

This leaves us with something of a conundrum. It is possible that the inclusion of the word 'defraud' was a mistake in Mark, but whether this is true or not, the one thing that the man would have immediately noticed was that Jesus omitted to mention 'covetousness'. When he replied to Jesus, 'I have kept all these since my youth,' there must have been something of a puzzle in his mind; why had Jesus not mentioned the last of the Ten Commandments which was usually learned together with the other social commandments (numbers 4 to 10)?

The reason the man went away shocked at Jesus reply to him was that He exposed the man's personal desire for money and wealth. He was not prepared to give this up, and his desire for this wealth amounted to covetousness; Jesus exposed that fact that although the man had done all he could to be a good Jew and be obedient to everything God required, his covetous love of money was more important than his love of God. He was not prepared to give up what he had so that he could receive it back, with the gift of everlasting life in the Kingdom of God. He 'coveted' this more than eternal life.

Application

These verses of Mark's Gospel present some of the most exacting challenges to a Christian today. The first challenge to 'be like little children' in order to enter the Kingdom of God flies in the face of almost every natural instinct we have, even for the proclamation of the Gospel. I have heard it said very many times that if the Gospel is to be presented to the world today, we must do this in culturally relevant ways, and to some extent, I agree. However, this so often boils down to loud music, 'cafe' style worship, fragmented churches which do not meet together and 'big' characters leading large churches doing lots of work. I do not necessarily have anything against experimenting with styles of church life in order to bring the Gospel to people, but what Jesus said about the Kingdom (and with great emphasis and passion in this essential passage of teaching) seems a long way from much that I see done. Doubtless, in each church there are selfless workers whose efforts are not visible, but Jesus says here that we should not be ashamed of showing the world how to find God's Kingdom and eternal life in a childlike way; unselfconscious, open to learning, and content to be dependent upon others. We will certainly know the Gospel is being preached in our lands when the brash arrogance of our world today is challenged not head on, but with open and demonstrable humility, simplicity and sacrificial service.

We will also know it is being preached when the possession of wealth, money, property and goods are willingly abandoned by the church in preference for winning people for the Kingdom of God. Jesus challenged the man who came to Him with the truth. He was unashamed to call this man to aspire to the childlike qualities of humility, dependence and simplicity which would enable him to be a disciple. It was a path which had no place for the power and wealth with which he was familiar, but a way of sacrificial service which, like Jesus' own pathway, was prepared to give away everything for the sake of one soul looking to enter the Kingdom of God.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Are children always a good example of the characteristics required to enter the Kingdom? In what ways are they not good examples?
2. How would you answer the question; 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'
3. Discuss in your group whether the churches of your country have too much wealth to be able to meet Jesus requirements for the practice of good discipleship.

Discipleship

If you are part of a church group, then do your best to introduce a discussion about the use of wealth in the church. If you are not, try to discuss this with a friend or family member. Look at everything, from the levels of income and wealth within your congregation to the value of your church buildings, musical instruments and technology etc. Try to move the conversation on to consider how you could witness to the Living God in today's world without this collective and individual 'wealth'. Ask the question, 'what does Jesus ask us to do to proclaim the Kingdom of God?'

Final Prayer

Save us, dear Lord, from assuming that we know what we are doing, and so failing to invite You to be with us in our daily lives. Give us the true humility which welcomes You and takes Your advice at all times, because we know Your voice and we trust You. Save us dear Lord; AMEN

Prayer

Great and powerful Lord, listen to the cries of those who call on You for help when they have been attacked by evil; disturbed by lies, frightened by wicked people or troubled by malicious deeds. Deliver them from the hands of their enemies, from slander, gossip and offence; and show them the power of Your salvation, through Jesus Christ our Lord: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Self and Sin

Scripture often describes a sin of 'stubbornness' amongst the Lord's people. Ask yourself whether you are sometimes too stubborn about things, especially matters to do with any church to which you belong. Pray, and ask the Lord to reveal to you whether there is indeed any stubbornness within you. If so, then confess the sin and ask for the Lord's forgiveness.

Meditation

- Tell us, preacher, what God has laid upon your heart;
 - Show that you have searched your soul to bring His Word to us.
- Don't tell us all about yourself;
 - Inspire us with your testimony about the Lord you know and love.
- Don't tell us what you think about Scripture;
 - Expound the Word, and explain the depth of its mystery and power.
- Don't tell us to make the Gospel relevant;
 - Tell us how Jesus loves and saves our bruised and hurting world.
- Don't tell us how to respond to your sermon;
 - Tell us that the heart of Jesus is always open to all, especially now.
- Preach a sermon from your heart, and from God's heart;
 - A word which awakens earth and quakes the very gates of Hell.

