

Whole-hearts and Empty Hands

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Date: 12 August 2018

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[0 : 00] Now, we're continuing our look at the cross-shaped life as we look at the section of Mark that surrounds the three predictions of Jesus' death. So we're going to read this evening Mark chapter 10, verses 1 through to 31, the second half of the teaching that comes after Jesus' second prediction.

Mark chapter 10, verses 1 to 31. 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.

And Pharisees came up, and in order to test him, asked, is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?

He answered them, what did Moses command you?

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.

But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.

[1 : 23] So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate. And in the house, the disciples asked him again about this matter.

And he said to them, whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.

And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them.

But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, let the little 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 shall not enter it.

And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them. And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked, good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

[2 : 28] And Jesus said to him, why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. 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. And he said to him, teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.

And Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said to him, 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. And come, follow me. Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. 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.

And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again. And they were exceedingly astonished and said to him, then who can be saved?

[3 : 49] Jesus looked at them and said, with man, it is impossible. But not with God. For all things are possible with God.

Peter began to say to him, see, we have left everything and followed you. Jesus said, truly, I say to you, there is no one who's left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake.

And for the gospel, 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. But many who are first will be last. And the last first. Amen.

This is God's word. Amen. Please do turn again in your Bibles to Mark chapter 10. Threading a needle is hard enough at times.

[4 : 58] A shaky hand or slightly deteriorating eyesight. And it can be a real struggle. Well, what about doing the same thing, only instead of a fine piece of thread, trying to get an enormous animal through the same little gap?

One might need to get the creative juices flowing. But I suspect that even the most doggedly determined person will give up at some point. No matter how small you can chop a camel up, you can't get the chunks of camel through the eye of a needle.

It'll be a step too far. Of course, it's a well-known saying of Jesus. It's easier to get a camel through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into the kingdom of God.

And some will take that to mean that Jesus is anti-money. But that is not at all what he's saying. He isn't taking aim at simply having money.

But what he has made clear in his teaching here in Mark is that following Jesus means giving up everything. That means, yes, our riches and our rights and our respectability.

[6 : 07] And just by living in the West, we are pretty rich in many of these things. Many of us are particularly so. But it comes with a danger.

If we lean too much on any of these, they'll leave us in great sorrow. We're in the section of Mark's Gospel that is punctuated by Jesus foretelling his death.

Jesus is going to suffer. That's what he's been saying. And so too are his followers. His path, his route, is the route to the cross. And if we're to follow him, it's the same path for us.

The path to glory is the path of giving things up. The crown comes after the cross. So Jesus' followers are to live cross-shaped lives, happy to lose their lives now in order to save it.

And last week we saw what that looked like for the pursuit of glory and prestige in the present.

Being first in this life will mean being last in the life to come.

[7 : 13] And this teaching all hangs on Jesus' words to his disciples after his first prediction and how the disciples desire to be the greatest. That isn't the pattern that Jesus wants his followers to pursue.

He says in Mark 8, verse 34, If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses it for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and yet forfeit his soul?

Following Jesus is the path of self-denial. It's the path of self-sacrifice. But it is the path to glory and the path away from losing our souls.

Mark crystallizes for us more of what it looks like to take up our cross and follow Jesus. There are three incidents in this passage and they cover three things that are close to almost anyone's heart.

[8 : 19] Marriage, children, and money. Following Jesus, carrying our cross has big ramifications for everyday life.

It will affect our aspirations. The comfortable middle-class dream of a nice family, lots of money, living a good respectable life, and then enjoying heaven is one that must come under the rule of the gospel.

So three incidents illustrate what cross-shaped living does and doesn't look like. First, verses 1 to 12, we see the tragedy of hard-heartedness.

Then secondly, in verses 13 to 16, we see that receiving the kingdom of God is for those who take humbly. And then in verses 17 to 31, we see that receiving the kingdom of God is for those who treasure the heavenly.

So first, verses 1 to 12, the tragedy of hard-heartedness. The cross-shaped life is a life that takes the law seriously, maximizing its reach on us and so denying ourselves what we see as our rights.

[9 : 30] The kind of question we ask about how to live often shows where our hearts really lie. If we ask the question, how far is too far or not far enough?

Or if we ask, what am I allowed to do? What's too much or what's too little? Then those sorts of questions betray a kind of tick-box approach to honoring God.

It's only really interested in letting God's purposes take hold of us as little as possible, as little as we can get away with. But if we're asking the question, how can I honor God?

Or what's the best thing that I can do? Then that shows a willingness to let his word truly drive and shape our lives, even if it's costly to do so.

In this case, divorce is the arena that we're looking at. This is the arena in which the incident plays out. And now divorce here is simply the presenting issue. So Jesus' response is not the final word

on divorce.

[10 : 32] He doesn't say everything that there is to think about here. And there's not time for us to get stuck in all of that. It's full of very painful issues. But we're not going to spend too long thinking about that.

But rest assured, there's much, much more that Jesus says about it. But the question from the Pharisees is verse 2. Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?

Notice what sort of question that is. At its heart, it's asking, what are my rights? What can I get away with? What is the least I can do whilst not falling foul of the law?

It's that sort of question. And the Pharisees think that they have it sorted, that they're in the right because they can quote directly from the law. They're quoting directly from Deuteronomy 24. So they are thinking, the law is on our side.

But of course, they're not treating the law as they should. They're getting this particular law all wrong. For the one that they're quoting was given to protect women and to prevent legalized adultery.

[11 : 37] It wasn't to grant frivolous divorce. But all they're interested in here is the certificate. That's what they say. Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.

The certificate was all that the Pharisees were interested in. We have a certificate. Tick. That's us in the right. We're covered. Whereas the purpose of the law was to dissuade casual and regular divorce.

And Jesus goes on to say that the very law was given, verse 5, because of their hardness of heart. Divorce is a tragedy. Jesus says it's a ripping apart of flesh.

Verse 8. Marriage was always intended to be a lifelong union right from the beginning. That's what Jesus says in verses 6 and 7. He points us back to Genesis.

From the beginning, marriage was to be lifelong. Anytime it ends, it is tragic to see that play out. All we have to do is ask the children that suffer divorce.

[12 : 46] The Pharisees want an easy way out. They want an easy law to keep. They have a take on the law that is much more concerned with a tick box righteousness that comes in just above the line that's okay.

It's all about their rights. It's all about what suits them. not a concern for what they have committed to or for the women that they're divorcing.

Just the certificate that says, I'm in the right. And so Jesus brings into focus here the cross-shaped life in this scenario. When it comes to family, that which is closest to us, we cannot prioritize ourselves.

It won't do to get rid of a spouse any time it stops working for us. That's the pattern we see so often on TV and in films. Suddenly a marriage needs some work, some attention.

It's no longer swimmingly along and smiles all the time. And before long, it's decided that actually it's just easier to end it. Rip apart the flesh. But marriage isn't a commitment to a spouse whilst it's easy and enjoyable.

[13 : 58] It isn't an arrangement so that we can get what we want. The pattern for marriage is seeing your spouse as greater than yourself. Marriage means serving one another, sacrificing for one another.

That's God's standard. Not something that's only good as long as it meets our wants and needs. And then when it stops doing that, a cheap divorce that suits us.

Jesus is saying that divorce is not like taking a faulty item back for a refund. It's not a reset button. No, no.

God's law has always been about the heart. It won't do to merely tick a box to say that we're keeping the law to its letter. And the Pharisees are even failing to do that here.

God's law is pervasive. It isn't looking for us to minimize it, but to maximize it. And that will involve a very great deal of self-denial. That's where the cross-shaped life comes in.

