

Coming to Jesus

Mark: The Gospel of the Kingdom

Mark 9:42-10:16

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This morning we continue in the Gospel of Mark as we look together at the unfolding and rapidly approaching ministry of Jesus as it reaches the cross. And as he does so, the interactions both with his disciples and those who oppose Jesus are becoming more pointed. And in this middle section—or beyond the middle section, actually—of the book of Mark, Jesus is deep into the sauce of teaching what discipleship is.

We've looked at the heart of faith. Lord, I doubt, but Lord, I believe. Help me in my unbelief. And then also we looked at the heart of discipleship, looking at the nature of what it means to trust completely in who Jesus is. And though I couldn't come up with a pithy way of saying the heart of something else, I came up with a different title for this week's passage. But it nonetheless gets to the heart of what it means to be in relationship to Jesus, and that is, what does it look like for us to come to him. "Coming to Jesus." We have different people coming to Jesus in this passage.

Now I strongly recommend that when you read your Bibles in all of their translations, you will see—if you have your Bible with you and you open up—what you will see is the sections of which I will be looking at this morning have these little headings as though they were meant to be separate. That's unfortunate, because they're not meant to be separate. Not that they can't be dealt with separately; they certainly can. But our desire this morning is to look at it with what is a biblical tool, the way the biblical writers use. Mark is using one here. It's called an *inclusio*, meaning where this passage begins, it also ends. It's bookmarked in the same way, that is, by referencing children.

And there begins to be a key to what it means to come to Jesus like a child. But not everybody is coming to Jesus like a child. The disciples aren't. The Pharisees aren't. And yet Jesus wants to demonstrate what it means to come to him. It's serious business. It's at the heart of discipleship. So let's look together in Mark 9:42-10:16.

⁴²“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. ⁴³ And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. ⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’ ⁴⁹ For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰ Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

^{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.

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.” 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.” 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.”

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. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.) Please pray with me. Now Lord Jesus, as you entered into these conversations and these dialogues with both the disciples and these Pharisees, you were teaching about what it meant to come to you and what matters to you, what matters to our Heavenly Father. Lord, help us to receive this teaching like little children, hearing and knowing that what you desire is good, but that you receive us—you receive us like little children. So will you help us to hear. Will you help us to receive. Will you help us to come to you like little children. Help the teacher. And may your Holy Spirit teach us. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Do you have a treasure that you didn't realize you had, until you stumbled upon it one day and maybe took a different look at it than you ever had before. This happened to a woman in England. She was going into the attic because she was expecting a plumber. And that plumber was going to have to re-pipe the house. To make sure there would be no water damage in the attic, she went up to the attic. And she went there, and she as she was rummaging through making sure anything of value was out of place, anything that needed to be covered would be covered. And so while she was in the attic space she decided—rather she discovered a detailed portrait of a bird in her attic. She never seen this ornate owl before, but the painting’s intricate brushwork caught her eye. And so she decided to take a photograph. She e-mailed it to Christie's auction house. One look at the owl and an art expert knew that the work was worth much more than anyone had suspected.

The auction house determined that the painting was entitled “The White Owl.” It was created by a Pre-Raphaelite artist William James Webb. And while the experts valued the work at around \$113,000, they considered it to be much more important because this particular artwork had actually hung in the Royal Society’s art exhibit in the 18th century. So they carefully removed it from this woman's attic. The plumber was put on hold. And they put it on the auction block. And in 2012 it went for an estimated price of about \$950,000.

This woman maintains that she had actually never seen this painting before, that it actually

belonged to her partner who had passed away. And it was just an impromptu cleaning out of the house because of the work. She was in complete shock. She said the painting had been given to her partner, but he had simply either lost interest in it, maybe it just sort of didn't turn his wheels anymore, so he just put it in the attic. And she simply said you never know what unexpected things you might find. So the writer says no, we don't know, of course, about you, but this unexpected art find is prompting many of us to go take a look at our attics.

