scribes and Pharisees. When the Pharisees attempt to trap Jesus, this begins a steady increase in the tension between Jesus and Israel’s religious leaders as he makes his way toward Jerusalem.

As we read in Mark 10:1, “*Jesus then left that place [Capernaum] and went into the region of Judea and across the Jordan.*” Mark’s “nothing but the facts” approach makes it easy for us to overlook how important the geography mentioned is in understanding what follows. Jesus was beginning his fateful journey to Jerusalem. Leaving the familiar confines of Capernaum, Jesus headed southeast from the Sea of Galilee, first into Judea, and then at some point, he crossed over the Jordan River and entered into the region of Perea. This was the standard route taken by pilgrims heading to Jerusalem from the northern part of Israel. This is also an area with which Jesus would have been very familiar. Let us not miss the irony here—as Jesus begins his final journey toward Jerusalem, he passes directly through the area where John the Baptist conducted his work in preparing the way for that “one coming after him.”

Jesus was not only well-known in these areas, as he passed through the region, we can imagine the people getting very excited about his unexpected appearance, especially since Jesus had been gone for some time. There was no doubt that as people learned that Jesus was actually headed toward Jerusalem, the expectations grew that Jesus’ messianic mission would eventually come to a great climax with a final confrontation with the Sanhedrin (the Jewish religious body).³ While Mark does not give us a time reference, it is clear from what follows that Jesus is in the final phase of his ministry and that three or so years have elapsed since he first began his public ministry nearby.

Having spent a significant amount of time training the twelve, Jesus will once again return to a more public ministry (although his public pronouncements are not so much for the benefit of the crowds, as they are for the further preparation of the disciples). Jesus will also confront the religious leaders of Israel as he heads south. In the last half of verse 1, Mark reports that as Jesus traveled through the region, “*again crowds of people came to him, and as was his custom, he taught them.*” Clearly, the people recognized Jesus, flocked to him, and he taught them as he made his way through the area.

At some point during his journey, Jesus’ movements were noticed by the Pharisees—who likewise may have sensed that some sort of final confrontation was inevitable. As we read in verse 2, “*some Pharisees*

³ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 352-353.

came and tested him by asking, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’” Again, the Pharisees are up to their old tricks. They try to trip Jesus up with a loaded question designed to expose Jesus as a lawbreaker. Since virtually everyone in first century Palestine was in agreement that divorce could be granted to husbands who did not like the conduct of their wives, we can only surmise that the Pharisees had heard somewhere along the line that Jesus’ views on the subject of divorce were much more restrictive.⁴ Since the Law of Moses allowed for divorce, if Jesus did not make such allowances, then the Pharisees could argue that Jesus was a law-breaker and perhaps subject to the death penalty. And so, in order to understand what is going on in this exchange, we need to understand something about how the Jews of that period practiced divorce.

According to the famed Jewish historian Josephus, as well as other sources from the time, virtually everyone agreed that Moses allowed divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 (our Old Testament lesson this morning). The only open question had to do with the grounds upon which such a divorce be granted—what did Moses mean by “indecency?” At the time of Jesus, the Rabbis interpreted the Deuteronomy passage and its reference to “indecency” to mean that if the wife’s behavior was not to liking of the husband, he could seek a divorce on the ground of “indecency” and would almost always be granted the divorce. In fact, Josephus records how he ended his own marriage. “At that time I divorced my wife, not liking her behavior.”⁵ Burn the toast, and you are gone! No alimony, no child support, no attorney’s fees! No nothing! All a husband had to do was claim “indecency.”

While there were some Jewish groups who limited the grounds for divorce to unchastity (adultery), they were outside the mainstream. Therefore, it is clear that the religion and culture of Jesus’ day was very lax toward the whole subject.⁶ The great irony is that Jesus was not under suspicion for having too lax a view of divorce, but because he had too restrictive a view. It was this suspicion of Jesus on this matter which prompted the question from the Pharisees, who Mark says “tried to test him” with their question.

