

Truth for Today

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For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Mr. David Anderson

God's standards and priorities for life – Mark 10

Mark chapter 10 opens with a new phase of the ministry of the perfect Servant: “[Jesus] left [Capernaum] 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”. The chapter ends with Jesus healing blind Bartimaeus outside the city of Jericho, as the Lord made His way for the last time to Jerusalem. Mark chapters 11-16 cover the final week of the Servant's life on earth. In chapter 10, which is pivotal to the whole of his Gospel (as we'll see in verse 45), Mark relates 6 incidents from the last 6 months of Jesus' life. They are:

- Questions about divorce from the Pharisees.
- Jesus blesses the children.
- The rich young ruler.
- Jesus tells of His imminent death at Jerusalem.
- The request of James and John.
- Blind Bartimaeus.

Let's look at each incident using our title “God's standards and priorities for life”.

The Pharisees question Jesus about Divorce, verses 2-12

Whilst busy teaching the crowds, Jesus was confronted with questions about divorce from the Pharisees: “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” They were testing Him, but He immediately countered them by asking what God commanded in the Law of Moses. (The Law of God abides as the ultimate authority on all social and moral standards for mankind.) They replied that a man was permitted to write out a certificate of divorce, but Jesus said that this allowance was only made because of the hardness of people's hearts. He went on to explain God's standard for marriage. Quoting Genesis 1:27 and 2:24, respectively, that “God made them male and female”, and “therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh”, He reinforced the sanctity of marriage with the pronouncement: “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate”. This was so much out of line with the prevailing opinion that it caused the disciples to ask about the matter, when they were alone with Him later. They received a direct reply: “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery”. These words of the Lord Jesus Christ remain valid for us in the 21st century in Britain, where divorce is so prevalent, and, sometimes, is even tolerated amongst Christians. (We should note in passing that, in Matthew's account of the incident the Lord adds an exception clause with respect to unfaithfulness. However, this isn't an excuse for anyone to dilute, or ignore, God's original intention for marriage, which is one man with one woman for their lifetime!)

Jesus blesses the children, verses 13-16

We've just been told of the Scriptural meaning of marriage. It's sad to note that when ordinary people from the crowd brought their children to Jesus, the disciples rebuked them. Jesus was indignant: “Let the children come to me; do not hinder them” He said, adding that they, too, have rights to the kingdom of God. “Jesus took them in his arms and blessed them, laying His hands on them”. In the UK, children's rights were established in law in the 1989 Children's Act, but the blessing of children has always been a priority with God. In this respect, much Gospel effort is expended in Sunday Schools, children's clubs and camps, etc. But here it's presented as something those parents wanted for their children. To ensure our children realised the Saviour's love for them, my wife and I used to sing this prayer to them at bedtime:

*When mothers of Salem
Their children brought to Jesus,
The stern disciples drove them back,
And bade them depart:
But Jesus saw them ere they fled,
And sweetly smiled and kindly said,
“Suffer little children to come unto Me.*

*For I will receive them,
And fold them to My bosom;
I'll be a Shepherd to those lambs,
Oh, drive them not away!
For if to Me their hearts they give,
They shall with Me in glory live,
Suffer little children to come unto Me”.*

The third verse opens with the words: “How kind was our Saviour to bid those children welcome, but there are many thousands who have never heard His name”. Such thoughts would make us pray for the on-going success of children's evangelism. However, as we now come to think about the rich young ruler's encounter with the Lord, we carry forward the warning that the Lord gave in verse 15: “Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it”.

The rich young ruler, verses 17-31

At first reading, it appears that this man had his priorities right. As Jesus was setting out on His journey, the man ran up and kneeling before Him asked: “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” First, Jesus questioned whether he realised the implication that, by calling Jesus good, he was acknowledging that Jesus was God. Secondly, Jesus asked him directly if he understood the requirements of the commandments. Unlike me, he was able to reply: “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth”. Thirdly, 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”. This gave the man a huge problem. “Disheartened by [Jesus' reply], he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions”. In other words, he wasn't willing to come as a child does in all his vulnerability to accept eternal life as a gift from God. He wanted it as a reward, together with the security that riches, in this life, appear to guarantee. Currently the financial world is in turmoil. A pertinent question is: What's more important in my life: present possessions or eternal life? Eternal life is offered on God's terms – total trust alone in His provision of salvation.

