

The Gospel of Mark – The Ethics of Jesus

Mark 10:1-16

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



Jesus and the Pharisees, we are used to their interactions by now in the Gospel of Mark. The Pharisees come and confront Jesus. Jesus hears their question and offers a response that exposes the hardness of their hearts and the real purpose of their question. Then, we often find the disciples asking for clarification on Jesus' response because they didn't understand. These interactions point us to the reality that understanding and applying the wisdom and values of Jesus isn't as easy as we might assume. However, we are also reminded in Jesus' faithful presence with the disciples that God is patient and helps us in our pursuit of following him in a life-defining way. **The key difference is that the disciples were teachable, and the Pharisees, by and large, were not.**

Moving now into the region of Judea, which is different in every way from the Galilean highlands in the north. Rugged Galilee, with its simple and strongly nationalistic peasantry, was very different from the sophisticated city dwellers of the south. Judea was dominated by Jerusalem, and Jerusalem was dominated by the temple, with its Sadducean aristocracy and Sanhedrin: vested religious interests and rigid religious orthodoxy were stronger there than in the north.¹ With this rigid religiosity, we are not surprised that Jesus is being tested by the Pharisees. And they test him with quite a question! One scholar notes, "Marriage and divorce were in Jesus' day, as they are in ours, matters of great interest and controversy. In ancient Judaism, marriage was not regarded as a union of equals for the mutual benefit of both husband and wife but rather as an institution whose chief purpose was the establishment and continuance of the family and whose chief enemy was childlessness. Jesus, however, teaches that marriage is not a male-dominated institution but a new creation of God, to which both husband and wife are equally responsible to practice discipleship in lifelong obedience."²

When Jesus is tested here, he doesn't give up on truth. Instead, he offers truth with grace. That is, he understands the Father's heart and invites all parties (including the Pharisees) to walk in the fullness of life in God. Giving up on God's commands doesn't lead to life, nor does legalism. Instead, Jesus shows us **that taking righteousness seriously means I need to think graciously and truthfully.**

1. The question at hand.

¹ R. Alan Cole, *Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 2, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 231.

² James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 298.

- a. **“Teacher, is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”** → “What did Moses command?” (Shorthand for what’s the law say?)
 - i. **They wanted to test him.** → There is a big difference between asking an honest question and asking a leading question.
 - ii. **They weren’t looking to get clarity or to try and understand a difficult issue.** They were leading Jesus to trap him.
 1. **In addition, the reputation of Jesus for being a friend of tax-collectors and immoral people (2:16) and numbering women like Mary Magdalene among his followers (16:9) must have looked suspicious to them.** If this was their hope, they were sorely disappointed: Jesus showed no sign of laxity here. Indeed, we can see from verse 10 that his strong views surprised even his own disciples so much that they later in private asked for an explanation.³
 - iii. Later in the passage the disciples ask Jesus about his answer to the Pharisees. They seem to be truly confused and desire clarification.
 1. Now, only a verse later (v. 14), Jesus is deeply frustrated at them again as that demonstrate that they are slow on the uptake of the values of Jesus.
 - a. Jesus sharply opposes their behavior. Mark spoke earlier of Jesus’ anger at the condition of the leper (1:41), but v. 14 is the only passage in the Gospels where Jesus is said to be “indignant.” The word for “indignant” (Gk. *aganaktein*) means “to arouse to anger,” that is, to vent oneself in expressed displeasure rather than simply brooding about it.⁴
- b. **Jesus not only answers their question, he sharpens the standards.**
 - i. Marriage and divorce were in Jesus’ day, as they are in ours, matters of great interest and controversy. In ancient Judaism, marriage was not regarded as a union of equals for the mutual benefit of both husband and wife but rather as an institution whose chief purpose was the establishment and continuance of the family and whose chief enemy was childlessness.⁵ → **Jesus, however, teaches that marriage is not a male-dominated institution but a new creation of God, to which both husband and wife are equally responsible to practice discipleship in lifelong obedience.**⁶
 - ii. **More on divorce** - As this passage indicates, Jews and Jewish law were agreed that divorce was permissible. The more conservative school of Shammai argued that the sole ground was “indecency,” that is, adultery, whereas the liberal school of Hillel argued that divorce could be granted “for any matter” (NIV, “for any and every reason”; Matt 19:3), that is, for many causes beyond adultery. Not even among the Essenes at Qumran, the most conservative faction of Judaism in Jesus’ day, was divorce expressly forbidden.⁷ → The Pharisees reflect the view that marriage is a disposable contractual arrangement. Twice they inquire about possible grounds of its dissolution (10:2, 4).

