

THE GOSPEL OF
MARK





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INTRODUCTION

“Following the King, Participating in the Kingdom”

In his article, “What’s the Definition of a Great Book?”, Rick Gekoski writes, “what you find in the greatest works of literature often involves some or all of the following: the high quality of the language, complexity of theme and detail, universality, depth and quality of feeling, memorableness, rereadability . . . When you read works of this quality you often feel, and continue to feel, that your internal planes have shifted, and that things will never, quite, be the same again.”¹

Using this definition, the Gospel of Mark can be categorized as exceptional literature. The author of Mark paints a picture of a nearly mysterious teacher, Jesus Christ, who traipses throughout the region of Jerusalem with a ragtag gaggle of staunchly loyal yet decidedly confused disciples. His bold claims of authority quickly garner opposition from the local religious authorities, while also captivating large groups of locals who flock to hear teachings and see healings and miracles performed. Ultimately this fickle crowd falls sway to the religious authorities’ rabble-rousing and join in demanding Jesus’ gruesome death. Yet death is not the ending for Jesus, whose resurrection three days later confirms his divine identity and gives hope for all who believe in him.

This is good literature.²

In addition to being good literature, the Gospel of Mark also falls under the genre of ancient biography. While the author of Mark carefully crafts a story in his gospel, he is also documenting historical events which happened in the life of a historical person, Jesus. While the genre of ancient biography differs slightly from modern biography, the ancient biography is still committed to “preserving accurate portraits of their main character.”³ The author of Mark tells not “a perspective of what the disciples had come to appreciate about Jesus by looking back and reflecting on what he did,” but rather documents a historical account of Jesus and his earthly ministry which then prompt and invite readers into reflection and engagement.⁴

Using methods of story, history, and biography, the author of Mark reveals to his readers the content of his message: the nature of Jesus’ identity and his Messiahship. Through this story and message, the author of Mark invites his readers to respond to the call of discipleship. So, as Gekoski writes, the reader “will never, quite, be the same again.”⁵

These themes of Jesus’ identity, Messiahship and discipleship provide a helpful framework for understanding the gospel of Mark and will be considered below, along with an examination of issues of authorship, dating, and original audience.

The kingdom of God which Jesus ushers in is thus not a kingdom relegated only to the realm of the mind or intellect but a kingdom that brings wholeness and restoration to all areas of life.

The Identity of Jesus and his Messiahship

Mark⁶ opens his gospel with, “The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (1:1). This summary statement captures the centrality of the character of Jesus Christ in Mark. The rest of the book develops who Jesus is and the nature of his identity. Throughout Mark, Jesus is the central character. With two exceptions (1:1-8; 6:14-29), all of the stories in Mark are about Jesus. The action, conflict and plot revolve around and develop through the character of Jesus. Not only is Jesus the central character, but the narrative is structured in careful, intentional ways to reveal the nature of Jesus’ identity to readers. Mark’s goal is to introduce Jesus to his readers, and so we must be looking for what we can glean about Jesus through Mark’s narratives. Commentator James Edwards identifies that “Mark’s portrayal of Jesus is characterized by three factors: his divine authority, his mission as the suffering Servant of God, and his divine Sonship.”⁷ The prominence of these themes warrant consideration as a framework for understanding Jesus as depicted by Mark.

Jesus’ Divine Authority

Jesus commands authority through his words and deeds, and through these words and deeds, establishes the coming Kingdom of God (which he announces in 1:15). Even from chapter 1, Jesus’ authority in teaching in the synagogue is recognized and brings amazement (1:21-28). Also throughout the book, Jesus consistently claims prerogative to do things that humans are unable to do. He professes forgiveness of sins (2:5-12), a task recognized as something only entrusted to God. Nature, even with its roaring waves and wind, are no match for Jesus’ power, as he calms the sea with a simple command (4:35-41) and traverses a stormy sea (6:45-52). Human disease also proves weak in light of Jesus’ power. As early as chapter 1 (1:29-34) Jesus vanquishes sickness, and continues to heal throughout the book.⁸ Jesus’ power also extends to the demonic world as he ousts many demons from individuals and silences them (5:1-20). Even death is powerless against Jesus (5:21-24, 35-43).⁹

While sometimes readers of Scripture and interpreters of Jesus' life tend to hold his teachings as more authoritative or revelatory of his identity than other events of his life, accounts of Jesus' miracles are rather what dominate much of Mark. In fact, it is striking how little of Jesus' teaching is recorded in Mark. Most of what is recorded are things Jesus does.

The kingdom of God which Jesus ushers in is thus not a kingdom relegated only to the realm of the mind or intellect but a kingdom that brings wholeness and restoration to all areas of life.

Jesus' Mission as the Suffering Servant of God

The suffering and death of Jesus plays a prominent role in Mark's gospel, as the final portion of Jesus' ministry occupies nearly half of the sixteen-chapter gospel. Not only does Mark give specific attention to the pain and death of Jesus in the last chapters of the gospel, but this imminent outcome is foreshadowed throughout the gospel. Even as early as Mark 2:20, Jesus begins hinting at the culmination of his time on earth: the ultimate sacrifice he will make on behalf of all people. These predictions continue during Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34), and in 10:45 Jesus makes a more explicit statement of his understanding of his servant task: "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."

Jesus' suffering is also a clear reminder of his humanity. The pain he experiences due to physical injury and betrayal of friendship points to his identity as a fully human man. Paired with his divine mission of salvation which culminates on the cross reveals a clear picture of Jesus' full divinity and full humanity.¹⁰

Jesus' Divine Sonship

At key points throughout the book of Mark, Jesus is declared to be the Son of God. Mark includes this identity in the introductory sentence (1:1), and the passion narrative builds to a climax of the Roman centurion's declaration: "Surely this man was the Son of God!" (15:39). These two statements bookend a theme Mark develops through his gospel, both the affirmation of Jesus as truly God's Son, "but also what kind of Son of God [Jesus] is."¹¹

Though a variety of titles (Christ, Messiah, Son of David, Lord, teacher, rabbi) are used to describe Jesus in Mark, the title "Son of God" holds particular prominence. Both at his baptism (1:11) and at the transfiguration (9:7), God declares Jesus to be "my Son, whom I love." This declaration affirms what is true about Jesus: that he is fully divine and of the same being as the Father. This is also frequently how demons describe Jesus (3:11; 5:7).

"Because [the demons] knew who [Jesus] was," Mark writes, "[Jesus] would not let the demons speak" (1:34). Commentator Robert Stein writes, "This indicates that the demons serve as an authoritative 'spokesman' for the Markan Christology."¹²

It is curious that Jesus frequently silences demons and others (e.g., Peter, in 8:29-30) who make affirmations about his true identity as Son of God and Messiah. This theme of secrecy surrounding Jesus' identity is much more prominent in the book of Mark than in other gospels. There are several likely reasons for this.¹³

First, Jesus wanted to define his identity on his own terms, and not have his identity conflated with the connotations associated with certain titles, particularly Messiah. Jesus knew that his identity could not be fully known until the cross, so premature labels were thus ineffective and even misleading, making him extremely hesitant to use these titles for himself.

First century Israel was a time of deep political unrest. The Jewish people had been long expecting a “Messiah” to save them from the oppression of Roman tyranny. Enter Jesus, who spoke of a new kingdom, exercised authority, and had the ability to gather large groups of people towards him. Political zealots probably saw much potential in Jesus to be the long awaited political Messiah.¹⁴ Knowing that actively associating himself with titles such as “Messiah,” “King of the Jews,” and “Son of David,” would mislead people to think that his ministry was political, Jesus resisted these labels. Jesus’ mission was to usher in the kingdom of God (1:15), not usurp Roman authority. Stein writes,

*Since Jesus’s own understanding of his messiahship was so radically different from that of his audience it was expedient to avoid the public use of such titles. The more enigmatic ‘Son of Man’ served as a better designation, and through it he was able to teach that his ministry involved not political revolution but giving his life as a ransom for many.*¹⁵

Jesus was crucified due to his assertion of divine authority, not because of his politics.

Suffering was a large part of Jesus’ Messiahship, but this was not something which could be fully understood until the cross. As Darrell Bock writes, Jesus was “working to recast, not simply accept . . . the term Messiah.” Much of that recasting involved including suffering as a key component of how Jesus brought about salvation. Thus any understanding of Jesus as Messiah before the cross was ultimately a limited and perhaps unhelpful understanding, leading to Jesus’ reluctance of being associated with this title.¹⁷

Mark: A Call to Discipleship

Timothy Keller writes that the gospel of Mark is “about being called to follow a King.”¹⁸ Mark ends abruptly with the women leaving the empty tomb in fear (16:6-8). This sudden ending prompts a question for every reader of Mark: “What will one do with what God has done for Jesus and what this Jesus asks of those who hear about him?”¹⁹ Mark has laid his case, communicating select events of Jesus’ life and the nature of his identity and Messiahship.

The disciples in Mark are not flat characters. They are at times believing, while also sometimes confused by Jesus. They both exercise great faith and become absorbed by trivial concerns. Yet, despite their sometimes frustrating lethargy in coming to a full belief in Jesus, their companionship of Jesus seems to take precedence in Mark over comprehensive belief: “Discipleship is repeatedly defined in Mark by simple proximity to Jesus: being with him (3:13), sitting around him (3:34, 4:10), hearing him (4:1-20), and following him ‘on the way’ (1:16-20; 10:52).”²⁰

Following Jesus and taking part in the mission of his kingdom - in all the broadness and ambiguity that entails - are key criteria in discipleship. Thus the question presented to the readers throughout is repeatedly: Will you follow the King and participate in the Kingdom?

Authorship, Dating, Original Audience

Before embarking on the text of Mark, a few additional preliminary issues need to be addressed. Here issues concerning the authorship of Mark, dating, and intended original audience of Mark will be considered before launching into the text itself.

Authorship

Technically, the Gospel of Mark is an anonymous account, as nowhere in the text does the author identify himself. Many scholars, however, attribute this gospel to John Mark, a close friend of Peter. Peter is also widely thought to be the main source of information about Jesus for John Mark. John Mark appears sporadically in the New Testament. His mother's house was a gathering place for the disciples (Acts 12:12) and likely the location of the Last Supper (Acts 1:13-14; Mark 14:14).²¹

John Mark himself traveled with Paul and Barnabas (Acts 12:25; 13:4) until he left Paul and Barnabas in Perga in Pamphylia (Acts 13:13). Because Paul felt that John Mark had abandoned the first journey, he did not allow him to participate in the second missionary journey. Barnabas disagreed. This conflict over John Mark caused a split between Paul and Barnabas, causing the two to go their separate ways. Ultimately Paul chose Silas as a traveling companion, while Barnabas invited John Mark for his subsequent journey (Acts 15:37-41).²²

While there is not universal agreement among scholars regarding John Mark being the author, there is strong consensus among evangelical scholars that he indeed authored Mark. The strongest evidence for this conclusion comes from the fact that early church traditions affirm him as the author. There is no documented doubt among early church fathers that the author was anyone but Mark.²³

Additionally, stylistic and thematic connections can be made between Mark's gospel and Peter's speech in Acts (Acts 10:34-43), indicating that Peter was likely John Mark's source material. Mark also records events Peter specifically witnessed.²⁴

However, the case for John Mark authorship is not fully watertight, and there are legitimate factors to consider that can point to an author besides John Mark. Overall, though, our faith does not rest on whether John Mark was the author or not. As Stein writes, "the truthfulness of the miracle accounts in Mark does not require Markan authorship."²⁵

Dating and Audience

Most scholars believe that Mark was written in the late 60's AD, likely after Peter's death in 64AD but before the fall of Jerusalem in 70AD.²⁶ The intended original audience of Mark also affects the dating of the book, as Mark is believed to be addressed to a group of persecuted Christians. Aligning known times of persecution historically with the probable region where Mark's audience was located can help to more precisely determine the date of writing.

Firstly, it is believed that Mark was written to Gentile, Roman Christians. Mark's minimal usage of the Old Testament, and providing of explanation of Jewish traditions and customs indicates he was likely writing to a Gentile audience (7:3-4; 12:18; 14:12; 15:42). Had he been writing to a Jewish audience, these explanations would be unnecessary. Also, Gentile and Roman characters are not presented negatively. For instance, the Gentile (Syrophoenician) woman professes great faith (7:24-30) and the Roman centurion declares Jesus' identity (15:39).²⁷

It is also thought that Mark was written to a group of persecuted Christians. The theme of suffering as being inextricably linked with discipleship and the weighty emphasis Mark gives to Jesus' suffering and crucifixion would have been a great source of encouragement to readers also experiencing suffering.²⁸

Identifying both that the audience of Mark was likely Gentile, and that they were likely experiencing persecution, helps determine the date of Mark's authorship. Harsh Roman persecution imposed on Christians during the late 60's AD makes it likely that this is when Mark was written.

Moving Forward

Mark is to be read as a narrative firmly rooted in historical events.²⁹ In reading this carefully crafted Gospel we encounter the dynamic, perplexing person of Jesus Christ, a figure who inaugurates the long-awaited kingdom of God, cares deeply for the people he comes in contact with, and ultimately gives his life as a sacrifice for humanity.

Joel Williams identifies some important questions to consider as we read this gospel. These questions are helpful to acknowledge both the historical and narrative features of this book:

- ï “What does this passage in the Gospels mean?
- ï What particular message about Jesus is being emphasized in this passage?
- ï How does the narrative shape of the Gospels help to communicate this message?”³⁰

He finishes his list with the question, “What is the appropriate response to this story of Jesus?”, which is perhaps the most critical question we can be asking.³¹ The gospel of Mark is not a sterile history text, nor a strict biography. It is the story of the good news of Jesus Christ, a story that demands a response of discipleship by following the King and participating in the Kingdom.

Additional Resources

Excerpt from *Four Portraits, One Jesus* by Mark L. Strauss³²

The Gospels are Historical Literature

The Gospels are historical in at least three ways. First, they have a history of composition. The authors drew on traditions and sources available to them to compile their works. The methods used to determine how the Gospels came to be are collectively known as historical criticism, or the historical-critical method . . .

Second, the Gospels are historical in that they are set in a specific historical context. This setting is first-century Palestine during the period of Roman occupation. To understand the Gospels, we must enter into the world in which they were written, a world very different than our own . . .

Third, the Gospels are historical in that they are meant to convey accurate historical information. This is implicit in all four Gospels and is explicitly stated by John (21:24) and Luke (1:1-4) . . .

The fact that the Gospels are historical in this third sense has profound implications for Christianity as a religion. The faith of the Gospel writers is based not on the esoteric teachings of a first-century philosopher nor on religious myths with symbolic meaning. It is based on the historical person and work of Jesus Christ. The Gospels claim to be the record of God's actions in human history, his entrance into human history in the person of his Son.

As an essentially historical religion, Christianity rises or falls on the historicity of core Gospel events: (1) Jesus' words and deeds, (2) his death on the cross, and (3) his resurrection, the vindication of his claims. As the apostle Paul wrote with reference to Jesus' resurrection, "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Cor. 15:14). For Paul, as for the Gospel writers, the historicity of these events confirm the truth of Christianity.

The Gospels are Narrative Literature

Although historical in nature, the Gospels are not merely collections of reports or sayings of the historical Jesus. They are also narratives with features typical of stories, including plot, characters, and setting. While all four Gospels are concerned with the same historical events – the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ – they present different versions of these events. They present characters from different perspectives. They develop plot in different ways. They emphasize different settings. Viewing the Gospels as narrative provides important insights into their literary and theological distinctions . . .

The Gospels are Theological Literature

While the Gospels are meant to be historical, they are more than unbiased news reports. They are theological documents written to instruct and encourage believers and to convince unbelievers of the truth of their message. This is evident in that they focus especially on the saving work accomplished through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is why we call the Gospel writers Evangelists . . . They are proclaimers of the good news about Jesus Christ and the coming of the kingdom of God . . .

In summary, we can classify Gospels as historical narrative motivated by theological concerns. Their intention is not only to convey accurate historical material about Jesus, but also to explain and interpret these salvation-bringing events. The Gospels were written not by detached, uninterested observers but by Evangelists, “proclaimers of good news,” announcing the good news of Jesus Christ and calling people to faith in him.