As the rich young ruler went away, Jesus turned to His disciples and said: “How difficult it [is] for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” These words shocked them but Jesus repeated them, adding: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God”, verse 25. I think that Jesus actually meant what He said, for verse 26 states that they were exceedingly astonished and protested: “Then who can be saved?” Looking straight at them, Jesus said: “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God”.

No one can be saved except by the sovereign work of God in their hearts. No amount of riches or effort of mine can earn me salvation. “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses ... saved us ... [through] Christ Jesus ... For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast”, Ephesians 2:4-9.

Peter reacted in verse 28. Hadn't the disciples left everything to follow Christ? However, there's a difference between trusting in Christ for salvation and following Him as one of His disciples. The Lord acknowledged that true discipleship will be abundantly rewarded. He replied: “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has 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 ... with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life”. But it's a matter for the Lord to assess, not for Peter, or anyone of us, to claim. “But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

Jesus Foretells His death, verses 32-34

This is the third time in Mark's Gospel that the Lord Jesus tells the twelve disciples what was to happen to Him. The first occasion was after Peter's confession of Him as the Christ, 8:31. The second occasion followed His transfiguration, 9:31. This third time was different. They were on route to Jerusalem and Jesus was pressing ahead of them, with a determination that they hadn't witnessed before. This made them both amazed and frightened. Previously He'd mentioned suffering, rejection, betrayal, death and resurrection, but they hadn't understood Him and were afraid to ask Him. Now He reiterated and emphasised these points in even greater detail:

- It was to take place in Jerusalem, the very place they were going.
- He'd be betrayed into the hands of the chief priests and scribes.
- They'd reject Him as their Messiah and condemn Him to death.
- They'd hand Him over to the Gentiles to execute their judgement.

- The Romans would abuse Him. They'd mock Him, spit upon Him and scourge Him.
- After that they would kill Him (in the parallel account, Matthew 20:19, He said this would be by crucifixion!).
- After 3 days He would rise again.

I hardly need to mention that the death of the Lord Jesus Christ was the all-important reason for the incarnation. This is made very clear by the Lord Himself in verse 45, which I'll comment on in due course.

The request of James and John, verses 35-45

The disciples again didn't grasp the significance of what Jesus said about His death. This time His whole attitude made them afraid. After His second Passion prophecy in 9:31, they'd spent the rest of the day arguing about who was the greatest amongst them. Here, James and John were arrogantly forward. Coming up to Him, they demanded: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And He said to them, "What do you want Me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory". Patiently, He replied that such a request carried with it a commitment. He asked if they were able to drink the cup that He was to drink, that is, participate in sufferings like those He had just outlined. Were they also able to be baptized with the same baptism with which He was to be baptized? That is, would they be willing to die for His cause? When they said they were able, Jesus confirmed that their way to glory would follow His, that is, through suffering and death, "but to sit at My right hand or at My left is not Mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared", verse 40.

The ten other disciples were indignant with James and John. However, Jesus intervened with a lesson on humility in service. Unlike worldly rulers, who lord their authority over others, "whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all". Why? Because the Christian servant is no different from his Master and even He, the Son of Man, "came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many", verse 45.

10:45 is the key verse of Mark's Gospel. Here are the 2 major priorities for God's Perfect Servant to fulfil:

1. to serve;
2. to give His life as a ransom for many.

This verse stands like a signpost, pointing both backwards and forwards.

- The words "to serve" cover Chapters 1-10; and
- The words "to give His life" cover Chapters 11-16.

As we look back over Chapters 1-10, we see what the expression "the Son of Man came ... to serve" actually means. The Perfect Servant had compassion:

- He healed the sick of diseases and afflictions;
- He released those demon-possessed from their bondage;
- He raised the dead back to life; and
- He fed the hungry.

He taught the people about God and announced to them the good news of the kingdom of God. But He also warned them of the dangers of hell fire. "God [had] anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him", Acts 10:38. God wants us to appreciate all the goodness of His life: "Behold My servant, whom I uphold, My chosen, in whom My soul delights; I have put My Spirit upon him; He will bring forth justice to the nations", Isaiah 42:1.

