

Freedom from Legalism
Pastor Ashley Brown
Wasilla Bible Church
March 2, 2008

Today we are going to be in the gospel of Mark, as we have been throughout this whole year. And we're gonna be in chapter 10 today. Before we get into that, I just ask that you would join me in prayer for just a moment.

Lord God,

We do come before You and recognize the fact that truly we are sinners. Lord, You came and You died for us, and You did that because of Your love for us and because ultimately You want us to know You and to praise You. Lord, I ask that You would help us to see the truth that is in here. Give us eyes to see it; Lord, give us minds to understand it; and God, I'd ask that You'd give us hearts to hold onto it, and to make it a part of our lives. Give me the words to say.

And I pray this in Your name. Amen.

Ok, Mark chapter 10—over the course of the year we've been going through Mark, and we've come to a point in time where, at the tail-end of chapter 8 on through today and through all of chapter 10, Jesus has been explaining what it means to follow Him. He's been explaining that 'if you want to follow Me, this is what it will mean.' And we're now coming to a point in time where He's still doing that, but it's kind of almost as though He's wrapping this up and He's comparing it to a few other things. And so what we're gonna look at today is a continuation of this. If you are a follower of Jesus, I tell you—you can learn something here, because this...it applies to you. If you wanna follow Jesus, this is part of what's entailed, this is part of what's expected, this is part of what's promised—is what we're gonna look at today.

If you aren't yet a follower of Jesus, this also applies to you. Why? Because if you ever come to the point that you decide you want to be a follower of Jesus, if you want to be a Christian, this is part of what it means.

So that's what we're gonna look at today. And we'll start in Mark chapter 10, and what we'll do is we'll just read through this a bit. And we'll read through it, and we'll stop and explain and look at it, and then we'll read through a little bit more, and we'll go on like that. And it starts off in Mark chapter 10, verse 1.

He...

...this is Jesus...

...set out from there and went to the region of Judah, and across the Jordan. Then crowds converged upon Him again, and as He usually did, He began teaching them once more. Some Pharisees approached Him to test Him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

He replied to them, "What did Moses command you?"

They said, "Moses permitted us to write divorce papers and send her away."

But Jesus told them, "He wrote this commandment for you because of the hardness of your hearts. But from the beginning of creation God made them male and female. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together man must not separate."

Now, in the house, the disciples questioned Him again about his matter. And He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her. Also, if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

We're gonna stop right here for just a moment, ok? And we're just gonna look at this. First of all, before we get into this, I know that probably there are people in here who have been through the pain of divorce. In fact, if statistics are at all accurate, probably at least one in four of us in here have experienced this personally, in a very real and intimate way in our own lives and marriages. And so, in many ways, this is an uncomfortable, uneasy part of this passage to address; but it's in here for a reason. And we can learn truth about marriage and divorce; but guess what? We aren't studying a whole series of passages on marriage and divorce right now. Instead, what we are studying is we are going through the passage here in Mark, and we're looking at what he wants to communicate. And in this instance, I'll tell you right now, divorce is not Mark's primary focus. It's an illustration of what his point is.

And so I hope it's ok if I just lay this foundation real quick. We aren't gonna spend a whole bunch of time sitting here talking and debating about divorce and when is it lawful, because in so doing we will have missed the point of the passage. I hope that what we can all agree on is this—that probably we can look at it and we can say 'You know what? Divorce is not a good thing.' I have yet to meet anybody that I have known, anybody I have ever talked to, who has gone through the pain of divorce and said, "You know what? That was a good thing. When I got married I planned on getting divorced. That's what I planned on doing. I thought I'd get married so I could get divorced a few years later." That's probably not what people thought, going into marriage.

And so we look at it and we say, "You know what? We understand that there is pain involved." But that's not Mark's point. So what we're gonna do is we're gonna look at Mark's point. And what we're gonna...and Mark's point is this—there is hypocrisy and legalism.

This situation here is just an illustration of that point. And where we find this is this. First of all, the Pharisees—they come to Jesus; and they came to Him in order to test Him. And they started asking when is it lawful, is it lawful to divorce your wife? When is it lawful? They wanted to know. What they wanted Jesus to do is they wanted Him to go ahead and say, 'Ok, here is the line in the sand, right here. So long as you don't cross that line, if you go all the way up to here, so long as you don't cross that line it's ok.' They wanted to know just how bad it had to get before they could get away with divorcing their wives.