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- 1 Rick Gekoski, "What's the Definition of a Great Book?" *The Guardian*, December 23, 2011, accessed May 1, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/dec/23/definition-great-book-rick-gekoski>.
 - 2 James Edwards writes that "Mark has . . . implicit major themes, requiring readers to enter into the drama of the Gospel in order to understand its meaning" (James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002], 13).
 - 3 Caleb Lindgren, "Why Don't the Gospel Writers Tell the Same Story?: An Interview with Michael Licona," *Christianity Today* 61, no. (May 2017): 45.
 - 4 Darrell Bock, *Mark* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 37.
 - 5 Gekoski, "What's the Definition of a Great Book?".
 - 6 While issues of authorship will be discussed more in full below, ultimately this curriculum will operate with the conclusion that John Mark authored *The Gospel of Mark*.
 - 7 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 13.
 - 8 Mark 1:40-45, 2:1-12, 3:1-6, 3:10, 5:25-34, 6:5, 6:13, 6:54-56, 7:31-37, 8:22-26, 10:46-52.
 - 9 Robert H. Stein, *Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 23; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 13-14; William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 27-28.
 - 10 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 2.
 - 11 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 15.
 - 12 Stein, *Mark*, 23; Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*, 2nd Edition (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 132; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 15.
 - 13 The most compelling reasons are listed here. See Stein, *Mark*, 23-26 for a fuller articulation of more theories.
 - 14 Suzanne Watts Henderson, *Christology and Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 12;
 - 15 Stein, *Mark*, 25; 22.
 - 16 Bock, *Mark*, 35, emphasis original.
 - 17 Mark L. Strauss, *Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 18; Henderson, *Christology and Discipleship*, 11-13; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 19.
 - 18 Timothy Keller, *King's Cross: The Story of the World in the Life of Jesus* (New York: Dutton Redeemer, 2011), 20.
 - 19 Bock, *Mark*, 39.
 - 20 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 16.
 - 21 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 5.
 - 22 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 5; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 21.
 - 23 Stein, *Mark*, 1-2; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 7-9. Most notably, early church historian Eusebius, includes a quote from Papias in his text which links John Mark to Mark. (Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 6-9). For a good overview of different scholars on this issue of author and dating see Bock, *Mark*, 1-10.
 - 24 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 10-12.
 - 25 Stein, *Mark*, 8. Stein does a good job of succinctly presenting the authorship issue (Stein, *Mark*, 1-9; esp. pages 8-9 for an overview of his conclusions).
 - 26 Stein, *Mark*, 4; 7.
 - 27 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 10.
 - 28 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 15; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 10.
 - 29 David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 5; Joel F. Williams, "Listening to the Voice of the Storyteller in Mark's Gospel," *Review & Expositor* 107, no. 3 (Summer 2010), accessed April 22, 2017, EBSCOhost
 - 30 Williams, "Listening to the Voice of the Storyteller," 311.
 - 31 Williams, "Listening to the Voice of the Storyteller," 311.
 - 32 Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: A Survey of Jesus and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 27-29.



LESSON ONE

Mark 1:1-13

“Jesus Christ, Son of God”

*“This is a God who is not identified with the help of a dictionary but through a relationship.”
(Kathleen Norris, Amazing Grace)¹*

*“For this reason [Jesus] did not offer the sacrifice on behalf of all immediately He came, for if He had surrendered His body to death and then raised it again at once He would have ceased to be an object of our senses. Instead of that, He stayed in His body and let Himself be seen in it, doing acts and giving signs which showed Him to be not only man, but also God the Word . . . He became visible through His works and revealed Himself as the Word of the Father, the Ruler and King of the whole creation.”
(Athanasius, On the Incarnation)²*

STARTER

In a performance crammed with energy and catchy, poignant songs, the Broadway musical *Godspell* tells the story of Jesus Christ in New York City in the 1970's.³ In the opening of the musical, John the Baptist sings "Prepare ye the way of the Lord!" while a random assortment of New Yorkers leave their lives in the city to follow this call. They gather at a large fountain, dancing and splashing as they celebrate their baptism and repentance and new life.

Jesus then arrives on the scene and is baptized by John. While being baptized, Jesus sings "When wilt thou save the people? Oh God of mercy when?" Jesus calls out to God in this lovely lyrical song, appealing to God's deep love for his people and asking for deliverance. It is this prayer, this plea for rescue, that ultimately Jesus fulfills.

These scenes reflect the opening verses of the gospel of Mark. Out of the desert, the wilderness, the long period of Israel waiting for a Messiah, John the Baptist arrives to prepare the way of the Lord. Hope arrives when Jesus enters the scene. God has not forgotten his people, but has sent deliverance in the form of his incarnate son. And this is cause for great joy, a joy so great to perhaps even warrant singing and dancing in public fountains.

2. Given the choice of anyone in the world, whom would you want as a dinner guest? Why?

Understanding the Text

Step one: Observation - What do we see?

Every time we read the Bible, the first thing we should ask is, "What do we see?" Read the text aloud during your group. Place yourself into the original audience and ask questions (who, what, where, when, how).

Read Mark 1:1 – 13 aloud.

Share observations together. What stands out? What do you notice?

Step two: Interpretation - What does it mean?

The goal is to understand the original author's intended meaning to the original audience. This requires research and discussion on the original readers' cultural and historical background. This is where it is beneficial to dig into a commentary or Bible dictionary, or to listen to a sermon. We are careful NOT to begin our study by asking, "What does this passage mean to me?" That question is application, not interpretation. There is only one meaning of the text – the author's intended meaning. Until we understand the meaning of the text we will not apply the text correctly to our lives.

Background

From the very beginning of the narrative, Jesus is quickly introduced and established as the main character of Mark. Mark communicates that the gospel "is a person," Jesus Christ.⁴ Verses 1-13 and the rest of the book illustrate just who this person is and the nature of the good news that has arrived with him.

While a lot happens in these opening verses, it is important to note Jesus' title as the Son of God, the use of Old Testament prophecy, the theme of wilderness, and the nature of Jesus' baptism.

Jesus, Son of God

Mark emphasizes the uniqueness of the nature of Jesus. Prophets foreshadow Jesus' coming, but Jesus himself is not merely a prophet. Before he even appears on the scene, or has a chance to do anything to prove his status, Mark declares him to be "the Son of God" (1:1). John similarly recognizes Jesus' superiority, which is also confirmed by God when he declares Jesus to be his Son, all before Jesus has really done or said anything. These events are in response to what is already true about Jesus: that he is God's Son. It is not Jesus' baptism or anything he does that make him God's Son, but these statements come in response to the reality of Jesus' divine identity.⁵

Old Testament Quotations

Mark begins his book with a collection of pieced-together Old Testament prophecies which function significantly in several ways. These Old Testament references link the story of Jesus tightly with the Old Testament. Jesus is not an isolated character arising from a vacuum. God has consistently revealed himself to his people throughout the Old Testament, and Jesus is now the culmination of that revelation. Fitting Jesus within this context is imperative to understand the larger scope of God's redemptive narrative. The stories of the Old Testament and Jesus in the New Testament are inextricably linked and woven together, so that pulling these stories apart would leave each story as half-told and incoherent.

Additionally, this collection of Old Testament quotations introduces the theme of wilderness, a prominent theme in this section, along with introducing the theme of preparation for the Lord, a prediction filled by John the Baptist.⁶

The Wilderness

Throughout Scripture, the wilderness is “a proving ground, a test of faithfulness, and a promise of deliverance.”⁷ It is fitting, then, that it is from the wilderness that God once again brings deliverance to his people. John the Baptist, out of the “desert region,” the wilderness, preaches “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” and declares the coming of “one more powerful than I” (1:4; 7). From the wilderness comes this message of grace, forgiveness, deliverance, and hope.

For Jesus, the wilderness is also a place of testing and deliverance. After his baptism, he is led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where he is “tempted by Satan” (1:13). Though the text does not give explicit details of the nature of this temptation or specifically say that Jesus resisted temptation, this is certainly implied.⁸ Jesus’ response of obedience for forty days in the wilderness contrasts with the frequent disobedience of Israel during their forty years in the wilderness. Jesus marks the constitution of “the new Israel of God.”⁹

A strong theme of hope is nestled within this place of wilderness. God’s consistent pattern of delivering his people from places of desolation is not lost on the readers of Mark who are themselves likely experiencing hardship and persecution.¹⁰ The amount of times “desert” or “wilderness” are mentioned in this section is not unintentional. Mark establishes this setting deliberately, using it as a commentary to show how God is about to usher in deliverance and hope to his people through the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus’ Baptism

Again, in an amazing economy of words, Mark tells the important event of Jesus’ baptism in three verses. Beginning in verse 9, John the Baptist is no longer the subject of the story, though he performs the baptism, but Jesus takes center stage. John’s baptism is one of repentance, and he even declares his inferiority compared to Jesus (1:4; 7). It seems curious, then, that Jesus would be baptized by John, for he had no reason to repent and was already confirmed as superior to John.¹¹

The way Mark tells this story also designates this “as a private event between Jesus and God.”¹² In this intimate moment, God declares his special relationship with Jesus, calling him his Son, “dearly loved” (1:11, NLT), and commissioning him for his earthly ministry.¹³

Group Questions

1. What is the importance to Mark’s audience of quoting Old Testament passages in 1:2-3 (see Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1)? What Old Testament character is John the Baptist reminiscent of and why is that significant (see 2 Kings 1:8)?

2. John’s baptism was one of “repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (1:4). Since Jesus was sinless, why was he baptized?

3. In what ways does 1:1-13 demonstrate Jesus’ divinity and humanity?

4. What is the significance of Mark including these scenes (the baptism and the temptation of Jesus) with so many supernatural forces at play?¹⁴

Step three: Application – How does it work?

It is the person who not only knows God's Word, but also obeys His Word that truly loves Him (John 14:21). Application of God's Word to our lives involves identifying the specific instructions from the text and making a plan to obey them. The questions below will identify some specific items to consider for your life.

1. As we begin this study of Mark, how would you describe your relationship with Jesus? Elaborate on any of the following options if you feel comfortable.

- a) Not sure about who he is, but I am interested in learning more.
- b) Struggling to stay connected to him, and looking for encouragement.
- c) I do try to follow Jesus, but sometimes I have doubts and make mistakes.
- d) My walk with Jesus is growing, and right now I feel pretty solid in my faith.
- e) I am not sure what a "relationship with God" looks like.
- f) Other: _____.

2. At the beginning of this study, who would you say Jesus is? Who do you see him to be?

3. Have you ever been in a spiritual wilderness? What did you learn there?

Group Prayer

Let's begin our study of Jesus by praying as he taught us to pray, with the Lord's Prayer. The group leader will read the bold sections marked "Leader," and all group members are welcome to contribute with the sections marked "All."

Leader: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

All: Praise God by speaking attributes of God. "God, I praise you for being ____."

Leader: Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

All: Name areas in your life or the world where we ask for God's kingdom come. "God, may your kingdom come to ____."

Leader: Give us today our daily bread.

All: Ask God for things we need. "God, please provide ____."

Leader: Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

All: Silently, and kneeling, if comfortable, confess your sins to God and remember those in your life to whom you need to extend forgiveness.

Leader: And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever, Amen.

Conclude with this prayer from the Scottish Episcopal Book of Common Prayer:

Leader: Almighty God, who at the baptism of [your] blessed Son Jesus Christ in the river Jordan [did] reveal the glory of his divine nature: let the light of his presence shine in our hearts, and his glory be shown forth in our lives; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.¹⁵

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 89.

2 Timothy Keller, *Jesus the King: Understanding the Life and Death of the Son of God* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 24-26.

3 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 46-48.

4 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 51.

5 Bock, *Mark*, 123; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 49.

6 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 69; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 50.

7 It would not have been unusual for Jesus to teach at the synagogue in Capernaum. Synagogues were places where local men gathered to hear the Torah read or taught, a role performed by lay people. It was at the temple in Jerusalem where sacrifices were conducted; sacrifices did not take place at the local synagogue (Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 53).

8 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 56.

9 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 75-76; Bock, *Mark*, 136; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 60.

10 Bock, *Mark*, 137.

11 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 69.

12 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 72.

13 Strauss, *Mark*, 94-96.

14 Allen Mitsuo Wakabayashi, *Kingdom Come: How Jesus Wants to Change the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 30-31. Wakabayashi's book provides an excellent, easy-to-read overview of the kingdom of God.



LESSON TWO

Mark 1:14-45

"Come, Follow Me"

"When Christ calls a [woman or man], he bids [them] come and die" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Cost of Discipleship)¹



STARTER

About 150 years ago, George MacDonald wrote a children's book called *The Princess and the Goblin*. Irene, the protagonist, is eight years old. She has found an attic room in the house, and every so often her fairy grandmother appears there. When Irene goes to look for her she's often not there, so one day her grandmother gives her a ring with a thread tied to it, leading to a little ball of thread. She explains that she will keep the ball.

'But I can't see it,' says Irene. 'No. The thread is too fine for you to see it. You can only feel it.' With this reassurance, Irene tests the thread. 'Now, listen,' says the grandmother, 'if ever you find yourself in any danger... you must take off your ring and put it under the pillow of your bed. Then you must lay your forefinger... upon the thread, and follow the thread wherever it leads you.' 'Oh, how delightful! It will lead me to you, Grandmother, I know!' 'Yes,' said the grandmother, 'but, remember, it may seem to you a very roundabout way indeed, and you must not doubt the thread. Of one thing you may be sure, that while you hold it, I hold it too.'

A few days later Irene is in bed, and goblins get into the house. She hears them snarling out in the hallway, but she has the presence of mind to take off her ring and put it under the pillow. And she begins to feel the thread, knowing that it's going to take her to her grandmother and to safety. But to her dismay, it takes her outside, and she realizes that it's taking her right toward the cave of goblins.

Inside the cave, the thread leads her up to a great heap of stones, a dead end. 'The thought struck her, that at least she could follow the thread backwards, and thus get out... But the instant she tried to feel it backwards, it vanished from her touch.' The grandmother's thread only worked forward, but forward it led into a heap of stones.

Irene 'burst into a wailing cry,' but after crying she realizes that the only way to follow the thread is to tear down the wall of stones. She begins tearing it down, stone by stone. Though her fingers are soon bleeding, she pulls and pulls.

Suddenly she hears a voice. It's her friend Curdie, who has been trapped in the goblins' cave! Curdie is astounded and asks, 'why, however did you come here?'

Irene replies that her grandmother sent her, 'and I think I've found out why.'

After Irene has followed the thread and removed enough rocks to create an opening, Curdie starts to climb up out of the cave - but Irene keeps going deeper into the cave. Curdie objects: 'Where are you going there? That's not the way out. That's where I couldn't get out.'

"I know that," says Irene. 'But this is the way my thread goes, and I must follow it.' And indeed the thread proves trustworthy, because her grandmother is trustworthy.²

1. What is a favorite childhood story? What made it a favorite?

2. Who is the most trustworthy person you know? What about them makes them so trustworthy?

Understanding the Text

Step one: Observation - What do we see?

Every time we read the Bible, the first thing we should ask is, "What do we see?" Read the text aloud during your group. Place yourself into the original audience and ask questions (who, what, where, when, how).

Read Mark 1:14 – 45 aloud.

Share observations together. What stands out? What do you notice?

Step two: Interpretation - What does it mean?

The goal is to understand the original author's intended meaning to the original audience. This requires research and discussion on the original readers' cultural and historical background. This is where it is beneficial to dig into a commentary or Bible dictionary, or to listen to a sermon. We are careful NOT to begin our study by asking, "What does this passage mean to me?" That question is application, not interpretation. There is only one meaning of the text – the author's intended meaning. Until we understand the meaning of the text we will not apply the text correctly to our lives.

Background

Kingdom of God

In the opening verses of this section, Jesus gives a summation of the gospel: "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (1:15). Something new has started with Jesus, a theme which will continue in the following stories.

Jesus' arrival ushered in a new era, a new kingdom of God's good and active reign in this world. However, this kingdom is near; it has not yet arrived in its fullness. There is a tension between the already, where this new kingdom has already broken in, but not yet, where this new kingdom is waiting to be fully realized. The stories that follow give a glimpse of the in-breaking of this new kingdom and what the consummated kingdom will look like.

The second part of this gospel summary gives a clear call to action: "repent and believe the good news." Being confronted with the reality of the kingdom inherently demands a response. The story and message of Jesus throughout Mark continually pose this question to his readers. The appropriate response to the gospel message is repentance, turning back towards God and away from sin, and belief and following Christ. Will this be your response?³

Calling of the Disciples

Jesus' first action after declaring the arrival of the kingdom of God is to call four individuals, Simon (also known as Peter), Andrew, James, and John, to be his disciples. Calling and creating a community of specific, named individuals as what Jesus does first shows the importance placed on being in relationship with Jesus. Much of Jesus bringing in the kingdom of God centered on him as the "center of a new, life-encompassing community."⁴

This calling is notable for other reasons. First, for a Jewish rabbi at that time to choose his disciples was highly irregular. In other instances, would-be students would seek out a rabbi with whom to study.