But the reality is sometimes things which were once about valuable lose their interest to us. They no longer hold that value. And at this point in Jesus's ministry a couple of things really didn't have much value. First, children. Not that they weren't a blessing, but children were thought of as not as important as adults. And so you've seen that. We've seen this before. The disciples sort of had an exclusive reaction to children. They were kind of getting in the way. Another thing which had clearly lost value was marriage. But also women.

And so Jesus takes things that seem invaluable or losing their value and uses them to demonstrate what God desires and ultimately what Jesus desires and what it means to come to him. There is some hard teaching here. I'm not going to skip over it; it's right here. But I do know this. I'm not going to be able to answer all the questions. So if you have questions, we can talk further. I would love to do so. But there is much here, so let's get to it.

You'll see in your outline **A Pervasive Problem, A Narrow Understanding, A Heart of Reception. A Pervasive Problem, A Narrow Understanding, A Heart of Reception.**

A Pervasive Problem. Yes, this passage teaches the corruption of pride. What do I mean. The pervasive problem, the sin beneath the sin, here is one of pride. How can I say that? I say that because Jesus has to get into the problem of the pervasive nature of sin and all of its effects, because the disciples had just been arguing about who would have the place of greatest prominence when Jesus comes into his kingdom. Remember we looked at that last week.

And Jesus uses children as an example of something which is precious and something which is to be valued, and he makes a special place for them. And he says do not cause any of these little ones who believe in me to sin. Meaning be careful how you live your life before them. They are impressionable; they're easily shaped. And you need to understand something about who you are.

Now, he's teaching the disciples and the others that are around him—he's teaching them something to us as adults that can so easily be forgotten. Because children cannot hide all of their weaknesses and foibles and all the stuff that's so easily on display, because they haven't become sophisticated enough how to shield their sinful patterns or their ways or their pride. They can't shield it with sophistication and iron and well, just adulthood. And so he's saying something about the way these adults need to be aware of the pride and sin that is so pervasive.

Children, according to Jesus in this situation, have equal status with the disciples, something which was beyond their understanding. Remember they had just been arguing about the person. . . that last week as we looked at, they were arguing about that person who had been doing things in Jesus' name. They're saying, hey, wait a second, that guy over there is doing something in your name, meaning he can't be like us. And here Jesus is saying not only are they not against us, they are for us. Here little children, do not allow anything to keep them from

me, because if you do it's better to be drowned.

But Jesus goes further. This pervasive problem begins for the disciples at the corruption of pride. They thought they had arrived. They had the gifts. They had the relationship. Don't let children get in the way, and don't let others take the glory. But Jesus goes further. When he begins to get into the body parts, notice there's nothing that is out of sight here. The eyes, the hands, the feet. Go anywhere, all three of those are going to be with you. No matter your eyesight, no matter whether you have arthritis in your hands or your hands are very strong, no matter whether you stumble or you have to use a cane or you can run with abandon. Everywhere we go, there you are and there I am. Jesus is saying if these things cause you to sin...

The whole invitation is—of course—who can escape the corruption of sin. None of us can. That's why it's pervasive. For ALL have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Because what is the glory of God? The glory of God is his holiness, his righteousness, his purity. This is God's glory. For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, meaning if you've committed one sin, we've committed all of them. Why? Because all sin is rejecting love for God and choosing love for self. I want it. I desire it. I need it. I will take it—whether it is our hands, our feet, or our eyes.

Jesus already taught this in the Sermon on the Mount. There might be a difference of degree, but all sin is the same in kind. It is rebellion against God. And the pervasive nature of sin deserves condemnation. And here we cannot skip over the hard words of Jesus. These are not my words, these are not my interpretations. These are simply Jesus's words. That sin, left on its own, in rebellion against God, will receive unquenchable fire. Eternally. And notice he says: “Where worm does not die and fire is not quenched, for everyone will be salted with fire.” This is the pervasive nature of sin, but it is also the condemnation that sin deserves.