They put it in this frame of mind because, in this culture, it's pretty much assumed that a woman is not going to divorce a man, for the most part. It's assumed that the man will divorce the woman. But here's the thing—Jesus, He responds in a very interesting way. He says, 'Here's the thing—you've totally missed the point. Yeah, Moses allowed this. He allowed divorce. But he allowed it because your hearts were hard. You were sinful. You wouldn't have it any other way. The way God originally designed it was that you two would live for life, loving one another. That's the way He designed it. And you're focused on the wrong thing.'

The Pharisees are wanting to see this line. It makes me think...my daughter, Charlotte... We were in North Carolina and my wife had just finished mopping the kitchen floor, or something like this, ok? My wife is mopping the kitchen floor. She gets done, and Charlotte wants to go in the kitchen. And Sarah, my wife, looks at her and she says, "Charlotte, don't go in the kitchen. I just mopped." And Charlotte wants to know, "Well, why can't I go in there?" And Sarah just says, "Charlotte, don't go in there. I just mopped."

And I piped in at this moment, and I said, "Charlotte, if you step on the linoleum you will get a spanking." So what does Charlotte do? My daughter...she walks right up to it, and she sits her bottom down on the carpet right next to the kitchen, she pulls her knees up to her chest and everything, and her toes just kind of start inching along. And she slides right up to it so her toes are sitting there, right on the edge of the carpet, right...right there in front of the linoleum. If she went a hair further she would have been on the linoleum, and I'm sittin' here watchin' her the whole time. She's watchin' me and she's goin' up, goin' up, goin' up until she gets right on the edge. And then she just sits there, happy as can be.

Now here's the thing that I would ask you. Was my daughter obeying me? Yes, she was, by the letter of the law. She did not disobey the directions that she'd been given. But what was goin' on in her heart? In her heart she was not at all obeying us. In fact, she was doing every...she was like, 'I'm gonna push it as far as I can; I'm gonna go as far as I can away from what you want me to do. So I just stop just short of where I'm gonna get in trouble.'

That's what the Pharisees are tryin' to do here. They're sayin', 'How far can we go; how much can we get away with before we get in trouble with God?' And what Jesus says is 'You've totally missed the point. You shouldn't be focusing on exactly where this line is. You should be running in the complete opposite direction, as hard as you can, for what God's intent is.'

The thing is, in here it uses the case of divorce and remarriage and everything else. But that's just an instance. This happens in all kinds of areas of our lives. I know. I'm guilty of this. And this is the thing—that's why it's so hypocritical when we get wrapped up in legalism. Because we think 'Oh, we haven't crossed the line,' when inside our hearts we're getting as far away from God as we think we can get away with. And so, though we may not have broken the letter of the law, we've totally stomped all over the spirit of it.

Happens in other areas of life. I mean, it really...you look. It can be in a relationship. You might ask, 'How far can I go in this relationship before I finally cross that line? I'm gonna push it as far as I can, but I won't cross that line.' Guess what? You've already sinned in your heart, because you're trying to figure out how far you can get away from God and get away with it. It happens in business practices. How far can I push that before I cross some legal limit or some moral limit?

See, the thing is...when we start trying to define these nice, neat, little lines so that we can feel good about ourselves for staying inside the boundaries, we're getting hypocritical because we've already turned our backs on God and we're heading away from Him. And Jesus says, 'That's not the point. If you want to follow Me, that's not the way to do it. Your hardness of heart has turned you away, and you should be focusing on God's intent instead.'

Let's go on. We're actually gonna skip over a few verses here. We'll come back to 'em, ok? So don't lose me here. We're actually gonna pick up in verse 17 again. And you'll see why we're skipping over this and coming back in just a moment. But in verse 17 it says

As He...

...Jesus...

...was setting out on a journey, a man ran up, knelt down before Him, and asked Him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to have eternal life?"

"Why do you call Me good?" Jesus asked him. "No one is good but one—God. You know the commandments, 'Don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, do not bear false witness, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.'"

And he said to Him, "Teacher, I've kept all of these from my youth."

