

Introduction (10:1)

*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 is getting closer and closer to Jerusalem.

And as he gets closer to his death,
he becomes even more “in your face” about the demands of discipleship.

1. What God Has Joined Together... (10:2-12)

2 And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked,

Think back to Mark 7.

There the Pharisees challenged Jesus on the question of handwashing.

Jesus’ response drew their attention to other biblical material
that they had not thought relevant.

His conclusion there – as here – rejected Pharisaic orthodoxy.

What is interesting is that in the case of handwashing

Jesus argues that the Pharisees are too conservative:

in the case of handwashing Jesus would be a liberal.

But here Jesus argues that the *Pharisees* are too liberal.

We sometimes think of the Pharisees as the “conservatives” –

but in fact, first century Jewish groups don’t fit the “conservative/liberal” labels.

Certainly on the question of divorce, the Pharisees were generally permissive.

Ben Sira 25:26 says “If she does not accept your control, divorce her and send her away.”

Josephus likewise says that he divorced his wife “not liking her behavior.”

Rabbi Akiba even said that a man could divorce his wife

“if he found another fairer than she.”

There were a few who followed Rabbi Shammai

who restricted divorce to reasons of “unchastity,”

but the majority opinion was the school of Hillel

who permitted divorce for any cause.

And so the Pharisees ask him to enter into the debate:

“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.”

Jesus asks for a command.

What did Moses command?

If you look back at Deuteronomy 24:1-4, you will discover that there is no command. The way that the law is stated assumes that a divorce has already happened – if a man divorces his wife...

The only command in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is that a man who has divorced his wife may not remarry her (if she has married someone else after the divorce).

So nowhere in the OT does God ever give his approval to divorce.

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."

Once again Jesus' response draws on parts of the scripture that they had not thought relevant.

What did Moses command you?

They think only of the legal provision in Deuteronomy 24 permitting divorce.

But Jesus reminds them of something else that Moses said.

Genesis also is part of the Torah –

and Jesus points out that if they had understood Genesis they would not have treated Deuteronomy 24 the way they did.

Jesus says that if you want to know what marriage is, look at Genesis 1-2.

Divorce was only permitted because of the hardness of your hearts.

Like the Pharisees, commentators have tried very hard "to make Jesus mean something less inconvenient than his words mean at face value." (France, 388)

But Jesus means what he says.

God's design for unbroken, lifelong marriage is not an 'ideal' which we all admire but do not seriously expect to be implemented. It is "the realistic standard to which we are expected to conform and on which the health of human society depends." (France, 389)

This statement shocks the disciples, and so when they have him alone, they ask him again.

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."

The fact that Jesus treats the woman equally with the man
is a new thing in the Jewish world.

Jesus assumes that divorce and remarriage go together.

In the Jewish world (as in the Roman) divorce ended the marriage relation,
thereby freeing both parties to remarry.

If a person is divorced, then they are – by definition – free to remarry.

It may be that the divorce was wrong and sinful –
but they are, in fact, divorced,
and therefore are now free to remarry.

The radical call of discipleship applies to every aspect of life –
even marriage!

Once, when I was single, I told a congregation

that you shouldn't think of your husband or wife

as the "cross" that you are supposed to take up.

Afterwards, an elderly married man came up to me and looked me in the eye and said,
"sometimes she is."

Because the call of discipleship is a call to die.

And that applies to every situation and relationship.

Taking up your cross means dying to self.

It means the old man and his way of doing things must die.

There must be a radical break with the old way of life.

And this must be reflected in the way you treat your wife.

Consider the way that God showed patience with his rebellious, adulterous wife.

Though he sent her away for a time,

he called her back – and indeed in Jesus, he laid down his life for her!

Divorce is never a *good* thing.

Of course, we know from other gospel accounts that Jesus added an "exception"

in the case of "porneia" – sexual immorality.

Mark does not include that here.

Why did Mark leave this out?

It is possible that Mark was unaware of this caveat,

and so he may simply be reporting what he was told that Jesus' said.

But all that does is force us to ask,

Why did the Holy Spirit inspire a version that lacked the caveat?

Mark seems to like to portray the "edgier" side of Jesus –

the Jesus who spits in peoples' faces and calls Gentile women dogs –

the Jesus who refers to his own disciples as a faithless generation!

Mark does not want to blunt the force of what Jesus is saying.
Divorce is *never* a good thing.
The modern concept of a “no-fault” divorce
is precisely the sort of thing that Jesus repudiates.