But that is not the end of the story. Jesus—you'll notice here at every point he says you have a choice. So against the pervasive problem, the corruption of pride, the corruption of sin, he actually calls us to be ruthless in our commitment to deal with it. No, Jesus does not mean literally to cut off your hand or to gouge out your eye or to lop off your foot. But what he is saying is if you are trying to deal and compromise with sin, your foot has already slipped. And you need to deal with it ruthlessly. Run the opposite direction. Deal with it. Expose it.

And the failure—and this is the key—the failure means this. The failure means not only the reception and the receiving of condemnation, it means that if we—and here he's speaking to those who are following him—and here's the message for Christians. That even Christians understand and profess the corruption of sin. They've heard the ruthlessness that is called for in dealing with sin itself. But a failure in dealing with sin means that the Christian loses saltiness.

He says salt is good, but if that salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? The whole idea here is salt was not used as table condiments as we use it. It wasn't that plentiful. It was also very expensive. But it was used to preserve meat or things that were used for sacrifice. It was used in cultivation to promote growth. And so he says how do we then preserve saltiness? He says, “Be at peace with one another.” Well, implied in that is you're in a relationship with one another. You want to seek—as he has taught other places—to love one another, to forgive one another, to confess your sins to one another. But he says if we fail to deal with the corruption of sin, the pervasive problem, then we will lose our saltiness.

Jesus's desire and call here is to deal with sin as it is, in coming to him. He is the only one who has truly dealt with sin. He is the Holy One. He is the Righteous One. And as we come to him as those who recognize our need of him, because of the pervasive problem of sin, there we begin to see we are being ruthless with sin. We're coming to the only one who can heal us. We're coming to the only one who can give us forgiveness. We're coming to the one who has paid the price for sin. And when we do, our saltiness can be restored.

Because to come to Christ as a little child, and all that that implies... How do little children come? They come with abandon. They're just...they're comfortable. They just come and they're ready to receive. So in coming to Jesus like that, we can't help but have forgiveness. We can't help but receive grace and mercy, and there to enjoy saltiness that preserves, that promotes growth.

But that is not the end of the text, because now something happens. Jesus as he goes along the way continues teaching, and now another group comes up to him. And this group, the Pharisees, have a narrow understanding of sin. Now this is in contrast to what Jesus has just said. Now Jesus's intention was not to teach on marriage and divorce. They were coming to him, the text tells us, to test him, that is, to subvert, to cause problems. The hope was that Jesus would announce that divorce is illegal, because if he does that, he will be in direct opposition to Herod, and we know what happens when that happens. John lost his head. Jesus might lose his. So they're wanting to subvert Jesus's teaching and his authority.

So they come to him, and in so doing they give us some sense of their understanding. So let's look at this again. "And he left there and he went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan, and the crowds gathered to him. And again, as was his custom, he taught them. And Pharisees came up in order to test him. 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' And he answered them, 'What did Moses command you?' And they said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.' And Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment."

So before I go any further I need to just deal with something pastorally. In this teaching on divorce and marriage I recognize that there are perhaps many in front of me who have experienced this, who have been divorced and maybe even remarried. And perhaps hearing these words raises a lot of questions or perhaps a lot of pain. I want you to know first that this is a painful issue for everyone involved. It's painful to hear about and it's been painful for many of you to experience. But the reality is, Jesus is not intending in his teaching with regard to divorce to be a blanket interpretation of all of its different developments. Meaning, it's not a teaching that you are going to take and to put over your circumstance and go, OK, this is what it is. It's more complicated than that, as you will see in just a moment.

That said, I have yet to counsel anyone who has experienced divorce who would say you know, divorce was a really good thing. It was an easy thing. It is not a good or easy thing. Divorce—and anyone who has experienced it recognizes—it is not the way it's supposed to be. Because it is not God's design. It is not God's desire. And yet at the same time I say to you there is grace and there is mercy. There is forgiveness, there is restoration. So hear this teaching in the context that his grace and mercy are rich. So let's dive in.

