

"Where the Children Are Blessed"

October 7, 2018

Mark 10: 2-16

² Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" ³ "What did Moses command you?" he replied. ⁴ They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away." ⁵ "It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied. ⁶ "But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.' ⁷ 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, ⁸ and the two will become one flesh.' So, they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹ Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." ¹⁰ When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. ¹¹ He answered, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. ¹² And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery." ¹³ People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." ¹⁶ And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.



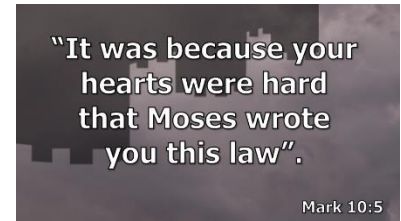
Today we begin a new sermon series called "The Upside-Down Kingdom". During September we spent the month in the book of James as we looked at how we live out a faith that works, in practical terms, in our everyday lives. Our October

series will extend what we learned in James and will delve into the priorities and perspectives that matter according to the kingdom of God. From within our churches and our own lives, when we look outside, looking out into the world, the priorities and perspectives of the world seem upside-down when we compare them with the ways of Jesus and with the teachings of the Bible. Over the course of this series, we will be encouraged to take the values of God's kingdom and to use them to turn the world itself upside down. When we seek to bless and love and serve those who are the least, the lost, the broken, the blind, then we are truly nearing the kingdom on earth. Let us pray...

Our passage today appears to have two distinct parts at first glance. The first eleven verses deal with divorce and the last four verses deal with having a child-like faith and with blessing the children. While our primary focus today will be centered on where and how children are blessed, we will spend a little time with the first part of our passage. In our modern society, divorce is a fact of life. Obviously, divorce was a part of Jesus' world too. Every single one of us in the Sanctuary knows someone who is divorced. Many of us, myself included, have experienced divorce first-hand.

In our passage today, the Pharisees approach Jesus and ask Him about the legality of divorce. Notice our passage tells us that they were coming to "test" Jesus. The Pharisees know the Law of Moses. They know the answer that they prefer to the question they ask. When Jesus turns the question back on them, they have no problem quoting the Law. But then, Jesus offers his insight into

the origins of this law. In verse five Jesus says, *"It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law"*. Jesus is implying that on occasion marriage had become hard during the days of Moses; therefore, some of the leaders influenced Moses to write a 'new' law concerning divorce. We find this law in Deuteronomy 24, verse 1. It reads, *"If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house"*. Note that this law is not universal in its application. It can only be a man that divorces his wife, not the other way around. It is not universal because the understanding of marriage in ancient Judaism was far different than our understanding of marriage. In one commentary I read this week, James Edwards wrote this: *"Marriage was not regarded as a union of equals for the mutual benefit of both husband and wife but rather as an institution whose chief purpose was the establishment and continuance of the family and whose chief enemy was childlessness"*. Not a union of equals. Not for mutual benefit. Chief purpose was making children. This is a much different understanding than our modern 'for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health...' Christian understanding of marriage. We will see that this ancient Jewish understanding is also a much different understanding of marriage than Jesus would offer.



In pointing out that this was a man-made law, Jesus goes back to the beginning, to the book of Genesis, to remind the Pharisees and also to reaffirm God's original design for marriage. Jesus seeks instead to recover God's will for marriage

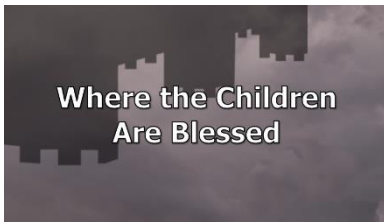
rather than to argue about possible exceptions to it. Turning to Genesis 1 and 2, Jesus reminds the religious leaders that, *"at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.' For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh"*. In the leaving of mother and father, the husband places his allegiance to his wife second only to obedience to God. Thus God, not man, is the lord of the marriage. This thought of God being the one in control of the marriage is developed as Jesus then adds, *"So, they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate"*. God's intent is for marriage to last a lifetime. If it is neither a man nor a woman who controls the marriage, but it is God that is in control, then a marriage can be lifelong.

"So, they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate".

Mark 10:8-9

Turning to Matthew 19, Jesus gives a more detailed explanation of God's intent for marriage. Here Jesus states that divorce is the result of sin and the hardness of our hearts. Jesus acknowledges that because we live in a fallen world and because we have hard hearts, divorce will occur. Yet Jesus also understands marriage in another way. In Ephesians 5, we gain a glimpse of this as we receive the picture of a marriage reflecting the spiritual union of Christ and His church. This makes marriage sacred because it mirrors this spiritual union. This view also makes marriage forever as it mirrors the eternal relationship of Jesus and His body, the church. It is within this context and with this understanding of holy matrimony that Jesus tells His disciples that remarriage constitutes adultery. As our Christian understanding of marriage has evolved, I believe we have come to the place where the church should emphasize the value and dignity and

sanctity of marriage while eliminating the shame and stigma often associated with divorce. Yes, God’s intent is for lifelong marriage. Yet, sin and other realities have made divorce a part of our world. As author Sam Storms suggests, in the church we should “mingle the call to obedience with the tears of compassion”. We must offer both truth and grace.



