**WHAT GOD HAS JOINED TOGETHER  
Mark 10:1–16**

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

Jesus encounters two types of hearts in this week’s passage—hard hearts and childlike hearts. The hardhearted Pharisees challenged Jesus with the controversial topic of divorce, and Jesus taught about the reasons for divorce and about marriage as God originally established it. The disciples also showed hard hearts, rebuking people for bringing their children to Jesus. In contrast, Jesus teaches about the attitude required to receive God’s kingdom, exemplified by a little child. When marriages lose God’s rule, then they become susceptible to disunity and divorce. May God reveal to us through Jesus’ teaching about God’s original intent for marriage how to receive restoration of God’s kingdom in our hearts and families.

1. **Hard Hearts and Broken Families (vs. 1–5, 10–12)**

In the previous chapter of Mark’s gospel, Jesus and his disciples passed through Galilee, possibly for the last time in his Galilean ministry. Today’s passage begins the last period of Jesus’ earthly ministry. Look at verse 1: “***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.***” Even though Jesus would soon go to the cross, he didn’t focus on himself, but on serving the spiritually needy people who came to him, teaching them from God’s word. John’s gospel tells us that at this time, the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council in Jerusalem, was plotting to take Jesus’ life (Jn 11:53), so Jesus stayed away from Jerusalem, avoiding confrontation before the appointed time.

However, Jesus was not left entirely alone by his adversaries. Look at verse 2: “***Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’***” On the surface, this seems like an innocent question, but we should take into account the political and religious context. Among the Jews of that time, there were two leading schools of thought, the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel. Whereas Shammai taught that divorcing one’s wife was only allowable in cases of adultery, Hillel allowed divorce due to much smaller offenses—even the burning of a meal. So for Jesus to come down firmly on either side of the debate could have alienated him from many Jews on the opposing side.

But a more sinister aspect of the Pharisees’ test for Jesus had to do with the territory he was ministering in: Perea. Perea, across the Jordan from Judea, was under the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas. This was the same Herod who had earlier imprisoned and beheaded John the Baptist for rebuking his marriage to Herodias after she had divorced Herod’s brother, Philip. Perhaps the Pharisees hoped that Herod would treat Jesus in the same manner if he were to voice a similar rebuke. So for Jesus to stand on the side of truth in this controversy would be to risk his popularity and even his life.

Divorce today is still a heated issue, though it has become much more socially acceptable—as well as much more prevalent. Growing up, a number of my friends had divorced parents, and I have relatives on both sides of my family who have divorced. Though the divorce rate is on a downward trend, estimates on the divorce rate in America generally range between 40 and 50%. Lest we think that this is a problem only of unbelievers, according to a Pew Research poll[[1]](#footnote-1), 74% of divorced or separated people in America identify as Christian. So this is a problem inside the church as well as outside.

There are arguments to be made on both sides of the issue, whether or not to legalize divorce, but let’s look at where Jesus went first to consider this controversial topic. Look at verse 3: “***‘What did Moses command you?’ he replied.***” Jesus went back to the Bible, specifically the books of Moses, wherein Moses gave Israel God’s law. For God’s people, our standard of right and wrong comes neither from persuasive arguments nor from societal consensus nor from pragmatism nor from what feels right to us. The Bible is our absolute standard of truth. God’s word contains wisdom that is relevant to every aspect of life, from religion to finances to relationships to recreation. When we listen humbly to God’s voice in Scripture with the guidance of his Spirit, we can discern God’s will, even for difficult issues.

So what did Moses command regarding divorce? The Pharisees claimed in verse 4 that “***Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.***” They were referring to Deuteronomy 24:1, which reads, “*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…*” Why did God give this law rather than expressly forbidding divorce? Jesus says in verse 5, “***It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law***.” Jesus points out that the reason for divorce is hardness of heart toward God. Divorce was not God’s original design. But God knew that people would stubbornly refuse the standard of marriage God had originally intended for mankind. So he established laws to promote the sanctity of marriage by making divorce require legal documentation rather than mere verbal confirmation to prevent rash actions. Additionally, God wanted to protect women, who had less power in ancient societies.

Jesus addressed the Pharisees directly, rather than their ancestors, by saying “*It was because* ***your hearts*** *were hard that Moses wrote* ***you*** *this law*”, revealing that hardheartedness was their problem also. Hardness of heart means stubborn refusal to repent and obey God. It means rejecting his rule, rejecting the kingdom of God in one’s life, or in one’s marriage, as Jesus addresses in this passage. So what does it look like when God rules in a marriage? What does the kingdom of God look like in the home? In order to answer these questions, we need to know God’s original purpose for marriage.

1. **What God Has Joined Together (vs. 6–9)**

Jesus went back further than the law to teach about marriage based on the first, sinless marriage that God created, which is God’s pattern for marriage. Look at verse 6: “***But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’***” In saying this, Jesus affirmed that God’s intention for marriage is between one man and one woman, thereby excluding other possibilities like homosexuality and polygamy. Jesus quoted from Genesis 1:27, which reads in full, “*So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*” This explains why God made marriage in this way: to bear his image. God is a more complex being than man. God is three persons in one divine being, and so he is inherently relational, with an eternal love relationship between the Father and the Son—a relationship of loving authority and loving submission. One person cannot by himself reflect the relational aspects of God’s character, and so God created marriage between man and woman to display his relational attributes of love, faithfulness, and cooperation, of loving authority and loving submission.