Then, looking at him, Jesus loved him and said to him, "You lack one thing. Go, sell all that you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow Me."

But he was stunned at this demand and went away grieving, because he had many possessions.

Jesus looked around and said to His disciples, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" But the disciples were astonished at His words. Again Jesus said to them, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."

So they were even more astonished, saying to one another, "Then who can be saved?"

And looking at them, Jesus said, "With men it's impossible, but not with God, because all things are possible with God."

We see another side to legalism here. Basically, we see the emptiness of it. We see the emptiness of it. You have this rich young ruler, and he...he...he's powerful, he's got money, he's been a good guy. He is just a stand-up good guy. And he comes, and he runs up, and he falls at Jesus' feet. And he says, 'What must I do to be saved? What must I do to be saved?' And what ends up happening is Jesus says, 'Well, you know the commandments.' Jesus knows what's in this guy's heart. And He says, 'Oh, you know the commandments. Don't murder, don't sleep with other people's wives, you know, honor your father, mother, all these things.' And he says, 'You know what? I've done all that from my youth. But what do I have to do to be saved?'

See, there's an emptiness here in this man's life; even though he's got all the money he could wish for, even though he's gained money, he's gained power, he's been a good, moral person for all of his life, he's followed the rules, he still knows deep down inside that he's empty. He still hasn't got it. He still isn't satisfied. It hasn't filled that void in his life. And he says, 'What do I have to do? I've done everything I can think of. I've followed the rules. I've gained all the wealth, all the money, all the power that I can, and it still isn't enough.'

And Jesus says this. He says, 'You still lack one thing; there's one thing you haven't done. Give up all your money and come follow me.'

Now don't lose me here. God may be asking you to give up all of your money—He may. But that's not the focus of this, see, because for this man...this man's money and his power was a *functional savior*. That was where he found all his significance. That is where he found his worth. He felt like 'You know what? If I just have this, I'm good enough. I can be enough. I have to have this.' And he couldn't let it go. And what ends up happening is, it says 'he was stunned at this and he went away grieved.'

We have all kinds of functional saviors in our life. It may be relationships; it may be an activity or an addiction; it may be a job. Wherever you find your self worth—it may be your family, how good your kids are, how good of a mom or a dad you are; it may be...I don't know what it is. But it's where you find your self worth. It's how you identify yourself, and you say 'You know what? Everything else falls away in life, at least I still have this.'

And what Jesus says is 'You know what? If it's not Me you've gotta let it go.' And this guy went away sad because he wasn't willing to let go of what mattered to him most, so that he could hold on to what truly matters most in all of life—and that is Jesus. And so he went away sad.

I can totally identify with this; because in all honesty—I've said it before when I've been up here—I am a recovering Pharisee. I am...I can so identify with the Pharisees. I can so identify with this rich young ruler. Why? Because for much of my life I was absolutely determined to figure out, ok exactly where is that line. Why? So that I could go all the way up to it, and I wouldn't cross it, but I'd still be a good person. I could still justify myself. I could still explain, or I could still tell my self, that 'You know what? I didn't really cross that line, so I'm ok.' Yet I still felt and I still knew in my heart, I was like this rich young ruler. I'd done all of this, but I said, 'You know what? I'm still empty. It still doesn't matter. It isn't enough, and I'm still hungry. And there's something else, and I know it.' And it wasn't until I finally said, 'You know what? I'm willing to let go—for Jesus, and just go with Him and trust in Him.' That's when the emptiness was filled.

And you see, what the disciples...the disciples end up saying this. They say, 'You know what? If those Pharisees who have all the lines, all the legal limits, figured out, if they can't make it; if this rich young ruler who's done everything right, and by all measurable indications he has been very blessed by God—if he can't be saved, then who in the world can? Who in the world can be saved?'

What Jesus ends up telling them, and this is actually kind of...this is where we're gonna jump back a few verses, is there is a freedom from legalism. Jesus offers freedom from legalism. Here in verses 13-16, they're sitting around. And this actually occurs between these two things. But the reason that it's put in here is because it's being contrasted with this legalism on either side. This is kind of the antithesis of what it is to be legalistic and wrapped up in trying to do and be good enough. And what Jesus...what happens is this. There were some people who were bringing children to Jesus so that He could touch them. They wanted Him to bless the children. But the disciples of Jesus, they rebuked them. They said, 'You know what? He doesn't have time for them. Get them away. Get 'em away; these are just kids—get 'em away. He doesn't have time for that.'