[14 : 58] Making any marriage work will involve sacrifice. I'm sure if you ask anyone who's been married 10, 20, 30 years, that's exactly what they'll say. Well, Jesus goes on to say that this hard-hearted way of thinking, this tragic view of divorce will only lead to one place.

Verses 11 and 12. Adultery. Breaking the very heart of the law. Trampling the Ten Commandments. Cheating on God.

The cross-shaped life embraces God's law from the heart. Being pleased to deny our rights and our comforts so that we'd maximize the law in how we live.

That our chief concern will not be with an easy ride, but with a life that brings glory to our Savior.

And that our whole lives would be committed to that.

This is another aspect of what it is to lose our lives now, but to gain them, to save them in the end.

This is what it looks like to forfeit the world and keep and gain our souls.

[16:07] This is a picture of how the heart is to be involved in the cross-shaped life. We can't settle for what the minimum is.

That won't do it all. Jesus is exposing a very hard-hearted approach to what he said. And he's saying, that will not do you. And so Mark goes on to give us two very different-looking people to say, who will receive the kingdom of God?

So secondly, verses 13 to 16. Receiving the kingdom of God is for those who take humbly. The cross-shaped life knows that eternal life can't be earned, and so freely and humbly takes hold of it with complete dependence.

We like to think that there's something special about us. We all want there to be something about us that makes us pleasing to God, something that God will look to about us that is good in us.

Now, we know, of course, that we can think and feel and even do things from time to time that we'd be ashamed if others found out about. And we know that we need Jesus and that it's with his merit that we can be right with God.

[17:23] But there's still a part of us that likes to think we do something to earn our place. There's something about us that contributes. Well, if you're like me in that, we also share the company of the disciples.

Remember last week, Jesus said, those who receive children, the least, the most unimportant, in his name, receive Jesus. And for the disciples here, receiving a child would bring no benefit.

At this moment in time, they're trying to listen to Jesus, and whilst they're doing that, there would be no place for a screaming child. Keep those little, distracting, grubby kids away.

This is the grown-up, sophisticated place of honor. Keep the children away. Jesus is talking to us.

The disciples long to be the greatest. We've seen them have that argument more than once.

So they have their sights set in a way that's above bothering with children. Well, Jesus pulls a rug from underneath them. Verse 13, children were being brought to Jesus and the disciples rebuked them.

[18:31] But look at what Jesus says, verse 14, let them come. Let the children come. Don't hinder them. It's to the children that the kingdom of God belongs.

Not the rich, not the powerful, not the nice. It's the lowly, those who offer nothing because they can't offer anything.

Jesus makes clear that his kingdom is for those who humbly take it. The key here is not being a child. Jesus isn't saying that his kingdom is only for children. Verse 15, it is those who receive it like a small child that will enter.

Now, a young child can only take and receive. When we're caring for young children, we don't do it so that they pay us back. They can't. They can't offer anything for the food that we make for them. They just take it and eat and look to you for some more. A child has nothing to offer. A child lives completely by what it's given.

[19:38] A child has nothing to barter with when it comes to getting things. A child doesn't sit down to its dinner and say, I've earned this today. I've worked hard and this is mine.

No, it just takes with complete dependence upon the giver. A child looks to its parent trusting that they'll lovingly give what is needed. And Jesus is saying it's to people like that that the kingdom of God belongs.

To those who knew that they don't deserve it. To those who knew that they can't earn it. but want it more than anything else. And so reach out and take it.

Jesus bursts the bubble of those who think that they can earn his kingdom or those who think that they can offer things in return. No, no, he says. Receive it like a child. Take it humbly.

Take it with empty hands. Jesus gives us this simple illustration of what it looks like to receive him. And it is cross-shaped because it means giving up any moral or religious credit we think we might have in the bank.

[20 : 50] It means receiving with empty hands that have let go of our pride. Empty hands that have let go of our accomplishments, our independence. Receiving because we know our hands are empty.

