Marriage and Children
Mark 10:1-16

We are back in Mark's gospel, and as a reminder, in the first part of this book, Mark's been wanting you to grapple with the question, 'who is this man, Jesus of Nazareth?' But when Peter answers that, 'You are the Christ, the Messiah.' the gospel takes a turn, as Jesus begins to make his way to Jerusalem.

And as he does, Mark's emphasis shifts, because now he wants us to consider, what does it mean to follow him? What does it mean to have Jesus be the one who shapes and centres your life?

And what today's passage teaches us is that it's going to have a profound influence on how you see the most intimate of relationship *and* how you value those society doesn't.

Now, for me, this summer has been great, because I've had the joy of being a part of three of our young couples' weddings. But sometimes, weddings can be tinged with something else, as well, can't they?

If you're single and wish you weren't, you share in the joy of the couple getting married, but at the same time be thinking, 'will this ever be me?' Or, if you think the ship's sailed, 'why wasn't this me?'

Or if you *are* married, but your marriage is strained, you can listen as they make their vows, and see all the love and hope for the future, and without being cynical be thinking,'but what will things look like in 10 years time?' Or maybe your marriage is not just strained but broken and you are happy for them, but what about you?

So to talk of weddings and marriage is to talk about one of the most joyful things there is. But it's also one of the most sensitive. And the problem when something is sensitive is that we can be defensive. We're already hurting, so our protective walls can go up. Yet what this passage makes clear is that Jesus wants to speak even into these kinds of sensitive areas.

But to hear him, we've got to be willing to hear. Because it's not just Jesus who's trying to shape you.

Culture and Relationships
Verse 2, 'And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"'

And this is not some kind of friendly debate, is it? They want to trap Jesus. Because they already know what they think. Look how they ask the question: 'Is it lawful for *a man* to divorce his wife?' Their view of the relationship between a husband and a wife was male-centred. All the power lay with the man. And the universal view in Judaism was that it was a man's right to divorce his wife. The only question was, when could he use that right?

And there were two opposing schools, both of whom looked to Deuteronomy 24:1 to defend their position, and where Moses wrote about a situation where a man 'found some indecency' in his wife, and divorced her.

And the school influenced by Rabbi Shammai said that that *indecency* referred only to adultery, and was probably the minority position; whereas the school influenced by Rabbi Hillel argued that 'some indecency' could mean anything - like if your wife burns the toast, or if you find someone prettier than her, then go ahead, you can divorce her. And that was the majority position.

So whichever school these Pharisees belonged to, they have likely picked up that Jesus takes a different view, and they want to expose him as one opposing Moses.

So look how he responds: v3, "What did Moses *command* you?" And what Jesus knows is that Moses did not *command* divorce in any situation. Which is why they reply, v4, "Moses *allowed* a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away."

You see, what Moses *did* command in Deuteronomy 24 was that where a man had found some indecency in his wife and decided to divorce her, he had to give her a certificate of divorce. He couldn't just chuck her out of the house. This had to be done legally. And that legal certificate enabled her to remarry and be provided for. Which meant that rather than Moses giving men some universal right to divorce, what he was actually doing was providing married women with legal protection and dignity. Because not only did her husband have to give her a certificate allowing her to remarry, if she did remarry, he couldn't go and remarry her if that second marriage failed. Which meant, no 1, that he couldn't try and wreck her marriage to get her back, and no 2, he couldn't just use her as something to discard and pick up whenever he wanted.

But these Pharisees weren't using Deuteronomy 24 to protect women and limit divorce. They were using it to sanction it - if a husband finds a reason to divorce, well, use it. Because for them, marriage was not a union of equals. Marriage was for the man, to continue his family line.

Ok, but you can see how they were so influenced by a patriarchal culture that they saw women as disposable commodities and go, 'oh that's terrible!' But how does our culture shape our attitude to marriage and relationships?

And what you realise is we are both like and unlike these Pharisees.

Recently, I read an article on how the Oxford English Dictionary is in a constant state of revision, as the editors try to document every word used in English. And the June 2022 update caught my eye, because among the words that made their first entry were 'multi-sexual', 'pan-gender' and 'enby' which stands for 'non-binary'.

So while for these Pharisees *men* were the boundary keepers of marriage, our current culture says, there are no boundaries. Whether it's same-sex, transgender or poly-amorous, love is love. Anyone can get married or divorced.

But if we're unlike them, we're also just like them. Because like them our current culture also sees marriage as disposable. All the time it's working for me, and makes me feel good, it's great, but when that's not the case, you're free to move on. And on the one hand, romantic relationships are everything, and you're deficient if you're not in one, but on the other they're disposable, easily replaced.

