

The gospel of Mark

Mark

Leaders Guide

*For even the Son of Man did not
come to be served, but to serve,
and to give his life as a ransom for many.*

Mark 10:45

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The Gospel of Mark is generally believed to be the first of the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John). It is considered the model and often the source for the other gospels.

What the Gospels were not

They were not basically instruction. Although the gospels contain dialogues and teaching (like Plato's philosophies) they were basically focused on the historical events surrounding one historical figure — Jesus. Yet, they were also not really biographies, because they show little interest in most of Jesus' life. What kind of biography ignores all but the last three years of a man's life, and then spends one-half of its length on his very last week? However, though they are historical, they are not really histories. When we compare the four gospels, we learn that they do not necessarily give accounts of Jesus' life in the same order in which they occurred. Not only that, they say very little about outside events. There is little effort to put Jesus' life into the broader context of the history of the day. The writer ignores events that the writer of a normal history would include. Finally, the gospels are not legends or myths. Many people have believed they are myths since they contain miraculous elements.

What the Gospels were

What then is a gospel? The word **gospel** (Mark 1:1) does not mean either "teaching" or "record," but "news." An **angel** was a herald or messenger that brought news of some historical event that had already happened. The most common examples in Greek literature are "evangels" about a victory in war or the ascension of a new king. We have found an inscription of a royal proclamation that begins: "*The beginning of the gospel of Caesar Augustus*". Emperors who had ascended to power or who put down a threat would send out heralds announcing the good news about the strength or inauguration of the kingdom. That messenger would always be proclaiming some historical event (e.g. a coronation, a great victory in battle) which would introduce a radical new state of affairs, a new situation for the people, for they now had to relate to him as king.

Why is this important to grasp? When Christians chose *evangelion* to express the essence of their faith, they passed over words that Hellenistic religions used, such as *illumination* (photismos) and *knowledge* (gnosis) or that Judaism used such as *instruction* or *teaching* (didache) or *wisdom* (sophia). Of course, all of these words were used to describe Christianity, but none achieved the centrality of *gospel*. This means that the word *gospel* was chosen to communicate:

First, that the gospel is news about what God has already been done for you, rather than instruction and advice about what you are to do for God. The primacy of his work, not our work, is therefore the very essence of Christian faith. In other religions, God reveals to us how we can find or achieve salvation.

In Christianity, God achieves salvation for us. The gospel brings news primarily, rather than instruction.

Second, that the gospel is all about historic events, and thus it has a public character.

“It identifies Christian faith as news that has significance for all people, indeed for the whole world, not merely as esoteric understanding or insight.” (William Brownson).

In other religions, the stories of miracles and other special events in the lives of the founder are not essential. Whether or not Buddha did Miracle X, does not affect whether the 8-Fold path to enlightenment works or not. But if Jesus is not risen from the dead, Christianity does not “work”. The gospel is that Jesus died and rose for us. If the historic events of his life did not happen, then Christianity does not “work,” for the *good news* is that God has entered the human “now” (history) with the life of the world to come. But if Jesus came historically, then all people should acknowledge and believe in them.

DATE

Most scholars believe that Mark was the earliest of the four gospels. (Careful study shows that Matthew and Luke followed Mark at many places rather than the other way around). Also, there is no clear reference at all to the momentous event of 70 A.D. — the fall of Jerusalem to Roman forces after a Jewish rebellion and the complete destruction of the Temple. It is difficult to believe anyone writing after 70 A.D. could have left such an event out (or even have left it implicit). There is, therefore, no good reason to date Mark any later than 65 A.D. This means that Mark was writing about events just 25-30 years before.

That is very important to recognize. It means that there were thousands of eye-witnesses to all these events still alive when this document was written. That has two implications. **First**, it means that the author had abundant sources for producing an accurate account. He did not have to rely on legends that had been handed down and that could not be verified. **Second**, it means that there is a control making it very difficult for an author to fabricate accounts. For example, it would be nearly impossible to successfully publish a (false) story in the year 2000 that a meteor crashed in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania in 1970 killing dozens of people. There are too many people still alive who lived in Bethlehem at the time. Better to make up a story about the meteor crashing in Bethlehem in 1770. Then your story will be harder to disprove. Thus the dating of Mark before 70 A.D. encourages us to trust his reporting.

AUTHOR

The author never names himself (though cf. Mark 14:51-52), but the unanimous testimony of early church fathers (who knew the apostles and their disciples) was that the author was John Mark, a friend of the apostle Peter. Mark's home was a frequent meeting place of the apostles in the very earliest days of the church (Acts 12:12). He was a cousin to Barnabas, Paul's companion, and was on several journeys with Paul. Later, he worked with the St. Peter, and was with him in Rome when he died under Nero's persecution in the mid-60's A.D. In 140 A.D. Papias, wrote:

"Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately all that he remembered of the things said and done by our Lord, but not, however, in order."

This is, therefore, "The Gospel according to Peter". Unlike Matthew, Luke, and John, it begins where Peter comes into Jesus' life. Peter is usually present, as if the stories are from his perspective. Vivid details are present when Peter is there, but are often missing when he is not. It even leaves out words of praise for Peter (e.g. Matthew 16:17) included in the other gospels.

FORM

Mark was a brand new genre (or type) of literature. There has never been anything like the four gospels. Reynolds Price calls it a "new thing entirely". It is almost as if a whole new literary form had to be invented to bring a whole new, unique message. (New wineskins for new wine!)

PALESTINE AT THE TIME OF JESUS

notes



Mark

Your Gospel is too small

Study 1 | Mark 1:1-15

Mark's Gospel is about "the gospel of the kingdom" which consists of these principles:

The healing, all-renewing presence of the kingdom of God that has come back into the world and history because Christ is that true King. However, this King comes in a way that reverses the values of the world — in weakness and service, not strength and force — to die as a ransom for us. Therefore we enter this kingdom through the "upside-down" pattern of the King who went to the cross.

We are accepted not because of our ability or merit, but through sheer grace and repentance. We "live out" this kingdom by following the "upside-down" pattern of the King who went to the cross. We live lives of sacrifice and service.

1. Read Isaiah 40:3-5 and then cf. with Mark 1:1-4. What is Mark telling us about the identity of Jesus?

First, right out of the starting gate, Mark abruptly and bluntly asserts that Jesus is the "Christ" and the "Son of God." *Christos* was a Greek word meaning "an anointed royal figure," but in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures it regularly referred to the "Messiah," the one who would come and administer God's rule on earth (for example, see Daniel 9). The Messiah was understood to be the deliverer of Israel from all its oppressors and troubles. "Son of God" is an astonishingly bold term which goes beyond the popular understanding of the Messiah. (Most people thought the Messiah would be a particularly powerful political — but human — leader.) Mark, however, immediately claims outright divinity for Christ. (See also 1:11, 3:11, 9:7, 14:61, 15:39).

Mark then tells us something that is even more emphatic and staggering. All by itself, the title "*Son of God*" could be understood as claiming that Jesus was some kind of divine being — perhaps one of many, or perhaps an immortal angelic type being (since in the Hebrew Scriptures, the angels are occasionally called 'sons of God'.) But Mark now goes for extreme clarity. He asserts that John the Baptist is the fulfillment of the "voice" crying out in the famous prophetic passage of Isaiah 40. In that text, Isaiah predicts that "*the Lord*" himself will come to Jerusalem (see Isaiah 40:9) and all the world will see his glory. The word translated "*Lord*" in English Bibles is the Hebrew "*Yahweh*," God's personal covenant name that he reveals to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3). Since Mark is equating John (see v. 4 "*so*") with the Isaianic "one preparing the way," it means he is equating Jesus with the Lord God of Israel himself! No higher claim is possible.

It also means that Mark roots the gospel of Jesus Christ as deeply as possible in the historic, ancient religion of Israel. Christianity, he says, is not a new thing. Jesus is the fulfillment of all the prophets' longings and visions, and he is the one who will come and take down mountains and raise up canyons — i.e. will restore and remake the entire universe. Thus Jesus and his gospel is rooted in the expectation of God's (the heavenly king's) return to rule the earth. This hope runs through the Old Testament, back to Genesis 3:15.

2. How, specifically, does John ‘pave the way’ for the Lord? i.e. What do verses 4-8 tell us about how the Messiah, the king, is to be received?

a) First, v. 4 - Repentance is the way to receive him. “So” means that John “prepared the way of the King” with repentance and seeking forgiveness of sins. But what does ‘repentance’ really mean? We have an indication in the very call to be baptized.

A major part of Jewish worship and ceremony was the various ablutions and washings that had to occur constantly. They represented the need for being holy and cleansed from sin in order to stand before a holy God. Ordinarily, this meant washing one’s hands before going in to the temple, and so on. Only Gentile converts who wanted to be part of Israel’s worship had to be baptized thoroughly (by effusion or immersion) as part of the ceremonial rites that made one “clean” and fit for the presence of God. Jews were never baptized because they were already considered “clean.” But John’s ministry was very startling. It called *every* one to be baptized. It signified, first, that your pedigree and moral record did not matter. Everyone was going to have to be saved by grace to enter this kingdom. Secondly, it signaled the need for complete newness — a new people of God would need to be formed, and a new covenant with God would have to be made. No wonder John’s ministry caused such a stir! His ministry of baptism was so unique that he could be called “*the Baptist*” — because no one else had ever done such a thing! He was declaring (what the prophets had said), that the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament were only pointers to something else — that no one was “fit” for the kingdom except through grace, that a radical salvation was needed.

b) Second, v. 7 – The baptism with the Spirit is the way to meet the king (or, perhaps more accurately, is a sign that you have *met* the king, since he is the one who baptizes with the Spirit). This statement and the immediate baptism by Jesus with the Spirit shows that water baptism is only a symbol of being cleansed. It does not literally cleanse from sin. The baptism with the Spirit is something that every Christian receives when he or she believes — it unites the person to Christ, into his “body”. See I Cor. 12:13 (“for we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free.”)

c) vv. 7-8 – An attitude of submission to the Messiah and a recognition of his high stature. This statement by John is remarkable. Since it was considered so demeaning to deal with smelly feet that even a slave by Jewish law could not be required to do such service. Yet John does not merely say, “I will untie his sandals,” but actually insists that he is not worthy even to aspire to that! This means that the Messiah is of enormous stature and dignity, and our obligation of service to him is as radical and complete as can be. We are his, completely his. He is our absolute Lord, and we must acknowledge him as such.

3. What do verses 9-13 tell us about what ‘the baptism of the Spirit’ means and brings to us?

a) v.10-11 – The baptism with the Spirit is ‘a spirit of sonship’. Of course, the Holy Spirit brings “power” as most readers of the Bible know. But what is the nature of that

power? It is not just abstract “strength” to do things. The power the Spirit brought Jesus was an immediate, direct assurance that he was a) loved by and b) pleasing to his Father. That is what the voice from heaven said to him. Was this a unique gift to Jesus only? At one level — the answer is yes, because Jesus’ “sonship” is different than ours. He is the eternal, natural, unique Son of God. But the Bible tells us that we too are children of God. First, we become children of God as we are “born again” (John 1:12-13) which happens by the Spirit (John 3:1ff.) So in that sense, the Spirit makes us children of God. When we believe in Christ, the Spirit comes in and imparts God’s own life and nature to us, even as biological children receive their parents’ nature. But there is an additional work of the Spirit. Romans 8:15-16 tells us that the Spirit of God “witnesses to our spirits that we are children of God”. This means that though we (“our spirits”) may know that we are children of God through faith in Jesus Christ, our hearts rather desperately need direct assurance. It is hard to believe “down deep” that we are unconditionally and even counter-conditionally loved by God as our Father. So the Spirit’s job is to “witness with our Spirit” — to flood our hearts sometime with this direct assurance, even as the Spirit did so with Jesus at his baptism. This then is the “secret” of how the Holy Spirit brings us power. He makes us God’s children and then continually reminds us of it, pressing and leading us to live in the confidence, purity, joy, and wonder that is consistent with that tremendous fact.

b) v.12-13 - The Spirit of sonship makes the wilderness a place of growth. Notice that “the Spirit *sent* him out into the desert.” Jesus enters the desert where he is tried and tested. This is not an accident, but part of the Spirit’s work in our lives. The result is not demoralization or weakening, but (v. 14ff) an empowering. Christians can expect that suffering will make us (not break us) if we know we are God’s children. (See Romans 5:2-5 “we also rejoice in our sufferings, for suffering produces hope... for God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”) NOTE: Mark was writing to Christians who were being executed by being thrown to animals in the Roman arenas. Here is amazing comfort — Jesus had been with the wild beasts, too!

4. What do verses 14-15 tell us about the essential message of the King?

a) What is explained? b) What is left “mysterious” and unexplained in Jesus proclamation?

a) The essential message of the king is: (1) First (“good news” v. 14) something has happened in history. (2) Second (“the kingdom of God is near”) the thing that has happened is that the God-King himself has come into history! (There cannot be a kingdom without a king. Thus to say the kingdom of God is almost here is to say that God the King is about to come and set up his rule.) (3) Third (“repent and believe the gospel”) the way to relate to this king and kingdom is not through making oneself worthy or accomplishing great deeds but through admitting your sin (repentance) and believing in the king.

b) What is left mysterious is: (1) Who is this king? If the kingdom of God is near, then the king is near —so who is he and where is he? Of course the reader has already been told who the God-King is (vv. 1-4) but we are now going to see how the answer to this mystery (“who and where is the king?”) will be slowly revealed to the people of Judea.

Baptism: During John’s time, the Jews often administered baptism as a rite of purification for Gentiles who were converting to Judaism. John went one step further, preaching that Jews as well as Gentiles needed to be baptized as a sign of turning from sin.

Time: The Greek word here refers not so much to a date on the calendar as it does to a decisive time when God acts in a special way. Jesus says the time has come, indicating a crisis point has arrived.

The people of course were waiting desperately for a Liberator —so this announcement must have created enormous excitement. (2) Why is the kingdom only “near” if Jesus is the king? There is a mystery even for us the readers. We know that Jesus is the king. But if that is so — why does Jesus only say the kingdom is “near”? Why not say “the kingdom of God is here because I am here!” If Jesus is the king, but the kingdom is only near, then in some way Jesus has not “set up” his kingdom. Something has to happen — something has to be done if his kingdom power and rule is going to be established and do its great liberating work. While the first mystery (“who is the king?”) is the subject of the first half of Mark, from chapter 1 through 8, the second mystery (“what did he come to do?”) is the subject of the second half of the book, from chapters 9 through 16.

5. Everyone notices the abruptness and breathless speed of Mark’s narrative style. Everything happens so quickly, all the statements and descriptions are extremely terse and direct. What do you think Mark is trying to get across?

First, “*the world according to Mark is a world torn open by God*” (Richard Hays). Mark immediately tells us Jesus is the Son of God. The heavens are “torn open” at Jesus’ baptism (1:10). Mark is telling us that God has “broken in” to history. His style gets across a sense of crisis, and conveys that the status quo has been ruptured. We can’t think of history as a closed system of natural causes any more. We can’t think of any human system or tradition or authority as inevitable or absolute any more. “*God’s abrupt intervention fractures apparent... continuities, and human life is laid bare before God.*” (Hays) Jesus has come; anything can happen now.

Second, Mark wants us to see that the coming of Jesus calls for decisive action. Jesus is seen as a man of action, moving quickly and decisively from event to event. There is very little teaching in the Gospel of Mark. Mainly, we see Jesus’ *doings*. It is his deeds that save us, and therefore we need to respond actively. We must repent, believe, follow him. We can’t remain neutral. We must not sit and reflect and find excuses for not changing our lives now.

6. What was the most helpful or impressive thing that you learned today personally? What practical application can you make from today’s lesson?

7. Look back over the whole section. What have we learned about what “the gospel” is? today’s lesson?

First, the gospel is that we are saved by his work, not ours (vv.1-8). Second the gospel is that we can be adopted sons and daughters of God (vv.9-13). Third, the gospel is that the kingdom of God, the liberating power of God, has come (vv.14-15). There may be other things you learn about the gospel from this passage as well.

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: He’s the Christ (1:1 and 8:29). He’s the “good news” that God promised would come. He’s the “good news” of victory (1 Samuel 31:9). Mark’s Gospel is about Jesus.

Why Jesus came: To solve the problem of sin introduced by the Fall (1:4, 1:13, 1:15, 15:38).

How should I respond? Not by opposition (1:14, 3:6), but by repentance and faith (1:15, 2:5 etc.). Mark’s book will demand commitment and change.

Prayer requests

The Kingdom of God

OPTIONAL STUDY

This section has been summarized from How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, (Zondervan, pp. 131-134).

In understanding Jesus' teaching and ministry, it is important to understand the kingdom of God in the ministry of Jesus. The Jews of Jesus' day thought they were on the very brink of time, when God would step into history and bring an end to this age and usher in the age to come. The Greek word for the end they were looking for is 'eschaton.' Thus to be eschatological in one's thinking meant to be looking for the end. The earliest Christians well understood this eschatological way of looking at life. For them, the events of Jesus' coming, his death and resurrection, and the giving of the Spirit were all related in their expectations about the 'coming of the end.'

The coming of the end also meant a new beginning — the beginning of God's new age — the messianic age. The new age was also referred to as the kingdom of God, which meant "the time of God's rule." This new age would be a time of righteousness (Isaiah 11:4-5), and people would live in peace (Isaiah 2:2-4). It would be a time of the fullness of the Spirit (Joel 2:28-30) when the new covenant spoken of by Jeremiah would be realized (Jeremiah 31: 31-34, 32:38-40). Sin and sickness would be done away with (Zechariah 13:1). Even the material creation would feel the joyful effects of this new age (Isaiah 11:6-9).

Jesus came and announced that the coming kingdom was at hand with his ministry (Mark 1:14-15). He cast out demons, worked miracles, and freely accepted the outcasts and sinners — all signs that the end had begun (Luke 11:20; Matthew 11:2-6; Luke 14:21; 15:1-2). Everyone kept watching him to see if he really was the coming one. Would he really bring in the messianic age with all of its' splendor? Then suddenly he was crucified — and the lights went out.

But no! There was a glorious sequel. On the third day he was raised from the dead and he appeared to many of his followers. Surely now he would "restore the kingdom of Israel" (Acts 1:6). But instead he returned to the Father and poured out the promised Spirit. Very early, beginning with Peter's sermon in Acts 3, the early Christians came to realize that Jesus had not come to usher in the final end, but the "beginning" of the end, as it were. Thus they came to see that with Jesus' death and resurrection, and with the coming of the Spirit, the blessings and benefits of the future had already come. In a sense, therefore, the end had already come. But in another sense, the end had not yet come. Thus it was "already," but "not yet."

The early believers, therefore, learned to be truly eschatological people. They lived between the times — that is, between the beginning of the end and the consummation of the end. Because the kingdom, the time of God's rule, has been inaugurated with Jesus' own coming, we are called to life in the kingdom, which means life under his lordship, freely accepted and forgiven. But also committed to Jesus' Kingdom priorities of the new age and to seeing them worked out in our own lives and the world in this present age.

The Meaning of “The Kingdom” – Biblical Texts and Implications

1. **“Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy; they will sing before the Lord, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth.”**

Psalm 96:11-12.

Implications: God created the world to be under his rule — all things were made to be managed by him. Things blossom and find fulfillment only under his rule.

2. **“Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you...”** *Genesis 3:17-18; cf. Romans 8:18ff.*

Implications: All areas of life are subject to disintegration and alienation when they are not under the Kingship of Christ: our relationship with God (spiritual), with ourselves (psychological), with other persons (social) and with nature itself (physical).

3. **“And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ... to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.”**

Ephesians 1:9-10; cf. vv.19-23

Implications: The plan of God is to unite the disintegrating life of the world with the life of heaven by bringing all things under the Kingship of Christ. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

4. **“The time has come — the kingdom of God is near...”** *Mark 1:15.* **“The kingdom of God is in you.”** *Luke 17:21* **“When you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.”** *Luke 21:31* **“If I drive these demons out by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.”** *Matthew 12:28.*

Implications: The kingdom is here now (Luke 17 and texts) but not fully (Matthew 6:10 and texts). Like a seed, the kingdom’s presence is nearly hidden, but revolutionary, and finally it grows into fullness, to overcome all resistance to God’s rule (Matthew 13:31-32).

5. **“Pray... thy kingdom come!”** *Matthew 6:10* **“Then the King will say to those on his right — come, take your inheritance, the kingdom.”** *Matthew 25:34* **“The seed... is the message of the kingdom...”** *Matthew 13:18-19.*

Implications: The kingdom is entered by the repentance and the new birth (John 3) and the healing of every area of life and relationship begins (Romans 14).

6. “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again... no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit...” *John 3:3, 5*

Implications: The kingdom advances in the world and in our lives through the “weapons” of the kingdom — the word (the King’s will) and the Spirit (the King’s power) (2 Corinthians 10). Because the kingdom is “already” but “not yet”, we feel ourselves caught in the tension of living in both realms (Romans 12:2; 13:11-14; 1 Thessalonians 5:4-8). We are already saved, yet shall be saved (Romans 8:24, 5:9-11), we are already redeemed yet will be redeemed (Colossians 1:14 and Ephesians 4:30), we are already adopted yet we will be adopted (Romans 8:15,23), we are already reigning in heaven as kings (Ephesians 2:6; Revelation 1:8), yet we do not see ourselves reigning yet (Hebrews 2:8). Paul sorts this out by saying, we are legally righteous (justified – Romans 5:1-5; 8:1) yet we are not yet actually righteous (Romans 8:2-4).

7. “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.” *Romans 14:17-18*

Implications: Christians are a model of the kingdom, a counter-culture, a royal colony of heaven here to display how human society can be under the Kingship of Christ (2 Peter 2) We are also agents of the kingdom, spreading its healing both in word (Acts 8) and through deed ministry (1 John 3:17-18), spiritually, psychologically, socially, physically. Our spiritual gifts are kingdom powers which heal people as they bring people under the Kingship of Christ.

8. “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds... every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to Christ.” *2 Corinthians 10:4-5*

Implications: cf. Matthew 10:37 with Luke 14:26. It shows that “hate” means “loved less.” Also, the two men in Luke 9 were perhaps being tested as the rich young ruler with an absolute demand, to indicate whether they would give Christ pre-eminence. To enter the kingdom takes absolute commitment to the King! Yet, to think you can enter the kingdom through the merits of your obedience is to rely on yourself as your own savior and to keep control of your life. You can only enter the kingdom through relinquishing your own good deeds

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

and asking for his mercy alone (John 1:12). To imagine that you can enter because of your obedience is to stay in charge of your own life! You enter by submitting to him, but only because he died for you.

9. **“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”**

1 Peter 2:9

“They believed Phillip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God.”

Acts 8:12

“But to each one of us grace (gifts) has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says, ‘When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men’” *Ephesians 4:7-8*

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters — yes, even his own life — he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” *Luke 14:26-27* He said to another man, “Follow me.” But the man replied, “Lord first let me go and bury my father.” Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Still another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family.” Jesus replied, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.” *Luke 9:59-62*

Summary: the kingdom of God is the renewal of the whole world through the entrance of supernatural forces — the Word, the Spirit, the church (where the Word and Spirit dwell).

“The Kingdom in Your Life” – Biblical Texts and Implications

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created; things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from the dead, so that in everything he might have the pre-eminence. For God, was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” *Colossians 1:15-20*

IMPLICATIONS:

1. **“All things were created by him and for him.” a) BY:** Jesus alone has built all things. Thus he alone understands how any person or relationship should function. His Word is the “manufacturer’s manual”. **b) FOR:** All people were built for a purpose — to belong to Christ. This means that only Christ has rights of ownership (and a creator has absolute rights.)
2. **“In him all things hold together.”** Since we were built for him, we experience disintegration when we are not under His Kingship. To the extent that we submit to His Lordship, wholeness flows into our lives. “God is reconciling all things to himself... through the cross.” It is by Christ’s death for sins that God is reuniting all things to himself. When we trust in Jesus’ death for our sins, we are reconciled to God, enter the kingdom, and the wholeness spreads in through our life.
3. **“In everything he might be pre-eminent.”** A believer must look at every area of his or her life and ask: “Is Christ pre-eminent here?”

“What does it mean, then, to allow Jesus to be Lord of our lives?... Just this: whatever controls us is our lord. The person who seeks power is controlled by power. The person who seeks acceptance is controlled by the people he or she wants to please. We do not control ourselves. We are controlled by the lord of our life. If Jesus is our Lord, then he is the one who controls, he has the ultimate power. There are no bargains. We cannot manipulate him by playing ‘let’s make a deal’. If he is Lord, the only option open to us is to do his will, to let him have control. [Of course] Jesus remains Lord whether we accept him or not. His lordship, his essence, is not affected by what we choose. But our lives are drastically changed by our choice.”
 –Rebecca M. Pippert

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

PRACTICAL STEPS – To treat Jesus as a King means:

- A. **Obeying.** (Not like Jonah. He thought that if he did what God had said that it would ruin things.) The evaluation question: “Am I willing to obey whatever God says about this life-area?” Symptom: guilt and “covering up”.
- B. **Accepting.** (Not like Job. He thought God was unfair, and that he knew how to run history better.) The evaluation question: “Am I willing to thank God for whatever happens in this area?” Symptom: worry, self-pity, or bitterness.
- C. **Relying.** (Not like Abraham. He made Isaac an idol, something he had to have along with God to be happy.) The evaluation question: “Is there something instead of God I am relying on for self-worth?” Symptom: insecurity (people-approval as an idol), “drivenness” (success or achievement as an idol), self-indulgence (comfort as an idol).
- D. **Expecting.** (Not like Moses. When called to do a great deed, he was sure he was not competent.) The evaluation question: “Are there problems or limitations in my life I think are too big for God to remove?” Symptom: boredom and discouragement.

A fifth, overall evaluation question:

If you ever say, “I’ll obey Christ if...” then you are still on the throne of your life, determining when and whether you will take a course of action. Are there any if’s in your life?

Life Evaluation:

1. On the basis of the evaluation questions, choose one or two areas of your life that you most need to acknowledge Christ’s Lordship more deeply. (Make a list of “life areas” and ask the five questions to yourself. **OR**, look for the presence of “symptoms” and track down sins (disobedience), worry/bitterness (dis-acceptance), idols (lack of reliance), or discouragements (lack of expectance).
2. What can you do to give Christ the Lordship in these areas?

Make a brief plan for each which may consist of the following elements:

1) Repentance, **2)** Prayer program, **3)** Attitude/thought change, **4)** Behavior change, **5)** Accountability

Mark

The meaning of the Kingdom

Study 2 | Mark 1:16-34

Jesus (verses 14-15) has just announced that “the kingdom was near.” We said last week that this statement leaves a couple of things very mysterious. First there is the mystery of “who is this king?” There can be no kingdom without a king. To say that the “kingdom of God is coming” is to say that the divine God-King is coming. But who is he and where is he? The writer, St. Mark, approaches this mystery rather like the writer of a *Columbo* episode. In a *Columbo* mystery, we, the audience, are given the answer to the “whodunnit” at the beginning, and then we watch Columbo discover the solution in stages. In the same way, we, the readers, are introduced to the identity of the divine king immediately, in Mark 1:1-4, where Jesus is identified as the Divine King. Then we watch as Jesus reveals himself slowly to the people around him. As he does so, we get to know Jesus personally and learn much of his unique self-understanding.

The second mystery, however, is the nature of this kingdom itself. If Jesus is the King, why is the kingdom only “near” (v. 15)? Why doesn’t he say, “I am here — so the kingdom of God is here?” Evidently, something must happen for it to be “set up.” What is that? What is the nature of it — will it mean a military victory for God’s people? If not, what kind of kingdom is it? How do we “enter” it? This second mystery is a mystery for the readers as well! Immediately after the announcement of verse 15, we see Mark beginning to reveal to us what the kingdom of God is all about.

1. In verses 16-20, what do we learn about the kingdom?

a) First, we learn that the kingdom means coming under Jesus’ authority in every area of our lives. After all, when you enter a king’s kingdom, every part of you comes in. Notice that (1) in vv.16-17, when Jesus calls, two men leave their vocations (as fishermen). So Jesus’ authority extends to our work life — he must have priority in that area. (2) Then in vv.19-20, when Jesus calls, two men leave their father and friends. So his authority extends to our family life — he must have priority in that area, too.

b) Second, we learn that the kingdom means working with Jesus to draw others into the kingdom. Jesus’ authority makes people into something greater than they were — fishers of men. v. 17 – “Fishers of men” is a wonderful metaphor for Christian discipleship in the context of the kingdom. Fishing entails pulling fish from darkness into light. In the Bible (and in many ancient cultures) the sea was the symbol of chaos and disorder and judgment (cf. Genesis 1:1-2. See also Jeremiah 16:16, Ezekiel 29:4ff.; Amos 4:2). Thus “fishing for men” means more than simply trying to convert people. Paul says that God “has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves...” (Colossians 1:13). Jesus’ goal is to bring people from one entire realm into another. When we follow him, we participate in this great work of transferring people from one kingdom into another.

c) Third, we learn that the kingdom of God means decision. Notice the language — “*at once they left...*” (v. 18); “*without delay he called them, and they left...*” (v. 20). This goes along with concept of “a world torn open by God.” Jesus streaks into people’s lives like lightning, and “ruptures the status quo” and calls for change and decisive action. He breaks in and makes people choose. All of this shows that entering the kingdom of God takes a decisive act of radical, exclusive commitment to Jesus as the King.

2. What do verses 21-22 teach about the kingdom of God?

In these verses we have Jesus exercising his authority over another area of life. Here we see Jesus demonstrating his intellectual authority. We must submit our ideas, our philosophies and ideologies and opinions to him. This is not surprising, since our beliefs and our behavior are intimately linked. We can’t really submit our practices to his authority if we don’t submit our minds and reasoning to him.

For the first time, Mark explicitly uses the term “authority” (v. 22), which literally means “out of the original stuff.” When Mark says that he taught them “as one who had authority,” he means Jesus taught about life with original rather than derived authority. Though this text does not give us an actual sample of his teaching, later we see some examples of this assumption of “original” authority. For example, the teachers and even the prophets would begin their teaching with, “Thus saith the Lord,” but Jesus would say, “but I say unto you.” This is something neither the teachers of the law nor even the Old Testament prophets ever had the audacity to do. Another unique characteristic of Jesus’ teaching was how he often began a statement by saying “Amen, amen” (translated in the King James as “Verily, verily” and in modern translations as “Truly, I say to you”) to introduce his teaching. (The first instance of this is in Mark 3:28, but it occurs repeatedly.) This term was pronounced by elders of the synagogue after a teaching as a way of approving and validating what the speaker had just said. The term means “yes, this statement squares with the Scripture and the traditions;” it is always used to affirm the teaching of someone else. Jesus, however, begins his statements with this formula and bestows it on himself. He is saying, “I take away your right to judge my teaching. No one has the authority to reject any part of my teaching nor is there any standard for evaluation of teaching any higher than me myself.” As one commentator said, Jesus’ use of this phrase was without analogy or precedence in history. No prophet, priest, elder, teacher of the law, or king had ever assumed to speak like this. Jesus was so much more authoritative in his teaching than any one else had ever been that it left his hearers dumbfounded.

3. What do verses 23-28 teach us about the kingdom of God? Despite modern prejudices against the idea of demon-possession, how does the existence of evil spirits help us explain what goes on in the world?

Here we see Jesus exhibiting power over demons through the exorcism of a demon-possessed man. This moves us beyond what we have already seen.

First, this is not simply a *claim* of authority (which we have in the calling of the disciples and the authoritative teaching), but is also a clear proof and exercise of Jesus' authority. He shows he has real power over supernatural evil. Second, this is an exhibition of power and authority beyond anything that any spiritual leader has ever demonstrated. Go through all of the Old Testament and there is no record of any prophet or priest casting out an evil spirit. Not only that, there is no incantation or ritual, no hocus pocus, as was always done by the exorcists of the time. Jesus does it merely with a couple of blunt words — "Shut up and get out!" And it was over. What an amazing show of power! We could almost say that Jesus "didn't even break a sweat." Notice that when Jesus heals he does not do an incantation and call on a "higher power." He *is* the higher power!

Our contemporary culture is still rather skeptical of the existence of demons. If a person is an atheist, it is consistent to then deny the existence of evil spirits. But it is not consistent to believe in God and in a *good* personal supernatural being and then refuse to believe that there are *evil* personal supernatural beings. But if we posit the existence of demonic forces, it does shed light on several things we know about the world and life. 1) First, demonic forces explain the complexity and intransigence of psychological problems. The older "physicians of the soul" understood that depression, fear, anger, or inner numbness may be so profound and difficult to deal with because of the multiplicity and inter-relatedness of the many different roots and causes. There are possible physiological, psychological, moral, and demonic sources for our problems. In the Bible, demons can accuse and tempt and stir up and aggravate all the other factors, making our emotional dungeons very deep and double locked. 2) Second, demonic forces can explain systemic social evil. Evil unjust social systems can reign in a culture and have enormously evil and devastating effects, yet no single individual member of the oppressive system seems to be "all that bad." Think of the average white person in apartheid kinds of societies. Very, very few are actively full of hate or are personally wicked individuals, and yet they participate in a system that is much more wicked as a whole than the sum of its parts. In Rwanda, many Christians got sucked up into genocidal rage in which whole tribes massacred other whole tribes. How do we explain this? There are indications in the Scripture that demons can stand behind human institutions such as governments or nations and can produce evil effects through those systems and institutions.

In summary, it is not possible to explain all the misery and evil in the world as simply the product of individual sinful choices. Evil spirits greatly magnify, aggravate, and complicate the sin in our hearts that we commit toward God, one another, and against our own selves. People get sucked into deep psychological and social abysses of wickedness and brokenness that the Bible says are the result of demonic activity. But Jesus shows his authority can heal the darkest troubles in the deepest recesses of the human soul — individually and corporately. He can handle the forces that enslave us.

This enables us to see in Jesus' ministry of exorcism, a paradigm for how the kingdom works. Here we begin to see of how Jesus' kingdom is more than simply my individual

obedience to his will. Jesus comes into my life not simply as a rule-giver, but also as a liberator and a healer. He doesn't bring simply rules, but a new "realm" of his kingly, healing power. Why?

For the first time, we come to see that the alternative to having Jesus as a master is to have some other false and enslaving power as a master. Not everyone is personally possessed by a demon like this man (v. 23-24) who has lost complete psychological control of himself. But Paul speaks in Ephesians 6 and elsewhere that in another sense we are fighting demonic "principalities" all the time. Anything we make into an ultimate value (for example, like our career) becomes a "master" and begins to exercise enslaving power over us. In the case of career-idolatry, it begins to drive us to over work, deceives our minds into denying how much we are working, begins to erode the strength of our family, etc. When Jesus comes into our lives, and becomes the supreme Lord, his kingdom begins to heal us of the denial, begins to heal our family life, begins to liberate us from the anxiety we feel over money and work. He becomes the ultimate Savior and therefore the ultimate Lord (King). The more the gospel of sheer grace dominates our thinking, the more his kingdom spreads through my life and liberates me from the power of false masters and saviors. This is the work of the "gospel of the kingdom." As I submit to his Lordship, he surrounds me and brings me into his kingdom, and I become new.

4. Over what area of life do verses 29-34 show his authority? What do we learn about the kingdom here?

Jesus' miracles of healing and of feeding show that Jesus is king over and concerned with the physical world — not just the spiritual. Therefore Jesus both teaches (ministers in "word") and heals (ministers in "deed").

This is very important. Christians must also meet both spiritual needs and physical needs with their spiritual gifts and resources. The "kingdom of God" moves us away from thinking only individualistically about evil and salvation. When the world was under God's rule, there was no sickness, death, poverty, crime, war, or injustice. When God returns to rule, there will again be complete health, peace, and justice in the world (Psalm 96, 98). Meanwhile, if we are agents of his kingdom, we also seek to be "fishers of men" by working against social injustices.

5. People today struggle with the idea that we must absolutely submit all of our thinking and practice to the Lordship of Christ. How can we answer a person who struggles like that?

a. First, we ought to say that deep down we need a king, even though our democratic institutions hammer into us the need for individual rights. Modern people in the West struggle with the idea of Jesus' absolute authority, because we have abolished

monarchy in our political lives. When we come to Christ, we almost always come looking for someone to help and love us, not to rule us. But we must receive him as a ruler. Democracy is good for society, but it is not the ultimate nature of spiritual reality.

I [believe in democracy] because I believe in the Fall... A great deal of enthusiasm for democracy descends from the ideas of people like Rousseau, who believed in democracy because they thought humankind so wise and good that everyone deserved a share in the government. The danger of defending democracy on those grounds is that they're not true. And whenever their weakness is exposed, the people who prefer tyranny make capital out of the exposure... The real reason for democracy is the reverse. We are so fallen that no person can be trusted with unchecked power over others. Aristotle said that some people were fit to be slaves... But I reject slavery because I see none fit to be masters...

But [democracy] is medicine, not food... The mind that hates all superiority is stunted... The man who cannot conceive of a joyful and loyal obedience on the one hand, nor an unembarrassed and noble acceptance of that obedience on the other, the man who has never even wanted to kneel or bow, is a prosaic barbarian. It would be wicked folly to restore these old inequalities on the legal or external plane. Their proper place is elsewhere... Where we are forbidden to honor a king we honor billionaires, athletes, or film-stars instead. For spiritual nature, like bodily nature, will be served. Deny it food and it will gobble poison. Human nature will not permanently endure flat equality if it is extended from its proper political field into the real, concrete fields within. Let us wear equality [with each other], but let us undress every night [before God]. — *C.S. Lewis, "Equality"*

b. Second, we should say that there is no alternative to being under the rule of a King. If Jesus is not your king, something else is. Anything else that we look to as authorities are "false gods."

Summary: We learn in this passage that a) the kingdom is comprehensive, extending over every area of life and reality, and b) the kingdom of God brings healing and wholeness to any area that comes under his authority.

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: He is the King, Christ and the Son of God. He is as powerful as John the Baptist said that He would be (1:7). He has supernatural authority.

Why Jesus came: Jesus came to establish a new kingdom. He holds power over the spiritual and physical world.

How should I respond? Man's response was apathy, everyone who meets Jesus was "amazed" and the evil spirits were violently opposed to him.

Prayer requests

Mark

The meaning of free grace

Study 3 | Mark 1:35-2:17

Jesus was a man of authority. His words were commanding and his commands were irresistible. Jesus has authority to heal and forgive — something to be understood to be the prerogative of God alone. We also see Jesus' authority to sit down and eat with sinners — something which, the teachers of the law believed, was forbidden. In contrast to the Scribes, Jesus needed no authority other than His own person.

1. In verses 1:35-39, what about Jesus' reaction to his new popularity seems surprising? What do we learn here about Jesus' personal priorities?

Verse 28 told us that news of Jesus' authority over body and spirit spread like wildfire, and soon there were overwhelming crowds surging forward to see him (vv. 32-34). Jesus reacts in two ways that are surprising. First, we see him get up *very* early to pray in a solitary place. The language indicates that this prayer was not brief and perfunctory but took up hours — for he is still praying by the time Simon comes to get him. This is surprising because most of us find that prayer-time is shortened or eliminated in times of heavy schedule and business. Second, when Simon tells him that there are huge crowds gathered even now to see him (v. 37), Jesus says that they should immediately leave (v. 38 — *Let us go somewhere else...*)! Why? One obvious reason for Jesus' response is that his ministry is for all people, not just for one group. But most commentators think that Jesus may need to leave Capernaum in order to make clear that he is a *preacher* of the kingdom (v. 38 — *Let us go... so I can preach... that is why I have come*) rather than just a miracle-worker (which seems to be the main concern of the Capernaum crowd — v. 32-34).

What do we learn of Jesus' priorities? First, we see unmistakably that prayer was a priority. The powerful king leans on his father. The exterior ministry of strength is contingent on interior dependence on God. Substantial time in prayer was the basis for substantial time with people. Second, we see that Jesus wanted a *balance* of word and deed in his ministry. In Capernaum, the deed ministry side (giving relief from suffering and affliction) was in danger of obscuring the word ministry side (calling people to repent and believe). When he says that he wants to go and preach, he does not mean that he wants to preach *rather* than heal, because he of course continues to do both. (I don't think we should see Jesus choosing to do preaching *rather* than do deeds of compassion.) But the deeds and words must work together so people believe the message of the gospel. That balance and integration is all important.

Thirdly, we can see something that was not a priority for Jesus — popularity *per se*. Though he was riding an enormous wave of popular support, Jesus turns and leaves it. Why? Of course, he wants to reach as many people as possible with the gospel of the kingdom. That is why he wants to move around (v.38). Yet crowds and popular support is only a means to an end. He is much more interested in the *quality* of the people's response to him than in the quantity of the crowd.

2. In verses 1:40-45, what is surprising about how Jesus heals the leper? What do we learn from his method?

In antiquity, the term “leprosy” was a term used to denote a variety of deforming and often fatal skin diseases and disorders. In many societies, lepers were “quarantined” in to places where they could not contact others and spread their disease. But in Israel, lepers were in addition considered “ceremonially unclean.” Even coming near a leper often made a person unfit for worship.

“If a [leper] stands under a tree and a clean man passes by, the latter becomes unclean. If a clean man stands under a tree and an unclean one passes by, the former remains clean. If, however, the unclean stands still under the tree, the former becomes unclean.” — *Rabbinical literature quoted in The Gospel According to Mark by W. Lane, p. 85*

A leper approaches Jesus asking for healing. Jesus gives him healing, but does so not only with a pronouncement, but with a touch (v. 41). This is a surprise. First, it is surprising because it is unnecessary for the physical healing. As we will see in a moment, Jesus can heal with just his mind — he does not need to physically touch someone (cf. Mark 2:10-11). Second, it is surprising because Jesus lays himself open to the charge that he is now ceremonially unclean (see the quote above). It seems an unnecessary risk.

But upon reflection, we see that the touch is significant for two reasons. First, the touch must have been a response not to the physical, but to the emotional suffering of the leper. It was unnecessary for his body’s healing, but the experience of leprosy was just as ravaging spiritually and emotionally. Lepers were outcasts, and thus were “relationally starved.” This man had not likely felt another human being’s touch for a long time. It was “*an unheard-of act of compassion*” (Lane, p. 87). So first we learn that Jesus does not only consider the physical side of this man’s problem. He approaches the man wholistically. Jesus is not above noticing and meeting a purely emotional need. Jesus gives the man more than he asked for.

Secondly, the touch is a declaration that Jesus himself cannot become unclean. He does not need to be made or kept fit for the presence of God. There is no indication that he now went to do the washings and the ritual purifications that someone did at that time who had become ritually unclean. This at least is Jesus’ declaration that he has come to make the ceremonial laws and even the sacrificial system obsolete. But even more, he seems to be claiming that he is the source of clean-ness, of fitness for the presence of God.

3. In verses 2:1-5, how is Jesus’ treatment of the paralytic surprising? What is Jesus teaching us?

Jesus comes back to Capernaum (v. 1) and they crowded in to see him (v. 2a). Though we last saw that this town had a deep desire to see more miracles and healings, Jesus

is preaching the Word (v. 2b) to them. Again we see Jesus' insistence on word and deed. Though it is an absolutely crucial and necessary part of spreading the gospel of the kingdom — doing good is not the whole of Christianity. If it was, then Christianity would be like all other religions. It would be a matter of following examples of virtue and fulfilling ethical standards. But in Christ we are saved by faith in what he has done. So we need to hear the message of what he has done in order to believe in it. This lesson is brought home in the particular case of the paralytic. Verses 3-4 show us that this man and his friends were extremely persistent and resolved to bring him to Jesus. But (again) when this man is set down before him, Jesus acts in an unexpected and surprising way.

First, almost certainly, Jesus' behavior was surprising to the paralytic and his friends. Surely they expected Jesus to heal him. Instead, Jesus forgives his sins! Jesus is therefore vividly showing that there is something more radical and basic and necessary than physical health — namely, being right with God. The practical application is very striking. When we suffer physical illness or material distress or any trouble, the most important result would be to make us right with God, closer to God — that is the main healing we need. Jesus shows that the physical/external is not insignificant, but not primary. The only disease that can really kill you is sin — the one medicine that will really cure you is forgiveness. So to be right with God is the real miracle.

But not only is Jesus' action surprising to the paralytic and his friends, it is also deeply surprising to us, the readers. A question that immediately arises at this point is: how could Jesus forgive someone who hasn't repented? Isn't it both Biblical (cf. Luke 17:3-4) and common sense that you can't forgive someone who is not repentant? Perhaps, you can "forgive" an unrepentant person in your heart in the sense that you will not take personal vengeance on them (cf. Mark 11:25). But here Jesus apparently tells the man his sins and guilt before God are wiped away. How can this be done if he hasn't repented?

But 2:8 shows that Jesus could read motives of the heart very well, and that means that he probably perceived in the paralytic a heart attitude of repentance, even though it was not articulated. How encouraging! Jesus is so tender, sensitive, and willing to give grace that he responds to the man's inner attitude, to his "inner cry" as it were. He doesn't ask outloud for forgiveness, but there can be no forgiveness before God without repentance, so there must have been a humble, inarticulate yearning for mercy and grace. And Jesus responds to that! We don't have to say things "just the right way" to be forgiven! We don't have to follow some set of steps. We just have to have a heart of dependence and to desire to get near him. He reads your heart, brings you in. He is aggressive in granting forgiveness. Amazing.

4. In verses 2:6-12, why do both Jesus (v. 10) and the teachers (v. 7) say it takes authority to forgive sins?

Here we have a third group of people who are surprised by Jesus' unexpected behavior. The religious leaders immediately realized that Jesus' statement presupposes an enormous claim about himself. That claim, if untrue, was blasphemy (vv. 6-7).

“Blasphemy” was to take upon yourself the rights of God. In other words, they saw Jesus’ action as tantamount to being a claim to be deity.

Why would they see it this way? Common sense gives us a clue. When someone sins against you, they have cost you something. To forgive them means that you do not hold them liable for the cost as a debt, but instead you absorb the cost yourself. (For example, if someone breaks your chair, and you forgive them, it means that you will pay to replace the chair yourself.) Now you can only forgive a debt if it is against you, OR if you are willing to pay (make good) someone’s debt to another party.

What, then, did Jesus assume when he said “*your sins (all your sins!) are forgiven?*” 1) If Jesus forgives someone their sins, he is claiming that ALL their sins are against him — that every sin violates HIS rules and crown rights and thus he is saying he is God the Creator. (In a sense, we are all his possessions, and all sins against any human being or against God are thus against him.) 2) It may also mean that Jesus is claiming that he can pay for these sins. (I can only forgive Mr. X for breaking Mr. Y’s chair if I have the money to pay the debt.) That, too, is virtually a claim to deity, for who could offer to pay for the sins of the world? When Catholic priests “forgive sins” they do so only as representing God and by telling you “you are forgiven.” Jesus, however, uses a Greek aorist tense: At this very moment, you are forgiven. He does it in his own authority (as he claims in v.10).

The religious leaders, then, are confounded because, although they expected the Messiah to be a figure of great power and might, they had no concept of a human being having divine authority to forgive. This was beyond any conception of a Messiah that they had.

5. In verse 2:9, what is the answer to Jesus’ question? What is his point in asking it?

When Jesus says, “which is easier?” He could be meaning: “Anyone could say ‘you are forgiven’ but not have the true power and authority to do so. However, no one could say ‘rise up and walk’ without the power and authority to do so. So to prove to you I have the authority and power to do the first, I will now do the second.”

OR, it is possible that the religious leaders may have believed (like Job’s friends did — and like most people at the time — cf. John 9:1ff) that all sick people were sick as a punishment for sin. So to prove to them that he had forgiven the man, he raised him!

Even if this latter reason was true of Jesus, this does not imply that the Bible teaches that sickness is always the result of sin. Job’s friends were roundly condemned for that view. Sickness in general comes because we are all sinners as a race. But particular cases of sickness are not necessarily due to particular sins. Jesus teaches that sickness

is not necessarily the result of personal sin (see John 9:1-3). However, research and common sense shows that the body and the mind are bound up closely together. Often, physical wasting and weakness is due to guilt and anxiety or fear or anger. Numerous studies now show that people who pray and sense a relationship to God have better recuperative powers after surgery or a major illness. James 5:13-16 indicates that a sick person should look for both medicine and spiritual forgiveness. Strengthening the spiritual strengthens the physical.

The point is the same in any case. Jesus is saying — if I can raise him, I can forgive him, you must admit I have more than a human authority! I will demonstrate with external healing the internal healing.

6. In verses 2:13-17, what do the terms “sinners” and “righteous” mean as used in these verses? How is this unexpected and surprising? What is Jesus teaching here?

When Jesus says he is not for the “righteous”, does he mean that some people don’t need him? No, this is actually a slam to the self-righteous. The clue is his reference to himself as a physician. When do you go to a doctor? Only when you have a health problem which is getting beyond your control — only when you feel you can’t get better through self-management. What do you want from a doctor? Not just advice — but intervention. You don’t want a doctor to simply say, “Yes, you sure are sick!” You want some medicine or treatment. What does that mean?

Jesus calls people “righteous” who are in the same position spiritually as those who won’t go to a doctor. “Righteous” are people who believe they can “heal themselves”, make themselves right with God through following ethical teaching. They don’t feel the need for a soul-physician, someone who intervenes and does what they can’t do themselves. To them, Jesus may be an example or even an instructor, but he is not a Savior — a physician.

Jesus is teaching us that he will only help those who know they are morally/spiritually failures, unable to save themselves. Only people who admit their sin, their spiritual bankruptcy, and their inability can have any connection to Jesus. The real pre-requisite for meeting Jesus is not a good life, but the admission that you are not good. And not just advice and teaching, but a new life is what you must ask from Jesus. Jesus is not merely a teacher, but a doctor. It means he doesn’t just tell us how to live, but gives us power, comes in, does something to us. The Bible says no one is righteous (Romans 3). Self-righteousness is in some ways the only fatal sin, because it blinds you to your need of a doctor.

So here is the surprise. The very people that most people think would be the most interested in Christianity — the moral and religious — are *always* the least interested in real Christianity (once it is explained to them). The very people that most people think

would be the least interested in Christianity — the big “sinners” — are always the most interested in real Christianity (once it is explained to them).

7. In verses 2:13-17, how does Levi and his calling differ from the earlier disciples and their callings (see 1:16-17)? What similarity is there? What does that teach us about Jesus? About us?

Peter, Andrew, James, and John were fishermen. That meant they were respectable blue collar people. Matthew, on the other hand, would have been very wealthy, moving in high circles, but also despised and an outcast from general Jewish society. The dissimilarity is striking, because it teaches us that there is no “religious type.” Jesus’ call is to any and all. The only person who is excluded is the religiously proud (v .17, the “righteous”.) Jesus can reach and transform anyone, if he can reach and transform a Levi. And his call is not merited; it must be all of grace.

The similarity is that Jesus call is totalitarian. It comes with tremendous power, with no conditions or negotiation. It also comes right in the middle of their previous work. It interrupts everything. This is just a way of Jesus showing that his authority is absolute, unparalleled. There can be no competition in our hearts with Jesus. He cannot have any rivals. Allegiance to him comes over any other allegiance: familial, vocational, economic, social. On the one hand, his call means there is no one who he cannot reach and change. On the other hand, his call means there is no compromise or half-way measures when it comes to relating to Jesus.

8. What is the theme that binds 1:35-2:1-17 together? Also, make a list of what surprising things we learn about Jesus himself.

After a wonderful survey of Jesus’ power and authority, we now have a survey of his enormous compassion. He depends on his Father, he touches the leper just to heal him emotionally, he senses the inarticulate, embryonic spiritual humility of the paralytic and rewards it, he reaches out to the outcasts of society. What a king — a king who is *filled with compassion* (1:41).

But this compassion is always counter-intuitive and surprising. It doesn’t come in the way we expect; Jesus’ salvation by sheer grace breaks the world’s molds and patterns. Thus the very persons that (by the world’s standards) should be interested in Jesus are not, and the very persons that should not be interested are. The people that (by the world’s standards) would be most useful recruits for Jesus’ organization are left behind, and the (supposedly) useless recruits are taken. People who come to him never get quite what they expect! They come for physical needs and get emotional and spiritual needs healed that they in ways they didn’t expect. Again, and again, Jesus’ grace shocks and surprises. He is always “coloring outside the lines”. He is not a tame lion. He is iconoclastic, continually breaking the mold and traditional categories.

What else do we learn about Jesus?

- a) He delighted to find the “hard cases”, to show he could do his healing work on anyone!
- b) He had no built in prejudices. He saw all people as “sick”, but the “sinners” who know they need a doctor are closer to the kingdom than the “righteous” who don’t know they are sinners.
- c) Jesus is only available to people who know they are moral failures.
- d) As a physician, he does not just teach us and tell us how to live. He puts his hand on us, gives us power, the Holy Spirit, the new birth. Other religions only give us teachers who tell us what to do. Praise God he did not just send us another teacher!
- e) His forgiveness really changes us — look at Levi! He immediately begins to bring his friends to Jesus. He is already becoming someone who helps and cares for his friends.
- f) Jesus is not just a doctor of bodies. The “Messiah” as popularly conceived was concerned to bring political freedom — and deal with external problems of oppression and poverty and so on. So a Messiah who healed bodies fit the popular image — but Jesus shows that he is here to do something far more radical! Forgiveness of sins — pardon and cleansing of the soul! And to do that, he must be more than a dynamic human prince; he must be God himself!
- g) It is possible to get excited about Jesus and yet miss the reality of who he is. (v. 1-2 “so many gathered that there was no room left”; v. 13 “A large crowd came to him.”) Yet in Acts 1, when all the followers of Jesus gathered, there were only 120 after 3 years. What’s it mean? That it is possible to be fascinated with Jesus and to seek material and emotional and external things from him, but not really get converted or enter his kingdom. Before we are sufferers needing help, we are sinners needing pardon. If you don’t think you are a moral failure, you are not a Christian. Christianity is only for those who know they are moral failures.

9. What were the implications for Mark’s first readers? What does this passage imply about how we should live and think now?

*Prayer requests***Remembering the big picture**

Who Jesus is: He's the Christ, the King and the Son of God. He has authority to heal sickness, forgive sin.

Why Jesus came: He preached and in doing so, called sinners to repentance.

How should I respond? Jesus' hearers experience amazement. They can't keep quiet about him (1:45) and have never seen anything like his miracles before (2:12). Jesus also provoked a following. Jesus can call anyone, however bad (2:12-17). We also know that repentance (1:15) and faith (1:15;2:5) are involved. We begin to see that this involves admitting that we are sinners in need of forgiveness. The emphasis here is on what Jesus does, not on what we do.

Mark

The offense of Jesus

Mark 2:13-3:6

OPTIONAL STUDY

In 2:15-17, we see that the religious and moral type persons are not attracted to Jesus as are the non-religious and the moral *outsiders*. Jesus says: "I came not to call the *righteous*, but *sinners*." He uses both terms ironically. He is saying that the word "righteous" here means self-righteous, and the word "sinners" here means people who know they are sinful and in need of a Savior. Jesus is turning normal religion on its head. He does not congratulate those who have attained a high degree of theological precision and moral discipline. Instead he warns them that they might be the farthest from him. In the next few incidents, Jesus challenges all sorts of expectations and practices of the religious and moral establishment.

1. Read 2:18-19. a) Why do people fast? (What does it accomplish?) b) Why do you think John's disciples fasted so much? (read 1:4-5) c) Why do you think the Pharisees' disciples fasted so much?

a) Fasting is a vehicle for creating intense focus and fuller concentration on the things of God. It is used as an aid to deeper heart commitment to prayer for something you are seeking from God or just for closer fellowship with him. Even if you are going about your daily business during your fast, it "detaches" you from the world, removing your full concentration, constantly drawing your attention back to your project of prayer. Because fasting is a deprivation and can create a physical sense of emptiness, it has been especially used as an aid to prayers of repentance or grieving and mourning (cf. David's fasting in 2 Samuel 12). Those fasting "humbled the body" as an aid to humbling the soul in prayer.

b) In verse 18, the present progressive verb form — *were fasting* — seems to indicate that this was a very regular part of John's spiritual discipline. Fasting was probably prominent among John's disciples because his ministry was centered on repentance. He and his disciples saw the world as without hope unless the Messiah came, and they were petitioning God for that and preparing themselves for that coming through repentance. As we have seen, John's baptism for repentance showed a profound grasp of the need for *grace*, though they understood their need for grace-salvation much more clearly than they understood the form it would take. For John and his people, then, fasting represented an attitude of humility toward God. It was an expression of dependence and their need for mercy.

However, the Pharisees' fasting could not have had the same motivation. There is always a danger that fasting can slip into the belief that our suffering and intensity can actually merit or move God to answer prayers that otherwise he would not. The heart of the fasters might be saying, "Look at how devoted I am! Look at how I am denying myself. I really am holy, totally sold out for you. Now then, bless me accordingly." Pharisaical fasting would have gone along those lines.

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2. Look at 2:18b. What does the complaint against Jesus and his followers tell us about their attitude and conduct?

Behind the statement “*your disciples do not fast*” is a concern about the whole demeanor of Jesus and his band. Compare Matthew 11:18-19 where it tells us Jesus was called “a glutton and a winebibber”. The lifestyle of Jesus’ disciples was obviously very lively! Remember the party at Levi’s house (Mark 2:13-17)? This shows what a departure his conduct was from all other religious teachers, even from John the Baptist. Fasting was the very *essence* of the “religious” spirit. a) First, religion tended to separate its followers from the world, detaching them from it. (Anyone fasting constantly is not going to be the most productive at work.) b) Secondly, fasting can promote an atmosphere of gloom and self-incrimination. But Jesus must have been the very opposite — a) He did not at all stay aloof from “non-believers”, nor did he disengage from the world and its society, and, b) he was not always serious, but joyful and gregarious. The joy and “worldly” lifestyle/attitude of Jesus was not “religiously correct” at the time. Again we see Jesus contradicting the expected norms of religion and religious practices.

3. Read 2:19-20. a) Does Jesus forbid fasting here or anywhere? b) Who is the “bridegroom” of Israel? (cf. Isaiah 54:4-6; 62:5; Jeremiah 2:2-3, 32; Ezekiel 16:1-8). What is Jesus claiming here? c) How does the image of “wedding guests” indicate how his coming changes the way we use spiritual disciplines?

- a) Jesus does not actually forbid fasting here or elsewhere. In Matt. 6:19ff he says, “*when you fast...*” which assumes that Christians can and sometimes will fast. But his disciples don’t fast as a matter of course, as John’s did. John’s fasting was legitimate, unlike the Pharisees’ fasting. Yet the whole passage indicates that a grasp of the gospel will bring about a spiritual life with less mourning and grieving than John’s did. The joy the gospel brings has a major impact on how the spiritual disciplines are used (i.e. fasting, prayer, worship services, confession of sins). And what Jesus says about this gospel-joy is remarkable.
- b) First, Jesus makes an utterly breathtaking claim here. The Bridegroom of Israel was God himself, who depicts himself as the “husband” of his people (Isaiah 54:4-6; 62:4-5; Hosea; Ezekiel 16; Jeremiah 2). Jesus is saying he is the Lord of Israel, God himself! A more direct divine claim is not possible. If Jesus simply literally said, “*I am God,*” there would be some doubt about what he meant. Does that mean he is a god, in a polytheistic world-view? But when he says he is the bridegroom, he is identifying himself with the Biblical Yahweh.
- c) Second, Jesus now talks about his followers as “*guests of the bridegroom.*” We should keep in mind the magnitude of the wedding celebration in that culture. It lasted all week and was a huge event. The Talmud said that invited guests were to be considered free from any religious or civil responsibilities while they were there — the entire obligation of those invited to the party was to rejoice! Before the wedding, there might be questions on the part of everyone around: Will I be invited? Am I a friend? But at the wedding, there is no uncertainty. The guests have had a personal invitation and have been admitted to the ultimate feast.

What are the implications of this for us? Jesus apparently is saying that the gospel of grace changes our religious practices. Until Jesus came, repentance usually was done without the certainty of God's reception. Notice the spirit of David's fasting in 2 Samuel 12:17 ff. People in other religions and even people within Old Testament Biblical religion had only a general sense that the divine is merciful. But there was no certainty or guarantee of forgiveness. But now, Jesus says, his followers are like wedding guests! The guests at a wedding know they are "in" with the bridegroom. They have been welcomed. This is the whole point behind the bridegroom illustration — acceptance by God. The death of Jesus in our place is the guarantee of our acceptance and admittance.

Jesus' point: "Constant solemnity and morbidity is inappropriate. When you are with John the Baptist or any other religious teacher, you do not know if you will find God or God will accept you. But when you are with me, the verdict is in! You are with God and God is with you. You are already invited to the big final feast of history — the wedding feast of the Lord!" Cf. Exodus 24 — when the elders of Israel came into the presence of God and saw that they were not destroyed, that they were accepted, they "ate and drank". Joy! Feasting! It all denotes the warmth, the delight of knowing God's welcome. Christians are to have a genuine aliveness, a joy about them.

Note: "*When the bridegroom is taken*" is probably Jesus' first hint about his fate in the gospel. We have already seen that the declaration "*the kingdom of God is near*" tells us that something has to happen for the kingdom to be "set up" or "break in." This reference to being "*taken*" and that "*on that day they will fast*" probably refers to the crucifixion and the days immediately afterwards. (cf. John 16:16-22 – "A little while, and you will not see me, and a little while, you will see me. You will be sorrowful, but then your sorrow will be turned to joy.")

4. Look at 2:20-21. Jesus continues to speak here about how his coming changes traditional religious practices. What is he saying?

New wine in those days was put into containers of animal skins for fermentation. Since wine emitted gasses and expanded as it fermented, it had to be put into new skins which were flexible and capable of expansion. Old skins, already stretched, were brittle, and thus new wine was never placed in them. The general gist of the parable seems obvious — Jesus' coming brings something so powerful and new that it cannot be contained in existing forms. The 'wine' is Jesus and his gospel. The 'wineskins' are the external ways we worship, pray, repent, live in community, and live in the world. What does this mean practically?

First, we know Jesus is talking about the immediate, radical changes in communal religious practices that happened as soon as he came. 1) Jesus' disciples eat without washed hands (Matt. 15:2) though it broke the Old Testament cleanliness laws. Why? Jesus is now our cleanness and holiness before God. 2) Jesus' disciples won't make sacrifices at the temple. Why? Jesus is now our sacrifice for sins. 3) Jesus goes to the "unwashed" Gentiles, not just the Jews. Why? Jesus' grace extends to all people. 4) Jesus' disciples don't obey all the myriad of regulations around the Sabbath (see below).

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In general, there is a shift from the complexity of so many regulations and external rules and minutiae toward a much simpler practice. Why? Religion is filled with rules and traditions because observers are not sure where they stand with the deity.

Multiplication of rules and duties grow out of our insecurity and uncertainty. Jesus and “grace” blows away the morbid, rigid, externalistic forms religious life had taken. Now with the gospel of Christ, we do things a) with grateful joy, knowing God loves us, b) with willingness, realizing how little God asks compared to what he’s already given, and, c) with understanding that these duties are ways of knowing God better and growing into his likeness — not ways to merit his love.

Second, however, we probably should apply this parable to the on-going life of the church. Maybe Jesus means that new outward forms are *always* called for — that the gospel’s radical newness and power will continually lead to new forms and structures for the church. In other words, the “wine of grace” continually frees the church up to be creative. How? It is the tendency to forget God’s grace that leads to traditionalism and rigidity of form. When we are not sure that God loves us apart from our spiritual performance, we cling to our distinctive, familiar ways of doing church. When we are spiritually insecure, we need to shore up a sense of being righteous and “right”. The gospel-wine of grace, however, continually frees us to think afresh what is the best way to organize and practice our faith in our current time and situation.

Third, however, we should apply this parable in the most broad way. Jesus is saying here — “if I come into your life, I will change everything”. It is typical for people to first approach Christ or Christianity with the hope that they will get help and support for their old life. They have expectations, goals, views of what is important, what they need, where they should be going. They come saying: “I want help to get the things that will fulfill me and make me happy. Will Jesus help me to get to my goals?” Jesus says here — “Don’t ask me to come in and simply help you with your old life. When I come in I give a whole new life. I will change everything. I won’t help you with your agenda; I’ll give you a whole new agenda.” Jesus shatters our categories. This is a very threatening statement! Jesus says: “If I come in to your life, sit loose to your expectations. All sorts of things will change! I won’t come into your life to be your assistant or consultant. I change everything.” Of course, if he’s the Bridegroom, that is only reasonable.

5. Read the following background note about the meaning of *Sabbath Rest* in the Bible.

- a)** In the Old Testament, when the Creator finished creating, he “rested” from his work. But that did not mean God was tired — it meant he stopped creating the world and started ruling world. Thus *Sabbath* in Bible means the peace and “rest” and blessing all creation experiences under God’s rule. Isaiah 66:1, “Heaven is my throne, earth my footstool — why build me a house for my place of rest?” So rest equals rule of God.
- b)** When we rebelled from God’s rule, we lost the Sabbath rest. If we are not under his Lordship, we become ‘restless’ and miserable in our sin (Isaiah 57:20-21).

c) God gives Israel some foretastes of “rest” when they obey him — but it is only the foretaste of something much greater to come. (Joshua 14:15; I Kings 8:56; Hebrews 4:1-10). He commands the Sabbath day to be observed once a week, to represent the rest and peace and restoration of what God’s salvation brings. (The English word “restore” retains something of the original meaning of rest as “healing that which is broken.”)

Read 2:23-3:6. a) What is Jesus saying about himself when he says I am “Lord of the Sabbath?” b) How does Jesus show that they are missing the “point” of the Sabbath — and what is that “point”?

a) First, this is an enormous claim (again)! If Jesus is “Lord” of the Sabbath, that means that he must be the King whose rule brings the Sabbath rest. And not only is the Sabbath-Lord the King of the world, he is the Creator of the world. After all, it was the Creator who originated the Sabbath (Genesis 1-2).

b) Second, Jesus heals a man with a shriveled hand on the Sabbath. We have, in v. 5, the assertion that the hand “*was completely restored.*” How much clearer can Jesus make it? The Sabbath rest of God is all about the healing and restoration that comes under the Lordship of Christ. Jesus is saying: “If I’m out on the Sabbath doing what the Sabbath is really all about — don’t complain!” Ironically, the rules and regulations of the Sabbath — designed to give literal physical rest and to forbid any physical exertion — made it impossible to bring about the “rest” that the Sabbath really points to, which is the full healing of all creation by the power of the kingdom. The man’s hand is a picture. All of our hearts, souls, lives, relationships are “shriveled” until they are under the Lordship of Christ. Under his rule, the hand becomes all it was created to be! And so only under his rule, can our lives and world become all they should be.

This means, then, that the ultimate “point” of the Sabbath is Jesus himself. When he says, “I am the Lord of the Sabbath”, he is saying, “The Sabbath day of rest is only a signpost pointing to the true and deep rest you receive in me when you believe in me.”

Application: Practically speaking, there are two “levels” of the rest that the Sabbath day points to. First, there is a deep spiritual rest that we can enter into immediately. Hebrews tells us “*There remains, then, a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for anyone who enters God’s rest, rests from his own work, just as God did from his.*” (Hebrews 4:9) The words “now” and “today” figure prominently in Hebrews 3 and 4 when talking of this rest. We can enter God’s Sabbath rest now by believing the gospel. This rest begins when we rest from our good works/our own righteousness, and experience forgiveness of sins through Christ alone. All the sweating and anxious striving is over. We know God has accepted us. When Hebrews says: “*[we] rest... just as God did from his,*” it shows how our rest in the finished work of redemption (by Christ) is an image of God’s Sabbath rest from the finished work of creation in Genesis 2:2. In the beginning, God said, “my work is finished!” so he could rest. On the cross, Jesus said, “my work is finished!” so we could rest.

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However, as the miraculous healing of the shriveled hand shows us, the ultimate Sabbath rest is the healing of all creation (Psalm 96, 98; Revelation 21). God's Sabbath rule of creation in Genesis 2:2 will be reestablished through the work of Christ, and eventually everything will be put right again. All death, disease, decay, war, poverty, dissension, and brokenness will be wiped away. Everything will be "unshriveled." But we don't have to wait for the Second Coming of Christ to seek this rest. Though we don't have miraculous power, we are to follow Jesus and seek this rest by working to heal the brokenness of the world through ministries of word and deed. We evangelize, counsel, feed, build, and embrace people with the gospel and the gifts of the Spirit to do what Jesus did on the Sabbath.

Ironically, it is only as we enjoy the "rest" of the work of redemption that we will be able to truly enter into the "rest" of restoring and renewing the creation. That is why Jesus said that we cannot get true rest simply through Sabbath regulations, but only through him (Mark 2:27-28). Why? When we use work to earn a sense of self-worth, then the work (ironically) is not about the work itself, or others — but it is about us. We are doing it for ourselves — for the money and status we need to shore up our identity. But if we 'rest' from our work by trusting in the finished work of Christ, we can truly be liberated to give of our money and time and heart to be a sign of the coming kingdom and the Sabbath rest.

6. Summarize and reflect on what we've learned. What are some of the practical differences there should be between a religious person who is trying to be good and a Christian who understands the gospel?

There are so many! Here are just a few:

- a) If we lose sight of grace, repenting is a much more dismal affair — but now it is to be one of joy! (vv. 18-19) In general, we are not to be long-faced, withdrawing from the world.
- b) If lose sight of grace — the laws of the Bible (they are there!) become ways to merit salvation, and thus people will try to continually "nail them down" and make them "keep-able" by breaking them into very detailed regulations. But if we grasp grace, we will see the law's purpose is to help us please the one who saved us and grow into his likeness. Instead of it being a burden, we should "delight in the law of the Lord" (Psalm 1).
- c) If we lose sight of grace, when we obey one of God's laws, we will become smugly self-righteous, and when we disobey we will be utterly crushed. But grace humbles the successful and comforts the failures. It keeps us on an even keel. The pleasure of giving pleasure makes you "obey" the wishes of the loved one. It is a totally different dynamic than legalism.
- d) If we lose sight of grace, Bible study, prayer, and fasting we will be burdensome and mechanical. The goal will be to get on God's good side, and to get things from God (blessing, heaven, answered prayers). If we grasp grace, the goal of these disciplines will be to get God. Sabbath observance, etc. will have a whole different motivation.

e) If we lose sight of grace, we might become workaholics.

7. How can you help your group spot the hallmarks of a modern “evangelical Pharisee”?

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Jesus claims to be the Bridegroom, the Son of Man and the Lord of the Sabbath. These are open and provocative claims.

Why Jesus came: He came to deal with the sin problem. His presence makes fasting inappropriate. He came to bring a completely new order of priorities. The opposition, which led to his death, was part of his deliberate plan.

How should I respond? The passage gives us our clearest picture yet of man’s opposition which led to the cross. Man-made religion does not respond rightly to Jesus. Human religion rejects God’s sovereignty and grace.

Mark

The community of the King

Study 4 | Mark 3:7-45

Each section of Mark contains a series of incidents in the life of Jesus. Each one shows us something about who Jesus is — His power, His purpose, and His self-understanding. It is as if the gospel writer is pulling a cover off of Jesus inch by inch. Each story reveals a little more of who He is.