³ R. Alan Cole, *Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 2, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 232.

⁴ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 306.

⁵ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 297.

⁶ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 298.

⁷ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 300.

Their attitude reminds us of a person who has just been granted a bank loan and then asks under what conditions he might be absolved from repaying it.⁸

1. Jesus makes it clear whether the divorce was initiated by the man or woman, if it is done for the wrong reasons it results in sin.
- c. **Jesus also points back to the ideal via the phrase, “the beginning.”**
 - i. **God’s commands and boundaries are not designed to minimize our freedom. They are designed so that we might live in the fullness of freedom.**
 1. **What Jesus doesn’t do it affirm their overly simplistic and reductionistic understanding of the issue nor does he allow for the relaxing of God’s standards and prescriptions.**
 2. Instead, when Jesus appeals to the “beginning,” he is appealing to the reality that there is in fact an ideal for us to experience. → I.e., **We have a created purpose and to live outside of that only gives temporary and fleeting satisfaction. But, to live in it, gives satisfaction and joy through all seasons of this life and the next eternal life.**
 - ii. What is important about this is that we are reminded that while we live in a broken world we do not have to settle for a “half glass full” experience. → I.e., “This is the best we’re going to get.”
 1. We understand that we begin to experience life in the ideal in part now and one day in full.
 2. How? → By experiencing God’s love and presence. By beginning to understand the fullness of the freedom that God’s prescriptions and designs offer us.

2. The broader principle.

- a. **The broader principle is not merely the rule in question, but the intention or more specifically, the motivation behind it.**
 - i. **Our motivation matters** → I.e., We can do the right thing for the wrong reasons and it ends up getting the wrong result.
 - ii. **Caution** – We can’t simply base our morals and our ethics off of our motivations or intentions, but we must not ignore intentions and motivations either.
- b. **Two different approaches in this passage – Pharisees and Jesus**
 - i. **The Pharisees** – Their motivation was to prove themselves more righteous and therefore more valuable than others by what they had achieved.
 1. **Jesus calls out their hardhearted motives.** They weren’t actually concerned for others or concerned about the issue they presented. They simply wanted to trap Jesus and prove themselves superior.
 - ii. **Jesus** – His motivation is for humanity to experience the fullness of life that we were created to experience.
 1. **Jesus in answering their question both rigorously holds to the truth and standard of the law, but he does so with grace and dignity that grace and truth restores.**
- c. **What is the risk here?** → I.e., Why did the Pharisees default to a very black-and-white system of rules? The right rule for the wrong reasons... (v.5)

⁸ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 301.

