

# Finding Gospel in Mark's Gospel

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## Marriage and the Hard Heart

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### Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Gospel Year B

#### Bringing up the Past

Mark 10:2-16

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

*<sup>2</sup> Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" <sup>3</sup>He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" <sup>4</sup>They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." <sup>5</sup>But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. <sup>6</sup>But from the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female." <sup>7</sup> 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, <sup>8</sup>and the two*

*shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. <sup>9</sup>Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”*

*<sup>10</sup> Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. <sup>11</sup>He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; <sup>12</sup>and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”*

*<sup>13</sup> People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. <sup>14</sup>But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. <sup>15</sup>Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” <sup>16</sup>And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.*

**Author’s Note:** There are some excellent text studies already posted on this Gospel reading [LINK](#). I encourage you to read all of them, including Eric Evers work that inspired my thoughts.



*Fortunately, there is another, different past that we can claim: a past that brings healing (salvation)—not just to broken marriages, but to broken, God-forsaken, hardened hearts as well.*

## **DIAGNOSIS: The Past That Destroys**

***Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): “You’re always bringing up the past!”***

Bob and Sally were fighting again, flinging accusations—Bob angry and Sally weeping. “You always act like this. Remember when....” Sally accused, but Bob interrupted bitterly, “You always have to bring up the past, don’t you?” “I can’t help it,” she replied, “It still hurts, and you’ve never said you were sorry!” “Just get over it,” Bob snapped as he slammed the door shut and disappeared for the evening.

Alas, Bob and Sally’s marriage is not the happy union they

imagined it would be on their wedding day.

***Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): “You always have to be right!”***

When Bob returned, the accusations continued. “The problem with you is that you always have to be right,” he said. “That’s because I am right,” Sally retorted, “and you’re the one who’s wrong! Everyone in the world would agree with me about that.”

In the beginning, Jesus notes, God created the world to run off God’s self. But alas, temptation became too great, and humans succumbed to trusting the Creator’s preservation-system (the Law) rather the Creator. Hence, Bob and Sally have become straight-jacketed by the laws of “you gotta”: You gotta perform, you gotta be perfect, you gotta be right,” and so on. But of course, that kind of performance-living ends reducing the people around you to being a means to your own ends. Jesus called it hard-heartedness.

***Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): “This is hell!”***

“You never loved me,” Sally laments. Bob yells back, “I can’t take this anymore. I want out! This is a living hell!” Sally crumples, sobs, she’s in hell too! All she ever wanted was to be loved, and now, not only is she unloved, but she also feels abandoned—alone, distraught. It’s a living hell for both of them.

Bob and Sally’s failure reveals an even deeper failure, namely, neither had welcomed nor received the “kingdom of heaven” that is in their midst. Unlike the little children who trustingly jumped into Jesus’ lap, these two had insisted on earning what they got. They pushed Almighty God out of their lives—except as their Judge. Alas, the Creator leaves them to deal with the very system in which they have placed their trust. But it judges

them. The end result? Justice is served. The kingdom of heaven is not theirs.



## **PROGNOSIS: Take Two: A Past that Makes All the Difference**

### ***Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Bringing Up a Different Past***

Fortunately, there is another, different past that both Bob and Sally can claim: a past that brings healing (salvation)—not just to broken marriages, but to broken, God-forsaken, hardened hearts as well. It's a past that can turn hell into heaven. That past began with the promise that Almighty God made “at the beginning” to rescue humanity from its own hells (both present and eternal). God fulfilled God's promise some 2000 years ago, when God became human in the person of Jesus, who descended into hell to “satisfy” the system that only judges and rescue us from hell.

When Almighty God raised Jesus, Jesus happily offered Bob and

Sally, "Come with me." "Why would you invite us?" they ask, holding on for dear life. Comes the heavenly response: "Because we've always loved you dearly! It's not a love you can deserve, we just give it freely! Now dear children, come along."

***Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Trusting the "Right-Maker"***

Bob and Sally had been baptized, but they had never claimed or lived it. But now this amazing "past" has resurfaced in their lives. (Long story, they had attended their nephew's baptism and heard some incredible promises.) They heard about "the sweet exchange: Jesus trading their sin and death for his righteousness. And ... what do you know? They believed it. Their hardened, self-justifying hearts began to soften and melt!

As they absorbed the significance of what all Jesus had gone through—for them!—they quit trusting themselves (or each other) for their right-ness, for their value, and they began to trust Jesus' righteousness. They learned that they could drop the old straight-jacket of the "you gottas" (the Law), and start behaving as if they were already living in the kingdom of heaven (living by mercy), which of course, they were. They called their baptismal anniversaries "freedom days."

***Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Forgetting the Past and Trusting Jesus for the Future***

What do you know. Bob and Sally began treating each other differently. Bob brought up the past again, but this time in a different way: "I was wrong, Sally. Please forgive me." To which Sally replied, "I love you, Bob. Let's move on." They changed in other ways as well, namely, they began paying attention to people they worked and lived with. "Hey neighbor, need some help with your yard work?" "Hey grandma, can we bring supper over tonight?" "Hey friends, let's figure out one thing we can do to

save our environment together.”

Mind you, neither they nor their marriage were perfect and, of course, they knew that. But they knew they could trust God’s baptismal promise and live boldly.

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# **Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Gospel, Year B**

## **IN THE ARMS OF JESUS**

*Mark 10:2-16*

*Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost*

*Analysis by Steve Albertin*

2 Some Pharisees came, and to test [Jesus] they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” 3 He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” 4 They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.” 5 But Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. 6 But from the beginning of 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, they are no longer two, but one flesh. 9 Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

10 Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. 11 He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; 12 and if she



divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

13 People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. 14 But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is too such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. 15 Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” 16 And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.



## **DIAGNOSIS: Bad News for Hard Hearts**

***Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): “The Pain of Divorce”***

The pain of divorce has wounded all our families. That is what



makes Jesus' words in today's Gospel so troubling. There is no compromise.

Today's Gospel begins with another confrontation between Jesus and those guardians of morality, the Pharisees. The Pharisees were the moral conscience of their society. They were the experts in right and wrong. In the case of divorce, they had developed a vast system of rules and regulations defining under what conditions divorce was or was not permitted. They came to test Jesus because they were suspicious that he would not abide by the rules.

Jesus refuses to play ball. He is not about spelling out the rules that justify divorce. He points out that Moses permitted divorce under certain circumstances not because he wanted to excuse it but because it was a concession to human sin. Divorce can never be "justified" to God. The existence of divorce is a symptom of a deeper problem.

### ***Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Hard Hearts***

It reveals our "hardness of heart."

What is "hardness of heart?" A rock is hard. It is impervious to outside influences. Water cannot penetrate it and runs off. So is it with the "hard heart." The "hard heart" always wants to be right. The "hard heart" insists, "I am right, and you are wrong! And this is why . . ." as the excuses and rationalizations come running off our tongue. The "hard heart" knows it all. The "hard heart" is unwilling and unable to concede any weakness or failure. The "hard heart" only wants to know "Is it lawful?" because the "hard heart" wants to know what it can get away with.

The "hard heart" is the enemy of marriage. When a spouse always has to justify himself; when a spouse can never say, "I am

sorry. Forgive me;" when a spouse always has to win; when a spouse insists that her needs are all that matter and can only say "me, myself and I," then the marriage is crumbling. Then the divorce is not so much the thing that destroys the marriage as the recognition that the marriage has already ended.

The "hard heart" is unwilling to be soft. A "soft heart" is dependent and willing to trust others. The "hard heart" has got to be in charge. The "hard heart" is terrified of being vulnerable and dependent. The "hard heart" resists ever conceding that it needs to trust anything or anyone other than itself. The "hard heart" is the enemy of love. Like water running off a hard rock, the "hard heart" is impervious to the love and tenderness of another.

### ***Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Breaking Hard Hearts***

But it gets worse. Jesus reminds us Pharisees that our "hardness of heart" and unwillingness to keep our marital promises is like thumbing our noses at God. Marriage is grounded in the very nature of creation. Jesus refers us to the creation of man and woman in the book of Genesis when he says, "Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." Our "hardness of heart" puts us at odds not only with each other. It puts us at odds with God. Mess with God and we are messing with trouble, big trouble!

There is no wiggle room here. Divorce can never be what God wants for his people. The more we try to make a case for it, the more we reveal our "hardness of heart."

The way of the Pharisee is a dead-end street. Our once strong, hard, and proud hearts are cracked open, grieving the loss of what we had once hoped would be, but now is shattered and lost. We feel so tiny, vulnerable, and weak, like a frightened child who feels lost and cannot find her parents.

## PROGNOSIS: Good News for Broken Hearts

### *Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): In the Arms of Jesus*



The crowds bring to Jesus little children to bless. In that world, little children were not the cute little kids we love to spoil today. In a world riddled with poverty and high rates of mortality, adults wanted those little urchins with their runny noses and smelly diapers to hurry and grow up so that they could make themselves useful. The disciples protest that Jesus should not waste his time on such urchins. But, Jesus blesses them anyway. He takes them up in his arms, puts them in his lap and hugs them, declaring, “It is too such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”

That is exactly what Jesus does for us. Jesus loves us in spite of our “hardness of heart.” Jesus loves us in spite of the wreckage we have made of our marriages and our families.

