

To Whom Does The Kingdom Of God Belong?

Mark 9:30-10:16

Key Verse: 10:14b

by Dr. Ben Toh

“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.’”

Today’s passage has 7 familiar teachings and events: 1st, Jesus’ teaching of his death and resurrection (30-32); 2nd, Who is the greatest? (33-37); 3rd, Don’t be exclusive (38-41); 4th, Causing others to sin (42-48); 5th, Be salty (49,50); 6th, Marriage and divorce (10:1-12); and 7th, The little children and Jesus (13-16). How does one deliver a message with 7 major topics? Let us study and think about these 7 stories and teachings with the theme: To whom does the kingdom of God belong? How can we enter the kingdom of God?

First, understand Jesus’ death and resurrection (9:30-32). Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. He knew that flogging and crucifixion unto death awaited him, as was vividly and graphically portrayed in the movie “The Passion of the Christ.” What could Jesus do at such a time? When we have some problem in our heart, we may become self-preoccupied and so distracted that we can’t do much of anything. Jesus knew that a brutal death was just around the corner. Yet at this very moment, he wasn’t thinking about how sorry he was for himself. Rather, his heart went out to his disciples. Jesus knew that they were still not very enlightened spiritually, but earthbound. So he taught them the main point of the Bible again, that is, his death and resurrection. Look at verses 30, 31. “They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, ‘The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.’” Jesus knew that they needed to believe the core of the gospel message, for they still had their own worldly ideas about following Jesus. So, whenever Jesus taught them the basic gospel message—his death and resurrection—they blanked out. They wanted to see Jesus reign in glory, with them by his side, not die a premature and painful death. But Jesus had to die. Why? It was for our sins. Isaiah 53:5 says, “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” Jesus wanted his disciples to deeply realize the love of God through Jesus’ death for their sins and for the sins of each of us. But verse 32 says, “they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.” The disciples were faithful and loyal to Jesus. But because they failed to grasp Jesus’ main teaching of his death and resurrection, they were still some distance away from the kingdom of God. To belong to the kingdom of God we must understand the meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection from our hearts.

Second, be a truly great man (33-37). Look at verses 33,34. “They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the road?’ But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.” Jesus was on his way to die on the cross for the sin of the world, but his disciples were arguing about who was the greatest, oblivious to Jesus’ personal agony of soul. For some people, “Who is the greatest?” might be the second most popular question right after “Who are you going to marry?” Whether we want to admit it or not, we all want to be the greatest, and we all want to be No. 1, never No. 2. This is so, simply because God created us in his own image (Ge 1:27). This means that God did not create us to be mediocre or to be wimps, but to be great, as God is great (Ge 17:1). So, if we feel that someone is greater than us, we secretly have no joy in our hearts, even if we try our best to make a plastic smile. Or if we feel that we are clearly greater than someone else, we have to control ourselves not to pump our fists. But today, a major tragedy is a dwindling desire for greatness. So, we hear people say, “C is a degree.” Also, Bart Simpson said, “I am a chronic underachiever and proud of it.” When a young man began studying the Bible, he repented because he had said that his goal in life before Bible study was to become a fat Jewel manager. It sounds cute. But it was not how God created us. Our God created us to be great, as he is great. Therefore, we should be great not for self-satisfaction, but in order to glorify our great God.

Thus, Jesus did not rebuke his disciples for arguing about who was the greatest. He simply taught them the way to be truly great. Read verses 35-37. "Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, 'If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.' He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, '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.'" Jesus used a little child in his audiovisual analogy of one who is truly great. In the world, a great man is the one who is on top. But in God's kingdom, a great man is a servant (35), like our Lord Jesus Christ (Mk 10:45). Our tendency is to give orders and direction, like a top notch CEO. Even a senior homeless beggar pulls rank and bosses his junior homeless beggar around. Jesus is the King of kings. But Jesus never gave any impression that he was the top man. Perhaps, a most touching image of Jesus is that of the father of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32). In a house, the father is king. But this father was not a king, but a loving father toward his rude son. His son's rebelliousness and belligerence and sins were like stabbing his father in his heart again and again. But though his father's heart was bleeding and broken to many pieces, he was gentle and humble toward his son to the end with many, many tears. This is how our God is toward each of us, in spite of all our wretched and hidden repeated sins. In the world, a great man is an able man who can do many things well. But able people are usually proud, either blatantly or subtly. In the Bible, a proud man is never regarded as a great man (Jas 4:6), no matter how able he may be. Jesus is a truly great man because, though he is God, he was a true servant and a truly humble man (Ph 2:5-8). To belong to the kingdom of God, we must be a truly great man, that is, a humble man.

Third, never cause others to sin (38-50). Look at verse 38. When the disciple John saw a man driving out demons in Jesus' name, he was upset, and he said sternly to the man, "Stop it! How dare you! To drive out demons in Jesus' name, you must first get my permission." He was very proud with an exclusivist spirit. He thought he had the monopoly of driving out demons in Jesus' name. Jesus said to him, "Do not stop him. No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward" (39-41). It is so easy to be elitist, cliquish or to be centered in our own small group, excluding those from other groups. But Jesus wanted his disciples to be broad-minded and open-hearted toward others who serve Christ, even if they are very different from them. What are you going to do if you exclude a fellow Christian on earth just because you don't like his way, and then you find that person in the kingdom of heaven where you can never get away from him throughout eternity?