To perfect the love relationship within a marriage, God blessed marriage to bring oneness between a man and a woman. Look at verses 7–8: “***‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, 8 and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh.***” The physical, emotional, and spiritual union between a man and his wife was the crown jewel of God’s creation, the climax of his creative work. To promote this oneness, God created sex as his blessing for marriages, to strengthen their conjugal bond and produce children. The greater the blessing, the greater the consequences of its abuse, and the physical, emotional, and spiritual effects of sexual sin, and especially sexual abuse, can persist for a lifetime. God designed marriage as the framework for sexual relations, and any sexual relations outside of marriage defy God’s design, including adultery, fornication, and prostitution.

Accepting God’s rule in the area of sexuality means trusting that God’s way of waiting until marriage and remaining faithful within marriage is best. God isn’t trying to keep us from finding happiness; rather, he wants us to have the greatest happiness, which comes through following God’s plan. Psalm 84:11 says, “*For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless.*” God has given us the boundaries of monogamous marriage not to withhold any good thing, but to shield us from harm and grief, and to grant us his favor. Abstaining from premarital sex correlates to a significantly lower divorce rate once married and increased relational satisfaction. However, the fundamental reason to live under God’s authority is simply that: God’s authority. Ephesians 5:3 commands Christians, “*But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people.*” Because we belong to the holy God as his holy people, we live to please him rather than ourselves, even if we miss out in this life.

Apostle Paul quoted the same passage from Genesis that Jesus did in Ephesians 5:31–32, saying, “*‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ 32 This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.*” The physical oneness that characterizes the relationship between husband and wife is a shadow of the spiritual union and intimacy that Christ shares with his church. The husband should show Christ’s faithful, selfless love to his wife, as Christ has shown to his church. The wife should show Christ’s faithful, selfless love to her husband, as Christ showed to his Father. Both husband and wife imitate Christ in a Christ-centered marriage.

Look at verse 9: “***Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.***” Jesus teaches that God is the one who joins together husband and wife; he is the establisher of each marriage. So marriage is bigger than either spouse or even the two of them together. Our marriages should not be about us or only our personal happiness, but for the glory and work of God. When marriage loses its original God-centered focus and becomes about happiness, then as soon as one or both of the spouses feel unhappy, there is nothing bigger for their marriage to stand on, whereas if the purpose is bigger than the two of them, the marriage has a firm reason for existing even through difficult times.

How does marriage contribute to the work and glory of God? Before God made Eve, he said in Genesis 2:18, “*It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.*” The word, “helper,” implies some work to be done, a task in the undertaking of which man needs help. There are many differences between men and women in general, and between each husband and wife. Apart from grace, these differences can lead to conflicts, but with the grace of Jesus, they are opportunities for growth, to become stronger together than would be possible apart.

What is the work that God has given to mankind for his glory? Immediately after God made man male and female in his image, he blessed them with a mission in Genesis 1:28: “*God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it…’*” Though some people warn of the dangers of overpopulation, the fact is that the earth is still not filled. Some estimate that the earth can support over 10 billion people, and that maximum occupancy will probably increase as technology continues to improve. The current population is around 7.5 billion, so God’s command to humankind to fill the earth still stands.

Furthermore, God desires that parents among his people produce godly offspring. So God spoke through the prophet Malachi, “*Has not the one God made you? You belong to him in body and spirit. And what does the one God seek? Godly offspring. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth*” (Mal 2:15). Children can learn to fear God through loving discipline and seeing a Christ-centered example from their parents.

For the church under the New Covenant, a spiritual aspect of the command to “be fruitful and multiply” becomes apparent. Jesus had no physical descendants, yet Isaiah prophesied about him, “*…he will see his offspring and prolong his days…*” (Isa 53:10). Jesus’ disciples, whom he lovingly addressed as his children, continued his legacy and his ministry, passing on his spiritual lineage to generation after generation of believers. “Make disciples” (Mat 28:20) is Jesus’ universal commands to Christians, single or married, but because of the co-helpfulness inherent in a God-centered marriage as well as the potential for spousal influence, good or bad, the decision of whom to marry is of critical importance to our ability to carry out Jesus’ mission for his church.

Steve Shadrach writes about this important decision in *The Fuel and the Flame*:

I do seminars around the country for college ministries and churches, and, regardless of the topic, I am always compelled to fit this sobering thought into my message: Who you marry will make you or break you. Simple to say, hard to apply, … Here’s another profundity: You *will* marry someone whom you date. If this is true, and it is in America where we get to choose our mates, then only date someone who has the qualities you are looking for in a lifelong partner. Make sure they have the same goals, values, passions, and vision as yourself. Getting married is the scariest, most risky decision someone ever makes. Give that boyfriend or girlfriend of yours some time to develop a track record, because the only way you can be sure of what they *will* give themselves to in the future is looking at what they *have* given themselves to in the past. You need … to run the bases of life in this order: first base, Master (Jesus Christ); second base, Mission (Great Commission); third base, Mate (a partner who has also run the bases properly).

