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HONORABLE DISCIPLESHIP IN MARK 10

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Mark 10 centers on two of the often-most discussed concepts in the Gospels: discipleship and counter-cultural kingdom values. Through a series of interconnected narratives, Mark outlines Jesus' grand vision for discipleship. Operating within the milieu of First Century Palestine, Jesus leverages the core cultural value of honor and shame in order to illustrate what constitutes as true honor in the kingdom of God. Ultimately, Jesus illustrates that honorable status in the kingdom of God as a disciple requires one to assume the status of a child and become a slave to all. I will first define honor-shame culture in the First Century and then explain how Jesus re-orientes it throughout Mark 10.

Honor was the “fundamental value” of the Mediterranean world in the First Century, the social value that undergirded all others.¹ It was more valuable than truth and wealth,² and it was present within Grecian, Roman, and Jewish cultures.³ Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh define *honor* as one's “public reputation... it is one's status or standing in the community *together with the public recognition of it*... it serves as the prime indicator of social place.”⁴ One either inherited honor or gained it at another's expense through public “challenge-riposte” interactions.⁵ Striving for more honor than what society granted made one a “fool” and a “greedy

¹ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Second Edition (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 369.

² Joseph H. Hellerman, “Challenging the Authority of Jesus: Mark 11:27-33 and Mediterranean Notions of Honor and Shame,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43, no. 2 (December 31, 2000): 216, <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=a5fb0883-5b12-3808-9693-fb7d3154efd8>, 216.

³ N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians* (London; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic; SPCK, 2019), 114.

⁴ Italics original. Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 370.

⁵ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 370; David deSilva, “Dr. David deSilva, Cultural World of the New Testament, Lecture 1, Honor and Shame,” 2016, video of lecture, accessed February 19, 2025. <https://youtu.be/o1Xt0RZgHmw?si=fnN3gri2kGPZLmZh>.

thief.”⁶ This backdrop frames the milieu of Jesus’ interactions with his disciples, the Pharisees, and members of the public in Mark 10.

In Mark 10:1–12, the Pharisees ask Jesus if divorce is legal. The challenge-riposte sequence reveals the Pharisees were more focused on maintaining honor after a divorce than adhering to God’s intention for marriage (vv.2–9). In a follow-up conversation with the disciples, Jesus says a man who divorces and remarries commits adultery against his ex-wife (vv.10–12). This was completely contrary to the cultural standard.⁷ Instead of maintaining one’s honor after a divorce, a man now assumed the same level of shame as adulteresses. The parallel passage in Matthew 19:1–12 indicates the disciples were shocked by this, saying “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry” (v.10 ESV). Thus, Jesus teaches honor with God is not maintained through divorce but in adhering to God’s vision for marriage,⁸ and, contrary to Jewish culture, divorced men are subject to the same shame as adulteresses.

One might object, saying Mark 10:1–12 is about identifying Jesus with the Essenes and John the Baptist, who were considered “politically dangerous.”⁹ This is a likely motivation of the Pharisees for two reasons. First, the interaction was approximately 30 miles from Machaerus, where John the Baptist was said to be imprisoned.¹⁰ Second, their question to Jesus is best seen

⁶ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 370.

⁷ Married and betrothed women were “bound to fidelity,” and “The infidelity of a married man is not punishable by law but is criticized (Mal 2:14–16; Prov 5:15–20).” See Elaine Adler Goodfriend, “Adultery,” in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 82. See also F. Hauck, “μοιχεύω” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-1977), 729–35.

⁸ cf. Gen. 1–2; Deut. 24:5; Prov. 5:18–19; Eccles. 9:9; Song 4:10–11 Mal. 2:13–16.

⁹ Craig A Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, *WBC* 34B; Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 81.

¹⁰ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 2, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2017), 143.

as entrapment.¹¹ However, the challenge-riposte structure of the interaction, along with Jesus' responses to the Pharisees and his disciples, indicate *he* was primarily focused on exposing the cultural misunderstanding of honor and shame within marriage and divorce. The interaction with the Pharisees was public, and they were shown to misunderstand the Torah despite advocating for strict Torah observance.¹² We should not see the attempted association of Jesus with John the Baptist to the exclusion of Jesus' correction of cultural practices. Mark's intention is for the reader to see both.

Jesus further re-aligns honor-shame in the kingdom of God by his treatment of children. The disciples rebuked those who brought children to Jesus, but Jesus rebuked the disciples, explaining that "to such belongs the kingdom of God" (Mk. 10:13–14). Seeing Jesus as merely referring to child-like innocence is insufficient. Unlike their protected status in the modern West, children in the ancient world "were the weakest, most vulnerable members of society... Children had little status within the community or family... a child was on par with a slave."¹³ Jesus had already clarified that there is no separation of status between being his disciple and children. When the Twelve were arguing about who would be the greatest, Jesus corrected them with three important truths: he who would be first must be a servant; receiving a child in Jesus' name is to receive Jesus himself; receiving Jesus is to receive the one who sent him (Mk. 9:35–37).