Look at verse 42. "And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck." To our Lord Jesus, causing someone to sin is a most serious matter under heaven. Why? It is because when we cause someone to sin, we may send them to eternal destruction in hell. One woman had studied the Bible for 7 years. But after God blessed her with a faithful husband and several lovely children, she became bitter and unthankful. After she went to another church, she began contacting members from her former church to strongly persuade them to stop Bible study. There was a young college student who was studying the Bible faithfully and struggling to overcome her sinful desires. But this aggressive woman convinced her to quit Bible study. Soon after that, the young woman began wearing very short mini skirts with high-heeled, knee-high black leather boots, which she never did while she was studying the Bible. Then she moved in to live with a boy she hardly knew. I agonized in my soul because this young woman who was gradually opening her heart to Christ was so very badly influenced by this bitter woman. What does Jesus say to us if we may have even a remote possibility to sin, or to cause others to sin? Look at verses 43-48. "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, 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, where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'" Jesus never exaggerates and he often speaks very mildly in a subjunctive mood and in understatement. So, Jesus does not say directly, "Obey," but he said, "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (Jn 14:15). But here, Jesus does not mince words. He said, "cut it off," twice and "pluck it out"! How do we cause others to sin? We do by giving a bad influence to others. A young Christian man said that he wants to go to Miami beach to show his non-Christian friends that he cannot be tempted at the beach. He must either think that he is superman, or a eunuch. If we want to belong to the kingdom of God, we must cry out to God that we may never cause little ones who believe in Jesus to sin.

Look at verse 50. "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other." As we know, salt is a preservative, and it greatly enhances the taste of food. Imagine eating a prime-grade \$30 sirloin steak without any salt! It is the same as a Christian who does not give good Christian influence to others. As salt is a preservative, a Christian must live a pure life and influence those around him to value purity, and not be influenced by the greed and immorality of the world. Jesus also says that if we Christians do not give good Christian influence, then we are worthless like tasteless salt. So, Jesus said, "Have salt in yourselves." To belong to the kingdom of God, we must lead others to Christ through our salty Christian influence.

Fourth, be faithful to your marriage vows (10:1-12). Look at 10:1. "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." Variations of this verse are repeated through out the gospels. Crowds flocked to Jesus. Jesus taught them the Bible "as was his custom" (1b). This shows us Jesus' faith and his first priority. "As was his custom," Jesus taught the Bible, believing that the word of God is the only solution to every person's every problem. On this occasion, some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" (2) This could be a contemporary question that society has already answered in the affirmative, since divorce has sadly become the very convenient and accepted norm of modern society. To this question, Jesus replied, "What did Moses command you?" (3) They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away" (4). They justified divorce by using the law of Moses. But Jesus replied, "It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law" (5). What does this mean? There is an ongoing sad story of relationships between many a man and woman throughout the world. A man and a woman meet and they like each other. Then they marry or they sleep together. If they still like each other, they continue their relationship. But if they meet someone they like better, they find a good reasonable excuse to end the relationship. People call this "playing the field." I call it being a devil, who will someday surely receive his due. In Moses' day, it was the same. If a man married a woman and did not like her, literally he just dumped her and proceeded to look for another willing woman, usually a younger and thinner one. As a result, there were many wounded and abandoned women and impoverished mothers who had to take care of their fatherless children. When Moses "permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce" (4), he was actually making it more difficult for a man to leave his wife by making him go through the legal process of divorce, instead of just replacing his wife at random. In effect, Moses was trying to protect marriages and women by making divorce a legal tedious due process. So, when Jesus said, "It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law" (5), he meant that the man's heart was hardened toward his own dear wife, because he had already decided to leave her. His hardened heart makes him forget how much his wife had loved him and sacrificed for him. I knew 2 women doctors who were in medical school with me. After they had both been married for several years, I was shocked to hear that they committed suicide. It was because their husbands whom they loved were going to leave them for younger women. Both their husband's hearts were so hardened that they just proceeded to marry their girlfriends soon after their wives and the mother of their children ended their lives. Nothing hardens a man or a woman's heart more than when they are no longer faithful, committed and loving toward the spouse of their youth, and they are just looking for a way out of the marriage or relationship.

A hardened heart is always the devil's work. Not only does a hardened heart crush one's spouse, it also scars and wounds their children, often for a lifetime. Tom Cruise is a Hollywood superstar. But he shared in a Time magazine interview that the worst time of his life, which he can never forget, was when his parents divorced. He said that he would never wish divorce on anyone, though he himself is already twice divorced. Cruise could enjoy his fame, wealth and popularity and simply forget about his painful past. But he cannot because he also wants his mom and dad to love each other forever. Someone said that marriage is 3 parts love and 7 parts forgiveness. Someone else said that the best way for a father to love his own children is to love his children's mother. When he does so, he himself will be happy all the days of his life. The evangelist Billy Graham and his wife Ruth were married for 66 years until Ruth Graham recently passed away on June 14, 2007. Once, a reporter asked Ruth, "Have you ever thought about divorce?" Ruth said, "Divorce? Never. Murder? Yes." When Ruth died, Reverend Billy Graham said that his love for his wife is stronger now than when he first married. Billy Graham is not only a great servant of God, but also a truly happy man because he was faithful to God and faithful to his marriage vows throughout his life.

