

JESUS TEACHES ON MARRIAGE AND CHILDREN

Mark 10:1-16

Key Verses: “Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” (9)

“Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” (15)

In today’s Bible passage, Jesus teaches about marriage and children. We know that the family serves a vital role in life and in community in any society. From the Bible we know that God established marriage between the first man Adam and the first woman Eve. Thus, marriage was God’s idea and plan. However, these days marriage is being redefined by those who reject the view of Jesus and the Bible. Some even mock marriage altogether, thinking it is not even necessary. Today, we want to listen to Jesus and confirm the importance and blessing of marriage in the sight of God. I will be referencing a few Christian marriage books and counselors as well. In this passage, we also want to listen to Jesus about the importance of welcoming little children and why we should be like them.

I. God’s blessing on those who accept marriage God’s way (1-12)

Jesus left Galilee, entered Judea and went across the Jordan (1). As usual, crowds of people came to Jesus. And, as usual, Jesus taught them. As he was teaching, some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” (2) We have seen that the Pharisees and teachers of the law were not sincere truth-seekers. They were not asking Jesus to gain insight and wisdom and to live a right life before God. Rather, it was an attempt to get Jesus into trouble. It was a test. How was it a test?

There are two ways they could get Jesus into trouble with this question. First, we saw what happened to John the Baptist when he challenged Herod for taking his brother’s wife to be his own. John ended up in prison and then was martyred. Jesus’ critics were hoping the same thing would happen to Jesus, since they knew Jesus’ view of marriage was similar to John’s. Second, knowing that Jesus would not be in favor of divorce, they wanted Jesus to oppose Moses’ law. In this way, they hoped to prove that Jesus was not a teacher from God, since he would be opposing Moses’ law. They must’ve thought they had Jesus in trouble with their question. So what did Jesus say?

“What did Moses command you?” Jesus replied (3). Jesus turned their attention to Moses and the Bible. Jesus regarded God’s word as the ultimate authority and truth. So should we.

In reply, they said (4), “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.” They quoted Deuteronomy 24:1 which says, “If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house...” The law goes on to say that if her second marriage dissolves, the first husband may not marry her again. This law of Moses was written to make divorce and remarriage not easier, but more difficult.

Until about 100 years ago, divorce was relatively rare, largely due to the influence of Christianity. It used to be difficult to get a divorce. There were laws against it. One had to prove abuse, abandonment or infidelity to obtain a divorce. Gradually, getting a divorce became easier and less costly. In the 1970s an American could go to Haiti to get a divorce within a few hours and then remarry on the same day.

Dr. John Gottman studied 2000 married couples over 20 years and could with 94% accuracy predict who would stay married and who would divorce. He wrote a book titled, "Why Marriages Succeed or Fail...and How You Can Make Yours Last." He details (in chapter 3) how 4 things can destroy a relationship: criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling (ignoring). Criticism is "attacking someone's personality or character—rather than a specific behavior—usually with blame."¹ Contempt has the "intention to insult and psychologically abuse your partner."² Defensiveness is "self-protection, a natural response to warding off a perceived attack."³ Stonewalling is to become like a stone wall in stony silence.⁴

Four principles he argues (in chapter 7) to get a relationship back on track are: Calming down, communicating nondefensively, validating, and overlearning⁵. Calming down and communicating nondefensively are self-evident. Validation means to show that their point of view has validity. Overlearning is to keep practicing, trying again and again, until it almost becomes automatic.

I'll say a little more about successful relationships later. For now, how did Jesus reply to their quote of Moses' law?

Jesus used this opportunity to teach them the Bible from Genesis. Jesus said (5-9): "It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law. 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 flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

Jesus taught so many important things here regarding marriage and divorce. Divorce is the result of hardened hearts. Hearts can become hardened or calloused by sin. A hard heart is proud and unrepentant.

Pastor and author Gary Thomas wrote a book titled, "Sacred Marriage: What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy." He says that the problem of most marriages is people enter marriage with the wrong expectations. In other words, they envision a dream marriage like Cinderella and Prince Charming. But there are no such marriages, because there are no such people. They expect their spouse to change, rather than accepting that they also need to change. He writes: "Behind virtually every case of marital dissatisfaction lies unrepented sin. Couples don't fall out of love so much as they fall out of repentance."⁶ In other

¹ Gottman, John, PhD, "Why Marriages Succeed or Fail...and How You Can Make Yours Last," Simon & Schuster (New York, NY), Fireside Edition, 1995, p.73.