- i. **Following the right rule for the wrong reason will ultimately lead to a wrong application and a distortion of the truth.**
 1. The religious leaders knew the law and what it said. They had the rule right on the most technical grounds. But Jesus points them to a deeper inward reality, they had unbelievably hard hearts. And with those hard hearts, they misapplied God's prescriptions, that is why Moses had to give them this concession in the first place. Now, some 1,000+ years later, they were trying to wring all of the "latitude" out of the rule while still following it.
 2. Ultimately these wrong applications showed that they didn't really understand at all. And with their lack of understanding, they kept passing on distortions of the truth which results in harm and exponential dysfunction.
- ii. This law of Moses, said Jesus, was not only as they admitted, permissive, instead of being imperative; it was actually concessive, because of the unresponsiveness of human hearts to God (*hardness of heart*). Better, in the days of the law, we might paraphrase, easy divorce than open adultery and defiance of all marriage codes. It was the lesser of two evils in Israel, but its very existence showed a fatal flaw in humanity, to which Jesus drew attention. Perhaps the toleration of polygamy in Old Testament times is another instance of the outworking of the same principle, as being something permitted in early days, but never praised, and never seen as God's plan for humanity.⁹ → **Jesus' purpose is to make clear that the intention of Deut. 24:1 was not to make divorce acceptable but to limit sinfulness and to control its consequences.**¹⁰
- iii. So with Jesus' words and broader conversation, we realize that something deeper is going here. What is it? → The ethical Christian life.

3. The ethical Christian life.

- a. What are ethics? → **The way we live life. → Moral philosophy, or the division of philosophy that involves the study of how humans ought to live. Ethics focuses on questions of right and wrong, as well as the determination of the human good.**¹¹
 - i. **Situational ethics** – The question of love.
 1. A term coined by the Episcopalian theologian Joseph Fletcher to denote the ethical theory that love is the primary, if not the only, principle governing moral action, and consequently that all other ethical principles and laws are illuminative, rather than descriptive, in nature and force. Situation ethics teaches that in any given situation the moral agent must seek to discern what in that circumstance would be the most loving course of action and then act accordingly.¹²
 - ii. **Utilitarian** – The question of the end.

⁹ R. Alan Cole, *Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 2, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 233.

¹⁰ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), 355.

¹¹ Stanley J. Grenz and Jay T. Smith, *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics*, The IVP Pocket Reference Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 35.

¹² Stanley J. Grenz and Jay T. Smith, *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics*, The IVP Pocket Reference Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 109.

1. A theory of moral reasoning within teleological ethics that looks to the principle of utility, that is, the degree to which an act is helpful or harmful in the world as a whole, to determine the rightness or wrongness of an act. Moral living, therefore, consists in doing that act that brings about the greatest balance of good over evil for the greatest number of people.¹³
- iii. **Rule-Deontological ethics** – The question of rule.
 1. A theory of moral reasoning within deontological ethics that declares that the rightness or wrongness of a moral act is determined on the basis of whether it is in keeping with or violates a set of rules or moral principles. The ethical life, in turn, consists in obedience to such rules or principles¹⁴
 2. Don't complicate it. → Do the next right godly thing.
 - a. **Do I know God's truth?**
 - i. Where do I start? → How do I know? → The big 10.
 - ii. Jesus is reorienting their hearts and minds to the purpose not only of the Sabbath, but also for their lives (vertical and horizontal).
Example: When you are on a hike, a map is a very helpful tool only if you can orient it correctly. → God's Word serves to reorient our hearts and minds.
 - b. **Do I trust God's truth based on his character?**
 - i. **Jesus corrects a mistaken interpretation that makes of Torah a burdensome yoke on human existence and recovers its true intent as an aid and guardian of life.**¹⁵
 - ii. God's rules, precepts, and principles are not meant to be a burdensome yoke on us as human. They are to be the guardians of our physical and spiritual lives. We are to submit to them in the way we understand other rules lead to our flourishing. The key questions are do we know God's rules and do we trust God's character? Because we can know the rules and not trust his character. When we are in that position, we see the rules as oppressive and even dangerous or evil. But, when we trust his character (through relationship) we see his rules as what they are, established for our flourishing. I.e., Rules without relationship results in rebellion.
 - c. Transformation not just transaction. → When we trust God based on his known character, we are more willing to submit to God's precepts and experience the transformation that God desires for us to experience.
 - iv. **Warning:** A danger to avoid is that we so desperately want to make the exception the rule and the rule the exception.
 1. This is how gambling works. The casino knows that the rule is on their side. They make you think you'll be the exception, but the rule is the rule and will always be. That's why we have the expression, "The house always wins."

