

Mark 10:1-31: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Mark chapter 10 verses 1 to 31 And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter.

And he said to them, And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them. And the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it he was indignant and said to them, And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.

And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, And Jesus said to him, And he said to him, And Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said to him, And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, And they were exceedingly astonished and said to him, Then who can be saved?

[2 : 40] Jesus looked at them and said, With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God. Peter began to say to him, See, we have left everything and followed you.

Jesus said, In Mark 10, Jesus leaves Galilee and enters Judea.

There he is asked by the Pharisees to weigh in on the debate between schools of legal opinion of the day, between Hillel and Shammai. The school of Hillel had a very extensive understanding of for any cause in Deuteronomy chapter 24, in the regulation on divorce.

But the school of Shammai had a far more restrictive understanding. They're trying to test him. Part of this test may have a political undercurrent to it. We should bear in mind that John the Baptist had ultimately lost his life because of speaking out against divorce in the case of Herod Antipas and Herodias, his brother's wife.

It was a dangerous issue to speak out on. And so if they could get him to speak out on this, they could get him in trouble in Galilee and Perea. Apart from the political issues involved in teaching against divorce, there were also debates among the Jews themselves concerning the subject.

[4 : 13] As I've just noted, in Matthew's account of this exchange, debates concerning the conditions under which divorce is permissible are much more foregrounded, whereas in Mark's account here, it's the legitimacy of divorce itself that is focused upon.

Jewish scholars of those days debated the meaning of the expression something wrong, indecent or objectionable in Deuteronomy chapter 24 verse 1. So some of the school of Shammai believe that this only legitimated divorce in cases of sexual immorality, whereas others of the school of Hillel interpreted it very broadly, believing that it could apply to something as minor as a wife accidentally spoiling her husband's meal.

So there are two things going on here. There's an attempt to entrap Jesus in a dangerous political statement, and second, there's an attempt to get Jesus to take a side in a divisive Jewish debate on the Torah.

And his response is to give them a question. In his teaching, Jesus frequently answers questions with questions or with parables. We can think of the parable of the Good Samaritan or paying taxes to Caesar and his response to that.

In this way, he challenges the questions that people ask him. It is very easy to fail to perceive loaded questions or to see the assumptions that are built into supposedly innocent questions.

[5 : 28] Jesus' approach to teaching often gets people to reconsider their questions and also shrewdly outwits questions that are designed to trap him or trip him up.

Questions, especially questions designed to trip someone up, can often be used to defend ourselves from the force of the truth or to undermine people who trouble our conscience. Questions of the type that the Pharisees bring here are also often an assertion of authority relative to someone else.

We might recall the way that the Pharisees inquire about the disciples' behaviour and their failure to wash their hands before meals. In that case, they are asserting their authority as judges and Jesus does not actually answer their question to them.

Rather, he challenges their right to ask the question, pointing out that they are people who nullify the law of God through their tradition. So answering a question with a question is in part designed to turn the tables, to deny people the right to judge Christ, while putting them in a position where they have to give an account of themselves.

The wording of Jesus' question to them is important. What did Moses command you? Not what did Moses write concerning divorce, but what is the commandment of the law on the matter?

[6 : 41] Note that the law is not just the ten words or the various commandments that surround it. It's the entirety of the Pentateuch. Jesus' answer to the Pharisees will expose their improper posture towards the law.

The answer to Jesus' question differs from what he requested. They say, Moses allowed.

Deuteronomy 24 though isn't a command concerning divorce, it's a concession.

What is the difference between these things? Well, a concession is an accommodation to human weakness, a recognition that human beings are imperfectible in their fallen state, and that good laws will make allowances for the sinfulness and immaturity of people and their societies.

Good laws are accommodated to the societies and the persons for which they're designed. So for instance, if you're raising young kids, you will accommodate your requirements to their abilities and their age of understanding.

And then as they grow up, those requirements will increase and you'll expect greater maturity from them. In the same way, while we are informed by a deeper and more absolute moral law, we need to have accommodation to particular circumstances and persons.

[7 : 47] If you allowed your teenagers the same liberties as you give to your toddlers, it would not be good. Jesus highlights the problem with the Pharisees' response. They haven't answered his question about what Moses commanded.

And Moses' concessions concerning divorce allowed for divorce, but they did not approve of it. It was an accommodation to the sinfulness of human society, not practice that was viewed positively. We might think of the practices of slavery or polygamy in a similar light. These were permitted and regulated, but never celebrated or encouraged. These practices were never God's good intention for humanity, but they were tolerated for a time as an accommodation to sin, weakness, immaturity and imperfectibility.

To find out what is really commanded, we have to look back further to God's creational intent for humanity. And Jesus joins Genesis 1 and 2 together to highlight the permanent unity that was always God's intention in marriage.

This is distinguished from laws that are accommodated to the hardness of human hearts. And this distinction significantly reframes the question of divorce. The Hillelites and the Shammaites are both approaching the question of divorce primarily within the horizon of the Mosaic body of laws, and they fail adequately to consider the horizon of God's creational intent.

[9 : 06] And the result of this is a loss of a sense of the way that divorce undermines God's intent for humanity. Divorce is a tragic accommodation, a legitimate accommodation, but a tragic one nonetheless.

To human sinfulness. It's not something that is positively allowed. Jesus may here contrast Moses and God. Moses is the divinely inspired prophet administering the moral law in a particular historical situation.

But God is the author of the timeless moral law. And there's a sort of legalism which snatches at all such allowances of a law accommodated to human sinfulness and imperfection, rather than pursuing the righteousness that it should direct us towards.