² Gottman, *ibid*, p.79.

³ Gottman, *ibid*, p.89.

⁴ Gottman, *ibid*, p.94.

⁵ Gottman, *ibid*, pp.176-201.

⁶ Thomas, Gary. "Sacred Marriage: What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy?", Zondervan (Grand Rapids, MI), 2015, p.89.

words, hard hearts result from an attitude that “I don’t need to change” or “I’m not the problem.” They ask, “Why can’t you be more like me?” instead of asking, “How can I become more like Christ?”⁷

Jesus taught that at the beginning of creation God made male and female. God made man and woman to unite physically and procreate. That’s how they were to “be fruitful and multiply.” That’s how God designed for children to be born and for people, made in God’s image, to continue on earth from generation to generation. The parent-child relationship is naturally very strong. But in the marriage union, a man and woman leave their parents and they unite to one another, and they become one flesh. They are no longer two separate individuals, living their own separate lives. They become one in God. They are committed to each other to live life together, to help each other to love and serve God together, and, if God wills it, to raise children together. That’s what God intended for marriage between one man and one woman. Nothing and no one should separate them in this life, except death.

Jesus’ disciples were surprised by Jesus’ clear teaching. It means that divorce was more common than we might realize in Jesus’ day. It seems people actually used Moses’ law to justify divorce and make it easier to divorce. So Jesus told his disciples, “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.” It is clear that to Jesus divorce is not an option for his followers. Ruth Bell Graham, the wife of Billy Graham, was once asked, “Did you ever consider divorce in your marriage?” She replied, in humor, “Divorce? Never. Murder? Yes.”

People considering divorce must ask themselves: “If after marriage, I would have no more chance to marry another person, no more opportunity to have an intimate physical relationship with anyone, would I still divorce?” In other words, if a second marriage is not an option, would divorce still be an option? This is the problem with people who say they married the wrong person. They are already thinking that there is someone they would be happier with. This is similar to people who think they would be happier in a different church. Again, they assume the problem is with others.

Gary Chapman, pastor and author of “The Five Love Languages,” said that he went to God in prayer when he had a conflict crisis involving his wife. God showed him an image of Jesus washing his disciples’ feet. He decided he would ask his wife three sincere questions: (1) What can I do to help you? (2) What can I do to make your life easier? (3) How can I be a better husband? She gave him answers and he did his best to fulfill her requests. Then, after a few months, she began to ask him the same questions. He now confesses to her in the greatest of compliments, “If every husband had a wife like you, there would be no divorce.” I highly recommend, if you are married, with or without children, to find a marriage seminar, or marriage conference, or join our Art of Parenting class in the church, or at least read a Christian marriage book with your spouse to work on and improve your marriage. If you are not working on improving your marriage as with any relationship, it’s a missed opportunity to grow in character.

To quote “Sacred Marriage” again: “Rather than spending time wondering if we married the right person, we can take all that energy and work on creating a beautiful story of how two imperfect

⁷ Ibid, p.220.

and seemingly incompatible people made their marriage into something amazing—creating kids, finding purpose, worshiping God, and being loyal to each other to the very end....A good marriage is not something you find; it's something you work for. It takes struggle. You must crucify your selfishness.”⁸

II. God's blessing on children and those like them (13-16)

After hearing about Jesus' teaching on the blessing of God on marriages that stay together in God's way, people brought their little children to Jesus. Children are one of the fruits of marriage. Like all parents, these parents wanted God's blessing on their children. They wanted Jesus to place his hands on their children and bless them. Years ago I knew a guy who was challenging my faith in Christ. It was clear that he was not interested in being a follower of Jesus. But suddenly he asked me a sincere question: “Do you think I should have my children baptized?” Even though this man wasn't interested in following Jesus himself, he wanted God's blessing on his children. Sometimes it's through this desire to see their children blessed that some parents open their hearts and come to Jesus themselves. A man I met yesterday was almost the same way: not so interested in church but interested in helping his kids to grow in character, so perhaps getting them involved in church.

Jesus must've been so happy that right after talking about marriage, people brought their children to him to be blessed. But not everyone was happy about this. In fact, Jesus' own disciples rebuked those people for bringing their children. Perhaps they said, “Hey, get those kids out of here! Jesus doesn't have time to deal with noisy, annoying kids!” Have you ever thought that way? To my shame, I have. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. Jesus was not happy with his disciples.