Bible Study - Mark 10:13-22

¹³ Now they were bringing children to Him so He might touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ When Jesus saw this He was indignant, and said to them, 'Let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to children such as these. ¹⁵ Amen, I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.' ¹⁶ Then He took them in His arms and blessed them, and laid His hands on them.

¹⁷ And as He was setting out on His journey, a man ran up and knelt before Him with this request, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' ¹⁸ Jesus answered him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: "You shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, give false testimony or defraud. Honor your father and mother."'²⁰ 'Teacher,' he replied, 'I have kept all these since my youth.'²¹ Jesus looked straight at him. He loved him, so He said, 'You are lacking in one thing: go and sell all you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then, come and follow me.'²² But he was shocked by what Jesus said, and went away sorrowful, for he had great wealth.

Review

Our reading describes two incidents used by Jesus to teach the disciples about true discipleship. Both stories are well known, firstly, Jesus' warm acceptance of small children, and secondly, the enquiry of a wealthy man about 'eternal life' (10:17). Both of these stories are important, and the second has consequences that Jesus sought to explore further with the disciples (see tomorrow's reading). Today, however, we learn from them that entry into the Kingdom is a gift from God (10:15), and that it is also a matter of being obedient to God's call and also His will (10:21). It may appear that there is a contradiction between these two, because it does not require effort to receive a gift, but effort is certainly required to be obedient! However, this would be to oversimplify what Jesus said, for the gifts of God have always

challenged their recipients to respond with the hard work of obedience and trust. Submissive acceptance and active obedience are both needed for entry into the Kingdom of God.

The story about Jesus receiving children is captivating, for behind it there are some Greek words in Mark's text that indicate a rare and powerfully emotive response from Jesus. Verse 14 says that Jesus was 'indignant', perhaps even 'furiously incensed', and this is the only place where the Gospels indicate that Jesus was so deeply offended. Why was this so? Perhaps it was because just prior to this, the Pharisees had interrupted Jesus (10:1f.) while He had been teaching about the fate awaiting those who put a stumbling block in the way of 'one of the least of these who believe in me' (9:42). He had also just warned the disciples not to be insular, but have an open attitude to the potential of the Gospel (9:38-41). How awful, therefore, that the disciples appeared to have failed to understand this, and they were now placing 'stumbling blocks' in the way of eager parents bringing their children to Jesus! With solemnity, Jesus spoke words that have meant a great deal to so many over the years; 'Let the children come to me ...' (10:14) and proceeded to use the children as an example of access into God's Kingdom. They were open, trusting and receptive of what God offered, and without such an attitude, how would anyone enter the Kingdom and receive the gifts of salvation and eternal life?

The second story is also fascinating. A wealthy man came to Jesus, sincerely wanting to become one of His disciples. He ran up to Jesus and knelt before Him with an attitude of earnest and diligent enquiry. We are tempted to wonder whether, if the disciples were not managing to understand Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom, would this man meet with Jesus' approval? The conversation began strangely; the man offered Jesus a respectful greeting by calling Him 'good' (10:17), but then asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life'? To our ears, there might be little wrong with this, but Jesus immediately challenged the man over his use of the word 'good!' We will discuss this further in the full study, but it is possible that Jesus was testing the man's real commitment to God. Jesus asked the man about the Ten Commandments, the heart of God's moral law, and the standard against which all life was measured (10:19); but although the man said he had kept these, Jesus challenged him about his wealth and status. The man was shocked, because he had never made any connection between this and God's call on his life, and he was unwilling to accept Jesus' challenge and leave everything behind. Jesus had warned to him during the earlier conversation (10:21), but the man could not accept the humility and selflessness Jesus required, and he left in sorrow (10:22).

We have already seen that at this point in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus faced the prospect of His death in Jerusalem (8:31, 9:30-32), and everything He did related to that end. Above all, He needed His disciples to learn about humility and service, because these were essential characteristics for those who would one day be leaders of His church.

Going Deeper

These two stories are very different, but they do go together, and the more we look into them, the more they tell us about discipleship. The disciples show their failings yet again, but their inability to learn, as previously, only acted as a foil for Jesus' teaching; and despite everything, Jesus remained loyal to them. At the end of this passage, Jesus challenged a man to accept the call of discipleship. He could have accepted, but he would never have replaced any of the 'twelve'!

Bringing children to Jesus

Occasionally today, we will sometimes see pictures of politicians 'kissing babies'. It seems rather strange that this should still happen, but it is, apparently, a demonstration of two social phenomena which have been around for a long time. Firstly, the politician likes to show people that he (or she) is 'connected' to ordinary people, even little babies. Secondly, but less observable today, there is the desire of parents to have their babies touched by someone who is perceived to be powerful or famous. In Jesus' day, it was certainly common for rabbis or well known figures to kiss or touch young infants held up to them, and the children would have been small, probably babies (the Greek word used in Mark refers to any child under the age of 12).