Yet by Jesus selecting his disciples, he remains the subject of the narrative and the gospel message by calling followers to himself. The emphasis of the nature of discipleship centers on Jesus himself rather than on the initiative of the disciples.⁵

Additionally, the disciples respond to Jesus' call with remarkable speed and determination. The first disciples called, Simon and Andrew, immediately "left their nets" (1:18). As fishermen, their fishing nets are, quite literally, their livelihood. With radical immediacy, Simon and Andrew place their work and vocation secondary to Jesus' call. James and John also abandon their livelihood in leaving their boat and work behind when called by Jesus (1:20). James and John not only leave their profession, as Simon and Andrew did, but they also leave their father Zebedee behind (1:20). Mark is already demonstrating that discipleship is costly, difficult, and involves prioritizing being with Jesus over everything else in life.⁶

Jesus as One with Authority

Mark's narrative gives contour to the nature of Jesus' authority. Beginning in this chapter and continuing through the book, the range of entities over which Jesus has and exercises authority is vast. From Jesus' first teaching at the synagogue in Capernaum, the people listening to him notice his inherent authority right away (1:23).⁷ Mark does not comment on what Jesus taught about, or even what he read from the Torah. The focus is on the way in which he taught, with "authority," which the listeners immediately recognized.⁸

The disruption by a man with an evil spirit in the gathering provide an opportunity for Jesus to demonstrate his authority in another arena, now on a cosmic level. With a simple command – no charms, incantations, or rituals – Jesus orders the evil spirit to leave the man. It is also with a simple action that Jesus exercises authority over sickness as he heals Peter's mother-in-law and the leper. Jesus' words create new realities of wholeness with the people he encounters.⁹

Man with Leprosy

Jesus demonstrates his authority and compassion in his encounter with the leprous man in 1:40-45. By approaching Jesus, the man with leprosy violates Torah law (see Leviticus 13:45-46). Because of his disease, the leprous man is considered ceremonially unclean.

According to Old Testament law, a clean person coming into contact with an unclean person makes the clean person also unclean, requiring the clean person to undergo ceremonial rituals in order to be restored to cleanness.

Yet instead of cringing with disgust upon encountering the man with a likely disfiguring skin disease, Jesus reaches out and touches him, likely the first physical touch this man has felt since developing this disease. Touching this unclean man would certainly have made Jesus unclean. Yet "Jesus' power to cleanse was greater than leprosy's power to stain."¹⁰ Jesus responds to the faith of the leprous man, who believed Jesus was able to heal him if he was willing, exercising his authority over the disease and offering the healing he so desperately seeks.¹¹

However, against Jesus' orders, the leprous man does not follow protocol for situations of healing (1:44; see also Leviticus 13:50, 14:2-4 and 10-11), nor does he remain silent about what Jesus has done. This ultimately hampers Jesus' ministry, restricting Jesus to "outside" and "lonely places" (1:45). The leprous man, who began the story as an outsider, estranged from his community due to his disease-riddled body, becomes an 'insider' by the end of the story; he was restored to his community, no longer banished to the outskirts of town. Jesus, on the other hand, begins the story an 'insider,' but is an 'outsider' by the end, limited to more isolated places where he would not be as bombarded with people. Already Mark shows that Jesus is one who willingly puts himself in the place of those alienated and in deplorable conditions in order to bring redemption. Already Jesus is one who willingly takes upon himself the shame and rejection of others, absorbing this into himself so that others may experience restoration and ultimately salvation.¹²

Group Questions

1. How do the stories in this section illustrate what the kingdom of God is now (aspects of the kingdom already at hand), and is to be like (what the kingdom will be like at full consummation, but is not yet)?

2. What do you notice about the way in which Jesus calls the four men to be his disciples? What are the responses of the men as they are called? What are the costs of becoming disciples of Jesus for these men?

3. How do demons, sickness, and people (the disciples and the crowd) respond to Jesus' authority?

4. Why does Jesus demand silence from the demon who declares who he is (1:25) and from the cleansed leper who wants to share about what Jesus has done (1:44)? (See the Introduction section for more information on this.)

5. In a day like 1:29-34, how would you describe the pressures Jesus faced? What is Jesus' rhythm of prayer and ministry as described in 1:35-39?

6. What do the actions of Jesus towards Peter's mother-in-law and the man with leprosy show about his character and intentions?

Step three: Application – How does it work?

It is the person who not only knows God's Word, but also obeys His Word that truly loves Him (John 14:21). Application of God's Word to our lives involves identifying the specific instructions from the text and making a plan to obey them. The questions below will identify some specific items to consider for your life.

1. What is the cost of being a disciple of Jesus today? Is Jesus just another teacher to you, or do you see Jesus as authoritative in your life?

2. Do we value prayer as much as Jesus did? Does your prayer life reflect this reality?

3. If the coming of the kingdom of God involves restoring people to wholeness, what does that mean for us as followers of Christ today? How can we be at work to actively pursue wholeness in our lives, the lives of others, our community, and the world?

Group Prayer

Group members share prayer requests with one another.

Silently reflect on the nature of your relationship with Jesus. If Jesus were to call you like he called the four men in this section, would you be willing to prioritize Jesus over important things in your life such as your vocation, time, spouse, children, family, money, dreams?

Confess ways you have not acknowledged Jesus as King in your life and ask him to be your top priority. Pray for one another's requests shared earlier, and pray for your group members to more closely follow Jesus as disciples.

Additional Resources

See the Bible Project's short video, "Holiness," for an excellent overview of the idea of cleanliness and uncleanness throughout Scripture: <https://youtu.be/l9vn5UvsHvM>.

Excerpt from Mark by Mark L. Strauss: "A Supernatural Worldview"¹³

Mark's perspective on spiritual warfare is in line with the biblical worldview. In the OT, Yahweh exercises supreme authority over all powers, whether physical or spiritual. He created them, and they must do his bidding. The most powerful kings of the earth are mere pawns in his hands: "No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither" (Isa 40:24). Though spiritual forces may act in opposition to God, they are ultimately subject to his authority.

The Lord limits Satan's power over Job (1:12; 2:6) and sends a malevolent spirit to torment Saul (1 Sam 16:14–16). Leviathan and Rahab, the awesome creatures of the deep (Job 3:8–9; 41:12–34), are playthings of God that must do his bidding (Pss 74:14; 104:26). All such forces of chaos will be crushed in the end (Job 9:13; 26:12; Ps 89:9–10; Isa 27:1; 51:9). In the NT the victory of God over all spiritual forces is achieved through the inbreaking power of the kingdom and the atoning work of Christ on the cross. Jesus is the Stronger One, who through his exorcisms and healings is binding Satan and plundering his house (Mark 3:26–27). According to Paul, Jesus' death and resurrection disarmed the spiritual powers and authorities and made a public spectacle of them (Col 2:15). In the Apocalypse, John affirms that the victory of the Lamb who was slain results in the defeat and ultimate destruction of Satan, the great serpent of old (Rev 7:12; 12:9; 20:2, 10; cf. Rom 16:20).

While Mark and other biblical writers assume a supernatural worldview, many modern readers balk at the idea. During the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, rationalism became the philosophical order of the day, asserting that truth could be discerned only through empirical scientific investigation. The gospel miracle traditions were treated with skepticism and assumed to have arisen from the superstitious beliefs of primitive peoples. As a rationalist and a deist, Thomas Jefferson was so disturbed by the gospel miracle tradition that he edited his own Bible, removing the supernatural elements.

Yet such a conclusion ignores both past history and present reality. For most of world history, the spiritual realm has been taken for granted. Even today most non-Western cultures assume a supernatural worldview, and spirit beings are viewed as a real presence in the world. Even in the Western world belief in God and the supernatural remains high. A recent survey on religious views in the U.S. conducted by Baylor University found that only 4.6 percent of Americans claimed they "do not believe in anything beyond the physical world." Most people apparently have an innate awareness that there is more to reality than the physical universe. It is difficult to attribute all such beliefs to the delusions of primitive peoples.

So how should Christians respond to the reality of the demonic? Two extremes should be avoided. Some Christians become obsessed with the supernatural, seeing demons everywhere and blaming Satan for every disease or setback in life. This can become an unhealthy obsession, allowing individuals to deny responsibility for their actions and even opening them up to demonic influence. Others, though claiming to believe in God, live as practical atheists, never acknowledging the reality or influence of spiritual forces in their lives. A balanced approach recognizes that Satan and his forces are real and active in the world and that we must take up the spiritual “armor of God” to defend ourselves against his attacks (Eph 6:10–20). Yet Christ has achieved the decisive victory through his death and resurrection (Col 2:15), and those who confess his name can live victorious lives without fear of oppression.

Jesus the Exorcist and Miracle Worker

The historical evidence that Jesus was renowned by his contemporaries as an exorcist and miracle worker is overwhelming. Exorcisms appear in various strata of the gospel tradition (Mark, Q, M, L) and in a variety of gospel genres, including miracle stories, pronouncement stories, controversy stories, sayings, parables, commissioning accounts, passion narratives, and summaries of Jesus’ activities. Although no exorcisms appear in John’s gospel, this can be explained from his selective use of sources and his unique theological purpose.

Sources outside the NT also refer to Jesus’ miraculous activity. Josephus states that Jesus was “a doer of startling deeds” (Ant. 18.3.3 §63), a probable reference to his miracles. The Babylonian Talmud claims Jesus was executed because he practiced magic and led Israel astray (b. Sanh. 43a). While this passage is a strong polemic against Jesus and Christianity, it admits as reliable the tradition that Jesus performed supernatural acts. The early church leader Origen quotes his second-century pagan opponent Celsus as claiming that Jesus worked certain magical powers that he had learned in Egypt. Even Jesus’ opponents had to acknowledge that, whatever the source of his power, Jesus had extraordinary authority to perform miracles.

Excerpt from Kingdom Come: How Jesus Wants to Change the World by Allen Mitsuo Wakabayashi

From Old Testament expectations, we get a sense that the kingdom of God was about God's great restoration, the reinstatement of God's intentions for his entire creation. It was God's kingship being applied in a world that had gone awry.

An image in C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* powerfully illustrates this concept. Four children stumble into a magical land called Narnia. The true king of the land is Aslan, a magnificent lion, the Christ figure. Yet at the time of the story, Narnia is under the rule of the White Witch, who has cursed the land so that it is perpetually in a bitter cold winter with no Christmas. But at one point in the story, Christmas does come as Father Christmas comes, dispensing gifts. Then springtime begins to invade the bitter winter of the White Witch's reign. The snow begins to melt, the trees release their snow covers, flowers bloom and birds chirp. What is going on? Father Christmas explains, "Aslan is on the move! The Witch's magic is weakening!" We come to understand that wherever Aslan draws near, springtime breaks out in the midst of the bitter winter of the White Witch.

This is what the kingdom of God is about. God's reign descends in and through Jesus and is applied in a world that is not yet fully under his authority. Sickesses are healed, demons are banished, sins are forgiven and people are assured of God's love for them. Wherever God's kingdom comes, his kingship is applied and the evil of darkness is banished.¹⁴

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- 1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 89.
 - 2 Timothy Keller, *Jesus the King: Understanding the Life and Death of the Son of God* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 24-26.
 - 3 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 46-48.
 - 4 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 51.
 - 5 Bock, *Mark*, 123; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 49.
 - 6 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 69; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 50.
 - 7 It would not have been unusual for Jesus to teach at the synagogue in Capernaum. Synagogues were places where local men gathered to hear the Torah read or taught, a role performed by lay people. It was at the temple in Jerusalem where sacrifices were conducted; sacrifices did not take place at the local synagogue (Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 53).
 - 8 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 56.
 - 9 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 75-76; Bock, *Mark*, 136; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 60.
 - 10 Bock, *Mark*, 137.
 - 11 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 69.
 - 12 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 72.
 - 13 Strauss, *Mark*, 94-96.
 - 14 Allen Mitsuo Wakabayashi, *Kingdom Come: How Jesus Wants to Change the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 30-31. Wakabayashi's book provides an excellent, easy-to-read overview of the kingdom of God.



LESSON THREE

Mark 2:1 – 3:6

“Conflict and Controversy”

“Morality is built into reality as deeply and inescapably as atoms and protons and neutrons . . . It matters what is done, said, believed, even thought. But moralism is something quite different. Moralism means constructing a way of life in which I have no need of a saving God . . . Moralism works from the outside: it imposes what right behavior on oneself or others. There is no freedom in it, and no joy.”
(Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*)¹

STARTER: The Myth of Procrustes

“Procrustes had a house alongside a well-traveled road in Greece, a strategically placed bed-and-breakfast. Somewhat stout, he seemed an affable man with a gracious manner. He liked things clean and tidy. And he wanted his guests to leave his hospitable place better than when they arrived, looking like a perfectly proportioned Greek statue. Most days he could be seen sitting comfortably in his rocking chair on the porch of his house, smoking his pipe, welcoming travelers and offering them hospitality. Smoke from his pipe conveyed a homey fragrance and his beard was a reassuring grandfatherly white. The house was neat and well-kept. It looked like a safe haven to tired travelers. Most evenings there was a guest or two.

After welcoming them and providing them dinner, Procrustes showed his guests their rooms. Procrustes had a bed in his house that he described as having the unique property that it would exactly fit the frame of whoever slept in it. What Procrustes didn't say was how this was the case: After his guests were fast asleep, Procrustes would enter their rooms and complete his hospitality. A short person would be stretched on a rack until he or she filled the bed; for a tall person whatever hung over of arms and legs would be cut off to fit the bed. Everyone was made over to fit the dimensions of the bed, either by stretching or by amputation. When his guests left the next morning, whether aching or hobbling, they measured to the dimensions of a perfect Greek. Procrustes and his bed are the stuff of moralism: a strategy carried out by people who are contemptuous of our particularities and force us to fit a preconceived pattern.”²

Warm Up Questions

1. Who is the most hospitable person you have ever met? What about them was so hospitable?

2. In what ways have other people tried to force you to fit their preconceived patterns?

Understanding the Text

Step one: Observation - What do we see?

Every time we read the Bible, the first thing we should ask is, "What do we see?" Read the text aloud during your group. Place yourself into the original audience and ask questions (who, what, where, when, how).

Read Mark 2:1 – 3:6 aloud.

Share observations together. What stands out? What do you notice?

Step two: Interpretation - What does it mean?

The goal is to understand the original author's intended meaning to the original audience. This requires research and discussion on the original readers' cultural and historical background. This is where it is beneficial to dig into a commentary or Bible dictionary, or to listen to a sermon. We are careful NOT to begin our study by asking, "What does this passage mean to me?" That question is application, not interpretation. There is only one meaning of the text – the author's intended meaning. Until we understand the meaning of the text we will not apply the text correctly to our lives.

Background

Mark groups five likely non-chronological stories of controversy in the section of 2:1-3:6 to display the building conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders.³ This conflict escalates rapidly so that, by the end of the section, the Pharisees and Herodians are thoroughly scandalized and angry at Jesus and are plotting his death (3:6). The nature of the characters in this section shed light on the reasons for conflict, so both characters and each controversy will be discussed below.

Characters: Who are the Religious Authorities?

Jack Dean Kingsbury, in his book *Conflict in Mark*, describes the different sects of religious authorities.

Pharisees: "The Pharisees were . . . a party among, though not of, the people. Their goal was that Israel should become the righteous nation of the covenant. To this end they taught compliance with the 'tradition of the elders,' an oral code of conduct effectively adapting the law of Moses to later times and changing demands."

Sadducees: "The Sadducees were a wealthy, conservative party concentrated in Jerusalem. Their members were from aristocratic families of patrician and priestly stock. They refused adherence to the tradition of the elders and advocated a rigorous application of the law of Moses to the life of the nation. In general, they espoused a political and religious policy, including cooperation with Rome, aimed at preserving the status quo."⁵

Scribes: "Scribes were the theologians and lawyers of the time, expert at interpreting the law governing Jewish society."⁶

Herodians: Not as much is known about the Herodians. While this was not likely as defined a group as the Sadducees or Pharisees, Herodians were probably individuals loyal to King Herod Antipas.⁷

Kingsbury also provides this helpful overview of all religious authorities at the time of Jesus: The religious authorities believe they are the ones God has appointed to be the rulers and guardians of his chosen people Israel. Because they are God's agents, their teaching concerning law and tradition is both authoritative and normative. To oppose them is to oppose God, and to challenge their rule and teaching is to summon Israel to stray from God's rule and teaching. In their eyes, therefore, Jesus poses the gravest sort of threat. Not only does he call the legitimacy of their leadership into question but he is also a menace to the spiritual well-being of Israel as a whole.⁸

Healing of the Paralytic

The healing of the paralytic man is simultaneously a story of four friends whose faith precipitates their friend's healing and a demonstration of Jesus' authority which immediately angers the religious leaders present for the miracle. Firstly, Jesus heals the paralytic man in response to the faith of his friends. Driven by the belief that Jesus was capable of healing their friend, the four friends carried the paralyzed man to Jesus, heaved him up on the roof, dug a hole in the roof, knotted sturdy ropes to his mat and lowered him into the house in front of Jesus. Jesus "saw their faith" (2:5), and responded with a declaration of healing, both physical and spiritual.⁹

Jesus' response to being confronted with the paralyzed man, however, initially seems peculiar. Instead of first commanding the man to get up and walk, he declares his sins forgiven (2:5). From a Western context it seems odd that Jesus here seemingly conflates physical and spiritual healing. Yet in a first-century Jewish context, especially "against the backdrop provided by the Old Testament where sin and disease, forgiveness and healing are frequently interrelated concepts," Jesus first declaring forgiveness is not quite as surprising.¹⁰ And, by proclaiming healing of soul and body, Jesus offers complete and holistic restoration to this man, something unique and totally distinct from others who claimed to have healing powers.¹¹

This claim to forgive sins, however, immediately touches a nerve with the religious authorities. As students of the Torah, they know that forgiveness of sins is something only God can do. Jesus' claim to forgive sins means he is claiming to be God, an assertion punishable by death. This claim is radical, particularly in the context of the Jewish faith which was built upon the foundation of monotheism (Deut. 6:4). Understandably the religious leaders are scandalized by this assertion, which would have threatened their entire religious framework. At its heart this controversy is about religious authority: by Jesus claiming to be God, he elevates his position much higher than the religious leaders, leaving them nothing less than furious.¹²

The Calling of Levi

Jesus calling Levi also infuriates the Pharisees. This story is crammed with drama: Jesus, now a well-known Jewish rabbi, approaches an individual considered “[vile]” by society who immediately follows Jesus in a dramatic display of obedience.¹³ Jesus then proceeds to host a dinner party, lounging, eating, and talking with a table full of “sinners.”