And I don't know about you but that's a real comfort to me because so often my heart doesn't want what is right and good.

And without the free offer of it we would be doomed. So Jesus says take it just like a child. Mark goes on to contrast this with another illustration of someone whose hands are very full and need to be emptied.

Verses 17 to 31 he says receiving the kingdom of God is for those who treasure the heavenly. This is where the bulk of the passage focuses. The cross-shaped life gives up this world and its wealth to follow the God who makes salvation possible.

These incidents build to their climax with this rich man and they show the cost of following Jesus. The Pharisees wanted to control the law for their own comfort. A child controls nothing and now we have a man who wants to control money.

[22 : 13] Jesus has just said it is to those who can take humbly that will inherit the kingdom and now this man asks the question of all questions. Verse 17 what must I do to inherit eternal life?

This man isn't a troublemaker he isn't testing Jesus he's asking a sincere question. Sometimes we can try and set this man up as if he's got an agenda but he just seems like a decent bloke respectful he kneels before Jesus he calls him good teacher completely in contrast to the way the Pharisees often approach Jesus and notice Jesus doesn't write him off he doesn't have a go at him because of his money it can often be the easy thing to attack the rich to have a go at them but Jesus doesn't do that look at verse 21 it says Jesus loved him this man seems very much like a good man verse 19 he treats others well keeping the commandments maybe we all knew someone like that maybe we work with people who are good family men we come across them at parents evenings maybe they're well respected they've got a good job well involved in the community they don't really hurt anyone in fact they're very caring and helpful aren't they the kind of people who belong in Jesus kingdom nice clean upright well off people well Jesus has just made clear that they don't on that merit alone Jesus answers in verse 19 with a list of six of the ten commandments do not murder do not commit adultery do not steal and the man says I've done these from a young age he's getting on well it looks all very promising so what must he do to inherit eternal life well Jesus tells him verse 21 sell all you have and give it away then come and follow me give everything away so that you've got treasure in heaven and then come and follow me look to heaven's treasure instead of this world's come with empty hands and follow Jesus but notice the four commandments that aren't mentioned they're the ones that relate to

God have no other gods before me nothing comes before God this man is faced with the choice that we've seen before this world and all that it offers are our souls for him it isn't glory like we saw last week but it's gold what does it profit a man to gain the whole world but forfeit his soul well here's the man who's gained the whole world but saving your soul is following Jesus by picking up your cross it's being happy to give anything or everything away to follow Jesus it's holding on to nothing so tightly that it will make us think twice about following God the child receives the kingdom with empty hands because it's got nothing to hold on to but the rich man has a lot and so those hands need to be emptied in order for him to follow

Jesus that's why verse 22 he's sorrowful he had a very real cost to be counted most of us comparatively with the rest of the world are very rich and very privileged with money with education with all sorts of things and with that can easily come a reluctance to let things go we want to hold on tightly to what we've worked hard for or to things that are pleasant that we enjoy who doesn't want nice things but it is much harder for someone who has everything success money comfort it is much harder with reputation to come to Jesus in fact verse 27 for us on our own it's impossible but with God it is possible look at the two questions that are asked verse 17 what can

[26 : 57] I do to be saved and Jesus gives the answer give it all away and follow me the more we have or the more we think we have the harder it is to give up and follow Jesus but then the question verse 26 then who can be saved that's a question that realizes we're hopeless without God and so when we begin to see that without God without our soul we are pur then that is Jesus showing us that following him is what really counts and he can work the impossible so that even a man who owns everything might be pleased to give it away to follow Jesus now Jesus isn't saying that only pur people can belong to him but what he is saying is that those who belong to him must hold with

an open hand all that they've got but that isn't impossible for we can look at

Jesus and see someone who is so completely and incredibly unlike anyone else ever and we can see that following him is better following him is worth it and then we can happily let go of anything happily let go of anything that we love except Jesus coming to him like a child with nothing because we know that it is better to have Jesus to belong to his kingdom than to have a full bank account or a grand job title or anything else that we aspire to in this world that is true no matter how much we struggle to believe it there's a piece of all of us I'm sure that will struggle to believe that the lure of money and things is very powerful but Jesus is saying here that God is the one who can change hearts so that even a rich man might be drawn to give all of his money away to gospel work that is not impossible for

