

Are You Able?

(The Gospel According to Mark, Chapter 10)

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The Gospel According to Mark
Chapter 10

We’re back again in the Gospel According to Mark, going chapter by chapter, and today we’ve reached chapter 10.

Jesus then left that place and went into the region of Judea and across the Jordan. Again crowds of people came to him, and as was his custom, he taught them.

Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

"What did Moses command you?" he replied.

They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away."

"It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied. "But 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.' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. He answered, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery" (10:1-12)

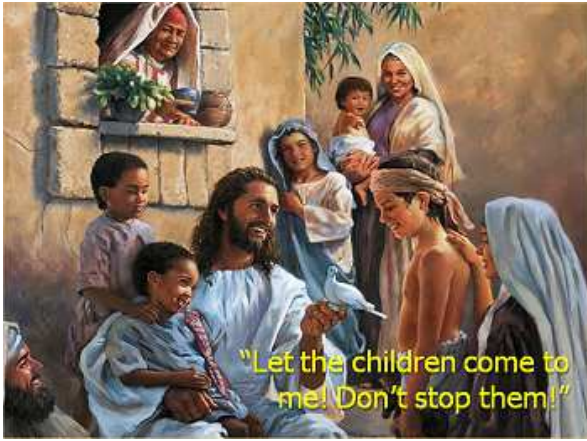
Mark Twain once overheard people complaining that some parts of the Bible are hard to understand. He replied that he had no problem with the parts he *couldn't* understand. What troubled him were the parts he *could* understand, only too well. I think for some of us this passage at the beginning of Mark 10 could be one of those troubling parts.

Divorce is common in our culture, in the general public but also (to a lesser extent) in the Christian community. Right now the Catholic Church is dealing with it in a big way, because Catholic teaching says that a divorced and remarried person — one whose previous marriage hasn't been annulled by the church — isn't supposed to receive Communion. Some of the Bishops want to overlook this and take what they consider a more merciful approach, but the majority are holding to the traditional view. Divorce is also an issue in the evangelical church, and some denominations won't accept a person for ordination if they've remarried after divorce.

In Malachi 2:16 the Lord says, "I hate divorce." I think anyone who has been through a divorce proceeding agrees with the Lord; they hate divorce, too. It's a humiliating procedure with overtones of guilt, and failure, and disappointment, and perhaps abuse. But it happens, and people who've dealt with it and are still Bible-believing Christians might be a little taken back at the severity of Jesus' statement in Mark 10. So how do we reflect on that? Several things.

First, as we've mentioned, Mark has a way of shortening his narrative; sometimes he leaves things out that we find in the other Gospels. So he doesn't include what Jesus says in Matthew: "Whoever divorces his wife, *except for unchastity*, and marries another, commits adultery" (Matthew 19:9). And that might not be the only situation the New Testament recognizes; Paul, for example, says that if an unbelieving spouse chooses to leave the marriage, the believing spouse isn't bound (1 Corinthians 7:15). There can be extenuating circumstances, and these don't exhaust the list. The Bible doesn't give a systematic or complete teaching on the subject.





Second, when we come into Jesus we become a new person; as Paul states in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation" — or better, that person has entered into God's new creation — so "the old has passed away, behold, the new has come." If a marriage failed before we were committed to Messiah Jesus, we don't bring that failure into our new life.

Third, the kingdom of God is based on mercy and forgiveness. As John writes, "My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; but if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John

2:1-2). Christian believers are by no means immune to making mistakes in life, but when we come to terms with whatever we've done and turn to the Lord he's ready to show mercy and give us a second, or even maybe third or fourth, chance to show that we *can* "get it right." "One strike and you're out" is not a Christian policy; the Holy Spirit will work with us to redeem our life, at whatever point we find ourselves.

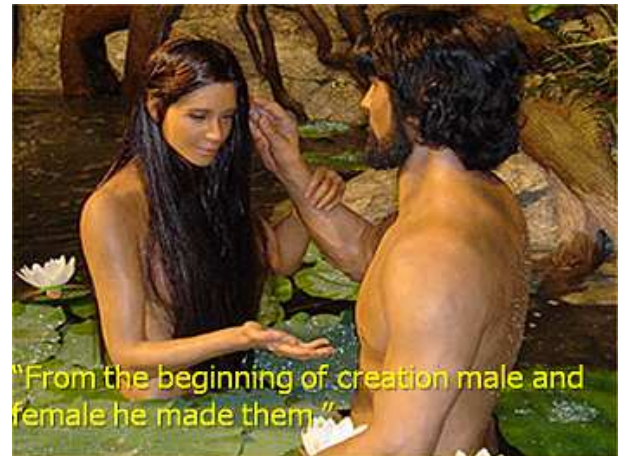
Fourth, consider the historical background into which Jesus uttered these words. In Jewish culture, and other cultures of the ancient world, a woman had no position in society unless she was attached to a man. Moses permitted a hard-hearted husband to divorce his wife, Jesus says, as long as he gave her a certificate. It was a hard-hearted thing to tell your wife, "Sorry, you aren't my wife any more" (and it could be done that casually). At least the man had to give his ex-wife a certificate so people would know she was no longer attached to him. But what was the poor wife to do? She couldn't go out and get a job to support herself; there was no public assistance, no food stamps, and no continuing support from the ex-husband. Maybe she could go back to her parents' house, or live with a brother, but it wasn't like our situation where, often, the wife has a better job than the husband and can make a go of it herself.