Frustrated, the Pharisees challenge Jesus’ disciples about his behavior. Their resentment towards Jesus largely stems from the type of people with whom he is associating: “sinners.”

“Sinners” would have been ceremonially unclean individuals, people seen as “inferior” to the Pharisees, and to Jesus.¹⁴ Associating with such individuals would have made Jesus “ritually impure” and frankly were below him on the social ladder.¹⁵ The Pharisees were not impressed with Jesus’ willingness to not only engage with people seen as criminals but to violate his ritual cleanliness in the process.

Perhaps the Pharisees would not have been so upset if Jesus’ dinner party was paired with a call for repentance, a plea for them to turn from their sinful ways. However, “there is no word in the call to Levi and in the dinner with sinners about repentance . . . The scandal of this story is that Jesus does not make moral repentance a precondition of his love and acceptance. Rather, Jesus loves and accepts tax collectors and sinners as they are.”¹⁶

Jesus pursues relationship with these people on the fringes of society, prioritizing being with them over requiring them to complete certain behavioral prerequisites before being in relationship. Commentator William Lane writes that this “meal was an extension of the grace of God and an anticipation of the consummation when Messiah will sit down with sinners in the Kingdom of God.”¹⁷

Concerns about Fasting

Another controversy arises, this time between Jesus' disciples and the disciples of John and the Pharisees. John's disciples and the Pharisees were following the traditional custom of voluntary fasting during two days of the week, whereas Jesus' disciples were not.

Within Judaism, fasting was only required on the Day of Atonement; fasting for other purposes was voluntary, but highly recommended and almost expected among religious leaders. This voluntary fasting "symbolized contrition for sin and ranked as one of the cardinal virtues of their piety."¹⁸ Not participating in such ritual fasting "[constituted] a serious breach of custom," and called into question the legitimacy of Jesus and his disciples.¹⁹

Jesus answers their question about fasting with a slightly ambiguous answer. His analogies of the bridegroom, new cloth on an old garment, and new wine in old wineskins cryptically answers their question by illustrating the nature of his coming. This era he has ushered in is so new that it cannot be conformed to old patterns and customs; these old habits and practices are irrelevant. As Commentator Darrell Bock writes, "The new era requires fresh packaging."²⁰

Eating, Healing on the Sabbath

Controversy between Jesus and the religious authorities continues to build with the final two conflicts centered around something the religious leaders held very dear: the Sabbath. As one of the 10 Commandments (Ex. 20:8-11), the Sabbath was highly valued, more so than fasting. In an effort to simplify the command of Sabbath rest, over time, religious leaders had outlined specifically what did and did not constitute rest, and therefore what were and were not acceptable behaviors on the Sabbath.

However, in doing so, they had essentially stripped the Sabbath of its original intent: something created by God as a gift to his people intended for "joy and refreshment."²¹

Thus while it appears that Jesus and his disciples are merely enjoying their Sabbath, in line with the spirit of this commandment, the Pharisees interpret this behavior as harvesting or reaping, actions strictly prohibited on the day of rest.²²

Similarly, religious leaders had established very clear regulations surrounding what aspects of medical behaviors were permitted on the Sabbath. If there was no “immediate threat to life,” then medical action on the Sabbath was prohibited.²³ Because the shriveled hand of the man Jesus encounters in the synagogue does not constitute a medical emergency, healing him was considered an infraction of Sabbath law.

Yet in both instances, Jesus’ actions and response expose the cold and legalistic understanding of the Sabbath by the religious leaders. While the Sabbath was designed as a time set aside for rest, enjoyment and rejuvenation, a time to promote the flourishing of life, the religious leaders had constricted this command so much that it had become the opposite. Jesus’ Sabbath behavior promotes joy and life while the religious leaders sacrifice these very things on the altar of legalism. In fact, in a significant contrast to the ways Jesus promotes restoration on the Sabbath, the religious leaders spend their Sabbath actively plotting to end life: “Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus” (3:6).²⁴

Group Questions

1. This section is one story after another of run-ins between Jesus and the Pharisees and religious leaders. What are the specific things that the Pharisees are frustrated with Jesus about? What specifically about Jesus’ behavior and claims makes these religious leaders so angry?

2. In the story of the paralytic man, why are the Pharisees so upset and why do they accuse Jesus of blasphemy? What is Jesus claiming about his own identity by forgiving sins?

3. What does it say about who Jesus is and his mission to call Levi? To socialize with "tax collectors and 'sinners'"?

4. In 2:18-22, Jesus gives a response that does not seem to match the question asked. Why does Jesus respond the way he does? What does his response have to do with what he poses?

5. What does fasting represent to the Pharisees?

6. What about Jesus' actions that so offends the religious leaders' view of the Sabbath? Does Jesus value the spirit or the letter of the law more? How? What does Jesus see as the purpose of the Sabbath command?

Step three: Application – How does it work?

It is the person who not only knows God's Word, but also obeys His Word that truly loves Him (John 14:21). Application of God's Word to our lives involves identifying the specific instructions from the text and making a plan to obey them. The questions below will identify some specific items to consider for your life.

1. How might the pressure to follow the letter of the law constrict your ability to follow Jesus wholeheartedly? Or, how have you experienced wholehearted time with Jesus, what was that like, and what was the impact of that time?

2. Are you offended by Jesus' call of Levi and people like Levi? Or, if Jesus called Levi, could he also call you? How do we as Christians act towards outsiders and sinners? How do you act towards outsiders and sinners?

3. As Jesus continues to usher in the Kingdom of God by what he says and does, what are emerging as priorities and values for him in this new Kingdom? In what ways does Waterstone already align with these values? In what ways does Waterstone need to exercise course correction to better align with Jesus' kingdom values?

Group Prayer

Spend some time looking back at Mark 2:1-3:6 and ask what things it shows you about God or what attributes you see of God in this passage.

Spend some time praising God for these aspects of his character and person ("God, I praise you for being ____").

Ask God to help you and your group members be more aware of who God is and how he is at work in your lives during this upcoming week.²⁵

Additional Resources

See the Bible Project's short video, "Holiness," for an excellent overview of the idea of cleanliness and uncleanness throughout Scripture: <https://youtu.be/l9vn5UvsHvM>.

Additional group discussion questions:

1. Do you see value in practicing a Sabbath rest? Is the Sabbath really all about grace? What role does practicing the law play in living out our faith?

2. Are we joyfully celebrating the coming of the kingdom of God or are we filled with heaviness and gloom in regards to the kingdom of God?

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- 1 Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 145.
- 2 Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 146.
- 3 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 91. Mark groups these stories thematically rather than chronologically. Original audiences were not as concerned with precise chronology as we are today.
- 4 Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark: Jesus, Authorities, Disciples* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 63. Regarding the nature of the Pharisees' dislike of Jesus, commentator William Lane writes, "From the Pharisaic point of view Jesus' word and action totally undermined their interpretation of the Law, their piety and their actions. Jesus was not simply another scribe who advocated an independent opinion; he constituted a threat to true religion and ancestral tradition" (Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 124).
- 5 Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark*, 63-64.
- 6 Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark*, 64.
- 7 Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark*, 64; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 101-102.
- 8 Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark*, 65.
- 9 Bock, *Mark*, 140.
- 10 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 94; Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark*, 70; Bock, *Mark*, 140; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 78.
- 11 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 99; Bock, *Mark*, 143-144.
- 12 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 77; Bock, *Mark*, 142.
- 13 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 101; 102. The Levi that is referred to here is likely the same person as Matthew (Matt. 9:9).
- 14 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 103.
- 15 Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark*, 70; Bock, *Mark*, 147.
- 16 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 85.
- 17 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 107.
- 18 Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark*, 71; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 88-89.
- 19 Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark*, 71; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 89.
- 20 Bock, *Mark*, 151.
- 21 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 120.
- 22 See also Exodus 31:13-17, 34:21.
- 23 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 122.
- 24 Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark*, 68.
- 25 Cindy Brunch, ed., *Small Group Idea Book* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 66.



LESSON FOUR

Mark 3:7-34

“The Nature of Being a Disciple”

“A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. 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.” (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*)¹

STARTER: Three Men Suffer from Messianic Complex

In this week's passage, Jesus encounters a variety of responses from people trying to figure out who he is. The crowds hear that Jesus is performing miracles, the evil spirits say, "he is the Son of God," his band of twelve apostles and closest followers are still confused, the religious leaders think he is possessed by the prince of demons, and his own family thinks he is out of his mind. The following is a true story of a psychologist working with three men in a mental health hospital who also were confused about who Jesus is. In this case their confusion stems from each believing himself to be the messiah.

"Psychologist Milton Rokeach wrote a book called *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti*. He described his attempts to treat three patients at a psychiatric hospital in Ypsilanti, Michigan, who suffered from delusions of grandeur. Each believed he was unique among humankind; he had been called to save the world; he was the messiah. They displayed full-blown cases of grandiosity, in its pure form.

Rokeach found it difficult to break through, to help the patients accept the truth about their identity. So he decided to put the three into a little community to see if rubbing against people who also claimed to be the messiah might dent their delusion — a kind of messianic, 12-step recovery group.

This led to some interesting conversations. One would claim, 'I'm the messiah, the Son of God. I was sent here to save the earth.' 'How do you know?' Rokeach would ask. 'God told me.' One of the other patients would counter, 'I never told you any such thing.' Every once in a while, one got a glimmer of reality — never deep or for long, so deeply ingrained was the messiah complex. But what progress Rokeach made was pretty much made by putting them together."²

Warm Up Questions

1. Have you ever met anyone that maybe had a minor messiah complex? What was your response to him or her?

2. Mark 3:8 mentions the various and far-reaching places people are traveling from to see Jesus. What is the farthest you've traveled to attend a concert, sports game, lecture, etc.?

Understanding the Text

Step one: Observation - What do we see?

Every time we read the Bible, the first thing we should ask is, "What do we see?" Read the text aloud during your group. Place yourself into the original audience and ask questions (who, what, where, when, how).

Read Mark 3:7 – 34 aloud.

Share observations together. What stands out? What do you notice?

Step two: Interpretation - What does it mean?

The goal is to understand the original author's intended meaning to the original audience. This requires research and discussion on the original readers' cultural and historical background. This is where it is beneficial to dig into a commentary or Bible dictionary, or to listen to a sermon. We are careful NOT to begin our study by asking, "What does this passage mean to me?" That question is application, not interpretation. There is only one meaning of the text – the author's intended meaning. Until we understand the meaning of the text we will not apply the text correctly to our lives.

Background Crowds and Demons

After the growing tension with religious leaders, Jesus retreats with his disciples (3:7). However, he is followed closely by a large crowd of people who have traveled from all over the region to see this miracle worker firsthand. Mark describes an aggressive, "unruly" crowd clamoring to touch Jesus, crowding and pressing in on him in their attempts to be healed.³

Jesus' reputation as a healer is what attracts these crowds. Yet, ironically, it is evil spirits, not the people Jesus is with, who accurately identify Jesus. By using his name and identity (calling out that he is the "Son of God" [3:11]), the evil spirits attempt to "control [Jesus] and strip him of his power."⁴ However, the evil spirits are no match for Jesus, who silences them with a simple command (3:12). Jesus has authority not only over the evil spirits themselves, but over the way in which his identity is revealed and communicated. Premature disclosure of this identity, of being the Son of God, could result in further "chaos" from the pressing crowds, or the conflation of Jesus' agenda with a political one. Jesus does not allow for a mere demonic voice to disrupt the way in which he chooses to reveal himself.⁵

Jesus' Disciples

Jesus then retreats from the crowds again, calling twelve specific men to be apostles.⁶ The number of men called, who these men are, and the nature of their call are all significant. That Jesus calls twelve disciples is immediately reminiscent of the Twelve Tribes of Israel in the Old Testament (Gen. 35:23-26). These tribes composed the nation of Israel, the people group through which God chose to reveal himself and enact his plan of salvation. Likewise, these twelve apostles will continue this mission. While Jesus has indeed ushered in a new era (see Lesson Three), this mission is not divorced from God's larger salvific plan which began with the Jews in the Old Testament. The twelve disciples are another piece in the fulfillment of God's plan.⁷

The types of individuals on this list of apostles is also telling. With a few exceptions (primarily Peter, James and John), very little is known about these men, aside from them being a "very diverse group of very common people."⁸ Jesus does not call the theologians, pastors, scholars or church leaders of the day; he calls commoners. Additionally, Judas is listed. If Mark was a fabricated account, the likelihood that the name of a betrayer would be included in the original list of apostles would be very slim. However, the inclusion of Judas not only reveals the historical veracity of this list of apostles but shows that the "followers of Jesus are not perfect . . . Jesus accomplishes his purposes in spite of their failure, perhaps even through it."⁹

Jesus is the focal point for the nature of discipleship seen in the call of these twelve men. It is not the disciples who initiate, but Jesus. It is not the men who decide what discipleship will look like or what is involved; Jesus defines this. This apprenticeship program to which Jesus calls these individuals is not about "what disciples can do for Christ," but is about "what Christ can make of disciples."¹⁰ And Jesus calls the disciples to "be with him . . . to preach and to have authority to drive out demons" (3:14-15). Being a disciple of Jesus involves being with him and ushering in values of the new kingdom of God.

Jesus, His Family, and Beelzebub

Chapter 3:20-35 is an example of one of Mark's favorite literary techniques. Here Mark "sandwiches" one story between another, and in doing so, draws attention to the middle story which contains the point Mark is trying to communicate. Mark describes Jesus' family both in 20-21 and 31-35, which forces the reader's attention to the middle section of 22-30. It is the sandwiched section which reveals the meaning to these neighboring stories, in this case, the nature of Jesus' extensive authority.¹¹

In both 3:20-21 and 31-35, Jesus' family is attempting to control Jesus. First they approach him out of concern for his well-being, wanting to "take charge of him" (3:21). Later, Jesus' mother and brothers approach him for a second time, again wanting to take control of the situation and Jesus' behavior (3:31-32). The sandwiched section, 3:22-30, gives context to these rather strange encounters with family, showing that Jesus is not one who can be controlled, but is one who has authority, even over evil forces.

Jesus' authority is demonstrated in this center section. The scribes challenge Jesus on the source and nature of his authority. While they recognize Jesus' authority and do not deny that he is truly driving out demons, they make the fatal mistake of attributing Jesus' authority to perform such exorcisms to Beelzebub¹², the "prince of demons," if not Satan himself, instead of the true source of this authority, the Holy Spirit. These religious leaders are eyewitnesses of Jesus' authority, yet still profoundly misunderstand what they are observing. In ascribing Jesus' authority to Satan, they are completely denying the work of the Holy Spirit.¹³

Commentator Darrell Bock summarizes this well:

To miss what God is doing through Jesus now and to conclude it is by the power of Satan is to reject what the Spirit of God is doing. Their decision that Jesus had an unclean spirit missed what God was doing through him, placing the agency in the wrong place (v. 30).

This sin involves making a set decision about what the Spirit is doing through Jesus. It is unpardonable to refuse to appreciate who Jesus is and that he comes from God to bring the kingdom and salvation. Ironically, those scribes seeking to defend God's honor in this scene are accused of risking blaspheming against him. What they see as an unclean spirit is the work of the Holy Spirit.¹⁴

It is not uncommon to see Christians extracting this notion of "blaspheming the Holy Spirit" (a.k.a. "the unpardonable sin") from this specific context of what Jesus is here conveying to the scribes. Care should be taken to not distort the meaning of this verse by removing it from its context. Additionally, this rebuke should not be reason, necessarily, to fear.