What happened in the incident recorded in our passage is that people were bringing their children to Jesus exactly like this. In the region of Galilee and doubtless all around, Jesus was the equivalent of a celebrity, and although Jesus responded to the crowds, He had often sought to keep His work and mission a secret, asking people not to talk about what He had said or done (4:11, 12 5:43, 8:30). It is easy to see why, in the crush of the crowds, the disciples sought to calm the people down and stem the flood of young children being thrust at Jesus for Him to touch or embrace. However, as He had done so many times before in difficult circumstances,

Jesus took hold of the situation and made something unique out of it. What he did had the effect both of teaching the disciples and the crowds about the Kingdom of God, and also bringing order to what was a potentially difficult situation.

What Jesus said next has been a subject of heated debate in the church ever since; 'let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for the Kingdom of God belongs to children such as these.' Some believe these words indicate that all young children (of Christian parents) should be baptised, because Jesus made it clear in this story that not only were they welcome in the kingdom, but they had prior entry! However, it is wrong to use this passage to justify any particular practise, especially when many who believe in the appropriateness of adult baptism would not deny the grace of God towards children of Christian parents. Both sides of this debate can and do agree that the Bible tends to regard children as integral to the family structure of life and included in the beliefs and practices of their parents, but they differ over how that should be reflected in the church's practice of baptism today.

Jesus provided His own commentary on this saying, and began it with the phrase He characteristically used when saying something of great importance; 'Amen, I tell you ...' (10:15). The saying was no more than an illustration of the characteristics required of a follower of Jesus for entry into the Kingdom of God. They needed to be 'like a child'. It was while saying this that Jesus picked up one or more children, 'blessed them' and then 'laid His hands on them'. There can hardly be a clearer demonstration of the importance of what Jesus was saying, but what did He mean by asking His followers to be 'like a child'?

It is possible to suggest a number of answers to this question, because children have many qualities, from inquisitiveness to single-mindedness. However, the clearest answer is the one which fits with Jesus' general teaching at this point, which is that children are unselfconscious and open, willing to be taught and content to be dependent upon the care of others. In this whole section of Jesus' ministry He sought to help the disciples rid themselves of the prejudice, closed attitudes and self-dependence which is characteristic of normal adult life. Stripped of this, they would be better able to understand what He was doing and follow the path of discipleship and entry into the Kingdom. Children proved to be His best example.

The earnest rich man

At the beginning of the next story, Mark reports that Jesus was 'setting out on His journey' (10:17). We know that Jesus had returned from Caesarea Philippi to Galilee, and then begun to travel south, down the eastern side of the Jordan river (10:1). Mark's comment keeps us in touch with the crucial journey Jesus was making to Jerusalem, and it gives added urgency to the meeting He had with the man (identified as a 'rich young ruler' in Luke 18:18f.).

The first exchange between the two was not promising, and centred around the way the man addressed Jesus, calling Him 'good'. Jesus' reply, 'Why do you call me good, no-one is good except God alone,' is yet another saying of Jesus which has caused great confusion over the years. Was Jesus personally uncertain of His own 'goodness' before the Father and unwilling to accept the accolade? This seems unlikely given all we know about Jesus from Mark's Gospel. Jesus was humble and did not parade His status as Messiah, but He knew who He was (see 9:2-8). It is far more likely that these words tested this man who had so suddenly appeared before Jesus. He was (according to all the Gospels) a Jewish man, and it was normal to call a famous rabbi 'good teacher'; so what was the man actually saying to Jesus? By asking the man what he meant by calling Him 'good', He challenged him to think about who He was. If God alone was good, what did this say about Jesus?

Nevertheless, Jesus proceeded to challenge the man immediately about his own life by asking him, in effect, whether he both knew and kept the Ten Commandments. However, Jesus asked not about the first four of the Ten Commandments but the rest of the Commandments about social responsibility and community living. These are listed in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 as; honouring of father and mother, and the commands against murder, adultery, stealing, bearing false witness and covetousness. Now if you look at the list which Mark quotes, it is the same as this except that it mentions 'defrauding' (10:19), and fails to mention 'covetousness'. It is barely possible to understand how Jesus could have miss-quoted something so basic as the Ten Commandments, especially by not mentioning the item of 'covetousness' which is emphasised in Exodus (20:17) and Deuteronomy (5:21), and replacing it with 'defrauding', a word which is virtually the same as 'stealing' (as earlier in the list of commandments).

If you look at Matthew's and Luke's version of this story (Matt 19:16-30 and Luke 18:18-30) you will find that Jesus simply misses out 'defrauding', and also fails to mention 'covetousness'.