The Pharisees are coming to him with something they think is going to be a softball. Surely

Jesus is going to get this wrong. But what we understand is very clearly, is that they had their own convenient interpretation about divorce. And women. Yet they're trying to trap and subvert Jesus and tempt Jesus. But the truth is, after Jesus has taught about the pervasive nature of sin, after Jesus has taught about the ruthlessness to which we are to deal with sin, now a group of people are coming to him and essentially have already figured out in their hearts how much can I get away with God and still be OK with him.

Because you see, their understanding of what Moses taught was that Moses was allowing and permitting divorce and permitting their activity. What they're referring to is Deuteronomy Chapter 24. The only thing that is being prohibited there is, that if you divorce your wife and you send her away because you don't like her—which is what they were doing—and she gets remarried to another man and that man doesn't like her and he sends her away, then the first husband can't go and remarry this woman. In other words, what Moses was trying to deal with—and this was their hard heartedness and this is the Pharisee's hard heartedness—is that they simply saw in their own interpretation and the rabbi's interpretation—which is not found in the law, but found in their written and their oral tradition, the Talmud—which was this idea that divorce could be easy. In other words, if you get tired of her, send her away. Why? Because men and women were not equal. And so they said well, I'm kind of tired of you. On your way.

So they themselves had already found what they figured to be loopholes: how can they still be thought of as holy and still be within the boundaries of what God allows. And so they figure how can we catch Jesus. And yet what Jesus does, he understands that they're trying to trap him. But what he does is, he recognizes their own convenient interpretation and he responds, not by teaching what God allows, but rather what God desires. Those are two completely different things. Do you see? That's why we can't take this text and apply it to every single example of divorce and remarriage. Because that's not what Jesus is doing here. He's not talking about what God allows, but rather what does God desire. What has he built marriage to be.

And he teaches it. He says from the beginning God made male and female. By the way, notice what he's doing: male and female. They're co-equally made in God's image. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." Meaning there isn't 'man and woman'; they are one. "So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." Meaning what is God...What did he design marriage to be? He meant for it to be a reflection of God's interrelationship among the Trinity. One and together in relationship, enjoying the unity that comes with that oneness.

And so God has designed man to be with a woman in marriage before the fall. Adam was lonely prior to the fall. And so God said let me provide for you a suitable helper. And so therefore we have two becoming one, as a picture of the Godhead, a reflection of the relationship. Now it's also: Let us make man in our image. This idea of God's relationship among the Godhead, enjoying oneness and also their own persons, yet one—here the picture is a husband and a wife become one, as a picture of what God designed them to be. And they are to be together.

And the desire and the design is to be a picture of the faithfulness of God. The glory of God. The beauty of God. And so he says what God has joined together let no man separate.

But of course for the disciples that's not enough. Why? Because they had heard the same teaching as the Pharisees. They, too, thought wait a second. OK, really? You're saying so, if I

marry a woman, I've got to stay with her? Yes you do. In that, because that is God's design. And so he says whoever divorces his wife and marries and another commits adultery against her.

Now this is key. This is Jesus saying and talking about how beautiful women and men are together. He's doing away with...He's doing away with this idea that men are up here and women are down here. Why? Because it was the Pharisaical teaching, the rabbinical teaching, that if a man committed adultery, he committed adultery against another man, another woman's husband. Do you see the difference? He hadn't committed adultery against his wife; he's committed adultery against another man. But here Jesus is saying absolutely not. Not only have you offended God, you've committed a sin against your wife.

And in other places the scriptures are rich in saying men and women are co-equal as children of glory and recipients of the gospel of grace. This is God's design. And he says, "If she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." Both are simply showing here that men and women are co-equal before the Father. And this is the nature of what sin does. It corrupts. And he's doing away with—and this is his desire, because that is what God desires—he's doing away with easy divorce, because you grow tired of someone and you simply want to go and find fulfillment somewhere else.

And I recognize we live in an age where men and women equally can divorce each other easily—well, relatively easily. And while there's not this situation where a woman can't divorce her husband, which could not happen in Biblical times, but now it can—that's about the only progress. Divorce is still painful. It's not what God desires. And yet there is restoration, there is forgiveness, there is renewal. We know this because of what Jesus is about to say.

