

Meeting Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

Session Sixteen – Mark 10:1-31

Mark 10:1 “And he left there and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan, and crowds gathered to him again. And again, as was his custom, he taught them.”

Jesus has been travelling down from to Jerusalem, and after his time in Capernaum in Mark 9, Jesus is leaving Galilee. Jesus is heading swiftly toward Jerusalem now throughout Mark 10 and will arrive in Mark 11.

The region that Jesus is now travelling to (“Judea beyond the Jordan”) is generally believed to be Perea, the territory that John the Baptist had been arrested and beheaded in. Both Perea and Galilee were ruled by the Herod Antipas (Herod the Great’s son).

There are also suggestions that Jesus travelled through Batanea, an area ruled by the far milder Tetrarch Philip, in order to escape the mounting danger from Herod. This danger is referenced in Mark 3:6 where “the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.”

Either way, Jesus is in a potentially dangerous situation, and his journey will only bring him closer his impending death, which he has now twice warned his disciples about. (Mark 8:31; 9:30-32)

Mark 10:2 “And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”³ He answered them, “What did Moses command you?”⁴ They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.””

There are similarities to the testing of Jesus in Luke 10:25. The questions being asked are not genuine, they are meant to trap Jesus. Jesus knows this, and instead asks what Moses *commands*.

There are two primary schools of Jewish thought at the time about divorce. Both affirm that divorce is *allowed* in Deuteronomy 24:1:

“When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a

certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house.”

The debate is over what constitutes “indecent”. Followers of the Rabbi Shammai believed that only serious moral shortcomings (particularly adultery) counted, while followers of Rabbi Hillel believed even annoying or embarrassing actions counted.

Given the fact that Jesus’ cousin John the Baptist had been killed for his opposition to the marriage of Herod Antipas, this was a subject that was likely to get him into trouble (especially if Jesus was indeed in Perea), and the Pharisees knew it.

Mark 10:5 “And Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. ⁶ But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ⁷ ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, ⁸ and the two shall become one flesh.’ So, they are no longer two but one flesh. ⁹ What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.””

Jesus asked what Moses commanded, but they respond with what Moses allowed because of their brokenness and sin. Jesus reminds them of the positive command that God himself gives regarding marriage in Genesis 1:27 and 2:24. Jesus takes their question about divorce and reorients it to marriage.

This joining and definition trumps all else. Nothing that comes after gets rid of that. It is easy to get into conversations of what we can get away with, or what is allowed, but Jesus brings it back to the specific way that God created faithful marriage to be: male and female who become one flesh and who are not separated.

Jesus goes even further to say that if God has brought something together, then we must make sure not to conspire against to separate the unity that God has created. The addition of “no longer two but one” means that it is not two parties going separate directions, but a breaking or tearing apart of one flesh.

Mark 10:10 “And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. ¹¹ And he said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, ¹² and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.””

When the confused disciples ask Jesus to clarify, Jesus further states that for the husband or wife to remarry would be adultery. This was not recognised in Jewish law. A man could commit adultery against another man by sleeping with his wife, but there was provision in the law for that adultery being considered as against his own wife. Jesus thus elevated wives to the same level as their husbands under his law, recognising that they are the ones being wronged.

Wives at the time had no recourse to divorce their husbands, however, and Jesus is condemning that action as well. This is particularly important, because it is precisely what John had condemned. Herodias had left Philip for Herod Antipas.

Mark 10:13 “And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. ¹⁵ Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.””

Directly after this discussion of divorce, we have a somewhat jarring shift to children. There is little context given here, but it is a clear reminder that marriage is not primarily about one individual, but the unified family that is created.

In connection to Mark 9:36, Jesus is again turning his attention specifically to children. The disciples try to keep the children away, but Jesus rebukes them. Parents have brought their children to be blessed, and this is why we can and should do the same. Jesus has no patience for those who would keep children away from him, and in fact reminds the disciples that children are not only not lesser (something discussed last week), but in fact have a special claim to his kingdom.

William L. Lane suggests that: *“The ground of Jesus’ surprising statement is not to be found in any subjective quality possessed by children but rather in their objective humbleness and in the startling character of the grace of God who wills to give the Kingdom to those who have no claim upon it.”*

It is to those *like children* who inherit kingdom of heaven. Children have a special way of receiving, unlike most of us as adults who are loath to accept “hand outs”. The kingdom belongs to those who recognise that they are small and have done nothing to earn it.

Mark 10:16 “And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.”

Jesus then shows his complete and tender love for children. They were worth his time, his attention, and his love. The adults wanted them to play quietly in the corner and allow the grown ups to work, but Jesus brought them into the center of what he was doing.

Blessing is not something that we generally speak of or value as highly in our context, but in the Jewish context, blessings were hugely important. It was to invoke a God’s good will toward them, and literally to “speak well of” them. Jesus

is both affirming their value here and now, and also invoking God's good action in their lives in the future.

Mark 10:17 "And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"¹⁸ And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone."

What must I do to inherit eternal life? This connects to question by lawyer in Luke 10 and is a question that is immensely important. We want to know if we'll "make it". The man doesn't understand that there is nothing he has that is enough to earn eternal life. He wants to know "what must *I* do."

Jesus hears this and gives him a hint: "No one is good by God, so why are you calling me good? Do you recognise that I am God? Or not? You've come to the right place, but do you really understand who I am?"

Mark 10:19 "You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'"²⁰ And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.""

Then Jesus again reminds the person coming to him that they already know what the law says: "You know the commandments! But are you really doing it?" This understanding of the law builds our salvation on things we *don't* do. Not what we *do*.