He reaches down to take us up in his arms. As he opens his hands to pick us up, we see hands that we did not expect. Scarred by a violent death, these are the hands of one who has been nailed to the cross. These are the hands of one who knows what it is like to be rejected and despised. He has a soft and vulnerable heart open to people like us. However, unlike us, this soft-hearted One did not run and hide. He trusted God all the way to the cross. His trust was not disappointed. On the third day, God raised him from the dead and announced to the world that because of Jesus, all the soft-hearted trusters of this world will never be hung out to dry.

***Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): New, Soft Hearts***

Therefore, when we drag ourselves through the doors on Sunday morning after a week that may have pulverized our hearts and battered our self-esteem, we come because we know that here Jesus says to the soft- and broken-hearted, "Come, my child. Let me take you into my embrace. Let me love you. Let me assure you that I will always have a place for you." We sit with Christ and our soft hearts trust that God loves us even though our lives may be battered and broken.

***Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Soft-Hearted Lives***

When we leave Jesus' embrace and walk back into the world, with its broken relationships, we no longer have to be hard. We can let our hearts be soft. We can do things and say words that the hard-hearted would never think of doing or saying: "I'm sorry. I forgive you. I love you. Join me in the company of Jesus."

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# **Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22)**

## **THE GREAT MARRIAGE**

**Genesis 2:18-24**

**Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22)**

**Analysis by Bruce K Modahl**

18Then the Lord GOD said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." 19So out of the ground the Lord GOD formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. 20The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. 21So the Lord GOD caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh.

22And the rib that the Lord GOD had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

23Then the man said,  
"This at last is bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
this one shall be called Woman,  
for out of Man this one was taken."

24Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

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## DIAGNOSIS: Lonely

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *“It is not good for the man to be alone.”*

In the most recent biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Strange Glory*, by Charles Marsh I was struck by how often Bonhoeffer struggled with loneliness. Such struggles occurred not only when in solitary confinement after his arrest, but also when separated for long periods from his family and his best friend Eberhard Bethge. Perhaps we all enjoy taking refuge in our own company at times. However, soon we crave companionship with others. Recent news reports document the terrible effects of solitary confinement on prisoners.

God knew it was not good for the man to be alone because God exists as a community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is present and involved in the creation but God is wholly other. The man needed a companion of his own kind.

God created every living creature out of the same ground from which Adam was created. God paraded them past Adam to see if there was one to be a helper and his partner. Presumably God created the other creatures male and female. Adam therefore knew from observation what was involved in partnering. I may be the only one who finds humor in the story but I cannot help picturing Adam naming the hippo and orangutan and then with an audible “yuck” asking God, “What are you thinking?”

It asks too much of the story to question why God did not create the humans male and female from the beginning. The writer has a larger theological task in mind which we arrive at in 2:24. The man and the woman are not like the rest of the creation. The man and woman cling to one another and they become one flesh, “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.”



**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *A Clash of Wills***  
God's intention is for the man and woman to be one flesh. However, at one time or another all of us who are married contravene God's will by asserting our dominance over our partner. This will to dominate is evident in all our covenanted relationships. Friendships, the workplace, and business arrangements are fraught with it.

For far too long the word "helper" as applied to the woman has been interpreted to confer secondary status. All too often biblical texts such as the gospel reading for this Sunday, Mark 10:2-16, are used to keep mostly women but sometimes men as well in an abusive relationship. If one partner abuses the other physically or verbally I wonder if the marriage is not already broken whether there has been a legal divorce decree or not.

The will to dominate is evident in the notion that marriage is a 50-50 proposition. Fifty percent of the time I get my way and 50% you get your way. The only logic of the two becoming one flesh is that marriage is a 100%-100% commitment.

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Not Your Will But Mine Be Done***

Only one time have I heard someone say, "As I was walking down the aisle I was thinking, 'I can always divorce him.'" Other than that one time I have never heard anyone say anything close to, "Divorce is a good thing. Everyone should have one." Rather I have heard stories of broken hearts, tears, anger, self-hatred, damaged children, and struggle. I have heard these stories also from those who stayed married, never addressing the loss of intimacy, showing contempt for and outright hatred for the other.

All of this is evidence of a clash of wills that ends up violating God's intention for our marriages. Divorce and

estrangement are more than the result of a clash between the wills of two parties. Divorce is the result of a clash of our will with God's. In divorce we transgress God's will and stand under God's righteous judgment. We have deformed God's creation and are subject to God's condemnation. God instituted marriage as a blessing. By our willfulness we divorce ourselves from God. We are indeed lonely. The grave is a narrow and lonely chamber.