Commentator James Edwards writes, "Anyone who is worried about having committed the sin against the Holy Spirit has not yet committed it, for anxiety of having done so is evidence of the potential for repentance. There is no record in Scripture of anyone asking forgiveness of God and being denied it!"¹⁵ However, those without interest in repentance and who do persist in a "conscious and deliberate rejection of the saving power and grace of God released through Jesus' word and act" are at risk.¹⁶

Mark 2:22-30 highlights Jesus' authority, especially with regards to his exorcising demons, which is highlighted in contrast to the surrounding stories of Jesus' family attempting to exercise authority over Jesus. While those close to Jesus attempt to "bind" and control him, "Mark signifies that the authority of Jesus binds even the prince of demons, but Jesus' followers must not and cannot bind him."¹⁷

Mark steers the attention of the reader to the nature of Jesus' authority, which is powerful enough to bind Satan through exorcising demons.

Jesus also makes a statement about discipleship through these interactions with his family. Ultimately, "discipleship depends on being in Jesus' presence and doing God's will."¹⁸ Those who have a special status, or in this case enjoy a biological relationship to Jesus, do not automatically gain discipleship status. In fact, those who assume special prerogatives on their relationship with Jesus come closer to resembling the scribes (3:22) than true disciples.

Group Questions

1. According to 3:8, where were people coming from? (Refer to the map provided in this book.)

2. What are the three intentions Jesus had for the twelve disciples he called (3:14-15)? What does this teach us about discipleship? What do we learn about discipleship from both this section (3:13-19) and from 3:31-35?

3. What is significant about Jesus calling twelve disciples?

4. What do we know about the make-up of this group of disciples?

5. How can we make sense of 3:29? What might Mark's original readers understand from this warning Jesus gives?

6. This section presents several groups of people: the crowd, the disciples, Jesus' family, and the religious leaders. How does each group respond to Jesus? At this point who does each group understand Jesus to be? What do the religious leaders accuse Jesus of, and what do you make of their accusations?

Step three: Application – How does it work?

It is the person who not only knows God's Word, but also obeys His Word that truly loves Him (John 14:21). Application of God's Word to our lives involves identifying the specific instructions from the text and making a plan to obey them. The questions below will identify some specific items to consider for your life.

1. How would you respond if your sibling or child was casting out demons and proclaiming the coming of the kingdom of God?

2. How have you experienced the tension between prioritizing Jesus in your life and your family? Do you experience the temptation to prioritize your family or those close to you over Jesus in your life? What might it look like to shift priorities so Jesus is your first priority?

Group Prayer

In celebration of who God is and what he is doing in the world, as seen in this lesson, close in this Psalm of praise. Leaders, read the non-bold sections; all group members read the bold sections aloud together.

Psalm 98 (NIV)

A psalm.

- 1 Sing to the Lord a new song,
for he has done marvelous things;
his right hand and his holy arm
have worked salvation for him.
- 2 The Lord has made his salvation known
and revealed his righteousness to the nations.
- 3 He has remembered his love
and his faithfulness to Israel;
all the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.
- 4 Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth,
burst into jubilant song with music;
- 5 make music to the Lord with the harp,
with the harp and the sound of singing,
- 6 with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn -
shout for joy before the Lord, the King.
- 7 Let the sea resound, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it.
- 8 Let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains sing together for joy;
- 9 let them sing before the Lord,
for he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples with equity.

Amen.

1 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper One, 2015), 52.

2 John Ortberg, "Leader's Insight: Curing Grandiosity (Part Two)," *Christianity Today*, January 29, 2007, accessed May 15, 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2007/january-online-only/cln70129.html>.

3 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 130.

4 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 130. It was believed that using a person's name would exercise power over them.

5 Bock, *Mark*, 162; Stein, *Mark*, 166. See the Introduction for more discussion of Jesus' silencing of demons who know his true identity. Also, Bock writes: "It is Jesus' authority over [demons] that is being highlighted. Demons will not thwart the program nor dictate the terms of how [Jesus' identity] is revealed. So they are not to make known who he is. Disclosure is to take place in other ways on Jesus' terms" (*Mark*, 163).

6 While Jesus names twelve individuals specifically here, it is clear that there is a larger group of unnamed women and men disciples who were with Jesus. For instance, the women who "had followed him and cared for his needs" (15:41) are not listed, nor are "Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome" (15:40).

7 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 115; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 133.

8 Bock, *Mark*, 166.

9 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 117; 116. In *Mark*, Stein discusses the historicity factor of Judas' inclusion in this list (174).

10 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 112, emphasis original, 113; Stein, *Mark*, 170.

11 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 137; Bock, *Mark*, 167; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 117.

12 "Beelzebub," occurs seven times in the Gospels, designating 'the prince of demons' (possibly Satan himself) (Matt. 12:24). It derives from 'Baal-Zebub,' the name of a Philistine deity (2 Kings 1), meaning 'Baal/Lord of the flies' (a deliberate Hebrew distortion of the name 'Baal-Zebul') (Tremper Longman III, ed., *The Baker Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2013), 181).

13 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 117-123; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 143.

14 Bock, *Mark*, 170.

15 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 124.

16 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 145; Stein, *Mark*, 190.

17 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 117; Bock, *Mark*, 169.

18 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 125.



LESSON FIVE

Mark 4:1-34

“The Kingdom of God”

“The parable of the sower, seed, and soil . . . calls us to listen with the whole of our beings so that we may hear and faithfully respond to God with all our lives.” (Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*)¹

“God is at work in us and through us as we wait. Our waiting is active and purposeful . . . a fallow field is never dormant. As dirt sits waiting for things to be planted and grown, there is work being done invisibly and silently. Microorganisms are breeding, moving, and eating. Wind and sun and fungi and insects are dancing a delicate dance that leavens the soil, making it richer and better, readying it for planting . . . Even now as we wait, God is bringing the kingdom that will one day be fully known. We can be as patient as a fallow field because we know there are gifts promised by a Giver who can be trusted.” (Tish Harrison Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary*, 111)²

STARTER

I (Jennay) was privileged and grateful to spend two weeks in Scotland with my friend one summer! . . . What a delight . . . We tasted haggis and whiskey, kept our eyes peeled for “Nessie” whilst sailing upon Loch Ness, listened to bagpipes, explored lots of castles, and generally played tourist in several Scottish cities.

Scotland is home to many castles and it was fun to explore these solid stone structures that had stood the test of time while imagining the people of old who dwelt there long ago. Each castle we visited was strategically placed or built for defense. Naturally so, as this was a primary purpose of the castle. Several castles we explored were situated atop craggy cliffs, limiting outside access. The sturdy rock walls of other castles were used to protect against attack, shielding those inside. The defenses of the castle insulated the insiders from the outsiders all whilst being overseen by a king ruling his kingdom.

But the more we talked about kings, castles, kingdoms, and knights in shining armor during our travels, we realized that while kings and kingdoms are metaphors commonly applied to God, God’s kingdom looks very different than these earthly kingdoms.

While a king’s kingdom is often within a castle, a microcosm of society protected by rock walls, moats, and if you’re lucky, a trebuchet, God’s kingdom is not intended to be solely inward focused or solely intended for self-preservation. While tending to the needs of those within the kingdom is vital, that alone is not what God calls us to do.

I suppose this may be the easier thing to do, though: surround ourselves with like-minded people pursuing somewhat similar goals, build a wall around ourselves and happily maintain our existence. But we see Jesus in the gospels continually seeking those not insulated behind the walls of religiosity. The kingdom is an outward reaching phenomenon – something made vulnerable without safety walls, relentlessly spreading. So while God may be our king and he rules a kingdom, the castles of Scotland don’t provide a very good illustration of this kingdom. In understanding the kingdom, we should probably toss this castle notion and stick with yeast and mustard seeds.³

Warm Up Questions:

1. What are you king or queen of? Your car? Your garage? Your kitchen?

2. What does the phrase “the kingdom of God” bring to your mind?

Understanding the Text

Step one: Observation - What do we see?

Every time we read the Bible, the first thing we should ask is, “What do we see?” Read the text aloud during your group. Place yourself into the original audience and ask questions (who, what, where, when, how).

Read Mark 4:1-34 aloud.

Share observations together. What stands out? What do you notice?

Step two: Interpretation - What does it mean?

The goal is to understand the original author's intended meaning to the original audience. This requires research and discussion on the original readers' cultural and historical background. This is where it is beneficial to dig into a commentary or Bible dictionary, or to listen to a sermon. We are careful NOT to begin our study by asking, "What does this passage mean to me?" That question is application, not interpretation. There is only one meaning of the text – the author's intended meaning. Until we understand the meaning of the text we will not apply the text correctly to our lives.

Background

Mark chapter 4 is unique as the author takes a break from Jesus' action-packed itinerary to spend an entire chapter on his teaching. Here Jesus teaches his central message as announced in 1:14-15, the kingdom of God. Using a series of parables, Jesus gives glimpses to those who will hear of the nature of the kingdom, the future hope of its coming, and the how "those who hear" should respond. It is to these "hearers" in Jesus' midst that he continually directs his parables (4:3; 4:9; 4:23).

Not only is the content of Jesus' message important, so also is the posture of the listeners: it is only through listening with faith that Jesus' audience can truly understand Jesus' teaching.

Parable of the Sower: Sower, Seed, Soil

The parable of the sower has essentially three sections: the parable is told to a large crowd (4:1-9) and interpreted for the disciples (4:13-20), and sandwiched in between these sections is an aside to just the Twelve disciples about the “secret of the kingdom of God” (4:11).

Again Mark uses this technique of inserting the central theme of a section in the midst of a story, the sandwiching technique which has already been utilized in Mark several times. It is in this middle section, albeit rather confusing, that the main point of the parable is made.

The parable opens with a sower planting seeds. Desiring a large harvest, the farmer sows seeds everywhere.⁴ The seeds fall on four types of soil: the path, rocky places, among thorns, and good soil. Only the seeds in the good soil flourish the way the farmer had hoped by producing an exponentially large crop.

Mark then inserts the interlude in verses 10-12, a section most commentators concede is one of the most difficult in the book (see Additional Resources at the end of the lesson). Because Jesus is speaking only to the twelve disciples here, this exchange likely occurred at a different time than the telling of the parable, but was inserted in the middle of the parable to illuminate its meaning.

Here Jesus’ implicit comments about “hearing” and “listening” (4:3, 9, 23) are made explicit: only those who truly hear what Jesus is saying will be able to understand the truths of the kingdom of God.⁵

Hearing through faith is the proper response to Jesus. It is “those who hear in faith” and “those for whom the fellowship and will of Jesus take precedence over everything else” who are the “insiders,” the true hearers.⁶ Jesus is not trying to intentionally confuse or mislead people; making himself known to people is one of his primary purposes on earth.⁷ However, Jesus is concerned with the nature of how people respond to him and his message of the kingdom. Hard, unreceptive hearts are a barrier to truly hearing Jesus’ message and knowing him.

Thus “the citation of Isaiah 6:9f. does not mean that ‘those outside’ are denied the possibility of belief. It indicates that they are excluded from the opportunity of being further instructed in the secret of the kingdom so long as unbelief continues.”⁸

Here the tension between humans’ ability to choose how they will respond to God and God’s sovereignty is seen. The coming and eventual fulfillment of God’s kingdom will be sovereignly orchestrated by God. Those who choose to respond in faith will be invited to participate in this coming kingdom, while those with hard hearts will remain outsiders.⁹

The narrative then shifts back to the parable itself with Jesus’ interpretation. The farmer “sows the word” (4:14), spreading the gospel and message of the kingdom of God without discrimination: “the sower’s activity is neither reckless nor careless but purposeful and necessarily extravagant.”¹⁰ While the farmer hopes for and intends a large harvest, only the good soil, one of four areas planted, bears fruit as the farmer had hoped.

Those on the path experience Satan’s interference. Though Jesus has arrived, Satan still remains actively opposed to the gospel until the full consummation of the kingdom (4:15). For some in “rocky places” (4:16), the experience of persecution is a barrier to believing the gospel, and decide to “let go of faith rather than [face] rejection.”¹¹ Those with thorny soil succumb to worrying about their finances and gaining material possessions which vie for attention and take precedence over the gospel of Jesus (4:17). These three types of soil depict poor responses to Jesus and the gospel. While for some there may be cursory receptivity of the seed, the gospel, this receptivity soon fades and does not persist.

The good soil, however, has the intended effect of the farmer. The good soil “[hears] the word, [accepts] it, and [produces] a crop” (4:20). This soil embraces the seed, the gospel, resulting in an abundant harvest. For those who are receptive to the seed and the initiative of the farmer, the gospel, the kingdom of God is able to take root and flourish and grow.

Lamp, Seeds and a Mustard Bush

Jesus then tells several more short parables, comparing the kingdom of God to a lamp on a stand, crops growing in a field, and a mustard seed. In the first parable, the Lamp on a Stand (4:21-25), Jesus can be understood as the lamp. The purpose of a lamp is to illuminate, expose, and bring light to the darkness. In the presence of light things are not hidden. Thus the lamp “testifies that God’s purpose in Jesus is to enlighten and reveal” the kingdom of God, both in the present and in the future when the fullness of the kingdom will be fully unveiled.¹²

The seed growing in the field shows the persistent, miraculous way in which the seed – the kingdom of God – advances and continues to grow. The kingdom of God is equated with something very ordinary: seeds in a field. To the naked eye, the newly planted field may look unassuming and unimpressive. But beneath the surface, the kingdom is spreading and growing and taking over, beyond what could have initially been imagined – and “all by itself” (4:28).

The mechanics of how seeds grow or how the kingdom expands is not always clear; yet the fact that God’s kingdom will continue to grow and expand, despite human involvement, is a source of hope and trust.¹³

Finally, Jesus likens the kingdom of God to a mustard seed. Something which initially looks small and “insignificant” will eventually be hearty and strong, a flourishing sanctuary teeming with animal life.¹⁴

Commentator Mark Strauss writes:

While the tiny size of a mustard seed may be sufficient to account for Jesus’ choice of this imagery, some commentators have noted how strange it is to use this plant as an image of the kingdom of God.

One might expect the kingdom of God to be compared to a mighty oak or a stately cedar of Lebanon. But a mustard bush?

Mustard was invasive and even dangerous to gardens. Pliny the Elder wrote that the plant “grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted; but on the other hand when it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once” (Nat. 19.170–71).¹⁵

God’s kingdom is described not as dramatic, glamorous, or showy – it’s not an awe-inspiring, stately redwood tree or a rose bush bursting with blossoms, but an ordinary mustard bush. Yet this ordinary and mundane shrub is something hearty, pervasive, not easily gotten rid of, and a place of “refuge.”¹⁶ Such is the kingdom of God. Orchestrated by God, his kingdom will continue to grow and expand despite human efforts. Nothing can hinder the progress and advancement of the kingdom which God has determined and will bring to fruition. Something that has started with Jesus will be completed in fullness in the future, a promise on which we can rest our trust and hope.

Group Questions

1. Why does Jesus intentionally conceal some of his teaching behind parables he knows any “outsiders” wouldn’t understand? Why does he only explain things to his disciples? (What’s the reasoning for v. 34: “he did not say anything to them without using a parable”?)

2. The Parable of the Sower is about the sower, the soil, and the seed. What does each of them represent? What do we learn about all three from this parable?

3. What are the four types of soil? What is their level of fruitfulness? Why are they fruitful or not?

4. What are the analogies used to describe the kingdom of God? What do we learn about the kingdom of God from these analogies?

5. Why do you suppose Jesus uses so many agricultural images in his parables?

Step three: Application – How does it work?

It is the person who not only knows God's Word, but also obeys His Word that truly loves Him (John 14:21). Application of God's Word to our lives involves identifying the specific instructions from the text and making a plan to obey them. The questions below will identify some specific items to consider for your life.

1. Of the four types of soil described in the Parable of the Sower, what type of soil do you think you are most like right now? Why? How do you see these four types of soil playing out in the world today? How do you cultivate good soil?

2. Do these parables about the kingdom of God reshape the way you see God's kingdom? How or why not?

3. Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:27-28 states: "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the thing that are not to nullify the things that are." How have we seen this play out through Scripture? (For instance, Judges 7, Gideon with his tiny army, or 1 Samuel 17, David the shepherd boy defeats Goliath and becomes king.) In Mark 4, how does God use insignificant things for his purposes? If God can use what is considered small and insignificant, how could he use you? How could he use Waterstone?

Group Prayer

In conjunction with Waterstone's three rhythms, Transform (God's kingdom coming in us), Neighbor (God's kingdom coming in others), and Restore (God's kingdom coming in the world), let's pray for the advancement of God's kingdom.

Transform

Leader: God, we pray for your kingdom to come in our hearts and lives. Transform our hearts to be "good soil," receptive hearers of your gospel.

Group: pray either aloud or silently for heart transformation.