This list is taken directly from the 10 commandments found in Exodus 20, and later referenced in Deuteronomy 5. These are the final six commands that have to do with the way that we love our neighbour. Although the first four are not referenced, Jesus seems to be saying that the way we treat our neighbour is a direct expression of our reverence for God. 1 John 4:20 appeals to this as well:

"If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen."

The man gives a very impressive answer, how many of us can say the same! This man has lived a life that is by all accounts a good one—about as good as a human life can be. But is it enough?

Mark 10:21 “And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”

This line about Jesus looking at the man and loving him is a wonderful reminder of the compassion that Jesus has. He does not look at the man annoyed or exasperated; he looks at him and loves him. This man seems to be asking his questions honestly. He genuinely desires to know what Jesus will say.

And because Jesus loves him, he tells him that there is still one thing to do: give up everything he has and follow him. This is not about earning through giving; it's about following Jesus.

Mark 10:22 “Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.”

The man, however, leaves sad. And why is he sad? Because he has lots of things. He has a lot to give up, and he has likely always lived in great comfort security—to give all of that up would take immense faith. This is precisely what Jesus asks for.

What Jesus is pointing out to the man is that there is something that comes before God. He can follow all of the “do not” rules and feel righteous, but that isn't what Jesus wants. Remembering the first words that Jesus says to the man, “Why do you call me good? Only God is good” puts this into perspective.

This is not just some travelling preacher asking the man to follow him: it's God. It will always be a problem if God himself has asked us to do something, but we will not do it.

Mark 10:23 “And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”²⁴ And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God!²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”

This is a tough saying for most of us, because we come from a very affluent society. Even those of us who are relatively poor comparatively to others around us would be considered very rich contrasted with the rest of the world. The problem is not the money itself. The problem is that money makes it hard to get into heaven, because we rely on it!

As we can see in the case of the rich man, and many of us, the idea of giving up our worldly possessions is met with great sorrow. Even if Jesus promises us that what we would gain by giving it up to follow him would be God's kingdom. It's hard because we don't want to trust God totally. And the more that we have, the more we feel we don't need to trust God. It's when we're at the end of our rope and totally out of options that we can finally place our trust fully in God.

That's why being rich and the dependence that comes along with it makes entering God's kingdom like trying to push a camel through the eye of a needle. We've likely heard about this "eye of the needle" being a gate into Jerusalem that the animals could go through, but the archeological evidence doesn't suggest that camels would have been able to through any such gate, nor does any other literary evidence.

The words in Mark refer to a tailor's needle, and in Luke a surgeon's needle. Jesus is taking the largest animal in Palestine and contrasting it with the smallest conceivable space to pass through.

Mark 10:26 "And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?" 27 Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.""

The disciples are understandably perplexed. "Who can be saved then!" The disciples find this doubly hard, because it was commonly thought that the wealthy had an advantage. Not only was their wealth understood to be a gift from God, and this wealth also allowed them to be far more generous than their poorer brethren. If the rich couldn't get into God's kingdom, then how could anyone?

Generosity or "almsgiving" was one of the three primary tenets of Jewish piety, along with prayer and fasting. It's clear from the man's question, and the disciple's response, that it was understood that one earned the kingdom of heaven, but Jesus says something quite different.

When we take this together with the previous section about how children are specially equipped to inherit the kingdom of God due to their ability to receive, it becomes clear that Jesus is making a point. The kingdom of God is a gift given by God. In order to recognise our need, and be able to really accept God's kingdom, we must be empty of all that gets in between us and following Jesus.

With man, it is **impossible to be saved** but with God, everything is possible. We can't save ourselves, but God can. That's the message that Jesus wants to get across.

Mark 10:28 "Peter began to say to him, "See, we have left everything and followed you."

Dear Peter seems to have been hardly able to contain his excitement as Jesus was speaking. "WE DID THAT!" he exclaims. Peter speaks for the group, and although this emphasis on their own actions seems to be a little self-congratulatory and perhaps miss the point of it being God who has worked, and not them, it's a start. The disciples' actions speak to a change of heart that recognises the need to follow Jesus: a recognition that they couldn't do it on their own.

Mark 10:29 "Jesus said, "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, ³⁰ who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life."

This is one of the most incredible, and yet perhaps confusing promises that Jesus makes. We sort of understand the second part, the part where Jesus says we will receive eternal life in the age to come, but what about the first promise? The promise that we'll receive "a hundredfold now, *in this time* houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands."

This seems at first glance like a prosperity gospel, or simply a lie. We've likely experienced loss and not seemed to gain a hundred times what we lost. But the answer seems to lie in something that is at once both very simple, and very complex: the church.

Remember Jesus' statement in Mark 3:33-35:

"Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother."

The simple part is that we know what Jesus is talking about: the church. The complex part is being a church that actually realises Jesus' will. The church is meant to be so full of genuine love and care for one another that even if we lost our blood family, we would still feel that we had gained. This isn't to minimise our

relatives, but rather to set the goal of the church. The church (that is, God and his people) is meant to be such a community that it is 100x better than anything we can give up!

We are also promised persecutions. Something that we prefer to ignore, and that in our context is not very commonplace. But persecutions were very real to the early church, and they are very real to many of our brothers and sisters across the world today. It may become more common for us as well, but this is not something to be surprised or angry about, it's a promise from Jesus.

Mark 10:31 "But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

Jesus is continuing the theme throughout these passages of turning the way that the disciples understand things upside down (or rather, right side up). The values we have, and the people that we place first will not necessarily be representative of God's kingdom. It is also a warning to us not to seek our own plans and welfare first, thinking that somehow, we can save ourselves. Rather, we must be willing to become small, and commit ourselves totally and radically to Jesus.