

Pictures Worth Protecting

Mark 10:1-16 *Mark 10:1 Then He arose from there and came to the region of Judea by the other side of the Jordan. And multitudes gathered to Him again, and as He was accustomed, He taught them again. ² The Pharisees came and asked Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" testing Him. ³ And He answered and said to them, "What did Moses command you?" ⁴ They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to dismiss her." ⁵ And Jesus answered and said to them, "Because of the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept. ⁶ "But from the beginning of the creation, God 'made them male and female.' ⁷ 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, ⁸ 'and the two shall become one flesh'; so then they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹ "Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."*

¹⁰ *In the house His disciples also asked Him again about the same matter. ¹¹ So He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. ¹² "And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."*

¹³ *Then they brought little children to Him, that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked those who brought them. ¹⁴ But when Jesus saw it, He was greatly displeased and said to them, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. ¹⁵ "Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it." ¹⁶ And He took them up in His arms, put His hands on them, and blessed them.*

This last week on Thursday, my wife and I celebrated God's goodness in giving us nine years of marriage together. Though we are barely out of the starting blocks compared to many of the marriages here, we are actually ahead of many. Of those who actually do get married, and don't simply live together, the divorce rate for first marriages is around 33%, and for all marriages, a little over 50%. Most divorces take place between the fifth and the ninth year of the marriage. Statistics SA records that in 2010 there were 20 383 children involved in divorces.

It's easy to just think of these in terms of numbers and statistics, which sound precise and yet far away. But marriage and family are not simply civil arrangements, like a business transaction. Marriage and family are one of God's many pictures. God has filled His world with things which help us to understand truth. The Bible keeps taking these things from the created order, which helps us to understand deeper, eternal realities. Think of how the Bible keeps taking images from the world to teach us: light, water, mountains, sheep, kings, swords, bread, servants. Whether it be animals, created objects, man-made objects, positions in society or customs, God made sure they would be there to illustrate truth. They become windows for man to look at and through, to see ultimate truths.

What happens when those windows are shattered? A broken window distorts our ability to see through it. Instead of encouraging us to look through and beyond it, we look at it, and see its ugly cracks.

Marriage and family are one of God's biggest and best windows. It's the window He created for all human beings to be exposed to. He created marriage and family even before human government, even before the formation of the church. Rightly used, this window can help human beings understand volumes of truth about God - His goodness, His loyalty, and His grace. And since it has such potential, you can be sure Satan will be throwing some of his biggest rocks at the window of marriage and family. The crack of divorce and the crack of rejected children harm our ability to see God.

That's not a new phenomenon, it's a very old one. The window of marriage and family has always been enduring cracks through the inherent sinfulness of man and the attacks of Satan. It was prominent during the time the Lord Jesus walked the Earth, just as it is prominent in our time. And

what we have here is the Lord, as the Master architect and builder, seeking to show us why these windows of marriage and family need to remain intact. Coming at him are some stone-throwers, people who want to permit and promote divorce and people who want to forbid and discourage children from coming to Him. In both cases, Jesus is going to respond and point people back to the original. He's going to show us what the windows were meant to be and how sin distorts those. As we look at them, we need to align our hearts with them. We need to embrace Christ's vision for these, make them our own. We need to resist the stone-throwing of our own hearts and of the culture.

I. Marriage: A Window of Covenant Unity

Mark 10:1-16 *Mark 10:1 Then He arose from there and came to the region of Judea by the other side of the Jordan. And multitudes gathered to Him again, and as He was accustomed, He taught them again. ² The Pharisees came and asked Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" testing Him.*

Jesus is heading to down to Jerusalem. We are almost into the very last week of Christ's life. Jesus is probably travelling with pilgrims down to Judea for the Passover. Along the way, the Pharisees are still trying to discredit Jesus. They want to find some area of teaching on which to publicly humiliate Him. They want to catch him out.

And so they bring up a long-standing debate they had been having among themselves. Two Pharisaic schools took different views on divorce. The school of Shammai said that divorce could only be for adultery – unfaithfulness but the school of Hillel had a very different view. They took the words in Deuteronomy 24:1, which say that if the husband found some uncleanness in her, in the widest possible sense, he could divorce her.. They said a man could divorce his wife if she spoilt his dinner . Alfred Edersheim: “.such offences as that of going in public with uncovered head, of spinning in the public streets, or entering into talk with men, to which others add, that of brawling, or of disrespectfullyspeaking of her husband’s parents in his presence. A troublesome,or quarrelsome wife might certainly be sent away. Childlessness after ten years, was also regarded as valid grounds of divorce.

Rabbi Akiba thought it was sufficient if a man had found another woman more attractive than his wife. So, as far as the Pharisees were concerned, divorce was fine. They were only concerned over what the right causes for divorce should be. Can a man divorce for just any reason, as Hillel taught, or can it only be for adultery, as Shammai taught? So they wanted to pigeonhole Jesus into one of their schools.

