

Bible Study Guide: Week of 9-27-2021

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Mark 10:2-16

²Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” ³He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” ⁴They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.” ⁵But Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. ⁶But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ⁷For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, ⁸and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

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

¹³People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” ¹⁶And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

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It is significant to note that this teaching of Jesus was prompted by a question from the Pharisees. So far in the gospel, the Pharisees have come up repeatedly as those who are opposed to Jesus’ ministry and teachings. Notice that it is only in response to their question that Jesus issues this teaching on divorce. Further, notice that their question is not forthright to begin with. Mark tells us plainly that they intend this question to be a test—the same word used to refer to Jesus’ being tested or tempted in the wilderness. They are not interested at all in Jesus’ answer; only in whether he will incriminate himself by his answer. They are trying to entice him into speaking against God or against Rome so that they can bring charges against him and get rid of him.

In his response, Jesus begins on safe ground while turning the question back on the questioners. By pointing to Moses, Jesus subtly indicates that the Pharisees already know the answer and that he is not going to give them the incriminating response they are seeking. Yet rather than agreeing with them outright, Jesus teaches the Pharisees that human “hardness of heart”—figuratively meaning a refusal to obey or a lack of perception or understanding about God’s will and ways—prompted God, through Moses, to make a way for divorce to occur in certain cases. Instead of this human institution that is a concession to the brokenness of humankind, Jesus refers even earlier than Moses to the story of creation from Genesis 1-2 to indicate that God’s intent is not divorce, but unity.

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The modern concept of divorce certainly has something in common with the ancient concept, but it is important to note the differences. In our modern context, although divorce seems more common than ever and is, thankfully, less of a taboo subject than it used to be (as much harm is often done to families and children because of this stigma), in the ancient world divorce was more akin to reneging on a business deal than dissolving a loving relationship. In our society, marriage is often for love. When the love is no longer there and conflict makes people miserable and causes pain, divorce is sometimes the result. In the ancient world, however, marriage was seen more as a contract related to property, power, and prestige. When the opportunity came along for a better deal, sometimes

people took it. Think, for instance, of the story of Herod and his wife in Mark 6. John the Baptist drew the ire of Herodias, the wife of Herod, for speaking out against their marriage. Why? Because Herodias had been married to Herod's brother. She and Herod's brother dissolved that marriage in order for Herod to be able to marry her. For Herod, this would have entailed political and monetary benefits aside from the marriage relationship itself. It is with this sort of marriage of fortune or advantage in mind that the Pharisees have come to question Jesus. They want to get him to speak out against such blatant manipulations of the marriage customs of his day. Jesus does this in private for the disciples, making it clear how God feels about such blatant disregard for the bonds of marriage that God created in the beginning. Clearly this is a different idea about divorce and marriage than we have today.

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This second teaching of Jesus comes on the heels of his earlier lesson to the disciples of taking a child, placing it among them, and saying, "you must welcome one such as this if you are to welcome me and be the greatest." In spite of that object lesson, the disciples demonstrate their ignorance and failure once again, rebuking the children and/or their parents for interrupting Jesus' teachings. Jesus responds with righteous fury and reiterates his earlier point to the disciples about welcoming the least and the lowest. Children had no status or standing in society at that time, so his words would have been counter-cultural.

Verse 15 can be translated as either:

"Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child receives it will never enter it."

Or

"Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as one receives a little child will never enter it."

The first translation is the more usual one and emphasizes child-like faith or acceptance. The second option, however, is more in line with Jesus' earlier words about welcoming children in his name and hammers home his earlier point. The truth is that both are important—both receiving without being encumbered by the concerns of adulthood such as power and prestige AND also receiving the kingdom in the same one welcomes a newborn child.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. In what ways might we tempt or test Jesus as the Pharisees did in this passage? How do you think he might respond?**
- 2. How has your own life been impacted by divorce? How do you experience Jesus'?**
- 3. What does it mean to you to "welcome the kingdom of God like a little child?"**