Here’s where the geography enters in and why we know that the Pharisees were up to no good. Jesus and his disciples are now in Herod’s territory—in Perea, east of the Jordan River. This is the same area where John the Baptist had spoken out loudly and repeatedly against Herod’s divorce some years earlier. The Pharisees very likely assumed (and even hoped) that if Jesus likewise began preaching against divorce, he may indeed get himself in trouble with Herod, who had put John the Baptist to death for doing the same thing. If Jesus preached against divorce and called Herod to task, Herod might act, thereby arresting Jesus and making life much easier for the Pharisees.

Once again, Jesus demonstrates that he’s not about to fall into the Pharisees’ poorly planned trap. Instead of being tripped up by the question, Jesus directs them back to Scripture, forcing them to explain how their own current practices of easy divorce jibes with the biblical passages they think gives them permission to do what they have been doing. According to verse 3, Jesus simply asked them, “*What did Moses command you?*” The Pharisees responded to Jesus by quoting back to him Deuteronomy 24. “*Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.*”

⁴ France, The Gospel of Mark, 390.

⁵ Cited in; France, The Gospel of Mark, 388.

⁶ France, The Gospel of Mark, 390.

In verse 5, Jesus tells the Pharisees that reason why Moses granted this “*was because your hearts were hard [that is Israel’ hearts] [so] that Moses wrote you this law.*” In other words, Moses permitted divorce on a very narrow ground (indecency), because the people were rejecting the law of God due to unbelief. Moses was faced with the reality of sin and the need to deal with the circumstances at hand. Notice too that Moses required that the wife was to be given to a certificate of divorce. This meant that should her husband divorce her, she was to be legally released from the marriage and was therefore was free to remarry. Divorce was never sanctioned by Moses. Moses was forced to deal with the fact that it happened because people are sinful. Furthermore, he built a provision into the law to protect the wife from the whims of her husband, a provision which, if applied, surely *lowered* the divorce rate. If a husband finds something about his wife which he considers “indecent” and he seeks to divorces her, he had better realize that should he do so, she is free to leave and can even remarry. She might indeed find that the grass was greener and the husband would lose her for good should he seek a divorce.

Jesus reminds the Pharisees that a bill of divorce was granted by Moses solely because people’s hearts were hard (sinful). Divorce was never God’s purpose and the lax attitudes of the Pharisees about the sanctity of marriage only demonstrated that they were every bit as hard-hearted as were the Jews to whom Moses had originally granted this exception. Jesus also reminds the Pharisees of God’s true intention for marriage, an important part of the equation which they had conveniently overlooked. “*But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.*” Jesus sees the creation account as reflecting God’s true purpose for marriage. The exception granted by Moses was exactly that—an exception because the reality of sin prompted the promulgation of the decree of Deuteronomy 24. Moses never overturned the original purpose for marriage. He made provision because people were sinful and Moses was especially concerned to provide for the protection of wives who burned toast.⁷

According to Jesus, then, the creation account in Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 is God’s standard for marriage, despite the Pharisees virtually trumping the creation account with their emphasis upon the exception. If the Pharisees want to appeal to Deuteronomy 24, they had better implement all of it, and provide for protection for woman and ensure that some “indecency” actually exists. But no, their interpretation of this passage shows how lax they had become, even though they saw themselves as defenders of the Torah and they believed that Jesus is the one who did not uphold the law. Despite all the talk about upholding the law, these guys are thorough-going antinomians.

In appealing to the creation account, Jesus is making the point that marriage (and the marital union) has been established and blessed by God from the very beginning. Let me put it this way. God establishes marriage as the foundation of society. God also says that sex is good, which is why he made two sexes and sanctions their union as “one flesh.” The sanctity of marriage is also the reason why sex before marriage is sin (fornication), why sex outside of marriage is sin (adultery), and why homosexuality is sin, it is a violation of the natural order (to put it bluntly, the parts don’t fit). God made us as sexual beings (male and female). He created marriage as that place where we are to be fruitful (enjoy our sexuality) so as to multiply (propagate) and preserve the race.

Jesus speaks of marriage as a divinely-ordained union between two people who become one flesh. In saying this, Jesus is directly challenging the lax attitude of the Rabbis, who allowed a husband to divorce

⁷ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 355.

his wife (and thereby destroy that union which God sanctions), solely on the basis of a husband's whim, requiring no legal protection (as Moses did) for the wife. Because God has joined these two people together as husband and wife and pronounces them "one flesh," Jesus says, "let no man divide them." But the casual division of this union is exactly the thing that the Pharisees were sanctioning, if not condoning. Once again, Jesus confounds the Pharisees from the very same Scripture they claim to be defending. They are no match for Jesus.