As we turn to the second half of our passage, found in verses 13 through 16, we begin by looking at the hierarchy of power and authority that was typical in the culture of the day. At the top was Caesar. Caesar’s power and authority were unquestioned. Below Caesar were the upper class – mostly senators and the wealthy of society. Below this level was the lower class, made up mostly of commoners and mostly of families. Families had their own hierarchy. Families were clearly led by the fathers, with women and slaves below them. Children were beneath the women and slaves. Children had no rights and were often treated as commodities. For example, if a child was born out of wedlock or if the child had a physical or mental disability, the father had the right to give the child away or even to have the child killed. A child’s value was primarily economic, as workers and as heirs. In this context, the children were not blessed. This was the status quo of the day. This is what led the disciples to rebuke people for bringing the children to Jesus – they were following cultural norms. But in our passage, we find that Jesus was indignant with them. In this case, Jesus’ displeasure here reveals his compassion and defense of the helpless, the vulnerable, the powerless. Jesus is affirming that the children are worth His time and should be worth our time.

In fact, Jesus turns the status quo upside down by saying, *"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these"*. In one fell swoop, Jesus turns the norm

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Mark 10:14

upside down by taking those found at the bottom and elevating them to preferred status. Those who are normally disregarded by society are favored by God. Those who are often on the outside are welcomed into the kingdom. The kingdom of God belongs to the children. In Jesus' kingdom, the children are blessed. In the larger society, in the common view held by the world, children were not blessed. Unfortunately, today's world is not much safer or better for some children – even in the land of opportunity, even here in America.

Where the Children
Are Blessed

According to the 2014 "State of America's Children Report", many children live in dire straits and hard conditions. Look at these statistics from the report:

- † 1 in 5 are born poor (16.1 million children)
- † 1.2 million students are homeless
- † 1 abused/neglected every 47 seconds
- † 1 is arrested every 20 seconds (4,000 per day)
- † 2,000 serving time in adult prisons
- † Guns kill 2,694 and injure 15,576 each year

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These statistics are sobering. Stepping outside our nation, it worsens. Worldwide about ten million children die annually from diarrhea. About three million more die from measles, tetanus, and whooping cough. Another two million die annually from respiratory infections, mostly pneumonia. As a whole, almost fifteen million children are dying each year from things that can be treated. The shot for measles, tetanus, and whooping cough costs \$5. The antibiotic pill that combats respiratory problems costs fifty cents. As Christians who love our children, these statistics are hard to hear. Imagine if these were the statistics that you lived with or that your children lived with each day.



Understanding Jesus' love of the children and His imperatives to care for the orphan and widow, the lost and the broken, the outcast and the sick, we must ask ourselves, do we do all we can to ensure that the children of our community and our neighborhoods are blessed? To begin to wrestle with this question, we begin by thinking about how we can create opportunities or situations where the children are blessed. I think it begins where it began with those parents and grandparents, those aunts and uncles, began in our passage from Mark 10. It begins by bringing the children to Jesus. We cannot bring children to the physical Jesus, but we can introduce them to and connect them to the spiritual Jesus. First and foremost, this happens in the home. When we pray with our children, when we read the Bible with our children, when we talk about our faith with our children, then they are blessed. Many of you also bless other children as well, offering yourself in service to the kingdom. This happens in Sunday school, at VBS, during our community meals, when you coach a child using

Christian love and care. This happens when you lead or volunteer at MYF, when you mentor a child through their 9th grade confirmation year, when you take a young person hunting or fishing.

Taken just one small step further, do we include all people who we know as the helpless, the vulnerable, the powerless? Do we do all we can to ensure that people of all ages have their basic needs met? Are we offering all people in need the love and care that Jesus modeled? Do we raise our voices against discrimination and injustice? Do we turn the world upside down when we see people being treated unfairly or with evil intent?

In the final verses of our passage today, Jesus goes on to tell us that we also must receive the kingdom of God like a child if we want to enter it. So, how do children receive or enter the kingdom of God? First, they enter it with the help of others. Children are willing to rely on others to learn about God, to explore their relationship with God. Second, children come to God with a degree of hope and expectation. They do not know all that they need - yet they know they need the help of another and they are hopeful that they will receive it. When children come, they come small, helpless, and powerless. They come with nothing but empty hands and eager hearts. J. L. Bailey puts it this way: *"To receive the kingdom of God as a child receives it is to receive it as one who has no credits, no clout, no claim"*. Is this how you entered worship this morning?

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- J. L. Bailey

Children come trusting in another and aware of their dependence on another. In this way, they point the way into the kingdom – trusting and depending on God. Children also come for affection and blessing. Jesus took the children in His arms and loved on them. He picked them up and held them. Holding them in His hands, He blessed them. It is a picture we know well. How do children greet their parents or grandparents when they see them? Picture it. Can you see it? Children run to them, arms extended upward, smiles on their face. The look in their eyes says, *'Pick me up, hug me, hold me close, tell me you love me'*. Again, I ask, is this how you entered worship this morning? Does this picture represent how you came to Jesus this morning?



We began today by looking at the idea of divorce and, consequently, at Jesus' understanding of marriage. We then transitioned to the status and treatment of children in Jesus' day and added in some of the challenges facing children, and by extension, many others living in need today. Many of these challenges are rooted in difficult economic conditions that affect all aspects of life. Children living in single parent homes disproportionately experience unique challenges, both in daily life and in spiritual formation. We next looked at the ways we help our children connect to Jesus. Lastly, we saw how Jesus valued and connected with the children that were brought to Him to be blessed. As we leave today, I want to challenge you to consider how this all connects together. As you go forth today, I challenge you to imagine how you personally, as the hands and feet of God, can create or support opportunities and places where the children are blessed. May it be so for you and for me this week. Amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) Growth in our faith happens at all stages in our journey. What will you do this week to ensure some growth in your faith?
- 2) Who do you know that is struggling economically? Spiritually? Both?
Spend time each day in prayer for them and their families.
- 3) What opportunities do you have to bring your children or grandchildren to Jesus? To bring other children? How can you participate and assist in these ministries?