And Jesus, He sees what His disciples are doing, and He was indignant and He said to them

"Let the little children come to Me. Don't stop them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I assure you, whoever does not welcome the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." And after taking them in His arms, He laid His hands on them and blessed them.

What Jesus says is, 'You know what? If you want to make it into the kingdom of heaven, if you ever want to be there, then guess what? You have to come to Me like a little child.' It's not somethin' where you have to have all these legalistic rules figured out, where you have to make sure that you walk this little tightrope so that you don't fall off either side, or else you aren't going to make it. No. Jesus says you have to come like a little child.

How does a little kid come? Like this—this is a picture of me and Liam, my son [*Ashley is tossing Liam in the air.*] This is in North Carolina. My son, Liam, he loves to fly. That's what he calls it. I can't make him fly quite as much as I once could, because he's getting bigger. This is probably six months, a year ago. I just take him and throw him up as high in the air. What you can't see on this picture is that Liam just has this massive grin on his face, and he is just yellin' and screamin' and laughin' with all kinds of joy.

Jesus says, 'You know what? That's what it's like. You gotta come to me like this.'

See, when Liam comes to me and he wants to fly, he just holds his hands up and he's like "AAAH??!" You know. And so I'm like, "You wanna fly?" "Uh huh! Uh huh!" Ok, here we go. And I'll throw him up. Liam knows he can't jump that high up in the air. And when he's up there, flyin' around with...laughin', screamin', hands up in the air, he doesn't even think about the fact that you know what? If Dad doesn't catch me, this is gonna hurt! He doesn't think about it. It doesn't even enter his mind. See, there is simple faith and trust in me. And I'll tell you what—I love it. I love it! This is one of the coolest things in the whole world, is that I have this little kid, this big, that thinks that I am the biggest, strongest, toughest thing in the world. He has no thought of the fact that 'You know what? If Dad throws me, he can't catch me.'

Jesus says, 'You have to come to Me like this.' It's not about thinking 'You know what? I can do it all. I've gotta make all the rules, and everything else.' No. It's the fact that you come and you say, 'You know what? I'll never be able to do it on my own. I'll never be able to jump that high. I'll never be able to get this ride, so to speak, unless if somebody else does it for me. And God is the only one—my Father, He is the only one who can do this for me, and He is the only one who has the strength to catch me.'

There's freedom from legalism that Jesus offers, where you can just come along for the ride that He is gonna take you on. But there's also a reward. And what we're gonna see is this. Read with me in verse 28.

Peter began to tell Him...

...Jesus...

"Look, we left everything and followed You."

This is after Jesus has said, you know, he needed to give...the rich young ruler needed to give up everything. And Peter says, 'Well, we gave everything up, and we followed You,' kind of almost as if, 'Well, we're good enough, aren't we?' And Jesus tells 'em, He says

"I assure you, there is no one who is left house, brothers or sisters, mothers or fathers, children or fields because of Me and the gospel who will not receive a hundred times more now, at this time; houses, brothers, sisters, mothers and children, fields, with persecutions, and eternal life in the age to come. But many who are first will be last, and last, first."

What Jesus tells us is this—'Guess what? I wanna give you abundant life now, and in the life to come.' So often we, as Christians, and I am often guilty of this as well, we want to try and focus on things like "Oh, become a Christian. Why? Why do you want to become a Christian? So you can go to heaven."

What Jesus says is that's not it. That's not the sum total of it. Why? Because it starts here, now, at this time—at this time. This is such an important thing, because here's the thing. If you aren't following Jesus, then you are missing out on life, here, today. It's not a matter of 'Oh, gee, I'll wait and I'll go to heaven later.' Guess what? You are missing out on life, and you aren't getting the fullest of it if you aren't following Jesus with all you've got. The thing is this—this isn't somethin' where Jesus says, 'Ok, well give all your money to the church and I'm gonna give you a bunch more.' No. That's not what He's talking about. In fact, it's interesting. Here He even says you'll also have persecutions. See, this isn't some pie-in-the-sky, rose-tinted glasses, everything's gonna be ok if you just follow Me. 'In fact,' Jesus says, 'guess what? You will get so much more in return than anything you've ever given up. It costs you everything to follow Me, but you will get so much more in return. But part of what will happen is you will have persecutions. You will suffer.'