¹³ Stanley J. Grenz and Jay T. Smith, *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics*, The IVP Pocket Reference Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 124.

¹⁴ Stanley J. Grenz and Jay T. Smith, *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics*, The IVP Pocket Reference Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 105.

¹⁵ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 96.

2. Even if I'm not in overt distrust of God's character, I can "make exceptions" to the rules and end up in the same disobedience as if I were overtly rebelling.
 3. This gets us to the place where we feel the tension of living out God's commands in a broken world.
- b. **How do we take God's commands seriously and walk through the complicated reality of this life?** → Again, we could dismiss their situation or we could step into it.
- i. Dr. Alan Branch suggests that Christians are not to confuse solutions with problems. He notes:
 1. **Resist the temptation to rush to a solution. When problems are confused with solutions, it can lead to a premature advocacy of an inadequate solution and premature advocacy of a preferred course of action.** When this happens, we develop ownership in the solution we have advocated. When the solution does not work out, we may engage in face-saving measures to protect our own reputation instead of working on the right solution to a vexing problem.¹⁶
 - a. I.e., Ethical dilemmas are complex and we should not treat them like they have simple solutions.
 - ii. **A simple example:** When Danielle and I were new parents, we let our oldest have a piece of chocolate on Easter ahead of having breakfast. Serious rookie mistake! This resulted in a total melt down, would not eat breakfast, and a tragically memorable Easter. The presenting problem was our child's disobedience right? Partly. It was also that we gave her chocolate first. It was also an unhealthy or unbalanced approach to parenting. We were parenting out of place that said, "I'm happy as long as my child is happy." By God's grace we grew from that moment and were able to see the bigger below the waterline things that needed to be solved in us and how to help our child. If we would have just rushed to a solution, we would have missed all of that. It also would have given us a distorted view of our child because the simple solution focused either on her behavior or the giving of chocolate.
 1. Too often when it comes to ethical or moral difficulties or complexities, as believers we can rush to apply the right rule without considering the real issues below the waterline. Or, we can through good intentions want to extend grace and never really get to the issue at hand that needs dealt with.
 2. Here is an uncomfortable truth – Both of those approaches lead to harm as they do not foster flourishing.
- c. **What is the goal or aim of the Christian life and experience?**
- i. The Shorter Westminster Catechism is a series of questions and answers that was designed to help believers know core theological and doctrinal commitments of the Presbyterian church. It was first written in 1647 as the Westminster Confession of Faith.¹⁷
 - ii. **The very first question in this document asks, "What is the chief end of man?"** That is, what is man's greatest purpose? Or, in other words, "What does it mean to be fully human?"
 1. **The answer – "To know God and enjoy him all of your days."**
 - iii. For a very long time the church has been wrestling through the issue of what it means to be fully human. Ethics speaks into that conversation and is a crucial partner in the

¹⁶ Dr. J. Alan Branch, Christian Ethical Decision Making (2015), p.8.

¹⁷ Justin Holcomb, Know the Creeds and Councils. (Zondervan, 2014) p.131ff

dialogue. But we will draw the wrong conclusion if we do not understand that everything from God is oriented around us knowing him and enjoying him.

1. **So, let us ask – Do I believe that the fullness of the Christian life is found in...**
 - a. ... Avoiding sin?
 - b. ... By courageously pursuing God's glory?
2. Your answer to this question will not only shape your faith journey, but it will impact your ability to offer grace and truth to those around you. In Jesus we see the perfect example of knowing what God has prescribed for our flourishing and courageously pursuing his glory in all situations. That comes out as grace and truth in all situations with Jesus.
3. **The good news for you and me? →** We have the very Spirit of God to help us know truth and apply it with grace.