Such allowances excuse us in these people's minds from the highest standard of divine righteousness. But that's never what they were supposed to do. Note that Jesus doesn't teach that Moses was wrong to allow divorce under some circumstances.

The allowances were made on account of people's sinfulness and hardness of heart, but they were not themselves sinful allowances. The Old Testament law provides us with a number of conditions in which divorce is treated as permissible, and I believe that the New Testament does not simply abrogate these.

[10:18] Accommodation to the reality of human sinfulness and weakness really is necessary for good law. Whether a serious abuse, for instance, or desertion or adultery, or some other such sin or failure, divorce may be appropriately permitted.

We should also note in such circumstances that we should not abstract the specific action of divorce from the broader failures of permanent exclusive union that might have precipitated it. While the act of divorce is an act of very grave moral weight, it's a purposeful act that ends a marriage, the one who initiates it should not be treated as if they bore the entire weight of blame for a failed marriage.

It may be that the blame lies almost entirely on the other side. What Jesus' teaching does is not simply to delegitimize the teaching of Moses, or to suggest an alternative legal code to replace it, but rather to relativise it.

The law of Moses and all other legal codes that are necessarily and appropriately accommodated to human sinfulness are not the north star of righteousness. In Mark, Jesus' teaching on divorce seems to be more absolute than it is in Matthew, where there are allowances made for the legitimacy of divorce in the case of adultery.

[11:32] The lack of such qualifications in Mark can help us to understand the radicality of Jesus' teaching in ways that might be unclear to many readers of Matthew. In Jesus' teaching in Mark especially, divorce is framed not primarily by the conditions of this present sinful age, but by God's creational intent at the beginning.

Where necessary accommodations to this sinful age exist, including those given for adultery, these accommodations are exposed for what they are. They're signs of how estranged we have become from God's good purpose for humanity.

Because we are a hard-hearted and sinful people, God permits us to divorce in the case of adultery. But lifelong, permanent, indissoluble and exclusive unity was always his intent.

And this teaching can be troubling for us. We live in a society in which both divorce and serial extramarital relations are rampant. It's a hard teaching today, as it was in Jesus' own day.

We would like God to tell us that it is okay to divorce, perhaps, under conditions X, Y and Z. But this is not what we're told. Rather, we are given the original intent of creation as the standard of our measure, with the concessions appearing more clearly for what they are against that background.

[12:46] They're tolerated, but not positively validated, ways of negotiating human rebellion against God's purpose in marriage. The fact of God's creational establishment of marriage is a measure by which we must consider divorce.

We may break faith with and reject our prior vow in the self-contradiction of divorce, but not in such a way as places us beyond the bounds of God's grace. And so the Church is bound both to uphold the institution of marriage and present God's grace to those in tragic situations of failed marriages. And there may be the possibility of people being called back to the abandoned task of marriage to a specific person. But sometimes the conditions for this simply no longer exist.

The end of chapter 9 of Mark had a couple of instances that drew attention to children as models for the kingdom. And here again, children are brought to Christ, and the disciples seek to prevent them being brought to Christ, but Jesus rebukes them.

These children, again, are models of what it is like to receive the kingdom of God. We have to receive the kingdom of God with the humble dependence of children. Here it should be clear that the children aren't just being brought forward as examples of something that refers to adults.

[14:00] The children are being valued in their own right. Christ blesses the children, and the children are given attention. Here we also see Jesus doing something beyond his exorcisms or his healings.

He's blessing people, and people are bringing children to him in order to receive this blessing. Many people have talked about Jesus' radical teaching and practice concerning women, or the poor, or people outside of Israel.

And all of these things are appropriate and important to talk about. But along with all of these things, we should talk about how radical Jesus' approach to children was. Jesus is then approached by a man who asks what thing he must do to inherit eternal life.

And it's easy to misread Jesus' discussion with this man. Many have seen Jesus as highlighting the futility of seeking righteousness according to the law, driving the man to despair of his righteousness.

But when we read the story, this isn't actually what he says. Jesus actually teaches that keeping the commandments is necessary for entering into life.

[15 : 09] The twist, in some ways, is in how this is understood. He highlights the second table of the law. And we should note that there's no reference to covetousness. Rather, that commandment is fulfilled in selling and giving to the poor.

And there's a fulfilment of the commandments on a deeper level by following Jesus himself. That is how you fulfil the first table. How you fulfil the duty of love to God.

By following Christ. If the final commandment, the commandment concerning covetousness, highlights the greed of the man and his attachment to his possessions, the call of Christ to follow him, highlights also the tragic way in which those possessions have prevented him from actually serving God, from loving God as he ought.

The man is a prisoner of his love for money. And even when Christ, who is described as loving him and calling him to follow him, offers him this great honour and invitation, he cannot accept it because he is so bound up with his money.

And he cannot leave that behind. Mark doesn't have the same degree of teaching concerning riches as Matthew does. But here and in other places like it, he does show us the way that riches can weigh us down, preventing us from serving and following our true master.

[16 : 26] This naturally makes many of us feel uncomfortable. We want our wealth and possessions to be off limits for Christ. We'll serve him in all sorts of different ways, but not if this is what is required of us.

Wealth is a power that can prevent us from entering the kingdom of God. It's something that can master us, and we should be very fearful of it, of falling under the sway of things that we think we own, but really own us.

However, those who give up things for the kingdom are promised to return, not just in the age to come, but also in the present age. And while it may be humanly impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God, with God all these things are possible.

A question to consider. What do you believe that Jesus is referring to in verses 29 and 30? Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions.