

February 5, 2017

Suffering Servant, Sovereign Lord *Life in the Kingdom of God*

Mark 10:1 – 31

Here in chapter 10, Jesus continues teaching His disciples what it means to follow Him; what it means to participate in the kingdom of God. Back in chapter nine we went with Jesus and three of His disciples to the mountain top. We saw Jesus transfigured on the mountain, the glory of God radiating from His very being, and we saw Him speaking with Moses and Elijah, talking about His coming exodus, and we heard the voice of the Majestic Glory out of heaven saying, '*This is My beloved Son; listen to Him*'. And then we came with them down the mountain into the valley of the demon possessed where Jesus begins to teach His disciples what life in the kingdom of God is all about. We saw that we need to adopt a posture of prayer; walk with unswerving obedience to God's word; live a life of service to others; have an open heart of generous acceptance; be ruthless toward sin in your life; and let the refining fires of God work a steadfast perseverance in your soul.

Now in chapter 10, Jesus teaches them about the sanctity of marriage, how to enter the kingdom like a child, and the perils of possessions. *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?"* In the parallel passage in Matthew of this same confrontation, it becomes clear that they are not simply asking if divorce is kosher. In chapter 19, Matthew records they asked Jesus, "*Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason?*"¹ The distinction here is important to understand.

The issue here was a controversy that had been ongoing in the Jewish religious community for a long time and it centered on the Old Testament passage in Deuteronomy 24. "*When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house,*"² This is the only place in the Old Testament where the issue is addressed in depth. And the controversy was over what exactly constituted "indecency" in a wife. What does that mean? That was the burning question of the day and they were trying to draw Jesus into it.

In Jesus' day, there were two schools of thought on this. The more conservative school followed Rabbi Shammai and taught that divorce was only acceptable in the case of adultery, or sexual immorality, that was the meaning of indecency. The more liberal school followed Rabbi Hillel and said divorce could be granted for merely displeasing her husband, "*even if she spoiled a dish for him, for it is written, 'Because he has found in her indecency in anything'*".³

1 Matthew 19:3 ESV

2 Deuteronomy 24:1 ESV

3 James R. Edwards, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Mark*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002),299.

Indecency began to be interpreted as anything that the husband didn't like. Divorce was permitted if she said something bad about her husband's parents or hung the toilet roll the wrong way round or squeezed the toothpaste from the top and not the bottom. Rabbi Akiba who followed Hillel, went further said that divorce could be granted if the husband no longer found his wife attractive. The Pharisees, who followed the teachings of Hillel and Akiba, had made divorce very easy and they wanted to keep it that way. Mark probably did not include the qualification, "for any reason", that Matthew did for the simple reason that divorce was so universally accepted among first century Jews that the qualification was implied in the question. Everybody understood it.

So these Pharisees, who ignored the weightier issues of justice and mercy and faithfulness, were straining at gnats on the issue of divorce. Essentially they were asking Jesus to define 'indecent', no doubt to feel better about divorcing their wives. Mark clearly tells us that this was a test for Jesus, or more accurately, a trap. It was another in a long series of attempts to discredit Jesus to the crowds who adored Him. If He answered one way, He might lose His head like John the Baptist whose condemnation of Herod Antipas' marriage to Herodias earned him a prison cell, and eventually cost him his head. If He answered another way, it would compromise the authority of the Torah and He would lose credibility with the people. These guys were always devising these brilliant schemes to trap Jesus, but they never figured out that He would never be drawn into their schemes.

Look at His answer: *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."* And it was a clever sort of thing to say. Essentially they were saying, 'If Moses permitted divorce, how can you say it is not part of the Divine ideal'? What they were really looking for were loopholes. They assumed that marriage included the idea of divorce and they wanted to know when it was acceptable. And that is often how we approach God's commands. We want to know how far we can go and still be in the will of God. We are always looking at the boundaries God has drawn around human activity and pushing them to the limit. We tend to operate at the limits instead of the center.

But Jesus doesn't allow that. He exposes their position and points them back to the original intent of marriage. *5 And Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment."* And in Matthew He adds, *'But from the beginning it was not so'.⁴* Essentially, Jesus ignores Moses and goes direct to the issue. *'The reason Moses allowed you to divorce was not because divorce was included in the original intention of marriage but because of your hard hearts. Deuteronomy 24 was given because you refused to follow God's design for marriage. It is a text of concession to your sin-hardened hearts. It is not a text of God's intention'.* You don't plan for success in something by following the rules for failure. Deuteronomy 24 was never meant as a pretext for divorce, but rather an attempt to limit its worst consequences for women in that society.

And then Jesus goes behind the authority of Moses and appeals to a previous and higher authority found in creation. *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.*" What Jesus does is take them back to God's original intent for marriage. It involves one man and one woman – *male and female*. Not male and male, or female and female, or males and females. One man, one woman – marriage. It is two becoming one – *the two shall become one flesh*. And it is a work of God – *what God has joined together*, not what man has joined together. Marriage is a work of God that is meant to reflect His image and likeness in the world, and to rip that apart is to tear God's picture.

I'm sure that didn't satisfy His critics who wanted to know about the exceptions and not the rule because we hear His disciples continuing the discussion as they left and went into the house: *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."* Here Jesus apparently sees no allowances at all for divorce. But as Jesus did with Deuteronomy 24, we must interpret His statement here in light of what He says elsewhere about the same subject. In two places in Matthew, in chapter 5 and again in chapter 19, Jesus clarifies the issue. In chapter five He says, *"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."*⁵ And in chapter 19 He says, *"And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."*⁶

These are the so-called exception clauses for divorce, but God never intended that we should look at His creation of marriage in terms of the exception. The essential thrust of Jesus argument here in Mark is not on the dissolution of the marriage covenant, but of the design and purpose God originally intended for marriage. In other words, divorce should never be a word in the Christian lexicon. These guys were asking the wrong question. They should have been asking "What does God think about marriage?" "What is His view of marriage?" But they should have known. They were students of the Bible. All the way through Scripture God plainly sets out what marriage is all about. From the wedding in Genesis to the wedding feast in Revelation, God speaks to His people about the significance and sacredness of marriage, and, in the book of Hosea God tells His people, *"And I will betroth you to Me forever. I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD."*⁷

God's plan and purpose for marriage is to mirror and reflect His plan and purpose for us, and when we violate that we mar the image of God. Here Mark is emphasizing the call of Christ to discipleship in marriage, and the question is, will those who follow Him heed that call? Will we as Christians, turn our backs on the culture of divorce and hold to the covenant of marriage as firmly as Christ does His church? Will we erase the word 'divorce' from our lexicon? Will we submit to the authority of the word of God in our lives?

5 Matthew 5:31-32 ESV

6 Matthew 19:9 ESV

7 Hosea 2:19-20 ESV

Before you start raising objections here, I know there are difficult and even seemingly impossible marriages and incredibly serious marital issues we face. That is a consequence of the fall. Sin has done its best to ruin the image of God in marriage. But that is no reason to think of marriage in terms that violate God's design. Can we be forgiven if we fail in marriage? Absolutely. Can we be restored? Unquestionably. There is no place in Scripture where anyone genuinely seeking forgiveness and restoration is ever denied by God. The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. And there are definite biblical grounds for divorce. The words of Jesus are not intended to chain those who fail in their marriages to an eternity of guilt. But will we set our focus on what is permitted, or commit ourselves to what is intended? We must stop thinking in terms of loopholes and exceptions and set our hearts to follow God's word on marriage.

At this point, Mark brings in the children. *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.* I cannot help but think that Mark brings the kids in on the heels of Jesus talking about marriage because they represent the fruit of marriage and should be cherished as such. But His disciples evidently were of the opinion that children should be seen and not heard and they went to work rebuking the parents who were bringing them.

The response of Jesus to the actions of His disciples is striking. Mark says He was indignant. The word indicates His anger was aroused. James Edwards, in his commentary says that it means '*to vent oneself in expressed displeasure rather than simply brooding about it*'.⁸ In other words, Jesus landed on His disciples with both feet. And I suppose that was for a lot of reasons, but probably the most important was what these children represented. What was expressed here is the deep concern and compassion Jesus has for the helpless, the vulnerable and the powerless. And it is these to whom, Jesus says, the kingdom of God belongs. *"Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.*

He points out that there is something about a child that is essential for entrance into the kingdom because He says, *"Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."* And the question is, what are the characteristics of children that are necessary for entrance in to the kingdom of God? Right away we could think of characteristics that He probably didn't mean. He probably didn't mean their awkwardness, or their immaturity, or their proneness to misbehave, or their innate rebellious little natures. Nor should we think that He necessarily meant their positive virtues. That is, what we tend to think of as their childish innocence or their purity or their spontaneity or their childish sweetness. If we think that Jesus commends children for these positive virtues, then we, along with the disciples, are out of luck.

8 James R. Edwards, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Mark*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002), 306.

I think the point of the story is that Jesus commends and blesses the children, not for what they possess, but for what they lack. They are coming to Him, just as they are, on the arms of someone else, without power, without sophistication, without an agenda. They were not coming to Him like the Pharisees who were trying to trap Him. To enter the kingdom of God you need to enter like a child. Children, for the most part are vulnerable. Children, for the most part are powerless. Children, for the most part don't have an agenda for Jesus. I think the point Mark is making is that children don't have anything to bring to the table but themselves; and whatever they receive, they receive by grace on the basis of sheer neediness, rather than based on any merit in themselves. That is how we too enter the kingdom of God. If you propose to come to God on the basis of any virtue you possess, on any goodness you think you have, or any merit you have earned, you won't get in.

This point is emphasized at the beginning of the very next story. *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?"* Luke calls this guy a ruler.⁹ Matthew calls him young.¹⁰ So he is widely known as the rich, young ruler. Evidently he had been listening to Jesus and something got him so excited that this man of power, wealth and influence actually ran to Jesus and knelt before Him. And what is interesting is that with all his wealth and power and influence, his soul was still unsettled as to his eternal destiny. And it is clear that he thought Jesus had the answer for him. Remember, Jesus had just been talking about how you get into the kingdom of God. And right on the heels of that comes this guy running up to Him, asking the \$64,000 question. You can almost hear him say, "Okay, I need to receive the kingdom of God like a child. Jesus, how do I do that?"

And his assumption is that he needed to do something. *"...what must I do to inherit eternal life?"* On the one hand, this is the most important question anyone needs to answer. On the other, it is not the right question. All the other religions of the world talk about what I need to do to go to heaven, or achieve nirvana, or become one with the universe, or whatever. That is, I am saved by what I do. Christianity is the only religion that says salvation is only through what another has done. This guy had gone through life seeing his efforts as key to getting where he wanted to go. And then He runs into Jesus. And he butters Him up a bit; *"Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

Jesus answers him with a theological question: *18 And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.* You see, the Jews would never refer to anyone but God as having the quality of goodness. God was absolute good. Humans were good only in a derivative sense. So the young man was indulging in a bit of flattery, no doubt intended to elicit a favorable response. But Jesus turns the focus from what the young man must do to who God is. No one is good except God alone. The young man was thinking of what he could do; and essentially Jesus tells him his starting point is all wrong. Furthermore, Jesus' statement confronts this young man with his evaluation of who Jesus is. By calling Him good, was he saying Jesus is God? If not, then he is inappropriately conferring deity on another fallen, sinful human. But if He is God, then the only appropriate response to Jesus is to worship Him, follow Him and obey Him totally.

9 Luke 18:18 ESV

10 Matthew 19:22 ESV

But Jesus doesn't give him anytime to respond and starts talking about the Law of 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.'*" The young man said, "What must I do?" And Jesus says, "You want to do something? Keep the law of God. Absolutely. Obey this in the good sense, that is perfectly, in the same way God is good, and eternal life is yours". And what is astounding is that the young man comes back with "Been there, done that". *20 And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth."* But even more astounding is that someone didn't jump up and say, "Liar, liar pants on fire." I mean how is it that someone could say in all apparent sincerity, "I've done this all my life. I've never broken one of these commandments. I've been good."

But no one blinks an eye. No one objects. No one calls him a liar or a hypocrite. Furthermore, Mark tells us that Jesus heard his response and *looking at him, loved him*. He didn't call him out. He seems to accept his statement as fact. And indeed Paul the apostle told the Philippians that *"according to righteousness by law, I was blameless"*.¹¹ One commentator said, *"That a person possessed the ability without exception to fulfill God's commandments was so firmly rooted in rabbinic teaching, that in all seriousness they spoke of people who had kept the entire Torah from A to Z"*.¹² But this young man was still missing that assurance in his soul that what he had done was going to be enough. He came to Jesus because with all his money and influence and religious piety, there was still something missing and he knew it.

And so Jesus gives him the missing ingredient: *"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."* "You want to do something? Have a garage sale of everything you have, give the proceeds away to the poor, and come and follow Me." Jesus had addressed the moral content of the Law, now He addresses the heart of the Law. *"You shall have no other gods before Me"*.¹³ This man's money and possessions occupied the place that should only be given to God. God must be first in our lives. Otherwise all of our life will be disordered. This young man wanted God. But Jesus pointed out that he already had another god. You see this young man thought only in terms of effort. Jesus tells him it's about relationship.

The call to enter the kingdom, the call to discipleship, is a call to radical trust and commitment to Jesus. "Give up your gods that won't save you and follow Me". This guy had money and influence and power. And Jesus says, "Let that go and take Me". He offers Himself as the substitute for the young man's riches. And only when he gives his riches away will he be in the position to receive the riches of the kingdom like a child. And then Mark records, *Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions*. Jesus is not talking just about money and possessions that may keep you out of the kingdom. He's telling us that everything we hold more dear than Christ Himself is functionally our god and will keep us from following Him. You see, for this guy, money and possessions were at the center of his existence. He couldn't imagine life without them. That's why he was sorrowful. His identity was all wrapped up in them and he couldn't let go.

11 Philippians 3:6 ESV

12 Strack and Billerbeck 1.814

13 Exodus 20:3 ESV

And so Jesus seizes on a teachable moment. *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!"* We should not assume that Jesus meant that only poor people get into the kingdom of God. What He says, is that it will be difficult. And I think only wealthy people can really know the truth of that statement. Because no matter how we poor people like to take a perverse kind of satisfaction in that statement, we all still would really like to be rich because we're pretty sure we could handle it. What Jesus was recognizing here is the addictive quality of wealth. Randy Alcorn says it best, "*The more you have the more you want*". And "*The more you have the less you are satisfied*".¹⁴ In other words, money and possessions become your priority and there is always more to have. And it is hard to give that up. Money and possessions make discipleship harder, not easier.

This literally blew His disciples away. *24 And the disciples were amazed at his words.* So Jesus repeats it. *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."* The picture Jesus is drawing here for His disciples is an impossible one. The thought of trying to squeeze a camel through the eye of a needle must have been not only absurd but seemed the essence of improbability. And you should understand the disciples were not thinking "Well that would be hard but I suppose it could be done". Mark says, *26 And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?"* In other words, to the disciples, Jesus just seems to have closed and locked the gates of heaven.

What we need to understand is that the Jews had their own prosperity theology. In Judaism, wealth and riches were seen as the evidence of God's favor and blessing and here was a guy who was evidently in great favor. Furthermore, he had kept the Law of God from his childhood. This was not only a rich man but a good one. Apparently he had done everything right and if anyone should get into the kingdom it would be him. No wonder they were concerned. If he can't get in, how in the world will we be able to enter? But Jesus was telling them that his goodness and wealth were actually a barrier to getting in. In the same way Jesus draws attention to what the rich young man lacked, the disciples hear His words and realize the lack in themselves. "We too have nothing in us that would commend us to God."

And Jesus says, "Right, unless you come as a child, helpless, vulnerable, powerless, you can't get in." *27 Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God."* Salvation is not within our power to attain. Left to ourselves, we're locked out. Salvation is a divine work through the perfect atonement and sacrificial death of Jesus. It is a **done** work, not a **do** work. It is for men an impossibility. But not with God. With God all things are possible and anyone can be saved. Salvation is wholly a work of God. It is impossible to receive the kingdom of God based on either what you do or on the basis of your own merits. All the possibilities are with God.

14 Randy Alcorn, *The Treasure Principle*, (Multnomah Publishers, 2001), 53.

At this point dear Peter speaks up. *28 Peter began to say to him, "See, we have left everything and followed you."* Peter thinks he gets it. "We've done it. We've left it all behind to follow You. We've done what that rich guy couldn't." But what is left unsaid here is the implied question, "So what's in it for us?" Mark doesn't include this but Matthew records that Peter says, *"See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"* But Jesus doesn't rebuke Peter for this. Instead He points out the benefits of giving up everything to follow Him. *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."*

In other words, the blessings of forsaking everything, for trading the preciousness of relationships and wealth for the preciousness of Christ and the sake of the gospel are too great to enumerate. A lot of prosperity preachers take this verse and spin it into a story about getting rich. If you give me \$1 you'll get \$100 back from God. However they conveniently leave out the part about persecutions. If they're right, then you also get a hundredfold increase in persecutions. Sign me up! No, what Jesus was trying to teach was that life in the kingdom of God is so much richer and fuller and deeper that the benefits and blessings are too great to imagine. And at the end of this life is the beginning of life eternal. You see, houses and family and lands will one day either leave you or you will leave them. And the only way to be assured of keeping them is to give them up.

That is the point of His last statement. *31 But many who are first will be last, and the last first."* In the kingdom of God there is a great reversal of all our earthly values of position, rank or standing. To the crowd, the rich young ruler had all the accouterments of wealth and power and position and the disciples were pretty much in last place. But in the kingdom of God, the first becomes last and the last becomes first. Those who are first in their own estimation will lose out to those who see themselves as last. Tim Keller notes, *"The heart of the gospel is all about giving up power, pouring out resources and serving...the center of Christianity is always migrating away from power and wealth."*¹⁵ To follow Jesus means a radical divestment of all that would subvert or derail us and ultimately keep us out of the kingdom.

You see, this is the example the Lord set for us. He left His comfortable home in heaven to live in a humble carpenter's home. Though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor. He gave up heaven's best to endure hell's worst so that He might bring us to God. And just as Jesus told the rich young man, "Imagine life without all the stuff you have. Imagine all you have is Me. Is that enough? Will you put Me first? Will you treasure Me over your family, over your houses and lands and money and stuff? Am I enough in the middle of a bad marriage?" Through the gospel, Jesus calls us to a life of radical discipleship that proclaims that Jesus is enough in every part of my life. John Piper wrote: *"Christ did not die to forgive sinners who go on treasuring anything above seeing and savoring God...[the gospel is] a way of overcoming every obstacle to everlasting joy in God. If we don't want God above all things, we have not been converted by the gospel."*¹⁶

15 Tim Keller, *King's Cross*, (Dutton Books, 2010), 124.

16 John Piper, *God is the Gospel*, (Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL, 2008), 47.

Heavenly Father,

Thank You for the gift You gave us in Your Son. Grant that we would treasure Him above everything in our lives. Let us see the beauty of Jesus and let our hearts be captured by Him. Forgive us Lord for pushing the boundaries of Your commands for our own selfish pleasures and help us to embrace what You have ordained as good for us and glory for You. Forgive us too for worshipping other gods before You and renew our hearts to worship You alone, we pray in the precious name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.