Jesus uses this challenge of the Pharisees as a basis to instruct his disciples when they are alone. As we learn in verse 10, "*When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this.*" It must have been a shock to the twelve that Jesus so completely disagreed with such a widely-held rabbinic teaching. Jesus now gives his disciples the proper interpretation of the divorce exception in Deuteronomy 24. Jesus "*answered, `Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.'*" Notice that Jesus is speaking specifically about the case at hand and the issue raised by the teaching of the Pharisees, specifically their use (indeed misuse) of Deuteronomy 24. Those men who get a divorce on the grounds of "indecency" (burned toast) as currently practiced by the Pharisees, commit adultery should they take another wife. The same holds true for women. Thus Jesus upholds the absolute command of God from Exodus 20:14 enshrined in the Ten Commandments—"You shall not commit adultery"—something the Pharisees completely overlooked.

Jesus is crystal clear about this. Marriage is to be seen as a permanent institution, spouses are to be faithful to one another, and divorce (i.e., ending the marriage) is not only the result of sin, it can lead to further sin (adultery).⁸ Notice too that Jesus places both husband and wife under the exact same legal and moral obligations—a remarkable thing in the first century, in effect, exposing the pro-husband interpretation of the Pharisees which denied the rights to be granted to the wife in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Jesus exposes how those most vocal about defending the law (the Pharisees), are actually undermining it with their lax attitude and their oral tradition.

In light of Jesus' teaching on the sanctity of marriage and given Jesus' prior teaching about the kingdom of God, Mark includes the account of Jesus blessing small children.

Mark doesn't say anything about where or when this incident occurred, but it quite naturally comes after a discussion of marriage. Here again we see how Jesus' view of things is radically different from his contemporaries, whether that be the Jews in general, the Pharisees who oppose him, or even the disciples who continually demonstrate how clueless they are.⁹ In Mark 9:36-37, Jesus has already used a child to illustrate the nature of God's kingdom. Now, Jesus must deal with his disciples' improper attitude toward children in light of the custom of parents who sought to have Jesus bless their little ones.

According to verse 13, this episode came about because "*people were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them.*" It was commonplace for Palestinian Jews to seek a Rabbinic blessing for their children. It was only natural therefore, that parents would seek to have Jesus bless their children as well. That these were small children (toddlers) and infants is clear from the parallel passage in Luke 18:57 and from the fact that Jesus could easily lift these children and take them

⁸ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 394.

⁹ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 395.

in his arms. The disciples tried to stop parents from doing this, because they did not want people bothering Jesus, or, and this is more likely, the twelve did not grant the parents permission.

Jesus' response to the disciples action is one of complete indignation. "*When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.'*" The other gospels do not mention Jesus' anger—certainly Peter remembered it and recounted this to Mark. While Jesus often expresses strong emotions throughout the gospels, here he is said to be truly angry. Why? Since the kingdom belongs to little children because God wills to grant them entrance into that kingdom, what gives the disciples the right to prevent the parents from bringing their children to Jesus? In Jesus, the kingdom draws near, and since these children are members of that kingdom, they should be allowed access to Jesus. Adults often resist when something is given them (due to pride) but children simply receive such things. Therefore, they are the perfect illustration of what entrance into the kingdom actually entails.¹⁰

This is why Jesus goes on to say in verses 15, "*I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.*" Jesus directs these words to the disciples who continue to miss Jesus' point. Little children are the model of how people enter the kingdom. God bestows his kingdom upon the low, the helpless, those who can do nothing to gain entrance. Entrance into the kingdom of God is not something which can be earned, or gained on the basis of human merit. As one commentator so aptly puts it, to receive the Kingdom is to allow oneself to be given it.¹¹ Therefore, the disciples are not to hinder parents who seek to bring their children to Jesus. Expressing his genuine love for these little ones, we read in verse 16 that Jesus "*took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.*" If the first century world was lax about marriage and divorce, it was tough upon children, who were often disciplined sternly, and who had no legal rights or protection. Returning to biblical standards, Jesus blesses the children, because the kingdom has been bestowed upon them, and through blessing them, Jesus is calling them and their parents to true discipleship as members of God's covenant people.

