

October 3, 2021 - A Compassionate View of Mark 10:2-16– Jan Steven

I was originally booked to speak on October 10 and the Gospel reading for that day was Mark 10: 17-31. And I looked at that passage and thought “yikes” because it’s the passage where Jesus says to a good man who he loved: “One thing you lack. Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

Hmm... Laur and I have money in the bank, and in every area of life we have more than we need. And I am not considering liquidating all our assets any time soon. But thankfully, at the end of that passage, when the disciples say, “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.”

Phew! There’s still a place for me at the table.

Then Pastor Doug asked if I could instead be the speaker on October 3. No problem. I had not put much thought into my reflection for the Sunday of the 10th. And then I took a look at the Gospel reading for October 3. And I’m like “Oh no! It’s Jesus’s teaching on divorce.” I have never been divorced but this – at least in the past – has been such a divisive teaching and it’s still a hard teaching ...

But I have decided – God being my Helper – to speak briefly about this because there is not one person here who has not been hurt by divorce on many levels. Be it their own, their parents, their children, their grandchildren, or their friends splitting up. Hence my sermon title is “A Compassionate View of Mark 10:2-16.”

Jesus and Divorce

² Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

³ “What did Moses command you?” he replied.

⁴ They said, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.”

⁵ “It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,” Jesus replied. ⁶ “But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’^[a] ⁷ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife,^[b] ⁸ and the two will become one flesh.’^[c] So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹ Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

¹⁰ When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. ¹¹ He answered, “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery

against her. ¹² And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.”

The Little Children and Jesus

¹³ People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. 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. ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” ¹⁶ And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.

May we pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord our Rock and our Redeemer.

Context is very important for Jesus’s teaching on divorce. There were at least five things at play here:

1. The Pharisees were trying to trap him. They weren’t really concerned about divorce.
2. Men were using divorce as an easy way to dump a woman, and take up with another – without committing adultery.
3. Jewish women and children were property. Without a patriarch to be attached to, they were doomed to disgrace and poverty.
4. And the fourth consideration? Herodias. She had originally been married to Philip – the brother of Herod Antipas. She divorced from Philip to marry Herod.
5. Children – especially the children of abandoned women – what was their fate?

OK, the first thing. The reason Jesus spoke about divorce at all is because the Pharisees were testing him, trying to lay a trap for him. There were two competing Pharisaical schools about divorce. One camp held that a man could only divorce his wife for a serious transgression. The other allowed for divorce for trivial offenses, such as burning a meal. *In the latter case, my hubs would be able to divorce me every second day.*

Two. So – regardless of what school - a man could divorce his wife either with some difficulty or very easily – and was free to marry another woman. So technically was not guilty of adultery. Though Jesus in the preceding chapter has already given judgment on that. He said “If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to

enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell..” Thus looking at another woman with lust was already adultery.

Three. And what about the situation of Jewish women and children whose husband abandoned them? In a culture in which women could not survive unless they were linked to the patriarchal household, it was disastrous to be divorced. Your own family would be ashamed of you. You could end up begging on the streets or worse. I do not know of any little girl who says, “When I grow up, I want to be a sex-worker.”

Four. While Jesus includes a woman divorcing her husband, poor Jewish women did not have this option. So I expect Jesus was specifically referring to Herodias who – after John the Baptist criticized her divorce from Philip and marriage to Herod – had John beheaded. The community would still be in shock and grief over this.

And finally, the children. I wonder if the reason the next section of Mark’s Gospel, which talks about blessing children, is located there because some of the women bringing Jesus their children were themselves abandoned. These women and children might have had no one and nothing... But they did have the compassion of Jesus. And if the religious leaders of the time followed Jewish teachings about caring for the poor and hungry, what a different world the abandoned and the orphaned would have had.

So I hope you can understand why I maintain that Jesus’s teaching on divorce is actually very compassionate. And that is well and good ... but what does Jesus have to say to us today about divorce? I truly do not know and at this point will not be speaking Biblically but making some observations.

Women in Canada are no longer property of a man – be it the father or the husband. Divorce will no longer lead to their ruin and to shame – or at least it ought not to.

And there are other ways men AND women can break a matrimonial bond other than sexual infidelity. There is repeated and intense cruelty – be it physical, emotional, financial, and social. Can we honestly insist a person stay in such a marriage if the partner will not or can not change? Or what if a spouse leaves? Abandons his or her spouse? Should the forsaken one have to be alone for the rest of his or her days?

There is no such thing as a happy divorce – especially for the children. I do know a man whose parents fought so relentlessly, that he and his four brothers went from fearing their parents would divorce to hoping they would. But they could not have known the economic repercussions of divorce. Immediately, the family income is cut in half.

According to American statistics, almost half of all families experience poverty following a divorce, and 75 percent of all women who apply for welfare benefits do so because of a disrupted marriage or a disrupted relationship in which they live with a male outside of marriage.

What I think I CAN say biblically is that we ought not to judge – that is the job of lawyers and judges. And that we need to have COMPASSION. And it is not enough to simply feel compassion – we need to live compassion. To assist in practical ways, in any way that we can. Donating to the Westview Centre for Women comes to mind, and I'm so grateful Grace gives annually. I have been listening to a podcast – Reading the Bible in a Year plus commentary - by Father Mike Schmitz. He asserts it is not enough to believe in Jesus, we have to be Jesus. Not literally of course, but rather we need to do the things he did on earth.

We are about to participate in the Lord's Supper. Here is what we read in the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (1995) – Article 12 – The Lord's Supper – in the Commentary.

“The believers' covenant with one another includes the pledge of love for brothers and sisters, of mutual accountability, of confession and FORGIVENESS OF SINS, and of the sharing of material and spiritual resources as there is need.”

What I wish to emphasize here is forgiveness of sins. Jesus says that we are to forgive from our heart. This is certainly Biblical. What is not Biblical but is an observation is that some folks, by the Grace of God, are able to forgive immediately and completely.

But for others, forgiveness from the heart is a process. Just like there are stages of grief, there are stages of forgiveness. It starts when you say, “I forgive you” but what you mean is “I will do you no harm” and in time goes as far as praying for your enemy – which is what Jesus requires...ultimately.

As we approach the communion table, you may be suffering – you may be feeling under attack or abandoned. Your heart may be feeling pretty stony and you are wondering if you can even take communion. But I can assure you – and this is a weird assurance – that there is not one person here who is sinless. We may be up to our ankles or up to our necks, but we are all sin-soaked. Some times in ways that are beyond our control – for example when our clothing is made by essentially slave-labour. When our tax dollars are used to promote Canadian arms exports.

And I believe that when you say “I forgive you” in your heart – if not in person - to your offenders, even if you are only at the beginning of the forgiveness path, that God honours this. He knows our trials and he knows our hearts.

I'd like to end my reflection with a common communion prayer which was tweaked by British Baptist pastor Phil Whittall.

Come to this table, not because you must but because you may,
not because you are strong, but because you are weak.
Come, not because any goodness of your own gives you a right to come,
but because you need mercy and help.
Come, because you love the Lord a little and would like to love him more.
Come, because he loved you and gave himself for you.
Come and meet the risen Christ, for we are his Body.

Amen