But Isaiah also prophesied that God's Servant would suffer death. This is highlighted in Jesus' statement: "the Son of Man came [also] to give his life as a ransom for many". The idea of a ransom was well-known to the disciples. The Old Testament taught that it was the redemption price, the full price, which had to be paid to secure the release of: a slave, land, or a captive nation. It was also paid in exchange for a person's life, e.g. Exodus 21:30 and 30:12. But Psalm 49:7-9 warns: "Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice, that he should live on forever and never see the pit". Here in Mark 10:45 Jesus proclaims that He is the answer to that problem! He made the full payment to ransom sinners from hell. But at what cost? He paid with His blood in the sacrifice He made at Calvary's cross. As Isaiah predicted: "He was wounded for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all... [He was] stricken for the transgression of my people...although He had done no violence, and there was no deceit in His mouth. Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush Him...[and to] make

His soul an offering for sin...Out of the anguish of His soul He shall...make many to be accounted righteous, [for] He shall bear their iniquities", Isaiah 53:5-6, 8-11. The good news of the Gospel is:

- [God can be] merciful to [the sinner] and says, 'Deliver him from going down into the pit; I have found a ransom", Job 33:24.
- "There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the [present] time", 1 Timothy 2:5-6.
- The Lord Jesus said He gave his life as a ransom for many. Whilst it's true that His provision is universal (for "He gave Himself as a ransom for all"), in reality it's only those (named "the many" of verse 45), who have repented of their sins and accepted Christ as their Redeemer, who actually benefit from it.

Blind Bartimaeus is healed, verses 46-52

Jesus was now approaching Jerusalem from the east. Although He was focussed on the momentous events awaiting Him there, He was still sensitive to the needs of people. On the way out of Jericho, He met blind Bartimaeus, who was sitting by the roadside. When Bartimaeus learnt that Jesus was passing along the highway, he cried out for mercy. The crowd told him to be silent, but this only caused him to be the more earnest. They had told him it was Jesus of Nazareth passing by, but he cried out: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" He recognized Jesus as the long-promised Messiah. Jesus heard his cry, stood still and commanded Bartimaeus to be brought to Him. Bartimaeus flung aside his garment, got up and came to Jesus. 'What do you want me to do for you?' Jesus asked. The blind man said to Him: 'Rabbi, let me recover my sight.' Jesus said to him, 'Go your way; your faith has made you well.' He recovered his sight immediately and followed Jesus on the way to Jerusalem".

This story is a favourite of mine because it conveys the Gospel so well: Bartimaeus lived in Jericho, the city of the curse. We live in a world cursed by sin: "sin came into the world through one man, [Adam], and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned", Romans 5:12.

Blindness is a picture of how sin has made us destitute before God. Like Bartimaeus, we can only beg for mercy. Naturally, our minds are spiritually blinded by Satan, the god of this world, to prevent us seeing the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ. We first need the light from God to shine in.

Just like the crowd that day outside Jericho, the majority of people are indifferent to the Gospel message. "We appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain ... Behold, now is the favourable time; behold, now is the day of salvation". Give it the priority that Bartimaeus gave it!

But those who do recognise their need of salvation can call upon the Lord, as Bartimaeus did that day outside Jericho. "The same Lord [Jesus] is Lord of all, bestowing His riches on all who call on Him. For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'".

Bartimaeus cast aside his garment. It was obstructing him getting to Jesus. We, too, must throw off any ideas of our own worthiness and repent of our sins: "We have all become ... unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment ... and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away", Isaiah 64:6.

The Lord Jesus said to Bartimaeus that his faith had saved him. Faith comes from hearing the word of the Gospel: "that if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved".

Having believed, Bartimaeus became a disciple. He was given the opportunity to "go his own way" back into Jericho. But, instead, he followed Jesus "in the way" - to Jerusalem and the cross. Likewise, believers are admonished by the Lord: "If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and [become My disciple]. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it", 8:34-35.

Let's finish with EE Hewitt's hymn, which is a good summary of the main points of my talk:

*Jesus pass'd thro' Jericho, as to the cross He went;
To the sinful and the lost the Son of God was sent;
All the suffering ones on earth, the blind, the halt, the lame,
Called His kind compassion forth, for unto them He came.*

*Jesus pass'd thro' Jericho, with joy the blind man heard;
Heeding not the world's reproach he begg'd a healing word;
This his opportunity, for him salvation's day:
"Lord, I would my sight receive, have mercy, now, I pray".*

*Jesus pass'd thro Jericho, and still He passeth by;
Would you from your sin be free? To Him lift up your cry;
Call to Him in humble faith, He cometh now this way!
Lo, the Christ of Jericho will save your soul today.*

*Saviour, I believe, Let me now my sight receive;
Christ of Jericho, Let me Thy salvation know.*

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