[Mark] says here at the end, "And they were bringing children to him." These are the other people who were surrounding during these teachings. They were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked these people from bringing children to him. "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. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child cannot enter it.'"

The passage begins with anyone who would cause a little one who believes in the Lord to sin. It ends with describing what it means to come to Jesus and the picture of coming into his kingdom needs to be like a little child. And then this odd teaching on marriage and divorce and sin. There's a lot going on here. What could it be?

Let me give this quote. I found it helpful as I was preparing and writing about little children. "People with children can understand this idea," the writer says. "Jesus is not commending children as innocent and humble, because we know that they are often neither." Did anybody do VBS? We know our children can do this. "Most likely he met that children were totally dependent upon the will of others and had no legal or social right to make claims for particular treatment. Children can't barge into the doors of a court room and demand treatment. They can't go around waving flags of legal and social rights. Children have an objectively humble place in all societies. To be childlike is to accept our incomplete growth and to simply depend upon the good pleasure of God. Once we believe that we have a status that bestows rights to be heard and received, we cease to be childlike." And I repeat this. "Once we believe that we have a status that bestows rights, a status that must be heard, a status that must be received,

then we cease to be like children. Rather we are called to come to the Lord childlike, incomplete in our growth, and simply dependent upon the good pleasure of God.”

Sin is pervasive. Divorce really hurts and splinters a lot of things. So how are we to deal with this? Jesus tells us. The disciples don't seem to get it. They rebuked those who are bringing children to him. But Jesus says no, no, no. If you come to me, not depending on your own righteousness, on your own record, on your own pride, or trying to figure out loopholes about how much sin you can get away with and still be thought of as holy—if you simply come to me as a child comes, not begging for respect or status, but simply come as one who is dependent upon me—then you will receive what it means to be forgiven, then you will receive grace, then you will receive mercy.

But more than that, look what Jesus does. In the passage [Mark] simply says, “And he took the children in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.” When we come to Jesus, we are not just received. The analogy here is, all those who come like children by faith to Christ are received into his hands. And he holds us in his hands and he blesses us. The blessing of Jesus is the matchless, righteous, perfect work of Christ. And there is nothing that can separate you from the love of Christ Jesus.

So I say to you, if this sermon, if this text, has brought things up in you that are painful or things that you're battling against or ways in which you recognize you've been trying to find that loophole, I say to you, come to Christ again. Or if you have never come to Christ, come to him today—like a child. And know this: that you receive grace and mercy and blessing. And he who is in Christ, there is now no longer any condemnation. We escape wrath, because Christ has taken it. We escape eternal judgment, because Christ has taken the penalty of sin and been laid in the grave. And what we receive is the blessing of eternal life, which is symbolized by Christ being raised from the dead on the third day. And like children in his lap we become united with him. And we can say, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ.

Are you ready to come to him like a child? Do you need to come to him like a child? And if you already are a child, know this. No sin can separate you from the love of your Savior. Come to Him anew this morning and receive the blessing and grace through Jesus Christ alone.

Let's pray. Father, we ask that you would receive us this morning, from the youngest to the oldest. We ask that you might receive us this morning as children. I pray that your Holy Spirit would draw us, that you would give us a desire and Grace to be ruthless in the face of the pervasive nature of sin. That you would help us to see the ways in which we try to interpret scripture to try to find ways, loopholes, to do just what we want to do and yet still be thought of as righteous before you. Lord, help us to come like children, not having a righteousness of our own, but needing and completely dependent on you. And Lord, we ask, through the matchless work of Christ, as you receive us may you also bless us with the grace that can never be quenched, the grace that covers us, and the grace that removes from us our sin as far as the east is from the west. Help us now as we come out of prayer, help us to rejoice in our Redeemer and Savior, the one who died for us on Calvary. May you receive all the glory and honor. In Jesus' name. Amen.