But there's another element in this brief passage that we need to pay attention to. That's the high view of *marriage* that Jesus expresses. He points out how marriage is grounded in God's creation: "From the beginning of creation 'male and female he made them; and that's why the man must leave his father and his mother and cleave unto his wife; so that the two become one flesh.'" (Mark 9:6-8).

He's quoting Genesis, of course. The Bible's account of creation shows how God proceeds by pairing opposite things together: light and darkness, heaven and earth, the sky above and earth beneath, land and sea. The universe is built up this way, by the interplay of opposites. That, by the way, is why homosexuality can't be reconciled with an orderly, meaningful universe; the pairing of opposites just isn't there. But the pairing of male and female in marriage is part of that creative process through which divine order comes into being. It's a beautiful thing. So let's ask ourselves this question: **Whatever my personal history, or whether or not I'm married, how can I work with the Creator to bring order, and peace, and beauty into this world he's made?**

People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. 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. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them (10:13-16).

How does a person receive the kingdom of God like a little child? My father used to give this illustration. On Christmas morning the adults take their time to get up, and get dressed, and finally they come down to see



what's under the Christmas tree. That's not how children behave on Christmas morning. They tumble down the stairs as soon as they're awake, eager to find their presents and open them. That's the attitude we need when we hear the news that God is coming back to his people and is rebuilding his world in our midst. We want to "open that present" as quickly as we can, so we rush like a little child into the arms of the loving Father who's come to us. At least, Jesus says, that's how we're *supposed* to enter the kingdom. **Am I hesitating to move into everything God has for me —holding back in indifferent or dignified restraint? let's be asking. Or am I eager for it, like a little child on Christmas Day, "throwing myself into it?"** Our answer to this question will shape our whole experience of the Christian faith, and how much we involve ourselves in the life of the church of Jesus.

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good--except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.' "

"Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy." Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!" The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."

Peter said to him, "We have left everything to follow you!" "I tell you the truth," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields--and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first" (10:17-31).

Could Bill Gates or Warren Buffet ever be a Christian? Wouldn't their wealth be an obstacle to their entering the kingdom of God, like the case of the rich young man in this incident? On the face of it, that's what Jesus seems at first to be saying: "How difficult it is for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!" So, by implication, do people have to be poor — or at least not too wealthy — in order to follow Jesus into the kingdom? Once again, let's pick up several points from what Jesus says here, some things that might get overlooked.



First, the man asks Jesus, "What should I do to inherit the life of the age to come?" Notice he's not asking how to be "saved" or how to "go to heaven." He's asking how to be prepared to be part of "the age to come," the world as it will be when God returns to set things right and undo the damage caused by human disobedience — the time when the Father's will shall be done on earth as in heaven. And Jesus gives him an answer: Be sure you keep the commandments, the simple rules the Lord laid down for that special community he's called to serve him. There are

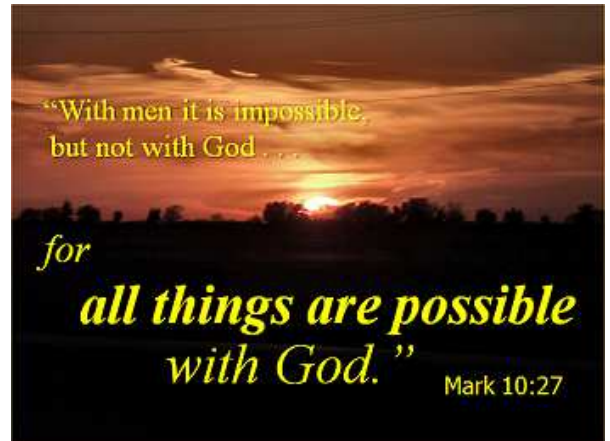
people today who say it doesn't matter how we live or how we treat other people, God is a God of grace and will always overlook our bad behavior. Jesus certainly doesn't agree with that, and neither does the apostle Paul nor any other New Testament writer. The commandments are important, and Jesus affirms them. But when the man says he has kept them all his life, Jesus adds one more thing the man has forgotten about: your wealth has a purpose, to enable you to help other people. Sell what you have, he says, and give the proceeds to the poor. It's not wrong to have financial resources, but it's wrong to hoard them or gloat over them, and not use them to bless others. That seemed to be a problem for the rich man. He wanted to enter the kingdom, but he was too attached to his wealth to let it go. He went away a sad man.