Marriage was instituted as a permanent ‘one-flesh union of man and woman.
It is always against the will of God to break it.

But this must force us to ask why God permitted divorce in the OT?
If we understand Genesis 1-2, then we begin to see
that Deuteronomy 24 does not encourage divorce.
Rather, God’s provision for divorce was a “regrettable concession” to hardened hearts.

Indeed, you will notice that both Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 19
and Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 7
are “regrettable concessions” – they do not encourage divorce,
but rather they permit it.

We should not think of the biblical teaching on divorce as a matter of
“if my spouse does X then I get to divorce him/her.”
Rather, it is, “if my spouse does X then it is permissible to divorce him/her.”
What is the difference?
In the former it is a “gotcha” mentality,
where you are just waiting for the trump card.
In the latter the assumption is one of repentance and forgiveness,
where you recognize that Christ’s call is for you to come and die.

Please understand that Jesus is speaking into a culture where divorce was *common*.
He is speaking to a culture in which “no-fault” divorce was the norm.

And Jesus says that his disciples *never* think of divorce as the first option.

Though as Jesus and Paul say elsewhere,
if your spouse utterly destroys the marriage,
then you are permitted to divorce him/her,
but divorce is *never* a good thing.

2. Entering the Kingdom Like a Child (10:13-16)

*13 And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them,
and the disciples rebuked them.*

First, Jesus challenges the received cultural norms regarding marriage and divorce.
Or, to put it more accurately,
he challenges *the Mosaic Law* regarding marriage and divorce!

He says that the Mosaic legislation was an accommodation to human sinfulness and hardness of heart!

Here, Jesus again challenges the cultural conception of children.

In 9:37 Jesus had told them that whoever receives a little child in my name receives me. But already they are missing the point again!

*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.”*

16 And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.

Jesus says that the kingdom of God belongs to “such.”

If you would enter the kingdom of God –
a statement regarding eternal destiny –
then you must receive the kingdom like a child.

How does a child receive the kingdom?

By inheriting it.

A child does nothing to receive a kingdom.

For a child to receive a kingdom,
he must be born into a royal family,
and then the king has to die.

Jesus has been talking about his impending death.

The king is about to die.

The way to receive the kingdom is to be part of his family-
it is to be like a little child.

And so then Jesus actually blesses the children.

As Isaac had blessed Jacob,
now Jesus blesses these children –
so that the blessing of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob
might come to them through him.

The following episode sheds further light on all this!

3. How to Inherit Eternal Life (10:17-31)

*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?”*

Note that the question has to do with inheriting eternal life.

Sometimes people are uncomfortable with this

because they think that the answer should be, “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.”

But the question, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”
is a question that includes not only justification, but also sanctification.
After all, the person asking the question is a circumcised Jew.
He is a member of the covenant community –
presumably he is already a believer.

So the question is *not* very similar to the Philippian jailer’s
“What must I do to be saved?”
Instead, we should put the question on our own lips.
After all, Jesus’ answer *assumes* that the man is a disciple –
and it is only after the man walks away
that we learn that he is unwilling to be a disciple.

18 And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.

When Jesus first said this,
I don’t doubt that many thought that he was refusing the adjective “good.”
But Mark includes it here for us who know better!
Why do you call me good?
No one is good except God alone –
so if you call me “good” then you are saying that I am God!

*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.’”*

Notice how Jesus is setting him up!
He repeats all of the “easy” commandments.
Why do I call them easy?
Because if you only consider the most literal sense of these commands,
then a very conscientious person
could plausibly argue that he is doing okay!

20 And he said to him, “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.”

He fell into the trap.

But this trap was not designed as a “gotcha” trap.
This trap was designed to open his eyes:

*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.”*

The Law does not provide the way to eternal life.
You cannot attain eternal life through a “checklist” mentality.

The call of discipleship hits you *precisely* where you *most*
do *not* want it to!

22 Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

What is the place in your life where you do not want Jesus asking questions?
That is the place where he is most concerned regarding your discipleship!

But before we start “applying” it –
let us first start with the literal sense:
after all, while this is not a command to all people
(Jesus does not command *everyone* to sell all that they have)
it is a command for some!
Do we really think that what was true of the rich young man
has never been true of anyone else ever since?