Leader: God, we pray for your kingdom to come in our hearts and lives. May we not be susceptible to the forces of evil, difficult circumstances which may tempt us to lose sight of you, or distractions which continually pull us away from you.

Group: confess either aloud or silently for specific things which are taking precedence over Jesus in your life. Pray for renewed receptivity to Jesus and the gospel.

Neighbor

Leader: God, we pray for your kingdom to come in our neighborhoods.

Group: pray either aloud or silently for your neighbors or those in your life who do not know Jesus.

Leader: God, we pray for your kingdom to come in Littleton.

Group: pray either aloud or silently for those in positions of power and influence in Littleton, those in this area who do not know Jesus, and for Christians and churches in Littleton to be a beacon of light and hope.

Restore

Leader: God, we pray for your kingdom to come and bring wholeness, justice and restoration.

Group: pray either aloud or silently for those in positions of power and influence on the global scale, an end to injustice and restoration of peace.

Leader: God, we pray for your kingdom to come in and throughout the world.

Group: pray either aloud or silently for our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world and for those experiencing hardship and persecution for their faith.

Together, all pray:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

Amen.

Additional Resources

From *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey* by Craig L. Blomberg¹⁷

Jesus' Rationale for Speaking in Parables (Mark 4:10-12, 21-25, 33-34 pars.) In between the parable of the sower and its explanation, Jesus' disciples ask him why he uses this form of teaching. Jesus' reply has perplexed many. He seems to be saying that parables conceal truth rather than reveal it (vv. 11b-12). Yet even Jesus' enemies elsewhere catch on to his meaning in his parables (Mark 12:12 pars.).

An adequate answer to this dilemma requires several considerations: (1) True, spiritual understanding in the Bible is never merely cognitive but also volitional. That is, unless one acts on Jesus' teaching by becoming an obedient disciple, one has not truly understood his message. (2) Jesus is using a shrewd rhetorical device. Parables, once they drive home their lessons, either attract or repel. Those who are not prepared to accept Jesus often become even more hostile against him (again cf. Mark 12:12 pars.), but others are convicted and repent. (3) Jesus is quoting Isaiah 6:9-10 from a context in which the prophet was told to pronounce judgement on an already rebellious nation. Yet the end of the chapter (6:13) promises that a godly remnant will reemerge. God never so exercises his judgment in this life as to prevent anyone who wants to move from becoming 'outsider' to 'insider' from doing so.

In short, Jesus is revealing secrets not previously understood about God's plans for his people (vv. 11a, 21-23). For those already out of touch with God, his enigmatic yet forceful way of revealing these secrets in parables, to illustrate the coming kingdom of God, will further repel and repulse (cf. vs. 24-25). For those open to Jesus' claims, greater understanding and discipleship will result (cf. v. 33).

Still, God is sovereign and is portrayed as choosing some people for treatment different from others. Douglas McComiskey explains this as Jesus "declaring that most Jews are still corporately in exile. Jesus divides his audience into two groups: disciples of Jesus, who as a group are restored from exile (at the very least the spiritual component) and are in the kingdom, and the crowd, who as a group (spiritually mixed) are still fundamentally characterized by corporate exile." As for the "mystery" of the kingdom, this is best defined as the fact that God's reign is present but not with irresistible power, as so many expected or wanted.

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- 1 Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark: Proclaiming the Power of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 67.
 - 2 Tish Harrison Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 111.
 - 3 Jennay Smith, "Here Not There," *Here and There Blog*, July 22, 2015, <https://hereandthere14.wordpress.com/2015/07/22/here-not-here>.
 - 4 First-century agricultural techniques often involved sowing seeds before plowing the soil; the audience would have likely understood that all these surfaces where seeds fell would have been plowed with the hopes of an eventual harvest, so the sowing in these areas was not a complete waste. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 153; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 128.
 - 5 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 126.
 - 6 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 132; Bock, *Mark*, 175; "The center of the sandwich in vv. 10-13 is the key to understanding the whole, that only in fellowship with Jesus do parables disclose the meaning of the kingdom of God" (Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 126).
 - 7 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 71. God desires to be known by his people and so incarnates himself as a human person so humanity can better know him!
 - 8 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 159; "only the person open to hearing what the parables say can benefit from what they teach;" not being open "leads to judgment" (Bock, *Mark*, 176).
 - 9 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 134-135; "The arrival of the kingdom does not come with automatic understanding and acceptance. In fact, many will not respond, but it has come nonetheless. The kingdom does not force itself upon people, but offers itself to them. Access is gained only through a welcoming heart" (Bock, *Mark*, 177); Henderson, *Christology and Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*, 98.
 - 10 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 68.
 - 11 Bock, *Mark*, 178; 179; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 133, 137, 138.
 - 12 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 140.
 - 13 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 143; Bock, *Mark*, 181; God's plan, a bountiful harvest and complete coming of the future kingdom will be realized: "the kingdom of God . . . comes mysteriously, by God's initiative and appointment without human intervention (Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 170).
 - 14 Bock, *Mark*, 182.
 - 15 Strauss, *Mark*, 200.
 - 16 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 78.
 - 17 Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 304-305.



LESSON SIX

Mark 4:35–5:20

“Jesus: One with Authority”

“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” (Jesus, John 10:10)

STARTER: Excerpt from The Screwtape Letters

In his book *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis writes a fictional correspondence between a senior demon, Screwtape, and his nephew whom he is mentoring, Wormwood, a junior tempter. In these letters, Screwtape gives advice to Wormwood who has been tasked with leading a young man, who Screwtape calls 'the patient' away from God who he calls 'the Enemy.'

C.S. Lewis writes in the preface, "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors...."

The following is an excerpt from one of Screwtape's letters to Wormwood:

"My dear Wormwood,
I wonder you should ask me whether it is essential to keep the patient in ignorance of your own existence. That question, at least for the present phase of the struggle, has been answered for us by the High Command. Our policy, for the moment, is to conceal ourselves. Of course this has not always been so. We are really faced with a dilemma. When the humans disbelieve in our existence we lose all the pleasing results of direct terrorism and we make no magicians. On the other hand, when they believe in us, we cannot make them materialists and sceptics. At least, not yet. I have great hopes that we shall learn in due time how to emotionalise and mythologise their science to such an extent that what is, in effect, a belief in us (though not under that name) will creep in while the human mind remains closed to belief in the Enemy [God]. The 'Life Force', the worship of sex, and some aspects of Psychoanalysis, may here prove useful. If once we can produce our perfect work—the Materialist Magician, the man, not using, but veritably worshiping, what he vaguely calls 'Forces' while denying the existence of 'spirits'—then the end of the war will be in sight.

But in the meantime we must obey our orders. I do not think you will have much difficulty in keeping the patient in the dark. The fact that 'devils' are predominantly comic figures in the modern imagination will help you. If any faint suspicion of your existence begins to arise in his mind, suggest to him a picture of something in red tights, and persuade him that since he cannot believe in that (it is an old textbook method of confusing them) he therefore cannot believe in you."

Warm Up Questions

1. What do you make of C.S. Lewis' statement, "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them"? Do you think it is true? Why or why not?
2. What is the worst storm or natural disaster you have experienced?

Understanding the Text

Step one: Observation - What do we see?

Every time we read the Bible, the first thing we should ask is, "What do we see?" Read the text aloud during your group. Place yourself into the original audience and ask questions (who, what, where, when, how).

Read Mark 4:35 – 5:20 aloud.

Share observations together. What stands out? What do you notice?

Step two: Interpretation - What does it mean?

The goal is to understand the original author's intended meaning to the original audience. This requires research and discussion on the original readers' cultural and historical background. This is where it is beneficial to dig into a commentary or Bible dictionary, or to listen to a sermon. We are careful NOT to begin our study by asking, "What does this passage mean to me?" That question is application, not interpretation. There is only one meaning of the text – the author's intended meaning. Until we understand the meaning of the text we will not apply the text correctly to our lives.

Background

Mark 4:35–5:43 contains four detailed stories demonstrating the boundless authority of Jesus Christ, confirming his dominion over nature, evil forces, sickness, and death.

In 4:35–5:20, Jesus calms a raging storm and relinquishes a destitute man from the clutches of evil. In both stories, "the power of Jesus prevails over chaos and destruction," and those observing Jesus' behavior are left with the question "'Who is this?'" (4:41).

Encountering Jesus and his displays of power and authority forces a response to this question. The question of who Jesus is and correct responses to Jesus are the lenses through which these two stories will be examined.

Jesus Calms the Storm Who is Jesus?

The account of Jesus silencing the storm in 4:35-41 reveals his innate and comprehensive power and authority. After a long day teaching the crowds, Jesus and his disciples set off on the Sea of Galilee where they are confronted by a "furious squall" (4:37).

The Sea of Galilee is a body of water located below sea level surrounded by high mountains and cliffs (most notably Mt. Hermon, a 9,200 foot peak 30 miles away) where the interplay of cool and warm currents between the mountain peaks and the sea could cause immediate and turbulent storms.

Jesus and his disciples were caught in just one of these storms. For the disciples, several of whom are themselves professional fishermen and sailors who grew up on the Sea of Galilee, to be so petrified by this storm indicates its severity. In a frenzied panic, the disciples abruptly wake Jesus, who was taking a nap. Jesus declares to the waves and wind: “Quiet! Be still!” (4:39).

This simple, three-word command immediately ends the storm; “it was completely calm” (4:39). Jesus calms the storm effortlessly. He does not have to resort to chants and incantations or long pleading prayers or requests to see a result.

As Darrell Bock writes, “creation is told to be muzzled. Creation simply obeys and all is calm.” Neither raging winds and driving rain nor tempestuous waves can prevail against the simple command of Jesus Christ, a demonstration of authority which confirms his identity as the Son of God. His authority extends to the powers of nature, restoring a turbulent sea to a state of calm, giving his disciples a glimpse of his true identity.

How Should we Respond?

While witnesses to this dramatic display of Jesus’ power, the disciples do not respond in faith but in fear, behavior which prompts Jesus’ reprimand in 4:40. Ironically, the disciples are more afraid encountering someone who can calm the storm than they were in the midst of the storm itself. The disciples are not questioning how this miraculous event occurred – they’re wondering who on earth can do this type of feat! This fear is especially in contrast to Jesus’ display of trust in God earlier, as he napped contentedly “on a cushion” despite the raging storm (4:38).

The event of calming the storm was both an opportunity for the disciples to see more of who Jesus is, and an invitation for them to respond in trust to what they learned of Jesus. When confronted with the reality of Jesus Christ, trust is the proper response. Yet the disciples respond in fear, representing not trust but a “lack of faith.” It is fear, not the “lack of knowledge,” that is “the real threat to faith.” Yet by the end of the story in 4:41, the disciples are still left questioning and wondering amongst themselves. Jesus patiently continues to beckon to his disciples to a posture of trust.

Healing of a Demon-Possessed Man Who is Jesus?

The dramatic exorcism account in 5:1-20 shows Jesus’ power to rescue a person from evil, brokenness, and uncleanness, and how this restoration to wholeness is a key component in the kingdom of God.

The graphic details Mark provides about the demon-possessed man paint a tragic scene. A man consumed by evil spirits constituted a danger to both himself and society (“no one was strong enough to subdue him,” 5:4), and so was banished to a cemetery outside of town. There, he “roamed through the graves and the hills, screaming out and slashing himself with sharp stones” (5:5, MSG). This is a deplorable creature. The forces of evil raging within him are wreaking havoc on the entirety of his being, chipping away at his humanity: “he is the living dead, left with no life.”

Not only is the possessed man deplorable, but he is unclean. Typically, Jewish rabbis would not associate with unclean people and things, for coming into contact with persons and things deemed unclean by Old Testament law often required refraining from participation in religious ceremonies for a time period, and purification rituals to restore one to cleanliness. Yet “everything about this scene would make Jewish readers squeamish,” making it unusual for Jesus, a Jewish rabbi, to voluntarily seek out this unclean man in an unclean, Gentile region.

Associating with dead bodies and tombs rendered one unclean, a state which would remain permanent if proper purification rituals were not followed (Num. 19:11-14). Since the demon-possessed man had not followed these rituals, he was essentially “permanently unclean.” Additionally, Old Testament law proscribes pigs as unclean animals (Lev. 11:7; Deut. 14:8), of which there were 2,000 nearby this man’s cemetery home. Jesus is one who willingly enters a place crowded with unclean people and things in order to restore the demon-possessed man to wholeness.

It is this unclean, pitiful creature who throws himself on his face in front of Jesus, shrieking out the name of Jesus, and declaring his own name to be “Legion” (5:7; 9). While it is not precisely clear what is meant by this name, “Legion” could refer to a unit in the Roman army, a group of soldiers numbering over 5,000. A name referencing a large army implies the aggression, destruction, and proclivity to violence reflected in these evil spirits, constituting a formidable “vast opposing force” to Jesus.

Yet as strong and destructive as they are, even the demons recognize they are no match for Jesus (5:7; 10), who they have correctly identified as the Son of the Most High God (5:7). Again, Jesus utters a simple command and the entire Legion of evil obeys him, immediately leaving the man and settling into a herd of pigs nearby (5:11-13).

This exorcism heals the man at once. The townspeople “saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind” (5:15). The contrast of the description of the man in verses 1-10 to how he is described in verses 14-20 is astounding. Jesus, as one with authority and power over evil, brought this man wholeness and life; “he was a restored human.”

Jesus is one who values restoration of human life so highly that it comes at the expense of a large herd of pigs. Curiously, neither Mark nor Jesus address the moral question of the death of so many pigs, a herd which would have likely caused significant economic repercussions for the pig owners. It must be, then, that “in the eyes of Jesus, the rescue and restoration of one person is more important than vast capital assets. Compared to the redemption of a human being, the loss of the swineherds, considerable though it is, does not rate mentioning.” It is this act of restoration that defines this new era, the kingdom of God, that Jesus is bringing in.

Jesus is also one who is actively ushering in the kingdom of God, a kingdom which is expanding, surprisingly into Gentile territory, and whose coming is “unstoppable.” By actively prevailing against the forces of evil, vanquishing demonic power and asserting his authority as the Son of God, Jesus is making things new and bringing new life. It is this newness and abundant life which defines the kingdom of God.

How Should we Respond?

Mark spends seven entire verses describing the response of both the townspeople who observe the transformation of the demon-possessed man and the response of the man now free of demon possession. Mark defines discipleship as being with Jesus. Here the formerly possessed man exemplifies discipleship whereas the fear of the townspeople form a barrier to their faith in Jesus.

Mark writes that the people who observe this miraculous turn of events are “afraid” (5:15). They are uncomfortable with the dramatic transformation of the man formerly possessed by demons. Unfortunately, their discomfort leads not to faith in Jesus, but to fear and a desire to have nothing to do with him.

Dawn Wilhelm writes, "The healed man is living testimony that God will not leave things as they are. It is easier to accept the presence of a crazy person outside the boundaries of town than a healed man who will walk among them, confronting them with the reality of God's transforming power in their midst."

This fear and uneasiness with what has just occurred prompts them to "plead with Jesus to leave their region" (5:17). As identified in the story of Jesus calming the storm, fear is the opposite of faith. Overcome by their fear, and therefore reluctance to believe in Jesus, even after the miraculous transformation that they have witnessed firsthand, they refuse to believe in the reality of who Jesus is.

On the other hand, the healed man responds in faith to Jesus; "here is a person who earnestly desires to be a disciple of Jesus Christ." At the end of the story the healed man is "sitting at the feet of Jesus," desiring to accompany him on his journey, wanting to be with Jesus. While it is not exactly clear why Jesus forbids him from accompanying him on his journey, because this healed man remains in the Gentile territory he becomes the first Gentile missionary. Jesus is forced out, but his gospel message remains in the person of the healed man. The kingdom of God continues to grow and expand in unexpected ways.

Group Questions

1. Over what does Jesus demonstrate authority in this section? What are the results of those demonstrations? In what ways does Jesus bring peace and wholeness out of chaos?

2. What are the disciples' responses to the fierce storm and to Jesus' authoritative act? Why were they so afraid? What is Jesus' response to the disciples after he calms the storm? Is he fair with them?

3. What are the different Old Testament uncleanness laws that the demoniac is breaking? How does this set up a contrast to Jesus' presence in that setting and the significance of what he does?

4. Mark does not mention the reaction of those tending to the pigs (except for that they told townspeople, v. 14), or the inevitable catastrophic economic loss of so many pigs. Why do you suppose Mark neglects this detail? What does this tell us about Jesus' priorities (see esp. 5:19-20)?

5. What is the response of both the disciples (4:40-41) and the townspeople when they saw these miracles (5:14-17)? Why is this significant? What does it reveal about who Jesus is?

Step three: Application – How does it work?

It is the person who not only knows God's Word, but also obeys His Word that truly loves Him (John 14:21). Application of God's Word to our lives involves identifying the specific instructions from the text and making a plan to obey them. The questions below will identify some specific items to consider for your life.