The second thing we note is the reaction of the disciples. They couldn't see how wealth could be an obstacle to entering the life of God's new age. After all, isn't prosperity a sign of God's favor? God must like you if he's allowed you to become wealthy. "If not a rich person," they ask, "how can *anyone* be saved?" Jesus' reply to the rich man has them puzzled. Again, the disciples apparently have the same blind spot the rich man had. Material wealth isn't a reward for being good; in fact, Jesus has just told the rich man that no one is really good except God.

If God allows us to prosper, it's because he wants us to have the resources we need *to bless others and build toward the kingdom of God*. The disciples should have known this, because they weren't exactly poor themselves — that's a common misconception. The Gospels tell us that some well-to-do people were providing for their needs, and they had a treasury that was used to help the poor. From the incidents of Jesus feeding the multitudes we learn the disciples *could* have bought enough food to take care of everyone, except that Jesus had another plan. The disciples were doing the very thing Jesus told the rich man to do, but at this point they couldn't see it and thought that being wealthy was the sign of God's approval.

Third, notice that Jesus doesn't say flat-out that a rich person can't enter the coming age of the kingdom. It may be difficult, but it's not impossible. We're fond of quoting Jesus' saying, "All things are possible with God." But we might forget the context in which he said this; it had to do with whether a rich man could be saved! Yes, Bill Gates or Warren Buffet *could* be saved, in spite of their billions, because God's acceptance of us isn't on the basis of our performance, or the doing of good deeds, but on the basis of our cry for mercy. Scripture says, "All who call upon the name of the LORD shall be delivered" (Joel 2:32). If our financial resources deceive us into thinking *we don't need the Lord*, then we'll never call on him — which is why God is just not on many people's radar screens. But even rich people can *call on the Lord*, once they realize that their wealth doesn't cancel out their need for forgiveness and renewal of life.

Fourth, what about that odd saying that concludes this passage? "No one who has left a house, or brothers or sisters, or mother or father, or children, or lands because of me and the gospel will fail to receive back a hundred times more *in the present age*: houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and lands — with persecutions! — and finally the life of the age to come" (Mark 10:29-30 KNT). Doesn't that sort of cancel out the whole idea that wealth and success — property, real estate, a good family — are obstacles on the pathway to God's kingdom? But from the whole scope of Jesus' teaching we know that there are certain "laws of the kingdom" (if we can call them that) which help us to prosper and be successful in life. Through perseverance, through generosity, through wise stewardship of what we have, and through other beneficial behavior Jesus describes, we can develop the resources not only to bless others and further the works of God, but also to have our own needs met — those needs our Father already knows we have, and is eager to provide for us. And, Jesus notes, we'll be so successful that those who don't know the Lord will be jealous of us; we will face persecution from people who misunderstand. But through developing these "kingdom qualities" we'll be prepared for the age to come, when God sets about to right the wrongs of this world and bring in his new creation. Let's conclude this section by asking ourselves, **Am I hoarding my financial resources to the point that I'm resisting God's call on my life, or am I using what I have freely to bless others and further God's mission in this world?**



They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him.

"We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."

"What do you want me to do for you?" he asked. They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."

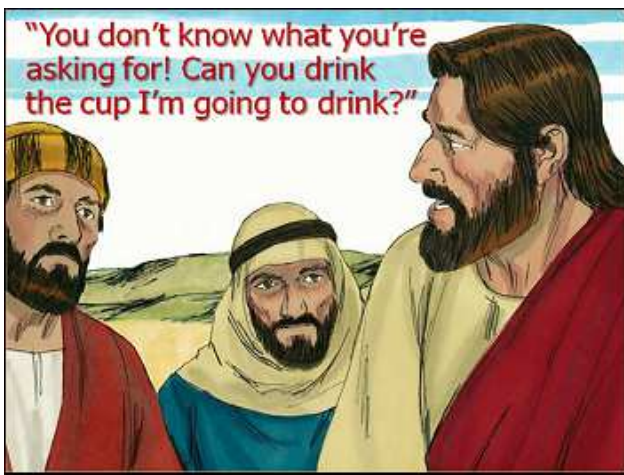
You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."

When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:32-45).