## **PROGNOSIS: Lonely No More**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (External Solution)** : *"It is not good for the woman or man to be alone."*

God the Father sends his only begotten Son to woo us. He is conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He is bone of our bones and flesh of our flesh. He woos us with words and deeds, as recorded in the scriptures, miracles and teachings far better than bouquets of roses. Still we spurn his advances. He woos us from the cross where he takes upon himself the violence and hatred that are products of our willfulness. He does not give up on us even then. He pursues us to the grave. We shall not be lonely there. The hymn "Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart" powerfully proclaims

And in its narrow chamber keep  
My body safe in peaceful sleep  
Until thy reappearing.  
And then from death awaken me,  
That these mine eyes with joy may see,  
O Son of God, thy glorious face,  
My Savior and my fount of grace.

In the creed we confess that Jesus pursues us to the gates of hell to rescue us from the bad company that would keep us in chains. He is the helper beyond all others. The word "helper" is used more often for God than for any human helper, male or female.

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Being the Bride of Christ***

It is not by our own assent that we become the bride of Christ. Rather the Holy Spirit calls us by the Gospel, enlightens us with his gift, sanctifies and keeps us in the faith. And the Holy Spirit places us in a community we call the church. Jesus is no polygamist. Jesus is bridegroom of the church of which we are a part through the waters of baptism. No matter how shallow the water in the font, in those waters we are put to death with Christ and raised with him to be new brothers and sisters in the priesthood we all share in Christ Jesus.

In this marriage we daily renew our vows. The words currently in use in the marriage service are "with all that I am and all that I have." The old words better state the transaction. "I plight [pledge] thee my troth [trust] and with all my worldly goods I do thee endow." This is the happy exchange of which Luther spoke and wrote. By confession we daily return to the baptismal waters to renew our marriage vows to Christ. We give him all our worldly goods, our anger, pride, resentment, jealousies. The list is endless. Jesus can have them. I for one am tired of them. They are killing me. And Jesus hands over to us all his worldly goods, forgiveness, fellowship with God and one another in the church, blessings as enumerated in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere in scripture, and the promise that one day we shall be like him with a glorified body.

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Forming Community***

"The Power of We" was a multi-session workshop designed for married couples. It was written by David Ludwig. Ludwig made good use of Paul's admonition in Ephesians 5:21 "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." That is the heading under which Paul goes on to deal with the practical matters of husbands and wives, children and parents, masters and slaves. When I have used this text at Confirmation Camp we translate the

last one as employer and employee.

I think this same text can be the heading for forming Christian community. It has practical implications as mundane as singing a hymn I don't like with all the gusto I can manage and depending on my brothers and sisters to sing with the same gusto a hymn I treasure which they do not.

Forming community begins with the promises we made at Confirmation: "to live among God's faithful people, to hear his Word and share in his supper." Then the covenant promises address our apostolic calling, "to proclaim the good new of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, and to strive for justice and peace in all the world." This calling takes the form of work in local food pantries, mission trips, and partnerships with mission efforts around the world.

Luther Seminary professor Gary Simpson advocates yet another way in an essay entitled "God, Civil Society, and Congregations as Public Moral Companions." The essay appears in the book *Testing the Spirits: how theology informs the study of congregations*, edited by Patrick Keifert, also a Luther Seminary prof. Guided in part by this essay a group of lay people in the congregation I most recently served, Grace Lutheran in River Forest, IL, attempts to be a public moral companion for the community in an endeavor called "Faith Perspectives." The goal is to address a different controversial topic in two workshops each year with speakers from various perspectives. Topics addressed to date include lessons from the Great Recession, health care in America, immigration, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and violence against woman and girls. A priority is to create an atmosphere in which those attending can voice differing opinions. So far more than 50% of the 75 to 100 people attending each workshop are from the community. The remainder of the participants are from the congregation. It was not long before

other congregations in the community started similar endeavors. Simpson claims it is one of our vocations to be public moral companions. He writes that in so doing we participate in God's creative work, nurturing and sustaining temporal life in the world (*Testing the Spirits*, p. 87.).

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# **Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

## **MARRIAGE**

**Mark 10:2-16**

## **Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost Analysis by Peter Keyel**

2 Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" 3 He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" 4 They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." 5 But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. 6 But from the beginning of 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 they are no longer two, but one flesh. 9 Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." 10 Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. 11 He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; 12 and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits

adultery.” 13 People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. 14 But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. 15 Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” 16 And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Divorced from God**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Divorce***

The Pharisees are testing Jesus with this question because it is one that is important to them. They wanted to know how they could live as God desired. The disciples thought so, too, which is why they ask Jesus for clarification of his answer when there are no opponents around. We are also eager to hear what God wills for marriage and sift through our understanding of God's Law and Promise for how to act and what will be faithful to God. Bob Bertram takes up much of this in *The Divorce of Sex and Marriage: Sain Sex*. Much like the Pharisees, though, and likely the disciples, too, we already know the answer: Divorce is wrong. How can something that is morally wrong be enshrined in religious law?

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Hardness of Heart***

Jesus answers the previous question succinctly: It is for our hard hearts that this law exists. In more words, we justify it as being worse in all sorts of ways if we don't go through with the divorce, since it will result in other sins. But those sins, no matter how terrible, don't change the fact that in marriage two were united into one. If divorcees do remarry, they have to



contend with the fact that they have previously united with someone else. They will always have the memories and experiences with the previous person. There will be baggage that the first person never had to deal with. Our hearts are hardened from all of this and by both those conditions leading up to the divorce and the divorce itself.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Separated***

None of this is as God intends. God joined together two sinners for their mutual good, and it is through our own sins that we have turned this to evil. Even in leaving, we sin further and bring more death to the table. In breaking our vows, we have rebelled against God, and earn the fruits of that rebellion. The law—God's good Law—given for the hardness of our heart, brings death to the marriage that we have made sinful. We finally get the death of marriage that we desire, but in so many ways we get more death than we bargained for.

## **PROGNOSIS: Married to Christ**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Joined Together***

For our hardness of heart, God also does a new thing. God comes into the world, bears the death we all have coming and rises from it. In a world of separation, God Incarnate is separated from life itself—divorced from existence. And, through the cross, he joins us to his Christ. What God has joined together, we cannot separate!

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *One Flesh***

Joined now to Christ, new things happen. Our separation from God is healed. We are one flesh with Christ. Living as forgiven sinners, we no longer need to harden our hearts to survive, nor do we need to get out. Our hearts are healed into one flesh, and we are joined together with all of God's creation. We no longer have to harden our hearts against the pain and the problems. We don't have to live in fear of what the divorce or the previous

relationship has done to us. We've been made new!

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Marriage***

This newness also frees us to live, not as we have before, but trusting in our connectedness to Christ. We can live out our one flesh union with God, consummated in Communion, in our daily lives. We can proclaim the cure for our rebellion against God that underlies our hard hearts and drives divorce. Not just through being with and loving those trapped in similar situations, but telling all people, in word and deed, what God has done for us in Christ Jesus.

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# **Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**TUNED OUT, TUNED IN**

**Mark 10:2-16**

**Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Analysis by Chris Repp**

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13 People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. 14But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. 15Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.’ 16And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

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## DIAGNOSIS: Out of Touch

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *Testy (Testing, testing... Can you hear me?)*

The two episodes that are combined in this pericope seem, at first glance, to have nothing to do with one another, nor perhaps with us. A second look reveals that they have everything to do with each another, and maybe us too. Both the disciples and the Pharisees are “testy.” The Pharisees test Jesus to see if they can catch him in a contradiction. They’ve been out to get him since chapter 3. Are they also testy about John the Baptist’s preaching against marital irregularities, and Jesus’ association with him (chapters 1 and 6)? They already know the answer to their question. They have the law on their side, and they feel justified in their practice of dismissing their wives. Jesus knows this, it seems, because he’s the one who brings up

the law. (Who's testing whom?)

The disciples also probably feel justified in their testy dismissal of the children brought to Jesus. They are part of Jesus' inner circle, and they know that Jesus should not be bothered by such triviality. Jesus is about serious stuff. He's for grown-ups. And so they run interference.

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Hard-Hearted (Faulty Receivers)***

The Pharisees have cited the appropriate precedents and await what must surely be a ruling in their favor. But they are out of touch. This guy Jesus, it turns out, is not a strict constructionist. He wants to talk about legislative intent! And that intent reflects badly on them, the testers. The law that they think justifies their practice was made as a concession to their heart trouble, their *cardiosclerosis* (*sclerocardia*, actually, in the Greek).

The disciples are having a similar problem—bad reception: an unwillingness to receive those whom God would embrace and bless.

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Cut Off (Loss of Signal)***

Arteriosclerosis has underlying causes: bad diet and lack of exercise among them. The underlying cause of *cardiosclerosis* is God (so says Exodus). Separation from God's good intention for the creation carries deadly consequences, which no amount of legal wrangling will avoid.

Likewise, the disciple's problem with reception results from a loss of signal from God. Has God stopped broadcasting, or are they just tuned to the wrong station? Either way, like the pilot in New York last month who dialed in the wrong frequency before hitting a tourist helicopter, the results are deadly.

## PROGNOSIS: Tuned In

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Reconnected***

From the beginning, says Jesus, God created us for life—life with God and with one another. It is God who formed us from lifeless clay, who joins us together in marriage, forms our inmost parts and knits us together in our mothers' wombs (Ps. 139). And it is God who makes life out of our mortal separation from God by joining us to the one who endures the deadly consequence of that separation on our behalf. Like those awkward, ugly antennas on our houses, the cross of Christ—awkward and ugly—reestablishes our reception, tunes us back in to God.

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Receptive***

With our reception reestablished, we become—no surprise here—receptive. Not only are we in touch with God's good intentions for us, we are open to the world God so loves. Rather than seeing others as disposable, or an annoyance, we are open to loving them as God loves them, to be invested in their lives as God in Christ is invested in ours.

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *On the Air***

No longer running interference for Jesus—or creating interference for ourselves—we, like Abraham, know ourselves to be blessed in order to be a blessing to others, embraced by our Lord so that we may embrace others. We become relay stations for God's message of repentance and forgiveness. And in place of the old diet that gave us cardiosclerosis, we partake of and share—broadcast, even—the new diet of the “word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4, Deut. 8:3) together with the bread of life.

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# **Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

## **DOING AND UNDOING “THE SPLITS”**

**Mark 10:2-16**

**Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22)**

**Analysis by Eric W. Evers**

2Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” 3He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” 4They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.” 5But Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. 6But from the beginning of 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, 8and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. 9Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

10Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. 11He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; 12and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

13People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. 14But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the



little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. 15Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” 16And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Divided**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Splitsville***

“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” Mark tells us this was asked under false pretense; it was a test. Perhaps the Pharisees sought to catch Jesus between “family values” and a “literal understanding” of the Law. But their question betrays far more of their intentions than they could know. Look how it is framed; they might as well have asked, “Jesus, what can we get away with?” Not “what is good,” or “how can a husband and wife best love and serve each other,” but “what is permitted?” What are the limits? This is hardly a healthy approach for either marriage or children (a connection suggested especially by Mark’s juxtaposition of the divorce question and the blessing of the children).

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Hard-Hearted***

Jesus addresses the inner problem, though. It’s not about who can end a marriage. It’s about hardness of heart. And to whom is this accusation directed? Jesus says, “because of your hardness of heart...” Israel’s? Men’s? The religious leaders’? Whose hearts are being accused by Jesus? Of course, the answer is, ultimately, all of ours. It isn’t just that we treat marriage lightly. It’s that we are stubbornly set in our selfish ways. We look at others as means to the end of our own happiness and pleasant satisfaction. And so, in our hardness of heart, we look at others as disposable when they no longer meet our felt needs.

Moses gave a concession, trying to bring some restraint to a fallen human condition, which the “good religious folks” tried to turn into permission for self-serving use, and dismissal, of others.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Excluded***

Such hard-hearted, self-serving people can hardly be child-like receivers of the free gift of God’s kingdom, and so shall not enter it (10:15). This is blanket condemnation. Our casual approach to relationships is merely a symptom of our deeply self-serving nature. This nature is fundamentally incompatible with God’s kingdom, and so he excludes those who have it, meaning all of us.

## **PROGNOSIS: Reunited**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *A New Union***

But there’s another marriage at work here, a much happier union. We who are so willing to separate ourselves from what the Father intended now find ourselves captured by a new love. Christ comes and becomes our soul’s bridegroom. He embraces adulterers, divorcees, and sinners of all stripes in his mercy. What is ours – our sin and rejection, becomes his, upon the Cross. And what is his – righteousness and the joy of the kingdom, becomes ours by faith. God has put Christ and the sinner together, a happy exchange.

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Childlike Receivers***

So now the quest for “what we can get away with” can cease. We don’t have to worry about seeing how far we can push the law and still justify ourselves. We have been justified! Instead of chasing loopholes, we can pursue love. In Christ, we can see others as fellow human beings, rather than tools for our own happiness. Instead of fighting for our own justification and satisfaction, we can receive these, and all good gifts, as

thankful children.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Blessed and Blessing***

Let us return, then, to the presenting problem: what is the “righteous” approach to marriage and divorce? As child-like receivers, we are not the manufacturers of our own “happy” or “successful” marriages; good marriage is a gift. It is a work of God, something which God has “joined together.” We receive it, but we do not control it. And that means when the gift does not conform to our expectations, rather than viewing this as a threat to our right to happiness, we can see the cruciform shape of struggle as an opportunity to have our wills conformed to God’s. Even the most rooted in Christ will likely struggle on this road; even the most patient and prayerful may not “hold it together.” When this tragic outcome does occur, we dare not cast stones. Instead, we know that we can cast these persons onto the care of Christ, which will never be separated from them. As fellow sinners, we can point them to the holy bridegroom who blesses even the unrighteous. In a community such as this, all will find that when the suffering of this sinful age seems worst, Christ is most powerfully present. We cannot be separated from his righteousness. Let us cling to him. Whether it is in the giving of strength to persevere or grace to the one who stumbles, Jesus will not leave us, nor will he cease making his righteousness our own.

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**Seventeenth      Sunday      after**

# Pentecost

**Who Says? Moses and Jesus**

**Mark 10:2-16**

**Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost – Proper 22**

**Analysis by Michael Hoy**

2Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” 3He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” 4They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.” 5But Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. 6But from the beginning of 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, 8and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. 9Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” 10Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. 11He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; 12and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” 13People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. 14But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. 15Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” 16And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

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## DIAGNOSIS: Moses says...

### Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Is it lawful?*

The first sign of a problem is evident in the question of the Pharisees, “is it lawful...?” Already in our speech, in our questioning, there is an indication of life-behavior that is being governed by particular rules and/or principles that have legalistic roots. It is “legalistic,” as we will see, because it does not take seriously just how damning the law can be. The confessors called it *opinio legis*, the “leaning toward the law.” The problem is not only a problem for the Pharisees. It is deeply rooted in the lives of Jesus’ disciples, who themselves question Jesus (v. 10).

### Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Testing (and tested)*

With this legalistic inquiry, the Pharisees are seeking to “test him [Jesus]” (v. 2). But they are unaware how, even in the questioning, they are themselves being tested. Jesus can perceive their hearts and responds with a question that exposes the source of their life’s inquiries: what Moses (the Law, the Torah) says. Do they know what Moses says? Absolutely! But they are only able to establish a surface relationship with Moses. They can quote Moses, but they really do not understand him. And Jesus establishes just how much they (we?) are being critiqued by that very Law of Moses at the level of our “heart”: “*Because of your hardness of heart Moses said...*”

### Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *What God says and does (via the Torah)*

Jesus doesn’t stop with Moses. He goes on to another section of the Torah, the book of Genesis, to explain what *God* did “in the beginning.” “*God* made them male and female.” “What *God* has

joined together, let no one separate.” At the root of our problem is our alienation from what God has intended all along. One may note, in the specifics of this text on the matter of divorce and the status of children, Jesus’ own testing of the heart (also for the disciples) underscores a righting of relationship, and leaving no option for superiority of males, or the inferiority of women and children. There is “righting” by God on the grounds of the Torah itself. But because it is righted in the Torah does not make it finally right for us-not even ultimately for those who have been regarded inferior in life. It only leaves us judged.

## **PROGNOSIS: Jesus says...**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** – *What God says and does in Jesus*

The critical judgment is overcome by Jesus’ own response to those who are judged by the Law: “Do not stop them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.” The fact that it is children who serve as the foil to the legalistic desire to get justified is fitting. Children are incapable of defending themselves. This is precisely the case for all of us (legalists all) who are under the Law’s judgment! Jesus takes us into his (cruciform) arms and hands, and blesses us.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution)** – *Receiving (= Passing)*

While we have been restricted by our failing the test of Moses and the Law, in Christ we get to pass into blessing by faith. This is the “receiving” of the kingdom of God as a gift, like children who depend upon a protector. Trusting that Jesus the Christ is the one who covers our beings means that we don’t have to defend, or justify, ourselves. Do we know what Jesus says? Absolutely! It is a Word of promise which we receive by faith.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution)** – *Answering with*



*blessing*

For all who are questioning in life “is it lawful?”, there is an answer that we can bring that can see them well beyond the law: an answer of blessing. What we have to bear is an answer to a much more profound question behind “what is lawful,” namely, “what makes *right*?” The righteousness of Christ is a gift freely given, though it cost Christ plenty (and may cost us in the sharing). But the final answer is an answer that enfolds one and all in the loving arms and hands of Jesus the Christ, using our arms and hands as the “body of Christ” in the world.

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## **Twentieth                      Sunday                      after Pentecost**

**The deadly trap of – Is it lawful?**

**Mark 10:2-16**

**Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost  
analysis by Ed Schroeder**

Sabbatarians,

The Gospel appointed in the RCL for next Sunday, Pentecost 20 (October 5), is Mark 10:2-16. Just in case “ochlos” texts from Mark are getting to be a bit much for you—the term’s there again in 10:1—I’ll also try my hand at a Crossings matrix for the Second Lesson: Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12. But first to Mark.

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## PROLEGOMENA for the text from Mark 10:

1. The “crowds” (10:1) who are the audience here are once more the “ochloi.”
2. The ones diagnosed by Jesus on this dicey issue of divorce are the Pharisees. The clear contrast to them are the children of 13-16 who don’t “do” anything except allow Jesus to “do” to them his embrace, laying on of hands, and finally, blessing.
3. Early on in the text are three diagnostic indices: obsession with the “Is it lawful?” question, testing Jesus, hardness of hearts. Those three items could almost serve as the three diagnostic stages of our Crossing matrix. See below.
4. The disciples are (again) on the wrong side, and that’s true in both parts of the pericope. Re: divorce: After Jesus has “settled” the divorce issue with the Pharisees, “the disciples asked him again about this matter.” Whatever the Pharisees were supposed to have heard, the disciples didn’t. My own imaging of that episode goes like this: “Ahem. Jesus, what was that all about? Is divorce lawful or isn’t it?” The Pharisee heresy is theirs too: wanting to live by the law, and therefore wanting every jot and tittle of that law “perfectly clear.”
5. Re: the children: When the disciples shoo the children away from Jesus, they signal that they are still clueless about the “Kingdom of God,” about Jesus’ role in it, and why kids (ochlos, of course) qualify. The posture for “receiving [important verb] the kingdom of God” reverses the frequent admonition: “Don’t just stand there, do something!” Here the counsel is: “Don’t (keep on) doing something, but just stand there, and let the Ochlos

Messiah do his deed of blessedness on you.”

6. Jesus did not make his blessing the kids contingent on their even understanding what he was doing. Their “faith” was simply letting him do it to them. Faith = the posture of receptivity. Au contraire the Pharisees who seek to test him, thus reversing the roles of active subject and receiving subject in their encounter with Jesus. Up till now this is true of the disciples too as Mark portrays them. It doesn’t get any better either when later in this chapter Jesus make the third passion prediction.
7. This text is mis-read when seen as “Jesus’ teaching on marriage, divorce and remarriage.” It is well nigh impossible to take that perspective on the text without falling into the legalism trap. Despite the alleged piety of wanting to get Jesus’s own “straight” answer to this “Is it lawful?” question, it mis-reads this Messiah fundamentally. It is another attempt to “test” (rather than to receive) him. Throughout the Gospels Jesus never answers such questions. For to do so would pull legalists even deeper into their entrapment. The ochlos Messiah came not to trap sinners, but to bless them (v.16).

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## A CROSSINGS MATRIX FOR MARK 10

**DIAGNOSIS: The deadly trap of “Is it lawful?”**

### **STAGE 1**

Obsessed with the question: Is it lawful? Living life by that fundamental rubric.

### **STAGE 2**

But law is only for the hard-hearted (whatever all that might mean). So the legalists’ question exposes the legalists’ heart. Doubtless a diagnosis they would protest. Yet when legalists’

hearts brings them to “test” Jesus, rather than “receive” him, the case is made for that heart’s hardness. Testing Jesus is a test-case for exposing a legalist heart.

### **STAGE 3**

At the deepest level to pursue the “is it lawful?” question is to expose that the questioner—despite his protests—is already breaking the first (sic!) commandment. To the Pharisees Jesus says point blank: sundered marriages contradict God’s will “from the beginning.” So even to ask for what’s permissible on divorce is to be already on the wrong side of the fence from God. In his re-run for the disciples Jesus leads them via the adultery commandment to the same end-point: breaking the adultery injunction is breaking the first commandment. Beset by divorce, frazzled marriages, sequential adultery, etc. hard-hearted sinners—today as well—need more law like they need a hole in the head. Which is what more and better law finally is. What such sinners need is rescue from the law’s constant accusations, call it the blessedness of the Kingdom of God.

**PROGNOSIS: Receiving a blessing beyond “what is lawful.”**

### **STAGE 4**

No surprise, the Ochlos Messiah brings blessing for those cursed by the law’s unending accusation and their curious addiction to that law nonetheless. Jesus is God’s Kingdom coming, God’s mercy-management of sinners in place of God’s otherwise “lawful” counting trespasses and paying sinners what their just deserts are. Christ is God’s blessing in place of the law’s curse. In his cross and resurrection he sweet-swaps his blessing for our curse.

### **STAGE 5**

Again, no surprise, the only way to receive this mercy-regime from God is to let his Christ do it to us. Call it faith, the posture of receptivity.

## **STAGE 6**

Disciples who've received Christ's "hands-on" blessing replace "Is it lawful?" living with mercy-management as their lifestyle—for themselves, for others. Especially do they do so with the ochlos in their lives, not begrudging them Christ's blessing, but embracing them and bestowing it upon them—hands on!