Application

1. The story of the healing of the demon-possessed man reveals great transformation in the life of this man. How has Jesus brought transformation in your own life? How are you sharing with your neighbors about what Jesus has done for you (5:19)?

2. In the midst of a life storm, is your first response fear or faith? How can we help each other develop trust in Jesus in the midst of these storms?

3. Who are the 'unclean' people today? Are we, you, willing to go spend time with 'unclean' people? What would it look like for us to bring them restoration today?

Group Prayer

Along with the man healed from demon possession, let us practice sharing with one another "how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you" (5:19). Spend a few minutes reflecting on the past week looking for times that God has worked in your life, answered a prayer or been present in a way you overlooked at the time. Listen to each person's experience, then pray together in praise for these things.

Additional Resources

See the Bible Project's short video, "Holiness," for an excellent overview of the idea of cleanliness and uncleanness throughout Scripture: <https://youtu.be/l9vn5UvsHvM>.

1 C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Harper One, 2015), IX.

2 C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, 31-32.

3 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 153.

4 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 175; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 148-149; Bock, *Mark*, 184

5 Bock, *Mark*, 185; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 177; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 149.

6 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 84; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 151.

7 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 149; Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 81-82.

8 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 177; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 152; Bock, *Mark*, 185.

9 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 152.

10 Bock, *Mark*, 189; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 154; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 182-183.

11 Bock, *Mark*, 188.

12 Bock, *Mark*, 188; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 155.

13 Bock, *Mark*, 190; 189; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 156.

14 Bock, *Mark*, 191.

15 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 159.

16 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 85; 87. Just as the seeds planted by the farmer in Mark 4:26-29, so the kingdom of God is expanding and growing in ways that cannot be stopped.

17 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 89; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 159; Bock, *Mark*, 191.

18 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 89.

19 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 159; 160; Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 89; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 187.

20 Bunch, ed., *Small Group Idea Book*, 73-74.

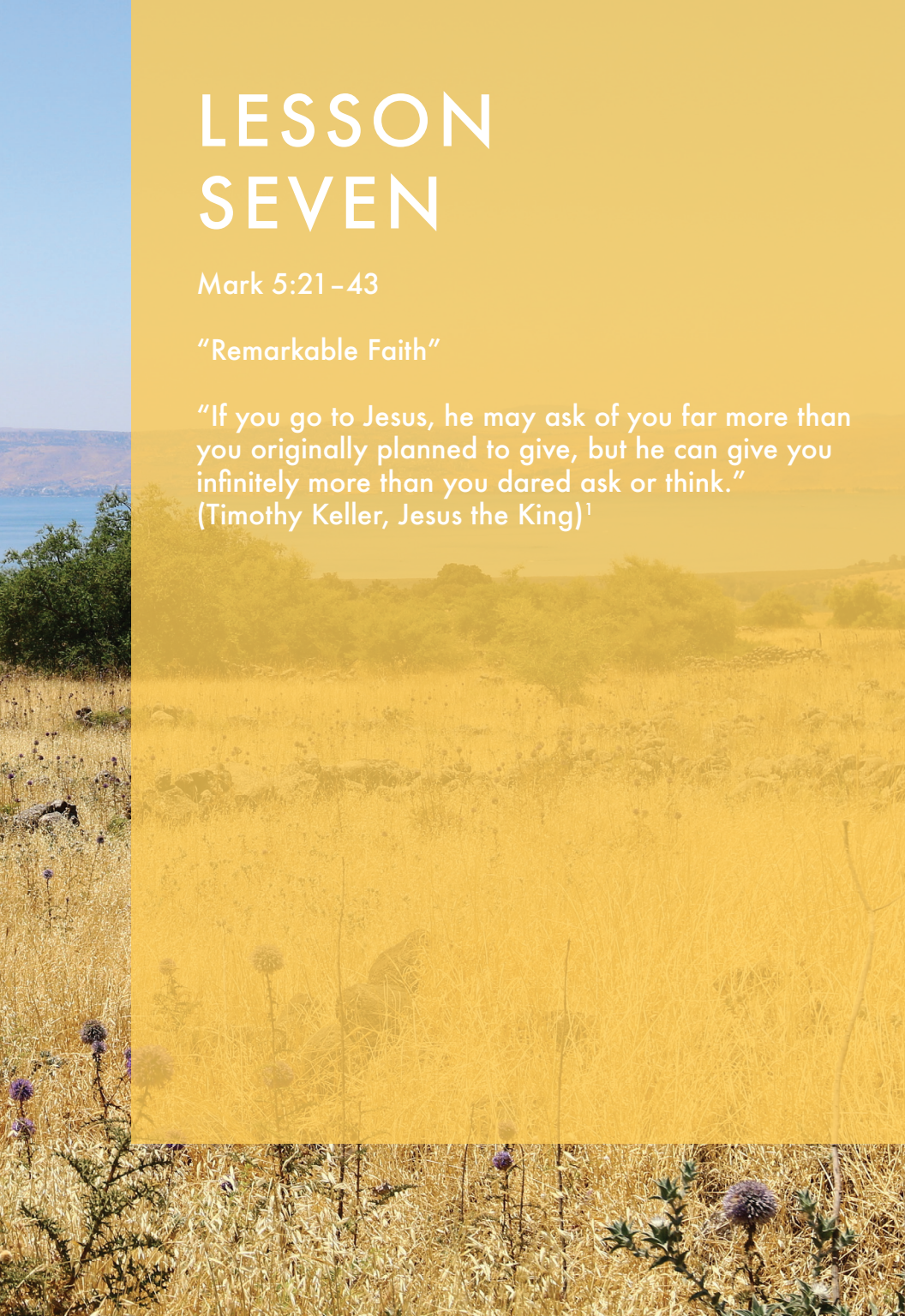


LESSON SEVEN

Mark 5:21–43

“Remarkable Faith”

“If you go to Jesus, he may ask of you far more than you originally planned to give, but he can give you infinitely more than you dared ask or think.”
(Timothy Keller, *Jesus the King*)¹



STARTER: Charles Darwin's Lost Faith

The following is an excerpt from Paul Johnson's biography of Charles Darwin.

"The arrival of children at regular intervals delighted [Charles Darwin]. Unlike many studious men, especially scientists, Darwin never regarded children, especially his own, as a nuisance or a distraction....

Darwin was especially kind to children when they were ill. Any sick child had the right to lie covered in blankets on the sofa in his study. The deaths of three of his ten children were painful tragedies to him. The one that hit him the hardest was the fatal sickness of his favorite child, Annie, which began in June 1850, when she was nine, and ended in her death the following April when she was ten.

We have a good photograph of her taken two years before her death. She obviously very much resembled her mother, but Darwin loved her primarily because of her goodness and the sweetness of her nature—'a perfect angel.' The inexorable progress of her mysterious malady is recorded in detail in letters and notebooks.

Darwin felt a huge burden of guilt because he believed her trouble was inherited from himself. She was subjected to the water cure under Dr. Gully, wet-sheet wrappings every two hours, rubbing of the back with a saturated towel, showers and pumpings, and ice-cold baths, especially of her feet and hands. Then, not responding, she was taken to Malvern, but nothing availed. On April 23, 1852, Darwin wrote to Emma [his wife], at dawn:

She went to her final sleep most tranquilly, most sweetly at 12 o'clock today. Our poor dear dear child has had a very short life but I trust happy, & God only knows what miseries might have been in store for her. She expired without a sigh. How desolate it makes one to think of her frank cordial manners...I cannot remember ever seeing the dear child naughty. God bless her...my own poor dear dear wife.

Emma's diary simply recorded: "12 o'clock." It is notable that Darwin's letters during the final phase were one long prayer to God for her recovery. He mentions God fourteen times in his letter to Emma [a very public Christian]; she, only twice. The blow was the worst single torment in his entire life, exceeding in pain even the death of his mother. He was too distraught to attend the little girl's funeral. He never forgot her, and he never forgave God for taking her away. The cruelty, as he saw it, blew away the last vestige of his belief in a benign deity. What Leibniz had called theodicy, the notion of divine justice, no longer made any sense to him, and thereafter, though without admitting it to Emma, he carried on his work as though God did not exist. The final collapse of his belief, be it noted, had nothing to do with scientific discovery: It was purely a matter of intimate loss."²

Warm Up Questions

1. When you were growing up, what did a day home sick look like? What did sick days look like at your house? What were the typical parental responses or treatments?

2. Have you ever had someone close to you die or been really sick? If so, how has that shaped your faith, both towards and away from God?

Understanding the Text

Step one: Observation - What do we see?

Every time we read the Bible, the first thing we should ask is, "What do we see?" Read the text aloud during your group. Place yourself into the original audience and ask questions (who, what, where, when, how).

Read Mark 5:21 – 43 aloud.

Share observations together. What stands out? What do you notice?

Step two: Interpretation - What does it mean?

The goal is to understand the original author's intended meaning to the original audience. This requires research and discussion on the original readers' cultural and historical background. This is where it is beneficial to dig into a commentary or Bible dictionary, or to listen to a sermon. We are careful NOT to begin our study by asking, "What does this passage mean to me?" That question is application, not interpretation. There is only one meaning of the text – the author's intended meaning. Until we understand the meaning of the text we will not apply the text correctly to our lives.

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Background

Mark 5:21-43 chronicles two interwoven ("sandwiched") stories of the healing of a bleeding woman and Jesus raising Jairus' daughter from the dead. Because the healing of the bleeding woman is inserted in the middle of the story of Jairus and his daughter, Mark is specifically highlighting this woman and her remarkable expression of faith. Jesus calls Jairus to believe; it is the faith of the bleeding woman that exemplifies the type of belief Jairus should have.³

Jairus

After healing the demon-possessed man, Jesus returns to Jewish territory where he immediately finds himself in the midst of a teeming, jostling crowd. Jairus is a synagogue ruler and a desperate father distressed over his sick daughter. He is panicked enough to push through the crowd, find Jesus, fall at his feet, and plead for the life of his dying daughter (5:22-23). As Mark records Jairus' name in the story and his title as synagogue ruler, it is likely that Jairus enjoyed a respectable social status and privilege in the community. Jairus is also one of the few religious leaders in Mark who expresses confidence in Jesus and his ability to heal. Jesus responds to Jairus' distressed plea, agreeing to go see his daughter.⁴

The Bleeding Woman

As Jesus made his way to Jairus' daughter, he was accompanied by a "large crowd" which "pressed around him" (5:24). One person in this clamorous crowd is a woman in an equally dire situation. For twelve long years this woman had endured a menstrual hemorrhage, of which twelve years of incompetent doctors and expensive medical bills had brought no resolution. To make matters worse, this medical condition rendered her "perpetually unclean."⁵ According to Old Testament law, women were considered ritually unclean during menstruation (Lev. 15:19-27). Because this woman's period is ongoing, she was never released from a state of uncleanness. Anyone who interacted with her would thus become unclean, causing her to be essentially ostracized from society. This woman is desperate to be made well.⁶

The woman believes that touching Jesus' clothes will restore her health. While perhaps this belief was tinged with "superstition," it is her confident faith leading to action which brings her healing and which is ultimately commended by Jesus. The woman is healed immediately, a fact not lost on Jesus even in the midst of the jostling crowd.

In these next few verses, both Jesus and the woman respond in remarkable ways. First, knowing healing has occurred, Jesus desires to have an encounter with the woman healed. He is not satisfied to anonymously dispense a cure, but desires a relationship and a personal encounter with someone. He is not content to dispatch a miracle; he wants to encounter a person. In the kingdom of God, miracle leads to meeting. Discipleship is not simply getting our needs met; it is being in the presence of Jesus, being known by him, and following him.⁸

Additionally, it is not respectable for a Jewish rabbi to interact with – let alone touch! – a woman, especially one who is bleeding, in such a wretched condition and lowly socioeconomic status.

However, Jesus does not scorn the woman for touching him, but responds with great tenderness, calling her “daughter,” commending her faith, and telling her to be freed from her suffering (5:34). The woman no longer has to endure physical suffering or the pain of ostracization; this healing has made her well and clean. Jesus refuses to abide by the gendered and socioeconomic hierarchies of the day, instead choosing to prioritize those on the fringes of society in need of healing and wholeness.⁹

There are no gender or social rankings in the kingdom of God. In fact, Jesus is one who actively seeks to reverse these hierarchies. Jesus’ tender acknowledgement of the woman and encouragement to hear her out is empowering to this woman and societal outcast: “divine power not only seeks the well-being of others but their empowerment. How strange and wonderful is the power of God in Jesus Christ.”¹⁰

The woman also responds to Jesus in impressive ways. The woman knows she is in a vulnerable position as Jesus searches for her in the crowd. As someone overwhelmed by shame who should not have been in a crowd of people because of her uncleanness, she is afraid of being exposed. Yet despite her fear, she came to Jesus and told her story (5:33). She chooses to act in faith rather than being crippled by fear.

Dawn Wilhelm writes that it is only this woman who “manages to overcome fear by faith.”¹¹ Just earlier the disciples’ fear led to a lack of faith. Here the woman shows faith despite fear. Because of this the woman is an “exemplar of faith.”¹²

Healing Jairus' Daughter

This interlude with the bleeding woman, however, stalls Jesus long enough that Jairus' daughter dies before Jesus arrives. Jesus is not distraught by the news of death, telling Jairus to not be afraid, but to "just believe" (5:36). Though Jairus exercised faith in Jesus before his daughter died, now Jesus is calling Jairus to even more radical faith, faith in the midst of seemingly hopeless and completely dire circumstances.

Yet what does it mean to have faith this radical? Here Mark's masterful narrative has already answered the question in the story of the bleeding woman. Jairus "must have the kind of faith the woman has (v. 34)! The woman exemplifies and defines faith for Jairus, which means to trust Jesus despite everything to the contrary."¹³ Upon reaching Jairus' house, Jesus, Peter, James and John were met by "people crying and wailing loudly" (5:38). It was customary at that time to hire people to mourn publicly when someone died. These "professional mourners" knew death when they saw it, scoffing at Jesus' assertion that the girl was sleeping instead of dead.¹⁴ Yet for those in faith, death, like sleep, is not a permanent state, and one Jesus is to eventually reverse.¹⁵

Jesus goes to the little girl and touches her. Again, contact with a corpse results in uncleanness according to Old Testament law. However, as with the touching of the bleeding woman, Jesus' contact with those who are unclean does not make him unclean but makes them clean. As one more powerful than both disease and death and any sort of unclean state, Jesus speaks tenderly to the girl, commanding her to get up. Again Jesus commands the family to not tell of this miracle, as he likely wants to prevent premature ideas of the nature of his Messiahship, something which can only be fully understood after his resurrection.¹⁶

Group Questions

1. Describe the journey of Jairus' emotions through this whole passage. What is the significance of a person in Jairus' position approaching Jesus?

2. Describe the journey of the bleeding woman's emotions in this passage. How would Mark's original readers have understood this woman's life before she was healed? After?

3. How was the woman breaking Old Testament law? What was Jesus' response to the uncleanness of both the bleeding woman and the little girl?

4. Why does Jesus bring the woman into the open and interact with her?

5. How does the bleeding woman become an example of faith, and define what faith should look like for Jairus?

6. Jesus describes the little girl as sleeping rather than dead (5:39). How does Jesus change the nature of death by saying death is sleep?

Step three: Application – How does it work?

It is the person who not only knows God's Word, but also obeys His Word that truly loves Him (John 14:21). Application of God's Word to our lives involves identifying the specific instructions from the text and making a plan to obey them. The questions below will identify some specific items to consider for your life.

1. Jesus responds with deep compassion and tenderness to those who have faith in him. Do you believe that he responds this way to you? Do you believe that Jesus wants to be in relationship with you? If so, how does this shape the way you live your life and see the world?

2. Perhaps you or someone close to you has had complete faith in God's power and ability to heal, but healing has not come like you believed it would. How did/do you respond to that?

3. This passage is a radical call to trust Jesus despite any circumstances. Do you resonate more with the faith of the bleeding woman (complete faith despite fear), or that of Jairus (faith that becomes wary in the face of seemingly hopeless circumstances)? How can we encourage one another to have a faith that closer resembles that of the bleeding woman?

Group Prayer

In light of these stories from Mark which reveal the compassion and power of Jesus, and which commend faith in the face of fear, let us praise God for who he is and petition for increased faith like that of the healed woman.

Leader: "O Lord, the helper of the helpless, the hope of those who are past hope, the savior of the tempest-tossed, the harbor of the voyagers, the physician of the sick; you know each soul and our prayer, each home and its need;

become to each one of us what we most dearly require, receiving us all into your kingdom, making us children of light; and pour on us your peace and love, O Lord our God" [from the Liturgy of St. Basil the Great, 4th-century church father]¹⁷

Group: pray aloud and/or silently for:

- ï Yourself or others who are overwhelmed by fear and who find it difficult to trust Jesus;
- ï Those who are sick, suffering, or lonely, that they may experience the wholeness and restoration only Jesus can provide;
- ï That we as followers of Christ and people of Waterstone may embody the kingdom values demonstrated by Jesus.