See, the thing is, if God is going to grow you, He's going to take you into the fire. You don't purify gold by just rubbing it, and coddling it, and keeping it tucked away safe and soft pillow-cushioned, air-tight temperature-controlled case. You stick it into the fire and burn off the impurities. And that's what God says 'I'm gonna allow to happen to you.' But what Jesus says is this. 'Listen, you have to give up everything to follow Me.'

It's just like Liam. The moment he comes to me and wants me to throw him up in the air, he's giving up all control over anything he has. He's putting total trust in me. He doesn't have a say in where he goes at that point, because he's just at my mercy to throw him wherever; and he's trusting that I'm gonna do that and I'm gonna catch him. Jesus says it's the same way. But what ends up happening is this, as He says, 'You know what? You give up all control, but you're gonna get so much more in return.'

You follow Jesus, He doesn't promise to heal your disease; He doesn't promise to take care of your money issues; He doesn't promise to, you know, whatever relationship problems you have will automatically be fixed, whatever addictions you have, whatever, that you will automatically become the perfect person and your life will be just peachy. But He does tell us that we can have abundant life.

What is that? It's not material possessions; it's something deeper. You look at this guy, who was the rich young ruler; we have this same sort of thing today in so many ways. Recently Heath Ledger, young actor, OD'd on antidepressants and all kinds of other stuff. Why? He had everything that you would think would make a person happy in life. He had money; he had fame; he could get anything and anyone he wanted at any time. But he still had an empty hole inside of his soul.

What Jesus says is 'Guess what? I'm not gonna make your life perfect. But you can have peace; you can have assurance; you can have joy even in the midst of that; and you can enjoy the ride.'

Just like Liam. I mean, here is Liam...he's sittin' here, and he's flyin' up in the air, and Liam...he really is in danger when he's flying. If I don't catch him, he's gonna be hurt pretty bad. That's just the way it is. But at the same time, he totally trusts me, and I do catch him.

There is such joy in following Jesus. There is a quietness and a peace, even in the midst of difficulty and suffering, where you say, 'You know what? This is worth it.' And so I would invite you in this way...if you are not yet a follower of Jesus, consider it. What I'll tell you is this—it's not going to make everything perfect in your life. In fact, what Jesus pretty much tells us is probably persecutions...they'll increase. Why? Because Jesus, God, will allow you to go through suffering. But he says 'You know what? I've paid for everything.'

There are two types of religion in this world, and we see 'em right here in this passage today. There's only two types. One is spelled 'do'—do. It's all about what I do, what you do, to get good with God; to make it where God will accept me; to become God; to be God; to whatever. It's all about 'me following the rules and doing things right.' And what He says is 'Guess what? With men it's impossible. You'll never get there.' And that's why you have these people who still have emptiness. And what Jesus says is 'Guess what? There's another type of religion, and it will fill that emptiness. And it's spelled 'DONE'—done.' Why? Because Jesus has done everything for you. He's paid the price, He's sacrificed Himself, He's shed His blood. And basically what it is...it's like this courtroom scene where here it is. You are on trial, and Jesus, who is a perfect person, He steps out and He says, "I take his responsibility. I take his place. I will pay his price." And He has you go, and then He accepts the punishment. And there is such joy, and peace, and fulfillment that can be found in that. And Jesus...that's what He wants us to become a part of; not get wrapped up in legalism—he wants us to experience His grace and His peace, to trust him and have faith in Him like a little child.

In just a moment I'm gonna pray. If you'd like to come up, talk with us, I'll be up here; there'll be a couple of other pastors, elders, that sort of thing, to talk to you about whatever you may want to talk about. We invite you to come up. Let's pray.

Lord God,

I thank You for this day. I thank You for the fact that You do love us, You do... You have paid for our sins, You have paid for a way for us to have abundant life and have it now. You call us to give up everything, but You promise so much more in return.

God, I ask that You would help us to realize that life, realize it now, realize what You have for us. And we pray this in Your name.

Amen.