

MARK: Glimpses of the Kingdom
Kingdom Values
Mark 10:1-45
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For over three years, Jesus' disciples—Peter, James and John, Matthew, Thomas, Judas, and the rest of them—followed Jesus closely. They heard Him preach about the kingdom of God, and they saw Him perform miracles that reinforced the truth that a new day had arrived. They spent time with Jesus as they travelled, and they even had the advantage of hearing Him explain many things to them when the crowds weren't around. The disciples' time with Jesus had been transformational, but there was still a lot of things that didn't make sense to them.

Today's sermon marks the final message in our series, "Glimpses of the Kingdom," but we're not finished in Mark. Beginning next week—the first Sunday of Lent—we're going to begin walking day by day through Jesus' final week.

In Mark chapter 10—the last chapter in Mark's Gospel before Jesus and the disciples entered Jerusalem on what we've come to call Palm Sunday—Jesus continued to teach the crowds and his disciples about the values of his kingdom. In this chapter, Jesus emphasizes how different the values of his kingdom are compared with the priorities of our world. I'm going to divide up the reading of this chapter into sections, because I think it will make it easier for us to follow. I encourage you to follow along as I begin by reading verses 1–12 of Mark 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 flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one 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.” (Mark 10:1-12)

Chapter 10 begins with yet another test for Jesus posed by his antagonists, the Pharisees. The question they ask Jesus is, “Is it lawful for man to divorce his wife?” The Pharisees knew that the law Moses gave to the people permitted divorce, but they were also aware that the law put a divorced woman at a great disadvantage. Her husband could remarry and go on with life as usual, but she was relegated to relying on charity from her parents or others. The Gospel of Matthew’s rendering of this dialogue makes the Pharisee’s intent in asking the question clearer. Matthew quotes the Pharisees as saying, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” Indeed, in that culture. Moses’ law had been interpreted so that men could divorce their wives over anything that displeased him.

Jesus acknowledged Moses’ law, but then He quickly went back to God’s intent at Creation, making it clear that God’s design for marriage was permanence, because the man and woman had become 1 flesh. He noted that Moses only permitted divorce, because of the hard-heartedness of people. Jesus’ interpretation of Moses’ law and of God’s original intent shifts the question from “What’s lawful?” to “What’s God’s best for a husband and wife?” In a male-dominant culture, Jesus’ value for women and men was revolutionary.

The Pharisees’ questioning of Jesus was followed immediately by a short scene in which parents brought little children to Jesus to have Him bless them. I’ll read verses 13–16.

People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on 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. 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.
(Mark 10:13–16)

The disciples—Jesus’ self-appointed bouncers—rebuked the parents who sought to have Jesus bless their children. Couldn’t these parents see Jesus was way too busy and much too important to spend time with children? When Jesus saw what was happening, He was indignant. He took the children in his arms and blessed them, and He said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them,

for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” In the eyes of the culture of that day, women and children were second-class citizens, but in God’s kingdom, they were valued and loved. At first glance, these events that are recorded in Mark chapter 10 might seem random to us, but they’re not. Mark is very intentional about grouping events together to make a point. I’ll now read verses 17–31, where a wealthy man came to Jesus with a question:

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: ‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall 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 someone who is rich 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.”

Then Peter spoke up, “We have left everything to follow you!”

“Truly I tell you,” 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—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.” (Mark 10:17-31)

Immediately after Jesus affirms women and children as valuable in his kingdom, a rich man came to Jesus asking Him what he needed to do to gain eternal life. The disciples who tried to shoo away the children from Jesus were probably thinking, “Now this is the kind of person Jesus should be

spending time with. A guy like this could really benefit the kingdom.” But rather than fawning over the wealthy man, Jesus treats him rather rudely by asking him difficult questions and essentially chases him away by telling him he needs to sell everything he has and give the money to the poor. Only then can he come and follow Jesus. The man went away sad and perhaps somewhat angry, because he was very wealthy and wasn’t willing to give up all that Jesus asked. Mark doesn’t tell us how the disciples responded, but I’m sure they were dumbfounded. “What’s Jesus doing—prioritizing women and children and chasing away wealthy men? He clearly needs to attend a seminar or at least read a book about ‘How to build a successful church.’” In Jesus’ kingdom, the wealthy and successful aren’t given special privilege. In fact, Jesus said it’s impossible for the rich to be saved apart from God.