According to Steve Shadrach, unity of Christ-centered and mission centered values is crucial for bearing lasting fruits in a marriage. The crowning glory of marriage is when husband and wife become coworkers for God’s mission, like Pricilla and Aquila, in whose home in Corinth the church was meeting (1Co 16:19). When I was a college student and growing as a disciple, Paul and Mary Choi worked together to serve me and teach me the Bible and raise me as a spiritual leader. I witnessed their beautiful co-working and received their loving service and faithful prayers. God used the two of them as a great blessing for me and for other students, and I pray that God might use Rebekah and me in the same way to bless and serve college students with God’s word.

God’s purpose for marriage is to bear God’s image and reflect his character and to be fruitful and multiply, producing godly physical and spiritual offspring. This is the beautiful picture of God’s rule and his kingdom in marriage. However, divorce frustrates that purpose, tarnishing God’s image and hindering fruitfulness. Divorce shows a failure to display God’s covenant love and faithfulness, a failure to love selflessly and humbly and to forgive as we would have God forgive us. It harms children and teaches a bad example.

Yet, there is hope of restoration. In the book of Hosea, God showed a vivid picture of his relationship with Israel by telling his prophet Hosea to marry a promiscuous woman. It was God’s message to his people that their idolatry toward him is like an adulterous wife cheating on her husband, yet God would not reject them forever, but forgive their sins when they repented and returned to him. In Hosea 3:1 God said to Hosea, “…*Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another man and is an adulteress. Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes.*” Even though they were unfaithful, God was faithful and initiated reconciliation.

Each of us is in need of God’s forgiveness, for our sins and rejection of his rule in our lives and our families are as the sin of adultery against God. God extended the offer of reconciliation by sending his Son Jesus Christ to this world to preach repentance and to bear the penalty for our flagrant infidelities. He did this in order that we might be restored to a covenant love relationship with him, a covenant sealed with the blood of Jesus.

Knowing and receiving God’s forgiveness of the vast measure of our sin is the basis for our relationships with others, especially in marriage. Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:32, “*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*” Forgiveness leads to reconciliation and peace, the restoration of God’s kingdom in the family and in the church.

1. **Childlike Hearts and God’s Kingdom (vs. 13–16)**

Look at verse 13: “***People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them.***” It was common during Jesus’ time for Jews to bring their children to receive a blessing from a rabbi. But Jesus’ disciples saw them as wasting Jesus’ time. They considered children as unworthy of Jesus’ attention; they thought Jesus had better things to do. They looked at the outward appearance, not recognizing little children as valuable in God’s sight. So they rebuked the parents who were bringing their children to Jesus.

How did Jesus see their actions? Look at verse 14: “***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.’***” It wasn’t just the Pharisees’ hearts that were hard and resistant to learning, but the disciples also hadn’t accepted Jesus’ teaching. Just in the previous chapter, Jesus had instructed his disciples about the importance of welcoming children, saying, “*Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me*” (Mk 9:37). But now they were turning away little children—and in doing so turning away Jesus and his Father. No wonder Jesus was indignant!

As in the previous chapter, Jesus used the little children as an object lesson to teach his disciples. Look at verse 15: “***Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.***” What does it mean to receive the kingdom of God like a little child? Children ask without trying to earn. A little child is unable to earn his food or lodging and requires his parents’ care and provision. They simply believe that their parents will provide for them. We must receive God’s kingdom in that same manner, through simple trust and dependence. Entrance to God’s kingdom is his gift, which we could never earn by any achievement or merit. Receiving such grace requires humility to acknowledge our own inability and powerlessness to gain it any other way. God does not see man’s social status, education, or ability when granting the kingdom of God. But he sees a childlike heart and attitude toward his gospel truth and promises.

How did Jesus welcome those who came to receive his blessing? Look at verse 16: “***And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.***” Jesus received them tenderly, with compassion and love. The disciples may have thought that they deserved Jesus’ attention for following him faithfully, but Jesus lavished his love and blessing on those who came to him without any concept of earning. We should also entrust ourselves to Jesus’ arms, finding comfort and blessing in his embrace like a little child.

Our lives and marriages fall short of the glorious potential which God created us for because we easily lose God’s kingdom in our lives by shifting the focus from God to ourselves. The law exposes our inability and guilt and shows the consequences of our unfaithfulness to God. But praise God, who sent us his one and only Son Jesus Christ to restore the kingdom of God in our lives. Christ is the king of every area of our lives, including our marriages and family lives. In Christ, there is true healing and restoration from our broken relationships. May God bless us to receive his kingdom, trusting with childlike dependence so that Christ may rule in our lives and marriages and bless us to grow in his image!

1. <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/marital-status/divorcedseparated/> accessed 4/22/2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)