Obviously, there is much here for us in terms of application.

When Jesus is challenged by the Pharisees with a question about divorce, it was because he held too high a view of marriage and too low a view of divorce. Lets not miss that very important point. His disciples were shocked by his views, as may be some of us here this morning. The very nature of the question and the hope that Jesus would somehow condemn himself before Herod, clearly demonstrates the deceitfulness of the Pharisees. It also gives Jesus the opportunity to correct the utterly improper way the Rabbis had been interpreting Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Jesus not only returns to the creation mandate as the basis for understanding marriage, given and blessed by God, and intended to be a permanent institution, Jesus also reaffirms the abiding validity of the seventh commandment—"you shall not commit adultery." In doing so, Jesus exposes how those who pride themselves in defending the law, have not only misinterpreted Moses, they have set up a system in which men can freely divorce their wives on the ground of burnt toast ("indecency"), while ignoring Moses' requirement that in such cases wives are to be given a certificate of divorce which protects them. Such a way of handling the law not only misreads Moses, it creates adulterers.

¹⁰ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 360.

¹¹ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 360-361.

While we don't have time to discuss the whole subject of marriage and divorce, we can say a couple of things which jump out at us from the text this morning. First and foremost, marriage is intended to be a lasting and abiding institution. God intends that once such a union is formed that we not divide it. It is that institution in which God intends for us to enjoy our sexuality and raise our children. It is human sin, not God's purpose, which leads to divorce. It is also important to point out that in Matthew's gospel (Matthew 5:31; 19:9), Jesus teaches that divorce *may* be granted upon the grounds of adultery. Paul adds the ground of desertion in I Corinthians 7. So while all divorce stems from human sin, not all divorces are sinful. But divorce is never God's purpose, and while Malachi says "God hates it," (2:16) the reality is that divorce is a fact of life for many here this morning.

For those among us who are the victims of adultery or desertion, know that God's grace is sufficient to forgive your part in the divorce, to enable you to forgive the one who wronged you, and for you to make whatever restitution, if any, which is required. Most importantly, God's grace is sufficient for you to move on with your life. For those among us who have caused divorce through sinful actions, know that while you must do all that you can to repent and make restitution for the damage you have caused, God's grace is sufficient to forgive you of your sin, and enable you to make peace and seek restitution with the person you have harmed, and likewise move on. That being said, we cannot accept the spirit of the age which says marriage is no big deal, (we just live together), and that divorce is just another potential hazard of life which befalls 50% of all marriages. Jesus directs his people to the original creation mandate—marriage is a divinely-sanctioned union between two people in which they become one flesh. Ending that union is a horrible, and dare I say, sinful thing. But neither is divorce some kind of unpardonable sin. Like other sins, it can be forgiven by the blood of Christ.

We also need to consider Jesus' attitude toward children. Clearly, Jesus loved the children, he blessed them as members of his covenant, and he was very upset with the disciples when they tried to prevent parents from bringing their children to him. Children are the perfect example of the kingdom of God, because they don't see the need to try and earn entrance, they just receive it. In fact, says Jesus, children (even very little ones—infants and toddlers) are members of his kingdom. This is why we not only apply to them the sign and seal of the covenant (baptism), but why we involve our children in our worship just as soon as they are physically ready. Jesus' attitude toward children should be our own. It was Jesus who said, "let the little children come to me." We must never hinder them from coming to their Savior!

But let us not miss the fact that our attitude is be just like that of those children who Jesus picked up and blessed. If we are Christ's disciples, we will not claim the kingdom, we will not try and force our way into it, we will simply receive it with the empty hands of faith. And never forget that in this kingdom there is forgiveness of all of our sins—there is forgiveness for divorce, there is forgiveness for adultery, and there is forgiveness for the sin of pride on the part of any who say to themselves, "I never committed the sin of adultery and I never got a divorce," therefore I am superior to those who have. In this kingdom, God freely receives repentant sinners. But he turns away all those who think they've earned their place with in the kingdom. Entrance into the kingdom of God is bestowed and received. Entrance can never be earned. We must simply receive the blessings which Jesus gives us, as those children who were brought to Jesus reveled in his blessing. Amen.