When the disciples see how Jesus dismisses this wealthy man, it occurred to them that maybe their own standing in God’s kingdom wasn’t very secure. Peter wanted to make sure Jesus understood how much he and the others have left to follow Him, and so he reminded Jesus of all the disciples have given up. Jesus affirmed his disciples for their sacrifice and then clarified that in his kingdom, the first will be last and the last will be first—a message that we’ll see in a moment clearly didn’t get through to at least two of the disciples. I’ll read verses 32–34, which are kind of an interlude in this chapter.

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 delivered over to the chief priests and the 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.” (Mark 10:32-34)

Mark tells us that Jesus and the disciples were on their way up to Jerusalem. Palm Sunday and the other events of Jesus’ final week are quickly approaching, so once more, Jesus tries as plainly as He knows how to tell his disciples that the religious leaders will arrest him and hand him over to the Romans who will condemn Him to death, but three days after that He will rise to life. We’re sometimes hard on the disciples for being slow to understand, but even though Jesus told them about his death a number of times, with everything that was going on and all their presuppositions about the Messiah, it was hard for them to grasp what Jesus was saying. I’m quite sure that if I were in their shoes, I’d have been just as clueless. I’ll pick up reading at verse 35 of Mark chapter 10.

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.” (Mark 10:35–45)

James and John missed the meaning behind Jesus’ statement that the first would be last and the last first, but they apparently did understand that Jesus’ end was near. They sent their mother to inquire of Jesus whether they might be promised seats at Jesus’ left and right in paradise. After their mother’s lobbying, Jesus asked James and John whether they could drink his cup or be baptized with his baptism—meaning could they endure the suffering He was going to undergo. They clearly didn’t understand what drinking his cup or being baptized with baptism meant, because they eagerly said that they could. And then Jesus tried to make his point plainly to them. He said that while it was the pattern of this world for rulers to lord over followers, that’s not the way it works in God’s kingdom. In his kingdom, the great serve others, and those who want to be first must be a slave to all. And He closed with words that expressed his mission, “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.”

Our world values wealth and power and often marginalizes women and children, but Jesus’ kingdom is upside down—a place where the wealthy give away their resources to care for the poor, where those in power serve others rather than lording over them, and where women and children are valued, not viewed as existing only to serve men.

Time moves on and some things have changed for the better, but the values of God's kingdom still run counter to the world in which you and I live today. Jesus' view of power, wealth and equality is very different than our world's view. Jesus called husbands to love, honor and care for their wives. He called adults to value children. He called the rich to embrace generosity. And He called rulers and leaders to serve those under them, not simply seek to benefit from the service of others on their behalf.

What shifts or adjustments is Jesus calling you and me to today so that we might fully embrace the values of his kingdom? Is He calling me to change how I view women, children and others who are on the margins of society? Is He calling me to adjust my view of wealth—understanding that I've been blessed to serve others and advance his kingdom agenda, not to simply obtain more for myself so I might be more comfortable and secure? Is he calling me to change how I view leadership, influence and power so I can live out his mission of serving rather than being served and giving my life for his kingdom? As I read these words of Jesus from what is known as The Sermon on the Mount from Matthew chapters 5–6 in The Message paraphrase, I invite you to listen for the Holy Spirit's insight for you...

“You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

“You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

“You're blessed when you're content with just who you are—no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.

“You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.

“You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'care-full,' you find yourselves cared for.

“You're blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

“You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.

“You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom.

“Let me tell you why you are here. You’re here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You’ve lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.

“Here’s another way to put it: You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I’m putting you on a light stand. Now that I’ve put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.

This is your Father you are dealing with, and he knows better than you what you need. With a God like this loving you, you can pray very simply. Like this:

Our Father in heaven, reveal who you are.

Set the world right; do what’s best—as above, so below.

Keep us alive with three square meals.

Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.

Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.

You’re in charge! You can do anything you want! You’re ablaze in beauty!

Yes. Yes. Yes. (Selected scriptures from Matthew 5–6, The Message)