

## JESUS: WIVES AND CHILDREN

### Mark 10: 1-16

Mark's account of Jesus's ministry in Galilee finishes at the end of chapter 9. The rest of his gospel moves the account relentlessly towards the final climax in Jerusalem. The first verse of our reading is really a summary passage reporting a further stage in the journey towards Jerusalem. The fact that the text says "he went into the region of Judea" suggests that he went South across the mountains of Samaria. At some point he crossed over the Jordan river into the region where John the Baptist had ministered before his martyrdom. This was the province of Perea, territory ruled by Herod Antipas who had ordered the killing of John the Baptist. Here Jesus began teaching crowds of people, resuming a public ministry which he had discontinued some time before he left Galilee (Mark 9:30).

The remainder of our reading today looks at two issues; firstly divorce and the secondly Jesus blessing children. Let's start on the first issue by looking at verses 2-4:

"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." (verses 2-4)

On the question of the lawfulness of divorce, the Pharisees and probably the majority of the Jewish people believed that divorce was both lawful and permissible in accordance with the terms of Deuteronomy 24:1:

"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," (Deuteronomy 24:1 NIV).

The only real issue in dispute was what the words "finds something indecent about her" meant. Opinions had polarised into two camps. The followers of Shammai argued that this meant something morally

shameful, particularly adultery, but also extending to a failure to observe Jewish Law. The followers of Hillel argued that anything causing annoyance or embarrassment to a husband were legitimate grounds for divorce. But, here, the issue before Jesus was more complicated. Verse 2 says that the Pharisees *tested* Jesus, the question was hostile. Jesus was being tested because John the Baptist had denounced Herod Antipas and Herodias over the lawfulness of her divorce and remarriage and was killed because of that. Jesus was within Herod Antipas's jurisdiction and, knowing Jesus's opinion, his questioners wanted to compromise him in Herod Antipas's eyes. No doubt they thought that perhaps Herod would seize Jesus as he had arrested John.

Jesus threw the question straight back to them by asking what Moses (really Jewish Law) *commanded*. The Pharisees responded not with a command, but an exception and a permission. Deuteronomy 24:1 permitted divorce provided that a certificate of divorce was given to the wife. This provision assumes divorce, but certainly does not command divorce nor does it state whether divorce is right or wrong. The main function of the provision was to give protection to a woman who had been rejected by her husband. Jesus is saying that the divine intention regarding marriage cannot be determined from a text about divorce.

Let's move on to see how the situation develops in verses 5-9:

"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. 9 Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."" (verses 5-9)

Jesus makes a forceful response, really a denunciation of human sinfulness which serves to clarify the purpose of Deuteronomy 24:1. Divorce is tolerated but not authorised or sanctioned. When Jesus affirmed that Moses framed the provision concerning the letter of dismissal out of regard to the people's hardness of heart, he was using

an established legal category of actions allowed out of consideration for wickedness or weakness. What is involved is the lesser of two evils, and, in this instance, a merciful concession for the sake of the woman. Jesus' purpose is to make clear that the intention of Deuteronomy 24:1 was not to make divorce acceptable but to limit sinfulness and to control its consequences.

This had direct bearing on the question of the lawfulness of divorce posed in verse 2. The Mosaic provision in Deuteronomy 24:1–4 was in reality a witness to the gross evil which arose from the complete disregard of the creation ordinance of marriage as set forth in Genesis 1:27; 2:24. Divorce was being permitted because people were determined not to abide by the will of God. Jesus's judgement of hard heartedness assumes the validity of the original divine ordinance of marriage and the force of his statement here is to eliminate Mosaic tolerance. Here Jesus is eliminating the tolerance of divorce sanctioned by Mosaic Law and applying the more stringent requirement of God's original ordinance. Jesus is lifting the discussion to the higher plane of God's original purpose with regard to marriage. He's appealing over legislation based on the Fall to God's original purpose at the beginning of creation. The original creation of mankind as male and female is resolved in unity through marriage which commits husband and wife to mutual fidelity and forbids adultery through the "one flesh" principle.