Now we seem to enter a new series of stories. Some have called Chapter 1 “Authority stories” because they show His authority. Some have called Chapter 2 “Conflict stories” because they show the wisdom of His grace over against the world’s thinking and mindset. Beginning in Chapter 3, we see Jesus beginning the creation of a new community, a new people of God who will embody the kingdom of God. He builds this community through serving people, teaching, preaching, training, counseling, healing, and liberating.

Since we continually will be watching Him minister to others, we can always read with two practical questions in mind. **1)** How can Jesus carry out this ministry in my life? **2)** How can I carry out this ministry in the lives of others?

1. Why do you think this passage (3:7-35) follows Mark 3:6?

At the end of the section 3:6, we are first told that the leaders of Israel had begun plotting to kill Jesus. They had rejected him, and this rejection by the “power structure” was very complete. The Herodians represented the more secular people in power, those who supported Herod and who were in league with the Roman imperial power. These were Jews, but their religious commitment was small and nominal. The Pharisees, on the other hand, represented the highly religious party which was usually a determined opponent of Herod and his whole administration. They believed that only extreme moral and religious purity by all of Israel would move God to send the Messiah who would help them throw off the yoke of Rome. The Pharisees despised Jews who had cynically and selfishly made their peace with Rome. So when these two “poles” of Jewish leaders meet in unity to destroy Jesus, we have a complete rejection by “institutional” Israel.

Jesus now begins to move away from simple declaration of the truth to beginning to recruit and build a new Israel, a new nation — a new “people of God” — not based on physical characteristics but on spiritual ones. He begins talking about who His family is (3:31ff.) He chooses the leaders of the new community (3:13ff.)

2. How do verses 3:7-12, in particular, contrast with 3:6? What is Mark teaching us?

There are two contrasts at least. First, though the leaders of the people reject Christ, the common people themselves follow him in greater numbers. The crowds were “*large*” and Jesus had to speak from a small boat in the lake because of the size of the multitude (v. 9-10). So the people who should be leading are “*behind*” and the people who should be

behind are “*pushing forward*” (v. 10). Second, though the religious experts can’t see who Jesus is, the evil spirits do (v. 11)! So the teachers and leaders who should be declaring the truth are so much in the dark that even the demons have better theology!

All this is part of one of the main themes of the book of Mark.

“[In the Gospel of Mark], God’s... invasion of the world has wrought an inversion: God has reversed the positions of insiders and outsiders. Those who are in positions of authority and privilege reject Jesus and the message; even Jesus’ own disciples [are continually shown to be] slow to understand his teaching. Others, however — people of low or despised position in the social world of first-century Jewish culture — receive the gospel gladly, for their need is great. The lepers, the demon-possessed, the woman with a hemorrhage (5:25-34), the Syrophonecian woman (7:24-30), the little children (10:13-16), blind Bartimaeus (10:46-52), the nameless woman who anoints Jesus at Bethany for burial (14:3-9), the Gentile centurion at the cross (15:39) — these are examples put forth by Mark of faithful response to Jesus. “Many who are the first will be the last, and the last will be first.” (10:31) Those of us who are familiar with the story should not under-estimate the shock of this inversion.” Richard Hays, The Moral Vision of the New Testament, pp. 89-90

3. Why does Jesus call twelve disciples? Why do you think that number “twelve” is mentioned (twice) as if it is very significant?

a) Why does Jesus call twelve disciples?

On the one hand, the disciples are called in order to multiply ministry. He wants to “*send them out*” to preach and do miracles (v. 14-15). He spends time with a few so that many can be reached. This is a response to the needs of the people, and it follows naturally from the account of the teeming, overwhelming crowds of 3:7-12. On the other hand, the method and manner of this calling shows that Jesus was following a Biblical pattern for the constituting of a new people of God (see below). It is interesting how these two concerns are always combined in gospel ministry. Paul calls himself a “*servant of the gospel*” and a “*servant of the church*” in the same breath (Colossians 1:23-25). We are to honor both the truth and the needs of people. We should not set them in opposition to each other.

b) What is significant about the number “twelve”?

There seems to be a direct parallel in this passage between the formation of Israel in the book of Exodus and the formation of the church. Just as God, after the Exodus, called his people together and entered into a covenant relationship with them, so Jesus now signals that he is re-constituting a people, a nation.

First, Jesus calls his disciples on a mountain, just like God made a covenant with Israel on Mt. Sinai. Second, Jesus calls twelve disciples, just as God made a covenant with twelve tribes. Mark often refers to them as “the Twelve”. He won’t even call them the “twelve disciples” as a way to emphasize the “twelveness”. The number is considered

very significant. (cf. also Luke 22:29-30, where it clearly teaches that the apostles “rule the twelve tribes”.)

Jesus, then is showing himself to be a greater Moses. In Luke 9:31, in the account of the transfiguration, Jesus meets with Elijah and Moses and speaks with them about his “departure” which is about to happen in Jerusalem. But the Greek word used is “exodus.” His death, then, is seen as the liberation of his people, just as Moses’ exodus was the liberation of his people. All this is incipient here in Mark. Jesus’ career is the new exodus event that liberates not just from physical bondage but from sin and death itself. Just as the new liberation is not just from physical slavery but from all sin and death —so the new community is not simply one particular national group. The old people of God was exclusive — only one race could belong. The new nation is inclusive — later we will see that people from any race can belong.

4. What does this section (verses 13-19) tell us about how we are to understand ourselves and conduct ourselves as disciples?

The word “disciple” doesn’t appear in this passage, partly because Mark wants to emphasize the “twelveness” of them. But the word “disciple” means a serious follower of a spiritual leader. We are not just called to believe in Christ, but also to seriously follow Him. In that sense, we can read the calling of the Twelve as a lesson by Mark for all of us who want to be Jesus’ disciples. What do we learn?

First, we must see ourselves as *chosen by grace*. Notice, he calls *those he wanted*, as God said to Israel (Deuteronomy 7:7-8) “I called you not because you were better or larger or greater than other nations, but simply because I chose to set my love on you.” This is a repudiation of “religion.” His disciples are called by God out of sheer love and grace. There is no indication that they were “top of their class”. [The rest of the narrative of Mark reveals this again and again.] They were slow (4:13) and hardhearted (8:17) and cowardly (16:8). They were called on the basis of grace, not their merits. We are chosen people, not “choice” people. This is humbling! Yet it can also bring security, because his love for us (like a parent’s for children) is not based on our performance and strengths, but on our relationship. This self-understanding is at the very root of what makes Christians different. It both humbles and emboldens — at the same time.

Second, we must see ourselves as *ministering and doing what Jesus did*. Notice, he calls them in order to send them out to do essentially what he was doing himself — preach in words and do deeds of deliverance (v. 39). Just as God chose Israel to be a “kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:6) (a priest was one who brought people to God), so the disciples were called to preach and do Jesus’ ministry of healing. They are called “apostles” — the “sent” ones. In other words, we are all to do the ministry of Jesus in some way. How? We are to communicate truth, show love, use the gifts of the spirit that we have, bring people under the power of the king that heals. We are not disciples unless we are also apostles in some sense. We cannot come to Jesus only to have our needs met, but to serve him in the world as agents of the kingdom.

Third, we must see ourselves as *ministering out of time spent with Jesus*. Notice, that he calls them to be “with him” (v. 14). There are various implications to this. (1) First, there is a balance between “being with” and “going out”. We must have a strong inner life of fellowship and intimacy with Him if we are to have a strong “outer” life of ministry and effectiveness with others. (2) Second, discipleship is not mere “information transfer” but is the result of a relationship. Jesus does not teach his disciples along academic lines; he does not see them Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 9am to noon. They are trained by living with Jesus. Every part of their lives is conducted with Jesus in the center of it.

Fourth, we must see ourselves being *called into a community, not just an individual relationship with Christ*. Notice that each disciple cannot be with Him without at the same time being with all the others. Jesus didn’t disciple people one-on-one in a series of appointments. He created a new “family.” To come into a relationship with Christ is automatically to be brought into a new family with people who ordinarily you would never associate with. Notice, Matthew, (a tax collector and Roman collaborator) and Simon the Zealot (someone working for the overthrow of the Roman power establishment.) If you are not in a community with other believers who are now linked by Christ in a way they could never be linked in the world — you are not a disciple of Christ.

5. Why does Mark separate verses 20-21 and verses 31-35 by verses 22-30? Why do verses 28-29 cause people trouble? How can you answer the problems?

a) Why He separates them.

This is a “sandwich” passage. The incident of Jesus’ family begins in v. 20-21, is interrupted by an exorcism episode in v. 22-30, and is concluded in v. 31-35. What is the point of the “sandwich”? When two incidents are “inter-leaved” the author expects the readers to compare them. What do the two incidents have in common? First, we see Jesus’ physical family rejecting Him (cf. John 7:5 where we are told Jesus’ brothers did not believe in him.) In 3:6 and now again in v. 22ff, we see the leaders of Jesus’ physical nation rejecting him. Verse 22 tells us the leaders of Israel show up again and agree with his family that he is insane, only adding that his insanity is really Satanic possession. (Notice that Jesus’ power is never disputed. Only the source of the miraculous power is in question). Both of these incidents together compare how Jesus is constituting both a new nation and a new family. Thus Jesus is saying, “your relationship to me must be spiritual and vital. No one is automatically related to me. If you are my same race or my same clan or even in my same immediate family, it does not mean you belong to me at all. There must be a living, vital connection to me.” That is his point.

Jesus’ argument in v. 23b-27 is this. “If I were driving out demons by demonic power, it would be like two members of a family warring against one another and destroying the family’s power. Maybe humans would do this, but give Satan more credit! He’s not that

stupid!" He is also saying, "the defeats of Satan you see are not just isolated miracles, but a whole ministry of wide-scale release from Satan's power. I am tying up Satan and plundering him of dozens of his captives and prizes."

b) Why does v.28-29 cause trouble?

vv. 28-29 - The "sin against the Holy Spirit" can be interpreted this way:

First, at the most basic level, Jesus is saying (in v. 28) that there is no sin per se that cannot be forgiven. He says "all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven." He does not say, "all but one." He means that there is no particular disobedient action in itself that is unforgivable. When thinking of the "sin against the Holy Spirit" we should not imagine Jesus is talking about some action that is impervious to God's mercy.

But Jesus has just been accused of working with Satan's power rather than the Spirit's power. Why? The religious leaders find Jesus' Messiahship does not fit their religious conceptions. They wanted a Messiah who (a) came in strength and worldly power, and (b) delivered the good and moral people over against the wicked and pagan people. Instead, Jesus comes as a Messiah who (a) comes in weakness and suffering, and (b) delivers outsiders and people who admit their sin over against the proud and self-sufficient. Jesus is redefining the kingdom in terms of grace. The leaders resist this gospel — they think it is "of the devil". Jesus, however, says that when they reject the gospel they are really resisting the Holy Spirit, who is the real power behind Jesus.

Now if you refuse to believe the gospel, and offend against the most basic work of the Spirit, then there is no way to forgiveness. If you believe in the gospel, any sin is forgivable, no matter how heinous. But if you don't believe in the gospel — no sin forgivable. If you refuse to listen to the Holy Spirit's testimony to the truth of the gospel, then there is no hope. The frightening thing is that it is possible to be very religious and moral and "miss" the gospel.

Note: It is possible that the sin against the Holy Spirit is mainly something that religious people do. Jesus only accuses religious leaders of it. This is a sin which can be committed by religious leaders (like the Pharisees) who, though deeply immersed in the Bible and religion, and having seen with their own eyes the miracles and changed lives of Jesus, nevertheless rejected Jesus as Savior.

Summary: Jesus' statement in v. 28 is that all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven. How can this be true in light of v. 29? Almost the only explanation is that a lack of repentance (spiritual pride) is the only sin that can kill you. If you repent, any and all sins are forgiven. But if you don't repent, there's not forgiveness for any thing. In any case, one thing is clear. If you are worried about having committed this sin, you certainly haven't committed it. Anyone who is committing v. 29 isn't worried or humble — and that's the opposite of blasphemy!

6. What does Jesus in verses 20-21 and 31-35 tell us about who is in His family? What are the practical implications for us?

a) Who is in His family?

(1) "Here" not "there" in v. 35 shows that not everyone is His brother or sister. Some people teach that everyone is a child of God. Jesus insists here and elsewhere that not everyone is in the family of God.

(2) His physical family "tries to take charge of him" (v. 21). By implication, His spiritual family is a contrast. His spiritual family consists of people who let Him take charge of them! When you let Him become your king, you can become his brother or sister. Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother. This is more than mere obedience. It is a relinquishment of self-determination. It is giving up the right to be one's own master. It is acknowledging that you are a child. It is to make a vow of unconditional obedience.

(3) His physical family thinks He is "crazy" (v. 21). By implication, His spiritual family is a contrast. They listen to His wisdom, submit to His Word. Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother. Children cannot live on their own, making their own decisions. A child of God acknowledges that condition.

b) What are the practical implications for us?

It is nothing short of astonishing that Jesus makes this statement to a highly ethnocentric, patriarchal, and family-centered culture. He is telling us here that no physical family is ultimately necessary, and no particular race and culture is ultimately necessary. Christianity was founded by a single man and was extended by a single man (St. Paul). It was the very first religion in antiquity that considered singleness a valid way of life. If you are a believer you have brothers and sisters and a family — you have the only family that really counts, and that really lasts. Our membership in God's family undermines the family-idolatry so widespread among traditional and conservative peoples. It tells us that a happy family is not the ultimate thing in life. On the other hand, our membership in God's family undermines the family-disdain so widespread among individualistic secular people. Human families are made in the image of God — who himself is a family, a Trinity. So human family life is important and should be cultivated.

But the other practical implication is that we can know we are loved.

The best commentary on these verses is the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15. There Jesus tells about a young man who takes his entire half of the family inheritance and wastes it and himself in sin and profligacy but is accepted back into the family by his loving father. But the prodigal can only come back in and receive clothes, food, and capital out of the elder brother's wealth, at his expense. In the story, the elder brother hates it. But this is Jesus' way to point out that he is the true elder brother. He willingly brings us into the Father's family at his expense. He died for us, He was plundered for us. We sit at the Father's table dressed in Jesus' clothes, with His ring on our finger. All through him. We must celebrate and live out the fact that we are members of a kingdom family, and it is all at the expense of our big brother, Jesus Christ.

Do you live every day as if you are a member of God's family, accepted, loved? Remember, a child in a family obeys not in order to be loved and accepted, but because he already is loved and accepted. You can't obey your Father unless your father has already brought you into the family by biology or adoption. Do you live as a child of the King, or as his slave?

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Jesus is the great authority that comes from God. Demons call him the Son of God (v. 11). Jesus shows himself as the Messiah who calls true Israel out of slavery (v. 13-14, 27; Deuteronomy 18:15,18; Isaiah 49:5). Jesus is the Redeemer calling His people to Him on the mountain to be a holy nation (v. 13-14; Exodus 19:5-6).

Why Jesus came: Jesus came not only to save and but also to judge. Mark 11:1-12 implies that those who reject Jesus are also judged by Him.

How should I respond? The right response is to follow Him, to listen to His teaching and to obey the will of God (v. 34). Verses 13 and 27 warn us against thinking we can do this for ourselves. The illogical response is to reject forgiveness and say that Jesus was mad or bad.

Prayer requests

Mark

The Word of the King

Study 5 | Mark 4:1-34

This is the first place in the book of Mark where we meet Jesus' teaching method of using "parables." Unlike the other gospels, Mark does not include long passages of Christ's teaching. Thus there are relatively few parables in Mark. The Greek word translated "parable" meant literally "to set one thing beside another" — to draw a comparison between two things and show an analogy. Thus parables begin, "this is like that." The parables of Jesus seek to teach us about the kingdom of God by comparing it with vivid and concrete situations in our world. Parables teach nearly endless new insights. If Jesus asks: "how is the church like a 'city on a hill'?" (*Matthew 5:14*) The answers are endless. Parables invite deep meditation and reflection.

It's helpful to again remind ourselves what Jesus means by "the kingdom of God." Many people think of a "kingdom" as the physical place which is ruled — for example when we hear of the "Kingdom of Gondor" we usually have to think of a definite geographical "realm." The Greek word *basilea* (kingdom) that Jesus uses refers more to the "ruling power" of the sovereign than to the "realm."

1. Read 4:3-9 and 14-20. a) What is the main point of this parable? b) What else does it tell us about the kingdom of God? c) What does it tell us about the Christian life?

a) The main point.

The main point is "*he who has ears, let him hear!*" (v. 9), that is, the kingdom comes only to those who have gone to great lengths to *listen* (verses 3, 9, 13, 23, 24). This strongly implies that the gospel is not something you simply pick up and do. Rather you must wrestle with it, reflect on it, think it out until it "sinks in" (like seed). By using the agricultural metaphor with the repeated call to "listen", Jesus shows us that it is extremely possible to think you understand the gospel when you really don't. "The penny has to drop". You may think you "get it" and yet it has not truly touched your heart or penetrated your understanding.

b) What else does it tell us about the kingdom of God?

Here are some of the implications. God's kingdom is so very different from earthly kingdoms:

(1) Earthly kingdoms come to the supremely confident, but God's kingdom comes to the completely humble, receptive. The ground that "gets" the kingdom is not hard but soft and easily penetrated. We have to "open up", let down our intellectual and volitional defense, and take in his message like the ground takes in seed. The kingdom comes not to the fierce but to the teachable — those who know they have much to learn.

(2) The power of the kingdom is truth not force. The kingdom of God moves forward not by political or military force, but through teaching and persuading and by hearing and learning. Jesus' kingdom will conquer through love and service, not force, through sweet

persuasion, not coercion, and it will produce loving obedience, not slavery, and therefore it will transform completely, not superficially. Jesus' kingdom is more like a seed on the heart than a boulder on the head. The boulder smashes from the outside, the seed penetrates to the inside. The entry of a seed is the most gentle of procedures.

(3) Third, we learn here how small and unimpressively the kingdom of God can start! A few seeds in the ground are essentially invisible. Nothing appears to have really happened. In the same way, the church of Jesus Christ for many decades consisted of a very small number of socially marginal people. No one would have ever thought that it was going to "take over" the Roman empire.

(4) Fourth, we learn how slowly and indirectly the kingdom of God can proceed. It may take a very long time and seem to be going nowhere. Some seeds and roots can lie fallow and hidden for an extremely long time and then spring up. So the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is not something that will break in completely and immediately. The agricultural metaphor at least suggests that it will come in stages. It generally grows organically and gradually, not coercively and suddenly.

(5) Fifth, we learn how varied and disappointing the response to the kingdom of God can be. Notice that most of the people do not become fruitful disciples of Christ. Only one of the four soils responds properly.

c) What else does it tell us about the Christian life?

(1) Nothing is more important in the Christian life than listening to and understanding the Word of God. Learning and studying the word takes all the skill, time, and patience of farming. Both our admission into and progress in the Christian life is a very deliberate process of listening to God's word.

(2) We must not necessarily expect dramatic immediate effects in our life. Of course there are many tremendous things that come to us the first second we believe — divine forgiveness, the new birth, adoption into the family of God, access to the presence of God. But like a new seed, most of this is virtually invisible. The concrete *fruit* of being an adopted child of God is not immediate. For example, if you have a bad temper, it is unlikely (though possible) that conversion will take it away at once. Instead, you will have to "work in" the doctrine of adoption to your heart over a period of time. Most Christian growth is not very dramatic, but neither is the planting and germination of a seed (to which the kingdom of God is likened). So Christian growth is not usually a spectacular event. It is the gradual maturation that comes from continual listening, study, thought and application of God's Word.

(3) There are three main enemies or barriers to patient, submissive listening to the Word. They are "the world, the flesh, and the devil" (1 John 2-3). Evil takes these three forms: evil around us "systemically" (world), evil within us "personally" (flesh), and evil above us "supernaturally" (devil). In the first three soils, we see these three forms of resistance to God's Word, though in reverse of the traditional order. This shows the many ways that sin can keep us from hearing the Word. We must be on our guard.

(4) Lastly, the parable shows that self-deception is easy. Many, many people think they have heard the word when they have never really heard the message at all. The Word must go in deep — it takes great openness. It requires that the truth penetrate very

deeply. Just as only time will tell if a seed has been properly planted, only time can tell if the truth has penetrated deeply.

2. What are the various ways Jesus shows us by which we can mis-hear the Word of the kingdom?

a) We can hear with a hard heart. (v. 15) Hard soil. "Satan takes it away." This could refer to people who are very skeptical and who outrightly reject Christianity. It may also mean someone who never lets it really "sink in." This would be completely nominal Christians, who will profess general belief if asked, and who attend church and "observe" religious practices, but who made no connection at all between the message and his/her heart and life. In other words, the truth does not move them, and it does not affect the way they live. They may come and sit in church but it has no impact on them at all. They never think out the implications, it makes no difference.

b) We can hear with a shallow heart. (v. 16-17) Shallow soil. "Trouble takes it away." This could refer to people who have a merely emotional response to the gospel. They may be in distress, and they really want some kind of love or help. But they never have thought things out and become really convinced of the truth of the Word. It is only true if it "works" for them, and when difficulties come, it seems totally "untrue", and so they abandon faith. Or it could be people who like the "joy" — the good news of the gospel (love, acceptance), but who have resisted the part of the gospel about repentance and sin and unconditional surrender. Some people might begin to come toward God, but when they hear the whole message, they give up.

Ultimately, the second soil speaks of people whose main problem is "the flesh," their own sinful hearts. The sinful heart can lead people to respond to the gospel only to a superficial degree because they just want comfort and blessing. When any real trials or difficulties appear, their superficial "faith" response melts away.

c) We can hear with a divided heart. (v. 18-19) Soil with other seeds. "Wealth and lust takes it away." This could refer to people who are real Christians but who cannot fully give Jesus their highest allegiance. Here the problem is the "world." In the world, material goods, power and comfort are the important things. The world surrounds us and tries to control our thinking.

Note: One of the questions that often is raised about soils #2 and #3 is — are these people real Christians who have "fallen away" or are these people who were never Christians? Soil #2 does not appear to represent true disciples, but there is doubt about soil #3. The view that these are Christians rests on the fact that v. 19 shows that the plant grows and seems to last. (The second soil produces plants that "fall away" — they die off). But though it doesn't wither, it also bears no fruit. Thus it is of no more use to the farmer than the grain that never sprouted at all. So a fruitless Christian is a loss to the Master.

What is "fruit" that a Christian should produce? It is probably meant to be a very comprehensive term. In Paul, it can refer to character change (the "fruit of the Spirit" in Galatians 5:22ff is love, joy, peace, patience, humility, self-control), or to serving others and bringing about changes in their lives (Romans 1:13 speaks of his coming to Rome to preach and to "have a harvest among you".)

3. Which of the four soils do you identify with now? Why? Which of the four soils have you identified more with in the past? Why?

4. In verses 10-12, who are the two groups of people Jesus is talking about? What characterizes each group? What is the “secret of the kingdom?”

This is a difficult saying to interpret. Either Jesus is saying that he is deliberately trying to be obscure, or he is saying that the parables-method reveals people’s hard hearts, since they will simply not take the stories and “plant them” through deep meditation and reflection. While the latter answer is a bit problematic, the former answer is impossible. Why would Jesus come in to the world to hide the gospel, when he could have done a far better job by not coming at all?

First, there are those “outside” the kingdom. The parables will basically remain opaque to them. This does not mean that they will be consciously confused by the parables. They may “get” the point intellectually, but they will not let the parables draw them in to personal understanding and deep conviction. In other words, they will not truly hear them. For example, in 2 Samuel 12, Nathan the prophet tells David a parable, but though David “gets” that it is really about him, he does not see the massive implications of the story for him. In the same way, people outside the kingdom are not personally convicted about Jesus’ teaching. They are not humbled by it and they don’t see its ramifications for them. They do not see how it reveals the deep workings of their heart. Thus they “hear but do not hear.” They will never be able to accept the deeper truth behind them.

Isaiah 6:9 is quoted, and the context is important. In Israel’s day, the people rejected God’s word, so in response God blinded and deafened them. If we resist the truth we have, even that will be taken from us. So we must not ignore the “so that” of v. 12a or “otherwise” of v. 12b. It means because of humanity’s rejection of God, God blinds and deafens them.

Second, there are those (by implication) “inside.” Jesus says that he chooses some people to explain the parables to, to get them to understand. This means that Jesus, by grace, comes and opens our minds to the truth. This is probably the “secret” of the kingdom. The disciples are shown that the kingdom has come in Jesus and that it can be received by receiving Jesus.

This is not an easy teaching, but it is true to our experience. Most of us spend years “hearing” the Biblical truths without really hearing them. But then at some point, we realized the implications of it all for ourselves. What happened? This text suggests that Jesus “came” to us through the Holy Spirit and opened our eyes to it. This raises some difficult questions. If He comes to us, why does He not come to all? But we are not told that. We do learn from this that anyone who stays blind has freely chosen to do so. By nature, we all dislike the truth, and we have willfully closed our hearts.

5. Read 4:21-23. What does this parable teach us?

Unfortunately, modern translations obscure a rather unusual “wrinkle” in this parable. Literally it reads, “Does the lamp come to be under the bed?” The use of the word “come” is interesting, because lamps do not “come.” They are not capable of movement, they are brought. (Most translations smooth this over and use a passive form “do you bring a lamp” rather than the active form in the text.) This form is completely intelligible, though, if Jesus is speaking of Himself. That is almost certainly what he is talking about. He is not talking about the “truth” or “the word” — he is talking about Himself.

What is this little parable here for? What is its point? Probably, this goes with the earlier parable as an assurance. See above, where we noted that the parable of the sower tells us of a) how invisible and small the kingdom’s beginnings can be, and b) how slowly the work can proceed, and c) how varied and usually disappointing the response to it will be. But here Jesus assures them that He did not come to be a little light under a couch. The purpose of having a light in a dark room is to illuminate the whole room. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bed. Jesus is saying, “believe me — I’ve come to show the whole world the kingdom of God. Everyone will eventually see it! Don’t despair during all the long wait.”

6. Read 4:24-25. What does this parable teach us?

“The measure you use — is the measure you get” probably refers again to the idea of listening. This is essentially a “parable” but a subtle one. He is probably referring to the fact that, in general, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. If you have a lot of money, it is quite easy to make a lot more, and so on.

This is a both a promise and a warning. What we get from God is dependent on how well we listen to his word (*consider carefully what you hear... whoever has will be given more*). It seems that to “have” and to “carefully listen” are the same thing. So the more we truly believe and submit to what he has said, the more he will give us. “More” what? It means at least more of his truth, but it probably refers to God’s blessing in general. So the promise is — hearken and obey the truth and you will get more. Jesus is saying something like this: “Why should I give you more wisdom and blessing when you aren’t acting on what you already know?”

But there is a warning here as well. Verse 25 tells us “*whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.*” Notice that on the one hand (the first clause) this person does not ‘have’, and yet in the second clause ‘what he has will be taken from him’. How can he “have” and yet not “have”? Obviously the words are being used in two slightly different ways and are being put together for memorable effect. It probably

means that if you don't apply and act on what you've learned from God, even what you knew will become unreal and you will lose it. Spiritual growth is a lot like riding a bike. If you don't go forward, you "fall off".

7. Read 4:26-32. What do the last two parables teach us?

The parable of the grain (vv. 26-29). There is a power in the Word, even though its power may be hidden and mysterious. "All by itself" it grows (v. 28). This probably means that the seed is the Word and the Word has a spiritual power of its own. The Word gives us spiritual life (cf. James 1:10-11; I Peter. 1:23-25; Romans 1:16-17). Another amazing claim! However, this powerful word takes time to work (v. 28b and 29). It could be that Jesus is reminding us of what we can do spiritually and what we can't (1 Corinthians 3:5-9).

The parable of the mustard seed (vv. 30-32). The Word looks insignificant, but produces results all out of proportion to itself. How is the Word like a mustard seed? 1) The Word of the gospel seems foolish to us — (it's a story of a man whose career failed!) Yet it produces amazing fruit in our lives. 2) The Word may enter our heart without fanfare and make no great difference at first, but the more we learn, the more it transforms us. When we accept the Word into our hearts, we have no idea what we got ourselves into!

8. How can your life more accurately reflect the priorities of Jesus' Kingdom?

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: He is The King who has ushered in a new kingdom.

Why Jesus came: He came to establish a kingdom. His kingdom advances through love, service and truth, not force.

How should I respond? (verses 3, 9, 13, 23-24) "Listen!" In the parable of the soils, Jesus describes three categories of wrong responses and one right response. Hearing the Word must be of great importance. We must hear with a new set of ears!

Prayer requests

Mark

Faith in the King

Mark 4:35-5:20

OPTIONAL STUDY

In three of the four stories we are about to study, Jesus directly refers to the subject of “faith”, and in the other story, faith is still a main issue. So the question is — “what does it mean to have faith in Jesus, the bringer of the kingdom?”

Answer: Martin Luther said that faith consists of three parts — notitia (evidence or knowledge), assensus (inclination or attraction), and fiducia (fidelity or commitment). Let’s look for these elements (and others) in the text.

- 1. Read 4:35-41. Notice the level of detail in this story. What sense do they convey to the reader? (After discussing briefly, read and discuss Excursus 1.)**

EXCURSUS 1: Did all this really happen?

If we are to learn faith and trust in Jesus from these stories, we have to notice the evidence that these stories really happened. The accounts are characterized by numerous small details, like the time of day (“evening”; 4:35), the cushion in the boat (4:38), the exact location of Jesus’ nap (“in the stern”; 4:38), the fact that there were other boats floating beside his boat (4:36), the girl’s age in the story of the raising of Jairus’s daughter (5:42), and the exact Aramaic words Jesus used – “Talitha koum” (5:41). These details are extremely interesting, for two reasons:

First, they are accurate. Experts in ancient history and culture tell us that in that time there was usually a cushion provided in fishing boats, kept under the coxswain’s seat for those who were not involved in either the actual sailing or fishing (Lane, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, p. 176). If someone were making up legends about Jesus many years later, it would be unlikely for them to have such accurate information about the practices and culture of Jesus’ time and place.

Second, they are unnecessary. They do not contribute to either the plot or to character development. In summary, there would be no reason for an ancient writer to record these details unless the story-source, the eyewitness(es), remembered them.

The first readers of the Gospels instantly knew that the writers were not presenting them as fables or epics or fiction of any kind. Thus these stories are either extremely deliberate and highly sophisticated lies, or they are historical accounts, but they cannot be “myths” (such as the Greek or Roman or German deity-myths), as some critical scholars have proposed.

Another important observation is how unflattering a picture of the 12 apostles is drawn (4:38, 40; 5:31). Many critical scholars have asserted that these gospel stories did not really occur, but rather were constructed by the early church to answer questions, to settle disputes, and to secure compliance and submission to the authority of the church.

FAITH IN THE KING

In other words, if there was a controversy about demons in the church, the leaders would write a story about Jesus casting out demons or about his teaching on demons. This way they could deal with problems in their midst. But why, if the early church was producing these stories, would it depict the apostles as so weak and so constantly mistaken. What would the motive be for doing so? We know that the early church had lots of doctrinal conflicts and needed to appeal to apostolic teaching and authority to keep its unity and consensus. So why were these things recorded? A logical answer is — they were recorded simply because they happened. In summary, the details of the Gospel accounts are strong evidence that these are accounts of real historical events. If we are going to believe in Christ, we need to know that.

2. Read 4:35-41. What does this account tell us a) about the person of Christ? b) about trusting in Christ?

a) The Person of Jesus

We learn two very different truths about Jesus. 1) On the one hand, we learn that he is quite human. Here we see him fast asleep during a “*furios*” storm. You must be quite exhausted to sleep through a storm. The exertions of his ministry are sapping him. He is drained to the bottom by his service to others. 2) On the other hand, the text obviously points to his divinity. The Sea of Galilee is surrounded by high mountains, making it like a basin, so when the winds from the southwest enter through clefts in the mountains, sudden hurricane force storms can arise without warning. And Jesus is able to stop a hurricane with a single word. He stands up and simply says, “Be quiet and stay quiet!” There is no sense of struggle. It is a simple statement. But there is even more. He does not simply stop the wind. Had the wind immediately stopped after Jesus’ statement, that could have been a coincidence. But he rebuked both the wind *and... the waves.*” (v. 39a). Where we read “and it was completely calm” (v. 39b) is a word that literally reads “mega-calm” or “dead calm.” This indicates that everything became totally still, including the waves! Now it is one thing to have stopped the wind, but the language indicates that the raging sea also suddenly became calm. We have a remarkable exertion of enormous power, unavoidably reminding us of the numerous assertions that the Lord alone has power to calm the wind and the waves (cf. Psalm 29).

The juxtaposition of Jesus’ divinity and humanity reminds us of the uniqueness of Jesus. If he had not been human, he could not have come as our representative, he could not have really suffered in our place. If he had not been divine, he could not have truly revealed God to us, he could not have faced the temptations and opposition of evil successfully.

This is the first in a series of miracles that show us the same thing — that he is truly “omnipotent” — all powerful. The areas over which he shows his power are: a) the wildest forces of nature (4:35-41, the calming of the storm), b) the most virulent and powerful demonic forces (5:1-20, the casting out of “legion”), and c) even death itself (5:35-43, the raising of Jairus’ daughter). This is to say that Jesus is divine. Jesus is all-powerful, even in situations that are hopeless in human terms.

b) Trusting in Jesus

1) First, we learn that faith has content, it is fed with truth and information. When he says, “Do you *still* have no faith?” (v. 40) he seems to be referring to all the things he has taught them and shown them. The word “still” indicates that Jesus has given them quite a lot of evidence about his power and goodwill. He is saying: “After all you have seen — do you still have no faith?” So faith is not simply an exercise of the will. Faith has to be in something, something you learn about and become acquainted with. Faith is (and is built up by) looking at all the evidence. (Luther’s “Notitia” means to study and think through the evidence with the mind.)

2) Second, we learn that faith is to some degree a matter of the will. When Jesus says, “have you still no faith?” he is assuming that they have something they should be doing and exercising. If faith were simply something that comes upon you, he would not talk like that. He is not saying — “oh, you poor men, you can’t help yourselves.” No, rather this is a rebuke and an exhortation to faith. He was not angry that they called out to him, but rather that they doubted his care, in spite of all the evidence he had given them. He shows that faith is an exercise. They could have reminded themselves that Jesus does care. They could have reminded themselves of all the love and miracles he has already shown them. We should note here that this does not contradict Ephesians 2:8-10 that speaks of faith as the “gift of God”. We have to read Scripture in such a way that texts supplement one another rather than contradict. Jesus is saying, “I’ve been giving you faith and all it needs — but you aren’t exercising it.” We cannot be passive, here. We must not just complain about a lack of faith. We must act on what we know. [Luther’s “Fiducia” means to commit to and act on the basis of the truth, despite fears and feelings.] Faith or trust in Jesus is, then, not automatic, not a feeling or impulse. Rather, it is something that needs to be exercised. It comes from thinking about the evidence, the facts, from telling yourself the truth. Cf. Matthew 6:28-30 — “why do you worry...consider the lilies... oh you of little faith!” Faith is not automatic, not a feeling, but comes from “considering” and thinking. When Jesus says, “why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?” (v. 40). He is asking them to deal with their fears by questioning them and thinking through them. He says: “Why are you afraid? Do you have sufficient reason for your fears and doubts?” Doubt is thus an absence of thinking.

3) Third, we learn that faith is a matter of personal inclination toward Christ. A lack of faith is seen here as a questioning Jesus’ love (v. 38 — “Teacher, don’t you care...?”) or Jesus’ power (v. 41 — “Who is this, that even the wind and waves obey him?”) Jesus’ word “still” indicates that he had been giving them lots of evidence of both his love and power. It should have been enough. Ultimately, faith is a matter of being attracted to Christ, of trusting him because of what he has done for them. To put this in traditional terms, the “formal principle” of faith is thinking and committing to the evidence, but the “material principle” of faith is resting in the love and work of Christ. The disciples’ main failure is they don’t think Jesus “cares” (v. 38). Until they see what he did for them on the cross, they are going to struggle. The terror of the disciples at the calm sea (4:41) is identical to the terror of the mariners in the boat after Jonah was cast into the sea (Jonah 1:10) Jesus calls himself the “true Jonah” (Matthew 12:40). Jesus is the true Jonah, who was consumed by a storm and sea of God’s wrath, so that we could have

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peace and calm and be saved! Jesus calmed the only storm that could really sink us, the storm of God's justice and wrath, by dying on the cross, so we could be saved. If we see him doing that, then we will be able to trust him in all the other smaller storms that come upon us.

His love in times past forbids me to think
He'll leave me at last in troubles to sink.
By prayer let me wrestle — then he will perform.
With Christ in the vessel, I smile at the storm.

To really trust in Christ, we have to realize that he may let storms rage for a while, but he absolutely does care! He cared so much that he was thrown into the raging sea of God's wrath. That is proof we can trust him to not let us sink in all the other trials and troubles that might come our way. Faith is looking at the evidence, acting on the truth with an act of the will, but also delighting in the love of Christ for us on the cross.

3. Read 5:1-20. What are some of the marks of "demonization" in this man? (After discussing briefly, read and discuss Excursus 2: The complexity of evil)

1) v.3-4 – Demonic activity brings greater strength. Notice that he can't be bound with chains or imprisoned. But 2) v.5 - Demonic activity seems to bring self-hatred. "He would cry out and cut himself with stones". Evil is always a Faustian bargain. It gives you power with one hand and removes it with the other. We see it in all the old stories. Evil brings you power and pleasure and yet also brings bondage and despair. 3) v. 3 — Demonic activity grows with time. Notice that they say that he could not be bound "*any more*" which indicates that evil cannot be checked but takes more and more of you. But the strongest indication of how evil multiplies is in the very name of the demoniac — "*Legion*." One evil opens up for the next.

EXCURSUS 2: The complexity of evil

Our contemporary culture is still rather skeptical of the existence of demons. If a person is an atheist, it is consistent for them to deny the existence of evil spirits. But it is not consistent to believe in God and in a good personal supernatural being and then refuse to believe that there are evil personal super-natural beings. But if we believe in the existence of demonic forces, it does shed light on several things we know about the world and life.

First, demonic forces explain the complexity of psychological problems. The older "physicians of the soul" understood that depression, fear, anger, or inner numbness may be so profound and difficult to deal with because of the multiplicity and inter-relatedness of the many different roots and causes. There are possible physiological, psychological, moral and demonic sources for our problems. In the Bible, demons can accuse and tempt and stir up and aggravate all the other factors, making our emotional dungeons very deep and double locked.

Second, demonic forces can explain systemic social evil. Evil unjust social systems can reign in a culture and have enormously evil and devastating effects, yet no single individual member of the oppressive system seems to be “all that bad.” Think of the average white person in apartheid kinds of societies. Very, very few are actively full of hate or are personally wicked individuals, and yet they participate in a system that is much more wicked as a whole than the sum of its parts. In Rwanda, many Christians got sucked up into genocidal rage in which whole tribes massacred other whole tribes. How do we explain this? There are indications in the Scripture that demons can stand behind human institutions such as governments or nations and can produce evil effects through those systems and institutions.

In summary, it is not possible to explain all the misery and evil in the world as simply the product of individual sinful choices. Evil spirits greatly magnify, aggravate, and complicate the sin in our hearts that we commit toward God, one another, and against our own selves. People get sucked into deep psychological and social abysses of wickedness and brokenness that the Bible says are the result of demonic activity. But Jesus shows his authority can heal the darkest troubles in the deepest recesses of the human soul — individually and corporately. He can handle the forces that enslave us. This enables us to see in Jesus’ ministry of exorcism a paradigm for how the kingdom works. Here we begin to see of how Jesus’ kingdom is more than simply my individual obedience to his will. Jesus comes into my life not simply as a rule-giver, but also as a liberator and a healer. He doesn’t bring simply rules, but a new “realm” of his kingly, healing power. Why? For the first time, we come to see that the alternative to having Jesus as a master is to have some other false and enslaving power as a master. Not everyone is personally possessed by a demon like this man (verses 23-24) who has lost complete psychological control of himself. But Paul speaks in Ephesians 6 and elsewhere that in another sense we are fighting demonic “principalities” all the time. Anything we make into an ultimate value (for example, like our career) becomes a “master” and begins to exercise enslaving power over us. In the case of career-idolatry, it begins to drive us to overwork, deceives our minds into denying how much we are working, begins to erode the strength of our family, etc. When Jesus comes into our lives, and becomes the supreme Lord, his “kingdom” begins to heal us of the denial, begins to heal our family life, begins to liberate us from the anxiety we feel over money and work. He becomes the ultimate Savior and therefore the ultimate Lord (King). The more the gospel of sheer grace dominates our thinking, the more his Kingdom spreads through my life and liberates me from the power of false masters and saviors. This is the work of the “gospel of the kingdom.” As I submit to his Lordship, he surrounds me and brings me into his kingdom, and I become new.

**4. Read 5:1-20. What does this account tell us a) about the person of Christ?
b) about trusting in Christ?**

a) The Person of Jesus

In chapter 1 we have already looked at the significance of Jesus’ power over the spirit-world. This is an exhibition of power and authority beyond what had come before. There is no record of any prophet or priest previously casting out an evil spirit. Not only that, as in chapter 1, we see Jesus performing no incantation or ritual, no “hocus pocus”. He

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simply “*gives them permission*” to leave the man and go into the pigs (v. 13).

“Permission”! What a statement about the authority of Jesus. Notice again that when Jesus does an exorcism he does not call on a “higher power.” He is the higher power!

But this particular incident goes beyond the previous examples of an exorcism. The demon-possessed man here is inhabited by an entire host of demons. This is a greater challenge to Jesus than Mark has shown us before. Previously, Jesus has faced “normal” demonic activity. But there is no question that Jesus’ power is absolute. Jesus does not have to do anything unusual — he has as much power over a troop of devils as over one.

b) Trusting in Jesus

1) First, the demons show us that faith goes beyond intellectual understanding and consent. “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the most high God?” (Verse 7). This is a perfect illustration of what James 2:19 says: “You say God is one — good! Even the demons believe, and tremble.” In other words, demons have good theology! They know exactly who Jesus is, and they tremble in awe before him. But that is obviously not enough — it only qualifies them to be demons! Obviously faith moves beyond knowing about Jesus to (as we saw above) living in trust of that truth, accepting that truth as the basis for our lives. Faith is more than just knowing the truth about Jesus, more than intellectual knowledge (“*notitia*”). It means stepping out and basing one’s actions and life on the facts consented to.

2) Second, we look at the townspeople. It is interesting to see how they respond. They obviously realized the enormity of Jesus’ power, but they ask him to leave! Why? They respected Jesus’ power, but this only threatened them. They didn’t want it “in their lives.” To live with a man who had that much power meant losing control. So here is another way to look at faith: it is to personally accept the presence of Jesus and thus the loss of control that comes with it. Again, it is not enough to recognize Jesus is the Son of God. To have faith in Jesus is to be willing to live with Jesus — to lose control, to have an unpredictable, irresistible force in your life.

3) Third, we look at the cured demoniac. He begs to be an attending disciple (one of the “elite”), but Jesus refuses, and the man obeys (v. 18-19). Jesus tells him that he is not called to travel with Jesus and be one of the “generals” in his army, but that he is to go home and live a normal life and be a witness to his family. In other words, he is called to be just a “foot soldier.” But he does his calling gladly and, evidently, with his whole heart (v. 20). Here we see true faith in contrast to that of the demons and the townspeople. Unlike the demons, he accepts Jesus as the new basis of his life, and unlike the townspeople, he gives Jesus control of his life. Jesus gives him a different agenda than the one he envisions, and he accepts it (v. 20). The demoniac experiences an “unanswered prayer” in v. 18-19, but he responds in obedience. That is faith.

4) There are several other applications: a) Clearly, Jesus wants you to let your loved ones and friends know what he has done for you (5:19) though we must do that winsomely. b) Also, this story shows us that no matter how messed up or how deeply enslaved we are, or how bad our problems, Jesus can liberate us. That takes faith, too.

5. What is an area of your life where you can trust Christ more?**Remembering the big picture**

Who Jesus is: He is all-powerful over hordes of demons and all-powerful in defeating illness and death. He is also all-powerful in hopeless situations, in spite of being asleep. Even when Jesus is enormously opposed, he prevails.

Why Jesus came: Jesus came to bind the “strong man” Satan and rescue people from his destructive work. Jesus came to go to the Gentiles as well as the Jews.

How should I respond? Man’s response in this passage is that of fear as opposed to mere amazement, and faith (verses 6:6, 9:23, 10:52, 11:22). Fear is generally opposed to faith: if the disciples had had faith, they would not have feared the storm. The demons feared Jesus and the Gerasene people wrongly feared Jesus’ presence. Yet the disciples were not wrong to tremble at the power of Jesus’ Word. He is revealing himself as Christ and God. The faith he demands is a faith that acknowledges and relies on his power, even during terrible the circumstances. In view of His power, our faith also carries with it a sense of awe.

Mark

Faith and power

Study 6 | Mark 5:21-43

This passage interweaves two accounts or stories from Jesus' life. The second story, that of a woman with a hemorrhage (verses 25-34) is sandwiched between the two parts of the first story, that of the raising of Jairus' daughter (verses 21-25). Whenever two stories are juxtaposed in this way, it is safe to assume that the author wants us to make comparisons and draw contrasts as a way to learn from the two incidents.

1. What common theme(s) do you see running through these two incidents and the two previous incidents (the storm and the healing of the demoniac)?

These miracles show us that Jesus is truly "omnipotent"—all powerful. Dick Lucas says that the theme of these four stories is "Jesus' authority over the impossible". The forces that bow down to Jesus (without even a struggle) are those forces completely outside of our human control. Last week we saw Jesus' power over a) the hurricane, the forces of nature (4:35-41), and b) the demoniac, the forces of supernatural evil (5:1-20). This week, we see Jesus conquering disease (5:25-34) and death itself (5:35-43). Notice the statement that the sick woman had completely exhausted human resources (v. 26).

The second theme running through them all is the theme of faith. Jairus is told to "*just believe*" (v. 36) and the sick woman is also given instruction on the centrality of faith (v. 34). The woman's faith connects to Jesus' "*power*" (v. 30).

So the theme(s) running through all four incidents could be put like this. a) Jesus has power of a divine magnitude. b) Jesus brings down barriers that human resources cannot touch. c) It is through faith that we connect to this power. d) Nothing in the universe can separate those who believe from the love of Christ (cf. Romans 8:31ff.)

2. In verses 25-26, what are the causes of the woman's suffering? What does this teach us about coming to Christ by faith?

It is interesting that the text says that "*she had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors... yet instead... grew worse.*" (v. 26). In other words, she had not simply been suffering from her disease, but also from the "cures"! The woman had essentially given up hoping for any human help. She had exhausted a) all her finances, and b) all the medical options.

This points us to the truth that we will not truly connect to Christ in a substantial way until we see that our most fundamental problems and needs cannot be met by anything in the world. Let's put this practically. To really connect to Christ by faith, you cannot look to him as a means to a happy family or a good career and status — but as an *alternative* to them. That does not mean you cannot be a Christian and have a strong family or career! What it means is that a Christian has come to see all the world's resources as utterly inadequate

in the final sense. A Christian comes to see that we have been looking for these things to be a “cure” for the subliminal loneliness, emptiness, or sense of inadequacy we feel. Only when we begin to see that nothing in the world really, finally, satisfies at all, can we come to Christ with anything but the right attitude. (Cf. the classic chapter on “Hope” in C.S. Lewis’ *Mere Christianity*)

Therefore, there is a “healthy” spiritual desperation and an “unhealthy” one. “Unhealthy” desperation characterizes people who are obsessed to get something in this life they are sure will make them happy and they are willing to do anything — even make vows to God — in order to get it. This makes an idol of the thing they want and makes God just a means to an end. On the outside this kind of person may seem very “desperate” spiritually, but they are not really desperate for God — they are desperate to establish their agenda.

3. Read verses 24 and 30-32. If a large crowd “pressed” around him, why didn’t anyone else but the woman get Jesus’ power?

This is one of the obvious lessons of the story. It is pretty clear that scores or hundreds of people were literally “touching” Jesus physically. The disciples’ response confirms it, since they talk about “*the people crowding against you*” (v. 30). Yet it is one thing to touch Jesus in faith, and another to just be in His proximity. (This is a bit ironic, since the woman erroneously thinks that physical touch is the key to her healing. She is wrong, as Jesus shows her in v. 35).

This is a strong warning to people who simply attend church. It is even a warning about people who are in leadership. Judas shows us later that you could literally live with Jesus and have his teaching every day and go to His “school” and still not spiritually connect with Him by faith. So we must not think that church attendance, or Bible study, or admiration of Jesus mean anything on their own. The crowd had all of these things. Only the woman connected by faith.

This leads us to ask: “what then do we learn about ‘connecting’ faith from the woman?” She is an excellent example, since her faith is rather flawed in many ways, and yet consists of the necessary core elements to spiritually “touch” Jesus.

**4. Read verses 27-34. a) What are the weaknesses or flaws in the woman’s faith?
b) How is this story a great encouragement for people with weak or flawed faith?**

a) What are the weaknesses or flaws in her faith?

The woman’s faith is quasi-superstitious. In v. 27b she thinks “*if I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.*” There are all sorts of mistakes being made here! She seems to think of Him as a sort of magician, with abstract power that would flow through mere physical objects. She has no idea that Christ’s power does not work through physical

contact, but through spiritual-faith contact. She doesn't realize that what she needs is a personal relationship with Christ through faith.

b) How is this an encouragement for people with weak faith?

Despite this extremely faulty conception of who Christ is and how we relate to him — she is healed (v. 29)! And then Jesus actually tells her, *"Daughter, your faith has healed you."* (v. 34).

This flies full in the face of the common view that "it doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you believe it with all of your heart". The Bible teaches almost the opposite. We could put it like this: "It's not so important that you believe fully, perfectly, or purely, as that you believe in the true Savior." The classic illustration is the skaters and the ice on the pond. The first skater goes out on to 1/4" ice saying, "I know this will hold me up", while a second skater goes out on to 4" of ice saying, "I'm scared — I hope this will hold me up". The skater with lots of faith will sink, while the one with little faith will be safe. Why? It is not the faith that saves, but the ice — the object of faith. All you need to live is enough faith to commit to the proper object. So we see that it is not the strength of the faith, but the object of faith that saves us. So faith is ultimately not a matter of psychological certainty at all, but a matter of commitment to the right object.

This is a great comfort. Jesus will respond even when our faith is filled with flaws and weaknesses, as long as we simply look to him. We must be careful when we hear the Bible say, "we are saved by faith." That does not mean we are saved because of our faith — because of the quality of it. That turns faith into a "work." Rather we are saved *through* faith. If we go to Him, it is His love and his work that saves us, not our faith-quality.

5. Read verses 27-34. a) What does the woman "get right" in her faith? b) What are some good motives that she might have had for being secretive about her touching?

a) What did she "get right"?

Her faith was very basic, and yet she had the core essentials. All she knew was: (1) the world could not help her, and (2) she was unworthy to touch a holy man, but (3) she was sure that He could still help, cleanse, and heal her. And that was enough.

b) What are some good reasons for being secretive?

The reason that the woman only wants to "touch and run" is probably much more than simple modesty. The "clean laws" of the Old Testament forbid anyone with a running wound or sore from going to public worship (in the temple) and they also forbid anyone who touched an unclean person from going to worship. To be "ceremonially unclean" was to be unfit for the presence of God. The "clean laws" of the Bible are somewhat confusing to Christians today, but it's best to consider them a way to teach human beings that God is holy and that we cannot simply go before God unless we are cleansed.

The woman with a blood-flow would have been "ceremonially unclean" (Leviticus 15:25-30), and therefore she had been excluded from public worship for years. And for her to come up and deliberately touch someone in public, especially a rabbi, would have

been considered a horrible act, for it would have automatically made him ‘ceremonially unclean.’ Her motivation, then, was one of humility. As an unclean person, she would have felt completely unworthy to directly approach a holy man. And to touch him in the crowd — so no one would see — would have protected both him and her from social ostracism or other consequences. It was, then, a (1) smart, (2) humble, and yet (3) hopeful action. Despite her feeling of unworthiness, she felt that he could help her — even with a touch.

6. In verse 30, what do we learn from the fact that Jesus had to “lose power” in order to heal her?

Commentators point out the reference to Jesus sensing a “power loss” during this miracle is unique. We have noted how he continually stills hurricanes, casts out demons, and heals people with just a word, without “breaking a sweat.” We never see Jesus being exhausted from an exorcism, for example. He does not need to even touch a person to heal (Luke 7:1-10). In short, Jesus’ ability to do miracles is so absolute that He is not bound to do them in any particular way. He does not need to speak, or touch or wave his hand, or do anything specifically. When, therefore, Jesus does a miracle in a particular way (like spitting on eyes — see Mark 8:23) it is not because he has to operate in that way, but rather it is for some didactic purpose. The particulars of miracles are there for the observers. Why, then, does Jesus heal this ceremonially unclean woman through a loss of power? Why does he experience weakness? To answer a question like this is always a bit speculative, but the author of the gospel is inviting us to ask the question and reflect.

At the very least, this incident is good news for people who have sinned or feel unworthy. Jesus can heal and save despite your unworthiness. Even if your record and problems have made you a complete outcast, they are no match for Jesus. He touches the leper, the demoniac, the Gentile — all those who are “ceremonially unclean”, unfit for the presence of God. Jesus is the Savior, and he provides his help not on the basis of our works and record, but of his grace. Record is no barrier for him! In fact, it could be that Mark wants us to see “spiritual uncleanness” of the woman as the parallel to storm (4:35-41), demons (5:1-20), and death (5:35-43). There is no human resource that can defeat any of these things. Our moral uncleanness (which “ceremonial uncleanness” represented) is, humanly speaking, an insurmountable barrier between us and God. No amount of human effort can atone for sin or undo what we have done wrong. But Jesus can heal.

However, the “power loss” may indicate something even more. She becomes whole through his weakness — and this may point to the cross and the means by which we are saved. *“He was crucified in weakness... [that] by God’s power we will live with him...”* (2 Corinthians 13:4). The momentary weakening points to the fact that he heals us through substitution. She can only become clean and whole because he will become unclean (cast out by God) and broken.

In Exodus 28:38, the garments of the High Priest are being described. This cryptic statement is made. *“And he will bear the guilt of the sacred gifts the people bring — it will be upon his head, so that they may be acceptable to the Lord.”* This seems to be a way to say that no matter how hard the people work at staying “clean” and obeying all the laws and regulations, their sacrifices will always be imperfect. But how would the High Priest bear those flaws and imperfections himself? But this surely points us to Jesus, the ultimate High Priest (Hebrews 4). He became cursed and unclean for us. Our uncleanness falls on him.

7. In verses 32-34, why do you think Jesus encourages her to ‘go public’?

Jesus is not content to just let her go away healed. He continues to look around and seek her (v. 32) despite the disciples’ skepticism that he will be able to find her (v. 31). Finally she comes and falls down and *“tells the whole truth”* (v. 33). It seems evident that she does this publicly. Upon her open confession, he calls her *“daughter”* (v. 35) which for Jesus is probably not just a holy-sounding address, but an indication that she is in the spiritual family. He then corrects her original idea about how his power works, telling her *“your faith”* has done it. Finally, he essentially *“declares her clean”* when he not only says that she is physically healed, but also at peace and freed from all her *“suffering.”*

Why did Jesus press to have this meeting? a) He wants Christians to openly confess to others what he has done for them. He said the same thing to the demoniac. It is good both for Christians and for the name of Christ that Christians not be “in the closet”. b) As a result of her willingness to identify as a believer publicly, He gives her deeper insight, He assures her more deeply that she is adopted, clean, and at peace with God. This indicates that the more we are willing to risk in commitment to him, the more we grow and receive from Him. Faith, if it is real, always leads to a changed life. (cf. James 2:17)

8. Read verses 21-25; 35-43. a) How does Jairus evidence faith in Jesus? (cf. John 3:1-2). b) What does the interruption (of ministry to Jairus by the ministry to the woman) teach us?

a) How does Jairus evidence faith in Jesus?

Jairus was a *“synagogue ruler”* (v. 22). This meant that at the very least he was a very distinguished member of a synagogue — like an “elder,” or he was the official responsible for supervising both the synagogue building and the service. Either way, he was considered highly respectable both socially and morally. Once we realize this, we notice the following. (1) Unlike Nicodemus, he does not come by night, but is willing to risk censure by the religious establishment in order to come to Jesus. (2) Though he

could have stood on his religious respectability and record, he falls at Jesus' feet, which is a clear way to show humility. He was begging for mercy; he was not demanding anything. (3) It was normal to do the laying on of hands in prayer for healing. What is unusual is Jairus' remarkable confidence that Jesus' coming will save the life of a girl who would otherwise die. In summary, Jairus shows the same core elements of the sick woman: 1) no one else can help, and 2) I am unworthy, but 3) you can heal and save from anything. However, he had these elements to a greater degree than she did. His understanding of Jesus and of faith seems much clearer.

b) What does the interruption teach us?

We said above that these two stories are "inter-leaved". When this happens, the author wants us to draw some comparisons and contrasts. When we compare the two stories we learn some "advanced" lessons in faith: First, the priorities of Jesus are not the world's. He loves the people the world despises. Dick Lucas says that one of the most striking things about the "sandwich" is that "*Jesus takes the time to comfort and teach an unclean woman with a chronic problem, causing a (male) church leader in urgent need to wait.*" Over and over in the gospels, we see Jesus refusing to be taken in by the world's standards of beauty, status, fame, and power. He does not give preference to people with more money, influence, or "clout" in the world. Jesus tends to love the publican over the Pharisee; the social, moral, political, racial "outsider". This is part of the reversal of values brought by the cross. The way up is down, the way to power is to serve, the way to life is a willingness to die, the last shall be first.

Second, Jesus' love is compatible with (seemingly inexplicable) delays. Jairus' faith, as we have seen, is of a "higher quality" than the woman's. In the world's logic, he "deserves" a more prompt response from Jesus than the woman. Also, the woman's problem is chronic and Jairus' daughter's problem is acute. The woman could have easily waited, but the little girl was on the verge of death. There's another reason that Jesus should have given him preference over the woman. Yet Jesus stops and deals with the woman. Her low-quality faith and less acute need gets immediate gratification, while Jairus' greater faith and more acute need is put on hold. And to him, it would have looked like Jesus' delay was fatal (v.35). In short — the woman believes (poorly) and lives. Jairus believes (well) and his daughter dies. Yet Jesus tells Jairus that despite all the appearances, he should "*just believe.*" Jesus is saying, "my loving care is compatible with deadly troubles and delays".

We need to cross reference this story with the disciples in the storm (4:35-41). They had a Lord who was sleeping and apparently unconcerned with their needs. Jairus is subjected to a delay and (as the disciples during the storm) to a Lord who is apparently inattentive and distracted from his needs. Is it possible that, after we pin our hopes on Christ, problems in our life might get worse? What does this tell us about faith in Christ? It tells us that our faith must rest on Him, not merely on our agenda for Him, or on Him as we wish Him to be. Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:7 – "*We live by faith, not by sight* [i.e. appearances]." In the boat and the storm, Jesus seemed not to be focusing on our problem. It often looks like Jesus doesn't "care." We can learn here that God loves us and yet that doesn't mean we won't see storms. God is not asleep, but rather he refuses to be hurried. Don't try to hurry Jesus. He simply will not allow it. He's too wise

and happy to be hurried.

9. Read verses 39-43. a) Why do you think Jesus says, “she is not dead, but asleep”? b) What does Jesus method in this miracle show us?

a) Some think this means she wasn't really dead, and only resuscitated. But Luke's account adds: *“And her spirit returned to her”* (Luke 8:55). The early church understood this as a resurrection from death. Jesus is saying that: “when I'm present, death is nothing but a temporary sleep.” The word “cemetery” came from Christianity, since it means “sleeping place.”

b) Some commentators shed wonderful light on how tender Jesus is here. First, he guards the family's privacy by sending the crowd out (v. 40). He does nothing for the cameras. Second, he takes her by the hand and says *“Little girl, get up.”* Though “talitha”, literally means “little girl”, it was actually a pet name, like “honey” would be today. And to say, “get up” is what you'd say to any child when awakening them in the morning. Look at this! Jesus takes her by the hand and says, “honey, it's time to get up.” Exactly the words her mother or father might say to her on a sunny morning. (1) What a show of power! With Jesus even the greatest enemy of all, death, becomes just a nice night's sleep. (2) What a show of tenderness! Here's the real parent we need, who has us by the hand, and will bring us through the very darkest night happy and refreshed and safe.

Why would you want to hurry someone like this? He knows what he is doing, and he loves you completely.

10. How might the disciples lives have been changed after witnessing these events? How can our lives change as a result of believing the truth found in this passage?

Prayer requests

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Jesus is powerful in humanly impossible circumstances: calming a storm, casting out the Legion, healing the leper, raising Jarius' daughter from the dead, and touching the unclean and making clean.

Why Jesus came: He came to make the unclean clean, restore the outcast and even to conquer death. He accepts those that the world rejects.

How should I respond? Man's response is that of uncompromising faith. All other resources are useless and inadequate.

The rejection of the King/ the shepherd King

Mark 6:1-56

OPTIONAL STUDY

The theme of these incidents all have to do with rejection of the Word of God. Even in Jesus' commission to the disciples he assumes a lot of refusal and resistance to the message of the gospel (6:11). Another theme of the section is "who is this?" Each section shows people's varied responses to Jesus, all falling short of the truth. This theme will climax in 8:27-30.

1. In verses 2-3, why were the hometown people "offended" (verse 3) at Jesus? Why did they find it so hard to believe in him?

The hometown people are having trouble reconciling two things — what they think they "know" about him and "*these things*" that they see and hear him doing. What they "know" is that Jesus is his humble and familiar origins, his low socio-economic status. He is just a simple "*carpenter*" (v. 3), and even the reference to his being just "*Mary's son*" (v. 3) rather than "*Joseph's son*" may be a reference to the rumors (certainly they existed) of his illegitimate birth. (Ordinarily, a man was described as being the son of his father, not his mother.) We all have a grid of expectations. We expect people of certain classes or vocations or cultures to be a certain sort of person. Jesus was from extremely ordinary or even somewhat socially marginal roots. Therefore he couldn't be anyone special. Yet, on the other hand, they see and hear "*these things*" (v. 2) — namely his wisdom and miracles. These things reveal a figure of enormous power and importance. His wisdom and miracles "burst the banks" of what we know human beings are capable of.

So here is their problem: there is a discrepancy between what they "know" (he's a human being of very common and humble origins) and what they "see and hear." How do they deal with the problem? They decide to ignore the evidence of their eyes and ears in favor of their pre-set conceptual framework. They let their prejudices dismiss and "filter out" the evidence. Their discernment could not penetrate the "veil of ordinariness" surrounding him. (W. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, p. 201) Their expectations were that a Messiah would be exotic, esoteric — not so commonplace. Thus they simply solved the tension of their expectations and the evidence by ignoring the evidence. Their pre-conceptions were offended by the facts, and they would not part with them, even in the face of so much evidence. No wonder we are told that Jesus was amazed at their lack of faith (v. 6). That does not necessarily mean Jesus was taken totally by surprise. But Jesus, since he wants people to believe, is exasperated in the face of such stubbornness. Thus he is justified in not doing any more or saying any more to them. He had done all he could do.

2. How is Christ and his message still offensive in this way today? What are some ways in which people still do this today?

Christ and Christianity can still be just as offensive today. In many ways we still cannot penetrate the "veil of ordinariness" around Christians.

a) First, there is the ordinariness of the gospel itself. The gospel teaches that we are saved by Jesus' good works, not ours. Unlike the other religions, we can relate to God

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with a simple, single stroke — an act of faith. Even a child can be made right with God. Even a serial killer on his death bed can be made right with God. Anyone can do it any time at all. There is no “Eight-fold Path” (Buddhism) or “Five Pillars” (Islam) that have to be traversed in order to be saved or to meet God. It is that simple.

This concept is simply unacceptable to many, many people. It is offensive because it seems too simple and easy. A woman once said to a pastor; “You mean that if I live a moral life for 70 years but don’t admit I am a sinner and receive Christ, I am lost — but that if a serial killer receives Christ at the end of his life he’s saved?” The pastor said, “yes.” The woman said, “That’s offensive! It’s too easy! I don’t believe that! I will never believe that.”

b) Also, there is the ordinariness of Christians. Because of the nature of the gospel, Christians are not those who attain moral superiority to all others. Christians are not necessarily those who have attained a higher moral and spiritual level of character. Rather they are those who have admitted their moral inability to please God (a very difficult admission!) and have come to rely on Christ for their relationship with God. Thus Christians are not (at first) “better” people, but rather forgiven people who have received grace. In fact, many new Christians are extremely weak people who have been very foolish and destructive in their behavior and when they cross the line into faith they do not instantly become mature. Their character flaws cling to them for a good while, even if their growth in grace proceeds apace.

The flawed nature of so many Christians (especially new Christians) is an offense to many people. Of course, non-Christians are people who don’t understand or accept this very concept of salvation-by-grace. So when they see a person claim to be a Christian — to know God — they think that must be a claim to be morally excellent and blameless, a quantum leap ahead of everyone else. Therefore they are often offended in two ways by Christians. 1) They are offended that anyone would claim to know God and be sure they were going to heaven. (To the non-Christian, that is like a claim to be nearly perfect!) 2) They are offended that so many Christians are very obviously imperfect. (Thus to the non-Christian, Christians seem mainly to be hypocrites.)

c) Finally, there is the ordinariness of Christian experience. Christianity (usually) is not accompanied by miracles or quick fixes. Christian growth is hard work and gradual. Here is quote from the fictional Screwtape Letters by C.S.Lewis. This is the advice of a senior devil to a junior devil on how to tempt his human subject.

Work hard, then, on the disappointment or anti-climax which is certainly coming [him] during his first weeks in the church... When he gets to his pew and looks round him... provided that any of those people sing out of tune, or have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes, the patient will quite easily believe that their religion must therefore somehow be ridiculous... The Enemy [Christ] allows this disappointment to occur on the threshold of every human endeavor. It occurs when the boy who has been enchanted in the nursery by stories from the Odyssey buckles down to really learning Greek. It occurs when lovers have gotten married and begin the real task of learning to live together... The Enemy takes this risk because He has a curious fantasy of making all these disgusting human vermin into what He calls his “free” lovers and servants — “sons” is the word He uses. Desiring their freedom, He therefore refuses to carry them,

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by their mere affections and habits, to any of the goals which He sets before them. And there lies our opportunity.

3. In verses 5-6, why does Mark say he “could not do any miracles” (and yet tells us that he healed some people of sickness)?

One possible reading of the term “*could not*” would be to see it as a statement that Jesus had no ability to heal people, even if he had wanted to, in the face of human unbelief. Some think this text is teaching that Jesus has to be believed in order to work his miracles.

This view, however is untenable. 1) First, think of the calming of the storm at the end of Chapter 4. It was done in the very teeth of the disciples’ faithlessness. If the onlookers had to have faith for him to do miracles, how could he have done that one? 2) Second, Mark’s statement can’t be an absolutely categorical one, since in the very same sentence (v. 5) we learn that he did do some miracles.

Most commentators agree with C.F. Cranfield, who wrote: “It was not that Jesus was powerless apart from men’s faith, but that in the absence of faith he could not work miracles in accordance with the purpose of his ministry.” In other words, Jesus did not lack the naked power to perform miracles, but he lacked the proper context for his *purpose* in miracles. You never see Jesus setting a mountain on fire or writing words in the sky or doing a purely spectacular display of divine power. Obviously someone who calmed a hurricane and raised the dead could do such things. Why didn’t he do so?

The answer (as this text indicates) is that Jesus’ miracles were not “magic tricks” designed to prove how powerful he was, but “signs of the kingdom” to show how his redemptive power operates. His miracles always healed and restored and delivered people in ways that revealed how we are to find him by faith and have our lives transformed by him. This is why Jesus made the woman with the blood flow “go public” (5:23-34). He is not just using his miracles to show his greatness, but to show how his kingdom comes into the world and into lives; who he is and how he had come to save. If Jesus saw people who would not believe, even with miracles, he did not do any. Why? He “could” not (due to the character of his mission) do a deed of power that would not redeem!

It is also possible that when Mark says on the one hand that he did “*not do any miracles*” and yet immediately says that he “*laid hands on a few*,” that he did no public miracles but rather healed some sick individuals privately.

4. What does this teach us about how Christ’s power can work in our lives today?

It is clear that Christ does more miracles where he is “*honored*” (v. 4). Practically, what does that mean? It that means we must provide him with:

a) honor through attitude. If we lose the wonder of who he is and what he has done for us, we won’t see his power in our lives. If he has become routine, taken for granted —

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if your gratitude and amazement for his person and work has worn off — you cannot expect him to work. This is probably the same thing as that which David calls “*the joy of thy salvation*” (Psalm 51). We must also provide —

b) honor through action. If we begin to disobey him, or if we refuse to give him priority in our time and our lives, we are not honoring him, and we won’t see his power in our lives. Our consciences will either bother us or harden us. Jesus actually says that if we obey him, he and his father will come and make themselves real to us (John 14:21). We also need to give him —

c) honor through prayer. As we saw in the calming of the storm (chapter 4:35ff.) and the woman with the flow of blood (5:27ff), Jesus does miracles to people with little faith or poor faith. But in both cases the weak people do come to him and appeal to him. This means there must be direct address; we must “seek his face.”

5. What is Jesus preparing his followers for in verses 7-13? Are there principles behind these measures that can help us today?

We need to read this passage in the context of the rejection of Jesus in 6:1-6 and the rejection of John the Baptist in 6:14ff. Jesus is not simply giving his followers directions for the mission, but he is getting them ready to experience rejection just as he was rejected by his neighbors. Verse 11 assumes that it will often happen, when he tells them to “shake off the dust.” Jewish travelers commonly would shake the dust off their feet from foreign lands. It was a symbolic way to show that they dissociated themselves from the moral pollution of those pagan lands and that they would not be subject to their ultimate judgement. Here’s how Jesus tells them to prepare for rejection:

a) First, they were to work in teams (v. 7- *by two*). Thus they were in supportive networks and not to be vulnerable “lone rangers.” There is a need for fellowship in Christian life and work, because of the hardships. Unconnected Christians will “go down” under the pressures.

b) Second, they were to rely on the hospitality of those to whom they preached (v. 8 – *no bread... no money... no extra tunic*). They were not to stay aloof from the people they were trying to reach. They were to truly live among them, even being dependent on them. This made them accountable to the people. It meant that their whole ministry was to be “above board,” public, not secretive. The world will be prejudiced against Christians, so we are to give it no ammunition. It is very interesting that Jesus tells Christians to be transparent and accountable to people as a strategy against prejudice and rejection!

c) Third, they were told to help people by practically (v. 13- *anointed many sick people*) addressing their felt needs as a way to open them to the gospel truth. Thus they were to come in a “servant mode” rather than in a “condemnation mode.” We are to be the greatest servants and most involved in alleviating suffering and hurt.