God no matter how daft it would seem to our world the cross shaped life takes all we have in this world and is happy to freely give it up knowing that the treasure of heaven is much more much more than 10,000 volts of gold and in the end of all this just like what Jesus showed with giving away our life in the end there's glory there's resurrection well here he shows us that in the end again Jesus will be no man's debtor verse 28 is the proof it isn't impossible the disciples had given up everything and they were following Jesus and so Jesus says yes you have given up everything and so no one who's given up these things will miss out verse 29 no no no have really will ■ dat houses and family and lands but also with persecutions and in the age to come eternal life there will be blessings in this life for following

Jesus if we're happy to give things up, if we're happy to sacrifice, to serve him, to follow him, to hold loosely all that we treasure, there will be blessings, yes, in this life and in the life to come.

For many of our Iranians that come to our church, they've left houses, family lands, and much more. And many of them have said that whilst their families are now furious that they follow Jesus, they have a family of hundreds in our church, a family that means everything to them. One of them in particular left behind a huge construction business, his family, a big house, all he ever knew. And as I sat in his flat eating dinner with him, he could sincerely say the words to me, Jesus is better. He didn't feel short-changed. The peace he now knew far outweighs all the wealth that he once had. Or there are others who've become Christians amongst us only to face mocking from their family. And it may be that the longer they're Christians, that that gets worse and worse.

[31 : 41] But Jesus is saying here that you have a family amongst your church, a hundredfold. God will be no man's debtor. There are real blessings now in this life, but also in this life there are persecutions. It's still the life of following Jesus in the path to the cross.

This life will always have that shadow of the cross looming over it. That's how it's meant to be. But then also in the end, it's the life that brings eternal life.

In the end, it's the life that comes to Jesus with empty hands, a life that humbly takes hold of the kingdom, the life that lets go of the good things of this world in order to cling on to the good things of heaven.

That verse 30 will enjoy eternal life in the age to come. When we've freely chosen to be last, when we've freely chosen to take on the status of a helpless child, then verse 31 will be first.

Then we'll get glory. Then we'll have everything. Then we will know for definite we haven't missed out. For those who embrace losing and giving up things in this world, that yes, we really do love, we will, verse 16, be received into the arms of God.

[33 : 18] But if we cling to our rights and our riches, if we want to control money, if we want all that this world offers and celebrates, well, that's a path that's destined to forfeit our souls and end up like this man in verse 22, disheartened and sorrowful.

Jesus said, what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? Jesus is saying, if we knew that we're lost without him and come with empty hands, then our souls are ours, that we have more riches than we could ever imagine stored up for us at the last day, that we will, verse 16, just like the little children, be blessed by Jesus.

That is following Jesus on his path and that path ends with the crown. Yes, it's the cross now, the cross that says, give things up, the cross that says, sacrifice.

But it's the cross that leads to a crown that will never fade away. Amen. And so it's a powerful picture, isn't it?

That little child being told to clear away by the disciples. But Jesus says, no, no, come to me. Sit on my lap. I welcome you.

[34 : 57] Amen. Let's pray. Father, we thank you that you have promised to us great blessings.

And that whilst you call us to give up and sacrifice and give things away for you, that we can be sure that you will not leave us with debit in our account.
That you will not leave us as your debtor. Father, we thank you that in the end you will lavish on us much more than this world can possibly afford us.
And so we pray that you would help us to follow you on your path. For we pray it in Jesus' name.
Amen. Amen.