But Jesus does not fall into their trap. He refers them to the Scriptures:

³ *And He answered and said to them, "What did Moses command you?"*

⁴ *They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to dismiss her."*

The Pharisees quote Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Moses permitted divorce. They are exactly right, Moses did permit it. Out of the five books of Moses, only here, in four verses, does Moses give permission to divorce in certain circumstances.

⁵ *And Jesus answered and said to them, "Because of the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept. ⁶ "But from the beginning of the creation, God 'made them male and female.' ⁷ 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, ⁸ 'and the two shall become one flesh'; so then they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹ "Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."*

Jesus explained that Moses did not command divorce. He tolerated it because of human hardness.

This exception came not from God's heart or from God's plan. This came as a concession to human unkindness, human hardness. To deal with existing situations, this law was given. But if we are to go back to the first book Moses wrote, where Moses wrote of the origin of marriage, what do we find there?

In God's original, pristine plan, He made humanity in His image. Both sexes reflected Him. God's plan was that a man, when he had come of age, would leave his parental authority to establish a new family. The wife too, leaves her parents, and husband and wife cleave together. They make a covenant of lifelong loyalty to one another, and then they consummate that with God's gift of physical unity. A blessed, and beautiful picture of oneness, unity, loyalty, and love.

What is this a picture of? Paul tells us that this is a great mystery – a great sacred secret now revealed – that marriage is a picture of God and His people, Messiah and His Bride. That from Adam and Eve, God placed this window in our world, so that, when rightly done, people would see a picture of a mightier reality - that God sets His love upon sinners, calls them, and then gives Himself for them, dying to cleanse them and make for Himself a fitting Bride. And then, like the union of physical love, we are joined with Him – He in us, and we in Him. Theologians speak of perichoresis. This is the truth - that in the Trinity, each Person indwells the other Person. And amazingly, we are called to be similarly indwelt. Union, oneness.

How long is this union for? How permanent is God's commitment to His people? How faithful and loyal will God be to His own promises?

So of all the pictures God could have placed in the world to help us to understand covenant loyalty, steadfast, loving faithfulness, absolute unity and oneness – it's this picture of marriage. And God didn't stumble upon that down the road. He designed it that way. He designed biological male and female, He designed the institution of marriage, He designed the idea of covenant, so that it would all be a window on His covenant loyalty to His people.

Divorce throws a rock at this window. Does Christ divorce His church? Does God forsake His promises? No. But divorce, which is not from God, but from man, shatters the picture. Let not man split up the unions that God makes.

¹⁰ *In the house His disciples also asked Him again about the same matter.* ¹¹ *So He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her."* ¹² *"And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."*

In God's eyes, the covenant is still in place, and the person marrying another is not freed from the first covenant. To marry when God does not grant the divorce is to commit adultery. Now we find that here in Mark, we don't read the exception clause. In Matthew 5, we read basically what we read here. In Luke 16:18 we read what we read here.

Matthew 19:9 ⁹ *"And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery."*

Three out of four times, we read no exception clause, and one time we read of it. Does that mean the exception clause is not valid?

No it doesn't mean that. Jesus only needs to say it once for it to be true. In the case of a lawful marriage, where one partner has committed unrepentant adultery, divorce is not commanded, but it is permitted, to the innocent party. So why doesn't Jesus say it here again? Why isn't it repeated in

Luke and in Matthew 5? I think the answer is found in the very attitude of the Pharisees. When we humans find an exception to the rule, what do we tend to emphasise? We emphasise the exception. See, we can, we're allowed!" What does God emphasise? The rule. Don't get divorced. Don't ruin the picture. Do your utmost to fight *for* your marriage. Do everything in your power to preserve that window on God's covenant loyalty. Don't enter into it without a full commitment to hang in there by God's grace till one of you stands at the other's graveside.

I know that those of you who have gone through the pain of divorce would not wish it on anyone else. And you would add your voice to the chorus, saying, "Avoid it at all costs!" To you, Christ would say, and now let your marriage *now*, be a picture of this covenant, loyal faithfulness.

Spouses, are you actively working on unity and oneness? Some marriages are not cracked by divorce, but they are distorted by perpetual disunity. The children looking at those marriages don't see a picture of Christ and His bride. They see a picture of two selfish people who happen to live in the same house. Marriage is the hard work of two lives surrendering to each other to be one.

Maybe your window needs some polishing. Maybe the smudges of selfishness need to be wiped off with repentance. Maybe the smudges of going your own way, determining a path for yourself, apart from your spouse, needs to be wiped with the cloth of repentance and forgiveness. Maybe the dirt of casting your eyes over to another woman, or another man, needs to be cleaned off with repentance, and re-commitment. Divorce doesn't happen in a day. Each day, that window into God's loyal faithful covenant love needs cleaning.

Out of this picture of covenant loyalty comes another picture.

II. Children: A Picture of God's Gracious Call

¹³ Then they brought little children to Him, that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked those who brought them. ¹⁴ But when Jesus saw it, He was greatly displeased and said to them, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. ¹⁵ "Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it." ¹⁶ And He took them up in His arms, put His hands on them, and blessed them.