Jesus did not stop at his sorrow over man's tragic justification of divorce. Rather, Jesus went on to explain God's deep love in blessing all mankind with the utmost blessing of a happy marriage. Read verses 6-9. "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. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." Firstly, "God 'made them male and female'" (6). Can you imagine how boring the world would be if everyone was male! God is indeed a creative genius who made us male and female. Secondly, "the two will become one flesh" (8). Two becoming one may seem impossible. Because of God's majesty and artistry he made each of us so unique and so different from each other. Some people are so gentle and patient, while others are kind of brutal. Some work fast, while others work as though they have all the time in the world. Some make snap decisions, while others take forever to make even a simple decision. Some people are so simple, while others are extremely complicated. Some people are shy and introverted, and some are outgoing and extroverted. Some people evaluate every possible worst-case scenario, while others are more adventurous and love to take risks. Our differences are as numerous as there are people in the world. So how can two people ever become one? Humanly, it seems that we will all have irresolvable conflicts and irreconcilable differences, and that sooner or later we are just not going to make it together. But that is not true. Instead, it is really God's wisdom to make us so different. If a wife is loving and gentle, while the husband is rough and tough, they can complement each other and cover each other's weakness. This is known as synergy, such that $1 + 1 = 3$. Also, their children can balance both their mother's gentleness and their father's rough edges and become very well balanced in life. So, "two becoming one" is really God's wisdom, mystery and miracle. Two becoming and remaining one is thus the key to happiness and paradise on earth (9). So those who divorce are allowing the deceitful and crafty devil to cause them to hurt one another and to rob themselves of happiness and paradise on earth.

Jesus' teaching of absolute irrevocable commitment in marriage without divorce was so revolutionary and shocking even to his own disciples. Perhaps, Jesus' disciples may have considered divorce in order to contemplate a younger more attractive woman. So "When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this" (10). Look at verses 11,12. "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.'" There is clearly no ambiguity whatsoever in Jesus' words. To Jesus, divorce is simply allowing oneself the possibility of sleeping with someone else. Though it should be 0%, we only thank God that over the last 45 years God has blessed UBF with a divorce rate in the very low single digits, while the national divorce rate is 60%. This is only God's mercy and grace to us and to our children. To conclude this part on marriage and divorce, one who belongs to the kingdom of God must be faithful to his marriage vows.

Fifth, the ticket to heaven is to be like a little child (13-16). Look at verse 13. "People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them." People wanted Jesus to bless their children and so they brought their children to him. But the disciples were highly irritated by these noisy children. So they glared at their parents and said sharply to their kids, "Be quiet, or go away." But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant (14a). "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'" (14b). He continued, "I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (15). Jesus had previously taken a little child in his arms to illustrate who a truly great man is (9:35-37). Now Jesus uses a little child again to show us who is the one who is qualified to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus is the best teacher of all mankind. Jesus' teachings are so crystal clear that we can never miss his main point. To Jesus a truly great man and the one who will enter the kingdom of God are one and the same. They must have the attitude of a little child.

What then does it mean to receive the kingdom of God like a little child (15)? It obviously does not mean to be childish and demanding and to throw a temper tantrum whenever things do not go the way you want. Rather, the loveliest attribute of children is the fact that they absolutely trust their parents' love. Jesus saw that this is the quality a man needs to enter the kingdom of God. This is the faith that God wants us to have as his children, who will spend eternity with him. Proverbs 3:5 says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding." A child simply trusts in his parents' love with all his heart without any doubts or fear or calculation.

But there is a problem with simply trusting in God. It is that we lean on our own understanding. A young woman was considering marrying a pure-hearted man of God. But she rejected him because he was not so cool, and he did not look like he was much fun. She leaned on her own understanding, instead of simply trusting in God with all her heart. But there is a woman who was introduced to a man of God who was humanly not so impressive. However, she trusted in God with all her heart and she entrusted her marriage 100% into God's hands. Now we can see that she is the happiest and most blessed of women, not because she married a kind and gentle godly man, but because she trusted in Jesus with all her heart and did not trust her own understanding and her own vanity.

Jesus said twice in verses 14 and 15 that “the kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (14b), and “receive the kingdom of God like a little child” (15). Again, our best teacher Jesus teaches us that we must have absolute trust and faith like that of a little child, if we want to enter the kingdom of God and belong to the kingdom of God.

In summary, we learned that those who belong to the kingdom of God must:

Understand the meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection (9:30-32).

Be a truly great man, that is, a humble man (9:33-37).

Never cause others to sin (9:42-50).

Be faithful to your marriage vows (10:1-12).

Trust God with all your heart like a little child (10:13-15).

May God bless you to receive the kingdom of God like a little child by trusting in the Lord with all your heart.