

# Jesus and Priorities

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Now that millions of people have started back to school, I've seen a smattering of posts on my FB feed that express academic anxiety. Apparently, some of my friends are worried about the difficulty of the school year before them. At least in my opinion, most of those fears are unfounded.

However, no teacher should make us more apprehensive than the Master Teacher, Jesus Himself. The Lord doesn't want to impart some body of knowledge to us while leaving us the same way we were. Instead, He wants His teaching to change us utterly. As with His hearers in the first century, many of us will find elements of the Lord's teaching that we resist with all our might. However, unless we are willing to conform our lives to His will, we will live those lives in vain. Let's consider, then, Jesus and priorities.

## Obstacles to Heaven

For our text this morning, we're going to be taking a context that stretches from the middle of Mark 9 to the middle of Mark 10. Within this context, the first few issues raised seem to have to do with obstacles to heaven. The first obstacle that appears is the disciples' debate about who is **THE GREATEST**. Mark records this in Mark 9:33-37. Sometimes, I can't help but despair of the human race. The apostles have one of the most amazing opportunities that anyone has ever had. They get to spend every day with Jesus in the flesh. They can go right up to Him and strike up a conversation about any spiritual topic imaginable. However, what do they actually do? On the way back to Capernaum, they spend the trip arguing about which of them is most important, and they do it quietly in the hope that they will be able to keep it from Jesus. Of course, the subterfuge doesn't work. Jesus knows exactly what they're up to.

As we shake our heads and marvel at the apostles, though, we'd better spare a little bit of head-shaking for ourselves. For all of us, the temptation to assert our value is a constant one. We do it at home, where we complain that we do more than our share of the chores. We do it among our friends, where we want to be the ones who are the wittiest and the most stylishly dressed. We can even do it in a church context, when we insist that things must be done our way, because we're Right. Maybe we're subtler about it than the apostles were, but we do our fair share of self-promotion too.

Jesus, however, reveals that rank in the kingdom is not based on self-importance, but on service. We're not supposed to be caught up in ourselves. We're supposed to be caught up in others. We are to spend our lives helping not only ourselves, not only our families, not only our friends, but the downtrodden, the forgotten, and the overlooked. Even some little kid scampering around down by our ankles is worthy of honor and respect. We're not too important for the little people. The little people are what's important.

Jesus identifies **PRECONCEPTIONS** as the next obstacle. John 9:38-42 tells the tale. It's funny. We condemn the Pharisees all the time for not believing in Jesus, despite His miracles, because He didn't line up with their preconceptions about Sabbath-keeping. Here, we see John doing exactly the same thing. He sees some guy going around casting out demons, which was only possible by the power of God, and tells the guy to stop because he isn't on the list of approved disciples.

In response, Jesus says three things. First, John should leave the guy alone, because anybody casting out demons in the name of Jesus has to be on the right side. Second, anybody who serves, no matter how humbly, is someone whom God will honor. Third, anybody who interferes with such service will earn not praise from God, but condemnation. Jesus clearly means the last statement to apply to John.

This is an important lesson for us today. Obedience to the will of God is one thing, but obedience to our think-so's is another. When we encourage others to obey, we must make sure that we aren't trying to bind our think-so's on them instead. All of us have opinions about "the right way to do things", but if somebody is serving God in God's way, even if they aren't doing it our way, we need to leave them alone. When we go to our brother, we'd better have book, chapter, and verse, not just a bunch of self-righteousness.

Third, Jesus makes no bones about how far we should go in **REMOVING OBSTACLES**. Read with me from Mark 9:43-50. First of all, let's pay particular attention to the vivid language that Jesus uses to describe hell. A couple of weeks ago, I read a press release by a liberal religious think tank. The title of the press release was "Survey Shows That American Christians Are More Like Pharisees Than Jesus". Once I

started reading the description of the survey, though, it was pretty clear what had happened. The people who conducted the survey defined Jesus as being loving and inclusive, and the Pharisees as being rule-followers, so anybody who said that following God's rules was important was automatically Pharisaical.

Yes, it is true that nowhere in the Bible do we find a higher expression of love than Jesus Christ. However, it is also true that Jesus talks more about the horrors of hell than does any other Biblical figure. That doesn't fit with our mooshy-gooshy cultural conception of Him, but we must acknowledge that the Lord didn't just preach a gospel of mercy and love, but also a gospel of repentance, obedience, and judgment.

Indeed, this terrible description of hell as a place where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched is the basis of Jesus' argument. Because hell is so awful, we should be willing to do whatever we must to avoid going there, even if getting rid of it is as shocking a thought as the thought of cutting off our own hand. There is nothing on this earth so precious that it is worth losing our soul over.

### **Facing Obstacles**

In the last section of Scripture that we studied, we concluded with Jesus' observation that it is better even to cut off body parts than to bring them with us into hell. Everything that we're going to see in this section is an application of that principle. The first area where Jesus points out the necessity for making tough choices is that of **DIVORCE**. Consider Mark 10:1-12. Often, we think of divorce as a modern phenomenon, but that's far from the case. Divorce occurred at epidemic levels in the Roman world, just as it does in our own. In an environment where divorce is so common, Jesus' teaching on the subject could not be more stark. God's rule is that once He joins a man and a woman together in marriage, they are to stay together until one of them dies. If they divorce and marry others, that's adultery plain and simple. As we know from Matthew 19, the only exception to the rule is if one spouse puts away the other for the cause of adultery. The ancient Israelites ignored this rule so much that Moses had to institute a rule to deal with the consequences of divorce, but divorce has never been part of God's plan for His people.

The Biblical principle here is straightforward. Its application is anything but, not because it's hard to understand, but because people don't want to do what it requires. It's always been interesting to me that whenever I'm studying with someone who doesn't believe in the necessity of baptism for forgiveness of sins, they always advance the same hypothetical about a believer who is on his way to be baptized but gets in a car wreck and dies. They think that the hypothetical logically invalidates the commandment to be baptized.

Here, people who don't like the commandment don't have to make up hypotheticals. All of us have met some nice married couple, even with kids, and, as we started talking to them, realized that they don't have a right to be married to each other. Who of us wants to say, "Sorry, but you have to blow your life up?"

Friends, that's exactly what Jesus is saying here. We need to read this text in the light of what we just read in Mark 9. If your hand or foot is keeping you from heaven, cut it off. If your eye is keeping you from heaven, gouge it out. If your wife is keeping you from heaven, put her away. That's a hard saying. However, that's what the Lord expects from us, and if we don't obey Him, we will surely suffer for it.

Next, Jesus touches on the subject of **CHILDREN IN THE KINGDOM**. Mark explains in Mark 10:13-16. This is one of those Jesus Christ Superstar passages, where, just like people want their kid with the politician or the football coach, these folks want their kid with Jesus. The disciples think that Jesus is too important to waste His time on such nonsense, but Jesus disagrees. In the first place, as He explained in the last chapter, caring even for children is what makes one important in the kingdom of heaven. Here, we simply see Him practicing what He had preached.

Second, though, Jesus tells us that we have a lot to learn from little children. I live with two of them, so I feel like I ought to be an expert these days, but I still had to think quite a bit about what it meant to receive the kingdom as a little child. I think the key is simplicity. Zoë and Marky are not very complicated people. If they want something, they'll be straightforward about it, and if they don't want it, they'll be straightforward about that too, to the point where we have lengthy discussions about being rude to Mama.

I think what Jesus is saying, then, is that if we want to go to heaven, we have to want to go to heaven. There can't be any reservations. There can't be any asterisks. Our desire to go to heaven must be the straightforward, sincere expression of who we really are. If that isn't really what we want, it's going to warp our conduct and our hearts. Our deviousness might fool others, but it won't fool God.

By way of contrast, Mark next relates the story of **THE RICH YOUNG RULER**. It appears in Mark 10:17-22. Here is a guy with an asterisk. He wants to go to heaven, but not if it means surrendering all of his possessions. He might not even be aware of his asterisk when he runs up to Jesus, but he certainly is by the time his conversation with the Lord is over, and it keeps him from discipleship.

There are a couple of avenues we need to explore here before we move on. The first is how counter-cultural this pair of stories is. Jesus invited a bunch of little children, nobodies in the world's eyes, to come to Him. However, He drove the rich young ruler away by asking something from him that He knew he wouldn't give. As God had said to Samuel a thousand years before, the Lord doesn't see as man sees. What is impressive to men isn't necessarily what impresses God, and vice versa. It sounds like everybody who knew this rich young ruler would have thought he was a great guy. It didn't matter. It doesn't matter whether we impress everybody around us either. What matters is whether we have a heart that pleases God.

Second, we must ask ourselves whether we are suffering from rich-young-ruler-itis. Typically, Bible classes on this text involve lengthy explanations about how this command to sell everything and give to the poor doesn't apply to us. Now, I don't think it does, but I think we also need to ask ourselves whether we protest too much. We know from other passages that it's perfectly acceptable for Christians to own private property, but those passages teach us that our use of those things must be centered on God, not ourselves.

Why do we have money? Why do we have things? Do we drive that car because we need a way to get to work, or because we want to impress others? Did we buy that house because we wanted to shelter our families and be hospitable, or because we felt we deserved that master bedroom suite? Do we anticipate that raise because it will enable us to contribute more to the Lord's work, or because it will enable us to go on nicer vacations? Friends, we might not be as far from the rich young ruler as we would like to believe. As with hands, feet, eyes, and spouses, if our money is keeping us from heaven, we need to get rid of it.

The rich young ruler's question touches off **A DISCUSSION** between Jesus and His disciples. Consider Mark 10:23-31. As the text indicates, the disciples were shocked to hear this from the Master. The Jews of Jesus' day equated physical wealth with spiritual health. Rich people were rich because they were godly; poor people were poor because they had displeased God in some way. Jesus, however, flips this flawed understanding on its head. He tells His audience that it will be nearly impossible for the rich to be saved, and from this, they assume that it's going to be nearly impossible for anyone.

As with so many of the words of Jesus, we shouldn't take His statements here at face value. The problem with the rich generally is not their riches per se, any more than the rich young ruler's problem was his riches per se. Instead, the problem lies within. Generally speaking, people are rich because they have devoted their lives to the acquisition and maintenance of wealth, and all too often, that dogged pursuit of fortune doesn't leave much time or attention for God. The love of money crowds the more important things out. Of course, not all rich people are like this. Some follow the admonition of Paul in 1 Timothy 6 to become rich in good works by sharing their money generously with others. Most rich people, though, do not.

Peter hears this, especially the part about how it is impossible for people to be saved on their own, and gets concerned. He points out to the Lord that unlike the rich young ruler, he actually has left everything to follow Jesus. In response, Jesus makes a point that should be reassuring to all those contemplating making hard choices for Christ's sake. Those sacrifices won't be in vain. Even in this life, we will gain a spiritual family that will make sure we are provided for and looked after. Then, in the life to come, we will inherit eternity. Jesus never says that following Him will be easy, but He does promise to care for those who do.

## Jesus' Purpose

In the last text we'll study this morning, Jesus describes His purpose to His disciples. This begins with **A THIRD PROPHECY**. It appears in Mark 10:32-34. The first thing worthy of notice here is Jesus' behavior and the disciples' reaction to it. As they travel to Jerusalem, He's leading the pack, and they are fearful and amazed. In order to appreciate why this would be, we need to fit this story into its context. Twice already, in Mark 8 and again in Mark 9, Jesus has predicted that the next time He goes to Jerusalem, He is going to be taken by His enemies, be killed, and rise from the dead three days later. The disciples have no idea what's going on, but it doesn't make sense to them that Jesus appears so eager to meet His own death.

As if to reaffirm what He has said already, Jesus pulls them aside and repeats the same prophecy. Indeed, He gets even more graphic. Now, He's not merely going to be killed. He's going to be mocked, scourged, spat upon, and then killed! And yet, here Jesus is, setting the pace toward His own death.

Few passages illustrate the steadfastness and love of Jesus as well as this one. He's not just guessing; He knows that these horrible things are going to happen to him, probably only a couple of weeks from now. Most of us in that situation would be dragging our feet. Not so for Jesus. He is so determined to follow God and so concerned for the souls of His people that He's almost running toward the cross.

And yet, this solemn, sublime moment is soon interrupted by **A REQUEST** made by the brothers James and John. Mark tells the tale in Mark 10:35-40. James and John's timing is almost comically bad. Jesus has just told them that He is going to Jerusalem to be taken and executed, but they are still expecting the glorious reign of King David Part II, and when Jesus is sitting on His throne in Jerusalem, the brothers want in on it too. They want to literally be Jesus' right- and left-hand men.

Jesus appears to be sarcastically amused by their request. He knows that His throne is going to be a cross, and these two are clamoring to share in what He is going to have? He asks them if they are willing to drink His cup and be baptized with His baptism. They have absolutely no idea what He is talking about, so they eagerly agree. Jesus promises them that they will get what they have asked for, which means that like Him, they are going to die for His name's sake. However, they aren't going to get what they wanted.

The final unfolding of the story raises the question of whether the great in the kingdom of heaven are going to be **RULERS OR SERVANTS**. Read with me from Mark 10:41-45. This too has a certain amount of dark humor to it. Jesus has just asked James and John if they want to suffer and die like Him, they've said yes, and now the other ten apostles are mad because they feel like James and John have stolen a march on them! In response, Jesus tells them that they've got it completely upside-down. Greatness in God's kingdom doesn't come from being big stuff and being able to tell a whole bunch of other people what to do. Greatness comes from serving others, the more humbly, the better. Of this, there can be no better example than Jesus. He really was big stuff. He was literally older than the universe. However, He surrendered His seat with God to come down, be a blessing to mankind, and ultimately, to die for them.

With this, our study of Mark comes full circle. Once again, Jesus replies to His apostles' ambitions with a call to humility and service. This call applies equally to us. If we are true disciples of Jesus, our lives won't be about how high we can climb in our professions. They won't be about how much money we can make. They won't be about fancy houses or fancy cars. Instead, our lives will be about expressing our love for others. The victories that we should be counting are when we are able to extend a helping hand to someone who needs it, when we are able to brighten someone's bad day with a joke or a smile, and when we are able to extend mercy and forgiveness to someone who absolutely does not deserve it. These things will not elevate us in the world's esteem, but they will bring us honor in the sight of God.

During the Lord's Supper, let's think about these things. Let's remember our Savior, who came not to be served, but to serve, who surrendered His life for us for no other reason than pure, unfettered love. Then, let's ask where we fit in the narrative we've just read. Are we like the disciples, always looking to emphasize our own importance? Are we like the rich young ruler, unwilling to surrender the things that stand between us and the kingdom? Or, instead, are we like Jesus?