¹¹ Greek *πειράζοντες*. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 792–93. Additionally, *πειράζω* is often used in the LXX for testing a partner in a covenant; it is used when Israel tests Yahweh but not Baal; see "*πειράζω πείρα πειρασμός πειράω ἐκπειράζω ἀπειράστος*," *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 3:695. Finally, Louw and Nida mention that Matthew calls the Devil "*ὁ πειράζων*" (Matt. 4:3), which plays into the motives of "obtaining information to be used against a person by trying to cause someone to make a mistake;" "*ὁ πειράζων*," *L&N*, 146; "*πειράζω; ἐκπειράζω*," *L&N*, 330.

¹² Mark J. Keown, *Discovering the New Testament: An Introduction to Its Background, Theology, and Themes: The Gospels & Acts*, vol. I (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 44.

¹³ This refers to social status as it pertains to participating in society. Coming of age increased a child's status. Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 336.

Honorable discipleship requires one to assume the lower status of a child. In Mark 10:13–16, then, the disciples illustrate that they failed to grasp what it means to receive and follow Jesus.

This is further illustrated in the story of the rich man (Mk. 10:17–31). The disciples were amazed at Jesus’ statement that it is difficult for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God (vv.23–24), and they eventually ask “then who can be saved?” (v.26 ESV). For them, there was an association between cultural honor and salvation. However, the story of the rich man illustrates that Jesus dismantles this assumption. The honor of wealth hinders one from assuming the shame of a child and following Jesus.¹⁴

Chapter 10 concludes with the story of blind Bartimaeus (vv.46–52), Mark’s shining example of faith and discipleship in this section. Blind Bartimaeus stands in contrast to the other characters in Mark 10, particularly the disciples. Bartimaeus preemptively calls Jesus in faith instead of being called (v.46). He shamelessly continued to call Jesus despite being rebuked and treated as not worthy of Jesus and his movement by those (physically) following Jesus (v.48). He “sprang up” and approached Jesus after being summoned (vv.49–50 ESV). He requested the recovery of his sight in faith (v.51). Finally, he followed Jesus after being healed even though the journey to Jerusalem caused many other followers to be afraid (v.52; cf. Mk. 10:32). Bartimaeus shamelessly sought Jesus and followed him because of his faith whereas the disciples, in addition

¹⁴ Maintaining family honor and social status were important expectations for children to live up to. This may have been the reason the rich man went away sorrowful. See William Racciah, [“Sociology and the Old Testament,”](#) in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

to following Jesus, concerned themselves with how following him might advance them to places of honor (cf. Mk. 9:33–37; 10:35–45).¹⁵

In conclusion, Jesus masterfully reorients what constitutes as honorable discipleship through the framework of honor-shame culture in the First Century Mediterranean world. He illustrates that one cannot have honor in the kingdom of God while seeking to subvert the teachings of Scripture; he identifies the path to receiving the kingdom of God is through the status of a child; he does not lower the standard of entry for ‘honorable’ members of society but instead requires them to go through the narrow gate; he dismantles the value of hierarchy and instead tells his closest followers that their goal should be servitude to all, just as the Son of Man, the υιοῦ θεοῦ (Mk. 1:1), came to suffer and serve many (Mk. 10:45); he responds to and uplifts blind Bartimaeus, the beggar who was dismissed by everyone else, who cried out in faith. Honor exists in the kingdom of God, but it is incompatible with the core value of honor-shame in the ancient Mediterranean world. It was these teachings of Jesus that spurred the early church to re-define honor and shame based on holiness and selfless love.¹⁶ The modern church must do likewise if she wishes to exhibit honorable discipleship in the kingdom of God.

¹⁵ The structure of the final three pericopes in ch.10 are significant. Jesus foretells his suffering, ridicule, and death (vv.32–34). Then, James and John request positions of authority in Jesus’ kingdom, indicating they are not focused on following Jesus in his suffering, and Jesus teaches the disciples that being πρῶτος (first) actually requires one to be a δοῦλος (slave) to all (vv.42–45). Finally, blind Bartimaeus experiences a very diluted version of the ridicule Jesus is about to receive, personifying how one picks up his cross and follows Jesus (cf. Mk. 8:34).

¹⁶ Wright and Bird, *The New Testament in Its World*, 115.

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