Remember how Jesus had already taught his disciples about welcoming children in his name? They argued about who was the greatest. Then Jesus took a little child and told them to welcome such as these in his name. Then they would be great. How could they forget so quickly? Were they not paying attention? It certainly didn't sink in to their minds and hearts. Words or ideas don't mean much unless they're put into practice.

Anyway, Jesus taught them again. Jesus said to them (14-15), “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, 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, placed his hands on them and blessed them (16).

We should not hinder children or anyone from coming to Jesus, even if they don't look worthy or ready in our eyes. It's good to bring people to Jesus for his blessing: children, diseased people, demon-possessed people, homeless people, rich people, educated or uneducated, Republicans or Democrats. All people need to come to Jesus.

Why does the kingdom of God belong to little children and those like them? What is it about little children that makes them fit for the kingdom of God? Well firstly, those who come to Jesus humbly for his blessing are fit for God's kingdom. God opposes the proud, but shows favor to the humble.

⁸ Thomas, *ibid*, p.121, 128.

Those who recognize they're sinners in need of God's mercy are closer to God's kingdom than those who think they're all right and don't need to repent of anything.

Children are trusting. They are not suspicious or cynical. If you offer them an ice cream cone or other gift they will accept it without hesitation or fear. Children are dependent. They recognize they need help and they take it readily. If you hold out your arms to a child to pick them up, they usually come running to you. Jesus says we must be willing to receive the kingdom of God like a little child to enter it. Unlike worldly rewards and trophies, God's kingdom cannot be earned or merited or achieved. It is a free gift to those who receive it in humble faith. Salvation and eternal life are gifts. We must receive them like a little child. So, not only are we to welcome little children, we are also to become like little children: trusting and dependent on God.

This is perhaps somewhat surprising to us. For example, we teach our children to be independent, since we think that's the key to success in this world. But children are not independent. They readily accept that they need help and guidance. They are ready to listen to whatever people tell them and to imitate whatever people show them. This is why we must be careful what we are saying and showing to children. If children hear their parents swearing, they will speak swear words. In contrast, if they see their parents praying, they will learn to pray. We should be good children to our Father in heaven.

In today's passage, Jesus gave us his kingdom teachings about marriage and children. Marriage is for keeps before God. Two become one in God. Children are precious to God. We must regard them as so. And, we must become like them: trusting in God, dependent on God, receiving the gift of God, like little children.

In November 2020, the Institute for Family Studies issued an article titled, "The U.S. Divorce Rate Has Hit a 50-Year Low."⁹ It stated that for every 1000 marriages in the last year, 15 ended in divorce, the same rate as 1970. However, the same article noted that the U.S. marriage rate also hit an all-time low. In other words, the rate of divorce is low, but far fewer people are getting married. Fewer people are willing to make the serious commitment to get married. At the same time, many more people are living together and having children out of wedlock in the U.S., Europe and all over the world. It means that the world is losing the meaning of marriage as the Bible and Jesus taught it.

Still, there are those who are saving their bodies til marriage to be united to only their spouse. There are those who have dedicated their marriages and their lives to Jesus and for the gospel of his kingdom. Christian marriage is not marriage for our own comfort or pleasure or benefit or achievement. Christian marriage is two people becoming one in God to serve his will. It's two people helping each other and their children to know and serve the Lord.

In The Message version of the Bible, Joshua 24:15 says, "If you decide that it's a bad thing to worship GOD, then choose a god you'd rather serve—and do it today. Choose one of the gods your ancestors worshiped from the country beyond The River, or one of the gods of the Amorites, on whose land you're now living. As for me and my family, we'll worship GOD."

⁹ Wang, Wendy. "The U.S. Divorce Rate Has Hit a 50-Year Low," Institute for Family Studies, 11/10/20, @wendyrwang.

I pray that all of us dedicate our lives and our homes to serve the Lord. May God have mercy on our sinsick nation and world. May God bring a revival of holy matrimony and godly house churches and blessed children in Jesus Christ our Lord. May God hear our prayers that many more Americans may honor God, believe the Bible, live for Christ and serve one another in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And may we all grow as better spouses, better parents, and better children of our Heavenly Father.