



The Round Church at
St Andrew the Great
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 8th May 2005
by Mark Ashton

10p

Mark chapter 10:1-31

Asking the Right Question

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 (v 1). I'm grateful to the preacher on the last two Sundays for getting us to look at the big picture of how Mark is developing the gospel story in these chapters, and not just at the individual incidents, however vivid and memorable those incidents were. Mark wrote his gospel, not just so that we should know certain events happened, but that we should know why they happened and what they meant. So this passage is not a series of random incidents.

I am a very impatient listener. Are you an impatient listener? I am the sort of person who finishes other people's sentences for them. When I am listening to a long-winded person talking to me, I'm always muttering to myself under my breath, "Oh, do get to the point! Stop blithering, get to the point, and then stop talking, so I can start talking." I am shamefully impatient. But Mark's gospel is good for people like me because it is always on the point. There's no long-winded padding. Nothing's wasted. There's not a word of it that does not show us more of God.

So the verses before us this evening will do just that, and we need to see what the whole passage is saying, and not get too submerged in the separate incidents. To that end, I have suggested four questions as our four headings in the service sheet: and incidentally two of them are good questions to ask God, and two of them are not so good. It is always important to ask the right questions in life. The wrong question gets you nowhere: What colour is the equator? How hot is democracy? Is the moon a liberal democrat? You might like to decide for yourself which of these four you think are good questions to ask God and which are less good.

1) What can I get away with?

(vv 2-12)

Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" (v 2). "What can we get away with?" It was a test for Jesus, and He pointed them straight back to the Bible: "**What did Moses command you?**" *he replied. They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away"* (vv 3-4). And Jesus then taught them the Bible (we saw when we were studying Luke 24 after Easter that we do not just need to read God's word in the Bible, but to let Jesus teach it to us—as He does here). "**It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,**" *Jesus replied* (v 5). He then showed them that the Old Testament law to which they were referring performed two functions.

First, it set forth the absolute will of God for us and in so doing revealed to us God's holy and perfect nature. Second, it made provision for the hardness of our human hearts and dealt with the practical consequences of our sin. They had been referring to Deuteronomy (which served the second purpose), but Jesus took them back to God's original intention for marriage in Genesis 1 and 2: "**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"* (vv 5-8).

Marriage is one of the Bible's pictures for heaven: the most intimate relationship that human beings can know on earth, as a feeble and inadequate pointer to us of the relationship God wants to have with us for ever. It

speaks to us of God's perfect love for us. So, it is to be unbreakable, because God's love is unbreakable. But what have we done with it? "***Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate***" (v 9). What God brings together, human sin tries to separate. So what do we learn? The perfection of God and the sin of man.

You see, the question is never, "What can I get away with?" Because the answer, so far as God is concerned, is "Nothing." His standards are too high for us and nothing makes that clearer to us than our experience of marriage. One preacher once challenged his congregation by saying "If anyone here thinks that he is sinless, would he please stand up?" And to his amazement a man did stand up. The preacher said, "Are you really saying you are without all sin?" "No", the man replied, "I am actually standing as proxy for my wife's first husband."

Notice that the disciples found Jesus' teaching no easier than we do: ***When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this*** (v 10). But Jesus did not budge an inch: ***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"*** (vv 11-12). And lest those of us who marry and manage to avoid divorce should think that we are therefore righteous, we need to remember that Jesus passed this same verdict on every man who ever cast a lustful glance at another woman's body (Matthew 5:28). The human race does not consist of those who are sexually and martially upright and those who are sexually and martially depraved. We have all fallen far, far short of God's standards.

2) Who can come?

(vv 13-16)

People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch 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. I tell you the truth, 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, put his hands on them and blessed them (vv 13-16). The Pharisees with their clever question about divorce had met a brick wall, a statement from Jesus about God's standards and holiness that would lead the sensitive to realise that we as a race can never live up to what God expects of us. And at that solemn moment, perhaps some young families, who clearly had not been attending to what Jesus had just been saying, tried to muscle in to get a family snap of Jesus with the kids. The disciples attempt to intervene, but Jesus felt it was an entirely appropriate gesture. ***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. I tell you the truth, 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, put his hands on them and blessed them*** (vv 14-16).