Jesus's final pronouncement in verse 9 grounds the sanctity of marriage in the authority of God himself. God intended that the purpose of marriage should be unity and that the obligations of marriage should be taken seriously. The decisive "No" to divorce provides the required safeguard against human selfishness which always threatens to destroy marriage. It also warns that the man who dissolves a union sanctioned by God inevitably stands under the divine judgment. This is an authoritative teaching by Jesus astoundingly different from that of the scribes and teachers of the Law in Jesus's time. The disciples are shown that even the ordinances of the Law are not to be followed blindly but are to be carefully considered in the light of the highest standards which Scripture

provides. Having regard to the time and place, Jesus's pronouncement confirms the bold testimony of John the Baptist and condemns equally Antipas and Herodias.

It's interesting that here Jesus is not said to mention the one circumstance which he mentioned elsewhere as justifying, although certainly not compelling, divorce – marital infidelity. However, the parallel account of this encounter with the Pharisees in Matthew's gospel does include this statement:

“8 Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. 9 I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.” (Matthew 19:8-9 NIV)

and Jesus's teaching recorded in Matthew chapter 5 also mentions this exemption:

“31 "It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ 32 But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.” (Matthew 5:31-32 NIV)

Thus, I think we can accept that Jesus was indeed making this exception, this allowance, and that Mark, perhaps to emphasise the absoluteness of Jesus's pronouncement, omitted to include it.

Jesus further elaborated his statements to the Pharisees for the benefit of the disciples, look at verses 10-12:

“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.” (verses 10-12)

The use of the word adultery brings us back to God's clear and absolute command:

“"You shall not commit adultery.” (Exodus 20:14 NIV)

from the ten commandments. An interesting element of Jesus's teaching is the concept of a man committing adultery against his wife, which was totally unrecognised in Jewish Law. A further revolutionary element was Jesus's statement about a wife divorcing her husband in verse 12. Under Jewish Law a woman generally had no right to divorce her husband (although documentary evidence indicates that this was not completely unknown) and indeed the concept of a right of divorce for women had only recently been introduced into Roman Law. This was a further pointed judgement of the conduct of Herodias who had deserted her husband Phillip to marry Herod Antipas. Mention of remarriage in verses 11–12 implies that the sin of adultery occurs as a result of remarriage rather than as a result of divorce. This implication is somewhat misleading, however, for in Jewish law remarriage was valid only if the grounds of divorce were valid. If the divorce was invalid, then the individual is still married and a second marriage becomes adulterous. Thus the thrust of Jesus' teaching is not simply to forbid remarriage after divorce but also to deny the Pharisees' presumption for divorce in general.

Jesus then pronounced a blessing on the children – see verses 13-16: “13 ¶ People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch 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 I tell you the truth, 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, put his hands on them and blessed them.” (verses 13-16)

I think this account of Jesus blessing the children is an appropriate follow on to his statements about the sanctity of marriage. The fact that Jesus took them into his arms suggests that they were quite young children. The disciples attempt to turn the children aside because they thought these young children were unimportant is one more example of their thinking in a worldly manner. These children need access to Jesus in whom the kingdom of God has drawn near. Unlike adults, who do not want anything to be given to them, children are

comparatively modest and unspoiled. The Kingdom belongs to such as these because they receive it as a gift. 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. We are utterly helpless in relation to the Kingdom of God; we can only enter when we are humble, like a little child, and are fully aware that our claim to enter the kingdom is utterly without merit and turn to Christ in repentance relying on being cleansed through his blood. A cleansing which we certainly do not deserve and which given to us entirely due to the grace of God.

So, what have we learned this morning. Well firstly we see that as Christians we are called to fully accept the sanctity of marriage and must hold it in the highest regard. I know I'll be speaking to many who've been involved in divorce and marriage break ups this morning. I don't condemn you, indeed I'm in no place to condemn you, having been involved in a divorce situation myself. More importantly, I tell you that neither does God condemn you. We often choose badly and make mistakes. Jesus's words are not intended to condemn us, but to warn us. If we repent of our sins, put them squarely behind us, and turn to Christ in true faith our sins are forgiven us and we are presented before our God as holy and sinless without spot or blemish. As Mark records Jesus as saying in chapter 3 and verse 28:

"I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them." (Mark 3:28 NIV)

So let's all put whatever is in our pasts behind us, seek God's forgiveness which is always available to us when we turn to our Father in repentance, and move on into a better future. Let's come to God humbly, like little children, accepting His forgiveness, given us through Christ's blood. Forgiveness offered us through God's grace and mercy, and enter into His glorious kingdom.