Summary: Christians are to pre-empt the natural resistance to the gospel through 1) living in unquestionable integrity and 2) acting with obvious compassion. But they are to

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ready themselves for inevitable rejection by 1) having realistic expectations, and 2) close Christian friends.

Despite all this instruction on being kind, open, and respectful to non-believers, Jesus tells his disciples also to “*shake off*” the dust. This was a direct, even shocking denunciation. Most commentators tell us that this was something that Jews often did in “unclean” pagan lands and cities. For the disciples to do this to a *Jewish* village was to warn the village that it would have to answer to God on the day of judgment. It would have been shocking to the Jewish townspeople to see their village treated as pagan, Gentile territory! What is Jesus saying? He is telling us that, despite coming in a “servant mode,” we are not to be cowards. We are not to seek to avoid persecution and rejection by compromising the message of repentance.

When we look closely at vv. 7-13, we see a remarkably balanced picture. On the one hand we must be servants, living transparently among people who don’t believe, trusting and respecting them and sacrificing for them. On the other hand, we must have the courage to tell the truth about Christ.

6. Mark’s account of John’s death is the longest of any gospel. It also seems to be a digression. What might be some of the reasons for its prominence? What is Mark getting across?

Probably this long account also helps show the Christian readers the nature and inevitability of rejection. Many believe that the gospel of Mark was written during the first persecutions of Christians in the Roman Empire, and that one of the author’s prime concerns was to ready people for suffering and death. W. Lane comments on the extremely brief account of Jesus’ temptation — “*He was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals and angels attended him.*” (Mark 1:13). Lane writes:

“It is significant that [unlike the other gospel writers] Mark does not report either the victory of Jesus nor the end of the temptation... his whole Gospel constitutes the explanation of the manner in which Jesus was tempted... The detail, recorded only by Mark, that in the wilderness Jesus was with the wild beasts, was filled with special significance for those called to enter the arena where they stood helpless in the presence of wild beasts. In Mark’s Gospel they found that nothing they could suffer from Nero was alien to the experience of Jesus. Like them, he had been misrepresented to the people and falsely labeled (3:21ff.).

Lane is claiming that Mark does not “finish” the account of Jesus’ temptation because he wants us to see how his entire life was filled with temptation and assault and trial. Why? Mark is giving a pastoral response to the persecution that Christians were suffering and would suffer in the future. This also explains why the account of John’s rejection and execution plays so prominently.

First, John the Baptist is a case study of how a believer attracts and faces rejection.

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a) He called Herod to repentance in no uncertain terms. He told the truth. He said, (v. 18), *It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife*. Therefore he attracted the hatred of Herod and especially his wife, Herodias (v. 19). b) Yet, it was clear that his compassion and integrity commanded respect (v. 20 – “Herod therefore feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man.”) In other words, John is a clear illustration of the ways in which the Christian is supposed to live and serve in the world. A clear Christian witness will be BOTH attractive AND repulsive to non-believers. If we only get resistance but never attract anyone to Jesus, or if we only seem to attract people but never get rejected for Jesus, or if we never get attraction or rejection — then we aren't living with integrity. If we are being both loving and truthful, we will both attract and repulse, like John did. The principles are laid out in 6:7-13, and John the Baptist embodies them.

Second, Herod himself shows us how NOT to handle rejection.

a) We know that Herod was curious and fascinated with John's message. Despite how uncomfortable and confused John's preaching often made Herod, he still loved to listen to it (v. 20). John's compassion and integrity and courage all attracted Herod and were making a “dent” on his heart. Sadly, this means that Herod may have actually been open to the truth — he was a prospective follower of Christ. b) But Herod was also desperately afraid of displeasing his wife, so he imprisoned John, though protecting him (v. 17-20). c) And finally, he was desperately afraid of losing face to his party guests, so he decided his pride was more important than John's life or honor (vv. 26-27). In summary, Herod is an example of someone who was not willing to take any “heat” or rejection for the truth, and as a result John's life was ended and Herod's own soul was ruined. Our own fear of rejection is then a terrible, soul-destroying thing. It can ruin the lives of many around us, it can make us moral cowards, and, worst of all, it can prevent us from laying hold of Jesus.

Third, Herodias is an example of why Christianity will bring rejection.

John had been saying, “it is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife” (v. 18). As a result, Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him (v. 19). There is no indication that she thought he was wrong. She hated him because he was right and was reminding her of it. Herodias is an example of how human beings deal with their bad consciences — they simply try to put the truth out of their mind. They try to forget. Romans 1:18-21 tells us that human beings know the basic truth about God, but they suppress that truth. That's how they deal with life. Christians, by word or life, will remind people of the truth and make it hard to suppress. Thus, they will be hated.

Deep in human hearts is an engine of self-justification. We all desperately want to reassure ourselves that we are all right. We do this by destroying anything that reminds us of the absolute standards of God's righteousness. Anything that points out our sin and need for God makes us nervous, guilty, resentful. Since Jesus was the perfect teacher and embodiment of God, he was hated the most. But if we are like him in any degree, we will get rejection too. Real godliness is off-putting and intimidating and maybe even infuriating or awesome and amazing — but never simply pleasant.

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7. In verse 34, Jesus sees us as sheep and sees himself as a Shepherd. a) What does it tell us about ourselves that he sees us as sheep? b) What does it tell us about Him that he sees himself as a shepherd?

a) What we learn about ourselves.

Jesus sees us as “sheep,” as he says most famously in the parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:1-7) and in the discourse of the Good Shepherd (John 10:1ff.) Sheep are particularly non-self-sufficient. They are utterly dependent on their shepherd for protection and feeding. They could not possibly exist in the wild. A pastor who used to be a shepherd once wrote: “*A sheep is a stupid animal... sheep proverbially follow one another. They lose their direction continually as cats and dogs do not.*” (D. MacMillan) The “sheep” image brings out two things: (1) First, it teaches us about the amount of plain foolishness that is in our hearts. Along with our overt, deliberate selfishness and pride there is an enormous amount of spiritual obtuseness, denial and insensitivity. (2) But most of all, sheep are helpless. They cannot save themselves. They must be wholly saved by another. They contribute nothing. That is why Jesus is moved by their sight. Sheep trying to live self-sufficiently are pitiful.

b) What we learn about Him.

The Shepherd is an ideal of both tenderness and toughness. Shepherds have to protect sheep from wild animals. They must be quite resourceful and skillful with weapons. And yet they do it all for the care of very helpless and silly animals. They must constantly be helping the sheep in the most simple ways. The sheep can do little on their own. In short, shepherding is comprehensive. The shepherd serves as protector, physician, provider, leader and owner. The sheep are dependent on the shepherd for absolutely every area of their lives. Sheep do not relate to the shepherd only on the weekends or during difficult times. He is their comprehensive Lord and Savior.

In short, the ‘sheep-shepherd’ image shows us we are more spiritually stupid than we ever dared think (we are sheep!) but we are more valued and loved by God than we ever dared hope (he is a shepherd!) “*See the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young*” (Isaiah 40:10-11). God has arms of power, but in those arms of power he carries the lambs he loves. They are his reward! His most prized possession. Jesus draws on this amazing imagery to tell us who he is and how his heart works.

8. Read verses 30-34. a) How does Jesus demonstrate in these verses what a shepherd is? b) How does Jesus demonstrate what a shepherd does? (Notice the word “so” in verse 34.)

a) The character of a Shepherd

First, Jesus has a deep *compassion* for the sheep. Jesus shows compassion for them v. 34. (The term in Greek was literally, “moved to the bottom of his being.”) His heart goes out to them. This is a deep sympathy. Jesus could be touched — he was not

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detached. People who came near him felt this intimacy and connection. Second, Jesus has *patience* and a sense of responsibility for the problems and needs of the sheep. Jesus had a retreat in mind for his apostles and himself in a solitary place (v. 31). Many who saw Jesus and the disciples leaving seem to have recognized where they were going, and they ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them (v. 32). But instead of irritation at this, Jesus does not send them away as though they are an imposition on him. He considers their problems to be his problems. Therefore he makes himself available. He pours himself out. Both of these character qualities show us a shepherd who will take our problems upon him and do anything to meet our needs. Thus, John 10 tells us that the true shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.

b) Work of a Shepherd

First, he keeps a balance in their lives *of the individual and the community*. Notice how Jesus sends his disciples out to minister but then "*gathers*" (v. 30) them for reporting and debriefing. He keeps the sheep together. Like a literal shepherd, it is in the best interests of each sheep to stay with the flock, to not go it alone.

Second, he keeps a balance in their lives *of the spiritual and the physical*. He provides a spiritual retreat to spend time with him (v. 31) yet he also gives them food in the feeding miracle (v. 42). Jesus' ministry to his sheep is therefore "wholistic", meeting all the needs, whatever they may be. He does not denigrate physical need for sleep and food.

Third, he keeps a balance in their lives *of resting and working*. Notice that the 12, usually called the "disciples" are now called "apostles" (v. 30), a word meaning "commissioned agent". They have graduated to becoming effective as agents of the kingdom in their preaching and their deeds (see 6:12-13). But as a result, there were now huge numbers of people continually coming and going, and their lives were so frantic that they did not even have a chance to eat (v. 31). In response to this, Jesus directs them to rest: "*come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest*" v. 31. Though this is said via a very gentle invitation, it is nevertheless a command. As Shepherd-King, he commands us to pray, rest, and spiritually restore ourselves at regular intervals. Thus prayer and rest is as much a command as ministry and activity. It is not a luxury, but a command (cf. Exodus 20:8-11 the command to "rest"). Jesus is not out to exploit his sheep. He "*makes them to lie down*" (Psalm 23). Workaholism isn't Christian. And "ministry" workaholism (where you are too busy with Christian activities to keep yourself spiritually and physically refreshed) is not Christian either.

Fourth, he keeps a balance in their lives *of truth and love*. It is important to notice the word "*so*" in v. 34. It tells us two things: a) First, it means Jesus is deeply moved by their spiritual helplessness and cluelessness and he is filled with compassion for them. "*So*" he began "*teaching them many things*". Jesus' Shepherd-love primarily moves him to begin to teach them the truth. This is striking. Truth and instruction must be primary and crucial for growth. It means that there is nothing more critical for the well-

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being of people than that they should come to understand truth about God, themselves, and Jesus. Thus we see the gentle Jesus, so willing to say kind and gentle things to his sheep, loves us enough to tell them us truth. Practically speaking — we will find Jesus' shepherdly guidance and love in the Word of God as we study it in order to "*listen to the Shepherd's voice.*" b) Second, it means Jesus is again making a divine claim. He sees the children of Israel gone astray without a shepherd. "*So he began teaching them...*" This means he sees himself as the Shepherd of Israel! He teaches them because he's the one they need. But who is the shepherd of Israel? The Lord God himself (Psalm 23). So we see Jesus is constantly, intuitively, relentlessly assuming his divine nature and authority in everything he says and does.

9. Read verses 35-37. What is Jesus trying to get across to his disciples in the conversation of these verses? How is he an example of what he is trying to teach them?

a) At first sight, Jesus' reply seems very unreasonable. The disciples had made a very rational proposal — that Jesus should send the people away so they could get something to eat. Instead, he insists that they give them something to eat. What is he doing? He is vividly showing them that they do not have the wherewithal to meet the needs of others. Their first response to his direction is to add up what it would cost to feed them — and they conclude that it is far beyond them (v. 37). Of course that is true; that was Jesus' whole point. Our own resources will never meet the needs of the world. This may seem to be a very obvious point, but it is not. In the hugely successful "12-Step" movement, the number one lesson is: "we are powerless over our problems". Until a person comes to realize "my problem is beyond my resources — I need help", he or she is in a position of terrible deception and vulnerability.

b) Jesus' second point is that, in his hands, seemingly inadequate resources can be multiplied. In the hands of Jesus, the insignificant becomes significant, the insufficient becomes sufficient, the loaves become a Messianic feast. The fact that there were twelve basketfuls of leftovers seems to be telling us that Christ "is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us" (Ephesians 3:20).

c) Jesus' third point is that he is willing to meet needs through human associates. He multiplies the loaves that they found (v. 38). He obviously does not have to use the bread they were able to produce, but he does. He could quite easily have created mountains of new bread, but he doesn't. In other words, though he first shows us the inadequacy of their resources, he eventually shows that he wants to work in the world through our resources — through us. This partnership is remarkable.

d) We learn a fourth point from this conversation — about the importance of prayer in a shepherd's life. Jesus' ends up being an example to all the disciples when he is seen looking up to heaven and giving thanks before breaking the loaves (v. 41). Jesus, while on earth, was a perfect model of what we humans beings should be, in that he only did things in reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit and the Father (Acts 10:38). Also, the meaning of Satan's temptations seem to be that Jesus was not to use his own power

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on earth; he was here to live life as our representative, doing all we should be doing. It means that technically we can do anything he did: have his faith, dependence on God, and purity of Spirit. But we also learn here that Jesus' first response to the disciples' obtuseness was to go into a time of extended, intense solitary prayer (v. 46). They didn't understand, so he begins to pray! The importance of prayer is a major practical point of the feeding miracle.

e) We might learn something else from this conversation. Sometimes our Shepherd does not answer our prayers and does not act in a way that seems very rational. Here is Jesus asking them to do something impossible, leading them to frustration and perplexity. We know that it is all because he is seeking to teach and humble them. But at the time he just appeared to be unreasonable. This reminds us of how often the sheep do not understand what the Shepherd is doing. The pastor who used to be a shepherd says:

“Even when sheep are found, it is very difficult to round them up and bring them home unless you have a dog to scare them. The lost sheep rushes to and fro... when you find it, you must seize it, cast it down, tie its forelegs together and his hind legs together and put it over your shoulders and carry it home.”

Imagine! Your loving shepherd has to sometimes “scare” you, “cast you down and tie you up”! That means often we will not understand our shepherd, even though we should always trust him. This is not easy.

10. What does the feeding of the 5,000 teach us about Jesus, the nature of Jesus' person, and His work? (Hint: why does Mark call it a “remote place” twice when it is clear that there are towns nearby to get food?)

Jesus' feeding of the 5,000 cannot be seen as a “rescue” of any kind. The need for food was not acute, and the availability of food was not that problematic. Nor can we say that he did this miracle mainly to show his power. The people evidently did not know about the miracle at all, and the disciples already had ample knowledge of his power. Yet the feeding of the crowd is one of the only miracles recorded by all four gospels. The only conclusion is that this was a crucial teaching miracle. Jesus is telling them who he is in a powerful way. Twice the apostles are rebuked for not “getting” the miracle (cf. 6:45-52 and 8:14ff). What were the points?

a) Jesus finds the people in a “remote place” (v. 35), and there feeds them miraculously. Mark uses the Greek word for “desert” three times, (vv. 31, 32, 35) though the NIV translates them “quiet place” and “remote place.” It is clear by the apostles' statements that though the place was relatively quiet, there were towns nearby. Why did Mark push the idea of this place being desolate? The word means “wilderness,” and he is seeking to evoke the memory of Moses' leading and feeding the people in the wilderness. Even the reference to the people sitting down in fifties and hundreds may allude to Moses' organizational model (cf. Exodus 18:21). The point? Deep in the memories of the Israelites was the “bread from heaven” with which God fed them when they were in the desert wilderness. Exodus 16 - “...the second month

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after they had come out of Egypt, in the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron... *'you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.'* Then the Lord said to Moses, *'I will rain down bread from heaven for you... Tell them, 'at twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God.'* That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost appeared on the desert floor... each one gathered as much as he needed."

In the same way, Jesus now feeds people with bread from heaven. He *"leads them like a flock"* (Psalm 77:15ff.) He is the same God who said to the hungry Israelites in the wilderness, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you" (Exodus 16:4). He is the Redeemer/King, the Good Shepherd (Psalm 23). He cares for their needs and meets them miraculously. Our true shepherd must be God himself — for the needs of our heart are too great to be satisfied or cared for by anyone else. In the end, the Shepherd-God will have to lay down his life for us, to give us what we need (cf. John 10:12, 18). No one else can do that.

b) The second thing we need to see in the feeding of the crowd is an important "sign of the kingdom". We have seen how Jesus' miracles are not simply naked displays and proofs of his power. Rather, they are pictures of how God's kingdom power works redemptively.

When Jesus heals the sick, raises the dead, and feeds the hungry, he shows that he is no more satisfied with the current condition of this world than we are! Jesus' power is not just to save us out of the world, but to heal the world. Jesus' miracles look back to the world God created originally, to the Garden of Eden. Feeding miracles look back to when no one was hungry; healing miracles look back to when no one was blind or broken or sick; nature miracles (like the calming of the storm) look back to when there was total harmony between humanity and nature. But the miracles do not only look back, they also look ahead. They point forward to the *new* heavens and new earth (Revelation 22). This means that we should not primarily think of miracles as suspensions of the 'natural order' but as the restoration of the natural order! Jurgen Moltmann wrote: *"Jesus' healings are the only natural things in a world that is unnatural, demonized, wounded."*

11. Read verses 45-52. What is Jesus' purpose in going out on the lake? (Notice that they are not in danger. Notice he was "about to pass them by" [verse 48].)

What is unusual about this miracle is that the recipients are not in dire trouble ("straining at the oars, because the wind was against them"— v.48). Nearly all the miracles are "rescues," in which someone is in great physical danger (from demons, from hunger, from sickness, from the storm as in 4:35ff.) Here his miracle is a sign of his enormous power, purely for their benefit. The miracle is thus a way to "rescue" them from ignorance ("under belief").

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Verses 48-49 – Jesus “was about to pass them by.” This is a remarkable phrase, because the grammar indicates that this was the significant thing he was doing! v.50 – Jesus immediately then says, literally, “Don’t be afraid, for I AM.” This is the name God gave Moses when he revealed himself in the burning bush. Also, when Moses on the mountain asked to see God’s face, God says, “No, but stand here and I will let my glory pass by (Exodus 33:19). Thus by saying “I AM” and passing them by, he shows he is the Creator God. His action is God-like (cf. Job 9:8; Psalm 77:19). YET, he applies it to them by saying, “Take courage, don’t be afraid” (v. 50). Jesus knows that the disciples continually fail to apply their knowledge of who he is to their present situation. He knows that the kindest, and most shepherd-like thing he can do for us is show us and remind us of who he really is. He is pointing to the difference that understanding who Jesus is should make in our lives.

Jesus walking on the water is the second way in this passage that he is showing himself to be the same God who shepherded Israel out of Egypt. Deep in the collective consciousness of the Israelites was their remembrance of having been delivered from Egypt under Moses by passing through the Red Sea. Psalm 77:15ff. puts it this way: “With your mighty arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. The waters saw you and writhed; the very depths were convulsed... Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind, your lightning lit up the world... Your path led them through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen. You led your people like a flock, by the hand of Moses and Aaron.” And we read in Job 9:8 – “He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea. God led Israel out through the sea.” (“treads on the waves of the sea... though your footprints were not seen.”) Now Jesus Christ treads on the waves. This is a clear identification of Jesus with the Lord God himself.

We learn here: a) Human beings are terrified in the presence of the Holy (cf. Moses in Exodus 3). b) Jesus is Lord over all storms. The storm or flood was an ancient sign of chaos. Psalm 29 says that God “enthroned over the flood.” Thus Jesus is showing his power over any chaos, any terror. c) The reason the Lord may send you into a storm is to show you his character and (ultimately) to comfort you.

12. Read verses 51-52. What common character quality prevented the disciples from understanding the meaning of both the feeding of the 5,000 and Jesus’ walking on water? How can we avoid that?

Verses 51-52 shows that the terror of the disciples was a failure to apply to their lives what they should have known by now. Jesus is both King and shepherd. Dick Lucas says: “Although they know Jesus can do the impossible, they [continually] fail to apply this knowledge to their present situation... We are being pointed to the difference that understanding who Jesus is should make.” This is the disciples’ continuing problem. They are quite able to see that Jesus can do impossible, miraculous things. And they are constantly shown that he loves them. But they still haven’t realized in the fullest sense who he is (that’s why Mark says they didn’t understand about the loaves) and thus they continually fail to apply that understanding to their present situation. That is

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probably what the “hard-heartedness” of v. 52 is. Faith is reminding ourselves of who he is and acting upon who he is in practical situations.

Here’s the best way to summarize the meaning of the two incidents: “Cast all your anxiety upon him, for he cares for you” (I Peter 5:7). Since he is a shepherd — he cares, and it is his job to endlessly heal the broken, find the lost, and support the weak. Since he is also God (an omnipotent shepherd), he cannot fail to be successful in these endeavors. Therefore we will be as anxiety-free as we are disciplined to remember and apply his identity to our current situations. He loves you more than you love yourself. He knows your needs better than you know your own needs. See John 10. He lays down his life for his sheep — that’s how much he cares. So cast all your anxiety upon him. Mark is showing us that these two things are not separate. He can meet our needs because he is the King of the universe. Therefore we cannot seek to have Jesus meet our needs as shepherd if we won’t acknowledge him as King.

13. If we really believed and practiced the teaching that Jesus is our Shepherd, in what practical ways would our lives be different?

Everyone will answer this differently, but here are some of the ramifications: a) First, Jesus’ example will be a model for us in our relationships with our family members (spouse and children) and in our relationships with others, especially in the church. Are we available as Jesus was, or are we highly possessive of our time? Are we sympathetic and compassionate, or are we highly possessive of our emotions — detached? Do we do both the “hard” part of shepherding (telling the truth) and the “soft” part (speaking gently, affirming and calling to rest)? Or do we tend to major only in one or the other? b) Secondly, Jesus shows us that the Christian life is more than ethics, more than just “obeying the rules.” Jesus is not just a king, but a shepherd. He wants intimate time with us (v. 31). We are to have a prayer life that does not just go through lists of requests, but actually communicates love and trust. We are to be his friend. c) Thirdly, we should apply the idea of him being shepherd-king to our emotions. (1) Since our shepherd is God/king, we should not worry about the future. He will give us what we need. (2) Since our God/king is our shepherd we should trust him to be working when difficulties hit. When we are most upset or hurting, we should know that (if anything) God’s heart is going out to us more (v. 34). d) Fourth, since our shepherd wants us to rest and “lie down”, we should avoid overwork and burn-out (v. 31).

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: In Chapters 1-5, we learned that Jesus has staggering divine authority to conquer Satan, forgive sinners and overcome death itself. Here, we begin to learn that Jesus is the promised Redeemer Messiah of Israel, a Redeemer who is also God himself.

Why Jesus Came: Jesus shows that he has come to redeem by performing miracles reminiscent of the exodus from Egypt. In this section we see Jesus:

- as the Good Shepherd teaching and leading his people.
- giving miraculous bread as in the time of Moses.
- crossing the divided sea as in the time of Moses.
- “passing by” in glory, implying that he is Yahweh the Redeemer.

But again he prays apparently in connection with turning away from the temptations of popularity even in a preaching ministry.

How should I respond? Earlier chapters have encouraged repentance, faith and listening. Here the emphasis is on recognizing Jesus as Redeemer. The disciples fail to recognize Jesus because they are “hard-hearted,” fundamentally in the same state as Jesus’ enemies.

Mark

Religion vs. the Gospel: I

Study 7 | Mark 7:1-23

The Mosaic law listed a number of physical conditions that disqualified someone from worship:

- contact with a dead body (*Numbers 19:11-22*);
- infectious skin diseases such as boils or sores or rashes (*Leviticus 13:1-46*);
- mildew in clothing, article, or home (*Leviticus 13:47-14:57*);
- any bodily discharges, either natural (as semen, menstruation, fluids from childbirth) or unnatural (diarrhea, yeast, hemorrhages of blood or puss) (see *Leviticus 12 and 15*);
- and eating any food in the lists of those items called unclean (*Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14*).

If a person became defiled through any of these things (or through contact with someone who was defiled), he or she could not come into the sanctuary of God for a period, and then had to wash with water for purification (*Leviticus 15:8-10*). The Bible only required washings of the priests at the temple (*Exodus 30:19 and 40:13*), not of all people. But the elders developed a “fence” (called “Halakah”) of more specific and strict rules than those of the Bible. They demanded that everyone wash their hands in order to be pure. Jesus, however, refused to have his disciples bound by such traditions.

1. The Old Testament “clean laws” use dirt to symbolize sin. Why is this a good metaphor? (In what ways does sin do to the soul what filth does to a body?)

A literally dirty person is unsightly, smelly, and unhygienic (i.e. is on the way to getting sick and/or passing the sickness to others.) No wonder then that physical cleanliness became seen as symbolic of being “clean” spiritually and morally — acceptable for the “holy place” before God’s face. (In the same way, fasting is a discipline creating a physical hunger that symbolizes spiritual hunger.) Here are some ways that physical dirt or infection showed the nature of sin.

a) Sin destroys. Most of the symbolic substances or processes called “unclean” had to do with death, disease, decay, pollution, infection. (To Near Eastern people, any bodily discharge suggested loss of vitality.) Many of the unclean foods were unhealthy or easily carried disease in days before refrigeration (e.g. shellfish were “unclean”). So sin is seen as destroying its bearer, eating away at the fabric of a person.

b) Sin defiles by isolating. Practically speaking, cleanliness is important for relationships. Dirty and smelly people are both unpleasant and dangerous, and in all cultures it is understood that we wash and clean ourselves in order to meet people or enter social situations. So sin is seen as cutting us off from fellowship with God and others.

A person who designated money as “Corban” did not have to give it to God during his lifetime — a fact that led to the type of abuse of which Jesus speaks.

c) Sin defiles by disfiguring. Dirt stains, discolors, misshapes, tarnishes, corrupts. So sin makes the heart and soul repulsive, ugly.

2. Read verses 1-5. a) The religious leaders drew up specific moral guidelines for their faith community that went beyond those laid down in the Scripture. What are the advantages and disadvantages of doing this? b) On balance, is this a good idea or a bad one, and why? c) What are some ways Christians ‘add’ to the law today?

a) Positives:

“Halakah” rules were designed as a kind of ‘buffer zone’ to protect the people from breaking the broader principles of Biblical law. As we noted, the Bible did not require that every person must constantly wash with water. However, the continual washing was justified in case there had been any unconscious contact with someone or something unclean. The reasoning, then, went like this: “If you are truly devoted to God and committed to holiness, you will be eager to go the “extra” mile to be absolutely sure you have not been defiled. A refusal to continually wash exhibits moral laxity, an indifference toward moral holiness.” Now surely this argument has some weight. Why not play it “safe?” If you really want to please God, why not go to the extra trouble, just in case? What reason could you have for refusing to obey this perfectly reasonable tradition except a selfish or self-righteous spirit? In general, faithful people will ask for detailed rules. For example, a boy or girl today might ask, “how far can I go in physical intimacy without going ‘over the line?’” And the youth pastor might answer: “Don’t even kiss! I can’t show you a verse in the Bible about this, but if you are really concerned for sexual purity, you won’t even touch each other.” Many Christians are very glad of the guidance when their leaders lay down such specific guidelines, even though they aren’t in the Bible at all.

Negatives:

But though “halakah” would seem at first sight to honor God’s law and his holiness, its effect might actually be to undercut and decrease the Law’s demands. Specific rules are always easier to obey than broad principles. By creating a hundred minor procedures, it becomes possible to feel you have fully complied and to feel righteous for doing so. For example, when the laws “love God with all your heart” and “love your neighbor as yourself” are broken down into 300 regulations, all the emphasis shifts to outward conformity and external behaviors. This gives the impression that the law’s demands are manageable and can be fulfilled. But if instead you focus on the deep virtue the law is really after, two positive things can happen:

(1) First, we are humbled by the Law (which produces a key Christian virtue!) When we see that we cannot come close to fulfilling it, it leads us to greater love and respect for others and greater dependence on God. If we ask, “what does it really mean to love my neighbor as myself?” we come to see that it means roughly this — to meet the needs of others with all the speed, creativity, energy, interest, and joy with which I meet my own needs. If I fail to do that, I am being selfish and my relationship with God is

blocked. That is overwhelming! It drives me to God and leads me to respect my neighbor.

(2) Second, it presses us to see the deeper issues of motivation and heart-attitude that are at the root of a holy life. Return for a moment to the example of the boy and girl wrestling with sexual self-control. If they are given a “halakah” rule of “don’t even touch,” it certainly might help them with self-discipline. On the other hand, the strong taboo might serve to stir up their passions even more! What they may really need is to see that they are turning to sex rather than to the Lord for comfort, self-worth, and connection. They don’t have the love, peace, and delight in the glory of God that they need.

b) Is adding to the Biblical rules good or bad, on balance?

On balance, it is a bad idea. A non-legalistic view of the law (e.g. a view that sees the broad requirements and particularly the character qualities it is after) shows the law more respect and eliminates the possibility of self-justification. A legalistic view (e.g. a view that adds specifics in order to aim for a sense of complete compliance) actually gives the law less weight. To concentrate on lots of specific rituals is to distract from the real point and to keep us from seeing the depth of our sin.

c) How can we “add” to the law today?

There are many ways to carry out today what the religious leaders did in Jesus’ day. One way is, of course, is to make a list of acceptable and unacceptable forms of entertainment, forms of dress, kinds of music, and so on. Of course, there certainly are books or movies that Christians should decline if we are going to keep our hearts sensitive and pure. But when a community uses detailed lists of forbidden and acceptable activities it tempts believers to feel safe and smug about their spiritual condition even if, in their character, they are stingy, abrasive, unloving, self-absorbed, materialistic, proud, and so on.

Another way we can do what the Pharisees did is by putting much more emphasis on defending right doctrine instead of living it out. Then people can feel superior to those without the “right” views. Again, the emphasis is on the externals.

Another subtle way we can do what the Pharisees did is by resting in the secure and sentimental emotions that arise from old and familiar patterns. It can be strong, even fierce opposition to change in worship, or a love of “inspiring” sermons, not convicting ones.

3. Read verses 6-13. a) How does Jesus answer the Pharisees’ question (about why he ignores the elders’ tradition) in these verses? b) What is his illustration and how can we do this today?

a) How does Jesus answer the question?

Jesus says their traditions do not strengthen the people’s hold on the commands of God. He says they have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men (v. 8). “*Let go*” shows that the emphasis on externalities and details actually distracts and weakens the people’s grasp on the principles of God’s law. Rules and regulations keep us from focusing on the broader ramifications of the law, and thus they pull one’s efforts away from developing the real virtues and character the law is after —such as integrity, patience, kindness and joy (Galatians 5:22ff).

b) An illustration.

He uses an illustration. A tradition based on Leviticus 27 says that God's claim on property supercedes all others. A person could thus pledge so much of his/her wealth to God (called "corban" meaning it was "holy" and set apart for God's use) that he/she couldn't help aging parents. However, in making this show of their religiosity they were in effect disobeying the God who said, "honor your parents." A person could hide their resentment of their parents behind a pious front of devotion to God. Jesus is saying it is quite possible to use one's religiosity to contradict the law of God, namely, to love and honor your parents.

How can we do this today?

If you become a Christian and your parents do not share your faith, it would be very possible to use their skepticism as a way of berating them (though you hide it under a claim of "witnessing") and then ignoring them (though you hide it under a claim of "separating from unbelief"). Your resentment and ambivalence toward your parents could thus be justified through your devout religiosity.

In general, it is very possible to equate religious activities (going to church, serving on committees, witnessing to unbelievers, attending Christian events) with a walk with God. A person can feel "close to God" because of Christian busy-ness, when they are neglecting to be good parents, neighbors, friends, citizens, and or even good worshippers.

4. Read verses 6-7. How do you think someone can "worship" God and "honor" God and yet have hearts "far from him?"

This important saying bears a lot of reflection. This principle is famously illustrated in the Parable of the Two Sons in Luke 15:11ff. There we have the Elder Brother, who obeys the Father's rules and spends lots of time with the Father, but reveals that he is far from his Father's heart and spirit. How can this be?

The quote of Isaiah 29:13 shows that the real purpose of the law is to get near God. "...Their hearts are far from me..." (v. 6) "Far from me" are spatial words connoting relationship. He is saying, "You do what I say, and you want what I can give you, but you don't really want me. You are not trying to get close to me. You really don't want me, but the things I can give you."

Isaiah 29:13 is essentially saying the purpose of the law is a relationship with God, to get more of God, to please and know and imitate and connect to him. The great commandment is: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart." The law is just a way to know him, resemble him, and please him, because it is an expression of his nature and heart. If the law is a means to the end of deepening our connection to God, then it is functioning properly in our lives. When it becomes an end in itself — when we use it simply to prove ourselves as good and moral people — it strangles us and those around us. Notice that God did not give the 10 commandments to Israel *before* he delivered

them from Egypt, but after. The law was not a way to get delivered from Egypt, but a way to live in fellowship with the Lord in the new land. The Law of God is merely the direction manual to our friendship with God. (It is the “stipulations of the covenant relationship.”)

5. Read verses 14-23. What does Jesus tell us in these verses is REAL uncleanness?

Jesus here refutes the Pharisees argument in the most thorough way. He shows them that he takes the law and the need for holiness far more seriously than they do. He shows that the problem of defilement is not an ‘outside’ job that can be dealt with by self-improvement, but an ‘inside condition’ that can only be dealt with by radical intervention and grace.

a) First, negatively, Jesus tells us real uncleanness is not a matter of external observance. “In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean” (v .19). Some people have asked, “isn’t Jesus now setting aside the commandments of God? For doesn’t the Old Testament call some foods unclean?” Jesus is not abrogating God’s commands, but transforming them through fulfillment. The clean-unclean laws showed that we need to be pure to go into God. (cf. the beatitude, blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.) But in Christ we can approach God, holy in Christ’s holiness. In the same way, Jesus is the true sacrifice, fulfilling the animal sacrifices of the OT, and He is the temple, fulfilling the temple worship of the OT. He has not “laid aside” these laws, but fulfilled them. Thus we do not offer animal sacrifices or observe the cleanness laws, because he is our sacrifice and He is our cleanliness. (The entire book of Hebrews is about this.) It is extremely important to understand this. Today, many people look at the many confusing ceremonial laws and believe that they make the Bible (or at least the Old Testament) obsolete. They say “See — we don’t observe these things anymore! So why follow the Bible in these other areas?”

b) Second, positively, he shows that sin begins inside, in the motives and desires of the heart. Actual behavioral transgressions (sins) are only the fruit, but the root (sin) consists of attitudes of selfishness, pride, rebellion to God, and so on. In other words, just as it would be silly to think that, in fasting, physical hunger is spiritual hunger, so it is silly to think that physical/ritual purity is spiritual purity. Spiritual purity is a heart of love for God and our neighbor.

6. List everything we learn about the Christian doctrine of sin from verses 13-23.

a) v.13 – Sin is breaking God’s commands, not human customs and cultural conditions. Jesus refers to “the word of God” as the standard for judging sin. So sin is never judged by popular opinion or by the changing mores of culture but by the absolutes of the Bible. (cf. Romans 4:15 – where there is no law, there is no sin. Or I John 3:4 – sin is lawlessness.) Notice that some of the sins in Jesus’ catalogue

(vv. 20ff.) are in our day socially unacceptable (like murder) and other things that are today almost applauded (like pride “arrogance” and “lewdness”).

b) v. 20ff – Though the ceremonial law of the Old Testament was provisional, the basic moral law — the 10 commandments — are still used as a standard. Jesus’ catalogue of sins follows the so-called “second table of the law”, the commandments which have to do with loving our neighbor.

6th commandment – “thou shalt not kill”

“Murder” v. 21 is the actual action of physical harm.

“Slander” v. 22 is to put people down with words and do character assassination.

“Malice” v. 22 is simply the motive of ill-will toward another.

7th commandment – “thou shalt not commit adultery”

“Sexual immorality” v. 21 is a word that refers to any sex outside marriage.

“Adultery” v. 21 is more specifically unfaithfulness toward one’s spouse.

“Lewdness” v. 22 means a whole mindset of sexual impurity which leads to an immoral life.

8th commandment – “thou shalt not steal”

“Theft” v. 21 is to unjustly usurp another’s rights over his/her possessions.

“Envy” v. 22 is resenting others for having what you do not. It is wishing not only that you had it, but that they would lose it.

9th commandment – “thou shalt not bear false witness”

“Deceit” v. 22 means deceiving or misleading anyone, robbing them of the truth they deserve.

10th commandment – “thou shalt not covet”

“Evil thoughts” v. 21 refers to a general attitude of self-pity and discontent with the limitations of your life. It is a whole stance toward life, and as such, it leads to violence, impurity, theft, and dishonesty.

1st commandment – “thou shalt have no other gods before me”

“Arrogance” v. 22 means setting yourself up as your own god, living for your own glory (self-aggrandizement), determining what is right or wrong for you (self-will).

“Folly” v. 22 is paired with arrogance here and elsewhere in the Bible because pride is so self-defeating. Arrogance is folly because it is childish and unwise. Together these two traits create a rooted attitude of stubbornness and self-centeredness: “nobody tells me what to do”. The basic attitude of the heart is to want our own way (Isaiah 53:6).

c) v. 20ff – We also learn here that each commandment is not only against certain behaviors, but also root attitudes and motivations. Sin is a disposition of the heart, not

merely overt actions. The catalogue of sins Jesus gives us mixes up actions (murder, theft) and motives/thoughts (malice, envy). Every act of murder has sprung from malice, so malice is the acorn and murder is the tree. The whole tree was originally in the acorn. God is every bit as concerned with the inside as the outside. Therefore, for any deed to be “good” it must a) be conformed to God’s law, and b) be done from the heart for the glory of God (I Corinthians 10:31 – whatever you do, do all for the glory of God). So a sin is not merely a deed that fails God’s standards, but any motives that fail as well. If at any moment we are failing to love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind, we are sinning (Matthew 22:37) for that is what we owe him. This is why Isaiah 64:6 can say that even “our righteous deeds are filthy rags”, because our hearts are never right.

d) vv. 14-15 – Sinfulness arises from inside, our natures primarily, not from the outside, how we are treated. Modern belief is that people are naturally good, and if they do evil, it is because they have been oppressed by society or warped by their parents, and so on. But Jesus clearly says, we sin because we are sinners, NOT we are sinners because we have been mistreated.

e) v. 23 – Sin makes us “unclean”. We are all unfit for God’s presence. We cannot save ourselves.

7. Refer to verse 19. How can Jesus just “declare all foods clean”? Is he just writing off a big chunk of the Scripture? cf. Matthew 5:17-18.

Is Jesus saying, “Some parts of the Bible don’t hold any more; some parts of it are obsolete?” That doesn’t seem to fit in with what Jesus says about the Law of God in Matt. 5:18: *“I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”* This categorical statement doesn’t seem to fit in with Mark 7:19 at all! But maybe we should look closer. Immediately before his statement about the Law in Matthew 5:18 Jesus tells us his relationship to it: *“I come not to abolish the Law and the Prophets... but to fulfill.”* This means that Jesus did not “declare all foods clean” by abolishing the clean laws, but by fulfilling them.

In Zechariah 3, the prophet has a vision of the High Priest standing before the Lord, covered in excrement and filth (v. 3). But God does not rebuke him or strike him. Rather the Lord turns and rebukes Satan who is standing by the High Priest accusing him of sin (v. 2). Then he says: *“Take off his filthy clothes... See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you...”* (v. 4-5). Later, the Lord speaks of a day in the future, when *“a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity”* (13:1).

Jesus was treated as unclean, and crucified outside the camp, on a garbage dump, that we could *“draw near to God in full assurance, having our heart sprinkled clean from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.”* (Hebrews 10:19). Jesus fulfills the clean laws so that, in him, we are “clean”.

8. **What are some of the main points from today's study? For each point, list some possible applications for today.**

Prayer requests

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: The whole of 6:31-10:45 reveals Jesus as Redeemer. This section explains what all people need to be redeemed from.

Why Jesus came: Jesus judges the man-made religion of the Old Testament. He hints that He will redeem from sin, by showing that separation from God is really a "sin problem." Jesus declares the Mosaic Law, which set the Jew apart from the Gentile, obsolete. Under the new covenant, anyone can be saved, not just Jews.

How should I respond? Man-made religion gets the diagnosis wrong and has nothing to do with the cure. The source of evil is our sinful hearts. Man desires to follow rules in order to be righteous before God, yet Jesus presents Himself as the only way to be righteous before God.

Mark

Religion vs. the Gospel: II

Mark 7:24-37

OPTIONAL STUDY

Tyre was a city outside of the geography of Israel. Jesus' trip to Tyre was the only recorded occasion he left Israel. His visit to Tyre was entering 'unclean' Gentile turf.

We must see the first of these incidents — at least — as having a very direct connection to the teaching of Jesus about the nature of sin in Mark 7:1-23. The Mosaic law required that worshippers be 'ritually clean,' physically healthy, have no contact with dead animals or people, abstain from a list of prohibited foods, and so on. The purpose of these rules were to act as a 'visual aid' to show us that we needed to be holy before God. Disease, decay, and dirt symbolize sin. The religious leaders, however, saw ritual purity not as a symbolizing holiness, but as constituting holiness. As a result, they added even more rules and regulations, the 'tradition of the elders,' on top of the Biblical laws. They believed that you could make yourself acceptable to God by scrupulously staying separate from profane and unclean people, places, and practices. Jesus says that they completely missed the point of the Old Testament regulations. Sin is first of all internal, a matter of the heart. Sin can't be dealt with by external washing but only through internal spiritual intervention.

1. Read verses 24-26. Why did Jesus go to "the vicinity of Tyre"? Was it to get some time for himself? Or to perform a mission? Why is this trip significant, coming after 7:1-23?

Verse 24 indicates that Jesus was trying to get some privacy. The reason is not specified. The disciples are not mentioned by Mark, though Matthew (15:21ff.) tells us that the disciples were with him on this journey. In light of Jesus' previous efforts to secure rest for himself in 6:30-34 and in 6:53-56 — both of which were interrupted — it seems likely that he is again trying to get some time for personal restoration. But (cf. Mark 7:18) we also know that the disciples were not growing very well intellectually or spiritually. Jesus also probably wanted the privacy away from public ministry for the growth and personal instruction of the disciples. So Jesus did not go to this region with any deliberate purpose of having any public ministry to the inhabitants at all.

On the other hand, his going to Tyre is 'missiologically significant'. This is the only recorded time that Jesus ever left the territory of Israel. He was going out into 'unclean' Gentile turf. The most 'religiously-correct' did not associate with Gentiles at all. Even if Jesus had no intention to do any public ministry, his willingness to travel into pagan lands is important. Coming after Jesus' dispute in Mark 7:1-23, this shows his disregard for the legalism and nationalism of the religious leaders of his day.

So we see that this is a 'trick question'! Jesus was probably combining strategic mission with his own need for prayer, rest, and private time. We too should not 'drive a wedge' between our Christian life and our private life! Everything we do should be controlled and affected by our allegiance to Christ.

2. Consider verses 24-26. Think of all the ways in which Mark is pointing out what an 'unclean' situation Jesus now involves himself in.

RELIGION VS. THE GOSPEL: II

The non-Jewish character of the person who approaches Jesus is stressed by the author. This person is a) a woman (who, in general, were of lower status in those days than men), b) a Greek, born in a Gentile land, and c) has a daughter who was possessed by an “evil spirit” (v.25). The footnote in the NIV translation tells you that the term used here is literally “an unclean spirit”.

In every way, then, this is a test case of what Jesus has just said. This is a pagan woman, a Gentile by birth, culture, and religion. As we can see by Mark’s continual need to provide translation of Aramaic terms, this gospel’s audience was a Greco-Roman one. They would have been immensely interested in how Jesus, a Jewish holy man and rabbi, would treat an unclean person with an unclean spirit.

3. In verses 26-27, what is so unusual and striking a) about the woman’s request, and, b) about Jesus’ response to her?

a) Her request.

Since this region was adjacent to Israel, it is very likely that this woman knew the beliefs and views of Jews and especially Jewish religious leaders towards Gentiles. For a woman to even approach and address a Jewish man in public (cf. John 4:29) was extremely brazen. For a pagan Gentile woman to ask a Jewish holy man for spiritual ministry was probably quite shocking (cf. John 4:9). By coming to Jesus she is ‘breaking all the rules’ — not only Jewish rules, but pagan rules. On the Jewish side, she is unclean and has no right to approach a representative of the God of Israel. From the pagan side — there are many gods and powers at work in the world. Why does she need to go after a teacher of the uptight and restrictive Israelite deity? Why not go to the god(s) of her city, her nation, her region, or her vocation?

b) His response.

Jesus’ response has provoked a lot of discussion. It appears at the very least abrasive and abrupt. At worst, it appears to be racist and condemning.

Some have simply said that Jesus is exhibiting intolerance here, and that in the process of the conversation, he learns to be more tolerant. It is true that Jesus had not gone to this region in order to minister to the Gentile inhabitants (v. 24), and so there is some credence to the claim that this woman’s boldness was unexpected and surprising even to Jesus. The problem with this view is that Jesus elsewhere exhibits no such intolerance toward Gentiles (cf. Matthew 8:5-12 with the Gentile centurion and John 4:1ff. with the Samaritan woman). Also, we have to ask ourselves: “why Mark would have recorded this story and ‘sent it out’ to Gentiles if it showed Jesus as a bigot who had to have his hand forced by a persistent Greek woman?” There are two other ways that this ‘harsh’ text can be understood, both of which fit in with the uniform picture of Jesus as wise and gracious.

(1) First, Jesus may have been referring to Gentiles as ‘unclean dogs’. Gentiles were completely oblivious to the clean laws and they were called “dogs” by many of the Jews. Dogs in those days were not usually cute housepets, but wild scavengers that ate garbage. They were most unclean and unhealthy in the most literal way. (For example, Rabbi Eliezer wrote: “*Whoever eats with an idolater is like a man who eats*

with a dog.") And since Jews often had this attitude toward pagans, the woman would not have been surprised to hear Jesus refer to her in this way. This is Jesus giving the woman the expected 'party line' which he has just denounced in Mark 7:1-23. He is saying: "You are a Gentile — how can you come to me, a Jewish teacher, to ask for help?" Why is he doing this? (See (3) below.)

(2) Second, Jesus may have been making a much more careful and specific point. On closer inspection, we see that Jesus is not referring to ordinary street scavengers, but rather refers to (literally) "little dogs" or puppies that are kept as pets and which are allowed to live in the actual living quarters (and dining rooms) of the family. This is a considerably less offensive analogy. And also, he says that the children should eat the meal "*first*" (v. 27), indicating that the puppies will eat, but later. This may well have reference to the fact that she is interrupting his rest and instruction with the disciples. She is intruding in on his schedule. He is saying, "I have a plan — to bring the gospel to Israel first, and then later to all peoples. I am here with 'the children' and we are gathered for a fellowship meal, and you are interrupting. Just as it is not appropriate for the pets to carry off the bread before the children are finished, so it is not time for a public ministry here with you."

(3) Either way we understand the statement, Jesus is giving her a negative response by telling her that she does not have the right to his ministry. He may be alluding to the fact that she is an unclean Gentile, or he may be speaking of the fact that she is interrupting a ministry to his disciples, or he may be referring to both matters at the same time. Either way, she certainly would understand the reference of her as a 'dog' as meaning that she had no intrinsic right to be 'at the table'. Either way he is giving her an initial refusal to her urgent request. But why? Most commentators call this an 'apparent refusal' designed to discern the basis for the woman's request. In the Gentile world, there were many miracle-workers and magicians that attracted public followings. Just as in Mark 5:25ff, Jesus is not satisfied with superstition. His miracles are not naked displays of power but redemptive acts designed both as responses to faith and as stimulants to faith. "*Jesus therefore put before the woman an enigmatic statement to test her faith. The irony of comparison is intended to invite a renewed appeal.*" (Lane, p.262.)

4. In verses 28-30, how does she react? What does this teach us about how to meet Christ by faith?

The woman reveals that her heart has opened to Christ in faith. Her reaction shows us much about how we too can meet Him by faith (and this is why Mark records it).

a) First, she takes no offense at his blunt assessment of her deserts. "*Yes, Lord*" she says! Not — "how dare you?" or "I am good as anyone else — I too deserve a 'place at the table!'" Instead, she says "*yes, Lord.*" What is she agreeing with? She is agreeing with his analogy of her as a 'dog!' Now this may have the more harsh or the less harsh connotations that we outlined above. But either way, it means that she has no right to be at the table. She does not take offense. She does not see the assessment as a racist statement that 'her kind' have no rights, but that she as a human-sinner does not

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deserve his help. Here is the great irony and paradox of the gospel. Only if you admit you are a dog under the table can you become a child at the table.

b) Second, she nevertheless refuses to take 'no' for an answer. She accepts his 'paradigm' of the dog-under-the-table, but then actually humbly and respectfully argues with him within his own paradigm. She knew the role of dogs in the normal Hellenistic household. She knew that, though the food was primarily for the children, the puppies *do* get fed from the table with the leftovers. Family members happily throw morsels to their pets. The woman uses this for her advantage. "Yes, Lord, I don't deserve a place at the table, but I know that there's enough for me on that table! Indeed, don't the children usually feed their pets during the meal?" Along with her humble acceptance of her unworthiness, she shows a confidence in the mercy and power of Christ. She is not put off by the apparent refusal.

This is more than a clever response, it shows an absolutely crucial balance in our approach to Christ. If, on the one hand, she had responded with too much pride [e.g. "How dare you say I'm unworthy of you?"] she would have not found Christ. On the other hand, if she had responded with too much despair [e.g. "You are right! There's no mercy or help for me!"] She would have also missed Christ. To not believe in the magnitude of our sin OR in the magnitude of his grace is to fail to find Christ as Savior. A Christian is neither bold-but-not-humble, nor humbled-but-not-bold, but is bold and humble at once. How can that be? If salvation is by sheer grace, then that means I am unworthy and yet infinitely valued and loved at the same time. Religion cannot produce this bold-humility in us. We are either worthy to be at the table, or completely excluded, depending on our performance. But this woman exhibits the saving faith that shows the bold-humility of those who are finding Christ. The Spirit is producing it in her even as they speak.

In some ways, to be either proud or despondent is to refuse to see Christ as Savior and to insist on being your own Savior. John Newton once wrote to a depressed man:

"You say you feel overwhelmed with guilt and a sense of unworthiness... You say it is hard to understand how a holy God could accept such an awful person as yourself. You then express not only a low opinion of yourself, but also too low an opinion of the person, work, and promises of the Redeemer... You complain about your sin, but when we examine your complaints, they are so full of self-righteousness, unbelief, pride, and impatience that they are little better than the worst evils you complain of."

Notice that Newton says that to despair of God's grace (i.e. that it is unable to forgive and receive someone as bad as you are) is really a form of self-righteousness. How so? It is a refusal to accept God's favor on the basis of mercy. A heart that says, "if I haven't earned it, I won't take it as a gift!" is as deeply self-righteous as the heart of a proud Pharisee. It wants Jesus to be an example and a Rewarder of the Righteous, but not to be a gracious Savior.

In summary, the woman gives us a perfect example of what true saving faith really is. On the one hand there is no hostility. She says, "you are right! I am a dog! I am a sinner, unclean and unfit." So she accepts the humbling statement from Jesus. But on

the other hand, there is no despair. She says, “but I know you are merciful and your love is superabounding. I know there is some for me. I don’t deserve it, but I need it.” Either pride (not believing in your sin) or despair (not believing in God’s grace) is a form of faithlessness. Either way there is a failure to see Jesus is our Savior. So the solution for the problem of sin is not striving for moral perfection, but admitting our moral failure and trusting completely in Christ’s forgiveness. You are more sinful and wicked than you ever dared believe, and yet you are more accepted and loved than you ever dared hope.

5. Read verses 31-37. a) What is unique about the healing here in comparison with the past healings? Why does Jesus do these things? b) Why do you think Mark continues to give accounts of Jesus’ healing?

a) What is unique?

First, Jesus takes the man away from the crowd. While other times Jesus is willing to do his miracle in full view of everyone, he declines to do that here. Why? Jesus must have perceived something about the man’s spirit and nature that made him want to guard his privacy. Perhaps this man could not take being a ‘spectacle.’ Perhaps he was extremely frightened and Jesus needed to take him aside in order to give him a place of safety, or to establish a trust relationship with him.

Second, Jesus uses many physical gestures as he has not before. He puts fingers to his ears, touches his tongue, spits on his fingers, looks to heaven and so on. We know from other healings that Jesus does not need to do these in order to put forth his power. Why then does he do this? He must be adapting to the communication mode of the deaf-mute. This man would have expressed himself through sign language, so Jesus does the same! He shows deep sympathy and personal engagement with him.

The basic point is this — since Jesus does not need to use sign language, etc., to do healings, this means that Jesus is adapting to the man’s emotional and physical needs. What an example! He finds the best way the man has to receive love and aid and he adapts to fit the man’s needs. Verse 34 tells us that when Jesus looked to heaven, he did so with a deep sigh. This shows the emotional involvement that Jesus has with us.

b) Why is Mark telling us this?

Mark uses an extremely rare word for this man’s speech impediment, the Greek word *mogilalon*. The only other place in the Bible that it is used is in Isaiah 35:5. That passage describes the coming of God’s future kingdom, by saying, “Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf be unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.” Charles Wesley put it into a hymn lyric:

Hear him, ye deaf! His praise ye dumb
Your loosened tongue employ.
Ye blind, behold your saviour come,
And leap, ye lame, for joy!

Thus Mark is reminding us that Jesus brings the kingdom. The kingdom of God is coming to renew the whole world.

6. Look back over these two incidents and draw out the practical lessons we learn.

There are far more than we can mention here. But here are a few:

a) *Jesus is not a 'tame Lion.'* This is a phrase from C.S.Lewis' Narnia tales, but you don't have to know the tales to understand the point. Jesus' first response to the Syro-Phoenician woman is very enigmatic and apparently negative and harsh. Yet with the deaf-mute he is immediately extremely tender and sensitive. Elsewhere we see Jesus snorting with anger as he heals people (Mark 1:41, 3:5-6, 11:12-17) or procrastinating in an apparently inexcusable, callous way as Jairus' little daughter dies. Jesus is quite unpredictable, and he is not always 'gentle, meek, and mild.' Why? He's God. He's above and beyond us. Again, to revert to the Narnia tales, we can say, "Safe? Who said anything about being safe? But he's good. He's the King, I tell you." Be slow to assume you know what Jesus needs to be doing in your life. As John Newton wrote: "Everything is needful that he sends; nothing can be needful that he withholds."

b) *Jesus will receive anyone. Cultural, racial, and class barriers do not matter to him.* The healing of the deaf-mute takes place in the Decapolis, an area of 10 independent Gentile cities. So the crowd, and probably this man, are also Gentiles as was the woman. Mark is continuing to show us that no one is ultimately 'unclean,' because everyone is unclean before him. Jesus tells us elsewhere that he alone can make us clean (John 13:10; John 15:3 – You are already clean because of the word I spoke to you.) It is typical of Jesus, when he first begins to try to tell them the "good news" to begin with the bad news. See Luke 10:25ff; Mark 10:21ff. If Jesus ignored cultural barriers, we should also seek to form friendship and relationships of understanding across class and culture barriers as well.

c) *If Jesus treated the deaf-mute with such sympathy and engagement, we should treat others the same.* Jesus, as it were, learned the man's language in order to speak to him. So we should be willing to come into people's worlds and learn their concerns and forms of thought and communicate in ways that they can understand and in ways that address their needs and concerns. (Of course, we can go too far in this direction. People also need to be called to repent and change their ways.)

d) *If we have to suffer in order to follow Jesus, remember it will not be anything like how he suffered to follow us!* When Jesus sighed (v. 34) it was either an actual experience of suffering (from his emotional tie-in) or an anticipation of great suffering later. The sigh points to the cost he would have to pay in order to heal us — the cross. For the "dogs" to become "children", the only true Child of God had to become a "dog," had to be cast from the table, on the cross. In order to love us, he had to take the wrath of God on sin. Now, if we are going to treat people with sympathy, if we are going to try to reach across cultural boundaries, etc., we are going to "sigh" as well. This is hard. But it's nothing like what he had to do for us. Think of that. It will make it easier to pay our little prices if we remember the big price he paid.

Mark

Who is this King?

Study 8 | Mark 8:1-30

We now reach the middle of the gospel. Until now the author Mark has been seeking to answer one question: "WHO IS THIS?"

Everything we see Jesus doing and saying has been to help readers gradually see who he is. The gospel now approaches its first of two climactic spots — one in its middle and one at its end. In both spots, a significant person "gets it," and confesses openly that Jesus has "the name which is above every other name." Here in 8:29, Peter says, "You are the Christ", namely, the promised Messiah Prince who would bring God's kingdom to earth and heal all ills." Then, at the end of the gospel, in 15:29, a centurion at the cross says, "Surely this man was the Son of God." First one of his own disciples understands who he is, and finally the whole world will see who he is. But up until this spot in 8:29, the disciples have responded to all the evidence with an amazing lack of comprehension. They still don't "get it," they don't see the obvious.

1. In verses 1-10, what differences are there between this feeding miracle and the one in 6:30 ff? What might be Mark's purpose in including this one?

This is the second mass-feeding miracle. (Jesus refers to both feedings in vv. 19-20, so these are not two garbled accounts of the same episode, as some have surmised.) We must remember, Mark is not just a reporter, but a teacher. He is highly selective in his use of material, and he would not show us another such incident unless he was making additional points. So we need to look at the differences between the two.

The main difference is the location. Back in 7:31 we are told that Jesus had traveled into the region of the Decapolis. That was a region of ten Gentile cities (hence the name) around the northern end of the Sea of Galilee. This was a very multi-ethnic, cosmopolitan area, and so the crowd would have been largely Gentile. Here's one commentator's description of the region:

"The province of Galilee was not large, only 50 miles by 25, but it... supported an enormous population... no less than 204 villages in the province, none with less than 15,000 inhabitants... the most densely populated area in the Middle East... Galilee was in pagan hands, where Greek language, pagan customs, and non-Jewish influences held sway." (Michael Green, *Matthew for Today*, pp. 65-66.)

Thus the main difference between this feeding miracle and the last is that it shows Jesus serving a multi-ethnic Gentile crowd instead of an only-Jewish crowd. Some also point out that the word for basket in v. 8 is a word for larger Gentile-style baskets in contrast with that used in 6:43. Also, there is more emphasis on the fact that the people had come "from a long distance" (v. 3). This lays stress on the fact that the crowd comes from a far-flung and diverse area.

So Mark is teaching us that Jesus is savior of the whole world, not just for Israel. It comes on the heels of the story of the Syrophonecian woman in Mark 7 in which that is very clearly the theme.

The other difference in stories actually lies in what appears at first the same — the disciples' bewilderment in both incidents. They are again clueless about Jesus' power to feed the crowd (v. 4) and later in the chapter Jesus alludes to their lack of faith and understanding about his person and abilities in the face of both feeding events.

In other words, this story shows up the spiritual obtuseness of the disciples in the strongest way. We readers of the gospel find it hard to believe that the disciples could have so failed to learn from the feeding of the 5,000 that they would not realize his miraculous power to feed the 4,000. But Mark is showing us how great is human spiritual blindness. The disciples continually fail to apply what they know of Jesus to new situations (cf. Mark 6:45-52). And that is the definition of unbelief. This revelation of spiritual blindness and incomprehension is important in the chapter, because the chapter shows additional examples of this blindness leading up to Peter's confession of the fullness of Christ's identity in vv. 29-30.

Of course, we need to see ourselves in the disciples. Mature believers learn that their own hearts will continually doubt him, again and again, though we are thrown into situations in which he previously showed us his power and care for us. We never stop worrying. We never expect him to act a second time to help us. We need to look at our anxieties now, and see how they fail to remember what he has done before. Spiritual memories are extremely short. That is the nature of our hearts.

2. In verse 11, why do the Pharisees ask for a sign? Why won't Jesus give them one? What does this teach us about the nature of faith in Jesus?

The Pharisees wanted him to "give a sign," not just to demonstrate he has power (that was obvious), but to demonstrate that he is the expected Messiah. Now they have, of course, seen many signs from him. So this request must mean that they felt that none of the miracles so far had been "big enough." In each case, various members of their party could point out that this or that deed could have also been attributable to satanic power or magic, or to trickery, or to some other source of energy. They felt that his miracles to that point had not finally proved who he was. They were asking for something more inexplicable and certain.

But if the miracles already provided were not enough, what sign would be "enough?" It is clear that their request for a real sign is a way of getting out of their own responsibility. They are in essence blaming their lack of faith on Jesus rather than on themselves. Their real problem is that Jesus is not acting like the Messiah they expected, and they want him to start doing so. The Messiah was supposed to triumph over oppression. Why doesn't he overthrow the Romans? Instead, he is helping the oppressed — healing and feeding and comforting — but that isn't enough to prove he's the Messiah! In other words, he does not fit their preconceived notions of Messiah-hood. And this is why they are blind to the evidences, though they are blaming him for their lack of faith.

Thus we learn that they have already decided that Jesus could not be the Messiah. Their assumptions and presuppositions were serving as a filter which explains away all the evidence that Jesus can give them. This shows the power of spiritual blindness.

So why does Jesus refuse to give them a sign? He is not refusing to provide any evidence to doubters. Some read this as a statement that faith in Christ must be “blind” and based on no evidence at all, but he has really given many “signs” and wonders to them (cf. Acts 2:22). What Jesus is saying is: another miracle will not produce faith in those who already have their minds made up that he cannot be the Messiah. Jesus has already provided ample supplies of evidence for his divinity. Earlier he showed how specious were the arguments that his miracles could have been done through Satan’s power (3:22ff.). But he cannot give them what they seem to want — evidence that removes uncertainty so much that there is no need for risk or commitment. In other words, faith in Christ cannot be involuntary. No one can be forced to believe. No evidence can break through a mindset that is determined to disbelieve.

The implication is this — that coming to faith in Christ does consist of looking at evidence. But it also consists of examining the motives of our hearts. We cannot believe unless we come to grips with the fact that we are not disinterested judges of the data. Imagine a judge who was trying a case involving a company in which he held stock. He could not be unbiased if he knew that, should the company be found guilty, he would lose thousands of dollars. So too, we are not unbiased looking at Jesus if we know that, should he be found to be the Lord, we must obey him and lose control of our lives. To judge fairly, we must be honest about our own hearts’ severe prejudice against Christ’s case, and we must repent of that and be open to him, if the evidence is going to be read properly.

This raises an extremely important issue. Is anything capable of being proven with certainty? The answer is — things we become certain of cannot be proven before we commit to them. We may look at the evidence, but we will always be uncertain until we trust in a thesis. Once we have abundant evidence, any demand for “proof” is really a way to avoid commitment. Thus the problem with the Pharisees was no longer an intellectual one, but a moral one. They had sufficient evidence (not to prove Christ, but to proceed to more openness, or to commitment), yet they didn’t want to believe or obey.

3. What is Jesus trying to get across to his disciples in verses 14-21? What does their failure to understand teach us about ourselves?

Jesus doesn’t want the Pharisees’ blindness to characterize the disciples as well. “Yeast” was in those days and times a symbol of evil. It is a good symbol, in that yeast infections were a sign of decay, yet yeast represents an influence that is unseen but pervasive. (For example, yeast works itself through the bread and then “shapes” the bread in its own image.)

So Jesus is warning them against being unconscious about their unbelief as are the Pharisees. They pose as being neutral and open-minded, when actually they are (unconsciously) very committed to non-commitment! As noted above, there is no way

to faith in Christ unless we become conscious of our own “yeast”, of our own biases against him. So yeast is a symbol of the Pharisees’ attitude, legalism and hypocrisy. He is warning them not to fail to believe as the Pharisees are failing. In other words, they must examine their hearts for the moral refusal to lose control to Jesus, and purge themselves of it, if they are going to be open to the evidence. Then, finally, they need to realize that the evidence cannot bring them to certainty unless they commit.

Jesus’ metaphorical language about yeast immediately loses the disciples. Why? If they realize that they partially resembled the Pharisees in their spiritual obtuseness, they would have probably picked up the gist of the comment. But because it could not occur to them that they partook in any of the same sort of blindness, they didn’t get the connection.

The applications to us today are many. Even if we are committed Christians, we should assume that we have a continual obtuseness as well, that obvious lessons are being missed, that we think we know a lot more about Christ and ourselves than we really know. It should lead to humility, to a lack of spiritual arrogance or know-it-all-ness, to a willingness to repeatedly re-visit Biblical texts and truths, to be very teachable and accept rebuke graciously, etc.

On the other hand, if we are looking at the evidence and assessing who Christ is, we must recognize that the process of evaluation is as much a moral one as an intellectual one. In other words: a) we must see and repent of our initial bias against Christ, and b) we must know that we cannot expect complete certainty from the evidence before we commit.

In sum, the incomprehension of the disciples is a warning to us. Jesus did not pick the 12 most stupid men in the world. They are a random sample of humanity, and their spiritual confusion tells us what the Bible says explicitly elsewhere: “no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord’, except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2:14). The only way out of our natural spiritual blindness is if there is divine intervention. This sets us up for the healing miracle and the confession of Peter which follow.

4. Read verses 22-26. Why does Mark put this healing account here between the rebuke of the Pharisees and disciples, and the story of Peter’s confession?

In vv. 1-10 we see the blindness of the disciples, and in vv. 11-21 we see the blindness of the Pharisees. Probably Mark is continuing to drive home the point when in vv. 22-26 we see Jesus healing a man who is literally blind. All this points the way to Peter’s confession. There we see that Jesus can heal spiritual blindness as well. This is something of a surmise, of course. But at least Mark was trying to show again that,

despite their blindness and slowness to understand, Jesus really is the “Christ” or Messiah that Isaiah prophesied in Isaiah 35. That prophecy is put in the hymn words: *ye blind, behold your Saviour come, and leap, ye lame, for joy!*

Why did it take two touches from Jesus to heal the blind man? We know from other examples that Jesus did not have to perform in two stages. One commentator gives a great interpretation: “A technical medical point is fascinating: it is not enough to see. For functional sight the brain must be able to understand what is seen. Key... is the close relationship to the disciples (v. 18)... they ...cannot see properly because they do not understand what they see” (Dick Lucas). In other words, this interpretation sees the first touch as healing the sight, and the second one healing the understanding.

At any rate, the two stages are there to show that our own healing of spiritual blindness is progressive. What does this mean practically for us, as we approach Jesus? 1) First it means there must be, as with the blind man, a willingness to admit you don’t see aright. There should be a humility. 2) Yet coming to Jesus is more than an intellectual process. There is a need for enlightenment. A real Christian must experience a newness of “sight”— a discovery that the truths of the gospel now thrill and comfort and challenge us as never before. We don’t simply know the truth, we “see” it. That must be part of genuine Christian experience.

5. Read verses 27-30. a) What does Jesus’ question tell us about Jesus? b) What does Peter’s answer tell us about Jesus?

a) The question

The question points out the difference between Jesus and every other founder of a major world religion. Jesus’ teaching was surprisingly self-centered. The other religious leaders talk mainly about behavior and salvation, and Jesus certainly discusses those subjects too. But his primary, central teaching is about himself, his identity and greatness. Imagine if any professor would say, “for the last three years, the most important thing I have been trying to teach you is this — do you really know who I am?” Such a teacher would be dismissed as crazy or arrogant in the extreme.

But this question shows that this was the basic burden of all his instruction. This forces us toward extreme positions about Jesus. Such behavior is only appropriate if he really is unique divinity. If he is just a man, even a very great one, such self-interest is totally inappropriate. Thus Jesus cannot just be a good teacher, but is either a divine person or someone to be shunned and rejected.

b) The answer

The word “Christ” meant a prince from heaven. The Messiah was the one who would bring in the kingdom of God, and thus put down all evil and oppression and pain and heal all ills. This is an enormous realization for Peter to come to. For Jesus broke all stereotypes and expectations of the Jews of the time. They expected a) that the

Messiah would come ONCE, in one stage, in which he would 1) heal the oppressed and, 2) punish the oppressors. Instead, Jesus comes TWICE, in two stages. In the first stage he comes in weakness, to make sacrifice for sins, to offer help to the oppressed, but only in the second stage, at his second coming, will he come in power, to put down all oppression and destroy all evil. This two-stage approach threw the religious leadership totally off track. Even John the Baptist (see Matthew 11) was thrown into doubt.

For Peter to realize that Jesus, in his weak state, was the Christ, was a tremendous insight. This does not mean that Peter yet foresaw that Jesus was coming to die for sins. But he was not realizing that this Messiah was not abiding by the expectations of coming in political power. In Matthew, the writer adds that Jesus also said to Peter in response: "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven" (Matthew 16:17). This means that Peter's spiritual blindness was beginning to heal.

What are the implications? Christians know now that Jesus came to bring the kingdom of God and of light, but not yet to end the old world/kingdom of darkness. Thus we live between the 1st and 2nd coming of the Messiah in the "overlap of the ages." The kingdom of God advances in service and love and sacrifice, not through coercion and taking power.

6. Read verse 30. Why would Jesus tell Peter to be quiet about his identity? Should we be quiet? Why or why not?

Most likely Jesus' warning to silence was due to the fact that even the disciples themselves did not realize what the real nature and work of the Messiah would be. Though their blindness was beginning to heal, they needed another "touch" (or several!) like the blind man. They were in no condition yet to proclaim Jesus as the Christ, because they were still seeing "men as trees walking," and did not yet see the complete picture of what he came to do. It was not until after his death and resurrection that they were equipped to preach Christ.

We are not in the same position, because we live on the far side of the death and resurrection. And all Christians are commanded to tell others about Jesus' identity (Matthew 28:20).

LOOKING AHEAD:

While the first half of the book centers on who Jesus is, the second half of the book focuses on what he came to do. In the first half of the book, many questions are answered about who he is. It is finally seen that he is both God yet human. That He is the king from heaven who comes to bring forgiveness and grace, who comes to adopt us into God's family, who comes to rule and heal us with his authority and his word. Yet the first half of the book leaves us with unanswered questions about how he will be bringing it all about. For example: a) Why a rejected King? In Mark 6 Jesus says he will be rejected, and that it is his lot to be rejected. Why? Does that mean he will fail? Why would it be part of God's plan for his king to be rejected? b) What do we do about sin? Jesus has shown us that sin is something deeply rooted in us and so we are unclean. Yet he continually indicates that he will receive us by grace, anyway. How can that be? What will he do about sin?

As soon as Peter confesses Christ, the focus changes, and the second half of the book immediately (and for the first time) explains that Jesus has to die to accomplish all these great things. So the second half of the book will show us why the cross was necessary and what it accomplished. That is the next subject.

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Jesus is the Christ, the Redeemer King! That is what the feeding miracles were pointing to.

Why Jesus came: He came to redeem those who *hear, see* and *understand* who he is.

How should I respond? There is plenty of evidence about who Jesus is. His ministry as recounted in the first half of Mark means that we cannot plead ignorance. We are answerable for our response to him and those who remain unbelieving will be justly judged. Nobody, however, will understand unless Jesus opens their eyes. The only way out of judgment is by God's gracious intervention.