So if that's what culture says, what does Jesus say?

Christ and Relationships

And the first thing he wants these Pharisees to confront is their own hearts: what drives their attitude to marriage and divorce. They tell him Moses allowed divorce, to which Jesus replies, v5, "Because of your hardness of heart he [Moses] wrote you this commandment."

Now imagine a young couple as they stand opposite each other on their wedding day. What do they promise each other? First, the groom promises to love his bride, to comfort her, honour and protect her, and forsaking all others be faithful to her as long as he lives. And then she promises the same. Then they promise to have and to hold each other from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death parts them. And then, as they place a ring on each other's finger, they say 'with my body I honour you, all that I am I give to you, and all that I have I share with you.'

And that is softness, open-ness, and vulnerability of heart put into words. It's what's needed for a marriage to flourish.

But just like a hardening of the arteries can slowly kill your physical heart, so a hardening of your emotional heart, and your volitional, decision making heart, can slowly kill a marriage. And Jesus is saying, when one or both partners in a marriage head to the exit, somewhere in the background there's hardness of heart.

Instead of daily making those decisions to love and cherish and serve, one or both has chosen not to. Instead of guarding the heart and turning the eyes, and doing what's required to emotionally and physically forsake all others, one or both have begun to think how someone else might be a more attentive or attractive partner. Instead of seeking forgiveness or giving forgiveness, one or both have laid another brick in the hard wall of bitterness or refusal to repent.

So why. Jesus asks, did Moses have to regulate your habit of divorcing your wives? Because of your hard hearts.

But when Jesus talks of hard hearts, he has something else in mind as well. Because when the Old Testament talks about hardness of heart, it's describing how people shut down on God, and refuse to hear him, or see life the way he does, or make something other than him the object of their worship. And when you make yourself, or your sexual pleasure, or your comfort, the thing that you love most, the thing your world turns around, it's inevitably going to impact the way you see your relationships. And you're going to prioritise what you desire, and as you do, harden yourself to what God desires.

And so, Jesus is saying, at the root of the relational pain between a husband and wife that ends in divorce, is one or both partners hardening their heart to each other, and to God.

But then, rather than enter into a debate about divorce, Jesus talks about marriage, and God's desire for marriage. Verse 6, 'From the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.'" And he's quoting the first chapter of the Bible, Genesis 1:27, that far from sex and gender being a social construct, our binary sexual identity is rooted in creation, just as it is written into every cell in your body. And so, whatever new words our current culture comes up with, or however people seek to

redefine marriage, Jesus says that at the heart of marriage is our nature as male and female, two people who are like but unlike. The same, but not the same.

But that's not all he's saying.

Last week a friend told me how a colleague had given a talk at work on the subject of misogyny, men showing contempt or prejudice against women, and he laid the blame at the door of Genesis. Which is ironic, because what Genesis 1 teaches us is that God created us male and female in his image. We're both his image bearers. So your identity and your worth is not based first and foremost on your sexual desires or romantic relationships, but on the fact that he made you, and made you to represent him to the world. And that is as true of women as it is of men. So it's not just our male and femaleness that's rooted in creation, it's our equality before God.

So, culturally, these Pharisees are thinking 'male rights' and Jesus is saying, no, husband and wife are equals. Which is why, in v11-12 when he talks about adultery, he says your gender doesn't matter, both are morally responsible.

So, foundation no. 1 of marriage - it's between a man and a woman as equals.

But then he lays another. And this time he quotes from Genesis 2, "'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh." (Mark 10:7-8).

So what's marriage? It's the coming together of two individuals, a man and a woman, to make one new reality. In old English, the husband leaves and cleaves. Up until now, he was to be loyal, above everyone else, to his parents. But now, he leaves them and his wife takes that place. And he is to hold fast to her, like glue.

Now, one of the modern fads in weddings is to write your own vows instead of using the traditional ones. Which is a fad I'm not a great fan of. Firstly, because it's just very hard to say as much, and say it as beautifully, and with such an economy of words, as the traditional vows say. But also because you can end up missing things out that you should promise or promising things that you probably shouldn't. Like at a wedding we attended a few years back where the bride promised her husband that she would surprise him every day. Now, I don't know about you, but I couldn't imagine anything worse. I mean if Su saw it as her job to always be surprising me, it'd be terrifying. I couldn't open a wardrobe without the fear that she might leap out on me. I'd go to put rubbish in the bin and take the lid off and she'd leap out like a jack-in-the-box. I'd live in a state of constant anxiety.

But you can also leave stuff out that should be there, as a friend of mine experienced recently where the young couple made some meaningful promises but made no mention of being faithful. Or as the traditional vows put it, to forsake all others, to have and to hold till death us do part. Probably because they just took it for granted. But what's taken for granted can quickly be forgotten.