We are far too quick to say that this has a “spiritual” meaning –
and then we eviscerate that spiritual meaning into a mere platitude:
“anything that gets in the way of Jesus needs to go!”
But we don’t *actually* get rid of anything –
or perhaps we get rid of overtly sinful things,

But Jesus tells this rich young man to get rid of “neutral” things –
or even “good” things (in the minds of many).

Jesus says that if this rich young man is to inherit eternal life,
he must get rid of the things that interfere with his discipleship.
And for this young man, that means possessions.

What is getting in the way of *your* discipleship?
And *please* do not tell me that in 21st century America
there is no one who must sell their possessions.

What would happen if Jesus told you to sell all that you have,
give to the poor, and follow him?

Would *you* walk away sad?
Do you love your possessions more than Jesus?

What is it that you do not want Jesus to touch?
What is it that you would not want to part with?

That is precisely what Jesus calls you to abandon!

Some have taken great comfort in the fact that Jesus only said this to one man.

But this is not true!
All you have to do is keep reading,
and you will find that Jesus expects this of *all* his disciples!

*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!”*

Let's not walk away too quickly – but with the disciples, let us be amazed at his words!

24 And the disciples were amazed at his words.

And Jesus does not soften his statement at all!
Rather, he broadens it to include everyone!

*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.”*

You may have heard people claiming that this is referring to a gate in Jerusalem,
through which a camel could only pass on its knees.
This was the claim of a ninth century French theologian –
but in fact, there is no evidence for such a gate!
And no one ever referred to such a gate until the ninth century!

Besides, this undermines the point that Jesus is making.
Entering the kingdom of God is not just difficult –
it is impossible!

And the disciples understand this.

26 And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, “Then who can be saved?”

If it was just a matter of crawling on your knees,
they would have been impressed with Jesus' wise teaching.
And then they would have gone on “trying harder”!

But Jesus has already dismissed the “just try harder” approach.
He has told the rich young man to do the impossible!

*27 Jesus looked at them and said, “With man it is impossible, but not with God.
For all things are possible with God.”*

Let me ask you a question:
is Jesus saying that it is possible for God to save us
in spite of the fact that we refuse to follow him?
or is he saying that it is possible for God to give us the grace

to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus?

I would suggest that the answer is found in the subsequent conversation.
The disciples certainly understood it as the latter –
and Jesus agrees.

28 Peter began to say to him, “See, we have left everything and followed you.”

We are so used to the disciples missing the point that we may miss the point
if we don't take this seriously!

But Jesus does take this seriously.
And he commends them for heeding the call to discipleship.

They may be dimwits who miss the point most of the time –
and quarrel and fight over idiotic things –

but they have left everything and followed Jesus!

And so Jesus says – as much to you as to them:

*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.*

Remember that the question was about inheriting eternal life.
The question was about “family.”

God had promised Abraham an inheritance – if he left his father's house.

Now, Jesus is telling Abraham's children that they must imitate their father
and leave everything (they don't realize it yet, but it will include the synagogue)
for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

If you do, then you will inherit eternal life.
And before that – even in this life
you will participate in the firstfruits of that inheritance.
Because you will be part of the family that Jesus is gathering together.

But the way to eternal life is the way of discipleship –
it is the way of sanctification.

Or, as we'll be seeing in our Shepherding Group study on Wednesday
“to escape the wrath and curse of God due to us for sin,

God requires of us faith in Jesus Christ, repentance unto life,
with the diligent use of all the outward means
whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption.” (WSC 85)

We are called to a life of faith and repentance –
a life of denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following Jesus –
a life of being part of Jesus’ new family
(that’s what the “outward means” is all about!).

That’s also why Jesus concludes:

31 But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

The kingdom of God is an upside down kingdom.
Those who think that they are something may in fact be worse than nothing
(think of many Renaissance popes or modern televangelists).
And many who are lowly and humble
in fact are first in the kingdom of God.

I’m not suggesting that we reinstitute the forms of medieval monasticism
(and in fact, monks, like anyone else, could become obsessed with pride and power!)
but we must recognize that they took Jesus far more seriously
in the way of discipleship.

You and I are awfully comfortable allowing all sorts of “other things”
to get in the way of our following Jesus.

“I’ll follow Jesus after the football game...”

“I’ll deny myself after I buy this new outfit!”

“I’ll take up my cross – after I finish this book!”

“I’ll give to the poor – if there’s anything left over at the end of the month”

Jesus says, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.

Jesus says “come and die”

What’s it going to be?