The ones who had no qualification are the ones to whom the kingdom of God belonged. It was not that they had some special quality of innocence or simplicity. It was that they had no quality at all: the helpless, the dependent, the ones who knew that all they could do was to accept what was given to them. How much our children take from us without even noticing, and quite right too! I love the story of the young man who left uni and got his first flat, and his mum and dad came to visit for the first time. As he showed them round his flat, he noticed that his dad was switching the light on in each room in turn. Eventually the son said, "Dad, it's alright. The electricity is fine. They all work". His dad replied, "Son, I've waited 23 years to come to your house, and leave every single light on!" Children take: that's what they're for.

Once again, as He had done before in the previous chapter, (9:36-37, 42), Jesus pointed, not up at the great saints and martyrs and teachers of the Jewish faith, but down to the children; not up to the people we would think of as holy, but down to the ones we would think of as helpless. ***And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them*** (v 16).

3) How good do I have to be?

(vv 17-25)

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?" (v 17). It seems a promising start, but the question contained a fatal flaw. Jesus called in question the man's use of the word 'good', and directed him towards God.

“Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone (v 18), and (once again) Jesus quoted God’s word: *You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honour your father and mother.’*” **“Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy” (vv 19-20). The man’s naïf reply showed that he had not understood the commandments, nor ever really taken them seriously.**

But notice how Jesus responded to this self-deceived and self-righteous person: ***Jesus looked at him and loved him*** (v 21a). I don’t think that was about the man’s attractiveness. I think it was about Jesus’ love. (It is interesting that we can read a sentence like that—***Jesus looked at him and loved him*** (v 21a)—and straightaway make it man-centred: “What was it,” we think, “about this man that caused Jesus to love him?” Instead of thinking, “What was it about Jesus that caused Him to love even such a man as this?”). And notice the nature of Jesus’ love: ***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!”*** (vv 21-23). Jesus unerringly indicated the one thing this man most needed to have—a relationship with Jesus, ***“Come, follow Me”***—and the one thing he most needed to lose—his possessions, ***“Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor”***—because the one (the riches) prevented the other (following Jesus).

It is very hard for the rich to trust Jesus. They have too many other things to trust in. ***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 a rich man to enter the kingdom of God”*** (vv 24-25). And on a Gift Day I am bound to say that the only way you or I will know for sure that our possessions are not coming between us and Jesus is when we give them away to the point of having to trust in God rather than in them. Would it be a good moment to ask yourself that question: Have I ever given my possessions away to the point that I have to trust in God rather than in them?

“How good do I have to be?” Wrong question, because I can never be good enough, but Jesus’ clear answer caused Peter to ask a better question:

4) Who then can be saved?

(vv 26-27)

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” (vv 26-27). You see, salvation is something God does, not something we do. We cannot save ourselves. We cannot make ourselves good enough, holy enough, religious enough, spiritual enough for God. We can only accept what He offers to us. And He offers salvation to the impossible cases: ***Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God”*** (v 27). So anyone can be saved. Even you, tonight, who least expect an encounter with God. He is only a prayer of acceptance away.

But does that mean that what we do with our lives here on earth does not matter? If God saves the undeserving, why should I live a good life? Well, one answer is provoked by Peter’s next remark. ***Peter said to him, “We have left everything to follow you!” “I tell you the truth,” 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—and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life*** (vv 28-30).

God is no man’s debtor. No human being ever did more for God than God did for him or her. He will not sell a place in heaven, and yet nothing we do for Him as believers goes unrewarded.

But it won’t quite happen in the way we might imagine. ***“I tell you the truth,” 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—and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first”*** (vv 29-31). He is not a predictable God. He will not reward us in the way we might expect. Remember, He gives us what we need not what we want. And He constantly turns our hierarchies

upside down ***But many who are first will be last, and the last first*** (v 31). Beware of putting other Christians on pedestals.

Let's run our eyes back through the passage: 1) So what can I get away with? Not a good question, because the answer is nothing at all, with a perfectly Holy God; 2) So who can come into His presence? Better question, because His kingdom belongs to any who will receive it like children—who are good at receiving things, which, let's face it, children are pretty good at; 3) How good do I have to be? Poor question: because I can never be good enough. The things I achieve and the things I acquire on earth are more likely to prevent me from following Jesus than to help me. What He wants is my trust; 4) So who can be saved? All whom God chooses to save, who recognise that God does the saving. There is no impossible case for Him, and there is no one to whom He is indebted. Whatever we give will not put God in our debt. He has given far more.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)