Instead, Jesus says it's this having and holding, and not letting go, it's this creation of a new, one flesh union, that's about way more than just sex, that's at the very heart of marriage.

And it's why people who have experienced infidelity and divorce describe it as being like an amputation. Because, as Jesus makes clear here, marriage is not just a contract of convenience that lasts as long as it's meeting my needs. It's two individuals being fused into one new reality.

And Jesus says, it's God who does the joining.

Verse 9, "*What therefore God has joined together,* let not man separate." These Pharisees gave men all the power in marriage, and yet it's not that Jesus comes along and says, 'no, men and women are equal, you both have the right to divorce', which is what our culture does. Instead he returns the authority in marriage back to God, and he's the Lord of the marriage. He's the One who defines what marriage is, and brings a couple together and glues them together. And what he joins, Jesus says, no-one else should separate.

Now, if you are anything like Jesus' disciples, that is going to raise a whole load of questions. Verse 10, 'In the house the disciples asked him again about this matter.' 'I mean, Jesus, is there no way out? Are there no grounds for divorce?'

And we don't have time to go into every possible scenario, but before we look at two, imagine a soldier and a surgeon. Because a soldier who's determined to stand strong in the battle doesn't do that by looking around for all the escape routes. And a surgeon who wants to become a great surgeon won't do that by studying all the legal grounds for suing the bad ones. And it's the same for marriage. If you want to build a good and strong marriage, looking at how you can legitimately get out if it is probably not the way to do it.

And yet, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus does say that where one partner has broken the covenant by committing adultery divorce is permissible. And in 1 Corinthians, Paul implies that where a non-Christian spouse walks out of a marriage, a Christian doesn't have to fight endlessly to try and preserve it.

But here, the grounds for legitimate divorce are not Jesus' priority. His priority here is the unbreakable bond of marriage. It's why in v11-12 he says that it's precisely because God doesn't terminate the marriage that to remarry after divorce is to commit adultery.

But… what if that's you? What if any of this is you? What if you're single and wish you weren't? What if you're married and it's hard? What if you're divorced or remarried?

And the one hope for all of us is the Lord Jesus. Because he's the only one who has ever loved his spouse perfectly. And you are that spouse.

And if you're single, it's knowing that he loves you with the life-laying down love of a husband for his bride, and that he made you as his image bearer that can give you an identity and a worth beyond anything a romantic relationship or marriage can ever give you.

And if you're married, it's seeing how he sacrificed everything for you when you were far from faultless, when you were hard-hearted to him, that can soften your heart to the faults of your spouse and enable you to create a marriage full of grace and forgiveness.

And if you're divorced and you know you were not without blame, then know that he has already paid for your sin and taken your shame. And we might keep ourselves chained to our past, but Christ never does. And if that's you and you've subsequently remarried, then look at how Jesus describes such a couple in v11 and 12 - as married. He recognises your marriage. So don't divorce again. Instead, if you've not done so already, seek his forgiveness for the past, and then look to him for grace for your future.

Ok, but following Jesus doesn't just transform how you see marriage but how you see children.

Culture and Worth
Look at v13, 'And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, *and the disciples rebuked them.'*

Why rebuke them? Are they worried the children are going to wear Jesus out? Or distract him from more important things? No. It's that in their culture it wasn't just women who lacked social status, so did children. So these disciples think this is beneath Jesus, and them, to be doing this. Kids aren't worth his time.

Ok, but again, is our culture any better? How does a culture built on personal freedom to pursue whatever makes me happy, and that prioritises image, and wealth, lead us to treat those we might see as a burden, or lacking in social capital? Like the unborn or elderly, or those beneath you on the social or academic/intellectual ladder. Do you look down on them as the disciples looked down on children?

And Jesus sees what's going on and Mark says, v14, 'he was indignant'. Because what you get angry about says a whole lot about what you value, doesn't it?

Christ and Worth
And instead of sending them away, Jesus takes these children and blesses them, and says, v14, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God." In other words, you may not value them, but God most definitely does.

But again, to value what God values is going to require heart change. Verse 15, "Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." In other words, it's not that children have to become like us before we value them, it's that all of us have to become like them.

You see, a child naturally trusts and depends on his parents. And to enter God's kingdom, Jesus says we need to stop evaluating ourselves and others by the quality of our resumés, and instead humble ourselves, and come trusting in Christ and depending on him like a child would.

But what can cause us to drop our pretensions and come knowing we have nothing to bring? When you know that to save you God's Son, his child, had to die for you. But he loves you so much he did die for you. Get that and you'll begin to value those the world sees as unvaluable.