Prayer requests

Mark

Following the King: I

Study 9 | Mark 8:31- 9:1

INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND HALF OF MARK'S GOSPEL

As we said last week, the first half of Mark's gospel tells us much about the person of Jesus, but leaves us with unanswered questions about the work of Jesus — i.e. how he will be bringing salvation and the kingdom. For example: a) In Mark 6 Jesus says he will be rejected, and that it is his lot to be rejected. Why? Does that mean he will fail? Why would it be part of God's plan for his king to be rejected? b) In Mark 7 Jesus presents teaching about sin that is surprisingly radical. Sin is something deeply rooted in *all* of us, not just in those who are 'enemies of the faith'. Yet he continually indicates that he will receive us by grace, anyway. How can that be? What will he do about sin? c) Also, in the first half of the book the disciples are repeatedly portrayed as failing to understand the nature of Jesus' work and power. As soon as Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the focus changes and Jesus immediately begins to answer these questions by (for the first time) talking about the cross. The entire second half of the book focuses on that — the crucified Messiah. It is all about why the cross was necessary and what it accomplished.

The book of Mark divides into two sections of roughly 8 chapters each. The first half begins with a summary of Jesus' "first half" message — "The kingdom of God is near!" (Mark 1:14-15.) This leads up to Peter's confession in 8:29 "You are the Christ." Now the second half begins with a summary statement of Jesus' "second half" message in Mark 8:31-38. And it will climax with the centurion's confession at the cross in 15:29 — "Surely this man was the Son of God."

Now that Jesus is revealing more explicit details about his mission, he also reveals more explicit details about what it means to follow him. In the first half, he told people to follow him (1:17-18, 20; 2:14-15), but now he begins to explain what that following entails. As Jesus takes up a cross, we must also. As the cross and glory are linked in Jesus' life, so the cross and glory will be linked in our lives. That is the surprising theme that is introduced to us in the second half of Mark, beginning here.

1. Read verses 31-32. In light of the teaching of entire first half of the gospel of Mark, how are these verses completely unexpected, even (apparently) contradictory to it?

The original readers of Mark would have been completely unprepared for Jesus' statement in vv. 31-32. Indeed, in some ways, they have been "set up" by the author for a shock. (It is a bit hard for us to put ourselves in the shoes of someone completely unfamiliar with the story of Jesus, but we exercise our imaginations a bit if we are to listen to Mark's teaching for ourselves.)

The first half of the gospel of Mark has been all about who Jesus is. It began with a summary statement (in Mark 1:14-15) of his "first half" message — "*The kingdom of God is near! Repent and believe.*" It proceeded through miracle after miracle and deed after deed that revealed his enormous power and dignity and divinity. "Who is this?" was the

question continually asked. Finally, the first half climaxed with the confession of Peter in 8:29 — “*You are the divine Messiah.*”

Now that we finally know who he is, we expect (rightly) that the second half of the gospel will reveal what he came to do. And again, the second half begins with a summary statement (in Mark 8:31-38) of his “second half” message. But when it comes the readers get a shock. Because of our normal human categories of “power and success”, we would expect that once Jesus is revealed to be the divine Messiah that he would marshal his forces, cast down his enemies, and take control. But instead of that, the moment his disciples realize he is the divine Messiah, Jesus begins to talk of suffering, defeat, and dying — as what he came to do!

“Throughout the first half of the gospel (1:1-8:26) we might have expected a rather different ending to the tale. Jesus bursts on the scene proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom of God and doing mighty works: he casts out demons, heals the sick, raises the dead, calms the sea and wind, walks on water, and twice multiplies bread to feed large crowds. In short, in the first half of the story, Jesus of Mark’s Gospel looks very much like a Hellenistic wonder-worker or magician. He acts as a superhero who exercises the power of God to subdue the forces of evil... [But at 8:31ff] we see that Mark has crafted a story to gain hermeneutical control over the traditions of Jesus as a miracle-worker. Those who perceive Jesus as a purveyor of power — whether supernatural or political — have failed to understand him. He can be rightly understood only as the Son of Man who will surrender power in order to suffer and die. Thus the question, “Who do you say that I am?”...is answered rightly only at the end of the story, when the outsider Gentile centurion, witnessing Jesus’ ignominious death on a cross, speaks the truth: “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (15:39). Here at the climax of the story we find the goal toward which Mark’s narrative presses: Jesus can be known as the “Son of God” only when he is known as the crucified one.” (Richard Hays, The Moral Vision of the New Testament, p. 75 and 84)

We see what a masterful writer Mark is! In the first half, he lulled us into thinking that we (the readers) are completely in the know. We are told in 1:1 that Jesus is the “*Son of God*” and then we watch as the foolish disciples and obtuse public slowly stumble to the truth that we already know. But now, unexpectedly, we are shown that he is not at all the kind of “deity” and “Messiah” we would ever expect! He came to give up power, to lose, to become weak, to serve and suffer and die. Our prejudices and worldly wisdom is now completely confounded and challenged. The gospel is that Jesus died and “lost” in order to win our salvation. Therefore, true liberation is submission to him; true righteousness comes to those repenting and admitting they have none of their own; true power comes to those who serve and love and empower others.

Now we can see something of the narrative structure of the book of Mark:

Introductory Confession: "Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1)

First Half — Who he is

"Gospel": *"The King has come!"* Our response: *"Repent and believe"*

First Confession: By an "insider"-Peter: *"You are the Messiah"*

Second Half — What he came to do

"Gospel": *"The King must die!"* Our response: *"Take up your cross and follow him"*

Climactic Confession: By an "outsider"-Roman: *"This is the Son of God!"*

2. In verse 31, the word *must* modifies and controls the entire sentence. What does it tell us about Jesus' purpose and what he came to do?

The word "must" modifies and controls the whole sentence, and that means that everything in this list is a necessity. He **MUST** a) suffer, b) be rejected, c) be killed, d) be resurrected. It has to happen. Think of the implications of this word.

a) First, many commentators believe that Jesus said he "*must*" die because it is prophesied by the Scripture. There is warrant for this view. At his arrest, Jesus says that it is happening because "*the Scriptures must be fulfilled*" (14:49). So the Messiah must suffer to fulfill passages such as those in Isaiah 52, 53 and Zechariah 13:7, etc. There the Suffering Servant is made "*an offering for sin*" and bore the iniquities of many. This is probably at least partially what is in mind. And it points to the extremely high view of Scripture Jesus had. But the force of the word "must" is not exhausted by a reference to prophecies. The prophecies foretold that the Messiah had to die, but why did he have to?

b) Second, he must have meant that there was no way that he could be the Messiah unless he suffered. "*The Son of Man must suffer*" means just that — that the Messiah could not bring the kingdom in without rejection and death. This of course was a complete departure from all the Jewish ideas of how the Messiah would deliver, and it is at odds with the universal human conception of how divine power and liberation should work. We think that power should come to the worthy and be used to coerce and knock down our enemies. But Jesus says that divine power comes through service and sacrifice. His triumph will be a defeat and his defeat will be a triumph. And power comes in to our lives by surrender and repentance and service. So "MUST" secondly means that to be God's Messiah, he had to come in suffering and loss — that is how God's power works in the world. But still this cannot exhaust the meaning. Why "must" God's saving power work like that in the world?

c) Thirdly, Jesus is also indicating (by the word "must") that he is planning to die, that he is doing it voluntarily. He is not merely predicting it will happen. This is what probably offends Peter the most. It is one thing for Jesus to say, "I will fight and will be defeated," and another to say, "this is why I came; I intend to die!" That is totally inexplicable to Peter. But to us, the voluntariness of his death makes it more precious.

He did it willingly, for us. cf. "I lay down my life... no one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord." (John 10:17-18) But still this cannot exhaust the meaning. Why "must" he voluntarily give up his life?

d) This word "must" looks beyond to the rest of the teaching of the Scripture. Alec Motyer in Look to the Rock points out that the Bible asserts truths in apparently unreconcilable tension with each other. For example, Exodus 34:7 says that the Lord will in "*no way clear the guilty*" and yet "*he will forgive wickedness*". How can he do both? In Psalm 51:14, David, who is quite guilty of murder (of Uriah, Bathsheba's husband) asks God to "*save me from bloodguilt, O God.*" He asks God to save him from the just penalty for murder. And then he adds that, if God does so: "*then my tongue will sing of your justice!*" How can that be? If God delivers David from the just penalty for his crime, David might sing of God's mercy, but how could he sing of his justice? How can God be both just yet gracious and accepting of guilty people?

Here is another example. Ray Dillard says that the histories of Judges through 2 Chronicles seem caught on the dilemma of whether God's covenant with his people is conditional (conditioned on obedience) or unconditional (by sheer grace). God is absolutely holy and also merciful. But how can he be both? Thus the narratives are mainly propelled by the tension of the **question**: "how can God be holy and still remain faithful to his people?"

These "tensions" pose a real problem! How can God be a God both of Law/Holiness and Grace/Mercy? It is quite wrong to "resolve" these tensions by essentially choosing some of God's attributes over others. If we make God a loving God who overlooks sin, or a legal God who only accepts the obedient, we have a lesser God than the God of the Bible. None of these tensions can be answered unless there is some radical, unlooked for solution. All of this points us toward the cross — where both the law of God and the love of God was fulfilled.

This little word "must" actually flies in the face of the popular conceptions of Jesus today. Modern people find confusing or distasteful the idea of a God who must punish sin. So Jesus not only contradicts popular views then, but also now. This little word also destroys many contemporary theories of Jesus' death — that it merely demonstrates God's love, or that it is merely an example of sacrificial love, etc. Modern scholars have said, "God is not really mad at sin, he didn't need a sacrifice for sin, he really just loves and accepts us all." But Jesus, saying I MUST die, strongly indicates that his death was a legal payment for sin, that we cannot be saved otherwise.

This word also proves the doctrine that we are saved by grace alone, not by any works. If we could save ourselves by living very good lives, there would be no reason for Jesus to die and suffer horribly. Why else would Jesus have suffered it? Why else would the Father have sent him to do it? If we don't accept the force of the word "MUST" we misunderstand the gospel.

3. Read verses 32-33. Why is Peter rebuked, and how is Peter a warning for us today?

The reason that Peter is rebuked is because Peter, remarkably, has just “rebuked” Jesus. As soon as Jesus is done giving us his new, more specific “gospel” in v. 31 — namely, that he will die — Peter “took him aside and began to rebuke him.” This word translated “rebuked” is the same Greek word used in Mark 3:12 where Jesus rebukes and silences the demons. Thus it is a very strong word, almost a condemnation. And Peter, hearing the idea of a weak, crucified Messiah, begins to rebuke Jesus as if what he had just said is evil!

Jesus, then “rebukes” Peter — which again is the same word, and in Jesus’ mouth it is strong yet appropriate. He treats Peter as if he were a demon-possessed man, calling him “Satan.” Calling Peter “Satan” sounds unnecessarily harsh, until we remember what Satan had said to Jesus, according to Matthew. The devil offered Jesus the world kingdom without suffering — “All this I will give you, if you will bow down and worship me” (Matthew 4:9). So Satan had tempted Jesus with the prospect of winning the kingdom through the way of pride and power and taking charge, not of humility and weakness and obedience. He was being tempted by Satan to achieve his Kingship exactly as the popular imagination envisioned the Messiah’s career. Satan wants a “religion of works” — in which people are saved by emulating a powerful, unsuffering leader, rather than through repentance and trust in a serving, dying leader. These two spiritual “models” are utterly at variance. The first one produces pride and scorn and conflict and the other produces humility and love and peace. So Peter’s words are Satan’s words.

How is Peter a warning for us?

a) First, Peter represents anyone who has set an agenda for God, and who then demands God to fulfill those expectations. For example, worry is saying to God, “I know what a good God will do in this situation, and I’m afraid you won’t get it right!!” So many of our problems come from thinking we know better than God what he should do!

b) Second, Peter represents anyone who cannot incorporate the concept of suffering and self-denial into their ideas of happiness and greatness. It was inconceivable to him that the Messiah, the man of highest power, would be rejected or suffer. This is even more common today. In ancient times, people expected a hard life and suffering; today we consider suffering intolerable. Today, we cannot imagine how suffering or pain can be redemptive, or can ever be God’s will. This is shallowness — but most people feel the same way. When trouble happens, we say, “God couldn’t be working in this! This couldn’t be his will! Nothing good can come out of this!”

c) Third, Peter represents anyone who doesn’t really feel that Jesus must die for them. The doctrine of the necessity of Jesus’ death is very insulting. It means that you are so sinful, nothing but the death of the Son of God could save you. He had to die for you. Your moral efforts will not avail. Basically, every human heart wants to believe that our

goodness and good record will be enough, and so implicitly or explicitly, we deny the necessity of his death. Many modern theologians, like Peter, say that God is not angry at sin and Jesus didn't have to die. Like Peter, they deserve rebuke.

In summary, Peter shows that he still does not truly "get" the gospel. He still does not see the difference between religion and grace-fulfilling-the-law. He still does not see the difference what the kingdom means — that through the death of Christ the future healing power of God can come into the world as a free gift. Peter doesn't really understand the idea of submitting to Jesus as a "King" at all. He has an agenda and expectations to which God must conform. Romans 1 tells us that we all want to make God in our own image, or to make him a manageable God. This is idolatry.

4. In verse 35, what does the first "save his life" mean (35a)? What does the first "lose his life" mean (35b)? What does the second "lose his life" mean (35a)? What does the second "save his life" mean (35b)?

This sentence is striking and put into vivid rhetorical form, pairing opposites and putting the principle in its most paradoxical form. Although ordinarily the term "save his life" would be seen as a positive condition, it is clear that in the first clause of the sentence it is something Jesus wants to discourage! This is seen because he says that this activity leads to "losing" one's life. Then in the second clause, we see the term "loses his life," which would ordinarily be seen as a negative condition. But it is clear that in the second clause of the sentence it is something Jesus wants to encourage. He says that this activity leads to "saving" one's life. Therefore, in the first clause both "saving one's life" and "losing one's life" refer to negative things, but in the second clause both "saving one's life" and "losing one's life" refer to positive things.

In the first clause, "saving your life" means to try to save yourself by your good works or to try to become happy through living out of self-interest. Thus there is a religious way to "save your life" and an irreligious way to do it. But Jesus says that to "save your life" (in any mode) leads in the end to "losing your life." This seems to mean that the very thing you hope to achieve or attain will escape you. You will not be happy if you live to be happy. You will not be accepted by God if you live to earn your favor with God. You will not know who you are if you simply live to please yourself and 'find out who I am'.

And in the second clause, "losing your life" means to give up your claims to self-determination (submission), give up your claims of righteousness (repentance), be willing to do anything (relinquishment), even to die, for Christ. This is called 'losing your life' partly because it appears to be 'suicide' to worldly wisdom. To give up your right to do as you please seems (to the world) to be the end of life. But Jesus says that the way of submission, surrender, repentance, and service is the way to really "save your life". Of course this does not mean that we "save ourselves", for that would contradict the first half of the statement! Rather, Jesus is saying that following him will result in salvation and joy.

We could paraphrase v. 35 in a couple of ways:

- You will never find out “who you are” (“save his life”) until you find out who I am (“for me”).
- Stop thinking so much about your issues and serving yourself — start thinking about my issues and serving me, and you will come to discover that your own issues and needs will be more and more resolved.

A good question for further reflection: What are some common misconceptions modern people have about Jesus’ call for self-denial?

5. How do verses 34 and 36 shed light on what verse 35 means?

a. We said that the first “save his life” is obviously a negative condition. The meaning of this term can be deduced with reference to v. 36. It is parallel in that verse to “gain the whole world” — to seek a successful life of achievement, comfort, etc. This refers to efforts to find our identities or gain self-worth or create happiness apart from God.

b. We said that the first “lose his life” is also obviously a negative condition. The meaning of this term can also be deduced with reference to v. 36. It is parallel in that verse to “exchange for his soul”. To neglect “the soul” is to neglect knowing God and spiritual issues. It means that the result of God-less, self-centered living is always an emptiness, a dissatisfaction, a fractured identity, and an eternity without Christ.

c. We said that the second “lose his life” is now a positive condition. The meaning of this term can be deduced with reference to v. 34. This “lose his life” means “to deny himself, take up his cross.” To “deny self” in the Bible is not to deny things to oneself, but to deny one’s self to your self. In other words, Christians give up the right of self-determination. Christians give up the right to decide how to live — they live as Christ directs. (Some times, obedience to Christ entails losing friends, money, comfort, or even one’s physical life. So to “lose your life” for Christ means being open for that to literally occur.)

d. We said that the second “save his life” is also now a positive condition. But there is no real parallel in v. 34. Probably, the meaning is very general — it refers to salvation itself in all its fullness. This “save his life” means that we develop a new identity, find a new satisfaction and love, and are literally saved unto a life with God in eternity. When we serve Christ, we discover what we were really built for. Just as a train will run far better on a track than on a football field, so we find that we “run” better serving Christ than ourselves. Psychologically and socially and spiritually we “heal” when we deny ourselves. We “save our psyches.”

In summary, we cannot be saved unless we are willing to “lose” our own record and our own will and rely on Jesus’ record and will.

More notes on the concept of self-denial:

Self denial is not self-hatred. Self-hatred is still in reality a form of self-centeredness — you are absorbed in your own problems, and your attention and focus are dominated by your flaws and failures. Self-denial is rather self-forgetfulness. For example: it means that when you approach God, a Christian focuses on Jesus' record, not your own, as a basis for your requests. On the other hand, when you decide how to use your money, a Christian focuses on Jesus' concerns and desires, not your own. And so on. It also means a condition in which you are not very concerned with whether or not you are being snubbed, given proper respect, and so on. Self-forgetfulness is a lack of touchiness.

"Take up his cross" in v. 34, probably means the same thing as "to deny himself" and "to lose his life." But perhaps the metaphor shows that the principle of self-will and self-determination will die a slow death. Crucifixion is a slow death, and it must be done daily. Perhaps the metaphor of "taking up the cross" means, as mentioned above, that self-denial may actually lead to literal death for Christ.

6. Read verse 9:1. In what way might some of those present see the kingdom of God come with power before they die?

We should begin by remembering that these words have puzzled many people. Some commentators state bluntly that this was a plain mistake. Mark (and/or Jesus) thought that the Second Coming would occur within the lifetimes of the apostles. That did not happen — so Jesus was mistaken. There is a major problem with that theory. The gospels began to be written down as the apostles — the living witnesses to Christ — were dying off. Mark was writing 30 to 40 years after Christ. It is unlikely that he would have recorded and passed this saying on if it was clearly an error. It doesn't make sense that the early church would have loved and cherished this gospel past the lifetimes of the apostles if that was what the verse meant. (Luke 9:27 records the saying as well, and that gospel was written even later.) So Mark's recording of the saying shows that the early church did not uniformly understand Jesus to be referring to his Second Coming.

Many think Jesus was referring to the transfiguration, which comes next in the gospel. It is true that it reveals Jesus in "power." If the transfiguration is in view, we must realize that its main subject is to talk about Jesus' suffering and death. Thus the death and suffering of the cross is the meaning of "the kingdom coming." What a paradox! The glory of the kingdom is the death of the king! His power is service; he dies to liberate. There are many people who believe this is what Jesus is referring to in this cryptic verse.

However, others believe that the "kingdom coming in power" referred to Pentecost. Luke spells this out pretty clearly in Acts 1:6, when the apostles ask whether "now... are you going to restore the kingdom...?" Jesus' replies that "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses..." (Acts 1:7). If

we remember that Luke also records this saying about them “seeing the kingdom” (Luke 9:27), a case can be made that Pentecost is in view. But it is not clear that Mark thought that this was the meaning of Jesus’ saying. So we have to be modest in our interpretation of this text. If we are careful not to become too absorbed in the puzzle, we can step back and see the pastoral meaning of Jesus statement. He has just told them that to belong to him could easily mean physical death. So 9:1 is Jesus’ way to comfort them. He says, “don’t worry — what ever you lose will be more than made up for! You will see great things! I will be with you!” So though we are not sure about Jesus’ specific meaning, his general meaning is clear — and it is wonderful!

7. There is a strange mixture of strength and weakness in Christianity. How does Jesus show this strange mixture in his mission? How do we see this strange mixture in Peter in verses 32-33? How do we see this strange mixture in the life Jesus calls us to in verses 34-37?

a. In the first half of Mark the focus was on the amazing person of Christ. In the second half the focus becomes the amazing work of Christ. A major reason that people had trouble understanding Jesus’ Messiah-ship was because of the apparent contradiction — this King has come to be killed! The triumph of this King will be through an (apparent) defeat. We see in this strange combination of strength and weakness in this first passage (8:31-38). On the one hand, Jesus identifies himself as “the Son of Man.” The Son of Man (Jewish hearers knew) was the glorious figure mentioned in Daniel 7:13-14, who would come from heaven with all power. Yet the emphasis of this passage is that the Son of Man must be rejected and must suffer and be killed.

Jesus triumph is his “defeat.” His power is his weakness. Jesus saves by losing! Jesus brings life by dying. If he had gone the way of strength (as Satan and Peter proposed) he would have come into weakness; by going the way of weakness (being obedient and reliant on the Father even unto death) he came into strength.

b. In Peter, we see the wonderful confession in 8:29, and yet his refusal to accept Jesus’ need to die in 8:32. So we see a picture of a Christian. There is a mixture of sin and grace in us. We are spiritually very weak, yet Jesus’ life works in us.

c. The paradox of Jesus is the paradox of the Christian. Jesus saves by losing, so we find ourselves by losing ourselves. C.S.Lewis said, “*aim at earth and you get neither earth nor heaven; aim at heaven and you get both.*” That is another way to state the same paradox. If we seek happiness more than righteousness, we get neither. If we seek righteousness more than happiness, we get both.

A Christian is expected to deny self, to be obedient no matter the sacrifice. But here’s the irony. This is the “way of weakness” — but it requires enormous strength to follow! So where do we get the strength to be weak as Jesus is weak? That strength comes from knowing that Jesus walked in this way before us; that the weight we bear is nothing like the weight he bore.

8. How can we follow Jesus' example of weakness?*Prayer requests***Remembering the big picture**

Who Jesus is: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of Man and the Suffering Servant.

Why Jesus Came: He will reign in power, but he must suffer and die.

How should I respond? To follow Jesus means to follow the Suffering Servant. To truly follow, we must openly acknowledging him and all his words. Inseparable from following Jesus is the cost of the cross. There is no other example He gives.

Jesus on the mount; Jesus off the mount

Mark 9:2-29

OPTIONAL STUDY

We saw that the very minute Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah (8:29), Jesus immediately began to teach, "Yes, but I am the Messiah who has come to be murdered." Peter rebukes him (8:31-32), so it is clear that only relentless teaching on Jesus' part is going to make any "dent" in the prejudices of the disciples. Now we are in the second half of Mark, and the contrast with the first half is already evident. Jesus now constantly speaks of his death and suffering, and he does it in ways that the disciples find extremely hard to swallow. This passage begins to answer the questions about the nature of Christ's life and the reasons that the Messiah has to die.

Jesus was transfigured "before them" (verse 2) meaning that the "Transfiguration" was for his disciples' benefit, designed to teach them about his person and work. Therefore, we have to ask "what does the *transfiguration* teach us?"

1. Read verses 2-8. What does the supernatural brightness of Jesus (verses 3-4) and the descent of a cloud (verse 7) tell us about Jesus' person and work? (Remember the cloud and bright light in the book of Exodus.)

a) First, the glory of Jesus (v.3-4) and the cloud (v.7) tell us that Jesus is not simply a great man, but Deity himself.

When God led the children of Israel out of Egypt, he gathered them at Sinai to enter into a relationship with them. He descended on Mt. Sinai in a cloud of glory (Exodus 19). Then he called the elders of Israel to come up into the mountain, where we read: "*and... the elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel, and there was under his feet a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. They beheld God, and they ate and drank.*" (v. 10). This was a revelation of the glory of God which was astonishing. Immediately after that, God had them build the tabernacle (tent) where his presence could dwell in their midst. The presence of God was represented by a glory-cloud that resided in the Holy of Holies, called the "shekinah." The transfiguration is clearly a parallel incident to what happened in Exodus. Jesus has just announced his death and mission (Mark 8:31). Now he calls his disciples up into a mountain, and the glory-cloud appears before them, just as it did on Sinai.

But the differences are remarkable. Moses' face shone when he came down from the Mount because he reflected some of God's glory (Exodus 34:29-30). But Mark tells us the dazzling glory emanates out from Jesus. "*His clothes became dazzling white*", a brilliance that no human power could produce (v. 4). The reference to a brilliance that "no one in the world" could produce shows that this glory is divine. This is a stupendous claim. Jesus is revealed to be the very glory of God (cf. Hebrews 1:3).

b) But second, the disciples' sight of Jesus' glory (v. 2-3) shows us he is not only God himself, but he is the *way* to approach the unapproachable glory of God.

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Moses had thirsted greatly to see the glory of God, but the Lord refused, because sinful human beings could not bear the presence of the Holy One (Exodus 33:18ff; cf. Isaiah 6). But here the disciples (and Moses and Elijah) see the glory of God. Jesus, as it were, is the new tabernacle, through whom we experience the very presence of God that Moses was denied. Mark says here implicitly what John says explicitly when he writes (obviously recalling the Transfiguration itself) *"The word became flesh and tabernacled among us... and we beheld his glory."* (John 1:14). John uses the word *"tabernacled"* in Greek which literally means *"pitched his tent."* We see in the text that Peter tries to build Moses, Elijah, and Jesus tents (*"tabernacles"*) (Mark 9:5) as well. Why? They realized that Jesus was being revealed as the glory of God. (cf. Peter's remembrance of the Transfiguration: *"We were with him on the mountain! and the voice came out of the Majestic Glory"* 2 Peter 1:16-18.)

Let's summarize. Most human beings have known that there is a God behind the universe, and also that there is a gap or chasm of some kind that cuts us off from God. Therefore, many religions had *"temples,"* in which the presence of the divine was mediated in some way (through priests or rituals or sacrifices or transformations of consciousnesses, etc.). But here on the mount we learn that not only is Jesus the God on the other side of *"the gap,"* but he is the bridge over the gap. He is not only the God we need, but the Mediator, the way to come into the presence of the Holy and the Glory.

2. Refer to verses 4-12. What does the presence of Moses and Elijah and the voice from the cloud tell us about Jesus' person and work?

The presence of Moses and Elijah (v. 4) and the voice from the cloud (v. 7) tell us that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament law (Moses) and the prophets (Elijah). Moses represents the Law of God, and Elijah represents the Prophets. All the threads of previous salvation hopes converge on him.

Both Moses (Exod 31:18; 33:18ff) and Elijah (1 Kings 19:8) had visions of the glory of God on mountains. But here they speak to the dazzling Jesus — a strong indication that Jesus is really the one to whom all their experience and revelation pointed.

First, see how Jesus fulfills all the strains of prophecy. The voice from the cloud, just as at Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:11) mingles the predictions of the divine Son from heaven (Psalm 2:7 — *"you are my son"*) with the prediction of the suffering servant (Isaiah 42:1 — *"in whom my soul delights"*). The Old Testament predicts the coming both of a powerful divine King (see Isaiah 1-39) and a Suffering Servant (see Isaiah 40-55). Jesus fulfills all these *"strains"* of prophecy. They converge upon him. For example, he will be God, Isaiah 9:6; yet will suffer, Isaiah 53. How could both be true? Jesus shows how they can both be true of one person. Note: Also compare Daniel 7 (which talks of the *"Son of Man"* who will return from heaven with God's kingdom). Daniel 7:9 describes the Son of Man as having dazzling white clothes, like Jesus had in the transfiguration (v. 3).

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Second, Jesus not only fulfills the prophets, he also fulfills all of the Mosaic revelation of the Law. On the one hand, he fulfills the law by obeying it perfectly. On the other hand he fulfills all the tabernacle service, for he is the sacrifice, the priest, and the house of God himself. How can God be completely holy and still accept and save his flawed and wayward people? The answer is that Jesus is not only the perfectly glorious and holy God, but also the one who offers himself as a sacrifice to cleanse us and bring us to God.

Only years later did Peter “get” how much was being shown to him on the mount of transfiguration. Jesus “resolves” the tensions implicit in the Old Testament revelation. How can God be both holy and yet gracious? How can the Messiah be both God yet a Suffering Servant? Peter remembers this lesson extremely well, for he writes, *“Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.”* (1 Peter 1:10-11).

3. Refer to verses 2-8. Why does the voice from the cloud add “Listen to Him!”? What do we learn from this?

As we already mentioned, Jesus is being shown to be the prophet, the priest, and the king that all other prophets, priests, and kings pointed to. That is why, though Moses and Elijah were great revealers of God, the voice says, “listen to Him.” He is the greatest of all.

As we have continually seen, the disciples are very, very slow to understand the gospel. They have a “grid” for how God’s salvation will work. It consists of some of the following principles: a) God will send a liberator who will be a powerful ruler, and b) if I am worthy and faithful to him, he will put me into a place of power in his new administration. No matter what he tells them, they listen to it through this ‘grid’. They discard or simply miss whatever Jesus says that doesn’t fit into it. They are not truly “listening” to him. The Transfiguration itself is an amazing — literally dazzling — effort to break through their “grids” so they can truly “hear” what he is saying to them.

Therefore, to believe and follow Christ, we must be good listeners. 1) On the one hand, this means that Jesus has intellectual authority over us. (This is not a popular notion in Western culture today!) He does not have authority only over what we do, but also over what we think and believe. Remember, the context of the transfiguration is Peter’s rebuke of Jesus (in Mark 8:32). Jesus’ Messiahship does not conform to Peter’s ideas. But the transfiguration shows we must submit our thought forms to the ultimate revealer of truth. 2) On the other hand, this means that we must not think we have truly “listened” to Jesus just because we’ve acknowledged the principle of his authority. Peter and the other disciples had “signed on” as followers of Christ, but they still didn’t really hear and understand what he was saying. Therefore we must not just agree that his Word is authoritative, but we must patiently study and listen to his teaching, always assuming that we are not “getting” it all.

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4. Why do you think the transfiguration occurs right after Jesus' first teachings on his death? Why is this not just important for the disciples but for us?

Jesus insists that he is going to be rejected, defeated, tortured and killed. The apostles are confused and angry with such an assertion. Why? Because they cannot square this agenda with their ideas of greatness and glory. The transfiguration is a powerful demonstration that Christ's glory is even greater than they imagine, yet it is "hidden" and different from what they imagine as well.

The transfiguration points to the fact that, despite outward appearances, the person and work of Jesus is glorious. Despite the fact that he is not seeking political and military power, he is going about (for those with eyes to see it) the real kingly campaign. This means that, properly understood, the rejection and death of the Messiah is really the highest triumph possible. His death defeats death and sin. His death is a glorious victory. This is why, just before he dies, Jesus says, "the hour is come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (John 12:23). The death of Jesus is not a denial or an absence of glory. Indeed, his death is the very apex of it.

Why did the disciples need the message so much? Because over and over they were in a condition in which their Lord and cause looked like it was utterly defeated. At that moment, it was hard for the disciples to imagine their poor, humble, weak, wandering mentor as the one who returns to judge with glory and angelic hosts! And later, when he was captured and killed, it was impossible for them to imagine his future greatness. The Transfiguration was, in a sense, a brief "lifting of the veil of ordinariness" to give a glimpse of the incredible power and glory underneath all the suffering and service and death.

We need this as much as the disciples. We are constantly in situations in which the gospel and the Lord do not seem to be succeeding. Prayers are not answered, people are not believing, we are not growing. Yet the Transfiguration remains a brief "peek" under the veil of the ordinariness and difficulties of our lives. It says, "despite how it looks on the surface, Jesus is working in your life and in the history of the world. The kingdom is here now to do great things, and it *will* eventually triumph through all our trials and troubles."

5. In verses 11-13, what does Jesus mean in his reference to Elijah? What is Jesus trying to teach them in this reference?

Notice that after the vision on the mountain, the disciples ask about Elijah, but not Moses. Why would that be? Because of Malachi 4:5, it was widely expected by the Jews that Elijah would return just before the coming of the Messiah. When the disciples saw Elijah, there was great excitement. Was this the sign signaling the revealing of the Messiah? So they ask Jesus about it.

There may be an even deeper reason for the question. Many experts in the Scriptures believed that Elijah would return and "*restore all things*" (Mark 9:12) before the Messiah came. In other words, he would bring about a state of justice and true worship

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in the land. How, then, does that fit in with Jesus' teaching that the Messiah would be rejected and suffer and be killed by the religious leaders? (8:31). If Elijah is going to bring in the peace of the kingdom, why would the Messiah come and suffer?

Jesus agrees that the teachers of the law are right — that "Elijah" will come to "restore all things" — but he then says (v. 13) — "but". Another fact must be taken into account. He says, "*Elijah did come to do that very thing, but they did to him everything they wished.*" This makes it clear that "Elijah" was John the Baptist. (Mark had mentioned in 6:15 that many people thought John was the figure of Malachi 4:5.) He says that Elijah has already come, but that he has been mistreated and murdered ("*everything they wished.*" v. 13). In other words, Jesus says: "Yes, John-Elijah came back to restore things, but the resistance to him was enormous and he has suffered and been killed." The implication is — "so why shouldn't I suffer and be killed?"

Jesus is doing two things here. On the one hand, he is trying to revise their understanding of the coming of the kingdom. As we have seen, the people of that time thought that the Messiah would come once and then the old age would end and the kingdom-era would begin. But Jesus shows us that the Messiah comes *twice* — the first time in weakness and suffering, and the second time in power and glory. Thus the kingdom of God has begun with all its life-giving power, and yet co-exists with the sin, injustice, and death of this world, until the King comes back the final time to finally and completely "restore all things." Jesus is revising their understanding of the coming of the kingdom. The forerunner has come, and the Messiah is here — but they both came to suffer and die.

On the other hand, this is simply another opportunity for Jesus to revise the apostle's understanding of glory, greatness, and the Messiah's career. By showing that "Elijah" has suffered and been rejected, that foretells that the Messiah he introduces must suffer and be rejected (v. 12). So Jesus continues to show the disciples that his way (and the way of anyone who identifies with him) is the way of humility, service, and sacrifice.

6. Read verses 14-29. What do you think is the main point of this miracle? How do we know? Why does Mark put this story here, sandwiched between two passages on how the Messiah has to die (8:31-9:13 and 9:30-32)?

a) This is just a continuation of Jesus' educational program for the disciples. In many ways it is no different than the "learning objective" of the Transfiguration. Jesus uses this opportunity to again teach the disciples that the way of Christ and the kingdom is the way of the cross — of humility and service. The disciples continue to show a "know it all" attitude. His teaching concerning his death is insulting and confusing and they resist it. They are interested in power and popularity and acclaim and success. The disciples tried prayer-less exorcism for the same reason that they couldn't understand why Jesus had to die — they didn't see how weak and sinful they were. They underestimated the power of evil in the world and in themselves. Here Jesus has another chance to show them that real power comes through humble dependence.

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b) Perhaps Mark is also using the story to point out the depth of evil and sin in general and the need for Jesus' death. The boy is a picture of the human race — we are spiritually possessed by evil, blind and deaf. (This goes against the grain of our popular culture's view of human nature. Movie after movie shows that we are capable of great heroic actions and can save ourselves along with a little bit of magical help.) But this story shows us that we are completely unable to help ourselves. Therefore it would have been useless for God to simply send a teacher or an moral example to earth. We do not need to be taught — we need to be saved. That is why Jesus had to come not as a Teacher primarily, but as a Savior. He had to die. He had to do something about our sin.

Note: Some commentators notice that, when Moses comes off Mt. Sinai after seeing God, he finds the people worshipping the golden calf. In the same way, Jesus and the disciples come off of the mountain into confusion and evil. It may be that the parallel is intentional, to continue to show how Jesus is the Lord of Sinai and the new Moses come to deliver us. But also it could just be instructive to us in the most practical way possible. Mountaintop experiences don't last! They have just been literally "on the top of the world," full of glorious assurance that Jesus is the Lord of Glory. They had worshipped with a sense of spiritual reality beyond which it is impossible to go in this life. Yet immediately they are plunged into a problem and confusion. Remember that no matter how strong is our walk with Jesus, there will be many times of darkness and misery while this world continues.

7. From verses 19 and 23, what does Jesus see as the basic problem of all who are involved? Why does Jesus speak so sharply to the disciples? Why can't they handle the situation?

There is much detail given about the boy's condition. We are told the demon's aim was to kill him (v. 22). The demon makes him deaf and mute and causes convulsions. It was an overwhelming condition — both physical and spiritual. It made not only the victim helpless, but it stymied everyone around him — his father, the disciples, and the teachers of the law.

Jesus is waiting for someone to admit helplessness and be humble. On the one hand, the disciples were so proud of their power that they hadn't even prayed before trying to heal! (v. 29) That shows a superstitious view of power — and a lot of pride. On the other hand, the teachers of the law were there arguing, trying to pontificate about what it all meant (v. 14). The only person that begins to show humility and acknowledge helplessness is the father of the boy. It is not until the father admits his unbelief and lack of faith that Jesus begins to work. Jesus jumps on the father's statement "if you can," and presses him to admit his lack of faith. He does, saying, "I do believe, yet I am full of unbelief." Then and only then is the power of Jesus released.

In summary, all the parties were evidencing unbelief because of pride. Dick Lucas writes about this passage, "The disciples had been tempted to believe that the gift they had received from Jesus (in 6:7) was in their control and could be exercised at their disposal. This was a subtle form of unbelief, for it encouraged them to trust in themselves rather than in God... To refer to them as an 'unbelieving generation' means that they are indistinguishable from unregenerate men..."

In the end, it is this subtle over-confidence and blindness to the depths of evil that is the reason no one can see the need for Jesus to die. The apostles don't realize how sinful they were — and so they think that just to follow Christ's example and his teaching is enough. So it has always been. People who find the idea of the cross offensive or irrelevant have never seen the power of evil in themselves nor in the world. They are superficial, undiscerning. The radical measure of the cross doesn't seem necessary.

The very idea of the cross is offensive and insulting. It means that you are so wicked, only the death of the Son of God can save us.

8. What do we learn about faith from this passage? About prayer?

a) About faith. When the boy's father admits that his faith is partial and incomplete, Jesus begins to work. That proves:

That faith is NOT a feeling of complete certainty. Jesus shows that faith is NOT primarily the absence of doubts and fears. Rather, faith is committing to and obeying Jesus despite your doubts and fears.

Many churches teach that faith is perfect psychological certainty. This leads people into a great deal of pain and confusion. Many people think that they have not gotten answers to prayer because they did not have enough "faith." This leads a person to have faith in faith instead of faith in Christ. It makes you think that Christ won't hear you until your faith is in a certain condition. That shifts the emphasis from Christ to the condition of your faith as that which helps you. The effect would be like staring at a windshield instead of through a windshield. The result will be an auto accident! A windshield does not have to be perfect to show you the road; your faith doesn't have to be perfect to grab hold of Jesus.

The admission of a lack of faith is the beginning of faith. Jesus begins to act as soon as the father admits his doubts. But the confession to Jesus shows loyalty and trust in him, and the commitment of his son to Jesus does the same. This is crucial to understand. A righteous person in God's sight is the one who admits he/she has no righteousness and comes to Christ. Jesus is saying, "if you say you see, you're blind; but if you say you're blind, you see." cf. Mark 8:22-26.

Faith therefore grows through commitment. Obviously, the father's faith, though weak, as he trusted in Christ, quickly got stronger as he watched the Lord work. In the same way, we cannot expect certainty before we commit. To demand that is unreasonable. In other areas of life it is the same. (You can't be sure you are hiring the right person until you've hired him/her and tried them out.) Faith and certainty grows in and through the acts of commitment and obedience. It cannot be worked up before.

So, usually, God wants us to believe before we see — i.e. we have to make some commitment and do some trusting before we can experience certainty. For skeptics, this means that the best way to learn faith is to "try on" Christianity like a pair of glasses — to look at life through it and see its coherence. Some commitment and trust is necessary preceding the growth of faith.

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Jesus is gentle and generous with incomplete faith. Notice that Jesus does not wait for our faith to be perfect. He challenges us to complete faith, but works with us where we are.

b) About prayer. The power of prayer is obviously not in the eloquence, but in the helplessness. Helplessness connects you to Christ; pride disconnects you. The prayer Jesus was telling the disciples they needed was the kind of prayer that the boy's father made to him (v. 24). Do we pray like that? What is the nature of that prayer? It is 1) honest, 2) helpless, 3) hopeful, 4) specific, 5) passionate.

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Jesus is the Son of Man referred to in Daniel 7. He is the Ancient of Days, the Son of God, whom God the Father loves. He is the Messiah, who must be preceded by Elijah (Malachi 4) and to whom the Old Testament points.

Why Jesus Came: We already know, from 8:31, that he says he "must die." Why must he die? Mark 9:2-13 answers in terms of God's will. It is God the Father's plan to reconcile sinners to himself. Mark 9:9-29 gives the beginning of an answer in terms of man's need. No mere human can break Satan's power to deafen, dehumanize and ultimately kill mankind.

How should I respond? We should listen to the apostolic teaching of the cross. We cannot "listen to Jesus" in the sense that the disciples did. But we can "listen" with confidence to Scripture, which is the written account of what Jesus said.

Mark

Following the King: II

Study 10 | Mark 9:30-50

Jesus has begun to tell the disciples that he is the Messiah, but he has come to be rejected and die. He repeats this here in 9:31. The first reaction of his followers is they simply did not understand what he meant (verse 32a). It didn't fit their categories, so it did not "register." Imagine that you are on a campaign team trying to get a man elected president. One day he says, "Listen, here's how the campaign will end. Not only will I lose the election, but the opposition is going to assassinate me." Surely his followers would think he was being sarcastic or trying to motivate them to work harder. We can imagine, then, why they were so confused! But we see another reaction as well. Fear. They don't want to admit how confused they are (verse 32b – "*they were afraid to ask him about it.*") They were afraid that he might be serious. Their fear and pride kept them from admitting how confused and scared the teaching made them feel.

As a result, in the last part of the book of Mark we see Jesus spending a lot more time with disciples, in order to enlighten them. (Verse 30 – "*Jesus didn't want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples.*") He enters a phase in which he puts much more into the intensive training of his disciples in the meaning of his death and resurrection (*i.e.* the gospel).

1. What is the effect of continually using the term "Son of Man" each time Jesus teaches about his death (8:31; 9:12; 9:31)? (Read Daniel 7:9-15 and ask what kind of figure this is.) What is Jesus trying to get across?

The burden of Jesus' teaching is the "paradox" of defeat-yet-triumph, of his weakness-yet-strength. When he calls himself the "Son of Man" he is identifying himself with the cosmic powerful figure of Daniel 7:9ff. This figure is a person of great power and high majesty, who will triumphantly bring in the kingdom of God. So when Jesus says the Son of Man must suffer many things (8:31), the Son of Man must suffer much (9:12), and the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men (9:31), he is deliberately juxtaposing images of the greatest victory with downfall, of the greatest power with vulnerability. He is continually seeking to get them to revise their concept of greatness. His constant message: my apparent loss is really a conquest, my apparent weakness is really my strength.

At this point, Jesus merely states this as a principle. He is not explaining how his death and rejection would be a triumph. That comes later, in 10:32-45.

2. How does the disciples' argument on the road (verses 33-34) show why they could not grasp the teaching of Jesus' impending death?

The disciples were arguing over who was going to have a higher place in Jesus' kingdom (v. 33-34). This is just another indication that they still have no idea what "*the Son of Man will suffer*" means. They completely misconstrue kingdom "greatness." Obviously, if they realized that the kingdom was humility and service, they would not be contending with each

other for the biggest slice of it! If the kingdom was political, then those closest to Jesus would share more of his political power. If the kingdom is a movement of suffering and service, then those closest to Jesus would share more of his rejection and humbling. Since they don't see how dying on a cross could lead to salvation and power, they don't even see how humility and service can lead to strength and greatness. They don't see how weakness and submission could ever lead to increased influence, authority and power. Actually, despite the initially paradoxical sound of this principle, there are many illustrations, even at the simplest level. Often a spirit of gentleness and humility can lead to acquisition of authority, while a proud grabbing for power can both reveal and result in weakness. For example, I Kings 12:1-17 tells of how King Solomon died, and how his son Rehoboam sought to consolidate the power of the throne. The people came to him and said, "your father was harsh to us." The elders advised Rehoboam to respond by saying, "I will be a king who serves you." But Rehoboam's young friends advised him to respond by saying, "I will be even more harsh to you," and thereby increase his power. Rehoboam took his young friends' advice. He spoke proudly and harshly, and the people rebelled. Rehoboam was left with only a small kingdom. His swagger revealed his inner weakness and insecurity, and it led to outward weakness and insecurity. As a result of the split, Rehoboam ruled a diminished state. A humble attitude of servanthood would have resulted in greater influence and authority. And this is only one example of how Jesus' principle works.

3. In verses 36-37, Jesus likens true discipleship to child-nurture. What is he teaching us about himself and us from this metaphor?

In v. 37 he says, "*whoever welcomes one of these little... welcomes me...*" This is a remarkable metaphor. To "welcome" a child is to take a weak and dependent being into your care, since children have extensive needs and give very little in return. In Jesus' context, children also had a lower social status than they do now. But even today, people whose careers or full-time work is to care for children are in general paid less and have lower social status. What then does this image teach us about following Christ?

First, it may be that Jesus is putting *himself* in the place of the little child! To receive them is to receive him. He has come to be powerless and helpless as a child. Though the "biggest" of all, became "little" and weak. That's what he is doing in suffering and dying. That is why the Father ("*the one who sent me*" – v. 37) gave him. The disciples are not accepting him as a sacrificing Savior of grace. And they exhibit this by their lack of a humble, serving spirit. If you are disdainful of the weak and helpless (such as children), or if you lack the humility and service which child-nurture requires, you show that you don't understand the very mission of Jesus.

Second, the image probably also puts Jesus in the place of the "welcomer." He seems to be saying, "I came to work not with the righteous and the powerful, but the people who know they are weak. If you want to be like me, you will also welcome the weak, the helpless, the needy." In this perspective, *we* are the children! He came to rescue us, because we are weak and sinful and spiritually completely helpless. We could never

have saved ourselves. Since we were the weak and helpless that Jesus came for, we should reach out to others. So to serve others unselfishly emulates him.

However one thinks out the image, Jesus is saying, “In my kingdom economy, the greatest one is the one who seeks most to serve. To welcome others who are little shows that you accept and understand my work on the cross. I welcomed *you* when you were poor and helpless, and so when you welcome others who are in this condition, you have welcomed me. Only people who understand the dynamic of what I did on the cross will be able to develop this “upside down” (to the world) view of greatness. In other words, we must see a) that he became little, and b) why he became little — because WE are little and weak and helpless. If we admit and accept those two things, we “welcome” him as our Savior. That will mean that we welcome “little ones” around us.

4. What is Jesus telling us about the kind of people we should minister to by this metaphor of child-nurture?

We’ve seen how the “little child” can represent the person of Christ in his mission as a suffering servant, and it can also represent us as weak and helpless and needing salvation from him. But let’s look at it a third way. Who is it that he is telling us to serve? Who are the “little children?” Here’s a list characteristics that make them examples of the people we are supposed to serve:

- a) Children were (and always have been!) unappreciative of what they have. They lack the comprehension or context to be deeply grateful. They complain and are seldom satisfied with what they have. To serve someone who is full of appreciation is not really service, because you get lots of return. But children represent ungrateful, unappreciative people. Therefore, Jesus is calling us not to only relate to and serve thankful people. We should also relate to and serve people who are too immature to give us gratitude and encouragement.
- b) Children can’t do you any favors. They don’t have money or power. There is a natural, unconscious gravitation to be friendly and kind to people who have assets, can open doors for you, and have lots to offer. But to serve someone who is full of power is not really service because you get lots of return. [Note: This, of course, doesn’t mean that we can’t serve people who are grateful or who have the power to reward us. Rather it means that if we only serve those kinds of people, we don’t really have a generous spirit but a mercenary one. It means we have not seen how Jesus became little, or how little (spiritually) we are, or both.]
- c) Children, especially then, lacked status. In many parts of that pagan world, children could be sold by their parents or killed as property, and infants were often killed if they were not the desired gender. So children were far more “little” than they are now. It was therefore amazing to be told to serve a child. Here Jesus means we are to honor and respect any types of people we would consider to have little status, people who we would ordinarily despise as much beneath us culturally, socially, etc.

Summary: What does this mean practically? It certainly at least means that in every relationship we should become servants rather than manipulators. We should never be operating on the basis of “how can I use *you* to meet my needs?” but “how can I serve

and meet yours?" But many people have gone further. They see here a special promise for people who give themselves to sacrificial service of literal orphans, poor, broken families, and people with deep needs. The verse seems to be saying that, if we welcome and serve such "little ones" in Jesus name, as he did, we will find we have "welcomed" the Father. It means that we will find the Father and the Son are very present in our lives and very real to us spiritually because we are serving others. We "go from the child, through Jesus, to the Father." Remarkable!

5. Now look more carefully at the phrase "welcome in my name." What does this phrase show us about how we are to serve one another?

In those days, hospitality was a highly significant duty. If travelers stayed with you, you were obligated to make them very comfortable — to literally serve them. The word Jesus uses here for "*welcome*" goes even beyond simple hospitality though — it literally means "to throw a reception." It meant to go all out to show someone honor and respect — to find all their tastes and desires and satisfy them.

But Jesus says also we are to welcome them *in my name*. To come in someone's name is to virtually stand in their place. For example, if someone comes "in the name of the king," it means that they represent the king, and that we must treat them as we would the king. To dishonor them is to dishonor the mighty sender. So to welcome the little ones "*in his name*" means to give unlovely, weak, unappreciative people some of the honor and respect due to Christ! That is why a Christian doesn't look for gratitude or payback from service. Why? Because we are already indebted to Christ for eternity, and we are only showing Jesus our gratitude through serving others for his sake.

Here's the most radical principle ever laid down for social relationships. Don't just "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," but "do unto others as if you owed them your lives!"

At the very least, that should be the pattern within the church, for the relationships inside the Christian community. Certainly every Christian is someone who bears Christ's Spirit in them and who has been loved and welcomed by Christ. Imagine what would happen if we were to be like that! Everyone would want in. But Jesus, by using a simple child, is telling us to treat all people in this way.

Thoughtful people will ask: "where do we get the power for this?" The answer is also in the term "in my name." Remember why the little ones represent Christ — because he became poor and little for us. It is gratitude for that, it is the thought of that which can provide the power for this kind of life.

6. What do we learn about the disciples from what John did to the man in verse 38?

The term “*in my name*” immediately leads the apostles to ask a question about who else can be said to represent Jesus.

They mention that they have seen a man who was doing a ministry that he said he was doing “in Jesus name.” Though he was doing nothing wrong, they tried to stop him, because, John said, “*he was not one of us.*” Literally in the Greek text, John says, “*because he was not following us.*” This shows that they wanted the power of Jesus’ name to themselves. Keep in mind that this man was doing something that many of them had just failed to do (v. 14-29). He was casting out demons with the power of Jesus, and therefore he was obviously using prayer (9:29) and a heart dependent on the Lord. Perhaps they thought that this man could outrank them in the coming administration!

Jesus corrects them. It is more of the same. Their actions with this “rogue disciple” (in their view) reveals again that the disciples still thought their standing in the kingdom was based on achievement, not God’s grace. They had been admitted to the elite graduate school with the ultimate Headmaster. Who did this other outsider think he was? They didn’t see that they were the “little ones” Jesus was dying for, that anyone in his kingdom was only there by unmerited love and forgiveness. One didn’t get into the kingdom by pedigree, credentials, and belonging to the right club.

It is significant that Jesus approves of a man who has been operating outside of his formal circle of the apostles. This text is very important for us to remember in a day of a deeply divided church. We consist of innumerable denominations and ministries and parties and theological views. We must not believe that those in other circles cannot be used of God. God has not only sent revivals and awakenings to one denomination!

7. Jesus’ reply to John continues through verses 39-50. Read these not as a random collection of sayings but as a series of responses to the disciples’ mistake about the “other disciple.”

Jesus’ reply to John is: Don’t stop him (v. 39a). Why not? We can read all the rest of the chapter as additional reasons why the disciples should not stop the “rogue disciple.” Here’s the argument for “why not stop him?”:

a) v. 39b – Because he is using my name properly. Just because he is doing a miracle does not mean that he is really a believer. There are false miracles (Mark 13:22) some of which are even done in Jesus’ name (Matthew 7:21-23). But, this man’s success in exorcism is in obvious contrast to the disciples’ failure (v. 14-29). The disciples failed because they did not rely on grace (they didn’t even pray before exorcising — v. 29!) but thought it was all a matter of power and status. It appears, therefore, that this man had a better grasp of grace and the true nature of Jesus’ Messiahship. He understands better than the disciples that he is a sinner and needs Jesus’ mercy. Jesus says that he could not trust in the name well enough for a miracle and then deny him the next minute.

b) v. 40 – Because he is not against us. There is no fence to be sat on when it comes to Jesus. A person is either with me or against me. There is no in between. Not to decide is to decide. He is clearly not against us, but for us.

c) v. 41 – Because *any* work in my name deserves to be honored. This is a famous verse, but not usually understood. He is saying, “The ministry of the kingdom is not only the spectacular stuff like demon exorcism or miracles or preaching. I also want my people to serve others and meet even the most humble and simple needs. It is possible to even give people a cup of water out of a love for me, and out of a desire to emulate my mission.” This wonderful little verse shows us what Paul says elsewhere (see 1 Corinthians 14), that every kind of gift and ministry deserves to be honored. It shows that Christians are to minister in deed as well as word, and it shows also that all kingdom ministry will be honored and rewarded — (“*will certainly not lose his reward*”).

d) v. 42 – We should read this verse as continuing to respond to John (and not just as a random saying “thrown in” here). Jesus is still talking of “little ones” as he was in v. 36, so he has not changed the subject!

If this is still a response to John, we have quite a warning in front of us. He warns the disciples about causing “*little ones who believe in me*” — i.e. believers — to sin. This almost has to mean that the disciples are going to discourage and lead believers to sin if they don’t overcome their pride, party spirit, and self-righteousness. The gospel requires repentance and faith — that’s hard enough! And we have great enemies that fight against our growth and progress in the faith — the world, the flesh and the devil. But unfortunately, we have a fourth “enemy” that can lead us to sin. Other Christians! Their behavior can discourage, disillusion, and tempt newer believers especially to sin. Jesus takes it seriously when we, out of party spirit and narrow mindedness, discourage people from serving Christ who don’t belong to our particular circle. This is a serious warning to Christians today, who are so divided by different denominations, organizations, theological systems, traditions.

e) v. 43-50 – This section on the seriousness and consequences of sin follows from everything that has been said. The disciples are thinking of their status, their position in the kingdom. Instead, they should be completely focused on the needs of others. They should not be thinking of how powerful they are going to be in the church. Instead they should be intensely seeking to help the “little ones” under their care. In vv. 43-48, Jesus says that causing someone to sin is a terrible thing, because sin is a terrible thing. Sin is our enemy, not other denominations! Our friends’ godliness and holiness and joy should be our concern, not their allegiance to us, or their compliance with the right power interests.

8. Jesus speaks more often about hell than any other person in the Bible. What does he tell us here? What are the implications of this?

a) Jesus characterizes hell as “fire” (vv. 48-49). Instead of just reacting in disgust or distress, we should think of how apt this image is. Fire disintegrates. Fire is painful. Sin, Jesus says, leads to “fire.” In other words, sin leads to disintegration and misery. Many people ask, “do you believe in a hell with literal fire?” The good news is that this language is surely metaphorical. Real fire eventually consumes its fuel and goes out.

But this fire can't die (v. 48). So we are not talking of physical fire. The bad news is that this "metaphor" is therefore referring to something obviously worse than physical fire. It is talking of spiritual disintegration and misery. Anger, greed, envy, hatred, guilt — all these things begin to disintegrate body, relationships, community, and spirit even in this life. Hell is simply the misery and disintegration that sin brings on now extended out fully and for all eternity. Thus hell is a fact, even if we must say that the "fire" is a metaphor.

b) Secondly, Jesus tells us how we should handle sin in our lives. Sinful behavior (the reference to hand and foot vv. 43-46) and sinful desires (the reference to the eye-v. 47) must be shown no quarter. Sin, Jesus is saying, is like a fire that has broken out in your living room. Let's say a cushion on couch has ignited. You cannot just sit there and say, "well, the whole house isn't burning — it's just a cushion." If you don't do something immediately and decisively about the cushion, the whole house will be engulfed. Fire is never satisfied. It will just take more and more.

It is the same way with sin. The drastic image of amputation (cutting off a foot or hand) means that we must be ruthless about sin. There can be no compromises. It must not be tolerated. It can't be allowed to smolder, it can't be confined to a corner. It will engulf you eventually — which is hell. We must confess sin and change and do anything to "put it out" — for the "fire" of sin's misery could eventually envelopes us and goes on forever. Sin never stays in its place. It always leads to hell, first in this life and then in the next.

(Probably, the terrible image of amputation is also telling us that we must be willing to even deprive ourselves of something dear in order to avoid sin.)

c) v. 48 seems to mean that hell is an everlasting condition. Thus the consequences of sin are infinite. Someone will conclude that Jesus' use of the doctrine of hell is harsh and unappealing. But if I don't know about hell, I don't know all Jesus took for me on the cross. Over and over we are told that the Messiah will take our punishment (Isaiah 53). If I don't know the magnitude of the penalty and debt, I won't know what he has done for me. Therefore, ironically, without a belief in and concept of hell, I can't know the depth of Jesus' love. Anyone who doesn't believe in hell usually does so because they say, "I don't believe a loving God would do that!" In that case, what price did Jesus pay for our sins? Not a lot — just 3 hours of physical pain. But if this is the penalty we owed — eternal agony — then on the cross Jesus would have taken on something infinitely greater. Ironically — if you deny the doctrine of hell to make God more loving, you make him less loving. You have lost the Biblical truth that Jesus experienced hell itself for us voluntarily.

d) The statement in v. 50 — about "*having salt in yourselves*" is a puzzle. Salt in those days was an important preservative. It kept meat from decaying, it kept things intact. Any meat without salt was going to disintegrate. "Saltiness" would thus be the opposite of disintegrating fire. Notice too that "*have salt*" and "*be at peace*" are the same thing. So Jesus is probably summing up this entire passage. He is exhorting them to be humble and avoid sin. He is urging them not to fight over position and status, but to be more concerned to serve others and spread his kingdom. (Here I am just guessing!)

9. How can you “live out” the truth found in this study?*Prayer requests***Remembering the big picture**

Who Jesus is: Jesus, proclaimed Son of God (verse 7), is still using the exalted title of Son of Man (verse 31). Yet he astonishingly identifies himself with an insignificant child (verse 37). As “first of all,” he becomes “last of all” and “servant of all” (verse 35).

Why Jesus Came: He was also sent by God to die, “handed over” (a term suggesting both human treachery and divine action) to men who killed him (verse 31). We do not yet see why sin is so serious (verse 42-48). Sin leads to death and hell, where nothing can be done about the “unquenchable” fires of judgment (verse 48). We urgently need to be redeemed from it before the judgment comes.

How should I respond? The gist of this section is not that we can deal with our own sin by repenting of the sin of religious pride but that we are helpless sinners in need of a Savior.

Mark

Meeting the King

Mark 10:1-31

OPTIONAL STUDY

In the first half of the book of Mark, the emphasis is on **who** Jesus is and on his public ministry. In the second half of the book, the emphasis is on **what** Jesus came to do and on his private instruction of his disciples. At first glance, it seems that some of the incidents in this chapter deviate from that scheme, but we must look more closely. The controversy with the Pharisees ends with Jesus' personal focus on the Twelve (verses 10-12). The interchange with the rich young man results in an extensive dialogue with the disciples (verses 22-31). The over-arching concern of Jesus is (still) to teach the meaning of the pattern of his death.

Introduction to the marriage controversy

There was a great controversy among Jewish rabbis over the grounds for divorce. In Deuteronomy 24:1-4, the Mosaic law says that if a man has "found something improper" in his wife, a divorce can proceed through the writing of a bill of divorce. So God, through the Mosaic law, granted and regulated divorce. But the question was: what does "something improper" mean? Rabbi Hillel taught that it meant anything at all that displeased the husband. Rabbi Shammai, on the other hand, taught that it only referred to gross sexual infidelity. In other words, one school took a very liberal view of marriage — that it was a relationship for pleasure and convenience which could be dissolved when it failed to produce that happiness. The other school took a very conservative view of marriage — that it was a binding relationship for commitment and protection which could only be dissolved under the most severe circumstances. Most of the Pharisees took the very liberal view. (This is surprising at first glance, but see below.) The debate was over which grounds were valid for divorce, and over the deeper issue of the nature and purpose of marriage.

1. Refer to verses 1-12. Why do you think the Pharisees would want to consult with Jesus about divorce?

When we remember the low regard that the Pharisees had for Jesus, it would seem unlikely that they were really approaching him in order to get any enlightenment for themselves! And as the word "*tested*" (v. 2) indicates, they were really only trying to trap him. And it certainly looks like an well-conceived trap. If Jesus takes either position, he can be made out to be either too lax or too narrow, and either way it will "pull him off his pedestal." Jesus' apparent lordliness and wisdom could be dimmed if it could be shown that he was just another theologian taking the positions of a particular party.

2. Does Jesus take a "liberal" or "conservative" view of marriage and divorce?

The Pharisees ask Jesus "is it lawful to divorce?" As is usually the case, the very way the question is phrased shows a prejudice toward a particular answer. The incontrovertible answer is "yes," because Deuteronomy 24:1ff. says so. But if Jesus had *simply* answered "yes," he would have affirmed the "liberal" attitude that divorce is perfectly permissible. Many of the Pharisees took this view, and felt free to divorce their wives for any reason whatsoever.

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Jesus' answer in v. 5 implicitly grants that divorce is God's provision, and therefore he cannot be put strictly into the conservative camp that believes divorce is never allowed or wise. But he immediately adds that divorce is only a tragic concession. He lays down two principles. a) First, he stresses that "*at the beginning*" God intended marriage to be exclusive and permanent (v. 6). Marriage makes two people "*no longer two, but one*" and "*one flesh*" (v. 8) — extremely strong expressions. This is to say that marriage is far more than an association or partnership for common goals. It creates a new unit, emotionally, spiritually, personally, and even physically. The marriage bond changes you permanently and the individual loses a great measure of independence. To make it clear, Jesus adds, "*let not man separate*" (v. 9). This immediately undermines the more "liberal" attitude toward divorce. It must be a dire, last resort. The only way to separate any parts of "one flesh" is through amputation! b) Second, he teaches that while God originally designed marriage to be life long, Moses' permission of divorce was necessary "*because your hearts were hard*" (v. 5).

This interesting statement "cuts both ways." On the one hand, it implies that because of sin and brokenness, sometimes divorce is warranted. Interestingly (see question #4 below) Jesus does not go into the proper "grounds for divorce" here. What he does say shows God's mercy remarkably. Though he does not want divorce, he grants exceptions because he sees the misery and sin in the world. Sometimes betrayal and cruelty can damage the fabric of a marriage so that its continuance would be a greater evil than divorce. All this is implied by the idea that God through Moses granted divorce against his ideal design, as a merciful adjustment to our sinful condition. On the other hand, this means that divorce can never be looked at as a morally neutral option. It is always the result of someone's serious sin, even if one party is mainly the victim and not the perpetrator. There can't be a "no fault" divorce. "Amputations" may be necessary but they are always an "evil" and terrible thing.

Jesus is therefore "cutting his own swath" and, as one commentator says, "*he agrees with neither Shammai nor Hillel*" (D.Carson, [Matthew](#) vol. 2, p. 411). The "hardness of heart" teaching exhibits both a merciful realism alien to many traditionalists, and also a high view of marriage alien to many in the more 'liberal' camp. As we just noted, Jesus omits telling us exactly when it is valid for a bill of divorce to be granted. But that is because he wants to focus more on our basic attitude. We are not to ask, "what can I get away with?" That shows we don't have the proper respect for the seriousness of the marriage institution.

Note: There is another way in which Jesus' teaching here cuts its own swath between liberal and conservative. And the conservative position was a blow for women's interests. Notice that the question is, "*is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?*" Under the "liberal" law at the time, husbands could shed a wife if she displeased him in any way. Women were vastly more vulnerable economically and socially in that ancient culture. Under the liberal Hillel policy, there was no security for the wife and no legal way to force the husband to keep his promises to her. Jesus shows, especially in v. 12, that male and female both have equal rights and responsibilities in marriage. (Now we see that the Pharisees 'liberal' attitude toward divorce is not so surprising. The liberal view was the more anti-woman policy. That fits with everything else we know about them!)

Today, marriage customs reflect the view of the Pharisees much more than the view of Jesus. The view today is that marriage is for the comfort and pleasure of both partners. Jesus sees the purpose of marriage as becoming “united.” In marriage, God’s character is to be revealed. We are to love and relate to each other as he loves and relates to us — with complete faithfulness, sacrificial commitment, and all-embracing unity.

3. Read verses 10-12. a) Is Jesus over-ruling Moses and now changing the Old Testament allowance for divorce? b) How do we then understand his seemingly categorical statement against divorce?

a) Is Jesus over-ruling Moses and changing the Old Testament allowance for divorce?

At first glance it appears he may be doing this. In particular, his words in vv. 10-12 seem to be changing Moses’ allowance of divorce. Jesus says that “*anyone*,” any man or woman who divorces and remarries, is committing adultery against the former spouse and may be leading the former spouse to commit adultery. This appears to disallow divorce completely, in opposition to the Old Testament. But it is highly unlikely that Jesus is doing this. Why not?

First, Jesus has already explained that the reason Moses granted divorce was “because your hearts were hard.” Has that reason/condition changed? Are people’s hearts less sinful now than in past centuries? If that is the reason for divorce in the Old Testament, then that condition would have to have changed to disallow divorce. But it is certainly not the case that people are now less “hard-hearted” than in the past. Second, nowhere does Jesus say anything like the “*but I say unto you*” phrase of the Sermon on the Mount (where he contradicts rabbinical tradition). Considering what we know about how Jesus upholds and honors the law of God, it doesn’t seem possible he is overthrowing Moses at this point.

Second, we know from other sources that Jesus did allow divorce on some grounds. Matthew 19:9 tells us Jesus said, “Anyone who divorces his wife except for adultery, and marries another woman commits adultery.” Paul also mentions desertion as grounds for divorce in 1 Corinthians 7. So we know that Jesus and the early church did not absolutely forbid divorce.

b) How then can we read the seemingly categorical statement about divorce?

First, (as mentioned above) Jesus avoids discussing the specific grounds of divorce in order to stress the right attitude. He wants a high view of the sanctity of marriage. He is really talking generally about the sinfulness of the Hillel “divorce for any cause” school. In this view, v. 11 means: “you cannot divorce for any cause as the Hillel party says. That is wrong. To do so is to indulge in adultery.” So he is speaking generally.

Second, Mark is not trying here to convey all Christian teaching on divorce. He is trying to show that the Pharisees are, through their legalism, missing the broad force of the law of God. Ironically, the most legalistic people have found a way to make marriage much too easy! Mark’s point is to show the Pharisees “testing” Jesus (v. 2) and Jesus exposing their hypocrisy again. The test could have been to try and use Jesus’

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statement against him before Herod. John the Baptist was arrested because his teaching on divorce and remarriage offended Herod, who had broken the Biblical laws at this point (cf. 6:17). Or, the test could simply be to find out if Jesus would uphold the Biblical law. They would like to prove that he did not honor God's Word.

Note: Some may object — “but Jesus in v. 12 says that not only the person divorcing sins in remarriage, but even the person who was divorced is sinning in remarriage. Doesn't that mean that even if divorce is allowed, remarriage never is?” But that is probably reading v. 12 improperly. Verse 12 may not be referring to the divorced woman. Many people think vv. 12-13 means this: “If you divorce your wife and marry another, you commit adultery, and if the wife you divorced also remarries, she commits adultery too.” But it could just as well mean: “if any man divorces his wife and remarries, he commits adultery, and if any woman divorces her husband and remarries, she commits adultery, too.” In light of I Corinthians 7:10-15, it is fair to conclude that a person who is wrongfully divorced is free to remarry.

4. Read verses 13-16. What do you think it means to receive the kingdom of God as a little child?

Jesus is not referring to the supposed “innocence” of children. This would not square with the strong things that Jesus has said about the sinful human heart in Mark 7. Also compare Biblical teaching such as Romans 5:12, Psalm 51:5 and Romans 3:10, 23. Nowhere in the Bible are children referred to as “innocent” people who only develop sin and evil later in life.

Rather than the “innocence” of children, Jesus is referring to their weakness. Children are very vulnerable, dependent, and cannot do things for themselves. Therefore, to receive the kingdom “as a little child” means to approach God with qualities such as:

Dependency and trust. Human children are unable to hunt, protect, or care for themselves; they are quite helpless compared to young animals. Thus we must come to Christ seeking his favor as a gift. We cannot merit his grace. He does not owe it.

Candor. Children are not good at hiding their flaws and feelings. They trust and are not suspicious. Thus we are to be completely honest about our flaws and fear.

In summary: the people who enter the kingdom are not the “worthy” and accomplished, but those who are willing to admit their helplessness and simply depend. Jesus rebukes the disciples, who still don't see that acknowledged weakness and dependence are the real qualifications for the kingdom.

Note: the word “blessed” in v. 16 is a very intense word. “Blessing” in the Bible is the state of God's perfect creation at rest (Genesis 2:3), which was lost in the fall (Genesis 3:14ff.). God promised Abraham that one of his descendants would bring this blessing back to the world (Genesis 12:2-3). Jesus “blessed” the children to show what is in store for those who approach him as they did!

5. Read verses 17-31. a) Why is Jesus' first answer to the rich young man so unexpected, in light of verses 13-16 and the rest of the gospel? What is he getting at? b) Why is his second answer so unexpected? What is he getting at?

a) First answer

Jesus has variously stressed that moral attainment and obedience to the law is not the way to be saved. He has also pointed to himself as the way to salvation. But to this young man Jesus does not say, "become as a little child and receive me." Instead he reminds the man of the law of God, the 10 commandments, and then tells him to obey them in order to get eternal life. The v. 21 reference to "selling everything you have" is probably an application of the first commandment against idolatry ("have no other gods before me") or the tenth commandment against any discontent or greed ("you shall not covet"). Certainly the little children were not required to do any of this! Thus his response is unexpected. Why did he speak in this way?

To this young man, the message — "your sins are forgiven because I came to die as a ransom" (cf. 10:45) — would have made no sense at all. Why not? Because he doesn't see himself as a sinner. There really cannot be any "good" news of salvation without the bad news of sin. Thus Jesus will not tell him the good news of forgiveness and the cross until first he takes a good look at the law so he can see his need and sin. Thus the requirement of "giving away all you have" is designed to show the man that he is guilty of the sin of idolatry, and therefore has not really kept the law. Though he may think of himself as moral and decent, his materialism seriously breaks the spirit of God's law.

So we see that, though Jesus continually denounces legalism, he does preach the law! Without the law, there is no knowledge of sin or need (Romans 3:20) and thus no understanding or appreciation of grace. Is it unloving to preach the law and to make someone see their sin and guilt? No. Notice that before Jesus convicts the man of sin, Jesus looked at him and loved him. (v. 21) He told the man about his sin because he loved him.

If the young man had said, "oh, I see I haven't really kept the law from the time I was a boy! How then can I be saved?" Jesus could have said something like, "I gave my life as a ransom for many — so now become as a little child, believe on me, and enter the kingdom." Instead the young man left sad and confused, because he didn't want to have to give up his riches. If he had seen this inner conflict was due to idolatry, and if he had cried out to Jesus, the response of the Lord would have been different.

Note: Don't be confused about Jesus' question, "*Why do you call me good? Only God is good!*" Jesus was talking to a man who had no idea that he was anything else but a human rabbi. The man's (somewhat fawning) pious talk needed to be dealt with immediately. Jesus is after the self-righteousness that thinks you can make yourself "good" and acceptable to God. He is saying, "I'm about to challenge your whole understanding of human moral goodness!"

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b) Second answer

The second answer is unexpected because Jesus does not usually tell people that they must become poor to be saved! (At least that seems to be what he is saying.) At first glance, Jesus is saying that the young man has to become poor on earth if he is going to become rich in heaven. But this is obviously not a uniform requirement he lays on everyone. For example, he calls Zaccheus to give away 50% of his wealth, not all (see Luke 19). Other places that he talks to rich people (i.e. Nicodemus), he says nothing about money at all.

Then why this call? The call to Christ is never to simply begin trusting Christ for your salvation. You have to also stop trusting other things for your salvation. “Repent” and “believe” go together not as two completely different things, but as two sides of the same coin. Jesus discerned that this young man’s basic spiritual justification and identity did not really come from his moral obedience to the law in general, but from his wealth. As God called Abraham to be willing to offer up Isaac, Jesus called this young man to be willing to give up his wealth. If Jesus had only called the man to “follow me”, the man could have spread a thin external layer of Jesus-admiration over a self-justifying and idolatrous heart. The man had to be confronted with his materialism. That is not the main problem for everyone — but it was for him.

Here is a remarkable insight. This is a man who had not “broken the rules” about money. There is no indication that he got his money illegally, or through oppression. There is no indication that he wasn’t generous or wasn’t “tithing.” If you only repent for your overt sins, it only makes you a moralist. You have to repent for the deeper self-justification of the heart. You must not only repent for your “bad things,” but for the idolatrous attitudes toward your “good things” — money, family, status, talents, relationships, and so on.

6. In verse 21, why would Jesus “send away sad” someone who filled him with love?

“Jesus looked at him and loved him.” This is quite a counter-intuitive little statement. The young man is spiritually obtuse, giving a self-righteous answer to Jesus’ question, showing very little self-knowledge. This spiritual weakness and ignorance does not elicit disdain or impatience from Jesus, but love! And then, out of love (!), Jesus tells the man to do something enormously hard — to sell all his possessions and give to the poor.

This tells us quite a lot of things both convicting and comforting. 1) Jesus loves us in spite of (or even because of!) our spiritual stupidity. Our weakness is no barrier to his love. 2) Jesus sometimes confronts us, calls us to do difficult things, and gives us confusing answers — out of love! Obviously, this young man would never get any “better” unless he got something in his life to humble him into the dust and shatter his comfortable world. Jesus often does the same thing to us, out of love. 3) We ought to love the spiritually weak, not disdain them. 4) We should not disdain the rich. Many people have far more trouble loving the rich than they do middle class or poor people. But a disdain for the rich may be rooted in our own inferiority, or envy, or self-righteousness.

7. What does Jesus teach about wealth and riches in verses 23-31? Why do you think riches are such a spiritual snare? What is Jesus promising in verses 29-31 and how can we “lose” and “gain” some of these things today?

Just because materialism was this young man’s main spiritual problem doesn’t mean we can avoid the implications of Jesus’ call to care for the poor and live more simply (v. 21). There are many implications in these verses about our own attitude toward wealth and material goods.

a) He teaches that riches are very dangerous spiritually. The “common sense” of that time was, “the richer you are, the more blessed you are by God! Thus the richer you are, the more godly you probably are.” But Jesus turns that on its head and says, “the richer you are, the harder it is to make spiritual progress.” Jesus is also teaching that it takes supernatural intervention to bring us into the kingdom (“with men it is impossible”).

b) Fundamentally, they become our “righteousness” and security and self-worth instead of God. Materialism breaks the first and last of the 10 commandments. Thus wealth can lead to pride, to a sense that we are somehow better people than others. There are many other spiritual dangers: 1) Wealth creates a privacy that makes it very hard for others to hold you accountable for behavior. 2) It creates distractions from Christian ministry because wealth either creates (a) the freedom to do many more absorbing leisure activities or, (b) the burden of excessive business and major projects or, (c) the burden of caring for numerous properties and possessions. 4) They may make you anxious about maintaining your wealth. 4) In general, it may get you to set your heart more on earth than on eternal realities.

c) Jesus is promising that when we give up wealth in this world for his sake, we actually do get wealth back, but in a different form. In other words, our physical, emotional, material needs will all be met, but usually in different ways than the ones we lost. We may lose family but we get a “new” family in the Christian community. We may lose some material security, but we get a new security by being part of a new community, and knowing God’s love in a more profound way, etc.

Test: What are some signs that money is too important to you? Try these: **(1) Envy.** Do you find yourself strongly resenting people who have a lot of money? **(2) Anxiety.** Do you worry a lot about money? **(3) Bias.** Do you have a clear bias toward people with money? Do you prefer them as friends? **(4) Spender or miser.** Are you either too prone to shop and buy things in order to feel good? Or, on the other hand, are you almost miserly? All these are signs that money and wealth has too much spiritual influence in your heart.

8. Read 2 Corinthians 8:9. You know something the rich young man did not. How can this make Jesus’ call to us a joy?

The rich young man went away sad. We will too, if we only hear Jesus “tut-tutting” us about money. But 2 Corinthians 8:9 reminds us of something critical. Jesus says to us, as it were, “I was a rich young ruler too, but I had a wealth, comfort, and status infinitely beyond what you had. And I lost infinitely more than you did — all to get you!”

MEETING THE KING

To have you! To get you I had to leave my cosmic wealth and go to the depths of infinite misery and poverty so that I could save you. If I could leave all that for you, why can't you be willing to set aside your money for me?"

When we see Jesus as the *true* "rich young ruler," we will be able to put all we have in his hands. We will see that his righteousness is our *real* spiritual wealth, and we won't look to earthly riches to define us. Then, and only then, our money will become just money. It will stop being our security and significance.

9. Is there a theme running through all three passages? What do all these passages tell us about entering the kingdom of God?

The narrative of the rich young man is a classic case study for learning how we actually meet the King and enter into his kingdom. When he met Nicodemus, he said, "*you must be born again to enter the kingdom of God.*" But in some ways the story of the young man is more instructive in how that conversion really takes place. It shows us the inter-relationship between law and grace. In fact, all the passages are talking to us about law and grace.

a) vv. 1-12. In this passage, Jesus shows that he continues to respect the law of God. It is given to us and is abiding in its demands. Even though the reference to "hardness of hearts" shows a gracious and merciful application of the law of God, it is still binding.

b) vv. 13-16. We learn here, entrance to the kingdom is not on the basis of attainment and morality, but acknowledgement of helplessness and need.

c) vv. 17-31. Finally, we see here something of how law and grace interrelate. We are not saved by the law, but we need the law to show us our need for grace and drive us to it. Verse 27 shows that salvation by the law is "impossible," and therefore eternal life is a free gift, yet it also shows that without the law, we can't see our need for the gift.

In summary: we must let the law convict us deeply enough (down to our motives) that we turn from it as a means of salvation, and discover the grace of God in Christ. Then, of course (see vv. 1-12), the law continues to guide the Christian in his or her conduct, though it is not a means of salvation. Therefore, both the law and grace have their proper roles in our lives.

One more thing is interesting to notice. When Jesus invites people into the kingdom, he may emphasize law and grace differently depending on where they are spiritually! Those who are filled with a sense of weakness ("little children") are immediately shown the open arms of Jesus and grace is stressed. Those who are filled with a sense of their own sufficiency and strength ("rich young rulers") are shown the law and its demands are stressed.

Later we get even more insight as to how law and grace both relate in the gospel. Jesus died to “ransom” us, to fulfill the punishment demanded by the law (10:45). Therefore the gospel of grace is based on a fulfilled law, and the law still drives us to grace.

10. Is there an application you can make as a result of today’s new found truth?

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Again we see Jesus the authoritative King, who expounds the real meaning of Scripture and states who will and who won’t get to heaven. He also is a Servant, welcoming little children.

Why Jesus came:

To judge: In Chapter 2, Jesus said he came to call sinners. In Chapter 7, he taught that man’s basic problem was sin. Now he convicts all of deadly sin, the Pharisees, the rich and the Twelve.

To save: But he also says that those who come to him admitting they are unable to help themselves will be “blessed,” “saved,” “inherit eternal life,” and “enter the kingdom of God.” This is the language of the true return from exile and of the promises to Abraham. His purpose in the first coming is to rescue men from the final judgment of the second.

How should I respond? Giving up everything to follow Jesus reflects a surrendered heart, but it is not a “work” we accomplish to earn God’s favor. We must admit we cannot earn our way to heaven and instead trust God to do the humanly impossible.

Mark

The meaning of His death

Study 11 | Mark 10:32-52

We have seen that as soon as Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah the book of Mark shifts its focus from the person of Christ to the work of Christ. Now that we know who he is — what did he come to do? In the passage before us we have Jesus' third attempt to teach his disciples the meaning of his death. (The first two were in 8:31-32 and 9:31-32.) This time, Jesus gives us more details about his death than previously. But the major advance for the reader is that, for the first time, we are told not just that he will die but why he will do so. Here he begins to explain the meaning and purpose of his death. Many believe that 10:45 is the key verse of the entire gospel, summarizing and combining all the Mark themes about who Jesus is and what he came to do.

1. Compare 10:32 to 9:31 and 8:31. What new details and concepts does Jesus add to this teaching about his death?

- a) For the first time, we are told that his death will be in Jerusalem.
- b) For the first time, we see that both Jews and Gentiles specifically will reject him. 8:31 speaks only of the Jewish religious leaders, and 9:31 speaks more generally about being delivered into the hands of "men." But here for the first time Jesus shows us that it is not the Jews only who will attack him. This subverts the effort to use the gospels for anti-semitic purposes.
- c) A key difference is the word "condemn." In 8:31, Jesus says he would be rejected by the priests and scribes, but in 10:32, they will also "condemn him to death." This is a legal word that indicates he will be tried and executed by a court, not simply murdered by a private person or party. But the word "betrayed" at least hints that he will die for crimes he didn't commit. Jesus will then be a victim of injustice.
- d) Another difference has to do with humiliation. They will "mock... spit... flog" him (v. 34). This adds that Jesus will experience the public humiliation that a criminal received in public Roman executions.

In general, the new information shows that there will be a decidedly judicial character to his death. It means that he will be tried, found guilty, and punished for crimes. These three verses still do not explain why this death must occur, and why it must occur in a judicial manner.

The three-fold repetition of this prediction (in just three chapters) shows that his death was not accidental nor incidental to his mission. Rather, it was planned and was absolutely central to both his identity and his purpose on earth.

2. a) How does the question (v.35) and the request (v. 37) of James and John show that they still don't understand the meaning of the cross, of "glory" and of "greatness"? b) What does James and John's request — and Jesus' response — teach us about prayer?

a) The question of greatness

The request shows that James and John clearly had no idea at all of what Jesus was really in for. They didn't see that Jesus' highest "glory" was going to be the courage, humility, and wisdom of his suffering and death. If they knew that Jesus' destiny was misery and suffering, they would never have been asking for a bigger slice of it!

Their question shows that they understood "glory" and "greatness" to be power rather than suffering and service. They don't understand how submitting oneself in service (even to the point of suffering) is the way God leads to triumph. They breathe a whole different spirit than Jesus — cf. their question in v. 35 (i.e. "we want you to serve us") to Jesus' spirit v. 45 (i.e. "I have come to serve you").

Jesus continues in v. 42-44 to turn the pagan notion of greatness on its head. In the world, the greater you are, the more people serve you (maids, butlers, groundskeepers, chauffeurs, cooks, etc. OR employees, underlings). But in Jesus' kingdom, the greater you are, the more people you serve.

b) Prayer

The approach to Jesus in vv. 35ff. is instructive when we apply it to our prayer life. James and John want Jesus to say "yes" before they ask their question. This is a distortion of true prayer. True prayer seeks to mold our will to God's, not God's will to ours. This does not mean that we cannot ask God for justice ("*thy kingdom come... on earth as it is in heaven*") and our needs ("*give us this day our daily bread*"), but we always do so with the over-arching awareness of our limited wisdom ("*thy will be done*") Jesus shows us true prayer in the garden (e.g. "*Take this... Yet not what I will, but what you will.*" — 14:34). The cross shows us that Jesus lived to the Father's will, and died to his own. The natural bent of the human heart is to use God as a need-meeter. Any person who only sticks with Christianity as long as things are going his or her way, is a stranger to the cross.

This incident does not only remind us of how we should pray with humility and openness to God, but we should also live in the same way. Mark may be playing up the irony of James and John's question by including the term "at your right... at your left" (v. 37). There were two men at the right and left hand of Jesus at the climax of his career — the two thieves crucified beside him!! Thus James and John have no idea what they are asking.

Mark's vision of the moral life is profoundly ironic. Because God's manner of revelation is characterized by... reversal and surprise, those who follow Jesus find themselves repeatedly failing to understand the will of God... [Thus] there can be no place for smugness or dogmatism in ethical matters. Those who think they have the matter firmly in hand are those who suffer from hardness of heart (3:1-6, 7:1-23). If our sensibilities are formed by this narrative, we will learn not to take ourselves too seriously; we will be self-critical and receptive to unexpected manifestations of God's love and power. (R. Hays, The Moral Vision of the New Testament, p. 90).

It is easy to laugh at how clueless the disciples are, but instead we should be asking: "What are we missing, right now? In what ways are we being blind to how God is working now?" God loves to confound the world, taking what it thinks is weak and using it to bring the world to its knees (cf. I Corinthians 1:26-29). Before us is a very case in point: this rag-tag Messiah, with only 12 assorted illiterates and fishermen as followers, gets executed as a criminal, and permanently shapes the rest of the course of civilization! If this is how God always works in our lives, we should always be humble and open in our attitude toward life. We should avoid the smugness of worry (!) You only worry if you are totally sure how life must go. We should avoid the smugness of being doctrinaire, proud, sure of ourselves.

3. a) What are the "cup" and the "baptism"? Read Is.41:17-23. b) To what degree do we do we share in them with Jesus?

a) What are the cup and the baptism?

First, the cup and the baptism refer to the fact that Jesus is going to bear the wrath of God on the cross. Both the "cup" and the "baptism" in the Old Testament refer to ordeals and suffering. The "cup" in the language of the prophets refers specifically to the wrath and justice of God against sin. Cf. Isaiah 51:17-23 ("*the cup of his wrath... the goblet that makes men stagger*") and Jeremiah 25:15-17 ("*take from my hand the cup filled with the wine of my wrath... when they drink it, they will stagger and go mad*") or Ezekiel 23:28-34 ("*you will drink it and drain it dry... and tear your breasts*").

It is very interesting that Jesus mentions "the cup" just after he teaches for the first time that his death will be a judicial one (see #1 above). The "cup" is the just wrath of God the judge on human evil. Jesus will also be judged by a court and receive "judicial wrath". For the first time we have a hint that the human judicial condemnation will be a reflection of a the divine judicial condemnation.

"Baptism" means to be flooded with something. Baptism, of course, can have a very positive meaning! But because Jesus pairs the "*baptism*" with the "*cup*", it surely has a negative connotation here. The great flood of Noah (Genesis 6) was a sign of God's wrath on the world. To be overwhelmed and submerged by a flood is a sign of judgement (cf. Psalm 69:2,15). But "baptism", unlike the image of "cup" contains an aspect of hope. Baptism means to pass through an ordeal. A baptism is to go under the waters and emerge again. Thus Romans 6:3-4 tell us baptism is like a death and resurrection. I Corinthians 10:1-2 tells us that when the Israelites passed into the Red Sea they were "baptized," and, though it was an ordeal, they emerged again. So likely this is a hint that the terrible death of Jesus would result in resurrection.

b) To what extent do we share in them?

James and John say (so cluelessly) that they can share in the cup and baptism of Christ (v. 39). Jesus' response to them is somewhat ambiguous, since we both do and yet don't share them with Jesus.

When Jesus first asks James and John if they can take his cup and baptism (v. 38) he seems to imply that what they ask is impossible. "*You don't know what you are asking*"

he says. “*Can you drink the cup I drink... ?*” The question seems quite rhetorical, meaning that no other could possibly experience what he was going to experience.

Then to our surprise, Jesus tells them that “*you will*” (v. 39) get his cup and baptism. How are we to read this? 1) On the one hand, obviously we could not bear the actual cup of God’s judicial wrath. That would have simply destroyed us. That is the very thing that Jesus came to avoid! He came to take the cup so that we did not have to. (See the next question). 2) On the other hand, to follow Jesus is to become servants and to suffer. Our lives will be conformed to his. That has been the burden of each of the three times Jesus has tried to teach the meaning of his death. Jesus has told us we too will “take up our cross” (8:34; 9:35-37). He says: “I am the kind of Messiah that wins through losing power and serving others. If you are my followers, your lives will follow this pattern.” In summary, it means that if we assume his life style, serving others instead of seeking to dominate and control them, we will also pay large costs, perhaps even death. [We know James was executed for his faith and John exiled for his.]

In addition, there is perhaps the indication that, just as his baptism led to glory, so the “mini-death” of our service and baptism will lead us to glory, too.

4. Read v. 45. What is Jesus saying about his death (especially when he calls it a “ransom”) that he has not told us before?

In this statement we are finally given insight into the purpose and reason for Jesus’ death — i.e. why he had to die and what his death actually accomplished.

a) First, the term “*come*” is rather important. It is a strong hint that Jesus existed before he was born. He came into the world. By saying, “*did not come to be served*” he assumes that he had every right to expect to be honored and served when he came, though he did not exercise that privilege. In short, the term “*did not come to be served*” quietly presupposes a truth of staggering proportions. Jesus is saying that he is a pre-existing divine being who came to earth.

b) Second, the word ransom is a often translated “*redeem*” in English translations. But “ransom” (the Greek word *lutron*) is a much better translation, because even today it has a set of meanings associated with the liberation from captivity through a payment. In those days, however, “ransom” did not usually mean to pay kidnappers (as it does today), but to purchase a person out of slavery. “*The word [lutron] took its origin from the practices of warfare, where it was the price paid to bring a prisoner of war out of his captivity.*” (L. Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, p. 512). The implications of this word are all-important.

(1) **First**, the word “ransom” assumes that we are in captivity and bondage. This tells us a lot about how Jesus sees our spiritual condition. If we survey what the rest of the Bible tells us about this, we can say that we are in bondage to sin, to death, and to the Law (at least). These are “forces” that hold us captive, that we cannot escape on our own.

(2) **Second**, the word assumes that there is a price or a penalty to be paid in order to release the slaves. There are some commentators who say that the word *lutron* only means to release a person from captivity (i.e. to “spring” them — opening their cell doors, unlocking their chains, as it were.) But careful study of the word in the Bible shows that it means not only to release, but to release through payment. Someone must bear a cost. The meaning of *lutron* as “payment” is nearly assured by the little Greek word “anti” (“for”) that Jesus uses when he says that he came to give his life (“*a ransom for many*”). The word normal force of this preposition is “in the stead of.” It means exchange, substitution. Under any rendering of the word, it means that what happened to Jesus would have otherwise had to happen to the *many*.

(3) **Third**, the verse tells us the size of the ransom-price or payment. “*Give his life a ransom for many.*” Jesus did not pay a quantifiable, finite sum. It was his whole life for ours. It was a complete substitution. To put it vividly: the very same dark forces that held us took hold of him instead. He experienced everything from the law, sin, death, and hell that we have or would have experienced. The ransomer experiences poverty and loss so the slave can experience plenty and freedom. The ransomer does that which the slave is incapable of doing or supplementing. It is all born by the ransomer. cf. Acts 20:28 “he purchased the church of God with his own blood” or 2 Corinthians 5:21 “he became sin who knew no sin, that we might become the righteousness of God in him.”

(4) **Fourth**, the word “*many*” is probably a direct reference to the famous Suffering Servant who is depicted in Isaiah 52:13-53:12 as being “*pierced for our transgressions.*” By his suffering “*my servant will justify many, he will bear their iniquities.*” (Isaiah 53:11). It is most likely that Jesus is claiming here to do the work of Isaiah’s Suffering Servant, and thus 10:45 is a very, very compressed summary of that whole chapter. To understand what Jesus means as “*give his life a ransom for...*” you have to read the whole passage of Isaiah.

(5) **Fifth**, the word “ransom” implies that a new relationship is formed with the ransomer. Ordinarily, the liberated slave now “owes” the liberator his or her life, and so a new relationship of love and grateful, willing service begins. In a sense, the former captive is now a “captive of love.” cf. I Corinthians 6:19 “you are not your own, you were bought with a price” and John 8:31-32 “if you hold to my teaching... you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.” cf. also the old Book of Common Prayer: “whose service is perfect freedom.”

In summary, Jesus tells us that he came as a substitute for us.

There are many who object to the concept that Jesus died as our substitute because of its implications that God is an angry God who has to be appeased with blood. This

sounds too much like the bloodthirsty gods of antiquity who demanded human sacrifice to feel properly honored. But that is to miss the point that the gospel teaches the *self*-substitution of God. This is not human beings trying to appease a begrudging, unwilling god, but the Lord himself coming and voluntarily putting forth himself as the substitutionary payment. That is the very *opposite* of the blood-thirsty gods of primitive religion.

On the other hand, this teaching on the death of Christ does assume there is real evil and real guilt and real divine, transcendent justice. While ancient people did not understand the grace and love of God, modern people do not grasp the justice and holiness of God. Jesus' death therefore was necessary. Otherwise, it would have been completely wrong. It is a) pointless or b) wicked to sacrifice your life unless it is absolutely necessary to save another. For example, if I said to my congregation, "let me show you how much I love you" and threw myself off the Queensboro Bridge, no one would feel very loved by me! They'd think I was crazy. However, if I died as I rescued someone from drowning in the East River, then my sacrifice would be a loving, coherent one. In the same way, Jesus' death is senseless unless we were truly and hopelessly lost, in the grip of sin and death.

So the substitutionary death of Christ challenges both ancient and modern views of God and the moral order. Modern people don't believe in the depth and reality of spiritual evil and guilt — they don't see that the holy justice of God *must* be honored. On the other hand, ancient people had no concept of a God so loving and gracious that he would come and make the perfect payment *himself*.

Of course, there is still much that is mysterious about this "wonderful exchange", and no one particular metaphor, such as "ransom" or "bought" can convey it. The metaphors of the courtroom ("justified," "made righteous"), of the temple ("sacrifice," "offering"), of the battlefield ("triumphing over them on the cross"), and of relationship ("reconciled," "propitiated") are also used to fill out and enrich our understanding of what Jesus did for us. But the basic idea in all of them is substitution. John Calvin says he took "what was ours as to impart what was his to us, and to make what was his by nature ours by grace?" (*Institutes* 2.12.2) John Stott wrote: "The concept of substitution may be said, then, to lie at the heart of both sin and salvation. For the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man... puts himself where God deserves to be; God... puts himself where man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives which belong to God alone; God accepts penalties which belong to man alone." (Stott, *The Cross*, p. 160). "God presented him as a sacrifice... so as to be both Just and Justifier of those who believe." (Romans 3:25-26)

5. Read Isaiah 53:2-12. If, as is likely, Jesus had this prophecy in mind, what else did he believe about his impending death?

a) This passage makes clear the implication in Jesus' use of the word "cup" to describe his death in 10:38. Here he shows that the suffering he was to suffer was more than

earthly, temporal, and physical. On the cross he somehow was to experience the rejection and wrath and blows of God. He was stricken by God – Isaiah 53:4.

- b) This passage makes even more explicit the substitutionary character of his death, which was implied in the word “ransom.” In Isaiah, we are told, first of all, that Jesus was not a sinner who needed to pay for his own sins. He was “numbered among the transgressors” (Isaiah 53:12) — he was not himself a transgressor. It also shows that he was treated legally as if he were a sinner. He stood in our place, as it were, in the dock. “The Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:6)
- c) Lastly, this passage spells out the effects of his death. It removes guilt (Isaiah 53:10), brings peace (Isaiah 53:5), and brings justification (Isaiah 53:11). He will justify many, putting them right with God.

6. What is Jesus saying about us when he says he dies to ransom us? (Follow-up question: in what ways are we “in bondage”?)

The word “ransom” means that the person being ransomed is not free. A ransom is the money paid to release someone from slavery or captivity. When Jesus said that his death pays a ransom for us, he is automatically saying that human beings are in captivity. cf. John 8:34 “anyone who commits sin is a slave of sin.” He is saying that the people he is dying for are in a state of bondage, not simply guilt. It means we are like hostages on a hijacked aircraft — not destroyed yet, but under captivity and in mortal danger. The only way for us to get out was to die on the cross.

This assumes that we are in bondage or slavery to bad masters. Admittedly, most people do not feel like sinners at all, let alone “slaves of sin.” But no one is more enslaved than the person who is not even aware that he or she is in bondage! So the fact that most people do not feel enslaved by sin only shows the depth of the problem.

What are the “bad masters” to whom human beings are enslaved, according to the Bible?

a) Sin itself John 8:34 – anyone who sins is a slave to sin. Becky Pippert: “Whatever controls us is our lord. The person who seeks power is controlled by power. The person who seeks acceptance is controlled by the people he or she seeks to please. You do not control yourselves — you are controlled by the lord of your life.”

b) The Law Galatians 5:18; Romans 6:14. What does Paul mean when he says we are all enslaved to the law? Objectively, we are guilty, under the law’s condemnation, because we break the moral law. Subjectively, we are guilt-ridden and anxious, even those of us who are not religious, because we know at some deep level that we should be perfect.

7. Read v.45. Despite the theological depth of Jesus' statement, his use of it is extremely practical. How is he using the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement in the lives of his disciples?

Jesus is not giving them a theological lecture. Rather he is questioning their whole concept of success, power, and greatness. Jesus brings out this summary of his atoning death to subvert the world-view of the time.

With the rise of Caesar Augustus as ruler, Rome was unified not only by one emperor but also by a political order based on the ethics of patronage. Augustus assumed the role of benefactor or patron for all of the Roman world... Slaves were indebted to their masters, sons to their fathers. Clients were bound to their patrons and often had clients of their own. The resulting network of overlapping obligation was spun like a web throughout the Empire, with everyone ultimately indebted to the emperor... and with the emperor having a client status with the gods themselves, a recipient of their patronage and their special agent...

...Against such a world order, Jesus' message stands in stark contrast... He insisted that status in the community must be measured [not by who owed you but] by one's role as a servant... Service was expected [only] when dealing with people of higher status, but Jesus communicated... that service was to be given to those of lower status, even little children... In this way, Jesus opposed the Roman order at the most fundamental level, substituting for a pervasive worldview grounded in debt and obligation... in the favor of the gods, a way of being in the world that took as its starting point the beneficence of God... The narrative context of the ransom saying in both Matthew and Mark features a bid for recognition and honor, in the form of requests for the two primary seats of honor." (Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, pp. 39-40)

James and John had a world-view in which every person earned one's status by serving superiors and getting them to reward you by putting you over inferiors who in turn had to serve you. Jesus turns this upside down. He says, "I come as one who serves my inferiors, in sheer free mercy and grace. In turn, they serve others. The ultimate example of this is in my death."

Roman World-View

Relate to gods by giving them service

Result: Put into a relationship

- 1) of power over others
- 2) but insecurity toward the gods

Christian World-View

Relate to God by receiving his service of you

Result: Put into a relationship

- 1) of service to others
- 2) and assurance toward God

8. This is Jesus' last healing miracle. Why do you think Mark places it here? How is Bartimaeus a good example for us?

Probably, Mark puts it here to show that it takes a miracle of healing to overcome spiritual blindness to the need for Christ to die. Bartimaeus is a good example in some of the following ways:

- a) His faith is persistent. He cries to God continually. Real faith knows that there is no help anywhere if not in God. cf. John 6 – “where can we go — YOU have the words of eternal life!”
- b) We have to be willing to take grief from others. The people around Bartimaeus mocked and criticized him for being so persistent in seeking Christ.
- c) We see that Jesus is compassionate. He doesn't ignore those who cry out to him.
- d) We don't receive from Jesus without an obligation to follow him. Bartimaeus follows him when healed. How do we know Jesus has touched us with his power? A changed life!

Summary:

v. 45 is a key verse for the entire book of Mark. Why? It combines and recaps all we have been told so far about Jesus, and then it takes us forward to learn something previously hidden.

1. Who he is

It combines and recaps that he is both king and servant.

- “the Son of Man”: This is a re-assertion that he is the King who was prophesied would return to rule the world (Daniel 7).

- “to serve”: Though the King, he is also the Servant, one who came to serve and suffer.

2. What he does

- “give his life”: We have been told this before, that he has come to suffer and die.

- “a ransom for many”: For the first time, we are told why he has to die, and what his death accomplishes.

9. **What was the most helpful or impressive thing that you learned today personally? What practical difference can it make in your life?**

*Prayer requests***Remembering the big picture**

Who Jesus is: Jesus is Redeemer King, son of Man and Son of David. Unlike the Gentile 'kings' Jesus really is Lord and has all authority. But his Kingship is demonstrated in 'littleness'; he is also the Suffering Servant (Is 52-53) and the substitutionary sacrifice (Ex 12 and Lev 16), the ransom by which we are redeemed.

Why Jesus Came: God says Jesus must die for our sins. Our sin is serious; we cannot save ourselves. now we learn that Jesus came not only to preach and call sinners, but to die for our death, the price of rescue from hell.

Man's response? Since Mark 8:32, the twelve have consistently failed to accept the necessity of the cross and have failed to accept the truth about themselves. In this passage, they at last come empty-handed, but do not see that even this is not enough. We can do nothing but God must do something. Sin is so serious that the divine Son of Man came to die in our place to save us. When we grasp that, our ideas of greatness will be turned on their heads.

Mark

The final temple

Mark 11:1-12:17

OPTIONAL STUDY

Biblical-theological background for Mark 11-15

If we are to appreciate the meaning of the triumphal entry and the cleansing of the temple (in Mark 11), and indeed, the whole of Mark 11-15 (which takes place in and around the temple) we need to have a deep grasp of the rich Old Testament background.

1. In the beginning, God gave us a “sanctuary,” a place where we could live in the presence of God and meet him face to face. That sanctuary was the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:8-9; Genesis 3:8-9). It was a place of total fulfillment and fellowship with God. It was the place of shalom, perfect peace and harmony.
2. But because of sin, we were banished from the sanctuary of God’s presence — a flaming sword was put at the entrance of the Garden (Genesis 3:24). This was a representation that the penalty for sin is death. The way back into the presence of God is blocked by justice. There is no way back into the presence of God without going under the sword.
3. In the wilderness, God created a moveable sanctuary — the tabernacle where people could draw near to meet him (Exodus 25:22). The actual throne room of the sanctuary was the Holy of Holies, separated by a thick curtain/barrier, which had pictures of the Garden on it, motifs of cherubim and palm trees (Exodus 26). But only the high priest could go into the Holy of Holies, and then only once a year. He had to go “under the sword” with a blood sacrifice, symbolically atoning for sin, paying the penalty in order to go in to God’s presence. At the conclusion of the tabernacle service, God blessed the people with his shalom or peace (Numbers 6:24-27). The shekinah glory of God’s holiness dwells behind the veil in the sanctuary and no sinner can enter there.
4. Though God allows Solomon to build a permanent physical sanctuary (I Kings 8:41-43), yet he alludes to a Son of David building a truly permanent “house” for God and us (2 Samuel 5:6-10; 7:1-16). Since Solomon is not this true Son, his temple is destroyed (I Kings 11:11-13; 2 Kings 25:8-11). During the exile, Ezekiel prophesies a new temple and a new David to build it (Ezekiel 37:24-28; 40-43). It will be much grander than Solomon’s temple. The Lord’s glory will fill it (Ezekiel 48:35), and it will become so large that all the nations of the earth will come to it and into it (Ezekiel 37:28).
5. The temple built after the exiles returned to Israel from Babylon did not fulfill this grand vision of the prophets. When the new foundation was laid, the older people wept because it was far less splendid than Solomon’s, not more (Ezra 3:12). It was this post-exilic temple that existed in Jesus’ day.

THE FINAL TEMPLE

So this temple was not the one that was prophesied (Haggai 2:1-8). That one would only be built when the Messiah, the new “David” came.

6. Zechariah 9-14 is critical for understanding Mark 11. Zechariah 9:9-12 tells of the Messiah, the king coming back “gentle and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” The prophecy ends in a stunning way. “On that day **HOLY TO THE LORD** will be inscribed on the bells of the horses, and the cooking pots in the Lord’s house will be like the sacred bowls in front of the altar. Every pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy to the Lord Almighty... And on that day there will no longer be a Canaanite in the house of the Lord Almighty” (Zechariah 14:20-21). Here we are told that the returning king will turn the entire city — even the entire world — into a giant holy of holies. It is a breath-taking and overwhelming vision. Even cooking pots will be as holy as those before God’s throne. The Holy of Holies will extend to include the whole world, so that even the Canaanites will be holy and living in the house of the Lord (Zechariah 14:21). This means that the Messiah will not simply build a building, but will mediate the very presence of God back to earth. He will **BE** the door to God, the final temple.
7. Mark 11 is essentially showing how Jesus fulfills this prophecy of Zechariah, and thus all the prophecies of the Old Testament that linked the Messiah to the temple. John is more explicit than Mark. He says, “*the word became flesh and tabernacled among us, and we beheld his glory*” (1:14). He tells us how, after Jesus cleansed the temple, he refers to his body as the temple (2:19-21). John records Jesus saying “*I am the Way, the Truth, the Life. No one comes to the Father but by me*” (John 14:6). Jesus is the final temple. In Mark 15:38, we are told how this could be —the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. Jesus went under the sword (Genesis 3:24). He took the sword into himself. He was the High Priest opening the way into the Holy of Holies, but he made himself the sacrifice. He paid the price to open the door.
8. In Mark and the other gospels, Jesus is depicted as “the final temple”. He thus brings us a salvation of unfathomable wisdom and richness. The ripping of the veil signifies the “outbreaking” of God’s royal, healing presence into the world — this is the coming of the kingdom. What does it all mean?
 - a. It means that Christ is not primarily a teacher, but a Savior. This is why Mark concentrates not so much on his moral advice, but on who he is and what he did. He comes to open the way into God for us.
 - b. It means that being a Christian is not primarily being a nice person who subscribes to certain beliefs and codes. It is a radical

regeneration of the heart and reorientation of the life. We are regenerated when we believe (John 3:3), because now the same raw presence that once shook mountains, terrified people, killed living things on contact now can live in us. For we who believe in Jesus are now temples in which the Holy Spirit of God dwells (I Corinthians 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16).

- c. It means that being a Christian gives us access to the presence of God through prayer now, and access to the bosom of God in the future. Moses' unrealizable yearning to see the light of God's glory and face (Exodus 33:18) is now our privilege (John 1:14; 2 Corinthians 4:6).
- d. It means that being a Christian makes us partners and participants with Christ in his work of spreading the healing and energizing kingdom-power through the world. Because Jesus is the temple, we too are the final temple, "living stones" in it (I Peter 2:4-10). Because Jesus is the High Priest, we are "priests" who can both draw near to God (Hebrews 4:14-16) and bring others to God (Hebrews 13). Because Jesus is a gate to heaven (John 1:51; John 14:6) we are linked to heaven (Colossians 2:20; Philippians 3:20). Because Jesus is an anointed one (Luke 4:18), as was the temple, so we are anointed (I John 2:20). All the lines and themes of the temple converge on Jesus — he is the Sacrifice, the Priest, the Altar, the Light, the Bread, the blood of purification. For all the promises of God become "Yes" in Jesus (2 Corinthians 1:20).

The judgment of the King

Mark 11:1-26

Chapter 11 really begins the last chapter of Jesus' life. We notice that in chapter 10:46-52) he allows people (like blind Bartimaeus) to call him the Messiah openly. This can mean only one thing — nothing else needs to happen before he is crucified! He knows that an open declaration of his identity will lead to execution, so the countdown begins. Chapters 11 through 15 cover only a week of his life, but it consumes nearly a third of Mark's gospel. The disproportionate length shows that the gospels are not a biography. These chapters are the climax and fulfillment of Jesus' ministry, not simply the end of it.

1. Read verses 1-6. A full six verses are devoted to finding a colt for Jesus to ride. Read Zechariah 9:9. What does it teach us that Jesus has this so well planned out? What are some practical, personal applications for us?

First, the incident shows how Jesus is in complete control of the events at the end of his life. Jesus clearly has thought this out quite well. He must have pre-arranged with the owner of the colt to use it. He knows what is happening — it is all part of his plan. Despite that fact that he is going to be taken, tortured, and killed — he is nonetheless in complete control! This is theologically crucial. Jesus' death was voluntary — he laid himself down for us.

Second, this incident shows us that Jesus had an amazing knowledge of and commitment to the Scriptures. Mark calls attention to this incident because of the prediction of Zechariah 9:9, that the Messiah would come riding on a donkey's colt. Mark does not quote Zechariah as does Matthew (cf. Matthew 21:1-9), but the allusion is unmistakable. We see how repeatedly and relentlessly Jesus seeks to fulfill the Scriptures, cf. Matthew 26:52-54, where he tells Peter not to resist his arrest, for "*then how could the Scriptures be fulfilled?*" We see Jesus quoting Scripture on the way to cross (Luke 23:28-30), and on the cross (Matthew 27:46). What does all this tell us? That Jesus' life was shaped by a total confidence in and knowledge of the Scripture. He brought every part of his life under it and faced everything in his life through it. Even in his moments of greatest agony, he quotes the Bible, revealing that his trust in it was at the very core of his heart and mission.

Personal applications: 1) The incident shows us the paradoxical lordliness of Jesus. Even though he takes the path of weakness and service, it is a royal, supremely confident weakness! So too our lives should be characterized by a (to the world's eye) paradoxical mix of meekness, humility, service with confidence, peace, strength. 2) The example of Jesus helps us sort out our own attitude toward the Bible. Some people feel they cannot submit to the full authority of Scripture until they spend years seeking to hunt down answers for every supposed contradiction of the Bible with science, history, or itself. Or, we could just contemplate the plain fact that Jesus himself completely trusted and followed the Scripture. We cannot, in the end, follow Jesus without adopting his loyalty to the Bible. 3) If we find ourselves — like Jesus on Palm Sunday — heading into trouble and suffering, we should not think that somehow things are out of our Lord's control. There is a plan. There's always a plan.

2. In verse 2, Jesus makes it clear that this is a colt “which no one has ever ridden.” Why would that be of significance? What does it symbolize?

We have already seen that he chose a colt to fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9. But why choose such a steed? What did that say or symbolize? A colt “no one has ever ridden” probably has at least two symbolic qualities. First, “*an animal devoted to a sacred purpose must be one that had not been put to ordinary use* (cf. Numbers 19:2; Deuteronomy 21:3)” (W. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, p. 395). For example, in 1 Samuel 6:7, when the sacred Ark of the Covenant was being returned to Israel from Philistia, it was stipulated that the animals transporting the ark must have never been yoked before. This was to symbolize that the holy God deserves our exclusive, supreme service. He does not share his glory with anything else. Anything devoted to God’s service must be devoted wholly and exclusively. But think! For Jesus to seek an un-ridden colt for the same reason the ark needed un-yoked animals was an enormous claim! This colt has a sacred task! He is bringing the Holy One into Jerusalem. What a claim. “*This detail emphasizes the appropriateness of the colt for the sacred task... characterizes Jesus’ entry as a symbolic action possessing profound messianic significance.*” (Lane, p. 395).

So, on the one hand, the choosing of an un-ridden colt is a claim of transcendent majesty. He is to be treated as if he is as holy as the Ark or the Temple. This shows his royalty and greatness as the Messianic king. Though he has already walked all the way to Jerusalem, he chooses to ride in the last two miles. Why? Because that is the position of a dignitary.

But there is another side to the symbolism of the colt. The other thing we know about a colt “*no one has ever ridden*” is that it would have been very young. Jesus, for his “royal steed” has chosen a baby ass! Refer again to Zechariah 9:9. Notice that the prophecy says the great king will ride on a “*foal*” — an very unlikely steed for a general. It is not a war-horse. Rather, it is a more appropriate steed for a child (or for a comic relief character such as Sancho Panza!). Jesus juxtaposes a triumphant riding with a humble and lowly means of transportation. What does this mean? This king comes to make peace, not war. To reconcile, not to divide. To save, not kill. It is as if Jesus said, “I don’t come in on a war horse! I’m not the Messiah you can conceive of. I don’t come in the kind of power you are thinking of. I come suffering, serving, humble and weak, but that is my kingdom triumph! To die!”

Imagine the disciples as the parade begins to take shape. They may have been confused by Jesus crazy statements about coming to die. But now they realize Jesus is going to ride in to Jerusalem in triumph! They think, “Ah! This is more like it!” and yet Jesus climbs onto the most unlikely steed possible — to remind them of the difference between their conceptions of greatness and power and his. Unlike Mark (who loves to be enigmatic in order to provoke us and draw us into active reflection and questioning) Matthew spells all this out. In his account of the Triumphal Entry, he quotes Zechariah 9:9 which says: “*See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*” (Matthew 21:5)

THE JUDGMENT OF THE KING

So Jesus gives us an acted parable, a remarkable self-disclosure. He says: "I am the King who comes in weakness. Therefore my kingdom is only entered through repentance and admitting your need. And it is lived out in you as you give yourselves to others out of the strength of knowing my grace." We can see all this in his entry.

Note: The medieval ideal of chivalry, the ideal knight, combined toughness and sweetness, because it had a Christian inspiration at its heart. "The knight is a man of blood and iron, a man familiar with the sight of smashed faces and the ragged stumps of lopped off limbs; he is also a demure, almost maiden-like, guest in hall, a gentle, modest, unobtrusive man. He is not a compromise or happy mean between ferocity and meekness, he is fierce to the nth and meek to the nth degree." (C. S. Lewis, "[The Necessity of Chivalry](#)") This ideal came from Christ, whose power was expressed in weakness, whose greatest triumph was to be killed meekly. And it becomes our ideal — courage to serve, power to submit, greatness in humility. (This is not to suggest that the history of medieval warfare was a good or Christian thing!)

There is probably a third element of significance in his riding of a young colt, and it is quite wonderful. It is extremely unlikely that a very young, un-"broken" colt would have been easy to control. No animal carries a human rider without a learning process which is difficult, to say the least. On top of that, this little colt has to ride through a turbulent, cheering crowd. Humanly speaking, there is no way that any human rider could simply jump up on to this animal and have it carry him through a crowd into the city. "*In the midst, then, of this excited crowd, an unbroken animal remains calm under the hands of the Messiah who controls nature (8:23-27; 14:22-32). Thus the event points to the peace of the consummated kingdom (cf. Isaiah 11:1-10).*" (D. A. Carson, [Matthew](#), p. 438). How remarkable. Jesus doesn't have to "break" the animal. He is Lord of Nature, and under his hand, there is nothing but harmony and peace. The animal knows and loves its true Master for who he is. This is a foreshadowing of the complete healing of all of nature under the future kingship of Jesus. "*The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard lied down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child shall lead them... They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.*" (Isaiah 11:6,9)

3. Read Verses 8-10. What do we learn from the response and cries of the crowd?

The words of praise come mainly from Psalm 118:25-26 (cf. 2 Kings 9:13), declaring Jesus to be the Davidic king, the Messiah. This is the climax of all the miracles he has done and the acclaim he has earned. They are pronouncing him to be the Messianic leader they are expecting. And in this "snapshot" we have a synopsis of [the](#) story at the heart of the Bible and indeed at the heart of all human history. Here is "the return of the King." This is what every heart longs for. The true King returns to finally put everything right.

But "*Hosanna*" literally means "Save us"! And surely Mark — the gospel writer who revels the most in paradox and enigma — must expect us to see the irony of this cry. Of course, the crowd has no concept of the *kind* of salvation he is bringing nor of the

strategy for bringing it. They expect a political and military salvation; he is bringing a complete salvation of soul and body. They expect a savior for only Jews; he is a savior for the world. They expect a salvation through might for the good and strong; he is bringing a salvation through sacrifice for the repentant and weak.

Also, the cries and the actions of the crowd rightly point to the blessedness that the true king brings. But again, the blessedness that Jesus will bring is vastly beyond anything the crowd is imagining. In the Bible, “blessedness” means more than a superficial happiness. Rather, it is a complete realization of final fulfillment. (cf. Matthew 5, the Beatitudes where blessedness is to “see God” to “be filled” to “inherit the earth” to “get the kingdom of God”). Blessedness is closely related to the concept of shalom, as can be seen in the Aaronic blessing in Numbers 6:24-27. The Messiah will bring all of creation back into fullness and harmony with God. Thus the palm branches waved in the triumphal entry were signs of that final coming, when “*the trees of the wood sing for joy, before the Lord, for he comes to rule the earth*” (Psalm 96:12-13) and “*the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands*” (Isaiah 55:12).

So “blessedness” means the healing of every ill, spiritually, psychologically, socially, and physically. This ecstatic view of the kingdom of God is very practical. If the trees under his final kingship will sing and dance, what will we be like? What could be more encouraging? And what should believers be about in the world? Not simply converting people to faith, as important as that is. All vocations that heal and restore creation are divine callings.

4. Read verses 12-14 and 20-25. Why does Jesus curse the fig tree? Since it is a “living parable,” what does it mean for how we should live?

In Palestine, during a certain season of the year, a set of little “nubs” appear on the fig tree just before the figs and the leaves come in. They occur before the leaves come in. They are the size of almonds and are edible. Travelers often ate them off trees during journeys. When Jesus approaches the tree and sees that the leaves were already in, but nothing edible was there, he responds harshly, for the fig tree is not “working properly.” The fact that there were no nubs meant not only that the fig tree was useless now, but that it would not bring in figs six weeks later, either. It was a fruitless tree.

a) This is clearly an object lesson; the fig tree is a visual aid. The fig tree clearly represents something else. Everything Jesus does has a teaching aspect — this is not a fit of temper. (Imagine how calm and peaceful Jesus is in all sorts of other circumstances. Why would this situation cause him to “lose it”?)

Jesus finds the fig tree a) not doing its appointed job and b) causing him hunger. Therefore, the tree becomes a metaphor for Israel, and beyond that, for anyone claiming to be God’s people who do not bear fruit for him.

b) In the Bible, “fruit” is used for many things. It means “visible outgrowth of real faith in the heart”.

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(1) Galatians 5:22ff. says “fruit” is internal character change (“love, joy, peace, kindness, self-control, humility”). (2) In Luke 3:9, John the Baptist says “fruit of repentance” includes social righteousness (sharing your possessions with the needy). [Notice, the offering Paul takes up for the poor is called “fruit” in Romans 15:28!] Likewise, in Ephesians 5:9, Paul says the “fruit of the light” is justice and righteousness in practice (“goodness, righteousness and truth”). (3) “Fruit” can refer to heart worship. Hebrews 13:15 says that praise is “the fruit of the lips.”

On the other hand, “leaves” might refer to many things that can appear to be signs of real belief but can grow without real heart change. An important cross-reference is Matthew 7:15-23. There Jesus gives example of “leaves without fruit”! 7:16 tells us that fruit is important. Then in v. 22 he tells us many people who are not real Christians will have preached the gospel and done miracles without having any fruit (7:22-23)! Evidently we can be very busy in church activities without real heart change (Galatians 5, Ephesians 5) and without real compassionate involvement with people (Luke 3; Romans 15).

5. Read verses 12-19. a) Why does Jesus cleanse the temple? What does it teach us about Jesus, ourselves, and the gospel? b) How do the temple cleansing and the fig tree cursing relate to each other?

a) What we learn from the cleansing.

Since many Jews came to the temple from all over the world, and since they could not carry animals to Jerusalem to sacrifice, there was a practical need at the temple precincts both for buying animals and for changing foreign currency. There was nothing illegitimate about this. But when we are told “Jesus entered the temple area,” it probably means the outer court, the place where the Gentiles would pray (v. 17, the reference to “the nations” confirms this). Jesus was concerned that this was the place that the non-Jews would come to worship and inquire after the true God. Evidently, this is where the marketplace was, showing that the Jews had no concern for really enabling any Gentiles to worship God in a meaningful way. The placement of the marketplace shows parochialism. It shows: a) insensitivity to true worship (noise and smell meant concentration on prayer and God was impossible), and it shows b) formalism, a lack of concern for outreach or true devotion.

What we learn about Jesus: First, it shows us the authority and majesty of Jesus as Lord as well as Savior. The only person who has the right to rearrange the furniture in a house is the owner of the house. Thus his actions prove his divine identity. He has the right to rearrange the furniture in the house of God because it is his house. Second, this shows us that Jesus hated religion which was only concerned with external rituals rather than internal realities like prayer and devotion. In addition, Jesus is judging parochial religion — only concerned with their own constituency, and not with those outside, the non-members. Last, we see that Jesus is a man of power! To overturn tables takes ferocity! Jesus’ servant attitude and humble and meek death were not the result of a wimpy temperament.

What we learn about ourselves: First, If Jesus comes to live in us, if we are “temples of God” (see “The Final Temple”), then Jesus has a right to rearrange the furniture in our life. There are no limits on what he can ask us to do. Second, if Jesus is concerned about “all nations” (v. 17) so should we be. If he is concerned that religion not become ingrown and lose its heart for reaching and including outsiders, so should we be. If Jesus is concerned that we reach out to love and serve people who are not believers, and/or who are not “our kind of people” — so should we be.

What we learn about the gospel: As one commentator has written, “*The earliest Christian groups... must have stood out as strangely distinctive by the fact that they practiced no sacrificial ritual, named no one as priest, and looked to no temple, like that at Jerusalem.*” (J.Dunn, *Epistle to the Romans*) This is a remarkable point. Christianity was essentially the first religion in history to say we could do without a temple-system. Every culture and religion at that time sensed that there was a need for constant mediation to bridge the gap between the divine and humanity. Everyone sensed the need for temples, priests, sacrifices, oblations, rituals, etc. that bridged the chasm between God (or the gods) and us. Christianity essentially said: “We represent the end of religion as you know it — a temple-less, sacrifice-less, priest-less access to God.” The cleansing of the temple symbolized many things — the corruption of the religious establishment, the mechanical nature of nominal religion, and so on. But ultimately, Jesus was serving notice that — now that he had come — he would replace the entire temple system. He was going to make oblations and temples obsolete.

b) The cleansing and the fig tree

The cleansing of the temple (11:15-19) is sandwiched between two halves of the fig tree incident. As we have seen before, when Mark uses such a narrative device, he is relating the two stories and calling attention to some similarity of theme or message.

Probably, the temple worship of the day was a perfect example of “leaves without fruit”, of form without content. There was lots of ritual observance and activity, but there was no real heart and soul. As we have seen: 1) there was no real concern or compassion for the “unwashed” Gentiles who were without God, and, 2) there was no real concern for true worship and adoration.

Another similarity is the note of judgement and severity. Jesus is the humble savior, who comes to save, not destroy. But these incidents give us a warning. If we reject his mercy, there is no other hope. Jesus is a figure of extraordinary love and sympathy, but he cannot be trifled with. A line from Lewis’ quote (see above) applies perfectly here. “He is not a compromise or happy mean between ferocity and meekness, he is fierce to the nth degree and meek to the nth degree”.

6. What is Jesus promising in verses 22-24 and requiring in verse 25? How does that follow from his judgement on the tree and temple?

Taken out of its context, the promise of v. 24 (“*whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours*”) seems like an exhortation to positive thinking! Many have read it to mean: “Whatever you ask for you will receive, on the condition that you remove any psychological uncertainty (doubt) that it will happen.”

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The first problem with this interpretation is that it takes the statement out of its *overall* Biblical context. Jesus asked very fervently for “the cup” to pass from him. He asked to be exempted from going to the cross, but he was turned down (Mark 14:35-36). Should we think that he hadn’t asked with enough faith? But then he’d not be the sinless savior. So the blanket, unqualified, un-nuanced reading of the 11:23-24 promise won’t hold up.

The second problem with this interpretation is that it takes the statement out of its *immediate* context, which is the issue of the fig tree. The cursing of the fig tree is an acted parable of the cleansing of the temple. Both are symbols of judgement. The disciple’s astonishment perhaps could indicate that he is shaken by Jesus’ displays of judgement on unrighteousness. Jesus’ statement then should not be read as an exhortation but as an encouragement. Jesus is not giving a blanket general promise that God will answer any prayer request without fail, but a specific promise that God will continue to hear and regard Jesus’ disciples despite his judgement on sin and fruitlessness. He is saying: “Have courage! God will bring you through even the most terrible judgement if you trust in me.”

There is a third “context” in which to take this verse — and that is Mark’s particular style. He likes to make points *without* the qualifications and “on the other hand” statements that Matthew, Luke, and John often make. For example, we saw how Mark only tells us Jesus’ condemnation of divorce. He does not add what Matthew does, namely that Jesus did allow divorce in some cases. Mark prefers brevity and its powerful impact. Taken all by itself, without reference to Matthew 19 or 1 Corinthians 7, Mark 10 could be read as forbidding all divorce — but that is to forget Mark’s style of writing.

Now in the same way, Mark is making a simple statement about the limitless possibilities of prayer. Period. He makes no effort to qualify it. He is saying, “Look! For the person who really trusts in God, there is no end to what can be accomplished.” The phrase, “*believe that you have received it*” is a vivid way to say, “When you come to God in prayer, know you come to one so powerful and loving that he can grant our request before we even come to ask for it!” Mark is saying what John Newton puts in his hymn:

Thou are coming to a King! Large petitions with thee bring!
For his grace and power are such — none can ever ask too much.

However, we must look carefully at “*have faith in God*” (Mark 11:22) and put it in the Biblical context. Look at Jesus’ own example of what it means to pray in perfect trust in God. Jesus said in his prayer, “*not my will but thine be done,*” and he told us that this is “paradigmatic” and must be included in every prayer. Thus he put “*thy will be done*” in the Lord’s Prayer, the model for all prayer. Why? Isn’t this a lack of faith? No — to fail to say it is a lack of faith in God. As we pray we must trust not only in his power (to give me what I want) but in his wisdom (to know what I need and when). Obviously, we must not pick and choose between the divine attributes when we pray “in faith”! We are to have faith in all of God’s attributes when we pray. That means we must, like Jesus says, exercise faith in the wisdom of his love as well as in the power of his love. (i.e. If I refuse to believe that God could turn me down, that is itself a failure to trust

that his wisdom might be greater than mine. To be “totally sure” that I will get exactly what I ask for, is really a *lack* of deep trust in God.)

This does not mean that the promise about prayer isn't extremely strong and encouraging. It is an invitation to God's people to attempt great things for God and move toward them with confidence through prayer. It is just that we cannot read it as a blanket guarantee of an affirmative answer for every specific prayer request.

7. Read verse 25. Reflect practically on Jesus' act of temple-cleansing. What can we learn here about the legitimate and illegitimate uses of anger?

- a) We can learn that anger is a legitimate emotion. It is not necessarily a sin. Jesus, the perfect one, can get very angry.
- b) We can learn a definition: anger is an emotion released to defend something valuable that is threatened. If you are defending something valid, and you do not allow it to lead you to do something sinful, anger is a good thing. Jesus was defending true religion and the purity of his house.
- c) Anger is invalid when it becomes bitterness or a desire for vengeance. In that case the thing we are defending is our ego and interests. Vengeance belongs to God because, 1) only he knows what any person deserves and 2) only he has the right (the blamelessness and the authority as our Creator) to stand in judgement over human beings.

It is interesting to notice that forgiveness is demanded by v. 25 whether or not the person has asked for forgiveness. Matthew 5 and 18 and Luke 17 shows that efforts should be made to reconcile with an estranged party, if possible (Romans 12:18). But here Jesus shows us that forgiveness is incumbent upon us even if the party has not repented. Forgiveness is thus to be granted before it is felt. Forgiveness is a promise not to 1) bring the matter up to the other person, 2) bring the matter up to others, or 3) continually bring the matter up to yourself.

8. In verse 11 Jesus does not simply ride in to Jerusalem. This verse shows his triumphal entry was actually to the Temple. Share from your reading: a) one insight that helps you most in understanding Jesus' mission, and b) one insight that helps you most in understanding the Christian life.

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Mark 11:27-12:17

This passage shows us Jesus repeating himself. The repetition of themes in Mark is not a lack of imagination on the author's part. Rather, it conveys a very important lesson for us. Jesus has only a few very basic things to say, but they are very difficult to learn. Discerning Christians sometimes realize their entire lives have been one long process of learning one or two gospel lessons.

Instead of Jesus instructing his disciples in the meaning of his death, we see him again confronting religious leaders and the crowds through the next couple of chapters. We are brought back to the theme of the first half of Mark — “Who is this?” Jesus’ triumphal entry to public acclaim has virtually forced the hand of the “chief priests, teachers of law, and the elders” (Mark 11:27). They can ignore him no longer — they must discredit him or destroy him. His entry was virtually an invitation from Jesus to “crown me or kill me.” There is never any doubt which option they will choose.

1. Read verses 11:27-33. a) What are they asking Jesus? b) Why would this group be so concerned about it? c) Why is Jesus’ answer so effective?

a) They come asking him “*by what authority*” he does “*these things*.” The phrase “these things” probably refers directly to the cleansing of the temple, but may indirectly refer to the ministry of Jesus in general. The “authority” question, then, was a request for his credentials. The question is surely a rhetorical question, since they knew Jesus was not ordained or accredited by any recognized religious order or institution. So their question is not a genuine request for information, but rather a confrontation.

b) Religious bodies set up credential-processes for the same reason that professions like law and medicine do so. Many self-proclaimed and self-accredited experts turn out to be quacks, with no more skill than the people who turn to them. And many so-called prophets and religious teachers have been terrible disasters (cf. Acts 5:36-38). Credential-processes usually consist of 1) education by particular institutions, 2) a certain number of other learning/training experiences, and, 3) the approval by groups of persons already credentialed.

So “credentialing” is a wise and good thing for the public. Yet it has a dark side. It becomes a way for a small number to exercise great power. The men questioning Jesus had a vested interest in the credential-system, because through it they were able to control who did ministry, and therefore they could control what spiritual instruction was being given to the public. They were now trying to use this power to silence Jesus.

c) But Jesus throws them a curve. He asks them a question about the validity of John the Baptist’s ministry. When he asks whether John’s ministry had heavenly authority or not, he is asking, as it were, “well, what was John’s authority for his ministry?” This was a brilliant move for three reasons that build upon one another. 1) First, (as v. 32 shows) John’s public ministry was universally held to have the signs of inspiration from God. 2) But second, this divine authority rested on John despite the fact that he also had no “credentials”. There are always people who rise up without the help or approval

of the power-structure's gatekeepers. John's career proved you could be a prophet from God and not be accredited! 3) Then third, (as v. 31 indicates) John the Baptist had supported Jesus' own claims. ("*why didn't you believe him*")? So they were completely trapped. If they admitted John was sent from God, that would essentially admit Jesus' authority. If they contended that John was not sent from God they would face the overwhelming backlash of public opinion. So they abstain from answering (v. 33) and, in an absolutely fair response, Jesus then refuses to answer their question.

This is not evasion on Jesus' part. It is brilliant argumentation. He says essentially, "my claims are based on the possibility of an authoritative ministry derived directly from God, without human credentials. Right before your very eyes there is a perfect example of such, universally acknowledged. Now, if you won't grant that particular premise, then I cannot draw the appropriate conclusion. If you are so stubborn as to refuse to admit the obvious premise, then we have nothing further to talk about. You have ended the discussion." Jesus has effectively shown them that they are incompetent to judge him. If they focus so much on human education and the credentials process that they cannot discern the marks of the Holy Spirit on a person, then they have no way to assess John's ministry or Jesus'.

One more note: If the "*these things*" (v. 27) refers only to the cleansing of the temple, then Jesus' reference to John would still be a very direct answer to them. Malachi prophesied that someone would be a forerunner for the Lord who would return and cleanse his temple. Jesus is perhaps contending that John was the messenger who was to come before "*the Lord, suddenly come to his temple*" (Malachi 3:1ff). If they did not recognize who John was, then they would not understand Jesus' authority to cleanse the temple. John's message to "repent" is always the necessary precondition for Jesus' message to "believe."

2. What practical implications does this interchange have for us?

First, we learn a good method of reasoning in matters of religion and faith. Jesus forces his opponents to examine their own presuppositions, their basic assumptions lying behind their questions. In this case, Jesus is saying, "The assumption underlying your objection is this: 'an unordained ministry is cannot be from heaven'. Alright, let's look at that assumption — does it hold up? Is it consistent with what you already know and do? For example, how does it account for the ministry of John the Baptist? It doesn't seem to. Now, if your premise leads inevitably to a conclusion we know is not true, you must revise the premise." This way Jesus shows that their objection at least lacks consistency and perhaps lacks integrity as well.

Christians can also reason with others about spiritual issues in the same way. For example, a Christian can say: "you assume that there is no God and that all behavior is therefore morally relative. Alright, let's look at that assumption — does it hold up? Do you really live consistently with that?"

Second, we learn that under many rational objections to Jesus is really an emotional resistance to losing control. The religious leaders open what appears to be an academic discussion, but when Jesus presses them skillfully, they simply get stubborn and refuse

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to grant him the obvious premise. They just clam up. Why? Because ultimately their problem with Jesus is a personal one. He represents a loss of power. We therefore must not share our faith with people as if rational argument will really bring people all the way into the kingdom. Beneath intellectual objections lies many personal fears. Actually, no one can argue about religious matters objectively, because they have too many radical personal implications. If skeptics grant that Jesus is the Son of God, they know that their entire life would have to change. How can anyone be an unbiased, objective evaluator of such an issue? So we all have personal problems with Christ's claims that often cloud our ability to reason.

Third, we can learn that an over focus on human credentials and tradition is spiritually dangerous. In areas of faith and religion, a pre-occupation with credentials and "proper channels" can be a human way to try to control the Holy Spirit. We must grant that self-proclaimed religious figures who refuse to submit themselves to the examination and training of others often are arrogant, rash, and dangerous. In every country, bad experiences with such "prophets" has led to better quality control processes for accrediting ministers and workers. But how easy it is for such processes to become ways for those in power to keep total control of a ministry. God works through the channels he chooses, and they may not be the "accepted" ones.

But a careful balance must be maintained. Self-accredited and completely independent ministries are often disastrous. Some kind of accountability is called for. We are born again into a Christian *community*. We are not to be radical individualists. The Biblical doctrine that we are all sinners (including religious leaders) strongly implies that we need to submit to one another.

3. Read 12:1-12. Why is this parable spoken to religious leaders, and how does it follow from the previous discussion?

The "*them*" to which Jesus refers means the priests, scribes, and elders of the previous discussion. The reference is so clear that even the religious leaders understand who he is talking about (v. 12). (Notice that no one comes to Jesus after this parable and needs an interpretation!)

Why is this particular parable — with the metaphor of the vineyard — used of religious leaders? Throughout the Bible, prophets and shepherds are likened to tenant farmers, because God's people are likened to a vineyard (see Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:8-18). A vineyard was a place grapes were grown to make wine. Every piece of equipment is noted in this parable. A wall was put up to protect it from trespassers or robbers or animals. The winepress was where grapes were treaded out with feet and the juice ran down a pipe out of it into a lower vat. A tower was used for storage, as a shelter where the workers lived, and as a lookout to see if robbers or others were coming. The owner leased it all to tenants who were to give him a percentage of the crop as rent.

The analogy of the vineyard to Israel has at least these features: a) Just as a vineyard owner protects his property with a wall, so God comes and sets us apart as his. b) Just as a vineyard owner expects fruit from his vineyard, so God expects us to obey and love

and resemble him. c) Just as a vineyard owner hires tenant farmers to care for the garden, though recognizing his ownership rights, so God calls religious leaders to nurture and cultivate the people of God but to give the proceeds to the owner, God. This image of Israel-as-vineyard was well known to all, and that is why the parable's referents are unmistakable.

In the parable, the vineyard owner is dealing with ineffective and insubordinate tenants, who have taken control of the vineyard for themselves. In the final scene, the owner sends his son saying, "surely they will respect my son." This is clearly a reference to the previous subject. The owner is saying, "surely these rascals will recognize the authority of my son! They will have to negotiate with him." Instead, the tenant farmers are even more hostile and deadly toward the son than they were to the messengers. Now this could not be more blatant. They just refused to "respect" Jesus' authority. The religious leaders of Israel will show themselves more contemptuous of and deadly toward Jesus than they are of "servants" (other prophets and ministers).

4. Read 12:1-12. a) What remarkable claims is Jesus making for himself in the parable of the vineyard? b) Read I Peter 2:4-8. In verse 10 Jesus changes the metaphor from a vineyard to a building. What is he teaching us with it?

a) His remarkable claims

He is claiming to be divine. All the listeners know that Israel is "God's vineyard" and thus the owner in the parable is God himself. Jesus then puts himself into the parable as the very son of God. And notice that he is not simply a son in the sense that we are all "sons" of God. Verse 6 says "*he had one left to send, a son, whom he loved.*" In the parable, Jesus is the only son. So he claims unique deity.

b) The metaphor of the capstone

When Jesus quotes Psalm 118, he turns from the metaphor in which Israel is a vineyard to a metaphor in which Israel is a building, and the religious leaders now are not the tenant farmers but the "builders." It is their job to build the people of God, but they have rejected the capstone. Now the capstone in any building was the "chief of the cornerstones." It was the first stone laid, and its dimensions had to be perfect, for it provided the plumb lines for all the rest of the foundation and the entire building. (If it wasn't cut into a perfect rectangle, the walls would lean, and so on.) In short, it would be completely impossible to build a building without a capstone (or with the wrong capstone). What does that mean?

First it means that Jesus is claiming to be "foundational" to the work of God and the people of God. God's saving work in history is to preserve a people for himself. But Jesus says that he is the capstone for that saving work of God in history. Just as the whole building rests on the capstone, so the whole of Christian salvation is personally built wholly and entirely on him! This is a claim to be much more than a teacher!

Second, Jesus is claiming that he will be rejected. This is a re-statement of what he says above, when he predicts he will be killed and thrown out by the tenant farmers. BUT, Jesus is showing that the rejection will become a "marvelous" triumph, for the

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rejection is the way that the capstone is laid into the foundation! The cross will be seen not as a defeat but a “marvelous” triumph, the beginning of a new temple. That is why, when Jesus dies, the veil in the old temple is ripped from top to bottom (Mark 15:38). The old temple is now obsolete when Jesus dies. The new capstone has been laid. Now, no more sacrifices, no more separation — Jesus’ sacrifice has “God and sinners reconciled.” So the capstone reference is not simply “tacked on” to the end of the parable, but is the amazing “turn” — the rescue-beyond-hope — that all great narratives possess. “*This [reference to the capstone] takes up and reverses the theme of his rejection, in the parable. God will vindicate the Jesus whom [the religious leaders] have rejected. That is the point.*” (M. Green, *Matthew for Today*, p. 208).

5. What practical implications does this parable have for us?

First, we can learn that we are God’s garden or vineyard. This means that God expects growth and fruit. We belong to God, but he uses an organic metaphor for us. We are to take what we have and are and increase. We are to invest our grace and our gifts and bear fruit for him. Matthew 25 tells us that he wants fruit and increase proportional to our talents. That means, for example, that the more money we have, the more influence we have; the more knowledge of God and the word we have, the more we are held responsible to spread his truth and love in words and deeds. Read John 15, which is also about “fruitfulness.” There are two kinds of fruit mentioned in the Bible: a) Internal fruit (Test questions: are you growing? Or are you as spiritually weak as last year? Are you more loving, more self-controlled, more peaceful than last year?) b) External fruit. (Test questions: are you having an impact on the people around you? are more people growing and being touched by his love through you?)

Second, we can learn that there is a natural enmity and hatred of God in us. The parable of the tenants certainly refers primarily to religious leaders. But it also indicates that the human heart is not merely indifferent or ignorant of God — rather there is an active bias and hostility to God in us. (Romans 8:7) The natural mind is enmity toward God; it will not submit to the law of God. Indeed, it cannot. We have a natural tendency to feel that God is unfair, that he doesn’t understand, that he makes it hard to believe in him, that his demands are unreasonable. We get upset at talk of judgement and moral accountability. We resent being told that we need to obey God. Despite the good things in our lives, we feel God hasn’t done enough for us, that he doesn’t love us. We need to realize that this spirit of enmity lives in people and that it continues always to some degree, even in the most mature Christians.

Third, the statement about the “capstone” shows us that there is no “middle ground” possible in your reaction to Jesus. In Isaiah 8:14, we are told that the Lord is either a sanctuary or a stumbling block, depending on the people’s response to him. The image is apt. A capstone was always huge. If you didn’t use it for a building, it was too obtrusive and large to do anything else on that site. You either built on it or you stumbled on it. There is no alternative to Jesus Christ.

Fourth, we learn what a responsibility it is to be a “tenant in the vineyard.” It is of course a great privilege to be appointed a leader, teacher, or shepherd in the church, but

anyone in such leadership must recognize how easy it is to begin to minister for our own power and ego needs rather than for God and his people. It is easy for our ministry to become a “fiefdom.” (By the way, this isn’t a warning just for ordained, “official” clergy — but to all shepherds.) We must always ask ourselves — “am I remembering whose vineyard this is?” We must not try to keep complete control of any body of Christians — they are his, not ours. We must not serve mainly for the recognition or the gratitude or for a sense of being needed. It is also interesting to notice that in the parable God sent prophet/messengers to instruct the shepherds. So those who are “feeding the Word” to others must be those who are most personally convicted and corrected by the Word themselves. The whole parable is a wake up call to anyone in Christian leadership. We should receive authority in the church with the utmost humility. God can always change tenants!

6. Read 12:13-17. What does this question have in common with the other accounts we’ve seen today? How does it follow from them?

The tribute money that is in reference here was a poll-tax that was required by Rome. It was bitterly resented by the whole Jewish nation. A denarius (the coin used in this account) bore the face of Tiberius. And the inscription was, “Tiberius Caesar, son of deified Augustus, chief priest.” *Pontifex maximus*. It was, therefore, regarded by many Jews to be a mini-idol.

The question raises another issue with regard to authority. This links the account directly to the question of 11:27ff. and the parable of the tenants. The Pharisees and Herodians are again trying to trick Jesus into an answer that will discredit him. They hoped Jesus would be forced to say either that the poll tax was an illegitimate one or else that it was just and legitimate and should be paid. Perhaps they were smarter from their defeat in 11:27-33. They think they have him trapped as he had trapped them before. If, on the one hand, he denounced the tax, he would be claiming that Rome had no authority. That would be insurrection, and would lead Jesus into a conflict with the Roman government. On the other hand, if he supported the tax, it would look like he was admitting Rome’s authority over the Jews. That would be extremely unpopular.

Note: We again see (cf. Mark 3:6) that Jesus unites former enemies, who work together to destroy him. Pharisees were very conservative theologically, while Herodians were seen by the Pharisees as “liberal compromisers.” But the entire spectrum — liberal to conservative — finds Jesus a threat. The gospel tells us that “the love of God fulfilled the law of God in the life and death of Jesus Christ.” The liberals (Herodians and Sadducees) didn’t believe in a God of wrath and law, while the conservative religious people didn’t believe that the law could be fulfilled in any way but our own moral effort. So Jesus will be seen by liberals as a dangerous conservative and by the conservatives as a dangerous liberal.

7. What is Jesus' answer and what are the implications for believers today?

Jesus, of course, will not be forced into a "reductionistic" reply. His answer shows that the believer's relationship to the state and to politics is not a simple one.

First he says, "*render to Caesar's the things that are Caesar's.*" He is making a simple point here. The use of Caesar's coinage acknowledges his authority. His picture on the coin is there because it was his precious metal that was used and which afforded them a currency. It was also his wealth, by which roads, education, military protection were provided. All these things are therefore "Caesar's" — they wouldn't be there without him. Therefore, if you use them, give him his due. This is the acknowledgement of a limited but real authority for civil government. Even the most wicked king or governor owes his position to God (cf. Proverbs 8:15; Daniel 2:21, 37-38).

Second, however, he says, "*and to God the things that are God's.*" This is a profound point. He is cutting away at a fundamental concept of the state that was common in antiquity. The ruler was seen as linked to and approved by the country's gods. The very inscription on the denarius expresses this conviction. This was a "divine right of kings" theory of government. Thus the power of the state and the ruler of the state was absolute. What the state said was what the gods said. Jesus refuses to accept this widely held view. He says "yes" to paying Caesar taxes but "no" to giving Caesar worship. He says that the state has authority, but it is only limited to certain spheres. This, of course, was radical and provided a basis and source in later centuries for various versions of democracy and non-totalitarian states.

Jesus is being quite realistic here. Any government is concerned for its own power and control. The Roman government believed that emperor-worship was necessary for the stability of the state. In paganism and polytheism there was no problem with this requirement. There were many gods — so why not add another? But both Jews and Christians could not share the worship of God with any other person or being. Eventually, Christians were persecuted for their refusal to participate in the emperor cult. It was because they would not say *Kaiser Kurios* ("Caesar is Lord"). Such a refusal represented a major threat to the absolute authority of Rome. To say Jesus (*alone*) is *Kurios* meant that there was a power and standard by which Christians could judge the state. So the wisdom of Jesus here is remarkable! He will neither over-react in one direction or the other. He will neither say Rome has no authority, nor will he grant it the authority that it actually claimed.

Note: Some have posited that Jesus was contrasting the coin with the people around it. Thus he might have been saying: "This coin has Caesar's image on it — give it back to him; you have God's image on you — give it back to him."

Practical implications: a) Christians respect authority. We are not anarchists or political radicals unless in a totalitarian state. Yet, b) Christians are critical of authority — they hold it accountable to God, so they are not traditionalists either. Human authority is always relative (because it is only over limited aspects of our lives), and never absolute, (because it is conditioned by God's law). If a human authority uses its power to break God's law or coerce those under it to do so, as Peter says in Acts 4 "*We must obey God rather than men.*" The Christian view of the state is one of "critical respect."

So Christians are very unusual politically. In totalitarian societies we look liberal. We are “free thinkers” because it never matters how loud government says “this is right” — it must be accountable to a higher authority. Christians will be less likely than the populace at large to be sheep. We don’t see our ethnic traditions, our culture, popular opinion, expert opinion, or state pronouncements as final. On the other hand, in individualistic cynical societies (like ours) Christians will look conservative, because we will be more likely to respect authority than the populace at large (for we see God’s hand behind it) and because we know that there are absolute moral principles we must all obey despite individual impulses and feelings, and so on.

Jesus’ words also indicate that Christians will always live in a certain tension with their government. Even democratic governments, like the U.S., will tend to impose a way of moral reasoning on public discourse that Christians may have to resist. For example, we are told today that when arguing in court, legislature, or in other public arenas, it is necessary to only appeal to empirical and rational findings and reasoning, and not to cite God or the Bible. But *“efforts to craft a public square from which religious conversation is absent, no matter how thoughtfully worked out, will always in the end say to the [believers] that they alone, unlike everybody else, must enter public dialogue only after leaving behind that part of themselves that they may consider most vital.”* (Stephen L. Carter, *The Dissent of the Governed* (Harvard U. Press, 1999), p. 90.) U.S. democracy pressures Christians to accept the modern public fact/private value distinction. (i.e. scientific fact is truth for everyone, but all religious and moral convictions should be kept private.) This is quite a bit subtler (and quite a bit less crass) than emperor worship! But the point is that the absolute claims of Christ always create some tension with our government, and yet Jesus wants us to ‘pay tribute’ to it and live in peace with it to the greatest degree possible.

Conclusion:

Jesus continues throughout this passage to claim absolute, unconditioned authority. He shows that all other human authority must submit to his. a) The authority of religious leaders is conditioned by his. They may try to lead the people of God for their own benefit and to control the public ministry to support themselves. But Jesus alone is head of the church. He can’t be controlled. b) The authority of the state is conditioned by his as well. It may try to overreach itself by demanding that no one sit in judgement over it. But God’s law must stand in judgement over human law. So this means that the Lordship of Jesus is complete over every aspect of our lives — public and private, work and play, thought life and behavior, intellect and feelings, material possessions and spiritual capacities. Everything! To make him Lord is to ask: a) am I obeying him in whatever he has told me in this area, and b) am I thanking him for whatever he has sent me in this area?

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Once again Jesus' supreme authority is evident, not only in his claim to be Son of God and the Messiah to whom John pointed, but also in his complete control over the supposed "authorities" of Israel.

Why Jesus Came: The parable of the vineyard puts Jesus' coming in the context of Israel's whole discreditable history. He has come, like the prophets before him, to demand from Israel God's due. But when rebellious Israel kills the messenger, he will rise from the dead, and they will have the care of God's people taken from them, to the marvel of believers.

How should I respond? The unbelievers' problem here is rebellion, not ignorance (12:12a). They should have admitted who Jesus was (11:27-33), respected him (12:6) and given God his due (12:17). Instead, they desire an inheritance only for themselves (12:7), are only in awe of men (11:32; 12:12b), ignore dire warnings (12:9-12) and lay deadly traps for Jesus (12:17).

Mark

The teaching of the King

Study 12 | Mark 12:18-44

This passage continues the series of “hot questions” served up to trap Jesus. He deftly fields these questions like a good infielder handles ground balls — he calmly picks each one up and throws it back! In one instance, he throws it back very hard, and goes on the offensive, totally defeating them. Jesus never dodged the hard questions. Sometimes people in the church brush off difficult inquiries with the response “don’t question, just believe.” Jesus doesn’t do that. It is interesting to notice that Jesus doesn’t simply set up a lecture series and give people information. Rather, his teaching is usually a response to concrete situations and questions.

On the other hand, we learn here that asking Jesus a question is very dangerous! He never lets the question remain at the abstract or intellectual level, but gets personal and makes you examine where you stand and to what you are committed.

1. Read verses 18-27. Jesus uses several different arguments to show the Sadducees their errors. What are they?

The Sadducees were the aristocratic and highly educated priestly families of Israel. They accepted the moral teachings of the Scripture, but they sneered at any elements of the supernatural. They accepted the Five Books of Moses as Scripture, but they did not regard the prophetic writings as such. For these reasons, they differed with the Pharisees over life after death. While the Pharisees believed in a final resurrection on the basis of Isaiah 26:19 and Daniel 12:2, the Sadducees denied that there was any existence after death. “*The doctrine of the Sadducees is this: souls die with bodies.*” (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18:1,4). The Sadducees perceived Jesus as basically a theological “conservative” in the Pharisees mold, so they provide a case study-question designed to make the idea of the afterlife appear ridiculous.

Assumed in the case study was the Jewish belief in “Levirate” marriage. If a man died without children, the man’s brother should marry his widow (not leaving her destitute) and bear children in the name of the deceased father’s family name. **Note:** This custom was not originated in God’s law, but was a very ancient practice (see Genesis 38:8) which Moses controlled and regulated in his legislation (Deuteronomy 25:5-6). There is no indication that this was actually required or widely practiced, though the basic idea lies behind the story of Ruth. Therefore, the case study posed by the Sadducees could possibly have happened, but it is of course not likely. Now, the question is — if a woman was married to seven brothers at different times, whose wife will she be in the afterlife?

Jesus doesn’t simply answer this question. He rebukes the Sadducees and takes apart their underlying assumptions and errors. He rebukes them for their attitude toward the Bible and toward God — “*you know neither Scripture nor the power of God.*” (v. 24).

First, he rebukes them for their view of God’s power. Their lack of faith in the future resurrection implicitly denies the power of God and the magnitude of the transformation he will effect. When Jesus says, “*they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven*” (v. 25), he reveals that the Sadducees’ question had

within it a hidden assumption. It assumed that the future resurrection life would be simply an extension of life in the present age. Jesus, however, says that when the kingdom comes fully to restore all creation (Matthew 19:28) our relationships will be massively transformed. (See the next question for more on this). Secondly, he turns to their view of Scripture. Brilliantly, he goes to Exodus 3:6, a passage in the Pentateuch (a part of the Bible the Sadducees accepted), in which God says “*I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*” even though talking to Moses, many years after the demise of those three men. Now if God can say he is their God (not that he was their God), then they were alive to him (v. 27) as he spoke. It is inconceivable that the eternal God’s covenant relationship with his people would not also be eternal. Notice that Jesus does not hang the hope of life after death (like the Greeks did) on the idea of an immortal part of us. Rather, he rests in on the commitment of God to us (“I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob”). This is a very powerful argument for life after death. We have a God who cannot, at our death, scrap that which is precious to him!

What do we learn here for ourselves, practically speaking? 1) Jesus shows the Sadducees they were wrong on their own terms (from the Pentateuch). It’s always best to do that when talking with people who don’t believe. Though Daniel 12:2 and other places outside of the Pentateuch explicitly mention the final resurrection and the afterlife (cf. Job 19:25-27), Jesus goes to the Pentateuch to show them their error. Anyone who doubts the true faith has to be trusting in something else in order to do their doubting. Everyone has faith assumptions and gives authority to something (science, reason, tradition, etc.). It is always best to work with people where they are and use their own terms and premises to show them their error. For example, many people will say, “I believe in a God who created the world, but I don’t believe in miracles like the resurrection. That just can’t happen.” Rather than saying, “Oh, yeah?!! Well the Bible says miracles do happen!” We could ask: “If you assume that there’s a God with the power to create the world, why would he not be able to resurrect and re-create?” This shows the person that she is being inconsistent with her own premises. That is always an effective way to reason. 2) We should take the teaching and the very words of the Bible very seriously. Jesus built his case on the tense of one word — the verb “am” — in one verse of the Bible. Jesus’ attitude toward the Scripture is one of complete trust and (even) minute obedience. We cannot follow him and trust him without adopting for ourselves his attitude toward the Bible.

2. What can we learn and infer about life after death, according to Jesus?

First, we see that Jesus affirms it! He speaks of us being “like angels” in the future state (v. 25).

Second, we see that we keep our personalities in eternity — we will still be ourselves. Some people have inferred from Jesus’ answer about marriage (v. 25) that there will be no memory of earlier life or relationships, but that is overlooking what Jesus says about Abraham in v. 26. Abraham is still Abraham, Isaac is still Isaac, Jacob is still Jacob! This is at sharp variance with the notion of Eastern religions. That view is that we enter the

“All-soul” and we lose our individuality and personality and rationality. In contrast, Jesus indicates that we maintain personhood. Jesus himself, in his post-resurrection appearances, is the most specific and vivid revelation of what the afterlife will be like. John 20:26 tells us that Jesus appeared in a room to his disciples though the doors were locked. Yet in Luke 24:37-43, Jesus also appears to his disciples after the resurrection, and proves that he is not “a ghost.” He eats a fish (vv. 42-43). He was corporal, yet he could come through locked doors. Another important point is that in Luke 24:28-31, Jesus appears to two disciples who don’t recognize him at first, though eventually they do. What does all this mean? That in the after life, we will retain our personality, rationality, even our physicality — yet they will all be transfigured and glorified, all flaws and imperfections gone.

Third, we learn that heaven will be a “world of love.” Why? When he says, “we will be like the angels,” some concluded that this means we will become sexless and genderless. Now obviously, the resurrection will radically change sex and gender, but we must beware of thinking that somehow the love we experience in heaven will in any way be less intense than it was in this world. The reason that we won’t “need marriage” is that marriage was just a kind of “training wheels” — a single place where we could go deep in love with one individual. But in the resurrected, renewed world: *“the intimacy which humans share with one another in marriage is universalized in the joy and love of heaven.”* (Michael Green, *Matthew for Today*, p. 214). Another commentator says: *“The greatness of the changes at the resurrection (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:44; Philippians 3:21; 1 John 3:1-2) will doubtless make the wife even of seven brothers capable of loving all and the object of the love of all — [somewhat like] a good mother is loved by all her children and is loved by them.”* (D. Carson, *Matthew Vol. 2*, p. 462). In other words, the love and communion we will have with all brothers and sisters in eternity will be infinitely beyond what we can only have fleetingly, partially, here on earth with one person in marriage (if we are very, very “lucky”!)

Like many people today, the Sadducees ridiculed the idea of afterlife because they could not imagine it. “Why would we want to float around all day on the clouds playing harps?” Though we don’t know that Jesus convinced the Sadducees, he surely silenced them. His suggestive hints at the character of our eternal life with God are so exciting and penetrating that the skeptics had nothing to ridicule.

3. Read verses 28-30. Why is Jesus’ response to the teacher of the law so amazing to them? (verse 34b, “no one dared ask him any more questions.”) What does it teach us about ourselves? How does it tell us more about the law?

This inquiry is still quite thorny and designed to trip Jesus up, but it seems also to be much more sincere and genuine. A teacher of the law was impressed with Jesus’ wisdom (v. 28) so he asks him an extremely difficult question. The teachers of the law were professional scribes and scholars of the law. They spent their lives studying, classifying, and categorizing it. Some had discerned 613 rules in the Old Testament law. And they were always trying to distinguish the lighter ones from the heavier ones. The question was: “of all the hundreds of rules and commands, which one is the most important?”

Jesus takes two commands from the Old Testament. First he takes the “*shema*,” Deuteronomy 6:4, which the pious Jew recited every morning and evening. It commands us to love God with all our being. The second he took from Leviticus 19:18, to love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves. Thus Jesus boils down all of the law of God into one principle — love, directed to God and to others. Here Jesus is going to the very heart of the ethical dilemma. Human thinkers have for centuries felt there was a tension between “Law” and “Love.” Do I do the legal thing, or the “loving” thing? Joseph Fletcher some years ago pitted these two against each other in his famous “situation ethics.” Fletcher said, essentially, that every law is relative except the law “to love.” Jesus, however, does not pit the two against each other. (In Matthew, we learn that he added, “*On these two hang all the law*” (Matthew 22:40). He is not so much picking one or two rules over the others, nor is he choosing love over law, but rather he is showing the priority of love *within* the law (Carson, p. 465). The law is not being fulfilled unless it is observed as a way of giving and showing love to God or others. This means:

a) First, on the one hand, Jesus shows us that love actually defines the lawful life. Jesus is saying, “what the law is really after is a loving life!” Of course, many of the Bible’s commands are, for clarity’s sake, cast as negatives — “thou shalt not.” But we must not be deluded by this. When Jesus says all the laws boil down to “love God and neighbor,” he is saying we have not fulfilled a law simply by avoiding what the law prohibits but we must also do and be what the law is really *after* — namely love. As Jesus shows in the Sermon on the Mount, the point of “thou shalt not commit adultery” is to be a loving spouse. (To just refrain from extra-marital sex is not enough.) The point of “thou shalt not kill” is to be a great, loving, self-sacrificing neighbor. The point of “thou shalt not steal” is to be radically and gladly generous. The point of “thou shalt not lie” is honest and personally revealing communication. We are not to be islands to each other. So every negative is actually pointing to a positive. Instead of watching our step around dozens of “thou shalt nots”, we are to find ways to love God and others deeply. Jesus here defines Christian ethics in a way that is delightful and very positive. It is all about good relationships, with God and others.

b) Second, Jesus shows us that law actually defines the loving life. Consider what Jesus is saying — that God gave us the law to show us how to construct a loving life. That refutes Joseph Fletcher. He says, “don’t do the legal thing — do the loving thing.” But Jesus here is saying, “ah, but how do you know what the loving thing is? You may, in your limited wisdom think it is loving to lie, to hide the truth, but as your Creator I am telling you that you are wrong! What do you think the law is for? It is God’s answer to the question, ‘what is the loving thing to do?’ Obey the law — then you will be truly a loving person.” Of course, in a fallen world, there may be situations in which the technically legal thing and the most loving thing seem to contradict. We should be very slow, however to trust our own wisdom in these matters. Anyone who says that “the loving thing” goes against God’s law is really saying, “I know better than God what is the most loving and beneficial behavior.” But how could you know better than God? God is the Creator of every person and the whole universe of human relationships, and therefore his law: 1) reflects what he will love and hate to see in us (so unless we

follow it, how can we love him?) and 2) reflects what human beings need (so unless we follow it, how can we love them?)

There may be one more insight we can glean from Jesus' teaching here on law and love. The law is not being fulfilled unless it is observed as a way of giving and showing love to God or others. If it is done as a way only or primarily to get love from God and others, in "works-righteousness," it is not being used properly. It is possible to concentrate on ritual and requirements "burnt offerings and sacrifices" (v. 33) and compliance with all behavioral regulations and still miss the inner dynamic of "*faith expressing itself through love*" (Galatians 5:6).

In summary, therefore, Jesus is saying that we must obey the law out of love (in a response to his grace) and in order to love (in response to his wisdom).

Note on loving neighbor "as yourself": When Jesus says, "Love thy neighbor as thyself," he is not commanding us to "love ourselves." Rather, this commandment assumes that we all love ourselves. Someone may say, "how can he assume this when so many people struggle with self-hate?" but that is to read into the word "love" more than is meant. In the Bible, love is not primarily a feeling, but an action. (That is a major implication of Jesus' teaching here. He is showing us that love is a duty, not just an emotion.) Love is giving priority to someone's needs and concerns. Even if I feel distaste for my neighbor, I am loving my neighbor if I meet his needs and give his concerns priority equal or greater than mine. Thus, when Jesus assumes our self-love, he is not talking about healthy confidence, or "self-esteem" as we use the term today. He is assuming an endless supply of self-concern. Even people complaining of "low self-esteem" show their intense concern for their own welfare — otherwise why does their lack of self-esteem bother them so?! "To love our neighbor as ourselves" means: to meet the needs of others with all the energy, delight, creativity, and consistency with which we meet our own.

4. Read verses 32-34. In what way is the scribe's question so wise, and why does Jesus say he is near the kingdom?

The teacher admits that these two commands are the most important (rather than all the regulations about burnt offerings and sacrifices v. 33). His reference to the "offerings" shows that he realizes that these cannot make up for sins. When he does that, he is coming to recognize what an impossible standard the law is. The closer he gets to seeing this, the closer he is to figuring out the gospel. If we concentrate on rules and regulations exclusively, we can begin to feel pretty righteous, but when we look at the heart attitude that the law really is requiring and getting at, we begin to realize how much we need grace and mercy. So this is always the first step to understanding the gospel. Before Jesus can tell us the good news about his work on the cross, first he must bring us to see that we cannot save ourselves. Before he can comfort us with his grace, he must disturb us by showing us the Law, showing us both the fairness and yet the impossibility of the law's requirement.

What is happening here is very analogous to Mark 10:17-23. (Though it is gentler and much less confrontational. Jesus always gives us what we need!) In that case and this one, Jesus shows that the law demands that we give God everything (10:21; 12:30). Both questioners get close to the truth by acknowledging how impossible the standard of the law is (10:21; 12:34). To accept God's humanly impossible standard and the inability of religion ("offerings") to save us is to take the first step toward Jesus. The gospel is: STEP #1 – See you are more evil and sinful than you ever dared believe, yet STEP #2 – See you are more loved and accepted in Jesus than you ever dared hope. This scribe is near the first step.

C. S. Lewis wrote, "*A recovery of the old sense of sin is essential to Christianity. Christ everywhere takes it for granted that we are bad. Until we really feel this assumption of his to be true, we are not part of the audience to which his words are addressed... When we merely say that we are bad, the wrath of God seems a barbarous doctrine. As soon as we actually perceive our badness, it appears inevitable.*"

5. Read verses 35-40. Why is it so amazing that King David would call some human "my Lord"? What misunderstanding about the Messiah is Jesus correcting in this question?

Here, for the first time, Jesus "goes on the offensive", posing a question to the religious leaders rather than answering one of theirs. Jesus asks, "if David is the king of Israel, who in the world could he be calling 'my Lord' in Psalm 110? And if this person is the Messiah, one of David's own descendents to whom he is speaking prophetically — why in the world would he refer to one of his own sons as 'my Lord'?" This is a remarkable argument. It comes down to this: David's language is inappropriate and inexplicable if this figure being addressed is just a human being.

Therefore, the Messiah must be more than a great human military leader who will lead the revolt against the Roman oppressors. Jesus is making them re-examine their assumptions about the nature of the Messiah. He is pointing to a Messiah who is greater than that which was popularly conceived and whose triumph therefore is greater than that which was popularly conceived as well.

6. Jesus' statement in verses 38-40 comes after a series of controversies with the religious leaders. How does what he says here reflect what we have seen in chapters 11 and 12?

The challenge Jesus issues with Psalm 110 seems to be the "knockout punch." After the "Greatest Commandment" discussion we are told that no one dared ask any more questions (v. 34), but with Jesus' question about "David's Lord" he has given them an airtight exegetical and theological case for his ministry. Jesus had come to the central city of the land, where all the greatest teachers and religious experts were to be found. And he had beaten them fair and square. "*The teacher who never attended the right schools (John 7:15-18) confounds the greatest theologians in the land.*" (Carson, p.

468). Then Jesus turns to the crowd, which always is delighted to see the “experts” confounded (v. 37), and he issues another warning about these kinds of religious leaders and religious guides. How can we tell who they are? Jesus gives us the following signs:

a) First, they crave recognition and status (“*be greeted in the marketplace*” v. 38b). They are not serving their people, but using their people to get the acclaim they want.

b) Second, they focus on power. They know and jealously protect their “turf” (“*the most important seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets*” v. 39a). They are mainly concerned about the power they wield in the city and within the religious institutions.

c) Third, they miss the main principles of “loving their neighbor” (v. 40a — “*widow’s houses*”). They show it by their lack of concern for the poor and needy. They tend to serve those who can repay them, and minister to the people who are well-connected and who can open doors for them.

In sum, these persons do not see ministry so much as an opportunity for service as a sphere for management and career advancement.

7. Read verses 41-44. Why does Mark put the story of the widow here?

She is the complete opposite of the sophisticated, skeptical Sadducees or the super-religious Pharisees. But Mark shows that her commitment to God is one of the “whole heart,” as Jesus was speaking in 12:30. Thus she is put here as a contrast. Whether under-religious or “over”-religious, both groups of leaders really idolize the self. They stay in complete control — they both have a religion that helps them avoid their absolute need for a savior. So they are “self-sufficient,” and have not gotten to the total dependence and heart commitment of the widow. She gives literally her whole life.

Summary: We must avoid being like either the Sadducees or the Pharisees. 1) The Sadducees had a God “too small,” and they ignored much of what Scripture taught. They were skeptical of the supernatural. They were “permissive liberals.” 2) The Pharisees on the other hand “missed the forest for the trees” when it came to the law. They were caught up in negatives and details and missed the fact that real religion is about relationships of love with God and others. And they missed that the law was designed to show them that they could not be saved and brought into a right relationship with God by adherence to it. Thus the Pharisees were “legalistic conservatives.” Strange — in the end, both of them were mere moralists, having missed that the relationship of love with God was the real point. In Jesus’ talk to the Sadducees, he showed that his relationship with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob couldn’t be ended by death. To the Pharisees he showed that “Love God” was the main commandment.

There are two ways that you can fail to understand the gospel. You can use religion, orthodox, traditional religion, to be your own Lord and your own Savior. (The religious person says, "of course God owes me, because I am a good person.") Or you can use irreligion and skepticism and licentiousness to be your own Lord and your own Savior. (The irreligious person says, "nobody tells me how to live! I determine what is right and wrong for me!") Both are the same, fundamentally. Both the conservative Pharisees and the liberal, sophisticated Sadducees refuse to let Jesus be their Savior and both maintain control over their own lives. They reject salvation by grace and therefore the Lordship of Christ. Instead, we must be like the teacher of the law who began to see the impossibility of self-salvation, and even more, like the widow.

8. Read verses 12:18-44. What aspect of Jesus' teaching is most challenging to you? How can you more fully follow "the teaching of the King?"

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Jesus is the Messiah and, according to the OT, this means that he is incomparably greater than David, descended from David but also the Son of God. As such, he has authority to interpret Scripture and to judge who is near and who is far from kingdom of God. The kingdom of God, God's reign, has itself come "near" in Jesus' presence on earth (cf. 1:14-15).

Why Jesus Came: As the Messiah, He is due our own whole allegiance. Instead of living for self, we can now live for God.

How should I respond? The passage contains two negative examples and two positives.

We must beware – of denying (either in theory like the Sadducees or in practice like the Pharisees) that there will be a resurrection, and therefore that there will be judgement and salvation. Such denial ignores what Scripture teaches about God's power.

We must beware – of religion like that of the scribes in general which courts homage from others, idolizing self. Such religion may look very holy, but fails in what is due to God and our neighbor.

We must emulate – the wise scribe's understanding of God's demands. Jesus commends him not because he has kept the two great commandments but because he knows they are the standard by which he will be judged, and that religion cannot make up for not keeping them.

We must emulate – the poor widow's total commitment, not just financially but personally. What she gives is, literally "her whole life" (cf. 8:34-37).

Prayer requests

Mark

The world won't last forever

Mark 13:1-47

OPTIONAL STUDY

Introduction to Eschatology

There is little consensus among Christians with regard to the details of what the Bible teaches about the “end times.” (The theological term for this area of inquiry is *eschatology*.) On the one hand, we must remember that the basic teaching of the New Testament on this could not be clearer: Jesus Christ will return visibly and personally at the end of time to judge and renew the whole world. There is very little disagreement about this fact among those who accept the basic trustworthiness of the Bible. Some estimate that almost one quarter of the New Testament is devoted to proclaiming this fact. If you reject the concept of the Second Coming of Christ, you essentially have to reject the reliability of the entire New Testament. Jesus is coming back.

But on the other hand, beyond this essential teaching, Christians with very similar commitments and beliefs have not been able to agree on most of the details regarding the Lord's return. One reason for this is because much Biblical prophecy comes in a literary genre often called “*Apocalyptic*.” Every literary genre comes with its own set of interpretive rules. We do not interpret poetry the same way we interpret history. But what are the “rules” for interpreting prophecy? “*Apocalyptic*” looks seductively like simple historical narrative, only written “ahead of time.” But it is also much like poetry in its images and ambiguities. In short, it is very difficult to understand Biblical prophecy. (When we see how New Testament writers interpreted Old Testament prophecies about the birth of Christ, we see just how tricky such interpretation is. For example, see Matthew 2:14 citing Hosea 11:1 as a prediction that Jesus would go to Egypt. Would you have ever interpreted Hosea 11:1 as a Messianic prophecy if Matthew hadn't explained it?)

What does this mean? First, it means we must hold any of our convictions about eschatology with a certain amount of tentativeness and humility. If we hold our views of prophecy and end-times with the same assurance and conviction with which we hold our views of Christ and the Gospel, we are simply giving ourselves too much credit. What makes us think that we are so much wiser than most of the rest of the Christian church? (Any particular view of the end is virtually a minority position — that is how fractured the church is over the interpretation of details!)

Second, however, we should not simply avoid any discussion of details. Our views here do have some impact on how we live our lives in the world. Our “eschatology” (as we shall see) can make us either very optimistic or very pessimistic about life in this world, and that affects how we spend our money and our time.

Therefore, we should study this subject with humility, but we *should* study it.

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The occasion for Jesus' discourse is his prediction that the temple will be destroyed. The temple was an impressive building. Josephus, the Jewish historian, tells us each stone was approximately 37 feet long, 12 feet high, and 18 feet long. Therefore, when Jesus says "not one stone will be standing upon another," he is predicting an extremely violent event, and a tremendous disaster. We know that this prophecy came true. In 70 A.D. the Roman army under Titus destroyed Jerusalem. He raised the Temple to the ground, as a "lesson" and warning to all rebels. This is quite important background knowledge for any readers of this passage.

1. Since the disaster Jesus is predicting in verse 2 is so mammoth, what point in history do the disciples probably think Jesus is describing? (i.e. What are the "these things" that the disciples are asking about in verse 4?)

The disciples probably believed that such an amazing event would actually be the end of the world — Judgement Day, the final establishment of God's kingdom. Therefore, "*when these things will be*" they are asking, "when will the final Judgment Day be?" But, of course, we know that the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. was not the end of the world. Therefore, though they don't know it, they are asking him about two separate events. Jesus' answer, therefore, should be read referring both to the end of the temple/Jerusalem AND the end of the world. This may be the key to interpreting this difficult passage.

This means that Jesus' discourse should be read at "two levels." Jesus is describing a very terrible time in Jewish history — the rebellion against Rome and the destruction of Jerusalem from 66 A.D. to 70 A.D. This is a 'mini-end' of the world. It is a time of terrible stress and trauma. Then he also speaks of the true and final end of the world. There are times (as we will see below) that he seems to be referring to both events at once, and other times he is rather clearly referring to just one of the two events.

Do you find this 'two-level' reading confusing? Yes, but it is also clarifying. Many people wish to read the entire text as speaking only of the very final ending of the world. If you read Mark 13 like that, then you are ignoring the great significance of the destruction of Jerusalem, and you may be led to construct a very detailed program for the 'end-times.' Because of the reference to the temple in 13:14, some Christians believe that the temple will literally have to be rebuilt and desecrated before Jesus can come back. On the other hand, there are many people who wish to see the entire text as speaking only of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. They are then led to take all references to the Son of Man 'coming in clouds' to be figurative. On balance, the 'two-level' interpretation is the best.

The disciples asked two questions: 1) "*when will these things be?*" and 2) "*what will the signs that are about to be fulfilled?*" But, since Jesus must tell them about two events, not one, we must look in his teaching for answers not to two questions about one event, but four questions about two events.

A-1 “when will the temple end?” A-2 “what will be the signs leading up to that?”

B-1 “when will the world end?” B-2 “what will be the signs leading up to that?”

A good way through the text is to ask ‘which of these basic questions is Jesus addressing here?’ (Remember — at many points Jesus may be treating both events at the same time, and yet it will be clarifying to try to make the distinction between the end of the temple and the end of the world.

2. Read through verses 5-13 and verses 14-23. After reading each, circle which question you think Jesus is addressing in that particular section.

A-1 “when will the temple end?” A-2 “what will be the signs leading up to that?”

B-1 “when will the world end?” B-2 “what will be the signs leading up to that?”

verses 5-13:	A-1	A-2	B-1	B-2
verses 14-23:	A-1	A-2	B-1	B-2

In the following, I’ve given what I think is the best reading of the text. Just keep in mind that sincere students and good commentators will differ about these matters.

vv. 5-13 — A-1 A-2 B-1 B-2.

Answer: A-2 On the whole, this seems to be speaking of the signs of the times before the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. **Case:** vv. 5-8 - In this description of the political scene Jesus describes a succession of false Messiahs (vv. 5-6), many reports of war and actual wars (vv. 7-8), and earthquakes (v. 8). We don’t know about the latter (the earthquakes), but just before the destruction of Jerusalem, the “zealots” (Jews who wanted to throw off Roman rule) led several years of uprisings and wars against Rome. In verses 9-13 — In this description of the church scene Jesus says that his disciples will be persecuted and tried (vv. 9, 11, 13). The gospel will be preached all over the Roman world, not just in Judea (v. 10). This happened as well (see Colossians 1:6, 23). An additional point: Jesus is talking about what would happen to “you” — his own apostles. The reference to the “synagogues” (v. 9) also seems to refer to the actual experience of the apostles. If it was the experience of believers before the end of the world, why would they be flogged in the synagogues? **Anti-case:** On the other hand, Jesus speaks of this time as the ‘beginning of birth pains’ (v. 8). This term would most likely be associated with the ‘birth of the new world’.

vv.14-23 — A-1 A-2 B-1 B-2.

Answer: A-1 This seems to be a description of the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. **Case:** vv.14 — In this description of “*the abomination of desolations*” we have a clear reference to the prophecy in Daniel 9:24-27 that something would happen in the temple that would desecrate it. No one is sure what this was! Perhaps the most likely

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fulfillment of the prophecy was the destruction of the building itself. Josephus, the Jewish historian says that the Zealots moved into and occupied the temple during their revolt against Rome. They allowed people who committed crimes to roam through the Holy of Holies. Murder was supposedly committed within the temple. This could be an explanation of the term. But we can't be certain. In any case, God is signaling that the temple is 'over'. vv. 15-23 — This describes a definite time and place of stress, but it doesn't seem possible to ascribe these events to the end of the world. If this was the end of the world, why would it be worse if it came in winter (v. 18)? If this were the end of the world why would it be of any help to leave Jerusalem (v. 14)? We know that all these kinds of things occurred when Titus descended on Jerusalem and razed it to the ground. That seems to be the best explanation for them.

“Seven years of bloody strife followed. At first the Jewish rebels gained the upper hand. Finally... under Titus... the Roman legions moved toward Jerusalem and the noose tightened. This time there was no relief. In April of the year 70 the siege began. The suffering of those who were trapped in Jerusalem became horrific. In September the most zealous Jewish rebels made their last stand in the temple... Sulpicius Severus reported that Titus wanted to eradicate the temple 'in order that the Jewish and Christian religions might more completely be abolished; for although these religions were mutually hostile... the Christians were nevertheless an offshoot of the Jews, and if the root were taken away the stock would easily perish". (Mark Noll, Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity, p. 26.)

Why was the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple so significant for Christians?

Why would Jesus spend time discussing the destruction of Jerusalem, and why would Mark (and Matthew) devote such time to it? Why did the early church need to understand it? Why do we?

3. Why do you think the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem was so significant for Christians?

First, it was significant theologically. Jesus comes as the fulfillment of all of Old Testament worship. Jesus has fulfilled the 'clean laws' so that all the dietary and ritual purity laws are abolished. Jesus has fulfilled all the offering and sacrificial system, so that we no longer have to make atonement for sins. Jesus has fulfilled — indeed has replaced — the temple itself. He is 'God-with-us.' Through him we enter into the presence of God. The literal, historical destruction of the temple is then a final proof that the kingdom of God has come in Jesus. It should not simply be read as God's judgment on the city for rejecting Christ (though that element is certainly present in Jesus' teaching about it in the Synoptic gospels). It is final vindication that God has come in Christ. We now have a 'new and living way' into the heart of God.

Second, it was significant culturally.

“While Christianity in its very earliest years may, in fact, have functioned as an appendage of Judaism, by the year 70 it was moving out on its own. That move to independence was greatly accelerated by Roman destruction of the Jewish temple... The blows that Vespasian, Titus, Hadrian, and other Roman generals rained upon Jerusalem did not destroy the Christian church. Rather they liberated the church for its destiny as a universal religion, offered to the whole world.” (Noll, pp. 26-27.)

The historian Mark Noll is referring to a tension in early Christianity that we know about through the writings of the Apostle Paul. Jewish Christians expected that new Gentile Christians would become culturally Jewish — adopting Jewish ways of living and behaving. But Paul objected to that. He insisted that the gospel of grace was a liberating force that made it possible for Christians to ‘stay in their culture’ when they converted. Legalistic ‘works-righteousness’ led to cultural narrowness, and long lists of behavioral “do’s and don’ts.” Under Paul’s teaching and leadership, the Christian church was becoming a trans-cultural, multi-ethnic phenomenon, with growing Christian churches in all cities and nations. (Cf. v. 10 — *And the gospel must first be preached to all nations.*) The destruction of Jerusalem was the final confirmation of Paul’s effort to make Christianity a faith for all peoples. It was the final blow to the mistaken idea that Christianity was the religion of one culture.

Of course, these points are just as important for us today as it was for the early church. We too must remember the implications of the gospel of grace. Some point out that the ‘center’ of Christianity is again on the move. This time it is moving to the southern hemisphere, to Africa, Latin America, and Asia, where Christianity is growing much faster than it is in its old center — Europe and North America. When the Christian ‘center’ becomes proud and complacent, God finds a way to shake us up and move us out, recovering the fact that he wants us to preach *to all nations*.

4. Read through verses 24-27, 28-31, and 32-37. After reading each, circle which question you think Jesus is addressing in that particular section.

A-1 “when will the temple end?” A-2 “what will be the signs leading up to that?”

B-1 “when will the world end?” B-2 “what will be the signs leading up to that?”

verses 24-27:	A-1	A-2	B-1	B-2
verses 28-31:	A-1	A-2	B-1	B-2
verses 32-37:	A-1	A-2	B-1	B-2

vv. 24-27 — A-1 A-2 B-1 B-2

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Answer: B-1 This is a description of the end of the world. **Case:** The events described cannot be mistaken here for anything else. He describes the end of the cosmic order as we know it, with the sun darkened and the stars falling (vv. 24-25). Jesus himself returns to earth in glory.

vv. 28-31 — A-1 A-2 B-1 B-2

Answer: A-1 I believe this is a more detailed reference to how long it will be until the temple is destroyed. **Case:** The v. 30 statement is that “this generation will not pass away” until “these things” take place. Obviously, the destruction of Jerusalem did occur within the lifetime of Jesus’ hearers, but the end of the world did not. Therefore, Jesus is not claiming that the disciples’ “generation” would see the end of the world, but only that it would see the end of the temple. Many Christians want to read the entire chapter as referring to the end of the world. If you do that, you have a big problem with this verse!

vv. 32-37 — A-1 A-2 B-1 B-2.

Answer: B-2 This is most likely talking about the end of the world, not the end of Jerusalem. **Case:** Here Jesus is referring to “*that day*,” a typical Biblical term for Judgement day. He says that no one (not even Jesus in his earthly form) knows when that will be. The details of the signs before the destruction of Jerusalem are far more detailed, and even the general time frame is given — it’s “*within this generation*.” But Jesus apparently is refusing to say much at all about the signs before then end of the world.

5. Make a list of all the insights you can glean from verses 5-37 about the second coming of Jesus Christ to earth.

a. He will return personally. (v. 26 — men will see). It is widely assumed by many people that the Second Coming doctrine needs to be jettisoned as a primitive, mistaken belief of the early church. Many believe references to Jesus’ “return” simply means that Jesus’ spirit and teaching lives on and will triumph. But in this place Jesus is claiming that he will return personally and visibly. It is impossible to maintain the ‘symbolic only’ view of the Second Coming in the face of this passage. If Jesus believed this so strongly, either he was right, or we shouldn’t follow his teaching at all. It’s one or the other. But what we can’t hold is that it is just a symbol.

C. S. Lewis does a good critique of the view which sees Christ’s Second Coming as a doctrine to be abandoned or revised:

“The modernist says, ‘Every great man is partly of his own age and partly for all time. What matters in his work is always that which transcends his age... We value Shakespeare for the glory of his language and his knowledge of the human heart, not for his belief in witches or the divine right of kings... So with Jesus. His belief in a speedy and catastrophic end to history belongs to him not as a great teacher, but as a first-century peasant...’

[But] when we select for serious consideration those doctrines which 'transcend' the thought of his own age and are 'for all time', we are assuming that the thought of our age is correct: 'thoughts that transcend the great man's age' really mean thoughts that agree with ours... No one would reject Christ's apocalyptic on the ground that apocalyptic was common to first-century peasants unless you have already decided that the thought in that respect was mistaken. But that is surely to have begged the question. [And] if we accept the doctrine of the Incarnation, we must surely be very cautious in suggesting that any circumstance in the culture of first-century Palestine was a hampering or distorting influence upon his teaching. Do we suppose that the scene of God's earthly life was selected at random? — that some other scene would have served better?" ("The World's Last Night")

b. He will return triumphantly. (v. 26). "Coming in clouds with great power and glory." In his first coming, he came in weakness as a servant to suffer for evil. But the next time will be totally different. He will come in strength as a ruler to destroy evil. He will come in a form that is beautiful and majestic.

This is the main theological and practical point of all "*apocalyptic*." The message is: God is in control. Despite the terrible stresses and cataclysms, history is linear — it is going somewhere. Everything will be brought to a conclusion at the throne of God. If we worry too much about the details of prophecy we will miss this main practical point — the Lord will triumph. This is critical for Christian hope and practical endurance. This teaches us the 'already but not yet' of the kingdom. We can handle our problems and frustrations with hope because we realize that nothing works properly yet. We must not have utopian visions, we must be prepared for only partial success and achievement. But we know that someday we will be part of this coming kingdom.

c. He will return redemptively. His return will mark the renewal of the created order. vv. 24-25 ("*the heavenly bodies will be shaken*") show that this is no mere spiritual or even a political revolution, but an renewal of the entire physical universe. Jesus speaks of the "regeneration of all things" in Matthew 19:28. The physical world will not be removed but will be 'shaken' and purged of all blemish and brokenness.

Jesus is coming in "clouds" (v. 26). Notice that it doesn't say he will be coming "through the clouds" of the atmosphere, but rather "*in clouds with great power and glory*." In the Old Testament, God's royal shekinah glory-presence was appeared as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. At the transfiguration, God's presence appeared as a cloud (Mark 9:7). In the Old Testament, this glory cloud only rest in or above the Holy of Holies, and it was deadly to those who touched it (cf. Exodus 19). Now Jesus is coming back to turn the whole world into a giant Holy of Holies. The shekinah presence of God will fill the earth as it once did the Garden of Eden. Everything will be purified, beautified, glorified and renewed.

While the triumphant return is critical for hope and endurance, the redemptive return is important for Christian social engagement. If we do not realize that the coming kingdom

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is a renewal of and a continuation of the physical world, we may be very passive in our battle against suffering, injustice, disease, hunger, and poverty. But as we have shown, the miracles of the kingdom — healing of bodies, feeding of the multitude, raising from the dead — are signs of what the restored world will look like. We are to imitate this coming kingdom in our own word and deed ministry.

“The renewal of Christ’s salvation ultimately includes a renewed universe... there is no part of our existence that is untouched by His blessing. Christ’s miracles were miracles of the kingdom, performed as signs of what the kingdom means...His blessing was pronounced upon the poor, the afflicted, the burdened and heavy-laden who came to Him and believed in Him... The miraculous signs that attested Jesus’ deity and authenticated the witness of those who transmitted the gospel to the church is not continued, for their purpose was fulfilled. But the pattern of the kingdom that was revealed through those signs must continue in the church... Kingdom evangelism is therefore holistic as it transmits by word and deed Christ’s promise for body and soul as well as Christ’s demand for body and soul.” (E.P.Clowney)

d. He will return justly. His angels *gather his elect* (v. 27) which refers to the fact that there are many people who do not belong to him and will be rejected and separated. This is judgement day, when a great division is made in humanity. This is critical for being able to live a life free from anger, bitterness, and a desire for vengeance. Miroslav Volf, a Croatian Christian thinker, explains that it would be impossible to escape the cycle of violence and retaliation if we did not believe that in the end the Lord will right all wrongs and mete out final justice. If we don’t believe this, then we will be tempted to do it ourselves.

My thesis is that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance...My thesis will be unpopular w/ many in the West... But imagine speaking to people (as I have) whose cities and villages have been first plundered, then burned, and leveled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit... Your point to them — we should not retaliate? Why not? I say — the only means of prohibiting violence by us is to insist that violence is only legitimate when it comes from God... Violence thrives today, secretly nourished by the belief that god refuses to take the sword... It takes the quiet of a suburb for the birth of the thesis that human nonviolence is a result of a God who refuses to judge. In a scorched land — soaked in the blood of the innocent, the idea will invariably die, like other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind... if God were NOT angry at injustice and deception and did NOT make a final end of violence, that God would not be worthy of our worship. Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace

e. Finally, he will return unexpectedly. It is impossible to know when he comes back (vv. 32, 33, 35). This is critical for Christian living. See the next question.

6. Read verses 32-37. We know that Jesus is returning but not when Jesus is returning. What is the practical impact of this balance of 'knowing and not knowing'?

Because we know *that* but not *when*, we should be alert (v. 33). This almost must mean that we should live as if Jesus could come back at any moment. The illustration in vv. 34-35 clearly shows that. We are like servants at a house with the master away. Since the master could arrive at any minute, the servant should be living exactly as they would want their master to see them.

A wonderful balance is brought to us by this image:

a. If, on the one hand, we knew exactly when Jesus was coming back, (say, next year), then we would quit our jobs and leave off all maintenance functions and just go a pray and preach the gospel. That kind of radical disengagement from the life of society is not what Christ wants for us, nor does any place in the New Testament. For example, all of II Thessalonians is written against that kind of apocalyptic radicalism. Often it is this very kind of 'certainty' about the details of Biblical prophecy that has led whole groups of people to drop out of society or working for the common good. (Note: The semi-hysteria over Y2K by many Christian groups had the same effect.)

b. If, on the other hand, we knew Jesus could not come back next week (or would not come back at all), we might lose our sense of urgency, and a major incentive to live pleasing to him. C. S. Lewis uses the illustration of a woman's make-up mirror. In a dark room, a woman can use a lighted mirror to put on her make up in such a way that she will look good in sunlight. In the same way, we are to "dress" ourselves morally and spiritually every day in such a way that we could bear the inbreaking of that irresistible light of his presence from heaven. The doctrine of the Second Coming leads us to live with that kind of immediacy and cosmic perspective.

"The doctrine of the Second Coming teaches us that we do not and cannot know when the world drama will end. The curtain may be rung down at any moment... Therefore, precisely because we cannot predict the moment, we must be ready at all moments... What is important is not that we should always fear (or hope) about the End but that we should always remember, always take it into account. An analogy may here help. A man of seventy need not be always feeling (much less talking) about his approaching death: but a wise man of seventy should always take it into account. He would be foolish to embark on schemes that require twenty more years of life; he would be criminally foolish not to have made his will. Now what death is to each, the Second Coming is to the whole human race... the whole life of humanity in this world is precarious, temporary, and provisional." ("The World's Last Night")

In summary, if we didn't think Christ was coming back OR if we thought we knew exactly when Christ was coming back, we would live with less hope and accountability.

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7. Reflect for a minute on how your behavior and life would change if you took seriously what you have learned here about 'The Return of the King'.

Everyone should have somewhat different 'applications'. (Many were mentioned under question #5 and #6.) Here are some possible ones:

a. There would be a wonderful confidence and boldness. We know that Christians can "lose the battle, but never the war". We would know that no one will get away with anything! We would not be discouraged by how things are going.

b. There would be a cure for bitterness. We feel we've been wronged, but Jesus is coming back to gather his elect. We don't have to sit in judgement on others.

c. We would know the ends never justifies the means! We might justify telling a lie or doing something wrong because we think we are getting to a good goal. But Jesus could come back any time — you never know if tonight is the world's last night. You never know if today is the last act in the play of your life. You must never be caught doing anything that disobeys your returning master.

"I can imagine no man who will look with more horror on the End than the conscientious revolutionary who has, in a sense sincerely, been justifying cruelties and injustices inflicted on many of his contemporaries by the benefits he hopes to confer on future generations: generations who, as one terrible moment now reveals to him, were never going to exist... We can, perhaps, train ourselves to ask more and more often how the thing which we are saying or doing (or failing to do) at each moment will look when the irresistible light streams in upon it; that light which is so different from the light of this world — and yet, even now, we know just enough of it to take it into account." ("The World's Last Night")

Therefore we must live in light of his imminent coming. The Bible brings up the "Second Coming of Jesus Christ" not to inspire us to a particular line of speculation, but to inspire us to a particular kind of life.

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Jesus is the true Messiah, Son of Man and Son of God. He is absent now, (verses 5-23) but he will return (verses 24-37). When he comes in glory, all will know who he is.

Why Jesus Came: He came to bring judgement, but not yet judgement on the world. He came to send the gospel out to the elect a New Israel of all nations. When he returns in final judgement, his people will be gathered.

How should I respond? Reject false "messiahs" and false "prophets," however spectacular, and all claims to know the date of Jesus' return. We need to spread the gospel, in light of Jesus' return. The last judgement could come at any time.

Mark

The King is prepared

Study 13 | Mark 12:18-44

This chapter begins the actual “Passion Narrative” of Mark — the actual account of Christ’s death. The foreshadowing and explanations are over. Now we watch it happen. *“The account of Jesus’ betrayal, arrest, condemnation, and execution furnishes a climax to the Gospel and brings together the motifs and themes developed throughout the account.”* (Lane; *The Gospel According to Mark*, p. 485).

1. Read verses 3-9. Why is the woman criticized for her action (verses 4-5)? Why does Jesus call her act “beautiful”?

The location of this event is Bethany (v. 3) just outside Jerusalem. Mark doesn’t give the name of the woman, but John 12:1ff. tells us that the woman who does the anointing was Mary, Lazarus’ sister. Bethany was where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived. The ointment (perfume) was extremely expensive — *300 denarii* (the Greek text reads), which was equivalent to the entire annual wage of an average worker. In all probability, such a valuable commodity was a family heirloom, passed down like jewelry or some other valuable possession. A normal family would have preserved such a precious object and sold it only in time of great need. In a sense, the woman is emptying her net worth on to Jesus. Although it was normal to use some ointment to soften and sweeten the feet of guests and travelers, her action was astonishing and radical.

The contrast with many of the disciples is drawn in vv. 4-5. Some of them complained that her action was extravagant and wrong. The criticism seems fair on the surface. Imagine you see a friend spending her entire year’s salary on a gift to someone. Surely you might say: “This is insane. If you can afford to part with that much money, you should spread it around to a lot of worthy causes.” We should keep in mind that the critics were Jesus’ “disciples” — men who were devoted to Jesus. They certainly were not against giving Jesus gifts and devotion. But this was “over the top” — disproportionate.

Jesus defends the woman with a remarkable statement: “*she has done a beautiful thing to me*” (v. 6) because “*she has anointed my body for burial*” (v. 8). Some believe that this meant she knew he was going to die, though that does not seem likely. But though she may not have had that precise an understanding, she perceived more deeply the magnitude of his worth and love for her. She felt something like the sentiment in the line “*Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small; Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.*” She knew nothing less than her most precious possession would do as a way to express the magnitude of her gratitude, love, and commitment to him. (Remember, Jesus had raised his brother from the dead).

If she probably didn’t specifically know Jesus was going to die, how did this “prepare” him for his burial? It must mean that Jesus, who knew what he was going to face, was deeply comforted and encouraged by this magnificent act. She helped him prepare for his death. He is human, after all.

All this unlocks the word “beautiful.” We are not to love Jesus “instrumentally,” in order to get things from him, like health, wealth, and happiness. We are to love Jesus “aesthetically,” for the sheer beauty of who he is and what he has done. The disciples

had not reached the spiritual level of this woman. They believed Jesus was the Messiah and that he in some way was going to liberate them, but their devotion to him was still calculated and limited. There was a limit to what they thought appropriate to give him.

Note: Jesus' defense of the woman includes "*the poor you have with you always*" (v. 7). This verse has been taken by some to mean that "*you will never eradicate poverty, so why be generous to them?*" That is not Jesus' point at all. He is talking about timing. "*You can help them [the poor] any time you want, but you will not always have me.*" (v. 7) This meant that it is quite right to help the poor, but all other concerns should pale before the climactic event that is about to occur.

2. In what specific ways should we be like her?

a) Her act is extravagantly costly. The perfume was worth "a year's wages" (v. 5), an enormous sum. The implication is that we can never give too much to Jesus. (For example, this obviously is generosity well beyond "the tithe"!) So this means we should be lavish with our money, when it comes to giving to Christ and ministry. We cannot conclude from this passage that we should not have a savings account! But clearly, a committed Christian will not accrue as much personal wealth as he or she would apart from faith. For a Christian gives generously to Christ's ministry.

But the meaning of this incident goes far beyond the realm of finances and money. It is often extremely expensive to obey Christ in terms of social and emotional capital as well as financial. If you simply tell the truth, or act with integrity or act with purity, or forgive (etc., etc.) it may cost you the respect of others, or it may cost you pleasure, or it may cost you freedom, and so on. **The point:** nothing should be of comparable worth to Christ. All else we own should become expendable and should look cheap compared to his supreme value.

b) The act is self-forgetful. In her day (and in ours, too) her action would be considered scandalous. It was not "proper;" it defied convention. People then and now believe that religion is all right in moderate amounts — but we should not get carried away! When you become this radically devoted to Christ, people may look at you as a fanatic, as they did her. But because her love centered on Jesus, she was not in the least self-conscious and she did not care what people thought. So it should be with us.

c) The act was whole-hearted. There is deep emotion expressed here. Her act of anointing his head was intimate and personal. Her belief in Jesus is not just intellectual, but engages her whole heart; it includes her emotions and her actions. This is an act of deep love and devotion. The lavishness of her generosity, the boldness of her deed comes from the deep and passionate love she felt for him.

d) The act was an act of radical vulnerability. By losing all her money and savings, and by losing all her credibility with the crowd, she was trusting that she would not be short-changed in the transaction. In other words, her action made her radically dependent on Christ. She no longer trusted in financial or social capital for her security. Most of us feel that if we give all to him (by obeying unconditionally), he will not take care of our needs. So we disobey, or are half-hearted, out of self-protection. But we must not.

These are all marks of a person who is not following Jesus for what they get, but for who he is. She is not following him in order to get things but in order to get him. Her critics found Jesus useful, but she found him beautiful. There was a limit to what they would give him; there was no limit to what she wanted to give him.

3. Read verses 10-12, 20-21. Judas is a chilling example. Here is a man who looked like a believer in every way, but was not. a) In what ways are we all like Judas? b) In what ways is a genuine Christian unlike Judas?

a) How are we all like Judas?

We are like Judas in that we all sin, and every sin against Jesus is actually a betrayal. Judas' sin seems particularly grievous because he was not part of the crowd, the Roman regime, or the religious establishment, but a close personal friend of Christ.

In the same way we, once we are Christians, no longer relate to Jesus simply as Creator or Magistrate, but as a personal friend, brother, spouse, and covenant partner. If a magistrate makes a law and you disobey it, it is a simple violation. But if a friend solemnly asks you to do something and you act against her wishes, that is not only a violation of your word but a personal act of betrayal. Now non-Christians sin against the Lord only in his relationship to them as Creator and King. They owe him obedience because he made them and owns them. But Christians can also sin against the Lord in his relationship to them as Redeemer and Brother. We are doubly obligated to him, for he sacrificed for us, and we know it, and we have entered into a personal family relationship with him. Thus all the sins of a Christian are always personal betrayals.

This is an important balance to the truth of Romans 8:1ff – “*Now there is no more condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*” A Christian is “in Christ” — we are seen by God as if we are already raised and seated in the heavenlies (Ephesians 2:5). We are seen as clothed in Christ's righteousness. His delight in us is based on what Christ has done, not what we do, and so nothing we do can bring us into condemnation. And yet — somehow — though our sins can destroy our acceptance in his eyes, our sins are also in many ways *more* grievous to his heart than the sins of others. We *know* him and what he's done.

It is very difficult to strike this remarkable balance in our own lives and hearts. We must live with more joy and boldness and confidence that he absolutely loves us and yet with more sensitivity to and hatred for the sin remaining in us.

b) How is a genuine Christian unlike Judas?

Though Judas was closely associated with Christ, received thorough teaching and instruction, and even went out with the other disciples and healed and cast out demons (Mark 3:13-19), yet Jesus' allusion (v. 21 “*It would be better for him if he had not been born.*”) indicates that Judas was a lost soul. Jesus says this even more bluntly in John 6:70 and 17:12, “*none is lost except the one doomed to destruction*” (cf. also John 6:64).

So Judas was like a genuine Christian in many ways — in his beliefs and ministry activities. How do we know whether we are real Christians or just superficially religious, as Judas was? The key difference is that he did not repent after he sinned. He simply despaired. It was not the magnitude of his feeling, but the nature of his despair that indicated an unregenerate heart. When a person will not repent, it shows a fundamental disorientation toward and rejection of God's grace. One may feel too proud to repent, or too self-hating to repent. But in either case, the person is too self-righteous to accept God's "charity." To say "I know God forgives me, but I can't forgive myself" or to say "God can't forgive me" actually proves a rejection of the gospel of grace, and a reliance of good works as the system of salvation. Even though you have failed to "live up" to moral standards, you feel you should have done so, and now you simply will not change your basic legalism and switch to a relationship to God based on grace. A Christian who has understood and accepted the gospel will always be able to accept God's forgiveness eventually.

Note: We must be careful not to read too much into Judas' suicide. A real Christian can get extremely despondent before becoming re-oriented to God's grace. Sometimes, during that time of despondency, a Christian might impulsively or unwisely take his or her life. The suicide then interrupts the normal process of coming back to a reliance on God's mercy in Christ. Thus we cannot say that a person who commits suicide has rejected God's grace. We know that Judas rejected God's grace not because he committed suicide but because the Biblical text tells us he did not believe (John 6:64). If you are a Christian and you commit suicide, you sin grievously. You have murdered. But no sin can bring us into condemnation if we have believed (Romans 8:1).

4. Read verses 18-20. Why does Jesus stress the fact that his betrayer is one of the Twelve? What do they reveal about themselves by their response? How are they different than the woman who broke the jar?

Notice that Jesus says that the betrayer is "one of you" four times — twice in v. 18 and twice in v. 20. Why would he stress this so much? By this statement, Jesus is humbling the disciples to see that they are all quite sinful and that they stand only by his grace. He is trying to show them their weakness.

The disciples all along have overestimated themselves. Jesus has tried to repeatedly show them that they are "chosen" people but not "choice." They could not cast out the demon in the boy (Mark 9:14ff.) and he indicated that it was because of their lack of prayer and spiritual dependence. Three times he sought to instruct them in the heart of the gospel — his rejection and death. The first time Peter actually rebuked him (8:31-33). The second and third time they actually ignored him and began to argue over who would have a higher place in his kingdom administration (9:30-34 and 10:32-40). He repeatedly shows them that they are weak and sinful and that they need grace; they repeatedly see themselves as competent and worthy of great honor and responsibility.

Now as the gospel nears its climax this theme is also coming to a head. Jesus seeks to melt their hearts (even Judas'?) by repeatedly telling them that the betrayer is among them. Unfortunately, they all react in disbelief – “Surely, not I?” v. 19. They cannot imagine themselves doing such a thing. In 14:27ff. we see a more specific instance of this. Jesus tries to tell Peter that he will betray him, and Peter refuses to believe it.

The principle is plain. When Jesus loves someone, he continually tries to show them their capacity for sin and their need for sheer grace and absolute mercy. Until we see how incapable we are spiritually, we are incapable of receiving God's grace! And ironically, until we see how useless we are, we cannot become useful. The woman with the ointment apparently had been so humbled by Jesus' love that she gave herself completely to him. The disciples, thinking themselves worthy, are not yet able to give themselves to him as she did.

5. Read verses 12-26; Exodus 12:1-20. When Jesus presides over the Passover meal, and says, “this is my body and blood,” he is drawing parallels between the Passover event and his own mission. What are these parallels and what do we learn from them?

a) The first Passover meal was held on the night before a great deliverance — a deliverance from physical slavery. The Lord's Supper was held on the night before an even greater deliverance — salvation from sin and death itself.

This is a tremendous claim. Jesus shows a tremendous “audacity” in changing and revising a Passover meal that Moses said was to be done as a perpetual ordinance (Exodus 12:14). He is saying something like this: “My death is the central and climactic event toward which the whole story of the people of God and the history of salvation has been moving. Every other deliverance by every other leader, every other sacrifice, every other prophet, priest, king, and hero — have all been pointing to this night. This is the climax of all history. I am about to deal with evil and sin and death once and for all.

b) The first Passover meal was instituted by a deliverer, Moses, who led the people out of bondage. The Lord's Supper was instituted by a greater deliverer, Jesus, who is creating an even greater and more universal people of God.

c) The first Passover meal centered on a lamb that was slain as a substitute. The Lord's supper also has as it's “main course” a Lamb that was slain as a substitute. Notice that at the Lord's Supper, however, Jesus does not pass out any meat. Why? *He* is the Lamb, the lamb to which all the other sacrificial lambs point.

After sending many plagues to Egypt to loosen their oppressive grip on Israel, God finally sends the ultimate plague. He sends “angel of death” into Egypt, which was the “sword of divine justice” unsheathed. In a sense, this was an intrusion of Judgment Day into a specific place and time. It is significant that this divine justice will fall on *everyone*, once it is unleashed. There is no racial prejudice with God's justice. It cannot “pass-over” the Jews simply because they are Jews. In every home, someone will die under the wrath of justice — in every home there would either be a dead child or a

dead lamb. The only way to escape was to put your faith in God's sacrificial provision — namely, you had to slay a lamb and put the blood on the doors as a sign of your faith in God's merciful provision. Any Israelite family who failed to do this — who trusted rather in their racial pedigree or moral attainments to save them that night — were tragically and bitterly disappointed.

Years after the flight from Egypt, Isaiah spoke about our sins: "We all like sheep have gone astray, we have each turned to our own way" (53:6). What could be done about them? Isaiah continues: "and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth" (53:6-7). In this passage, Isaiah is looking beyond the Passover lamb. He is saying that the Passover meal does point back to the little substitutes, the lambs of our past. But he is saying that the meal also points ahead to a great substitute, someone who truly would die for our sins and absorb the wrath of God. John the Baptist put it all together when he said, "behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

d) The first Passover meal contained "unleavened bread". The Israelites were in such haste and danger that they did not have time to use yeast. Thus unleavened bread came to represent the affliction and trials of the people in Egypt and the wilderness. It was customary for the presider at Passover to pass out the bread saying, "this is the bread of our affliction." But the Lord's supper also consists of a course of bread, yet Jesus tells us, "this is the bread of my affliction". The bread now represents the brokenness of his body.

e) The first Passover meal contained four cups of wine, which represented the four promises of blessing in Exodus 6:6-7, "I will deliver." These promises were for salvation from slavery, for fellowship and relationship with God, and for life in a new land. The Lord's Supper also contains a cup of blessing. Jesus' shed blood and death is now "the wine" — the vehicle for all these blessings. He himself took the cup of God's justice (Mark 14:36) so we could have the cup of God's blessing.

f) The first Passover meal was, of course, a meal. It was not enough that a lamb be slain and its blood put on the doorposts. The lamb also had to be appropriated, eaten. In the same way, the Lord's Supper is a way of "taking" the death of Christ and appropriating it personally. It is common to distribute the Lord's Supper and say, "feed on him in your hearts by faith." You don't get the benefit of food unless you take it in and digest it. The "mealness" of Passover and the Lord's Supper tells us that the death of the Lamb is something we must be constantly feeding on and living upon. We are to continually think and reflect on his death and its meaning until it becomes a genuine source of humility, joy, love, forgiveness, wisdom, and strength for our daily lives.

The "mealness" of God's salvation also reminds us that no one can appropriate the benefits of his death without entering into a personal relationship with him. To share a meal with someone is to have a relationship. So Jesus here is saying that we must have a personal relationship with him, that we have to put our faith in him, if all the benefits of his perfect, substitutionary, sacrificial suffering are to come to us.

6. Make a list of everything we learn specifically about the meaning of Christ's death from this teaching that He is our Passover Lamb.

a) Jesus' death is a *sacrifice*. The plain teaching of the New Testament is that Jesus is the Passover lamb — the one to whom all the Passover feasts pointed. The Lord's Supper is the Passover meal. His reference to his blood is important. The Old Testament tells us that only through the shedding of blood can sin be atoned for. (Read Leviticus 17:11 and Hebrews 9:22 — why do you think the Bible says only blood can cleanse from sin? The best answer is — that the just penalty for sin against God is death (Romans 6:23), and thus shed blood represents the forfeiture of life — the only thing valuable enough to pay the penalty with.)

2) Jesus' death is *substitutionary*. A lamb was slain so that the Israelite first born would not be. In other words, the Bible had given the people of God the pieces of a puzzle, but it was not visible for years how they fit. It was clear that we could be saved somehow by substitutionary sacrifice. It was further clear that the helpless, sweet lambs and sheep which were sacrificed weren't really able to atone for sin. It was further clear that some mysterious figure (Isaiah) would suffer for us. He was the one the lambs pointed to. Israel's first born were saved because God's first born is sacrificed.

3) Jesus' death was *absolutely necessary*. We are all subject to the angel of death. The original lamb saved each home from judgement. This means that we are under judgement unless we take shelter under the blood of the lamb. Thus Jesus' death means nothing unless there is wrath and danger and judgement to be saved from.

4) Jesus' death was *poignant*. By Jesus characterizing himself as a lamb, he shows how vulnerable, weak and helpless he became. "He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth" (53:6-7). Though he is all-powerful and omnipotent — look what he became for us!

5) Jesus' death was a *perfect and sufficient sacrifice*. Just as the Passover lamb had to be without blemish, so Jesus was a perfect, sinless person. He did not die to pay for anything of his own. This was all important to support the concept of substitutionary sacrifice. Because he was perfect, his death is of infinite value. We can add nothing to it. There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

CONCLUSION

The New Testament writers go out of their way to tell us that Jesus is the Passover lamb. Other references: In John 19:29, John tells us Jesus was given vinegar to drink on a hyssop branch; the hyssop branch was the bush God commanded the Israelites to use to spread the lamb's blood on their doors. In John 19:36, the point is made that Jesus died before his legs could be broken (a common practice to hasten the death of crucified criminals). In the same way, the Passover lamb had to be perfect — without blemish or broken bones. Much is made of the fact that during Jesus' trial, he was most of the time silent (Mark 14:61). Isaiah 53:7 foretold that the Messiah "was brought like a lamb to the slaughter and as sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth."

If you stopped Israelites in those days and said, “who are you and what is happening here”? They would say: “I was a slave, under a sentence of death, but I took shelter under the blood of the lamb and escaped that bondage, and now God lives in our midst and we are following him to the promised land.” That is exactly what a Christian says today.

Prayer requests

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Just as physical Israel was saved from death in Egypt by death of lambs (Exodus 12), so Jesus is the true Passover Lamb whose death saves the True Israel from death. He is the Suffering Servant who dies for many (Isaiah 53:12). He is totally in control; he is King.

Why Jesus Came: Jesus came to die not for the worthy but for the unworthy, and to give his body and blood to atone for the sins of people of all nations. This makes his death amazingly good news.

How should I respond? Although it looks increasingly as if everyone will deny the crucified Christ, the story is not yet over. In thankful devotion, we can give praise for the death of the “Passover Lamb.”

Suffering at the hands of His friends

Mark

Mark 14:27-52

OPTIONAL STUDY

The next three sections of Mark look at how Jesus suffered at the hands of his friends, enemies, and Father. These titles are taken from the passage titles of the “Read, Mark, Learn” curriculum used for many years at St. Helen’s Bishops Gate Church in London. The titles show us that the suffering of Christ was multi-dimensional — physical, mental, and spiritual. It is necessary to understand the depths of what he endured for us if we are to appreciate the riches of what he procured for us. Secondly it shows us how to face trials in our own life.

Note: We will only touch today on verses 27-31 with little comment. It will be better to consider these predictions of Peter’s denial along with the later account of what and how he did it.

1. Notice in verses 27 and 49 how Jesus continually refers to prophecy throughout his trial. a) What does this tell us about Jesus’ death? b) How does the cross help us to face suffering and injustice in our own lives?

a) What does this reference to prophecy tell us about Jesus’ death?

First, it tells us that Jesus’ death is all part of God’s plan. Nothing is happening by accident (Acts 2:23). This means that evil and suffering can be used (and overcome) by God who weaves it into an overall plan that accomplishes a greater good.

Second, it tells us that Jesus himself, especially in his human nature, heavily used Scripture to walk by faith and to stay true to his course. He quotes the Bible constantly, especially when he is under stress. If *he* needed the Scripture in order to face the difficulties of life, how much more do we need it?

b) How does the cross help us face suffering and injustice in our own lives?

It does so in at least three ways.

First, it shows that God so hates suffering and injustice that he has endured it with us. He is “in solidarity” with those who groan in misery. The sufferings and death of Jesus constitute perhaps the most terrible injustice in history. Jesus suffered (as we will see below) more than anyone has ever suffered. And his death was surely the greatest injustice, because he is the only sinless and perfect defendant, who was not only innocent of the alleged crime, but was innocent of any wrongdoing whatsoever. He is the only person who truly deserved no trouble or suffering at all! This means that he cares. He knows what we go through. It also shows us that God hates tyranny and injustice. He has set himself against it. This is deep encouragement.

Second, however, it shows that we all deserve to die for our sins. The cross means that we are all part of what makes the world a bad place. We sin. We are selfish and unkind to others and rebellious toward God. This is deeply humbling. It keeps us from being terribly self-righteous (in our suffering) toward those who are unkind to us. It keeps us also from being terribly self-righteous (in our suffering) toward God. We cannot demand a happy comfortable life. We don’t deserve it.

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Third, the sufferings of Christ show us how God can include evil and suffering in a plan that eventually brings about redemption, salvation, and joy. In the story of the cross, we see how God had controlled events for centuries leading up to Jesus' death. We can see why nearly every detail of his end had to be as it was. We see the enormous wisdom of the cross, how it perfectly fulfilled both the holiness and love of God. Because the Bible gives us such a clear and elaborate explanation, we are not confused and devastated at the foot of the cross the way the disciples and Christ's admirers were.

Very few people complain "why would God allow all that evil and injustice to happen to Jesus?" because the Bible at great pains shows us the reason behind it. We don't complain because we see a greater good that God was bringing about through the evil and suffering. Now unfortunately we do not have a full explanation of why God allows any other trial or suffering. We don't have a whole book to explain *our* life-sorrows the way we have a book that explains Jesus' life sorrows. But the cross is proof that God has a good plan for us, even if we can't see most of us. On the cross, God says (as it were): "The cross shows how much I love you and how much I hate your suffering! I'm willing to come and be part of it, in order to save you. This is proof I care for you, and that if I have not stopped evil and suffering, I must have a good reason. I am not telling you what that reason *is*, but the cross proves I must have one."