While my father was a student at Boston University School of Theology in the 1920s, Earl Marlatt — who was a professor — introduced the hymn he had written, "Are Ye Able," based on this passage from the Gospel of Mark. (It's No. 372 in our hymnal.)

"Are ye able," said the Master, to be crucified with me?

"Yea," the sturdy dreamers answered, "to the death we follow thee."



When the hymn was first sung, my father recalled, two theology students went to Dr. Marlatt. "Is this really what's required of us if we're going to be involved in Christian work?" they asked. "Yes," he answered, "that's what's required." The two students immediately left the school; they didn't want any part of it.

Give those two students credit for being honest. We so often sing about how much we love the Lord and how committed we are to him. But how loyal to Jesus and his cross might we be if a crazed gunman proposed to shoot us if we acknowledge being a Christian, or if we faced an ISIS threat to convert to Islam or lose our heads? Even Jesus' closest disciples, who so eagerly pledged they would stand by him through the difficult days to come, faded into the background once Jesus was arrested and,

in Peter's case, even denied knowing him. It took the resurrection to make them bold enough to take a stand, and eventually all, except perhaps John, came to a martyr's death. You and I in America have little concept of the price Christians in some parts of the world have to pay for their faith, but we need to remember that the liberties we still enjoy today came through the self-sacrifice of many believers before us who suffered and died to secure what we have.

When James and John, the sons of Zebedee, ask Jesus for positions of honor in his kingdom, they reveal that they still don't get what kind of kingdom Jesus is building. It's a kingdom of service to others, in which those who lead are those who enable their fellow believers to be the people God wants them to be. When we think of leadership we usually think of being the boss, the one who controls other people. It's hard work to think differently, and to realize that what Jesus is looking for in his church, for example — or in the family, or even in a nation — is the person who puts the needs of others before his own and serves them with a humble spirit.

When Jesus speaks of leading by humble service, however, let's not make the mistake of refusing to take on some leadership role when asked to do so, using humility as our excuse. That's not humility, that's avoidance of responsibility. With the Spirit's guidance we walk a fine line between grasping for position, on one hand, and refusing leadership, on the other. (By the way, it looks like Paul Ryan, the new Speaker of the House of Representatives, is trying to walk this fine line as a faithful Catholic Christian.) Let's ask ourselves this question: **Am I willing to serve in a leadership role if asked, knowing that leadership doesn't mean bossing others around but setting the example of humble service to the Lord?**

Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (that is, the son of Timaeus), was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." So they called to the blind man, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you." Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.

"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him. The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see." "Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road (10:46-52)

Bartimaeus knew what he wanted. He wanted his sight, and he was determined to get it from Jesus even if that made him a noisy nuisance to his neighbors in Jericho. Evidently Bartimaeus has heard the reports about Jesus, and from what he has heard — about how Jesus is able to heal people and set them free from what oppresses them — he realizes Jesus must be the Messiah, the "son of David" as he calls him. Now Jesus is passing through town, and Bartimaeus isn't going to let this opportunity for healing get away. When Jesus sees his persistent faith, he restores his sight.

Several times through Mark's Gospel we've seen how our faith is a critical factor in receiving the healing virtue, or power, that emanates from the person of Jesus. Our persistence in prayer, and our expectation that Jesus will respond to that prayer, work in combination with Jesus' ability to heal us. But Bartimaeus shows us another aspect of faith we don't always consider. As long as Bartimaeus was a blind beggar, he was dependant on other people to lead him about and to supply his needs. Once he has his sight, he no longer has any excuse to sit by the road and beg others to take care of him. As a healed man he will now be responsible to provide for himself. So his faith must be greater than faith to be healed; it's also faith to accept responsibility for his own life, and quit crying out "Poor me, poor me!" So here's our final question from this chapter: **Am I afraid to ask Jesus for what I need — whether it's healing or something else — because if I receive it I'll have some new responsibilities I don't want to accept?** Are we able, not just to face the opposition that arises because of our loyalty to Jesus, but also to accept the responsibilities that come when Jesus delivers us and makes us whole?

Let's review the questions Mark, chapter 10 has raised for us:

- Whatever my marital history, how can I work with the Creator to bring order, peace, and beauty into his world?
- Am I holding back from what God has for me, or am I eager for it like a little child?
- Am I using my financial resources freely to bless others and further God's mission in this world?
- Am I willing to become an example of one who leads by serving others?
- Am I willing to accept the responsibilities that come with being delivered and healed by the power of Jesus?

This will be our last visit to Mark for a while, because when Jesus reaches Jericho he's almost to Jerusalem. With the next chapter, Mark takes his story into Passion Week, or Holy Week as we call it. That's a story we usually tell at another season of the year, and we can look forward to that.

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