Parents of children wanted Jesus to bless their children – perhaps heal them, but mostly simply hold them, pray for them, perhaps consecrate them. The disciples decide that children are too insignificant for Christ's agenda. In their eyes, you don't bring these helpless, crying, noisy little people to the King. You leave them with mothers, sisters and nursemaids.

But Jesus is greatly displeased by this. He is displeased by the short-sighted attitude of the disciples. And He is displeased on the effect this will have on the parents and the children – to make them think that you need to be important enough, old enough, mature enough to come to God.

He says – let them come, they represent those who do come. Who comes to the kingdom? Those who, like little children, are no longer boasting in themselves, they come empty-handed, simple, trusting in Christ alone.

John 1:12-13 *² But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: ¹³ who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.*

If you lack that childlike, simple trust, you won't come. But if you come without being wise in your own eyes, without trying to explain everything, you will receive God's welcome into His family and

be adopted.

Children represent God's gracious call. Children are a picture of God's adopting welcome and the simplicity with which we must come. God calls helpless people to be childlike and become His children.

Ephesians 1:3-6 ³ *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ,* ⁴ *just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love,* ⁵ *having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will,* ⁶ *to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He has made us accepted in the Beloved.*

Just like divorce ruins the picture of union, so treating children in a particular way ruins the image. Here the disciples nearly ruined the picture. They wanted to make coming to Jesus complicated and sophisticated. They wanted to set up hurdles and qualifications, so the picture of God's free, and gracious invitation for all to come and drink freely of Christ, was being distorted.

Christ lovingly took the children up in His arms, blessed them.

Children are to be welcomed, firstly into a family and then invited to God's family. Now, unlike some denominations teach, you do not automatically become a child of God's covenant simply by being a member of a Christian family, or by being baptised as a baby. Instead, each person must individually come to Christ, and receive His grace. But we are to be instruments, pointing, and calling, and inviting children, and then all people to come freely to God, and receive the new birth, and then His adoption.

How does sin crack this picture?

To begin with, millions are refused entry into the world altogether, through the horror of abortion. Millions of precious, individual, special lives are murdered because of one of the blackest lies to emerge from the Pit – that an unborn baby is nothing more than a part of a woman's body. And when children are refused entry into the world, this radically shatters the picture of God's call.

Some do not refuse them through murder. A growing trend in our culture is to refuse them through selfishness. Increasingly, children are merely viewed as an inconvenience. Some people simply do not want the 'trouble' of children, somehow forgetting that others went to the trouble of bringing them into the world. Some people simply do not want the responsibility, fearing they will not be able to perfectly control every physical, economic, and emotional circumstance, somehow forgetting that others were apparently willing to take that risk and bring them into the world.

Some refuse them through abandonment and rejection. I read a horrifying statistic recently. Forty-five countries were surveyed, and South Africa came out with the lowest levels of marriage of all the countries, with 62% of children being born outside of marriage, and most of those growing up without both biological parents. People today take the privilege of sex without the responsibility of parenting. And many, it would seem in our country, most, just walk away and abandon their children. Those of you who know this pain can testify of how difficult it is to deal with a father who did not stay. It becomes very hard to imagine a heavenly Father who invites, when you have an earthly father who rejects.

Some refuse them by filling the home with sinfulness. The Bible tells parents specifically not to provoke their children to anger. That does not mean, never displease your child. Your child will be

notably displeased when you obey the other biblical command to discipline him. It means do not act in sinful ways to which the child may rightly be angry. What might be some of those? Lou Priolo has a helpful list. Let me just list some out:

Lack of marital harmony

1. Modeling sinful anger
2. Habitually disciplining in anger
3. Scolding & Constantly finding fault
4. Being inconsistent with discipline
5. Having double standards
6. Not admitting you're wrong and not asking for forgiveness
7. Not listening to your child's opinion
8. Comparing them to others
9. Failing to keep your promises
10. Chastening in front of others
11. Not allowing enough freedom
12. Allowing too much freedom
13. Mocking your child & ridiculing or name calling
14. Abusing them physically
15. Unrealistic expectations
16. Practicing favoritism

We know that our children will see sin in our homes. The real question is, will they see us going to God for grace, and confessing our sins? Will they see us confessing our wrongs to them, asking for their forgiveness? Will they see that God will forgive and cleanse those who come to Him in childlikeness? Will they learn that for every sin, there is a solution: the finished work of Christ received by repentant hearts?

Is your home a place of grace?

And so too, our churches. Churches can give the impression that what they are about is for adults, and the children must run away and do something else. In so doing, we might unwittingly be refusing them. We might be communicating to them – this message, this Gospel, this Christ, this baptism, this Lord's Supper, is not for you, it is for someone else, someone who has more than you, who knows more than you, who has more merit than you.

Here are two windows into the Gospel. Being a child in a Christlike *home* says: there is a God of love, who desires you in His family. Repent of your sin, come as you are to Christ, and He will receive you as His child, and adopt you. A Christlike *marriage* says: the God of love died for you, to make you His own bride, and you He will be faithfully loyal forever.

God gives us two negative commands here: what God has joined, do not split apart. Whom God invites, do not forbid. Don't break God's windows. Let's allow the Gospel to shine through them.