It is a good exercise to imagine what Jesus' followers felt around the cross. God did not seem to be making any sense! Here was a man who was almost single-handedly banishing sickness and brokenness from Palestine by the power of his scores of miracles. Here was a man whose wisdom apparently could heal all the ills of the world. Here was the Son of God. So how in the world could his defeat and death accomplish anything beneficial at all? Why was God allowing this? God almost seemed to be an enemy of the good and the true and the right. Imagine the people who lost their faith at the cross, leaving in disgust, saying, "there is no way God could bring any good out of this!" Yet they were looking at the greatest act of love and wisdom that we know of. This is our challenge. We must not mistrust God because he doesn't fit into our understanding of how things should go.

2. Contrast Jesus' reaction to death (read verses 33-34, 36) to the deaths of so many Christian martyrs in history (read below). Why the difference?

Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer were burned at the stake for their faith in Oxford, England, 1555. They were tied side by side, and when the fire was lit at their feet, Latimer said (famously): "Be of good cheer, Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day, by God's grace, light up such a candle in England, as I trust, will never be put out." At roughly the same time, John Bradford was burned at the stake with John Leaf. As the fire was being brought, he said to Leaf, "Be of good comfort, my brother, for we will have a merry supper with the Lord tonight." Both Bradford and Latimer raised their hands and prayed as they burned. There are innumerable similar accounts of Christian men and women who died for their faith with peace in their hearts.

Contrast the confidence and joy of these martyrs with the demeanor of Jesus, who was

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clearly shaken by his sufferings. In v. 33, we read, "...he began to be deeply distressed and troubled", and he says, (v. 34) "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." He doesn't want to face the experience. Verse 36 – "Take this cup from me." Throughout the gospel of Mark we have seen the enormous power and dignity of Jesus. He claimed to be judge of all the earth, the eternal Son of God. His assurance of his sonship is always absolute. What then can we conclude from the fact that he trembles before his death in a way that far weaker persons have not?

Here we learn by deduction that Jesus faced more on the cross than suffering at the hands of his friends (who abandoned him) and enemies (who tortured and killed him). There is no evidence that Jesus lacked courage, nor that he was more emotionally fragile than most people. The only possible reason that he feared and shrank more than others from his execution is that he was going to suffer a more terrible death than anyone else ever has suffered or will suffer. The death of Jesus was qualitatively different than any other death. The physical pain was nothing to the spiritual experience of cosmic abandonment by the Father.

It is extremely important to notice that Jesus is already sinking and breaking. He is "distressed," "overwhelmed" now, even though the crucifixion hasn't yet begun! Mark is showing us that the very anticipation and foretaste of his suffering was enough to throw the soul of the Son of God into violent agony. What then was the full experience of that pain like? We can't imagine.

The dreadful sorrow and anxiety, then, out of which the prayer for the passing of the cup springs, is not an expression of fear before a dark destiny, nor a shrinking from the prospect of physical suffering and death. It is rather the horror of the one who lives wholly for the Father... Jesus came to be with the Father for an interlude before his betrayal, but found hell rather than heaven opened before him, and he staggered. – William Lane, Commentary on Mark

3. a) What does "the cup" tell us about Jesus' sufferings? (Recall Mark 10:38.) b) Many people reject the very idea of hell or the wrath of God. What impact does such a rejection have on one's appreciation of the love of Christ?

a) "The cup" was a normal Old Testament metaphor for the wrath of God on sin. Ezekiel 23:32-33 reads, "You will drink a cup large and deep, full of ruin and desolation and you will tear your breasts." Isaiah 54:17, 22 – "You will drink the cup of his fury and will stagger." Jesus was going to experience that. One way to imagine it is to think of hell. "Hell" is a Biblical term and a very real condition, but the Scripture is very vague in its specific descriptions. Images of fire and darkness must be taken metaphorically (just like images of gold and jewels with regard to heaven) — but that should be no comfort to us. The images are efforts to convey a condition of complete hopelessness and agony. Hell is the suffering that arises both naturally and legally from sin. The payment is endless torment.

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The idea of hell is not at all far fetched when we consider the “wages of sin” even in this life — tortured conscience, broken relationships, psychological emptiness and fragmentation. Sin is cosmic treason which incurs an infinite debt, and thus the payment is eternal. (*ALL religions have recognized that our deeds are imperishable*”. Czeslaw Milosz, [NY Review of Books](#)). But in a very real sense, hell is also something we choose ourselves. We were built to know, love and serve the Lord as our God, and to the degree we fail to do that our souls do not ‘work’. The prouder and more self-centered we get the less we can love and receive love, the less we can give and receive honesty and truth, and so on. All our lives, we run from God and seek to be our own Lords. Hell — the experience of complete separation from God — simply happens when God finally says, “Thy will be done! You wanted to be our own Lord and Savior. So be it.” Then we fall into complete spiritual disintegration. It is this ‘disintegration’ that Christ experienced for us on the cross.

b) If there is no wrath of God, you can’t really make sense of Jesus’ death nor appreciate the magnitude of his love.

First, you can’t make sense of Jesus’ death. Many people say, “I don’t believe in a God who needs Jesus to die in order to forgive us. I believe in a God who just forgives us out of love. I don’t see the cross as a sacrifice to appease the justice of God, but simply as a wonderful example of how we should love one another sacrificially.” But if Jesus’ death does not ‘objectively’ procure our forgiveness, it can not be a subjectively moving, inspiring example of love. Illustration: If a friend is walking with you by the Hudson River, and if he says, “let me show you how much I love you” and throws himself in and drowns — do you find that an inspiring act of love? No. You think what he did was crazy or stupid in the extreme. But what if your friend is walking with you by the Hudson River and you fall in and he jumps in and rescues you but drowns in the act. Then you will say, “my how he loved me!” If Jesus did not have to die because of our sins, then his deliberately seeking death was quite wrong. If his death did not objectively save us from peril, it cannot subjectively move us to live as he lived.

Second, you can’t appreciate the magnitude of his love. Many people who deny the wrath of God do so because “I believe in a loving God.” But without a ‘doctrine’ of wrath and hell, you cannot appreciate the depths of Jesus’ love for us. It is an act of tremendous love for one person to give his physical life to save the physical lives of others. But this goes far beyond that. Jesus was willing not just to suffer physical pain but to suffer hell itself for us. Ironically, if you try to make God *more* loving by eliminating his ‘wrath,’ you will find Jesus *less* loving. The Jesus of the Bible loved you so much that he took hell itself for you. A rejection of the doctrine of hell and judgement trivializes the strong love of Jesus who took it for us.

4. What does the word “Abba” mean and tell us about Jesus’ sufferings?

“*Abba*” is an Aramaic diminutive term for “father.” It is the equivalent of our term “Daddy” or “Papa.” In this phrase we learn a great deal about the nature of this suffering. The wrath of God was going to be the torment of separation. We know something of this pain. The more intimate and important a relationship, the more

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torturous it is when it is severed. For example, if your friend says, “I reject you”, it is bad, but if your spouse says, “I reject you”, it is far worse.

This explains both the depths and nature of Jesus’ suffering on the cross. As we will see later, God ‘forsook’ Jesus on the cross. We cannot imagine the intimacy and life-giving love that the Father and Son had together. It was total, eternal, and infinitely richer than any love or joy we can know. Their intimacy was from all eternity. Because his relationship with the Father was infinitely greater than ours could ever be, his ‘disintegration’ and torment in the complete loss of that relationship would be infinitely worse than ours could ever be. The loss of it was an infinite and unique pain. This is the reason that Jesus could ‘pay the price’ right there on the cross.

In essence, Jesus (beginning in the garden, and finally on the cross) had no God, no meaning, no hope at all. One writer put it this way:

“He was without any comforts of God — no feeling that God loved him... God was his sun before, now that sun became all darkness... He was without a God, he was as if he had no God. All that God had been to him before was taken from him now. He had the feeling of being utterly condemned, as when the Judge says: ‘Depart from me, ye cursed... from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power.’ He felt that God said the same to him. Ah! This is the hell which Christ suffered. Dear friends, I feel like a little child casting a stone into some deep ravine in the mountain side, and listening to hear its fall — but listening in vain. The ocean of Christ’s sufferings is unfathomable.”— Robert Murray M’Cheyne, “My God, My God”

In other words, Jesus suffering was infinitely worse than eternity in hell would be for any of us. Thus the depths of despair and pain was multiplied unimaginably for Christ and thus paid all of our penalties in full. The very idea of a single figure bearing the punishment for all our sin is staggering. Nahum 1:6 – “*Who can stand before his indignation? Who can abide the fierceness of his anger or his fury? His wrath is poured out like fire; the rocks are shattered before him.*” It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

5. In how many ways does Jesus show his obedience to the Father in this passage?

a) He obeys by loving his friends. He obeys the “law of love” (love your neighbor as yourself) by being loving and patient with the disciples though they kept falling asleep even when he asked them to stay awake and pray for him. (v. 34, 38, 41) We should remember that he is about to face unimaginable agony for them. Jonathan Edwards reminds us that Jesus had every right to say, “Why should I — infinitely greater than all the angels of heaven — why should I plunge myself into these dreadful torments for these sinners? Why should I leave all my love and glory and take this violent agony of burning into my soul for these who will never repay me and don’t love me enough to stay awake with me in my moment of greatest need?” But he did not say this.

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b) He obeys by praying to the Father. He obeys the law that says we should pray and be dependent on God. Twice he goes to the Father (v. 36, 39). All the way through this trial, he keeps praying “*Father forgive them*” and “*Father, into thy hands I commend*” (both in Luke) and even “*My God — why have you forsaken me?*” Even when God is forsaking him, he never stops praying. He never stops calling God “*my God*,” the covenant term of personal relationship and fidelity.

c) He obeys despite unanswered prayer. Jesus is willing to obey though his will is crossed, though his prayer is denied (i.e. “*let this cup pass from me*”). Often we will obey God as long as we are getting some rewards and some answers to our major prayers. But if we only “obey” when God is answering our hopes and prayers, that is not obedience at all. It is self-interested compliance. Obedience is unconditional surrender.

d) He obeys voluntarily. Jonathan Edwards points out that the Garden was the greatest test of all of obedience. God gave Jesus a foretaste of the agony so he could see what was really about to happen. (W. Lane – “*Mark understood Gethsemane to be the critical moment in Jesus’ life when the full meaning of his submission to the Father confronted him with its immediacy.*”) Jesus has known up to now that he would suffer. But in the garden he seems to get a foretaste of the agony of separation. Now he knows what his mission will cost him, but there is still time to pull out. Everyone was asleep and the betrayer was not yet come. There was no coercion now. This was “the point of no return.” But he stayed. Thus his obedience is complete.

The obedience of Jesus here was matchless! Jonah obeyed in the fish, saying, “*All thy waves and billows have passed over me but I will look to your holy temple.*” But a greater than Jonah is here! Jonah was only under an ocean of water, Jesus was under an ocean of God’s wrath and he stayed obedient. Adam was told by God, “obey and you will live” and he didn’t; Jesus was told by God, “obey and I’ll crush you to powder” and he did!

6. Why is his obedience significant for us? What difference does it make?

“Jesus was a doing as well as a dying savior” (Robert M. M’Cheyne). He came not only to take the curse but also earn the blessing. He came not only to take the punishment of death for us but also to earn the reward of eternal life by obeying God perfectly, by “fulfilling all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15).

The practical implications of this are quite vast. Most people think of Christ’s work only in its negative aspect. In other words, they only see him as a “dying Savior,” paying the penalty for our sins. If that is all you see, then when you fall or sin in a major way, you will go to God for forgiveness. But you will believe that, day in and day out, God regards you because of the quality of your moral efforts. This will lead either to a spiritual pride and self-righteousness (if you largely live up to your principles) or else to a feeling of despair and self-hatred (if you fail your principles.) But Jesus is not only our sin bearer, but our righteousness. He not only, as substitute, dies the death you should have died — he also, as substitute, lives the life you should have lived. When we believe in him there is a “double” legal transfer. Our record is put on him, and he is treated as we

deserve to be, but also, his perfect record is put on us, and we are treated as he deserved to be. When we receive Christ, it is not just that our sins are transferred legally to him, but also, his obedience record is transferred to us! That means this matchless obedience is credited to us, and God treats us as if we obeyed all Christ obeyed. John 17:23 – Love them even as you have loved me. 2 Corinthians 5:21– *he became sin who knew no sin so we could become the righteousness of God in him.*

Thus we live with complete humility (because our record does nothing to merit his regard), but in complete confidence (because his record brings us his complete love and acceptance). Without understanding his obedience for us, we can only feel either humiliation or pride — but never the bold, joyous humility that the gospel brings.

7. In what other ways is Jesus' example in the garden full of practical comfort and guidance for us?

Above, in question#1, we discussed how the cross reveals the wisdom of God's plan so that we can rest in the knowledge that God weaves suffering into a good plan for our lives. But in addition, the cross gives us some very, very practical directions for bearing up under burdens.

a) Comfort:

(1) The cross shows us that Jesus knows how we hurt. He has experienced human pain first hand — in his passion and death, Jesus experienced every facet of human suffering — physical, social (rejection, loneliness), psychological (alienation, fear, grief), and spiritual (separation). There is no parallel in any of the other world religions — a God who has not only suffered some of what we have, but far more than we have.

(2) The cross shows us that Jesus will never forsake us. We are often afraid that we will “wear his love out.” But if Jesus' love for us could endure the very wrath of eternal justice how in the world will anything else wear it out? It has already endured hell and the omnipotent wrath of God rather than let us go! What could *you* do to put him off?? We are promised that Christ will never forsake us (see Hebrews 13:5). This puts flesh on that promise. We can really believe it.

b) Direction:

(1) For prayer. Jesus' prayer is a model. a) He is honest about his needs and feelings (let this cup pass from me). There is no “denial” — no effort to say the “proper Christian thing.” Wonderful spiritual reality. He lets his heart's desires be known. But, b) he shows that the goal of prayer is not to bend God's will to ours but to conform our will to God's. He is after strength and will to do God's will. Now real prayer will have both honest pouring out of the heart and yet a unwavering spirit of submission. To lack the former makes prayer superficial; to lack the latter makes prayer selfish.

(2) For dealing with self-pity. If Jesus was patient, uncomplaining, and trusting when suffering things he did not deserve at all, how can we do differently when we remember that we are sinners who don't really deserve a comfortable life? He suffered uncomplainingly for us, can't we suffer uncomplainingly for him? Also, remember that his sufferings were so much greater than yours for you. Say, “Lord, my sufferings are

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mosquito bites compared to yours. You took the real suffering for me, the wrath of God! If you took that lovingly and calmly for me, I can take this lovingly and calmly for you.

(3) For integrity. When no one was looking, Jesus stayed. He could have slipped away. That's integrity — to stay true to principle even when no one is looking and you are "in the dark." If he was true to us when no one is looking, so we should also be faithful to him when no one is looking. He was true to us "in the dark," so we can be true to him "in the dark."

(4) For relationships. We learn much about human relationships from Jesus' request to his disciples to "*keep watch with me*" and from his response to their failure to do so. a) First, the fact that Jesus asks them to stay awake and pray with him shows the importance of human relationships. Jesus is facing the ultimate test, and he wants the support of his friends. This shows that Jesus is very human, of course, but let's not forget that he is perfect and sinless. It is not, therefore, a sign of weakness to 'need people'! The only sinless man needed human relationships and support. b) Second, it is remarkable that, after the disciples fail Jesus (through either weariness or cluelessness or both), Jesus says to his disciples, "*the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak*". (v. 38) Though they failed him and though he is confronting them ("*beware of temptation*", v. 38) he also affirms them. He finds something positive to say about their partial sincerity. (cf. "*Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing.*" Luke 23:34). So even when we are confronting others, we should do so with affirmation and love and gentleness.

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Jesus is fully man; his suffering is real and he dreads the cross. But he is the obedient Son of God, willing to die, thereby fulfilling the Old Testament prophecy (verses 27, 49).

Why Jesus Came: He came to drink the "cup" of God's wrath, bearing the penalty of man's sin on man's behalf. No one else could do this; he was left utterly alone. And there was no other way. Only God Himself could pay the penalty of man's sin by dying in man's place.

How should I respond? We will be ashamed of Jesus and his words unless we both understand the cross and, "watching," pray for God's help. We shall do neither unless we understand ourselves and that we are all prayless, sleepy, self-reliant failures.

Suffering at the hands of His enemies

Mark

Study 14 | Mark 14:53-15:15

There are three incidents related here: **a)** Jesus' interrogation before the Sanhedrin (verses 55-65); **b)** Peter's denial of Jesus (verses 53-54; 66-72); **c)** Jesus' trial before Pilate (15:1-15).

The Sanhedrin, before and after the time of Christ, was the highest tribunal of the Jews under Roman occupation. It consisted basically of three groups: the priestly families (mainly Sadducean "liberal" in beliefs), the scribes, and the elders (the latter groups were made up of many Pharisees). Its jurisdiction was fairly wide in Christ's time. It not only had authority over Jewish religious ceremonial practice, but it had some power with regard to criminal law. It could order arrests. It was empowered to judge cases that did not involve capital punishment, but capital cases needed the confirmation of the Roman procurator.

1. Read 14:53-72. Is Jesus getting a fair hearing — is he getting justice here? Why or why not?

To understand this passage, we must know some of the rules for trials in Judaism. The rules for jurisprudence at the time were surprisingly careful in order to avoid the unjust conviction or execution of an innocent person. (**Note:** We must keep in mind that much of the information we have on Jewish trials of the time comes from the Mishnah, a body of ancient Jewish Rabbinic traditions which are hard to precisely date. See Carson, Matthew, vol. 2 p. 550.)

The mode of trial. It was traditional to procure a defense attorney for the accused, but Jesus was given none. It was also stipulated that a capital offense case had to take at least two days. The guilty vote and the sentence could not be pronounced the same day. Why? Each judge had to "sleep on it" and consider if they had overlooked something.

The taking of testimony. The qualifications for witnesses and their role in legal proceedings were very exacting, and in many ways somewhat different than in Roman law (from which we derive more of our Western jurisprudence). There had to be two or more witnesses to convict a defendant (Numbers 35:30; Deuteronomy 17:6,7; 19:15), and, in addition, the testimonies had to agree on each particular or the prisoner was discharged immediately. In other words, if depositions were taken but differed from one another even in details, they were inadmissible as evidence.

All of this was to protect against the possibility of executing someone unjustly. The Mishnah says: "A Sanhedrin, which as often as once in seven years condemns a man to death, is a slaughterhouse."

Now we turn to ask if the trial is just? No, it was not. Here are the reasons why:

a) v. 55 "*they were looking for evidence so they could put him to death.*" This is the first injustice. A court is not supposed to decide on a verdict before the evidence! Chapter 14:1 tells us that the Sanhedrin was already made up of men who had decided Jesus would die. Now they were just finding legal pretexts for doing so.

b) v. 56 “many testified falsely against him, but their statements did not agree.” The spurious and inadmissible testimony should have led to the case being dismissed. But instead, they kept Jesus and kept looking for a new way to convict him. Verses 57-59 tells us that even the testimony around the “temple charge” did not agree in every particular, but they kept the trial going anyway.

c) vv. 61-62 – Jesus is asked to confirm their charges against him, and therefore they are actually asking him to testify against himself. This reflects the failure to give him defense counsel.

d) v. 65 – Remarkably, we are told “then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck them with their fists” This behavior shows tremendous malice and is not at all appropriate behavior of judges or a jury against a condemned man!

2. Read 14:58. First, Jesus is accused of saying that he will destroy the temple and replace it in three days. In what way is this charge false? Yet in what way is this charge true?

The first charge mentioned by Mark is the claim that Jesus had threatened to destroy the temple and rebuild it. This charge as it stands is false, because the first half of it is spurious. Jesus had never threatened to destroy the temple. He said that the temple would be destroyed (Mark 13), and he also made the cryptic statement, “tear down this temple, and I will rebuild it” (John 2:19-21). But since he never made this exact claim, it was impossible to get two witnesses to verify it unanimously in its details.

However, the teaching of Jesus in many subtle ways did indicate that he was a “threat” to the temple in that his coming would make the temple obsolete. As we have seen, the entire latter part of the book of Mark is all about Jesus’ relationship to the temple. When Jesus enters Jerusalem, he goes right to the temple to cleanse it (Mark 11:11). Very soon afterwards, he refers in Mark 12:10 to the fact that he was the “rejected stone” which would become the “capstone” of a new temple. Finally, in Mark 15:38, at the death of Jesus the veil separating the Holy Place (where God dwelt) from the people was ripped from top to bottom.

In light of all this, the strange statement of John 2:19 (“destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up again”) begins to make sense. Jesus fulfills the temple. He will die — and offer the sacrifice to end all sacrifices. His “passive righteousness” of death on the cross will cleanse us from sin completely. Our record is “imputed” to him and he is treated as we deserve. But then he will rise — and become the High Priest to end all High Priests. That means he stands before the Father in our stead. His record is “imputed” to us and we are treated as he deserves. Thus he will offer us infinitely better access to God than the old temple and infinitely greater certainty of forgiveness than the old sacrifices. Christianity must have looked so odd to the other religions of that time. It had no temples, sacrifices, or priests. But it was because Jesus himself was the “final” temple.

Therefore, this accusation, though false and clearly garbled, was actually homing in on the heart of Jesus’ teaching, and was truly discerning the radical threat he posed to the older way of religion in Israel.

3. Read 14:61-62. Secondly, Jesus is accused of blasphemy. Is he innocent or guilty of this charge?

Jesus is asked by the High Priest if he is the Christ (the "Messiah"), the *Son of the Blessed One*. Ironically, this is the central question of the whole Gospel of Mark, and Jesus treats it with the fullest respect. At other times in the gospel, he avoids it (7:5-6) or turns a question back on the questioner (11:29). This time, Jesus answers head on — positively and fully. First, by saying "*I am*" he does claim to be the Messiah, the promised one. However, we should remember that in general the Jews did not expect the Christ to be literally divine. He would be the "Son of God" in the sense of being the object of his special love and favor. Therefore, second, Jesus goes on to explain the meaning of the term "*Messiah*" by identifying himself with the "*Son of Man*" in Daniel 7:13). Third, by saying he will sit at the right hand of God in heaven he is probably claiming to be David's Lord (Psalm 110:1) who sits at the right hand of the Father, and the unique heir of God. This is tantamount to a claim of deity.

When Jesus makes his astonishingly full claim, he is instantly convicted of blasphemy. "Blasphemy" usually meant to make a mockery of God, and anyone who claimed to be divine was automatically thought guilty of it. But was Jesus therefore guilty of this charge? He was not. His claim was only blasphemy and mockery of God if it was untrue. If it was true, it was not blasphemous. In summary, he was completely innocent of all charges and therefore the trial was in every way a miscarriage of justice. The just is suffering unjustly. The righteous One is being condemned.

In both of Jesus' Biblical allusions in his claim (Daniel 7:13 "Son of Man" and Psalm 110:1,5 "at his right hand"), the Messiah is coming as a judge. So Jesus is saying, "though you think you are my judges, actually I am yours. You should be standing before me, not I before you." The judged ones are judging and the judging one is judged. Everything is turned upside down. Mark is therefore showing us that the one who is on trial is really the judge, and the ones who are judging are really on trial. They are refusing to see the real evidence of who he is — his sinless life, his miracles, his incomparable teaching. In 15:29-32, Mark is explicit that it is they who are committing blasphemy, for they are trivializing and trampling on God himself.

This is quite a vivid depiction of the human condition. We have put God "in the dock" and assumed our position "on the bench". Here then we have acted out the very essence of all the teaching of the whole Bible about the root of the human problem (sin) and the nature of the divine solution (grace). John Stott has put it perfectly:

For the essence of sin is us substituting ourselves for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for us. We assert ourselves against God and put ourselves where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for us and puts himself where only we deserve to be. We claim prerogatives which belong to God alone; God accepts penalties which belong to us alone. (J. Stott, The Cross of Christ)

That is the whole Christian message in a nutshell, and it is starkly and dramatically played out in this trial. The members of the Sanhedrin assume a place that only Jesus deserves; Jesus assumes the place that they deserve.

4. Read 14:66-72 (also refer to 14:27-31). In what ways are Peter and Jesus going through the same experience during this time? But how does Peter's response contrast with Jesus'?

The parallels between Peter and Jesus here are a great example of Mark's literary artistry. By comparing and contrasting the two men in such ironic ways, Mark is commenting both on the sin of Peter (and us) and the grace of Jesus.

First, Peter, like Jesus, is also being questioned. However, Jesus was being interrogated by the whole Sanhedrin and the high priest (vv. 55,61). Meanwhile Peter is questioned only by a mere servant girl (vv. 66, 69).

Second, Peter, like Jesus, is being charged with something that will get him into great trouble. However, the charges against Jesus are false (vv. 55-57), while the charges against Peter are completely true (vv. 67, 69-70). He is a disciple of Christ.

Third, Peter, like Jesus, responds to the charge. However, while Jesus professes and declares the truth (vv. 61-62), Peter denies the truth (vv. 68, 70-71).

Fourth, Peter, like Jesus, is with the guards. However, Jesus tells the truth despite the consequences, and he is beaten by the guards (v. 65). Meanwhile Peter denies the truth for the sole purpose of avoiding consequences, and so he sits and warms himself with the guards (vv. 54, 67)!

Fifth, Peter, like Jesus, is cursed. However, Jesus receives the condemnation (the "curse") of the Sanhedrin (v. 64) unfairly. Meanwhile Peter actually brings down the curse on himself (v. 71) e.g. "*May I be cursed and condemned if I am his follower.*" Peter is self-condemned, and justly.

In summary: What is Mark saying? Again, Mark shows that it is not really Jesus who is on trial. It is not just the religious leaders who are really on trial in Jesus' trial, it is also Peter who is on trial in Jesus' trial. We might not identify with the religious leaders, but it is rather easy to identify with Peter. Again we see — Jesus was on trial in our place, taking our penalty for us. But Mark brilliantly shows us these doctrinal points (of "federal solidarity" and "imputation") with moving artistry. Jesus' trial actually reveals in both Peter and the leaders the very sins (the cowardice, the pride, the self centeredness) that Jesus is dying for. Peter condemns himself (v. 71) and weeps (v. 72). But Jesus experienced human *injustice* to satisfy divine *justice* (Romans 3:23-25), so that now for Peter "*there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*" — (Romans 8:1).

5. How can we avoid doing what Peter did?

As we just said, Peter is not difficult to identify with. Imagine what it must have been like for him. All his hopes and dreams are imploding. He doesn't understand what is going on. He and Jesus were really going to "go places" together. They were going to overcome evil and injustice, and now the "bad guys" were all winning! Peter had left everything for Jesus — and now what? Peter's cowardice and lying are easy to understand. He was now defenseless. He had no inner resources. He begins to act out of naked self-preservation.

This also happens to us. We invest an inordinate amount of our hopes and dreams in "scenarios" we develop for how our life should go. When our life does not turn out that way, we are dazed and disoriented, like Peter, and then we are vulnerable to temptation. We too may find ourselves doing things that are quite "against our moral principles". But our inner emptiness makes us susceptible and helpless.

So what was Peter's foundational mistake? He had completely misunderstood the gospel. He understood neither what Jesus' salvation was all about nor what his place in that salvation was. He didn't understand that Jesus' salvation was not a salvation of works, but of grace. He didn't understand this salvation comes *by* weakness (the death of Christ) which paradoxically becomes enormous strength (resurrection!). And he didn't understand that this salvation is appropriated in weakness (repentance and faith) which also becomes enormous strength. Though he thought he was trusting in Christ, he was really trusting in his own competence and righteousness and wisdom (after all, he was Jesus' disciple!) Though he thought he was living for Christ, he was really using Christ as a way to get power and status in the world. So his real basis was his own righteousness and his real goal was his own worldly status. When it was revealed that he was a helpless sinner, and that following Christ would not lead to worldly status, Peter collapsed.

Many of us are just like Peter. We think we are trusting Christ, but really we are resting in our goodness and moral performance for which we believe God will bless us. And our real goals are various forms of approval, power, comfort and control with which we believe God will bless us. When circumstances either a) reveal the depths of our spiritual and moral weakness, and/or b) call into question whether we will reach our life-goals, then — we collapse just like Peter.

So how can we avoid a Peter-type collapse? We need to learn about the gospel before a crisis shows us our flawed foundation. Peter, when told about the cowardice of his heart in 14:27-31, did not believe Jesus. He only began to weep in repentance after he denied Christ. Now the Bible tells us too that we are sinners, self-centered, cowardly. Will we laugh such an assessment off, not taking it seriously, or will we begin to repent now and look to humbly depend on God and make changes now?

But what if we have already had a Peter-type collapse? Do not worry. Peter (obviously) is restored. It is never too late in life to believe the gospel.

6. Read 15:15. Why did Mark include the interesting note that Barabbas was released instead of Jesus? i.e. What does the release of Barabbas teach us about Jesus' work on the cross?

a) First, we should notice how different Barabbas was from Christ. He was a violent man who had done murder. He deserved to die. One more time we see Mark driving home the central theme of the substitutionary nature of the work of Christ. The innocent dies in the place of the guilty. *"For Christ died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, to bring you to God"* (1 Peter 3:18). The just took justice for the unjust!

b) But second, we should notice an interesting similarity between Barabbas and Christ. He was an 'insurrectionist' (15:7). That seems to indicate that he was a 'freedom fighter', a man who resented imperialistic oppression and who probably wanted the divine kingdom to come in through violent means. (He may have been a 'zealot' or one in sympathy with them.) Here then is a deep irony. If they put Barabbas to death, they put an end to his rebellion against the powers of this world. But when they put Jesus to death, they only *helped launch* his revolution against the powers of this world.

"Barabbas was [a guy] burning the system down, he is killing people... [But] if you let Barabbas go, you can always stop him. The most Barabbas will do is go out, round up another bunch of guerillas and start another riot. You can always stop him by bringing out the national guard and putting down his riot. Find out where he is keeping his ammunition. Raid his apartment without a search warrant and shoot him while he is still asleep. You can stop Barabbas.

But how do you stop Jesus? They nailed him to a cross... Then they buried him, rolled a stone over his grave, wiped their hands and said, "There is one radical who will never disturb us again..." Three days later Jesus Christ pulled off one of the greatest political coups of all time: He got up out of the grave... the leader of a new creation — who has overthrown the existing order and established a new order that is not built on man." (Tom Skinner, "The U.S. Racial Crisis and World Evangelism" in Christ the Liberator, p. 208)

7. Who, in the account of Mark, can be "blamed" for Jesus' death, if anyone? Think of the entire account of all the events leading up to his execution.

The trial of Jesus as recorded here has been used wrongly by both 1) Gentiles who want to blame the Jewish race for the death of Jesus and 2) Jewish writers who want to blame the gospels for anti-Semitism. But an anti-Semitic reading of the text (for either motive) cannot be supported. Here are some responses.

First, if we read the gospel accounts fully, we see that both Jews and Gentiles were involved in the death of Jesus. The account of Mark shows that the religious leaders among the Jews, the Roman authorities, and even the foolishness and cowardice of his

own disciples — all contribute to the injustice and death of Jesus. Both Pilate and the religious leaders are spoken of as “handing Jesus over to death.” The Romans actually supervised and carried out the execution itself.

Second, the NT writers can’t be reasonably labeled ‘anti-Semitic’ since they were all Jews. They would have had no motive for arousing anti-Jewish attitudes among Gentile readers. That would have only created problems for them! In the gospels, it is Jews who believe in him as well as Jews who convict him. Those who were most complicit in Jesus’ death are blamed spiritually as religious leaders — not racially as Jewish people — for their role.

Third, every Christian reader can see from this gospel narrative that Jesus had every opportunity to escape death, but that he had to die because of our sins. Thus believers know that ultimately we are the ones responsible for putting Jesus on the cross. The Bible both implicitly and explicitly tells us that all humankind is hostile to God and his son. We are all “enemies” (cf. Romans 5:10 and context). We are not neutral or indifferent to God, but our hearts are filled with natural “enmity” (Romans 8:4). We react in anger toward the God who claims absolute rights over us. The death of Christ is the result of humanity’s hostility to Christ, not the result of any one racial group’s actions.

Conclusion:

If we look, we see the theme all through this passage — Jesus is our substitute. Jesus, an innocent man, is receiving the justice due a guilty man. Jesus, though innocent, is counted “worthy of death” (v. 64), so that we, though guilty, can be acquitted. The blameless is blamed so the blameworthy can go free.

Section 1 – 14:53-65: Jesus is clearly innocent and tells the truth under interrogation, yet is condemned by a court which should itself be condemned. Jesus gets the punishment the judges deserve.

Section 2 – 14:66-72: Peter lies and denies the truth under interrogation, yet escapes. Jesus gets the punishment Peter deserves.

Section 3 – 15:1-15: Jesus is again clearly innocent before the Roman court. Barabbas becomes a metaphor for us all. In a symbolic switch, Jesus gets the punishment Barabbas deserves.

Paul writes, “*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*” (2 Corinthians 5:21) This tells us of what the theologians have called “double imputation.” Not only is our sin “imputed” or transferred to Christ, but Christ’s righteousness is “imputed” or transferred to us.

The concept of substitutionary justice is (as Stott says) the very heart of the gospel. It teaches us that we are now “*holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation*” (Colossians 1:22). If we think of the cross as only some sort of expiation and pardon for our sins, and not as also the reception of Christ’s righteous record, we don’t grasp the thoroughness of our salvation. People say “I can’t forgive myself” or struggle in various ways to try to “prove themselves” and don’t realize that in Christ

they are “holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation”. When God sees us, he sees us clothed in Christ’s righteousness. This is all spelled out in Paul’s letter, especially in Romans and Galatians, but it is all laid out in narrative form here in the gospels. Jesus is bound so we can be “released” (15:15). We get what he deserved, and he gets what we deserve.

Prayer requests

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Jesus’ claims are made public for the first time. He is the Messiah/King of Israel, the Son of God as well as Son of Man, the one who will sit at God’s right hand and come in glory to judge. He is shown to be innocent by the very people who most want to prove him guilty. As Suffering Servant, he responds to their taunts with silence.

Why Jesus Came: He did not come to be the kind of King we think we want, and which they falsely accused him of being in order to kill him. He came to be the kind of King we really need, who will die not only at the hands of, but also die in the place of, such murderous rebels as we are.

How should I respond? The Sanhedrin hated Jesus at once; Peter and the crowd denied when persecution came; Pilate was “choked” by the cares of the world (cf. 4:15-19). The contrast between Christ and all who reject him is not there to encourage us to follow his example better in future but to show us our helpless need of salvation. He did not come to call the righteous but sinners (2:17).

Suffering at the hands of His Father

Mark

Study 15 | Mark 15:16-39

We must remember that Mark always has two reasons for including small details in his narrative. First, anything he writes is included because it happened. Mark is not making this up. (See below, question #2.) Second, however, anything he writes is included in order to teach us about Jesus. Mark is not 'preachy' — he does not do much direct explanation or exposition or moralizing. Rather, he selects facts and events in such a way as to drive home the meaning of the work of Christ. So we should constantly ask: "Why did Mark include that? What is he trying to tell us here?"

1. Look at the "mocking" of Christ. Read verses 17-20, 29-32, and also 14:65.

a) For what particular things is Jesus mocked? b) What do you think Mark is showing us in the account of the mocking?

a) For what things is Jesus mocked?

In vv. 17-20 he is mainly being mocked for his claim to be a King. a) In v. 17, the purple robe mocked his claim to be king. b) In v. 17, the crown of thorns also mocked his claim to royalty (it was more mockery than torture). c) In v. 18, the cries "*hail, king!*" and d) in v. 19, the falling on the knees was very direct and vicious scorn of his kingship claim.

In vv. 29-32 he is mainly being mocked for this claim to be a Savior in two ways in particular. (1) They mock his *weakness*, his inability to come down off the cross. Their premise (and common sense, really) is that he would have to save himself *in order to save others*. (v. 31). In essence, their argument in v. 31 is "how could someone save others if he can't save himself?" (2) They also mock his claim to destroy and replace the temple (v. 29).

Back in 14:65, we see that he is mainly being mocked for his claim to be a prophet. They blindfold him and strike him, challenging him to "*prophecy*," i.e. to tell them who it was who was hitting him.

b) What do you think Mark is showing us in the account of the mocking?

The theological 'richness' of the mockery is remarkable! Jesus is mocked for the three specific aspects of his mission on earth. Historically, Christians theology has taught that Jesus came to be a prophet (to instruct us), and to be a merciful priest (to save us), and to be a royal king (to rule us). This is the sum total of all he came to do. Mark of course is pointing us to all of this great saving work in the account. Even the rejection of Jesus Christ reveals his glory. Even their insults proclaim him for who he is!

But the taunting of Christ points to more than his three-fold work on our behalf. Mark is here being deeply ironic. The glory and wisdom of God is seen in this — Jesus' tormentors are helping to accomplish the very salvation purposes that they mock as they attack him. They believe they are destroying his pitiful kingship and his saving purposes by killing him. But they are only facilitating them. "*God makes the very wrath of man to praise him.*" (Psalm 76:10) So Mark is also pointing to the sovereignty of God. His purposes cannot be thwarted.

Lastly, Mark is showing the paradox of true power and strength. In v. 32 the chief priests and teachers say that Jesus' weakness is the reason they cannot believe in him. "Let this Christ... come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." They are claiming that his weakness is incongruent with his Messiahship. But this is surely the supreme irony. They are looking full in the face of the greatest act of God's saving power in history. But they cannot 'see' it because they are looking at the gospel with a "religious grid" in their mind. In their understanding, God's savior will come in (military) might and save the moral and good people from the bad oppressors. But the gospel is that God's savior comes in weakness and saves those who repent (who admit their moral weakness) from sin and death itself. They say that his weakness is a barrier to salvation. We know (with Mark, the narrator) that his weakness is the very thing that actually accomplishes our salvation. Therefore they cannot see the real strength of Jesus. It takes far more 'strength' to be voluntarily weak for someone else. It took enormous love and (yes) strength for the Son of God to submit to a condition of weakness voluntarily for our sake. They cannot see the real power of God.

George Herbert, in "The Sacrifice", assumes the voice of Jesus from the cross and puts the irony of the situation perfectly.

"Now heal thy self, Physician; now come down".
 Alas! I did so, when I left my crown
 And fathers smile for you, to feel his frown:
 Was ever grief like mine?

In healing not my self, there doth consist
 All that salvation, which ye now resist;
 Your safety in my sickness doth subsist:
 Was ever grief like mine?

2. Read verse 21. What does this interesting little note about 'Alexander and Rufus' tell us about a) Mark's readers, and b) the trustworthiness of the account?

Mark tells us that Simon of Cyrene, who helped Jesus carry his cross, was '*the father of Alexander and Rufus.*' This annotation would be incomprehensible unless these men were at least somewhat famous and well known to the readers. (A "Rufus" is mentioned in Romans 16:33, but this was a common name.) This has some implications for us as we read a text like Mark and ask: "how do we know these are not just legends made up years later?" First, it seems most likely that Alexander and Rufus are contemporaries of the readers. If Simon of Cyrene was their father, then they were either alive at the time of the crucifixion or they were born not too long afterward. (They might have even been present at the event as children.) That would mean that the gospel of Mark was being written within a normal lifetime or less after the crucifixion. Second, it means that Mark and the other gospel writers had quite a few eyewitnesses of all these events to draw on.

All this makes it hard to think of Mark giving us fabricated stories or legends. How could he (or others) make up stories about Jesus when there were scores or hundreds of people around who had been there, at nearly all the events? Such notations are not characteristic of legends and fables. We can trust that Mark is seeking to give us reliable historical accounts.

3. What is Mark trying to get across about human nature in these descriptions of the mocking, spitting, beating?

First, the account shows us how easy it is to be caught up with popular opinion and to “go with the flow” of the crowd. It is likely that many of the people who just “passed by” (v. 29) were part of the crowd that had cheered his triumphal entry a week before. It is also interesting to see that the two thieves being executed with him hurled insults as well (v. 32). You would think that men being executed at that point would have felt some solidarity with their fellow-convict. But instead, they went along with everyone else. The tide of opinion — that Jesus is a pitiful failure — has reached high tide. Even his own disciples have been swept away by it. Perhaps Mark is showing us how difficult it is to hold fast one’s faith in the face of public opinion to the contrary.

Second, the account shows us how easy it is to “miss” what God is doing in a particular situation. Virtually everyone is blind to what is really going on. We can certainly be sympathetic here. The reason everyone thought God had abandoned Jesus was because God *had* abandoned Jesus! But they could not discern that there was deep redemptive purposes being worked out anyway, far beneath the surface of what appeared to their senses. This should make us patient with God and with his work in our lives. When we see “the sun darkened at mid-day” and everything going wrong, we should not begin to mock and jeer that everything is just senseless.

Third, the account surely is pointing us to the malice that the human heart bears toward God. Romans 8:7 – *The natural mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, indeed it cannot.* Mark is seeking to reveal that the human heart is not neutral but rather is naturally hostile to God’s claims. The basic principle of it is that we *hate* anything that threatens our self-sovereignty. We want to be our own masters and our own lords. And the absolute claims of the true God are utterly repugnant to our hearts, whoever we are. As we know, Jesus Christ is the ultimate and clearest revelation of the nature of the true God. (“*The only begotten One, who is in the bosom of the Father — he has made him known.*” John 1:14-18). Therefore it is not surprising that when people came near Jesus, the foundations of their hearts were laid bare. There was no way to respond to him mildly:

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher... You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. (C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity)

This famous passage is almost always used to press people to leave “dead center” and come to a conclusion about Christ intellectually. But it also speaks to how Christ “polarizes” people spiritually as well. Jesus’ absolute claims, when listened to honestly, will drive you to either terror, hostility, or adoration. It is not possible to respond to him moderately. Why? The theological (and psychological answer) is: he taps in to the heart’s natural spiritual hostility to the claims of God. Once you have really listened to him, you either have to convert, flee, or attack. Mark shows us how he was attacked.

4. Read Romans 8:7. a) Do you think that Paul exaggerates here when he says we are all naturally hostile to God? b) How have you seen this natural human enmity to God in normal human behavior? In yourself?

We may think Paul is exaggerating if we think he is saying that every human being is overtly and consciously malicious toward God or toward faith. Our “enmity” is usually incipient, hidden, even unconscious. Of course, the easiest way to hide the hostility (from ourselves as well as others) is by adopting a deep indifference to anything religious at all. Some have said that the deepest form of hate is indifference. When we despise something enough, we refuse to even let it get a rise out of us.

An even more subtle way to hide the natural enmity of the heart is by devising views of God that don’t offend us. Only the true God will arouse the terrible anger in our hearts (that was revealed at the crucifixion). But there are several false pictures of God that mollify the heart and seem to make us friendly to God though there has been no true conversion through the Holy Spirit.

(1) The first false view of God that can hide the heart’s enmity is a God who is remote and impersonal (a divine “life-force”), or similarly a very compliant, loving God who accepts everyone and everything. That God-picture will inspire us or comfort us much, but it will also not directly trigger our natural spiritual enmity. We may feel very cordial and warm toward a God who makes few demands on us. (2) A second false view of God that can hide the heart’s enmity is a God who is very strict and legally demanding, but as long as we feel we can meet his demands and put him in a position of having to bless us, then we may also feel cordial to him. This is a much more “unstable” view of God to have, however, because if this “God” has been supposedly given the good and moral life he demands, and if then he does not answer all our most heart-felt prayers, we may become enormously angry with him. Nevertheless, a demanding, moralistic “God” is also a non-threatening God, in the long run. He can be “bought off” with a good life. So neither the “relativist” nor the “moralist” have a God that triggers and reveals the natural spiritual hostility of the human heart toward the Lord.

But the God of the Bible is not only totally holy, but totally gracious. Not only does he demand we submit to his will, but he tells us we are incapable of it and will have to rely completely on his grace. In other words, there is no way to confront the true God and retain a scrap or shred of self-sovereignty. We have no rights before a God like that. He is so wonderful to us, and he has done so much for us, that there is nothing he cannot ask of us. And that is what the natural, unredeemed human heart cannot stand. We

cannot stand anything that threatens our self-sovereignty. We want to be our own masters and our own lords. It is the true God of the gospel of Jesus Christ which is the most “untamable” and “threatening” God of all. Without the work of the Spirit in our hearts, reconciling us to him.

b) How have you seen this enmity working?

It shows itself in our thinking. People do not just disbelieve in the gospel, but they are deeply offended by it. Or they can listen to it over and over again and simply find the gospel ridiculous.

It shows itself in our feeling. No matter how much good God does for us, our hearts are often cold and lethargic toward him. Often prosperity makes us forget God altogether. This shows the natural ingratitude at work in us, a deep desire to believe we are self-sufficient.

“The natural heart does not love to have much to do with God. The natural tendency of the heart is to fly from God and keep a distance from him. If anything true is said to the natural mind about God, they are apt to forget it. Their minds are like the hard path that the seed falls upon and the fowls of the air soon take away... This enmity especially shows itself in our difficulty with secret prayer. They would much rather spend a quarter of an hour in hard bodily labor than spend a quarter of an hour in prayer... They see no manner of beauty or loveliness, nor taste any sweetness in God. And because they cannot see his beauty, they are not pleased that he is omnipotent and can do whatever he wants...” Jonathan Edwards, Men Naturally God’s Enemies

It shows itself in our wills. We may think we are fine Christians and love God, but when life crosses our will, when we have an important prayer request denied, we get extremely angry and feel like rejecting God altogether.

5. Some have called verse 34 “the most important and terrible question ever asked.” a) What does the question tell us about what Jesus is doing? b) What does it tell us about what the Father was doing? c) What is the answer to Jesus’ question?

a) What was Jesus doing?

This is an amazing fact, that Jesus is still calling God “*my God*.” That is an address of intimacy. To call anyone “my Susan” or “my John” is affectionate. And Biblically, “my God” is covenantal address. It was the way God said someone could address him if he or she had a personal relationship with him. “*You shall be my people, and I shall be your God.*” Therefore, Jesus’ cry-question reveals that Jesus was being obedient to God, even in the face of total rejection! He was still praying, he was still in a covenant-obeying, dependent posture. Jesus, then, was not only a “dying” savior but also a “doing” savior. He was not only dying the death we should have died, but living the

perfect life we should have lived. Our sins were being imputed to him, so that when we believed, his perfect record could be imputed to us. 2 Corinthians 5:21 — *God made him sin, who knew no sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.*

“‘My God, my God.’ These words show the greatest faith that ever was in the world. Faith is believing the word of God, not because we see it to be true, or feel it to be true, but because God has said it. Now Christ was forsaken. He did not see that God was his God — he did not feel that God was his God, and yet he believed God’s word and cried: ‘my God, my God’... Jonah showed great faith: ‘all thy billows and thy waves passed over me — yet I will look to thy holy temple’ (Jonah 2:3,4). He was literally at the bottom of the sea. Ah, but a greater than Jonah is here! Christ was now beneath a deeper sea than that which covered Jonah. He was under a sea of God’s wrath — he was in outer darkness — he was in hell; and yet he believed the word of God. ‘Though he slay me, yet will I trust him.’ Dear believer, this is your assurance. You are often unbelieving and distrustful of God — behold your surety! He never distrusted, he never disobeyed, even in hell! Cling to him — you are complete in him!” – R. M. M’Cheyne

b) What was God doing?

It tells us that God the Father had actually turned his back on Jesus. The darkness (v. 33) is a sign of God’s judgement (Isaiah 13:9,10; Jeremiah 15:6-9). It is a natural sign of rejection; as the sun is hidden so the light of God’s face and favor is hidden. The nature of Jesus’ question is obviously a cry of agony and pain — it is not an academic or detached theological question! The cry-nature of it shows that God was inflicting enormous pain on his son by rejecting him.

“Look who it was who forsook him. Not his people Israel — not Judas the betrayer — not Peter his denier... ah! It was his Father and his God. Other things affected him little compared with that. The passers by wagged their heads — he spoke not. The chief priests mocked him — he murmured not... [But] God brought darkness over his soul. This was infinite agony. So he cried...” – R. M. M’Cheyne

Jesus was then experiencing the “infinite agony” of hell there on the cross. We are of course looking at a bottomless mystery here in many ways. Jesus’ agony in his separation from Father would have been infinitely greater than ours because his relationship with the Father was infinitely greater. There would have been no consolation in any cognitive knowledge that he would be resurrected. Indeed, for all we know, that knowledge could have disappeared as he fell into the infinite abyss of damnation.

c) What is the answer to the question?

The answer to the question — “Why did the Father forsake him?” is — “for us!” There was no other way for God to accept us than if Jesus died for us.

“From the broken bread and the poured out wine seems to rise the cry: ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ [The answer is:] for ME — for ME! May God bless his own Word.” – R.M. M’Cheyne

6. How can this cry help you when you feel alone and forsaken (even by God)?

Jesus helps us when we see him crying out as an example. Often we feel ‘forsaken’ and totally in the dark. God seems absent. All our prayers are going unanswered. But we are only ever *apparently* forsaken, not really forsaken (Hebrews 13:5; Matthew 28:20 - *Lo! I am with you always.*) We feel abandoned not because God has truly abandoned us, but only because he is not giving us our own way. He is treating us in a way that is wise beyond our wisdom. Now look at Jesus. He was truly in the dark, and truly forsaken by God. Jesus shows us that obeying and trusting in dark times is right because we simply owe it to God. God did not save him because he trusted in him. He obeyed because God was God. And yet, because he continued to trust and obey, God acted through it in a redemptive way. So we should obey like Jesus did — just because God is God, and also knowing the unfathomable depths of his wisdom.

But Jesus is not only an example. He helps us when we see him crying out as our substitute. The above paragraph assumes that we are never truly forsaken by God (as Jesus was) but only apparently forsaken. But how do we *know* our forsakenness is only apparent and not real? How do we know that God has not truly abandoned us because of our sins? When we feel forsaken, we know it is only apparent because he took the actual and real rejection for us. We can say, “if you took this actual rejection for me, I can take this apparent rejection for you.” Also, when we turn to him, we know he will understand. He endured what we endure, but at a far more profound level.

7. What is the meaning of the tearing of the veil (verse 38)?

Refer to the personal reading “The Final Temple.”

a) When God put Adam and Eve into the garden, he gave them a “sanctuary” or safe place where they could know God face to face and experience the complete fulfillment of his presence. After they sinned, they were “cast out of the garden,” meaning they lost the presence of God. It was not fatal to them, because they were sinful. A “flaming sword” now separated us from the sanctuary or presence of God.

b) God sets up his temple in the midst of his people. In the center of the temple is the “Holy of Holies,” a little garden of Eden, where God’s face and presence dwells. On the veil in front of the sanctuary are symbols of flowers and trees — the garden of Eden! But the heavy veil shows that we are still separated from the perfect blessedness of the face of God. No one can enter except the high priest once a year who brought in a blood sacrifice for the sins of the people. Why the sacrifice? There was no way to get into God’s presence without going under the flaming sword. Sin had to be paid for, if access to God was to be procured. But the annual sword-sacrifice and entry through the veil was only a symbol. It was repeated every year. What did it mean? How would the gap ever be bridged?

c) Jesus' rejection and his cry "Forsaken!" is followed by the ripping of the veil. It meant that the flaming sword had come down on Christ. It meant the final blood sacrifice was Christ. It meant the high priest who had permanently entered the veil was Christ! And thus, the veil was opened for good. We now have access to God. The ripped veil means that now, when we believe that Jesus is the final priest and final sacrifice who took the flaming sword into his own soul — that now the royal presence of God which was once fatal to people can come and live within us. The Holy Spirit, the new birth are both consequences of the ripped veil.

8. Read verse 39. In many ways, the confession of the centurion is the climax of the crucifixion and even of the gospel of Mark. Contrast him to everyone else around the cross. What is the connection between verses 38 and 39? What do you think Mark is trying to get his readers (us) to do here? How can we do it?

It is striking to draw the contrast between the centurion and everyone else. The disciples who have been taught by Jesus for years are completely confused and stymied. The religious leaders have looked at the very deepest wisdom of God and have rejected it (v. 32). Even the onlookers can't hear Jesus' correctly. They think his cry toward God is a call to Elijah (v. 35).

Then we see the centurion. In every way, he is an 'outsider' and one that should not be able to understand what is going on. The officer is one of the oppressive Romans, a Gentile pagan far from God, and the man in charge of having beaten, mocked, and killed Jesus. Yet this is the only human being in the gospel who actually uses this highest title "Son of God" (Peter only called him the "Christ" in Chapter 8. Demons and the Father have used the term, but no human being). The people who (humanly speaking) ought to understand — do not. The person who ought not to understand — does.

It is unlikely the centurion understood the full force of what he was saying, unless he had earlier contact with Jesus, which is a possibility. But the point of Mark is that now the way is open to anyone. The centurion's confession comes right after the tearing of the veil. Anyone can come.

The parallels with Peter's confession are interesting. At the end of the first half of Mark, Peter finally "gets" who Jesus is with the help of the Holy Spirit. But now, at the end of the second half of Mark, a true outsider, an unwashed pagan "gets" who Jesus is. The implication is that the Holy Spirit will now work in the lives of all sorts of people. God reverses the place of "insider" and "outsider." What a comfort — there is hope for anyone! But what a challenge. Don't put your hopes in your religious instruction or moral attainments.

Here the ultimate purpose of the gospel writer Mark comes clear. He wants his readers to confess Jesus as the Son of God, and to know that if we do, we have access to the "innermost sanctuary" — the welcome and arms and heart of God. He calls us to "see how Jesus died" (v.39) and confess with the centurion that he is the Son of God.

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Jesus is the Christ and Redeemer King, the Son of God. Jesus suffers as the Passover Lamb not only at the hands of men but at the hands of God.

Why Jesus came: Jesus came so that we would believe in this Messiah, the one who “must” die. Jesus bore God’s wrath and died in our place, He was banished by his Father so that we might be welcomed.

How should I respond? Believe in this Messiah, the one who must die (8:31).

Prayer requests

The King is dead: Long live the King!

Mark

Study 16 | Mark 15:40-16:8

The brevity of Mark's account of the resurrection is notable and has aroused a great deal of discussion. And yet for all its brevity, Mark's treatment lays out some of the most compelling evidence for the historicity of the resurrection.

1. What are we to learn from the fact that the witnesses and people showing faithfulness here to Jesus are Joseph, a Pharisee (15:40-47), women (16:1-8), and a Roman centurion (see 15:39, 44)?

Women at that time had very low status in both the Roman and Jewish world. In most cases, the testimony of a woman was not admissible evidence in court. Yet Mark (and the other gospel writers) repeatedly tell us that women were the main witnesses to the events of both the crucifixion and the resurrection. (See Mark 15:40, 47; 16:1-8. Cf. Matthew 27:55-56, 61; 28:1, 5-7)

"This is the supreme irony, the supreme humor, the supreme surprise value of almighty God, that when he does his greatest act since the creation of the world, in raising his Son from the dead, he attests it through the lips of those who were so widely discounted."

– Michael Green

What do we learn from the prominence of women as the main witnesses to the resurrection? There is both an "objective" and "subjective" application. First, this is a very strong kind of "objective" evidence that the resurrection accounts were not simply "made up." If the Christian writers were fabricating stories about the resurrection, they would never in a million years have made women to be the primary eye-witnesses. Women in that society were the very kinds of people who were considered unreliable. By far the most likely reason for Mark to assert that women saw Jesus first is that — women actually did see Jesus first. He really has no other possible motive.

Second, there is a "subjective" or practical application. The women disciples of Jesus are clearly shown exercising more discernment and courage and faithfulness to Jesus than the 12 apostles. Remember too that it is likely the apostles' own eyewitness memories that are behind these accounts. Mark also shows us that Joseph, though a Pharisee, shows enormous courage and independence of thought by honoring Jesus and burying him. And the Gentile centurion is the only human being in the gospel to call Jesus "Son of God"—he sees his glory. Mark is showing us that God does not call people on the basis of pedigree or resume or status. Rather, he works without regard to the world's categories of "insiders" and "outsiders", "respectable" and "marginal." Thus the gospel contradicts the world's view that salvation is by effort and works and achievement.

"Why does Matthew [and Mark] record only the resurrection appearances to the women and the appearance in Galilee to his followers [Mark 16:7]?... The answer... First, the Messiah emerges from a despised area [Galilee]... For this reason too Jesus first appears to women whose value as witnesses among Jews is worthless... He sheds his light on despised people... for the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit (Matthew 5:3)..." D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, p. 590.

2. List all the possible alternative explanations for the resurrection (other than that it happened!) Now consider all the ways that Mark's information and accounts undermines these explanations.

a) Alternative explanations that have been put forth:

- (1) It was a resuscitation. Jesus didn't actually die on the cross, but "swooned" and recovered later to show himself to his disciples.
- (2) It was a sincere delusion. The disciples had a passionate expectation that Jesus "just couldn't be dead". Thus they may have had a hallucination, or in some other way convinced themselves that they were experiencing him as alive.
- (3) It was a fraud. All or some of the disciples stole the body away to hide it and to claim they'd seen him. It was a conspiracy.
- (4) It was meant to be a symbol. The early disciples never meant us to believe that Jesus was literally and physically raised. Rather, these accounts were an artistic way to say his "spirit" and "teaching" live on.
- (5) It was a legend. In the recent centuries, many have asserted that these accounts were legends that grew up around Jesus over the years and were written down many years after the events.

b) The details in these verses undermine each of these alternative explanations. Every part of this passage repeatedly seeks to eliminate the possibilities that the resurrection was other than a great miracle.

- (1) A resuscitation? It seems that Mark may have been quite aware of this explanation, because there is quite a lot of information here to undermine that theory. The whole burial account is a way to "certify" that Jesus was really dead. Joseph of Arimathea is named here as an identified witness who actually had Jesus' body wrapped up and sealed it in a tomb (15:46). A Roman centurion (who would be an expert) bore witness of his death to Pilate (who would be the legal authority; 15:44). Finally, two women are cited as eyewitnesses to the burial (15:47). So multiple experts and witnesses prove he was really dead.
- (2) A delusion? Obviously, the women who speak to the angel (16:5) are a group. People don't have group hallucinations! But perhaps the most overlooked bit of evidence in the gospel accounts is how completely un-expected the resurrection was to the disciples. Everything in the text indicates this. The fact that they had purchased spices (16:1) for the body (which were very expensive) shows that they loved him very much, but it also shows they did not expect him to rise from the dead! The reaction of the women to the angel also shows their inability to believe in the resurrection. Their first reaction is not: "I knew it! I knew he'd do it!" but instead they are shocked, confused, and afraid (16:8). And finally, it should be noted that none of Jesus' 12 disciples are there at all. Clearly, no one expected him to do what he had predicted.

But this raises another question. Why, despite Jesus' clear and repeated predictions of his resurrection was it so unexpected to his followers? It is often felt by modern people that ancient folks were much more prone to believe in miracles. But Mark shows the followers of Jesus acting just like we would have. The answer by some recent historians is very intriguing and helpful.

It cannot be stressed too strongly that "resurrection" for Jews of the period had nothing to do with mere "resuscitation". It was not a matter of coming back into the same sort of life. It was a matter of going through death, and out into the new world beyond... Nor [was] it the same as immortality, or the transmigration of a disembodied soul or spirit. It is what the Maccabean martyrs of the second century BC were longing for when they spoke of Israel's God giving them back their limbs and organs after they had suffered horrible torture and death. People who believe that sort of thing would not be prepared to use the word "resurrection" unless something emphatically physical had taken place.

Equally, it must be stressed that first-century Jews were not expecting people to rise from the dead (in this sense) simply as isolated individuals, on a one-off basis, here and there... "Resurrection" for them was something that would happen to all dead Jews, and perhaps all dead humans. It would happen on the great future occasion when the True God finally brought history... into the new day... a whole new world order...

It will not do, therefore, to say that Jesus' disciples were so stunned and shocked by his death, so unable to come to terms with it, that they projected their shattered hopes onto the screen of fantasy and invented the idea of Jesus' "resurrection" as a way of coping with a cruelly broken dream. That has an initial apparent psychological plausibility, but it won't work as serious first-century history. We know of lots of other messianic and similar movements in the Jewish world roughly contemporary with Jesus. In many cases the leader died a violent death at the hands of authorities. In not one single case do we hear the slightest mention of the disappointed followers claiming that their hero had been raised from the dead. They knew better. Resurrection was not a private event. Jewish revolutionaries whose leader had been executed by the authorities, and who managed to escape arrest themselves, had two options: give up the revolution, or find another leader. Claiming that the original leader was alive again was simply not an option.

Unless, of course, he was. – N.T. Wright, Who Was Jesus?

- (3) A fraud? Mark reveals the remarkable fact that Joseph, not the disciples, buried Jesus and that the women, were concerned to anoint and honor the body. Where were the disciples? Their cowardice and depression and abandonment of their Master is obvious. Everything indicates that they were too demoralized to carry out a

hoax. If they were going to carry out the fraud, surely they would have been at the burial to see exactly where the body was. But there are two other major difficulties with this theory.

First, as we have seen, the complete lack of belief in an individual resurrection makes the “Delusion” theory highly unlikely, but it also makes the “fraud” theory unlikely. We said that Jews who did believe in the resurrection only believed in a general resurrection at the end of time; the idea of one individual raised by himself into the new world order was preposterous. What then would have made the disciples think that they could convince others that Jesus was raised from the dead? Unless Jesus really was appearing to people, there is simply no way that a movement based on this belief would have gotten off the ground. Everything in their belief system resisted such a claim.

Second, history tells us the disciples all lived lives of sacrificial service and died terrible deaths to spread the gospel of the risen Christ. Could a hoax have transformed them like that? Do you die for something you know is a lie? Do you live lives of service for something you know is a lie? Self-sacrifice comports with delusion but not with a hoax.

(4) A symbol or a legend? As we have seen, first century Jews did not have the Greek idea of an ‘immortal soul’ or the modern idea of someone’s ‘spirit living on’. They would not have used the term ‘resurrection’ for anything non-physical. (See the N.T. Wright quote above. See also below, question #4.)

And a legend? Mark is careful to name and identify real, historical individual witnesses. In 15:40,47 and 16:1, the women are named repeatedly. The fact that one of the Mary’s is called “*the mother of James... of Joses and Salome*” indicates that these people were well known in the early church. (Remember also the reference in chapter 15:21 to Simon of Cyrene ‘*the father of Alexander and Rufus.*’) Mark does not merely say “some people saw” — then there would be no way to authenticate the account. The naming of people is Mark’s way of saying, “All I am writing can be verified. Check it out for yourself!” Remember, Mark was written 30-35 years after the events (roughly our relationship to the first walk on the moon), so this account is well within the lifetimes of (probably) the Mary’s and (certainly) of James, Joses, and Salome. This is a way to show that the resurrection was a historical fact.

Also, as we have seen, Mark’s record that women were the first witnesses to the resurrection attests to the authenticity of the record, because in that culture no one would have made up a story with women as the primary witnesses. By claiming that only women were the first witnesses (and by giving readers their names and family records), Mark’s account has all of the “ring of truth.”

“The more one examines into the various factors which seem to account for the extraordinary victory of Christianity, [in the ancient world] the more one is driven to search for a cause which underlies them. It is clear that at the very beginning of Christianity there must have occurred a vast release of energy, unequalled in the history of the race. Without it the future course of the faith is inexplicable. That burst

of energy was ascribed by the early disciples to the founder of their faith. Something happened to the men who associated with Jesus. In his contact with them... in the assurance of his resurrection and continued presence with his disciples... is to be found the major cause of the success of Christianity." – K. S. Latourette

Summary: The resurrection of Jesus was neither a lovely myth, nor a symbol of new life developed decades after Jesus' life, nor a hallucination based on wishful thinking, nor a trick. Rather, it was a historical phenomenon, witnessed to and attested by numerous reliable sources. The Biblical evidence cannot "prove" beyond a shadow of a doubt that the resurrection occurred. But the evidence is nearly irrefutable that hundreds of people, often in large groups, who had no cultural or religious reason to believe it—testified that they saw the risen Christ, often repeatedly, over a 40 day span after his death. What do we do with that?

3. Read 16:7. What is the significance of the angel's assignment to "go, tell his disciples and Peter?"

The angel's announcement shows that Jesus has forgiven the disciples even before they have repented! As we have just seen, the faithfulness of women, Gentiles, and Pharisees has been greater than that of his hand-picked, trained male disciples. This proves that salvation is by grace. But now, Jesus immediately reinstates his disciples anyway. The promise is that Jesus will appear to them (*they will see him*) and he will reintroduce them into leadership in his movement (*he will go ahead of them*). Amazing! This doubly proves that salvation is by grace, since not only the despised "outsiders" are welcomed but failed "insiders" are too!

The addition of the word "*Peter*" is significant. Why bring his name out on its own? Through the angel, the Lord is giving Peter special assurance and comfort because he was especially guilty of abandoning and denying him. Jesus is giving everyone exactly what they need individually. "*Peter is singled out because of his repeated and emphatic denial of Jesus... His disloyalty might well be regarded as [having]... disqualified him... Yet the summons provided the assurance that Peter had not been rejected by the risen Lord.*" (Lane, p. 589). Lane adds, "*The promise 'there you will see him' implies a resurrection appearance to Peter... (1 Corinthians 15:5).*" Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 tells us that Peter received one appearance of the risen Christ all by himself. This is the only gospel that hints at it. (This confirms the tradition that Mark's gospel is based on Peter's memories.)

The resurrection, then, is all about forgiveness. First, it is proof that Jesus' death has made "satisfaction" for our sins. It is God's way to write across the pages of history "PAID IN FULL". His death procured our forgiveness — and the resurrection is proof. But second, we see that the resurrection also means specific, personal forgiveness and reconciliation. We see the risen Christ forgiving the disciples before they even have been able to repent for their abandonment of him. Remember Mark 11:25. Are we as quick to forgive as Jesus?

4. Why does Mark take such care to show that the resurrection was a historical event? Why does that matter?

Other religions are primarily philosophies. That is, they are sets of teaching about how to live. Christianity is primarily an announcement of events in history, things that happened. Those events include the incarnation (God becoming a human being), the crucifixion (the God-man dying in our place), and the resurrection (the God-man breaking death so he can live with us and us with him).

Other religions have accounts of miracles, but they only authenticate or exemplify the founders' teaching. But whether the miracles happened or not does not ultimately make any difference, because it is the following of the teaching that saves us. But in the Christian faith, we are saved by grace, not our performance. We are saved not by what we do but what he has done. Therefore, it is the miraculous events which actually save us. We're saved NOT by the teaching, but by these historical events.

Thus, if you take away the historical events of Christ's life and death and resurrection, you take away the heart of Christianity, and it becomes just another life-philosophy that saves you through your own self-effort.

5. Most of the reliable manuscripts we have indicate Mark's gospel ending abruptly at 16:8. If (as it seems) he ended it that way, why did he do so, do you think?

The earliest manuscripts we have of Mark end at 16:8, and thus most scholars agree that the two different endings we find in later manuscripts (and usually printed in Bibles) were not part of the original text. The language and style of the Greek of these endings are significantly different from that of the rest of the Gospel, so it is pretty clear that Mark didn't write them. They were added by later writers to give Mark a longer and more "satisfying ending". So the real question is: "did Mark end his work at v. 8 or was his 'last page,' his original ending, lost at a very early stage of transmission?"

a) The case for saying Mark did NOT end like that: To end the book with the first witnesses still in fear and doubt is unlikely. The whole point of the book is to get us to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. So why would Mark finish without the disciples in a state of faith? To end the book without the apostles seeing Christ with their own eyes (an extremely important basis for the foundation of the church) is unlikely, especially when the women were sent by the angel to tell the disciples (v. 7) to come and see him.

b) The case for saying Mark DID end at v. 8: Mark has been building a case throughout the Gospel. He has been making an argument that Jesus is the Son of God, the Christ. Now his argument is complete without any further additions necessary. Here is his argument: 1) The resurrection clearly happened physically and historically. 2) The disciples are going to be recommissioned. 3) Mark begins and proceeds with great abruptness anyway, so this highly abrupt ending could fit with his literary style.

Some say that Mark leaves off the narrative abruptly to put us into the story. It is as if we now hear the troubled testimony of these women. The facts are before us — now

what will we do? Will we ignore it and say, “it couldn’t be true — there must be some other explanation”? Or will we “finish” the story for ourselves — and put ourselves into it and carry out the great commission of all who know the risen Christ?

“This Gospel’s lack of closure calls for active response from the reader. We have noted that Mark is fond of concluding narrative units with questions or exhortations that aim beyond the characters in the story and address the reader directly (e.g. ‘Do you not understand?’; ‘keep awake!’) The strange ending of the Gospel works in the same way. What kind of story is this whose message of joyous hope ends with the abrupt and enigmatic words, ‘and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid’? It is a Gospel of uninterpreted gestures and suggestive silences. Precisely for that reason, it summons readers to supply the ending by taking up the cross and completing the interpretation in their own lives of discipleship. The Gospel of Mark cannot be ‘understood’ from the outside; it can be read rightly only through following Jesus in self-involving, self-sacrificial service.”
– Richard Hays, The Moral Vision of the New Testament, p. 90-91.

So those ancient writers who tried to “finish” Mark were actually (in one sense) on the right track! He invites us all to do so — with our own lives. Whether or not he did end the Gospel at verse 8, that is how we should end our reading of it. We should put ourselves in the story, and respond to the risen Christ.

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: He’s the Suffering Servant, Ransom, Passover Lamb, Son of Man, Son of God who is innocent, authoritative, loved by his Father.

Why Jesus came:

- To judge all men for fruitlessness, man-centered religion, and rebellion/blasphemy.
- To save both Jew and Gentile, including blasphemers/rebels/his killers from hell for eternal life.
- To serve by dying as ransom. He is the Lamb who accepted God’s wrath and takes away the sin of the world.

How should I respond?

- Be unashamed of Jesus. (Examples: Take up cross! Deny self!; Be little/welcome little; Serve! Witness! Watch!; Have faith in God! Give All!)
- Be ashamed of ourselves. (Examples: we reject word about cross; we reject word about us; we give man God’s due; we deny/kill our Savior.)
- Pray for forgiveness/mercy.

Prayer requests

The Gospel of Mark is generally believed to be the first of the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John). It is considered the model and often the source for the other gospels.

What the Gospels were not

They were not basically instruction. Although the gospels contain dialogues and teaching (like Plato's philosophies) they were basically focused on the historical events surrounding one historical figure — Jesus. Yet, they were also not really biographies, because they show little interest in most of Jesus' life. What kind of biography ignores all but the last three years of a man's life, and then spends one-half of its length on his very last week? However, though they are historical, they are not really histories. When we compare the four gospels, we learn that they do not necessarily give accounts of Jesus' life in the same order in which they occurred. Not only that, they say very little about outside events. There is little effort to put Jesus' life into the broader context of the history of the day. The writer ignores events that the writer of a normal history would include. Finally, the gospels are not legends or myths. Many people have believed they are myths since they contain miraculous elements.

What the Gospels were

What then is a gospel? The word **gospel** (Mark 1:1) does not mean either "teaching" or "record," but "news." An **angel** was a herald or messenger that brought news of some historical event that had already happened. The most common examples in Greek literature are "evangels" about a victory in war or the ascension of a new king. We have found an inscription of a royal proclamation that begins: "*The beginning of the gospel of Caesar Augustus*". Emperors who had ascended to power or who put down a threat would send out heralds announcing the good news about the strength or inauguration of the kingdom. That messenger would always be proclaiming some historical event (e.g. a coronation, a great victory in battle) which would introduce a radical new state of affairs, a new situation for the people, for they now had to relate to him as king.

