

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 10/03/2021



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, October 3rd

Mark 10:2-16

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Jesus' advice on getting a divorce

This is one of those texts where it is helpful if the author discloses their exegetical approach. Some will take the literal English words of the text and construct meaning from the literal text divorced from any historical context and seek to apply without regard for any current context. This approach tends to see such passages as rule books. Others will seek to adapt this biblical text so that it conforms to twenty-first century cultural norms. This approach makes Scripture subservient to the culture. The approach here is to go back to the first century and attempt to understand this text in the way the original audience would have and then apply this meaning to our current culture. While not negating pre-Genesis 3 ideals, this text perhaps reveals more about concern for abused people than it does for a law and how the church should relate to people who fall short.

Mark 10:2-16 Commentary

The context of this text is found in 10:1. Jesus and His disciples left Galilee and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. Crowds gathered and as was His custom, Jesus taught them.

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."

We do not know the exact motive behind the Pharisees' question. Perhaps this was a test of Jesus' orthodoxy? Maybe they were trying to get Jesus to say something against Herod who had divorced his wife. We know that the Pharisees and Herodians were already plotting together to destroy Jesus (Mark 3:6). Maybe they just wanted Him to weigh in on the debate between the two main Rabbinic schools of thought on this matter. Regardless, Jesus' response is masterful, responding to their question with a question of his own. The Pharisees answer by paraphrasing part of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 which explains the laws concerning divorce. What the Pharisees had conveniently left out of their response was there was only one reason where a divorce was permissible: "*because he [the husband] has found some indecency in her*" (Deuteronomy 24:1).

There was a controversial debate at the time over what was meant by "indecency". The school of Shammai interpreted this in its strictest form - there had to be adultery and nothing less. The school of Hillel, on the other hand, had a much more liberal interpretation. Permitted grounds for divorce included spoiling a man's meal, speaking disrespectfully about his relations in his presence, loudly arguing with him, or even if he found a better-

looking woman than his wife! The fallout from this debate had huge implications for women. In such cultures (our own too until relatively recently), the economic stability of most families depended upon marriage. In some cases, the very survival of a woman depended upon being part of a household. Imagine what it must have been like for women who had to live under the continued threat of divorce in such a society.

From the text we see that Jesus is not drawn into the Shammai versus Hillel debate:

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."

There are two things notable in Jesus' response. First, "because of your hardness of heart" suggests Jesus infers that there must have been a problem at the time (or expected in the future) which required Moses to include a law on divorce. Otherwise, why have this law? Jesus is clear where the blame lies, both during the time of Moses and in His time. Second, Jesus does not become involved in any nuanced interpretation of Mosaic Law or brings up any subsequent human interpretations from the oral Torah. Instead, Jesus refers to Genesis 1:27 and 2:24.

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."

To help interpret these verses we need to look at Matthew's account of what Jesus said about this issue during the Sermon on the Mount. Here Jesus says, "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery" (Matthew 5:31-32). Here we have Jesus specifically stating how sexual immorality is appropriate grounds for a divorce. We can only assume Mark implies such and thus vv.10-12 pertain only to those initiating divorce for any other reason.

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

It was a common practice for mothers to bring their children to such a distinguished visiting Rabbi to be blessed. We read how the disciples were feeling like a security detail at a teen rock concert trying to keep hordes of teenagers off the stage. To the disciples these children swarming over their Master with grubby hands and running noses were a nuisance! As the disciples scolded the children, we read how Jesus was "indignant" or "greatly displeased". Perhaps this was because Jesus had already told his disciples a few verses back that "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me" (Mark 9:37) and they still do not understand! Regardless, there is a fundamental point of difference in how Jesus saw the situation. Jesus took the children in His arms and blessed them.

Reflections

The issue of marriage and divorce has become even more complicated in our time as it now involves matters of gender and same sex marriage. Gender has also become complicated. Gender is now viewed as something more

fluid and self-determined. What would Jesus say about all this? What we do know is what Jesus said in this text. Two things emerge. First, given the cultural aspects of the time, women were radically disadvantaged by the abuses allowed under the oral tradition surrounding divorce. Jesus went back to Scripture, to Genesis 1:27 and 2:24, and thus God's standard, not human argument. Men and women are both created in the image of God and were destined to live as a family unit. What can be taken as a rule on divorce is Jesus speaking against the abuse of women by a perversion of the law that treated them as chattel. The irony here is that Christ's words in this text have been used to justify women staying in physically and emotionally abusive marriages over the centuries.

We live in a Genesis 3 world and thus we fall short of the ideals of Genesis 1-2. This does not negate that we must continue to strive for these ideals, particularly those redeemed in Christ. After all, it was Christ who pointed to Genesis in His response. Yet recognizing how we all fall short; the text also provides insight on how we should behave to those who do not meet ideals of Genesis 1 and 2 in one way or another. This week's text contains a third reference to children. The previous two are children as representatives of the downtrodden in society with no rights or influence (9:36-37) and children as new believers (9:42). Children were of the lowest status in this society. For those who may be excluded from the church because legalistic standards representing human interpretations of righteousness, Jesus welcomes such people, even if some try and stop them coming, like Christ's disciples tried to stop the lowly children from coming to Him. Some people may see this differently. It is worth remembering how this week's text is part of a larger body of text bookended by two blind healings (8:22-26 and 10:46-52) and thus drawing attention to our own spiritual blindness. May our eyes be fully opened.

The third child reference pertains to how we must receive the Kingdom like a child. What does this mean? If we consider the above scene, the children would have been running to Jesus with awe and wonder. Their eyes were solely fixed on Him and would have been persistent enough to push past the disciples. The children took Jesus at His word with an innocence and trust that the world had not yet destroyed. To the children that day, there was nothing more important in their lives than being with Jesus. This is how we must be to receive the Kingdom. Mark challenges us to find ourselves in this scene. Do we see ourselves as the children or as the gatekeeper disciples more concerned about keeping the "unworthy" away? Which of these made Jesus indignant?



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