Why is this important to grasp? When Christians chose *evangelion* to express the essence of their faith, they passed over words that Hellenistic religions used, such as *illumination* (photismos) and *knowledge* (gnosis) or that Judaism used such as *instruction* or *teaching* (didache) or *wisdom* (sophia). Of course, all of these words were used to describe Christianity, but none achieved the centrality of *gospel*. This means that the word *gospel* was chosen to communicate:

First, that the gospel is news about what God has already been done for you, rather than instruction and advice about what you are to do for God. The primacy of his work, not our work, is therefore the very essence of Christian faith. In other religions, God reveals to us how we can find or achieve salvation.

In Christianity, God achieves salvation for us. The gospel brings news primarily, rather than instruction.

Second, that the gospel is all about historic events, and thus it has a public character.

“It identifies Christian faith as news that has significance for all people, indeed for the whole world, not merely as esoteric understanding or insight.” (William Brownson).

In other religions, the stories of miracles and other special events in the lives of the founder are not essential. Whether or not Buddha did Miracle X, does not affect whether the 8-Fold path to enlightenment works or not. But if Jesus is not risen from the dead, Christianity does not “work”. The gospel is that Jesus died and rose for us. If the historic events of his life did not happen, then Christianity does not “work,” for the *good news* is that God has entered the human “now” (history) with the life of the world to come. But if Jesus came historically, then all people should acknowledge and believe in them.

DATE

Most scholars believe that Mark was the earliest of the four gospels. (Careful study shows that Matthew and Luke followed Mark at many places rather than the other way around). Also, there is no clear reference at all to the momentous event of 70 A.D. — the fall of Jerusalem to Roman forces after a Jewish rebellion and the complete destruction of the Temple. It is difficult to believe anyone writing after 70 A.D. could have left such an event out (or even have left it implicit). There is, therefore, no good reason to date Mark any later than 65 A.D. This means that Mark was writing about events just 25-30 years before.

That is very important to recognize. It means that there were thousands of eye-witnesses to all these events still alive when this document was written. That has two implications. **First**, it means that the author had abundant sources for producing an accurate account. He did not have to rely on legends that had been handed down and that could not be verified. **Second**, it means that there is a control making it very difficult for an author to fabricate accounts. For example, it would be nearly impossible to successfully publish a (false) story in the year 2000 that a meteor crashed in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania in 1970 killing dozens of people. There are too many people still alive who lived in Bethlehem at the time. Better to make up a story about the meteor crashing in Bethlehem in 1770. Then your story will be harder to disprove. Thus the dating of Mark before 70 A.D. encourages us to trust his reporting.

AUTHOR

The author never names himself (though cf. Mark 14:51-52), but the unanimous testimony of early church fathers (who knew the apostles and their disciples) was that the author was John Mark, a friend of the apostle Peter. Mark's home was a frequent meeting place of the apostles in the very earliest days of the church (Acts 12:12). He was a cousin to Barnabas, Paul's companion, and was on several journeys with Paul. Later, he worked with the St. Peter, and was with him in Rome when he died under Nero's persecution in the mid-60's A.D. In 140 A.D. Papias, wrote:

"Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately all that he remembered of the things said and done by our Lord, but not, however, in order."

This is, therefore, "The Gospel according to Peter". Unlike Matthew, Luke, and John, it begins where Peter comes into Jesus' life. Peter is usually present, as if the stories are from his perspective. Vivid details are present when Peter is there, but are often missing when he is not. It even leaves out words of praise for Peter (e.g. Matthew 16:17) included in the other gospels.

FORM

Mark was a brand new genre (or type) of literature. There has never been anything like the four gospels. Reynolds Price calls it a "new thing entirely". It is almost as if a whole new literary form had to be invented to bring a whole new, unique message. (New wineskins for new wine!)



Mark

Your Gospel is too small

Study 1 | Mark 1:1-15

Mark's Gospel is about "the gospel of the kingdom" which consists of these principles:

The healing, all-renewing presence of the kingdom of God that has come back into the world and history because Christ is that true King. However, this King comes in a way that reverses the values of the world — in weakness and service, not strength and force — to die as a ransom for us. Therefore we enter this kingdom through the "upside-down" pattern of the King who went to the cross.

We are accepted not because of our ability or merit, but through sheer grace and repentance. We "live out" this kingdom by following the "upside-down" pattern of the King who went to the cross. We live lives of sacrifice and service.

- 1. Read Isaiah 40:3-5 and then cf. with Mark 1:1-4. What is Mark telling us about the identity of Jesus?**
- 2. How, specifically, does John 'pave the way' for the Lord? *i.e.* What do verses 4-8 tell us about how the Messiah, the king, is to be received?**
- 3. What do verses 9-13 tell us about what 'the baptism of the Spirit' means and brings to us?**

Baptism: During John's time, the Jews often administered baptism as a rite of purification for Gentiles who were converting to Judaism. John went one step further, preaching that Jews as well as Gentiles needed to be baptized as a sign of turning from sin.

Time: The Greek word here refers not so much to a date on the calendar as it does to a decisive time when God acts in a special way. Jesus says the time has come, indicating a crisis point has arrived.

Prayer requests

4. **What do verses 14-15 tell us about the essential message of the King? a) What is explained? b) What is left “mysterious” and unexplained in Jesus proclamation?**

5. **Everyone notices the abruptness and breathless speed of Mark’s narrative style. Everything happens so quickly, all the statements and descriptions are extremely terse and direct. What do you think Mark is trying to get across?**

6. **What was the most helpful or impressive thing that you learned today personally? What practical application can you make from today’s lesson?**

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: He’s the Christ (1:1 and 8:29). He’s the “good news” that God promised would come. He’s the “good news” of victory (1 Samuel 31:9). Mark’s Gospel is about Jesus.

Why Jesus came: To solve the problem of sin introduced by the Fall (1:4, 1:13, 1:15, 15:38).

How should I respond? Not by opposition (1:14, 3:6), but by repentance and faith (1:15, 2:5 etc.). Mark’s book will demand commitment and change.

The Kingdom of God

OPTIONAL STUDY

This section has been summarized from How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, (Zondervan, pp. 131-134).

In understanding Jesus' teaching and ministry, it is important to understand the kingdom of God in the ministry of Jesus. The Jews of Jesus' day thought they were on the very brink of time, when God would step into history and bring an end to this age and usher in the age to come. The Greek word for the end they were looking for is 'eschaton.' Thus to be eschatological in one's thinking meant to be looking for the end. The earliest Christians well understood this eschatological way of looking at life. For them, the events of Jesus' coming, his death and resurrection, and the giving of the Spirit were all related in their expectations about the 'coming of the end.'

The coming of the end also meant a new beginning — the beginning of God's new age — the messianic age. The new age was also referred to as the kingdom of God, which meant "the time of God's rule." This new age would be a time of righteousness (Isaiah 11:4-5), and people would live in peace (Isaiah 2:2-4). It would be a time of the fullness of the Spirit (Joel 2:28-30) when the new covenant spoken of by Jeremiah would be realized (Jeremiah 31: 31-34, 32:38-40). Sin and sickness would be done away with (Zechariah 13:1). Even the material creation would feel the joyful effects of this new age (Isaiah 11:6-9).

Jesus came and announced that the coming kingdom was at hand with his ministry (Mark 1:14-15). He cast out demons, worked miracles, and freely accepted the outcasts and sinners — all signs that the end had begun (Luke 11:20; Matthew 11:2-6; Luke 14:21; 15:1-2). Everyone kept watching him to see if he really was the coming one. Would he really bring in the messianic age with all of its' splendor? Then suddenly he was crucified — and the lights went out.

But no! There was a glorious sequel. On the third day he was raised from the dead and he appeared to many of his followers. Surely now he would "restore the kingdom of Israel" (Acts 1:6). But instead he returned to the Father and poured out the promised Spirit. Very early, beginning with Peter's sermon in Acts 3, the early Christians came to realize that Jesus had not come to usher in the final end, but the "beginning" of the end, as it were. Thus they came to see that with Jesus' death and resurrection, and with the coming of the Spirit, the blessings and benefits of the future had already come. In a sense, therefore, the end had already come. But in another sense, the end had not yet come. Thus it was "already," but "not yet."

The early believers, therefore, learned to be truly eschatological people. They lived between the times — that is, between the beginning of the end and the consummation of the end. Because the kingdom, the time of God's rule, has been inaugurated with Jesus' own coming, we are called to life in the kingdom, which means life under his lordship, freely accepted and forgiven. But also committed to Jesus' Kingdom priorities of the new age and to seeing them worked out in our own lives and the world in this present age.

The Meaning of “The Kingdom” – Biblical Texts and Implications

1. **“Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy; they will sing before the Lord, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth.”**

Psalm 96:11-12.

Implications: God created the world to be under his rule — all things were made to be managed by him. Things blossom and find fulfillment only under his rule.

2. **“Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you...”** *Genesis 3:17-18; cf. Romans 8:18ff.*

Implications: All areas of life are subject to disintegration and alienation when they are not under the Kingship of Christ: our relationship with God (spiritual), with ourselves (psychological), with other persons (social) and with nature itself (physical).

3. **“And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ... to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.”**

Ephesians 1:9-10; cf. vv.19-23

Implications: The plan of God is to unite the disintegrating life of the world with the life of heaven by bringing all things under the Kingship of Christ. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

4. **“The time has come — the kingdom of God is near...”** *Mark 1:15.* **“The kingdom of God is in you.”** *Luke 17:21* **“When you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.”** *Luke 21:31* **“If I drive these demons out by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.”** *Matthew 12:28.*

Implications: The kingdom is here now (Luke 17 and texts) but not fully (Matthew 6:10 and texts). Like a seed, the kingdom’s presence is nearly hidden, but revolutionary, and finally it grows into fullness, to overcome all resistance to God’s rule (Matthew 13:31-32).

5. **“Pray... thy kingdom come!”** *Matthew 6:10* **“Then the King will say to those on his right — come, take your inheritance, the kingdom.”** *Matthew 25:34* **“The seed... is the message of the kingdom...”** *Matthew 13:18-19.*

Implications: The kingdom is entered by the repentance and the new birth (John 3) and the healing of every area of life and relationship begins (Romans 14).

6. “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again... no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit...” *John 3:3, 5*

Implications: The kingdom advances in the world and in our lives through the “weapons” of the kingdom — the word (the King’s will) and the Spirit (the King’s power) (2 Corinthians 10). Because the kingdom is “already” but “not yet”, we feel ourselves caught in the tension of living in both realms (Romans 12:2; 13:11-14; 1 Thessalonians 5:4-8). We are already saved, yet shall be saved (Romans 8:24, 5:9-11), we are already redeemed yet will be redeemed (Colossians 1:14 and Ephesians 4:30), we are already adopted yet we will be adopted (Romans 8:15,23), we are already reigning in heaven as kings (Ephesians 2:6; Revelation 1:8), yet we do not see ourselves reigning yet (Hebrews 2:8). Paul sorts this out by saying, we are legally righteous (justified – Romans 5:1-5; 8:1) yet we are not yet actually righteous (Romans 8:2-4).

7. “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.” *Romans 14:17-18*

Implications: Christians are a model of the kingdom, a counter-culture, a royal colony of heaven here to display how human society can be under the Kingship of Christ (2 Peter 2) We are also agents of the kingdom, spreading its healing both in word (Acts 8) and through deed ministry (1 John 3:17-18), spiritually, psychologically, socially, physically. Our spiritual gifts are kingdom powers which heal people as they bring people under the Kingship of Christ.

8. “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds... every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to Christ.” *2 Corinthians 10:4-5*

Implications: cf. Matthew 10:37 with Luke 14:26. It shows that “hate” means “loved less.” Also, the two men in Luke 9 were perhaps being tested as the rich young ruler with an absolute demand, to indicate whether they would give Christ pre-eminence. To enter the kingdom takes absolute commitment to the King! Yet, to think you can enter the kingdom through the merits of your obedience is to rely on yourself as your own savior and to keep control of your life. You can only enter the kingdom through relinquishing your own good deeds

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

and asking for his mercy alone (John 1:12). To imagine that you can enter because of your obedience is to stay in charge of your own life! You enter by submitting to him, but only because he died for you.

9. **“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”**

1 Peter 2:9

“They believed Phillip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God.”

Acts 8:12

“But to each one of us grace (gifts) has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says, ‘When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men’” *Ephesians 4:7-8*

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters — yes, even his own life — he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” *Luke 14:26-27* He said to another man, “Follow me.” But the man replied, “Lord first let me go and bury my father.” Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Still another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family.” Jesus replied, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.” *Luke 9:59-62*

Summary: the kingdom of God is the renewal of the whole world through the entrance of supernatural forces — the Word, the Spirit, the church (where the Word and Spirit dwell).

“The Kingdom in Your Life” – Biblical Texts and Implications

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created; things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from the dead, so that in everything he might have the pre-eminence. For God, was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” *Colossians 1:15-20*

IMPLICATIONS:

1. **“All things were created by him and for him.” a) BY:** Jesus alone has built all things. Thus he alone understands how any person or relationship should function. His Word is the “manufacturer’s manual”. **b) FOR:** All people were built for a purpose — to belong to Christ. This means that only Christ has rights of ownership (and a creator has absolute rights.)
2. **“In him all things hold together.”** Since we were built for him, we experience disintegration when we are not under His Kingship. To the extent that we submit to His Lordship, wholeness flows into our lives. “God is reconciling all things to himself... through the cross.” It is by Christ’s death for sins that God is reuniting all things to himself. When we trust in Jesus’ death for our sins, we are reconciled to God, enter the kingdom, and the wholeness spreads in through our life.
3. **“In everything he might be pre-eminent.”** A believer must look at every area of his or her life and ask: “Is Christ pre-eminent here?”

“What does it mean, then, to allow Jesus to be Lord of our lives?... Just this: whatever controls us is our lord. The person who seeks power is controlled by power. The person who seeks acceptance is controlled by the people he or she wants to please. We do not control ourselves. We are controlled by the lord of our life. If Jesus is our Lord, then he is the one who controls, he has the ultimate power. There are no bargains. We cannot manipulate him by playing ‘let’s make a deal’. If he is Lord, the only option open to us is to do his will, to let him have control. [Of course] Jesus remains Lord whether we accept him or not. His lordship, his essence, is not affected by what we choose. But our lives are drastically changed by our choice.”

–Rebecca M. Pippert

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

PRACTICAL STEPS – To treat Jesus as a King means:

- A. **Obeying.** (Not like Jonah. He thought that if he did what God had said that it would ruin things.) The evaluation question: “Am I willing to obey whatever God says about this life-area?” Symptom: guilt and “covering up”.
- B. **Accepting.** (Not like Job. He thought God was unfair, and that he knew how to run history better.) The evaluation question: “Am I willing to thank God for whatever happens in this area?” Symptom: worry, self-pity, or bitterness.
- C. **Relying.** (Not like Abraham. He made Isaac an idol, something he had to have along with God to be happy.) The evaluation question: “Is there something instead of God I am relying on for self-worth?” Symptom: insecurity (people-approval as an idol), “driveness” (success or achievement as an idol), self-indulgence (comfort as an idol).
- D. **Expecting.** (Not like Moses. When called to do a great deed, he was sure he was not competent.) The evaluation question: “Are there problems or limitations in my life I think are too big for God to remove?” Symptom: boredom and discouragement.

A fifth, overall evaluation question:

If you ever say, “I’ll obey Christ if...” then you are still on the throne of your life, determining when and whether you will take a course of action. Are there any if’s in your life?

Life Evaluation:

1. On the basis of the evaluation questions, choose one or two areas of your life that you most need to acknowledge Christ’s Lordship more deeply. (Make a list of “life areas” and ask the five questions to yourself. **OR**, look for the presence of “symptoms” and track down sins (disobedience), worry/bitterness (dis-acceptance), idols (lack of reliance), or discouragements (lack of expectance).
2. What can you do to give Christ the Lordship in these areas?

Make a brief plan for each which may consist of the following elements:

1) Repentance, **2)** Prayer program, **3)** Attitude/thought change, **4)** Behavior change, **5)** Accountability

Mark

The meaning of the Kingdom

Study 2 | Mark 1:16-34

Jesus (verses 14-15) has just announced that “the kingdom was near.” We said last week that this statement leaves a couple of things very mysterious. First there is the mystery of “who is this king?” There can be no kingdom without a king. To say that the “kingdom of God is coming” is to say that the divine God-King is coming. But who is he and where is he? The writer, St. Mark, approaches this mystery rather like the writer of a *Columbo* episode. In a *Columbo* mystery, we, the audience, are given the answer to the “whodunnit” at the beginning, and then we watch Columbo discover the solution in stages. In the same way, we, the readers, are introduced to the identity of the divine king immediately, in Mark 1:1-4, where Jesus is identified as the Divine King. Then we watch as Jesus reveals himself slowly to the people around him. As he does so, we get to know Jesus personally and learn much of his unique self-understanding.

The second mystery, however, is the nature of this kingdom itself. If Jesus is the King, why is the kingdom only “near” (v. 15)? Why doesn’t he say, “I am here — so the kingdom of God is here?” Evidently, something must happen for it to be “set up.” What is that? What is the nature of it — will it mean a military victory for God’s people? If not, what kind of kingdom is it? How do we “enter” it? This second mystery is a mystery for the readers as well! Immediately after the announcement of verse 15, we see Mark beginning to reveal to us what the kingdom of God is all about.

1. In verses 16-20, what do we learn about the kingdom?

2. What do verses 21-22 teach about the kingdom of God?

3. **What do verses 23-28 teach us about the kingdom of God? Despite modern prejudices against the idea of demon-possession, how does the existence of evil spirits help us explain what goes on in the world?**

4. **Over what area of life do verses 29-34 show his authority? What do we learn about the kingdom here?**

5. **People today struggle with the idea that we must absolutely submit all of our thinking and practice to the Lordship of Christ. How can we answer a person who struggles like that?**

Prayer requests

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: He is the King, Christ and the Son of God. He is as powerful as John the Baptist said that He would be (1:7). He has supernatural authority.

Why Jesus came: Jesus came to establish a new kingdom. He holds power over the spiritual and physical world.

How should I respond? Man's response was apathy, everyone who meets Jesus was "amazed" and the evil spirits were violently opposed to him.

Mark

The meaning of free grace

Study 3 | Mark 1:35-2:17

Jesus was a man of authority. His words were commanding and his commands were irresistible. Jesus has authority to heal and forgive — something to be understood to be the prerogative of God alone. We also see Jesus' authority to sit down and eat with sinners — something which, the teachers of the law believed, was forbidden. In contrast to the Scribes, Jesus needed no authority other than His own person.

- 1. In verses 1:35-39, what about Jesus' reaction to his new popularity seems surprising? What do we learn here about Jesus' personal priorities?**
- 2. In verses 1:40-45, what is surprising about how Jesus heals the leper? What do we learn from his method?**
- 3. In verses 2:1-5, how is Jesus' treatment of the paralytic surprising? What is Jesus teaching us?**

8. What is the theme that binds 1:35-2:1-17 together? Also, make a list of what surprising things we learn about Jesus himself.
9. What were the implications for Mark's first readers? What does this passage imply about how we should live and think now?

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: He is the Christ, the King and the Son of God. He has authority to heal sickness, forgive sin.

Why Jesus came: He preached and in doing so, called sinners to repentance.

How should I respond? Jesus' hearers experience amazement. They can't keep quiet about him (1:45) and have never seen anything like his miracles before (2:12). Jesus also provoked a following. Jesus can call anyone, however bad (2:12-17). We also know that repentance (1:15) and faith (1:15; 2:5) are involved. We begin to see that this involves admitting that we are sinners in need of forgiveness. The emphasis here is on what Jesus does, not on what we do.

Prayer requests

Mark

The offense of Jesus

Mark 2:13-3:6

OPTIONAL STUDY

In 2:15-17, we see that the religious and moral type persons are not attracted to Jesus as are the non-religious and the moral *outsiders*. Jesus says: "I came not to call the *righteous*, but *sinners*." He uses both terms ironically. He is saying that the word "righteous" here means self-righteous, and the word "sinners" here means people who know they are sinful and in need of a Savior. Jesus is turning normal religion on its head. He does not congratulate those who have attained a high degree of theological precision and moral discipline. Instead he warns them that they might be the farthest from him. In the next few incidents, Jesus challenges all sorts of expectations and practices of the religious and moral establishment.

- 1. Read 2:18-19. a) Why do people fast? (What does it accomplish?) b) Why do you think John's disciples fasted so much? (read 1:4-5) c) Why do you think the Pharisees' disciples fasted so much?**

- 2. Look at 2:18b. What does the complaint against Jesus and his followers tell us about their attitude and conduct?**

- 3. Read 2:19-20. a) Does Jesus forbid fasting here or anywhere? b) Who is the "bridegroom" of Israel? (cf. Isaiah 54:4-6; 62:5; Jeremiah 2:2-3, 32; Ezekiel 16:1-8). What is Jesus claiming here? c) How does the image of "wedding guests" indicate how his coming changes the way we use spiritual disciplines?**

THE OFFENSE OF JESUS

4. Look at 2:20-21. Jesus continues to speak here about how his coming changes traditional religious practices. What is he saying?

5. Read the following background note about the meaning of *Sabbath Rest* in the Bible.

Background note:

- a) In the Old Testament, when the Creator finished creating, he “rested” from his work. But that did not mean God was tired — it meant he stopped creating the world and started ruling world. Thus *Sabbath* in Bible means the peace and “rest” and blessing all creation experiences under God’s rule. Isaiah 66:1, “Heaven is my throne, earth my footstool — why build me a house for my place of rest?” So rest equals rule of God.
- b) When we rebelled from God’s rule, we lost the Sabbath rest. If we are not under his Lordship, we become ‘restless’ and miserable in our sin (Isaiah 57:20-21).
- c) God gives Israel some foretastes of “rest” when they obey him — but it is only the foretaste of something much greater to come. (Joshua 14:15; I Kings 8:56; Hebrews 4:1-10). He commands the Sabbath day to be observed once a week, to represent the rest and peace and restoration of what God’s salvation brings. (The English word “restore” retains something of the original meaning of rest as “healing that which is broken.”)

Read 2:23-3:6. a) What is Jesus saying about himself when he says I am “Lord of the Sabbath?” b) How does Jesus show that they are missing the “point” of the Sabbath — and what is that “point”?

6. Summarize and reflect on what we've learned. What are some of the practical differences there should be between a religious person who is trying to be good and a Christian who understands the gospel?

7. How can you spot the hallmarks of a modern "evangelical Pharisee"?

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Jesus claims to be the Bridegroom, the Son of Man and the Lord of the Sabbath. These are open and provocative claims.

Why Jesus came: He came to deal with the sin problem. His presence makes fasting inappropriate. He came to bring a completely new order of priorities. The opposition, which led to his death, was part of his deliberate plan.

How should I respond? The passage gives us our clearest picture yet of man's opposition which led to the cross. Man-made religion does not respond rightly to Jesus. Human religion rejects God's sovereignty and grace.

Mark

The community of the King

Study 4 | Mark 3:7-45

Each section of Mark contains a series of incidents in the life of Jesus. Each one shows us something about who Jesus is — his power, his purpose, and his self-understanding. It is as if the gospel writer is pulling a cover off of Jesus inch by inch. Each story reveals a little more of who he is.

Now we seem to enter a new series of stories. Some have called Chapter 1 “Authority Stories” because they show his authority. Some have called Chapter 2 “Conflict Stories” because they show the wisdom of his grace over against the world’s thinking and mindset. Beginning in Chapter 3, we see Jesus beginning the creation of a new community, a new people of God who will embody the kingdom of God. He builds this community through serving people, through teaching, preaching, training, counseling, healing, and liberating.

Since we continually will be watching him minister to others, we can always read with two practical questions in mind. **1)** How can Jesus carry out this ministry in my life? **2)** How can I carry out this ministry in the lives of others?

1. Why do you think this passage (3:7-35) follows Mark 3:6?

2. How do verses 3:7-12, in particular, contrast with 3:6? What is Mark teaching us?

3. Why does Jesus call twelve disciples? Why do you think that number “twelve” is mentioned (twice) as if it is very significant?

4. **What does this section (verses 13-19) tell us about how we are to understand ourselves and conduct ourselves as disciples?**
5. **Why does Mark separate verses 20-21 and verses 31-35 by verses 22-30? Why do verses 28-29 cause people trouble? How can you answer the problems?**
6. **What does Jesus in verses 20-21 and 31-35 tell us about who is in his family? What are the practical implications for us?**

Prayer requests

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Jesus is the great authority that comes from God. Demons call him the Son of God (v. 11). Jesus shows himself as the Messiah who calls true Israel out of slavery (v. 13-14, 27; Deuteronomy 18:15,18; Isaiah 49:5). Jesus is the Redeemer calling his people to him on the mountain to be a holy nation (v. 13-14; Exodus 19:5-6).

Why Jesus came: Jesus came not only to save and but also to judge. Mark 11:1-12:12 implies that those who reject Jesus are also judged by Him.

How should I respond? The right response is to follow him, to listen to his teaching and to obey the will of God (v. 34). Verses 13 and 27 warn us against thinking we can do this for ourselves. The illogical response is to reject forgiveness and say that Jesus was mad or bad.

Mark

The Word of the King

Study 5 | Mark 4:1-34

This is the first place in the book of Mark where we meet Jesus' teaching method of using "parables." Unlike the other gospels, Mark does not include long passages of Christ's teaching. Thus there are relatively few parables in Mark. The Greek word translated "parable" meant literally "to set one thing beside another"—to draw a comparison between two things and show an analogy. Thus parables begin, "this is like that." The parables of Jesus seek to teach us about the kingdom of God by comparing it with vivid and concrete situations in our world. Parables teach nearly endless new insights. If Jesus asks: "how is the church like a 'city on a hill'?" (*Matthew 5:14*) The answers are endless. Parables invite deep meditation and reflection.

It's helpful to again remind ourselves what Jesus means by "the kingdom of God." Many people think of a "kingdom" as the physical place which is ruled—for example when we hear of the "Kingdom of Gondor" we usually have to think of a definite geographical "realm." The Greek word *basilea* (kingdom) that Jesus uses refers more to the "ruling power" of the sovereign than to the "realm."

- 1. Read 4:3-9 and 14-20. a) What is the main point of this parable? b) What else does it tell us about the kingdom of God? c) What does it tell us about the Christian life?**

- 2. What are the various ways Jesus shows us by which we can mis-hear the word of the kingdom?**

- 3. Which of the four soils do you identify with now? Why? Which of the four soils have you identified more with in the past? Why?**

4. In verses 10-12, who are the two groups of people Jesus is talking about? What characterizes each group? What is the "secret of the kingdom?"

5. Read 4:21-23. What does this parable teach us?

6. Read 4:24-25. What does this parable teach us?

7. Read 4:26-32. What do the last two parables teach us?

8. How can your life more accurately reflect the priorities of Jesus' Kingdom?**Remembering the big picture**

Who Jesus is: He is the King who has ushered in a new Kingdom.

Why Jesus came: He came to establish a kingdom. His kingdom advances through love, service and truth, not force.

How should I respond? (verses 3,9,13,23-24) "Listen!" In the parable of the soils, Jesus describes three categories of wrong responses and one right response. Hearing the Word must be of great importance. We must hear with a new set of ears!

Prayer requests

Mark

Faith in the King

Mark 4:35-5:20

OPTIONAL STUDY

In three of the four stories we are about to study, Jesus directly refers to the subject of “faith”, and in the other story, faith is still a main issue. So the question is — “what does it mean to have faith in Jesus, the bringer of the kingdom?”

Answer: Martin Luther said that faith consists of three parts — notitia (evidence or knowledge), assensus (inclination or attraction), and fiducia (fidelity or commitment). Let’s look for these elements (and others) in the text.

- 1. Read 4:35-41. Notice the level of detail in this story. What sense do they convey to the reader? (After discussing briefly, read and discuss Excursus 1.)**

EXCURSUS 1: Did all this really happen?

If we are to learn faith and trust in Jesus from these stories, we have to notice the evidence that these stories really happened. The accounts are characterized by numerous small details, like the time of day (“evening”; 4:35), the cushion in the boat (4:38), the exact location of Jesus’ nap (“in the stern”; 4:38), the fact that there were other boats floating beside his boat (4:36), the girl’s age in the story of the raising of Jairus’s daughter (5:42), and the exact Aramaic words Jesus used – “Talitha koum” (5:41). These details are extremely interesting, for two reasons:

First, they are accurate. Experts in ancient history and culture tell us that in that time there was usually a cushion provided in fishing boats, kept under the coxswain’s seat for those who were not involved in either the actual sailing or fishing (Lane, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, p. 176). If someone were making up legends about Jesus many years later, it would be unlikely for them to have such accurate information about the practices and culture of Jesus’ time and place.

Second, they are unnecessary. They do not contribute to either the plot or to character development. In summary, there would be no reason for an ancient writer to record these details unless the story-source, the eyewitness(es), remembered them.

The first readers of the Gospels instantly knew that the writers were not presenting them as fables or epics or fiction of any kind. Thus these stories are either extremely deliberate and highly sophisticated lies, or they are historical accounts, but they cannot be “myths” (such as the Greek or Roman or German deity-myths), as some critical scholars have proposed.

Another important observation is how unflattering a picture of the 12 apostles is drawn (4:38, 40; 5:31). Many critical scholars have asserted that these gospel stories did not really occur, but rather were constructed by the early church to answer questions, to settle disputes, and to secure compliance and submission to the authority of the church.

FAITH IN THE KING

In other words, if there was a controversy about demons in the church, the leaders would write a story about Jesus casting out demons or about his teaching on demons. This way they could deal with problems in their midst. But why, if the early church was producing these stories, would it depict the apostles as so weak and so constantly mistaken. What would the motive be for doing so? We know that the early church had lots of doctrinal conflicts and needed to appeal to apostolic teaching and authority to keep its unity and consensus. So why were these things recorded? A logical answer is — they were recorded simply because they happened. In summary, the details of the Gospel accounts are strong evidence that these are accounts of real historical events. If we are going to believe in Christ, we need to know that.

**2. Read 4:35-41. What does this account tell us a) about the person of Christ?
b) about trusting in Christ?**

**3. Read 5:1-20. What are some of the marks of “demonization” in this man?
(After discussing briefly, read and discuss Excursus 2: The complexity of evil)**

EXCURSUS 2: The complexity of evil

Our contemporary culture is still rather skeptical of the existence of demons. If a person is an atheist, it is consistent for them to deny the existence of evil spirits. But it is not consistent to believe in God and in a good personal supernatural being and then refuse to believe that there are evil personal super-natural beings. But if we believe in the existence of demonic forces, it does shed light on several things we know about the world and life.

First, demonic forces explain the complexity of psychological problems. The older “physicians of the soul” understood that depression, fear, anger, or inner numbness

may be so profound and difficult to deal with because of the multiplicity and inter-relatedness of the many different roots and causes. There are possible physiological, psychological, moral and demonic sources for our problems. In the Bible, demons can accuse and tempt and stir up and aggravate all the other factors, making our emotional dungeons very deep and double locked.

Second, demonic forces can explain systemic social evil. Evil unjust social systems can reign in a culture and have enormously evil and devastating effects, yet no single individual member of the oppressive system seems to be “all that bad.” Think of the average white person in apartheid kinds of societies. Very, very few are actively full of hate or are personally wicked individuals, and yet they participate in a system that is much more wicked as a whole than the sum of its parts. In Rwanda, many Christians got sucked up into genocidal rage in which whole tribes massacred other whole tribes. How do we explain this? There are indications in the Scripture that demons can stand behind human institutions such as governments or nations and can produce evil effects through those systems and institutions.

In summary, it is not possible to explain all the misery and evil in the world as simply the product of individual sinful choices. Evil spirits greatly magnify, aggravate, and complicate the sin in our hearts that we commit toward God, one another, and against our own selves. People get sucked into deep psychological and social abysses of wickedness and brokenness that the Bible says are the result of demonic activity. But Jesus shows his authority can heal the darkest troubles in the deepest recesses of the human soul — individually and corporately. He can handle the forces that enslave us. This enables us to see in Jesus’ ministry of exorcism a paradigm for how the kingdom works. Here we begin to see of how Jesus’ kingdom is more than simply my individual obedience to his will. Jesus comes into my life not simply as a rule-giver, but also as a liberator and a healer. He doesn’t bring simply rules, but a new “realm” of his kingly, healing power. Why? For the first time, we come to see that the alternative to having Jesus as a master is to have some other false and enslaving power as a master. Not everyone is personally possessed by a demon like this man (verses 23-24) who has lost complete psychological control of himself. But Paul speaks in Ephesians 6 and elsewhere that in another sense we are fighting demonic “principalities” all the time. Anything we make into an ultimate value (for example, like our career) becomes a “master” and begins to exercise enslaving power over us. In the case of career-idolatry, it begins to drive us to overwork, deceives our minds into denying how much we are working, begins to erode the strength of our family, etc. When Jesus comes into our lives, and becomes the supreme Lord, his “kingdom” begins to heal us of the denial, begins to heal our family life, begins to liberate us from the anxiety we feel over money and work. He becomes the ultimate Savior and therefore the ultimate Lord (King). The more the gospel of sheer grace dominates our thinking, the more his Kingdom spreads through my life and liberates me from the power of false masters and saviors. This is the work of the “gospel of the kingdom.” As I submit to his Lordship, he surrounds me and brings me into his kingdom, and I become new.

4. Read 5:1-20. What does this account tell us a) about the person of Christ?
b) about trusting in Christ?

5. What is an area of your life where you can trust Christ more?

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: He is all-powerful over hordes of demons and all-powerful in defeating illness and death. He is also all-powerful in hopeless situations, in spite of being asleep. Even when Jesus is enormously opposed, he prevails.

Why Jesus came: Jesus came to bind the “strong man” Satan and rescue people from his destructive work. Jesus came to go to the Gentiles as well as the Jews.

How should I respond? Man’s response in this passage is that of fear as opposed to mere amazement, and faith (verses 6:6, 9:23, 10:52, 11:22). Fear is generally opposed to faith: if the disciples had had faith, they would not have feared the storm. The demons feared Jesus and the Gerasene people wrongly feared Jesus’ presence. Yet the disciples were not wrong to tremble at the power of Jesus’ Word. He is revealing himself as Christ and God. The faith he demands is a faith that acknowledges and relies on his power, even during terrible the circumstances. In view of His power, our faith also carries with it a sense of awe.

8. Read verses 21-25; 35-43. a) How does Jairus evidence faith in Jesus? (cf. John 3:1-2). b) What does the interruption (of ministry to Jairus by the ministry to the woman) teach us?
9. Read verses 39-43. a) Why do you think he says, "she is not dead, but asleep"? b) What does Jesus method in this miracle show us?
10. How might the disciples lives have been changed after witnessing these events? How can our lives change as a result of believing the truth found in this passage?

Prayer requests

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Jesus is powerful in humanly impossible circumstances: calming a storm, casting out the Legion, healing the leper, raising Jarius' daughter from the dead, and touching the unclean and making clean.

Why Jesus came: He came to make the unclean clean, restore the outcast and even to conquer death. He accepts those that the world rejects.

How should I respond? Man's response is that of uncompromising faith. All other resources are useless and inadequate.

THE REJECTION OF THE KING/ THE SHEPHERD KING

12. Read verses 51-52. What common character quality prevented the disciples from understanding the meaning of both the feeding of the 5,000 and Jesus' walking on water? How can we avoid that?

13. If we really believed and practiced the teaching that Jesus is our Shepherd, in what practical ways would our lives be different?

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: In Chapters 1-5, we learned that Jesus has staggering divine authority to conquer Satan, forgive sinners and overcome death itself. Here, we begin to learn that Jesus is the promised Redeemer Messiah of Israel, a Redeemer who is also God himself.

Why Jesus Came: Jesus shows that he has come to redeem by performing miracles reminiscent of the exodus from Egypt. In this section we see Jesus:

- as the Good Shepherd teaching and leading his people.
- giving miraculous bread as in the time of Moses.
- crossing the divided sea as in the time of Moses.
- “passing by” in glory, implying that he is Yahweh the Redeemer.

But again he prays apparently in connection with turning away from the temptations of popularity even in a preaching ministry.

How should I respond? Earlier chapters have encouraged repentance, faith and listening. Here the emphasis is on recognizing Jesus as Redeemer. The disciples fail to recognize Jesus because they are “hard-hearted,” fundamentally in the same state as Jesus' enemies.

Mark

Religion vs. the Gospel: I

Study 7 | Mark 7:1-23

The Mosaic law listed a number of physical conditions that disqualified someone from worship:

- contact with a dead body (*Numbers 19:11-22*);
- infectious skin diseases such as boils or sores or rashes (*Leviticus 13:1-46*);
- mildew in clothing, article, or home (*Leviticus 13:47-14:57*);
- any bodily discharges, either natural (as semen, menstruation, fluids from childbirth) or unnatural (diarrhea, yeast, hemorrhages of blood or puss) (see *Leviticus 12 and 15*);
- and eating any food in the lists of those items called unclean (*Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14*).

If a person became defiled through any of these things (or through contact with someone who was defiled), he or she could not come into the sanctuary of God for a period, and then had to wash with water for purification (*Leviticus 15:8-10*). The Bible only required washings of the priests at the temple (*Exodus 30:19 and 40:13*), not of all people. But the elders developed a “fence” (called “Halakah”) of more specific and strict rules than those of the Bible. They demanded that everyone wash their hands in order to be pure. Jesus, however, refused to have his disciples bound by such traditions.

1. The Old Testament “clean laws” use dirt to symbolize sin. Why is this a good metaphor? (In what ways does sin do to the soul what filth does to a body?)

2. Read verses 1-5. a) The religious leaders drew up specific moral guidelines for their faith community that went beyond those laid down in the Scripture. What are the advantages and disadvantages of doing this? b) On balance, is this a good idea or a bad one, and why? c) What are some ways Christians ‘add’ to the law today?

A person who designated money as “**Corban**” did not have to give it to God during his lifetime — a fact that led to the type of abuse of which Jesus speaks.

7. Refer to verse 19. How can Jesus just “declare all foods clean”? Is he just writing off a big chunk of the Scripture? cf. Matthew 5:17-18.
8. What are some of the main points from today’s study? For each point, list some possible applications for today.

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: The whole of 6:31-10:45 reveals Jesus as Redeemer. This section explains what all people need to be redeemed from.

Why Jesus came: Jesus judges the man-made religion of the Old Testament. He hints that he will redeem from sin, by showing that separation from God is really a “sin problem.” Jesus declares the Mosaic Law, which set the Jew apart from the Gentile, obsolete. Under the new covenant, anyone can be saved, not just Jews.

How should I respond? Man-made religion gets the diagnosis wrong and has nothing to do with the cure. The source of evil is our sinful hearts. Man desires to follow rules in order to be righteous before God, yet Jesus presents Himself as the only way to be righteous before God.

Prayer requests

Mark

Religion vs. the Gospel: II

Mark 7:24-37

OPTIONAL STUDY

Tyre was a city outside of the geography of Israel. Jesus' trip to Tyre was the only recorded occasion he left Israel. His visit to Tyre was entering 'unclean' Gentile turf.

We must see the first of these incidents — at least — as having a very direct connection to the teaching of Jesus about the nature of sin in Mark 7:1-23. The Mosaic law required that worshippers be 'ritually clean,' physically healthy, have no contact with dead animals or people, abstain from a list of prohibited foods, and so on. The purpose of these rules were to act as a 'visual aid' to show us that we needed to be holy before God. Disease, decay, and dirt symbolize sin. The religious leaders, however, saw ritual purity not as a symbolizing holiness, but as constituting holiness. As a result, they added even more rules and regulations, the 'tradition of the elders,' on top of the Biblical laws. They believed that you could make yourself acceptable to God by scrupulously staying separate from profane and unclean people, places, and practices. Jesus says that they completely missed the point of the Old Testament regulations. Sin is first of all internal, a matter of the heart. Sin can't be dealt with by external washing but only through internal spiritual intervention.

- 1. Read verses 24-26. Why did Jesus go to "the vicinity of Tyre"? Was it to get some time for himself? Or to perform a mission? Why is this trip significant, coming after 7:1-23?**
- 2. Consider verses 24-26. Think of all the ways in which Mark is pointing out what an 'unclean' situation Jesus now involves himself in.**
- 3. In verses 26-27, what is so unusual and striking a) about the woman's request, and, b) about Jesus' response to her?**

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Jesus is Redeemer not only of Israel but of the whole world. He redeems the world because he is compassionate. He is able to because he has divine authority.

Why Jesus Came: Jesus came to deliver from evil those who admit their need, to open the ears of the spiritually deaf and to redeem all nations. Note that these stories are pictures of redemption, not redemption itself, and pictures which show that it will happen rather than how. The 'how' is taught in the second half of Mark and the actual event happens on the cross.

How should I respond? The woman sets us an example of humble dependence, the antithesis of the Pharisees' proud self-righteousness. We will follow her example as we see ourselves as 'Gentile sinners' who have been radically accepted by Christ.

Mark

Who is this King?

Study 8 | Mark 8:1-30

We now reach the middle of the gospel. Until now the author Mark has been seeking to answer one question: "WHO IS THIS?"

Everything we see Jesus doing and saying has been to help readers gradually see who he is. The gospel now approaches its first of two climactic spots — one in its middle and one at its end. In both spots, a significant person "gets it," and confesses openly that Jesus has "the name which is above every other name." Here in 8:29, Peter says, "You are the Christ", namely, the promised Messiah Prince who would bring God's kingdom to earth and heal all ills." Then, at the end of the gospel, in 15:29, a centurion at the cross says, "Surely this man was the Son of God." First one of his own disciples understands who he is, and finally the whole world will see who he is. But up until this spot in 8:29, the disciples have responded to all the evidence with an amazing lack of comprehension. They still don't "get it," they don't see the obvious.

- 1. In verses 1-10, what differences are there between this feeding miracle and the one in 6:30 ff? What might be Mark's purpose in including this one?**
- 2. In verse 11, why do the Pharisees ask for a sign? Why won't Jesus give them one? What does this teach us about the nature of faith in Jesus?**
- 3. What is Jesus trying to get across to his disciples in verses 14-21? What does their failure to understand teach us about ourselves?**

4. **Read verses 22-26. Why does Mark put this healing account here between the rebuke of the Pharisees and disciples, and the story of Peter's confession?**

5. **Read verses 27-30. a) What does Jesus' question tell us about Jesus? b) What does Peter's answer tell us about Jesus?**

6. **Read verse 30. Why would Jesus tell Peter to be quiet about his identity? Should we be quiet? Why or why not?**

Prayer requests

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Jesus is the Christ, the Redeemer King! That is what the feeding miracles were pointing to.

Why Jesus came: He came to redeem those who *hear, see and understand* who he is.

How should I respond? There is plenty of evidence about who Jesus is. His ministry as recounted in the first half of Mark means that we cannot plead ignorance. We are answerable for our response to him and those who remain unbelieving will be justly judged. Nobody, however, will understand unless Jesus opens their eyes. The only way out of judgment is by God's gracious intervention.

8. How can we follow Jesus' example of weakness?**Remembering the big picture**

Who Jesus is: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of Man and the Suffering Servant.

Why Jesus came: He will reign in power, but he must suffer and die.

How should I respond? To follow Jesus means to follow the Suffering Servant. To truly follow, we must openly acknowledging him and all his words. Inseparable from following Jesus is the cost of the cross. There is no other example He gives.

Prayer requests

Jesus on the mount; Jesus off the mount

Mark 9:2-29

OPTIONAL STUDY

We saw that the very minute Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah (8:29), Jesus immediately began to teach, "Yes, but I am the Messiah who has come to be murdered." Peter rebukes him (8:31-32), so it is clear that only relentless teaching on Jesus' part is going to make any "dent" in the prejudices of the disciples. Now we are in the second half of Mark, and the contrast with the first half is already evident. Jesus now constantly speaks of his death and suffering, and he does it in ways that the disciples find extremely hard to swallow. This passage begins to answer the questions about the nature of Christ's life and the reasons that the Messiah has to die.

Jesus was transfigured "before them" (verse 2) meaning that the "Transfiguration" was for his disciples' benefit, designed to teach them about his person and work. Therefore, we have to ask "what does the *transfiguration* teach us?"

- 1. Read verses 2-8. What does the supernatural brightness of Jesus (verses 3-4) and the descent of a cloud (verse 7) tell us about Jesus' person and work? (Remember the cloud and bright light in the book of Exodus.)**

- 2. Refer to verses 4-12. What does the presence of Moses and Elijah and the voice from the cloud tell us about Jesus' person and work?**

- 3. Refer to verses 2-8. Why does the voice from the cloud add "Listen to Him!"? What do we learn from this?**

8. What do we learn about faith from this passage? About prayer?

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Jesus is the Son of Man referred to in Daniel 7. He is the Ancient of Days, the Son of God, whom God the Father loves. He is the Messiah, who must be preceded by Elijah (Malachi 4) and to whom the Old Testament points.

Why Jesus Came: We already know, from 8:31, that he says he “must die.” Why must he die? Mark 9:2-13 answers in terms of God’s will. It is God the Father’s plan to reconcile sinners to himself. Mark 9:9-29 gives the beginning of an answer in terms of man’s need. No mere human can break Satan’s power to deafen, dehumanize and ultimately kill mankind.

How should I respond? We should listen to the apostolic teaching of the cross. We cannot “listen to Jesus” in the sense that the disciples did. But we can “listen” with confidence to Scripture, which is the written account of what Jesus said.

Mark

Following the King: II

Study 10 | Mark 9:30-50

Jesus has begun to tell the disciples that he is the Messiah, but he has come to be rejected and die. He repeats this here in 9:31. The first reaction of his followers is they simply did not understand what he meant (verse 32a). It didn't fit their categories, so it did not "register." Imagine that you are on a campaign team trying to get a man elected president. One day he says, "Listen, here's how the campaign will end. Not only will I lose the election, but the opposition is going to assassinate me." Surely his followers would think he was being sarcastic or trying to motivate them to work harder. We can imagine, then, why they were so confused! But we see another reaction as well. Fear. They don't want to admit how confused they are (verse 32b – "*they were afraid to ask him about it.*") They were afraid that he might be serious. Their fear and pride kept them from admitting how confused and scared the teaching made them feel.

As a result, in the last part of the book of Mark we see Jesus spending a lot more time with disciples, in order to enlighten them. (Verse 30 – "*Jesus didn't want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples.*") He enters a phase in which he puts much more into the intensive training of his disciples in the meaning of his death and resurrection (i.e. the gospel).

Jesus frequently used the title

"Son of Man" when referring to Himself. In Jesus' day, it was also recognized as a Messianic title. Daniel 7:13-14 refers to the Son of Man descending down from Heaven to establish an everlasting kingdom of righteousness on earth.

- 1. What is the effect of continually using the term "Son of Man" each time Jesus teaches about his death (8:31; 9:12; 9:31)? (Read Daniel 7:9-15 and ask what kind of figure this is.) What is Jesus trying to get across?**
- 2. How does the disciples' argument on the road (verses 33-34) show why they could not grasp the teaching of Jesus' impending death?**

8. Read 2 Corinthians 8:9. You know something the rich young man did not. How can this make Jesus' call to us a joy?

9. Is there a theme running through all three passages? What do all these passages tell us about entering the kingdom of God?

10. Is there an application you can make as a result of today's new found truth?

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Again we see Jesus the authoritative King, who expounds the real meaning of Scripture and states who will and who won't get to heaven. He also is a Servant, welcoming little children.

Why Jesus came:

To judge: In Chapter 2, Jesus said he came to call sinners. In Chapter 7, he taught that man's basic problem was sin. Now he convicts all of deadly sin, the Pharisees, the rich and the Twelve.

To save: But he also says that those who come to him admitting they are unable to help themselves will be "blessed," "saved," "inherit eternal life," and "enter the kingdom of God." This is the language of the true return from exile and of the promises to Abraham. His purpose in the first coming is to rescue men from the final judgment of the second.

How should I respond? Giving up everything to follow Jesus reflects a surrendered heart, but it is not a "work" we accomplish to earn God's favor. We must admit we cannot earn our way to heaven and instead trust God to do the humanly impossible.

8. **This is Jesus' last healing miracle. Why do you think Mark places it here? How is Bartimaeus a good example for us?**
9. **What was the most helpful or impressive thing that you learned today personally? What practical difference can it make in your life?**

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Jesus is Redeemer King, son of Man and Son of David. Unlike the Gentile 'kings' Jesus really is Lord and has all authority. But his Kingship is demonstrated in 'littleness'; he is also the Suffering Servant (Is 52-53) and the substitutionary sacrifice (Ex 12 and Lev 16), the Ransom by which we are redeemed.

Why Jesus came: God says Jesus must die for our sins. Our sin is serious; we cannot save ourselves. Now we learn that Jesus came not only to preach and call sinners, but to die for our death, the price of rescue from hell.

Man's response? Since Mark 8:32, the twelve have consistently failed to accept the necessity of the cross and have failed to accept the truth about themselves. In this passage, they at last come empty-handed, but do not see that even this is not enough. We can do nothing but God must do something. Sin is so serious that the divine Son of Man came to die in our place to save us. When we grasp that, our ideas of greatness will be turned on their heads.

Prayer requests

Mark

The final temple

Mark 11:1-12:17

OPTIONAL STUDY

Biblical-theological background for Mark 11-15

If we are to appreciate the meaning of the triumphal entry and the cleansing of the temple (in Mark 11), and indeed, the whole of Mark 11-15 (which takes place in and around the temple) we need to have a deep grasp of the rich Old Testament background.

1. In the beginning, God gave us a “sanctuary,” a place where we could live in the presence of God and meet him face to face. That sanctuary was the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:8-9; Genesis 3:8-9). It was a place of total fulfillment and fellowship with God. It was the place of shalom, perfect peace and harmony.
2. But because of sin, we were banished from the sanctuary of God’s presence — a flaming sword was put at the entrance of the Garden (Genesis 3:24). This was a representation that the penalty for sin is death. The way back into the presence of God is blocked by justice. There is no way back into the presence of God without going under the sword.
3. In the wilderness, God created a moveable sanctuary — the tabernacle where people could draw near to meet him (Exodus 25:22). The actual throne room of the sanctuary was the Holy of Holies, separated by a thick curtain/barrier, which had pictures of the Garden on it, motifs of cherubim and palm trees (Exodus 26). But only the high priest could go into the Holy of Holies, and then only once a year. He had to go “under the sword” with a blood sacrifice, symbolically atoning for sin, paying the penalty in order to go in to God’s presence. At the conclusion of the tabernacle service, God blessed the people with his shalom or peace (Numbers 6:24-27). The shekinah glory of God’s holiness dwells behind the veil in the sanctuary and no sinner can enter there.
4. Though God allows Solomon to build a permanent physical sanctuary (I Kings 8:41-43), yet he alludes to a Son of David building a truly permanent “house” for God and us (2 Samuel 5:6-10; 7:1-16). Since Solomon is not this true Son, his temple is destroyed (I Kings 11:11-13; 2 Kings 25:8-11). During the exile, Ezekiel prophesies a new temple and a new David to build it (Ezekiel 37:24-28; 40-43). It will be much grander than Solomon’s temple. The Lord’s glory will fill it (Ezekiel 48:35), and it will become so large that all the nations of the earth will come to it and into it (Ezekiel 37:28).
5. The temple built after the exiles returned to Israel from Babylon did not fulfill this grand vision of the prophets. When the new foundation was laid, the older people wept because it was far less splendid than Solomon’s, not more (Ezra 3:12). It was this post-exilic temple that existed in Jesus’ day.

THE FINAL TEMPLE

So this temple was not the one that was prophesied (Haggai 2:1-8). That one would only be built when the Messiah, the new “David” came.

6. Zechariah 9-14 is critical for understanding Mark 11. Zechariah 9:9-12 tells of the Messiah, the king coming back “gentle and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” The prophecy ends in a stunning way. “On that day **HOLY TO THE LORD** will be inscribed on the bells of the horses, and the cooking pots in the Lord’s house will be like the sacred bowls in front of the altar. Every pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy to the Lord Almighty... And on that day there will no longer be a Canaanite in the house of the Lord Almighty” (Zechariah 14:20-21). Here we are told that the returning king will turn the entire city — even the entire world — into a giant holy of holies. It is a breath-taking and overwhelming vision. Even cooking pots will be as holy as those before God’s throne. The Holy of Holies will extend to include the whole world, so that even the Canaanites will be holy and living in the house of the Lord (Zechariah 14:21). This means that the Messiah will not simply build a building, but will mediate the very presence of God back to earth. He will **BE** the door to God, the final temple.
7. Mark 11 is essentially showing how Jesus fulfills this prophecy of Zechariah, and thus all the prophecies of the Old Testament that linked the Messiah to the temple. John is more explicit than Mark. He says, “*the word became flesh and tabernacled among us, and we beheld his glory*” (1:14). He tells us how, after Jesus cleansed the temple, he refers to his body as the temple (2:19-21). John records Jesus saying “*I am the Way, the Truth, the Life. No one comes to the Father but by me*” (John 14:6). Jesus is the final temple. In Mark 15:38, we are told how this could be —the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. Jesus went under the sword (Genesis 3:24). He took the sword into himself. He was the High Priest opening the way into the Holy of Holies, but he made himself the sacrifice. He paid the price to open the door.
8. In Mark and the other gospels, Jesus is depicted as “the final temple”. He thus brings us a salvation of unfathomable wisdom and richness. The ripping of the veil signifies the “outbreaking” of God’s royal, healing presence into the world — this is the coming of the kingdom. What does it all mean?
 - a. It means that Christ is not primarily a teacher, but a Savior. This is why Mark concentrates not so much on his moral advice, but on who he is and what he did. He comes to open the way into God for us.
 - b. It means that being a Christian is not primarily being a nice person who subscribes to certain beliefs and codes. It is a radical

regeneration of the heart and reorientation of the life. We are regenerated when we believe (John 3:3), because now the same raw presence that once shook mountains, terrified people, killed living things on contact now can live in us. For we who believe in Jesus are now temples in which the Holy Spirit of God dwells (I Corinthians 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16).

- c. It means that being a Christian gives us access to the presence of God through prayer now, and access to the bosom of God in the future. Moses' unrealizable yearning to see the light of God's glory and face (Exodus 33:18) is now our privilege (John 1:14; 2 Corinthians 4:6).
- d. It means that being a Christian makes us partners and participants with Christ in his work of spreading the healing and energizing kingdom-power through the world. Because Jesus is the temple, we too are the final temple, "living stones" in it (I Peter 2:4-10). Because Jesus is the High Priest, we are "priests" who can both draw near to God (Hebrews 4:14-16) and bring others to God (Hebrews 13). Because Jesus is a gate to heaven (John 1:51; John 14:6) we are linked to heaven (Colossians 2:20; Philippians 3:20). Because Jesus is an anointed one (Luke 4:18), as was the temple, so we are anointed (I John 2:20). All the lines and themes of the temple converge on Jesus — he is the Sacrifice, the Priest, the Altar, the Light, the Bread, the blood of purification. For all the promises of God become "Yes" in Jesus (2 Corinthians 1:20).

Chapter 11 really begins the last chapter of Jesus' life. We notice that in chapter 10:46-52) he allows people (like blind Bartimaeus) to call him the Messiah openly. This can mean only one thing — nothing else needs to happen before he is crucified! He knows that an open declaration of his identity will lead to execution, so the countdown begins. Chapters 11 through 15 cover only a week of his life, but it consumes nearly a third of Mark's gospel. The disproportionate length shows that the gospels are not a biography. These chapters are the climax and fulfillment of Jesus' ministry, not simply the end of it.

- 1. Read verses 1-6. A full six verses are devoted to finding a colt for Jesus to ride. Read Zechariah 9:9. What does it teach us that Jesus has this so well planned out? What are some practical, personal applications for us?**
- 2. In verse 2, Jesus makes it clear that this is a colt "which no one has ever ridden." Why would that be of significance? What does it symbolize?**
- 3. Read Verses 8-10. What do we learn from the response and cries of the crowd?**

THE JUDGMENT OF THE KING

- 8. In verse 11 Jesus does not simply ride in to Jerusalem. This verse shows his triumphal entry was actually to the Temple. Share from your reading: a) one insight that helps you most in understanding Jesus' mission, and b) one insight that helps you most in understanding the Christian life.**

This passage shows us Jesus repeating himself. The repetition of themes in Mark is not a lack of imagination on the author's part. Rather, it conveys a very important lesson for us. Jesus has only a few very basic things to say, but they are very difficult to learn. Discerning Christians sometimes realize their entire lives have been one long process of learning one or two gospel lessons.

Instead of Jesus instructing his disciples in the meaning of his death, we see him again confronting religious leaders and the crowds through the next couple of chapters. We are brought back to the theme of the first half of Mark — "Who is this?" Jesus' triumphal entry to public acclaim has virtually forced the hand of the "chief priests, teachers of law, and the elders" (Mark 11:27). They can ignore him no longer — they must discredit him or destroy him. His entry was virtually an invitation from Jesus to "crown me or kill me." There is never any doubt which option they will choose.

1. Read verses 11:27-33. a) What are they asking Jesus? b) Why would this group be so concerned about it? c) Why is Jesus' answer so effective?

2. What practical implications does this interchange have for us?

3. Read 12:1-12. Why is this parable spoken to religious leaders, and how does it follow from the previous discussion?

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Once again Jesus' supreme authority is evident, not only in his claim to be Son of God and the Messiah to whom John pointed, but also in his complete control over the supposed "authorities" of Israel.

Why Jesus Came: The parable of the vineyard puts Jesus' coming in the context of Israel's whole discreditable history. He has come, like the prophets before him, to demand from Israel God's due. But when rebellious Israel kills the messenger, he will rise from the dead, and they will have the care of God's people taken from them, to the marvel of believers.

How should I respond? The unbelievers' problem here is rebellion, not ignorance (12:12a). They should have admitted who Jesus was (11:27-33), respected him (12:6) and given God his due (12:17). Instead, they desire an inheritance only for themselves (12:7), are only in awe of men (11:32; 12:12b), ignore dire warnings (12:9-12) and lay deadly traps for Jesus (12:17).

Mark

The teaching of the King

Study 12 | Mark 12:18-44

This passage continues the series of “hot questions” served up to trap Jesus. He deftly fields these questions like a good infielder handles ground balls — he calmly picks each one up and throws it back! In one instance, he throws it back very hard, and goes on the offensive, totally defeating them. Jesus never dodged the hard questions. Sometimes people in the church brush off difficult inquiries with the response “don’t question, just believe.” Jesus doesn’t do that. It is interesting to notice that Jesus doesn’t simply set up a lecture series and give people information. Rather, his teaching is usually a response to concrete situations and questions.

On the other hand, we learn here that asking Jesus a question is very dangerous! He never lets the question remain at the abstract or intellectual level, but gets personal and makes you examine where you stand and to what you are committed.

- 1. Read verses 18-27. Jesus uses several different arguments to show the Sadducees their errors. What are they?**
- 2. What can we learn and infer about life after death, according to Jesus?**
- 3. Read verses 28-30. Why is Jesus’ response to the teacher of the law so amazing to them? (verse 34b, “no one dared ask him any more questions.”) What does it teach us about ourselves? How does it tell us more about the law?**

8. Read verses 12:18-44. What aspect of Jesus' teaching is most challenging to you? How can you more fully follow "the teaching of the King?"

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Jesus is the Messiah and, according to the OT, this means that he is incomparably greater than David, descended from David but also the Son of God. As such, he has authority to interpret Scripture and to judge who is near and who is far from kingdom of God. The kingdom of God, God's reign, has itself come "near" in Jesus' presence on earth (cf. 1:14-15).

Why Jesus came: As the Messiah, He is due our own whole allegiance. Instead of living for self, we can now live for God.

How should I respond? The passage contains two negative examples and two positives.

We must beware – of denying (either in theory like the Sadducees or in practice like the Pharisees) that there will be a resurrection, and therefore that there will be judgement and salvation. Such denial ignores what Scripture teaches about God's power.

We must beware – of religion like that of the scribes in general which courts homage from others, idolizing self. Such religion may look very holy, but fails in what is due to God and our neighbor.

We must emulate – the wise scribe's understanding of God's demands. Jesus commends him not because he has kept the two great commandments but because he knows they are the standard by which he will be judged, and that religion cannot make up for not keeping them.

We must emulate – the poor widow's total commitment, not just financially but personally. What she gives is, literally "her whole life" (cf. 8:34-37).

Prayer requests

Mark

This world won't last forever

Mark 13:1-47

OPTIONAL STUDY

Introduction to Eschatology

There is little consensus among Christians with regard to the details of what the Bible teaches about the “end times.” (The theological term for this area of inquiry is *eschatology*.) On the one hand, we must remember that the basic teaching of the New Testament on this could not be clearer: Jesus Christ will return visibly and personally at the end of time to judge and renew the whole world. There is very little disagreement about this fact among those who accept the basic trustworthiness of the Bible. Some estimate that almost one quarter of the New Testament is devoted to proclaiming this fact. If you reject the concept of the Second Coming of Christ, you essentially have to reject the reliability of the entire New Testament. Jesus is coming back.

But on the other hand, beyond this essential teaching, Christians with very similar commitments and beliefs have not been able to agree on most of the details regarding the Lord's return. One reason for this is because much Biblical prophecy comes in a literary genre often called “*Apocalyptic*.” Every literary genre comes with its own set of interpretive rules. We do not interpret poetry the same way we interpret history. But what are the “rules” for interpreting prophecy? “Apocalyptic” looks seductively like simple historical narrative, only written “ahead of time.” But it is also much like poetry in its images and ambiguities. In short, it is very difficult to understand Biblical prophecy. (When we see how New Testament writers interpreted Old Testament prophecies about the birth of Christ, we see just how tricky such interpretation is. For example, see Matthew 2:14 citing Hosea 11:1 as a prediction that Jesus would go to Egypt. Would you have ever interpreted Hosea 11:1 as a Messianic prophecy if Matthew hadn't explained it?)

What does this mean? First, it means we must hold any of our convictions about eschatology with a certain amount of tentativeness and humility. If we hold our views of prophecy and end-times with the same assurance and conviction with which we hold our views of Christ and the Gospel, we are simply giving ourselves too much credit. What makes us think that we are so much wiser than most of the rest of the Christian church? (*Any* particular view of the end is virtually a minority position — that is how fractured the church is over the interpretation of details!)

Second, however, we should not simply avoid any discussion of details. Our views here *do* have some impact on how we live our lives in the world. Our “eschatology” (as we shall see) can make us either very optimistic or very pessimistic about life in this world, and that affects how we spend our money and our time.

Therefore, we should study this subject with humility, but we *should* study it.

THIS WORLD WON'T LAST FOREVER

The occasion for Jesus' discourse is his prediction that the temple will be destroyed. The temple was an impressive building. Josephus, the Jewish historian, tells us each stone was approximately 37 feet long, 12 feet high, and 18 feet long. Therefore, when Jesus says "*not one stone will be standing upon another,*" he is predicting an extremely violent event, and a tremendous disaster. We know that this prophecy came true. In 70 A.D. the Roman army under Titus destroyed Jerusalem. He raised the Temple to the ground, as a "lesson" and warning to all rebels. This is quite important background knowledge for any readers of this passage.

1. Since the disaster Jesus is predicting in verse 2 is so mammoth, what point in history do the disciples probably think Jesus is describing? (i.e. What are the "these things" that the disciples are asking about in verse 4?

2. Read through verses 5-13 and verses 14-23. After reading each, circle which question you think Jesus is addressing in that particular section.

A-1 "when will the temple end?"

A-2 "what will be the signs leading up to that?"

B-1 "when will the world end?"

B-2 "what will be the signs leading up to that?"

verses 5-13:

A-1

A-2

B-1

B-2

verses 14-23:

A-1

A-2

B-1

B-2

3. Why do you think the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem was so significant for Christians?

4. Read through verses 24-27, 28-31, and 32-37. After reading each, circle which question you think Jesus is addressing in that particular section.

A-1 "when will the temple end?"

A-2 "what will be the signs leading up to that?"

B-1 "when will the world end?"

B-2 "what will be the signs leading up to that?"

verses 24-27: A-1

A-2

B-1

B-2

verses 28-31: A-1

A-2

B-1

B-2

verses 32-37: A-1

A-2

B-1

B-2

5. Make a list of all the insights you can glean from verses 5-37 about the second coming of Jesus Christ to earth.

6. Read verses 32-37. We know that Jesus is returning but not when He is returning. What is the practical impact of this balance of 'knowing and not knowing'?

7. **Reflect for a minute on how your behavior and life would change if you took seriously what you have learned here about 'The Return of the King'.**

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Jesus is the true Messiah, Son of Man and Son of God. He is absent now, (verses 5-23) but he will return (verses 24-37). When he comes in glory, all will know who he is.

Why Jesus Came: He came to bring judgement, but not yet judgement on the world. He came to send the gospel out to the elect a New Israel of all nations. When he returns in final judgement, his people will be gathered.

How should I respond? Reject false "messiahs" and false "prophets," however spectacular, and all claims to know the date of Jesus' return. We need to spread the gospel, in light of Jesus' return. The last judgement could come at any time.

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Just as physical Israel was saved from death in Egypt by death of lambs (Exodus 12), so Jesus is the true Passover Lamb whose death saves the true Israel from death. He is the Suffering Servant who dies for many (Isaiah 53:12). He is totally in control; He is King.

Why Jesus came: Jesus came to die not for the worthy but for the unworthy, and to give his body and blood to atone for the sins of people of all nations. This makes his death amazingly good news.

How should I respond? Although it looks increasingly as if everyone will deny the crucified Christ, the story is not yet over. In thankful devotion, we can give praise for the death of the "Passover Lamb."

Prayer requests

Suffering at the hands of His friends

Mark

Mark 14:27-52

OPTIONAL STUDY

The next three sections of Mark look at how Jesus suffered at the hands of his friends, enemies, and Father. These titles are taken from the passage titles of the “Read, Mark, Learn” curriculum used for many years at St. Helen’s Bishops Gate Church in London. The titles show us that the suffering of Christ was multi-dimensional — physical, mental, and spiritual. It is necessary to understand the depths of what he endured for us if we are to appreciate the riches of what he procured for us. Secondly it shows us how to face trials in our own life.

Note: We will only touch today on verses 27-31 with little comment. It will be better to consider these predictions of Peter’s denial along with the later account of what and how he did it.

- 1. Notice in verses 27 and 49 how Jesus continually refers to prophecy throughout his trial. a) What does this tell us about Jesus’ death? b) How does the cross help us to face suffering and injustice in our own lives?**

- 2. Contrast Jesus’ reaction to death (read verses 33-34, 36) to the deaths of so many Christian martyrs in history (read below). Why the difference?**

- 3. a) What does “the cup” tell us about Jesus’ sufferings? (Recall Mark 10:38.)
b) Many people reject the very idea of hell or the wrath of God. What impact does such a rejection have on one’s appreciation of the love of Christ?**

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Jesus is fully man; his suffering is real and he dreads the cross. But he is the obedient Son of God, willing to die, thereby fulfilling the Old Testament prophecy (verses 27, 49).

Why Jesus Came: He came to drink the “cup” of God’s wrath, bearing the penalty of man’s sin on man’s behalf. No one else could do this; he was left utterly alone. And there was no other way. Only God Himself could pay the penalty of man’s sin by dying in man’s place.

How should I respond? We will be ashamed of Jesus and his words unless we both understand the cross and, “watching,” pray for God’s help. We shall do neither unless we understand ourselves and that we are all prayless, sleepy, self-reliant failures.

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Jesus' claims are made public for the first time. He is the Messiah/King of Israel, the Son of God as well as Son of Man, the one who will sit at God's right hand and come in glory to judge. He is shown to be innocent by the very people who most want to prove him guilty. As Suffering Servant, he responds to their taunts with silence.

Why Jesus came: He did not come to be the kind of King we think we want, and which they falsely accused him of being in order to kill him. He came to be the kind of King we really need, who will die not only at the hands of, but also die in the place of, such murderous rebels as we are.

How should I respond? The Sanhedrin hated Jesus at once; Peter and the crowd denied when persecution came; Pilate was "choked" by the cares of the world (cf. 4:15-19). The contrast between Christ and all who reject him is not there to encourage us to follow his example better in the future but to show us our helpless need of salvation. He did not come to call the righteous but sinners (2:17).

Prayer requests

Suffering at the hands of His Father

Mark

Study 15 | Mark 15:16-39

We must remember that Mark always has two reasons for including small details in his narrative. First, anything he writes is included because it happened. Mark is not making this up. (See below, question #2.) Second, however, anything he writes is included in order to teach us about Jesus. Mark is not 'preachy' — he does not do much direct explanation or exposition or moralizing. Rather, he selects facts and events in such a way as to drive home the meaning of the work of Christ. So we should constantly ask: "Why did Mark include that? What is he trying to tell us here?"

- 1. Look at the "mocking" of Christ. Read verses 17-20, 29-32, and also 14:65.**
 - a) For what particular things is Jesus mocked? b) What do you think Mark is showing us in the account of the mocking?**

- 2. Read verse 21. What does this interesting little note about 'Alexander and Rufus' tell us about a) Mark's readers, and b) the trustworthiness of the account?**

- 3. What is Mark trying to get across about human nature in these descriptions of the mocking, spitting, beating?**

8. Read verse 39. In many ways, the confession of the centurion is the climax of the crucifixion and even of the gospel of Mark. Contrast him to everyone else around the cross. What is the connection between verses 38 and 39? What do you think Mark is trying to get his readers (us) to do here? How can we do it?

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: Jesus is the Christ and Redeemer King, the Son of God. Jesus suffers as the Passover Lamb not only at the hands of men but at the hands of God.

Why Jesus came: Jesus came so that we would believe in this Messiah, the one who “must” die. Jesus bore God’s wrath and died in our place, He was banished by his Father so that we might be welcomed.

How should I respond? Believe in this Messiah, the one who must die (8:31).

Prayer requests

4. **Why does Mark take such care to show that the resurrection was a historical event? Why does that matter?**
5. **Most of the reliable manuscripts we have indicate Mark's gospel ending abruptly at 16:8. If (as it seems) he ended it that way, why did he do so, do you think?**

Prayer requests

Remembering the big picture

Who Jesus is: He is the Suffering Servant, Ransom, Passover Lamb, Son of Man, Son of God who is innocent, authoritative, loved by his Father.

Why Jesus came:

- To judge all men for fruitlessness, man-centered religion, and rebellion/blasphemy.
- To save both Jew and Gentile, including blasphemers/rebels/his killers from hell for eternal life.
- To serve by dying as ransom. He is the Lamb who accepted God's wrath and takes away the sin of the world.

How should I respond?

- Be unashamed of Jesus. (Examples: Take up cross! Deny self!; Be little/welcome little; Serve! Witness! Watch!; Have faith in God! Give All!)
- Be ashamed of ourselves. (Examples: we reject word about cross; we reject word about us; we give man God's due; we deny/kill our Savior.)
- Pray for forgiveness/mercy.



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