All pray together from Psalm 112 (vs. 1, 7, NLT):

Praise the Lord!

How joyful are those who fear the Lord
and delight in obeying his commands.

They do not fear bad news;
they confidently trust the Lord to care for them.

How joyful are those who fear the Lord
and delight in obeying his commands.

Praise the Lord!

Additional Resources

For an additional perspective on the nature of healing:

Wetherell, Kristen. "Does Jesus Want to Heal Me?" The Gospel Coalition, March 13, 2017. Accessed July 29, 2017. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/does-jesus-want-to-heal-me>.

Many of us have prayed for healing (or other forms of restoration), and it has not come in the way we would have hoped. For an excellent and insightful resource which wrestles with this very question, see:

Sittser, Jerry L. *When God Doesn't Answer Your Prayer: Insights to Keep You Praying with Greater Faith and Deeper Hope*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007.

See the Bible Project's short video, "Holiness," for an excellent overview of the idea of cleanliness and uncleanness throughout Scripture: <https://youtu.be/I9vn5UvsHvM>.

1 Keller, *Jesus the King*, 71.

2 Paul Johnson, *Darwin: Portrait of a Genius* (New York: Viking, 2012), 61-63.

3 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 168.

4 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 162, 168.

5 Bock, *Mark*, 195. See Lesson Six for more discussion of uncleanness.

6 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 191-192; Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 94; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 163.

7 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 163; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 192-193; "to act on what one hears about Jesus is always in Mark the sign of a disciple, and this the woman does" (Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 164). Some people did believe, though, that touching the cloak of a Rabbi or healer would bring healing, generating this superstition around Jesus.

8 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 165, emphasis original.

9 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 95; Jesus "is willing to stop his journey in order to see and hear the unnamed woman – an indication of the priority God gives to those who are impoverished and otherwise unrecognized by society at large" (Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 99); Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 165.

10 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 99.

11 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 101; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 193; Bock, *Mark*, 197.

12 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 97.

13 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 168; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 195-196.

14 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 196.

15 "The reference to sleeping may indicate to Jairus the way Jesus wants him to see the girl, and hence the way God would have us regard those who die in faith" (Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 167).

16 Bock, *Mark*, 199; 196. See Introduction chapter for more discussion of the nature of secrecy in Mark surrounding Jesus being Messiah.

17 Counsell, ed., *2000 Years of Prayer*, 47.





LESSON EIGHT

Mark 6:1-56

“The Nature of Discipleship”

“Who stands fast? Only the man whose final standard is not his reason, his principles, his conscience, his freedom, or his virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all this when he is called to obedient and responsible action in faith and in exclusive allegiance to God – the responsible man, who tries to make his whole life an answer to the question and call of God.” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*)¹

STARTER

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906 – 1945) was a theologian and pastor in Germany during the rise of Nazi Germany. Bonhoeffer was one of the main leaders in the Confessing Church movement in Germany during this time which opposed both the Nazi party and the German Protestant church which forfeited the gospel and embraced Nazi ideology. For Bonhoeffer's resistance and participation in the Valkyrie plot to depose Hitler (July 20, 1944), Bonhoeffer was imprisoned in a concentration camp and executed two weeks before the end of World War II (Spring 1945).

The following is an excerpt from Eric Metaxas' biography of Bonhoeffer, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, about how Bonhoeffer faced his execution for standing up for the gospel against the Nazis.

"The camp doctor at Flossenbürg [concentration camp] was H. Fischer-Hüllstrung. He had no idea whom he was watching at the time, but years later, he gave the following account of [Dietrich] Bonhoeffer's last minutes alive:

On the morning of that day between five and six o'clock the prisoners [...] were taken from their cells, and the verdicts of the court martial read out to them. Through the half-open door in one room of the huts I saw pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor and praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God."²

Warm Up Questions

1. Who in your life do you admire for their moral courage?

2. What in your life is worth living and dying for?

Understanding the Text

Step one: Observation - What do we see?

Every time we read the Bible, the first thing we should ask is, "What do we see?" Read the text aloud during your group. Place yourself into the original audience and ask questions (who, what, where, when, how).

Read Mark 6:1 – 56 aloud.

Share observations together. What stands out? What do you notice?

Background

Hometown

Chapter 6 begins with Jesus traveling to his hometown (presumably Nazareth) where he teaches in the synagogue. Yet instead of being met with openness and excitement, the people of Nazareth receive Jesus with skepticism and indignation. Nazareth was a small town: everyone there knew Jesus, watched him grow up, and had likely even purchased his handiwork.³ They knew Jesus to be a craftsman, not a teacher who taught authoritatively, and, they thought, presumptuously. "Jesus, we know you and grew up with you! Who do you think you are to be teaching in this way?," they likely asked him. While the closeness they enjoyed to Jesus could have paved the way for deep discipleship, instead it resulted in apathy and even annoyance: this "exposure to Jesus and the gospel is no guarantee of faith; indeed, apart from faith, exposure to the gospel inoculates as often as it enlivens."⁴ The people of Nazareth had become too accustomed to and comfortable with Jesus that it prevented them from seeing who Jesus really was.

It is precisely this reaction which prevents Jesus from doing any miracles in Nazareth. Jesus is surely capable of performing miracles; it is not his ability which is stunted here (6:5). But Jesus is not in the business of performing miracles without an expression of faith. Jesus does not work miracles in order to convince people of belief; this is a shallow and superficial faith. Dawn Wilhelm writes, "Jesus is not willing to coerce belief by manipulating events to prove his prophetic and divine identity."⁵ Thus the people of Nazareth's unbelief and "lack of faith" (6:6) prevented Jesus from doing any healings there.⁶

Sending out the Twelve

After leaving Nazareth, Jesus sends his disciples out on their first missionary venture. Outfitted only with bare necessities, Jesus commissions the disciples two-by-two to preach, cast out demons, and heal the sick (6:12-13). This incident demonstrates both the nature of discipleship and the nature of the kingdom of God.

Concerning the nature of discipleship, the disciples are forced to trust God on this journey. Having only basic supplies and minimal training, Jesus creates a situation where the advancement of his kingdom comes not because of the skills, abilities, and charisma of the disciples, but through God who uses the willingness of fallible and finite humans. The disciples do not yet fully understand who Jesus is; they do not have every point of their theology figured out or have an exhaustive philosophy of ministry.⁷ Not that these sorts of preparations are unimportant, but eventually the rubber meets the road as theology is worked out and refined in the context of life and ministry, all while trusting God who is doing the sending. James Edwards writes, "a genuine call to ministry always calls us to that for which we are not adequately prepared."⁸

This passage also shows that being a disciple of Jesus involves furthering the kingdom of God. Suzanne Watts Henderson writes that "ideal Markan discipleship . . . is based . . . on their faithfully carrying forward Jesus' own kingdom of God enterprise."⁹ Just as the first five chapters of Mark show Jesus ushering in the kingdom of God through preaching, healing, and casting out demons, so too are the disciples to join in and continue this same kingdom work. The disciples are not only to preach, but are also not only to cast out demons and heal the sick. This is not an either/or, but a both/and, situation. The kingdom of God is not purely intellectual (preaching) nor purely physical (healing and exorcising); the kingdom is a demonstration of God's holistic redemption, bringing wholeness to the entirety of persons, communities, and societies. It is to this mission that the disciples are called.¹⁰

John the Baptist Beheaded

Mark 6:14-29 is one of two sections in Mark (the other being 1:1-8) where the story centers on John the Baptist, not Jesus. There are several different ways to approach this story. Some commentators focus on the historicity of King Herod, the royal family and politics, some emphasize the death of John as a foreshadowing of Jesus' death, some focus on the weak character of Herod or the variety of titles ascribed to Jesus.¹¹ For the purposes of this lesson, this story will be discussed through the lens of discipleship.

Mark intentionally inserts the story of John's death in the midst of the account of Jesus sending out the Twelve disciples, showing his readers the inevitable cost of discipleship. Mark Strauss writes: "by 'sandwiching' the death of John between the beginning and end of the mission of the Twelve, Mark shows that the path of true discipleship is one of self-denial and self-sacrifice."¹² For anyone who follows Jesus, death (such as John experienced) is a real possibility. John's death shows that there is an "inseparable relationship" between "discipleship and death."¹³

Feeding of the Five Thousand

Jesus' outdoor feast for thousands (of most likely poor people) on a grassy hillside comes in stark contrast to the questionable revelry of Herod's banquet (among the elite of the day). The feeding of the five thousand teaches its readers about discipleship and the kingdom of God, and links the character of Jesus to God as demonstrated throughout Old Testament traditions.

Jesus' attempts at finding rest are foiled when the crowds discover where he is and run to meet him (6:32-34). Having compassion for the people, Jesus teaches them until the day is over and mealtime is at hand. Jesus recruits his disciples for the task of providing a meal for the crowd. After mitigating the disciples' initial panic at the overwhelming task of providing food for such a crowd, Jesus locates some lonely bread and fish, miraculously multiplies it, and again enlists the disciples' help, this time in distributing the meal.¹⁴ This is a miracle in which the disciples are actively involved.

Suzanne Watts Henderson writes, “Mark’s feeding account finds the disciples working side-by-side with their master,” and it is this working alongside – working with – Jesus for the furthering of his kingdom which is a key component of being a disciple of Jesus.¹⁵ Discipleship does not involve observing the work of God from the sidelines, but fully immersing and participating in the work of God.

Additionally, as the parables in Mark 4:26-32 indicated, the kingdom of God will be a place of abundance. The twelve baskets of food leftover in this story point to the overwhelming surplus associated with God’s kingdom. God’s kingdom is defined not by deficit, but by abundance; in his kingdom there will be enough.¹⁶

This theme of provision is a theme carried throughout Scripture. In the Old Testament, God provides to the Israelites in the wilderness (incidentally, the location of this meal is also a “remote place” [6:35]) by providing meals every day of manna and quail (Exodus 16), oil and flour for a widow (1 Kings 17:7-16), many jars of oil for another widow (2 Kings 4:1-7) and multiplying bread for 100 men (2 Kings 4:42-44). Just as Moses led the Israelites through the desert, so is Jesus leading and shepherding these people, providing for their needs and catching them up in the larger mission that is the kingdom of God.¹⁷

Jesus Walking on Water

After the feast was over, Jesus hurries his disciples into a boat and retreats to pray. In the middle of the night,¹⁸ a wind storm catches the disciples by surprise and they become weary as their journey towards the shore stretches nearly until dawn. So Jesus goes to them.

The text says that Jesus “was about to pass by them” (6:48). Why would Jesus see his friends struggling and simply walk by them? Yet this phrase of passing by is not merely an indication that Jesus was going to stroll atop the waves past his disciples, but is an Old Testament reference which gives more insight into who Jesus is. In Exodus 33, Moses requests to see the glory of God.

Had Moses received his request, he would not have survived, for coming face-to-face with God's glory would have killed him. So God told Moses, "'I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you . . . There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen'" (Exod. 33:19; 21-23, emphasis mine). Mark's reference to Jesus as passing by the disciples is identifying Jesus with the God of Moses, and is, in fact, a "divine revelation."¹⁹

Yet in the moment, this profound identification of Jesus' divinity is lost on the disciples. Jesus knows the disciples are confused: they still do not yet understand fully who he is and often succumb to fear (6:49-50). However, instead of abandoning his disciples in frustration, he approaches the struggling, fearful disciples, passing by them so that they may see more of who he is, revealing God's glory and giving them another glimpse of his Messiahship. In this instance, the disciples are presented with yet another opportunity to choose faith in Jesus over fear. However, they still do not quite yet understand who Jesus is.²⁰

Conclusion

Chapter 6 concludes with another display of Jesus' compassion. He cares for the sick and suffering, healing all who came to him.

Dawn Wilhelm concludes, "Jesus cannot help but extend God's grace to all who are in need, and there is not one who leaves bereft of his power."²¹

Group Questions

1. Why is Jesus not treated well in his home town, and even seen as a scandal? Why was Jesus unwilling to perform any miracles in Nazareth (6:5)?

2. What do you observe about the nature in which the Twelve disciples are sent out by Jesus? What was Jesus trying to teach his disciples about the nature of discipleship in the way in which he sent them out? Who is Jesus that he has the authority to give others authority over evil spirits?

3. Again Mark uses a literary sandwich, dropping the story of John the Baptist's death in the middle of the story of the disciples being sent out. What does Mark intend to show about the nature of discipleship by inserting John's story here?

4. How does Jesus respond to the crowd (6:33-44)? How do the disciples respond?

5. How does Jesus address both spiritual and physical needs with both the sending out of the Twelve and with the needs of the crowd? What does this indicate about the nature of his kingdom?

6. Why did Jesus pass by the disciples on the lake? Why are the disciples so afraid? Why does Mark say that their hearts are hardened? What does this show about the complexity of the characters of the disciples?

7. What do we learn about Jesus from each story? What are things he values, and what do we learn about who he is as Messiah and Son of God?

Step three: Application – How does it work?

It is the person who not only knows God's Word, but also obeys His Word that truly loves Him (John 14:21). Application of God's Word to our lives involves identifying the specific instructions from the text and making a plan to obey them. The questions below will identify some specific items to consider for your life.

1. These stories reveal much of Jesus' power, authority, and compassion. Where have you seen these attributes of God played out in your own life?

2. How does Waterstone do at addressing both the spiritual and physical needs of those in our community and around the world? Where could we do a better job at addressing both? Where could you do a better job at addressing both?

3. Jesus sends his inexperienced and recently appointed disciples out with only a few possessions, and yet God works through this inexperience and inadequacy to further his kingdom. How has God used you in times of unpreparedness to advance his kingdom?

Group Prayer

Mark 6 reveals a God, through Jesus Christ, who deeply cares for and provides for his people, a reality which should be accompanied by gratitude.

Spend a few minutes in silence, thinking or writing out attributes of God that are deserving of gratitude and things for which you are thankful.

Together as a group, offer these thanks to God. (God, I thank you for being ____; God, I thank you for ____)

Close with this prayer from St. John Chrysostom, a 4th-century church father.

(Leader reads normal print, group reads bold print):

"Blessed are you, Oh Christ our God; you revealed your wisdom to simple fisherfolk, sending down upon them your Holy Spirit, and through them you caught the whole world in your net. Glory to you, Lover of humankind. Amen."²²

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- 1 Eric Metaxes, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 432.
- 2 Metaxes, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, 532.
- 3 Mark identifies Jesus as a “carpenter” here (6:3), but this word really indicates a craftsman or stonemason. Given the limited trees in and around Nazareth, it was likely Jesus worked with a material other than wood (Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 171; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 201).
- 4 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 174; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 201-203; Bock, *Mark*, 201-202; Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 103.
- 5 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 104.
- 6 “Unbelief excluded the people of Nazareth from the dynamic disclosure of God’s grace that others had experienced” (Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 204); Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 103; Bock, *Mark*, 202.
- 7 Bock, *Mark*, 204.
- 8 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 183; Henderson, *Christology and Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*, 157; Bock, *Mark*, 204; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 178-183
- 9 Henderson, *Christology and Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*, 137.
- 10 Henderson, *Christology and Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*, 142; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 178; Bock, *Mark*, 205.
- 11 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 183-189; Lane looks more specifically at the Herodian family and the historicity of this account, especially in comparison to Josephus’ account (Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 214-223).
- 12 Strauss, *Mark*, 267.
- 13 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 189. This becomes more explicit with Mark 8:34: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”
- 14 Some interpret this story as a miracle of generous sharing amongst everyone in the crowd. However, this is very unlikely to be the case: “The feeding of the five thousand is sometimes explained not as a true miracle but as a triumph of sharing on the part of the crowd . . . the moral is a good one . . . but it is neither the purpose of the story nor sufficient to explain the feeding of the five thousand. The facts of the story are clear. There are thousands of hungry people, and there are insufficient means of feeding them. Were there sufficient provisions among the crowd, the disciples, in their anxiety about the situation, surely would have known of them; or the provisions would have been broken out by now” (Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 193).
- 15 Henderson, *Christology and Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*, 203; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 196; Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 113.
- 16 Bock, *Mark*, 214; Henderson, *Christology and Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*, 202-203.
- 17 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 231; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 195; Bock, *Mark*, 211.
- The Romans designated the night into four sections. The fourth watch was about 3:00am – 6:00am (Bock, *Mark*, 216; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 198).
- 18 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 115.
- 19 Henderson, *Christology and Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*, 237; Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 115; Bock, *Mark*, 216; 20 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 198-199.
- 21 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 116; Bock, *Mark*, 219.
- 22 Counsell, *2000 Years of Prayer*, 49 (Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom).

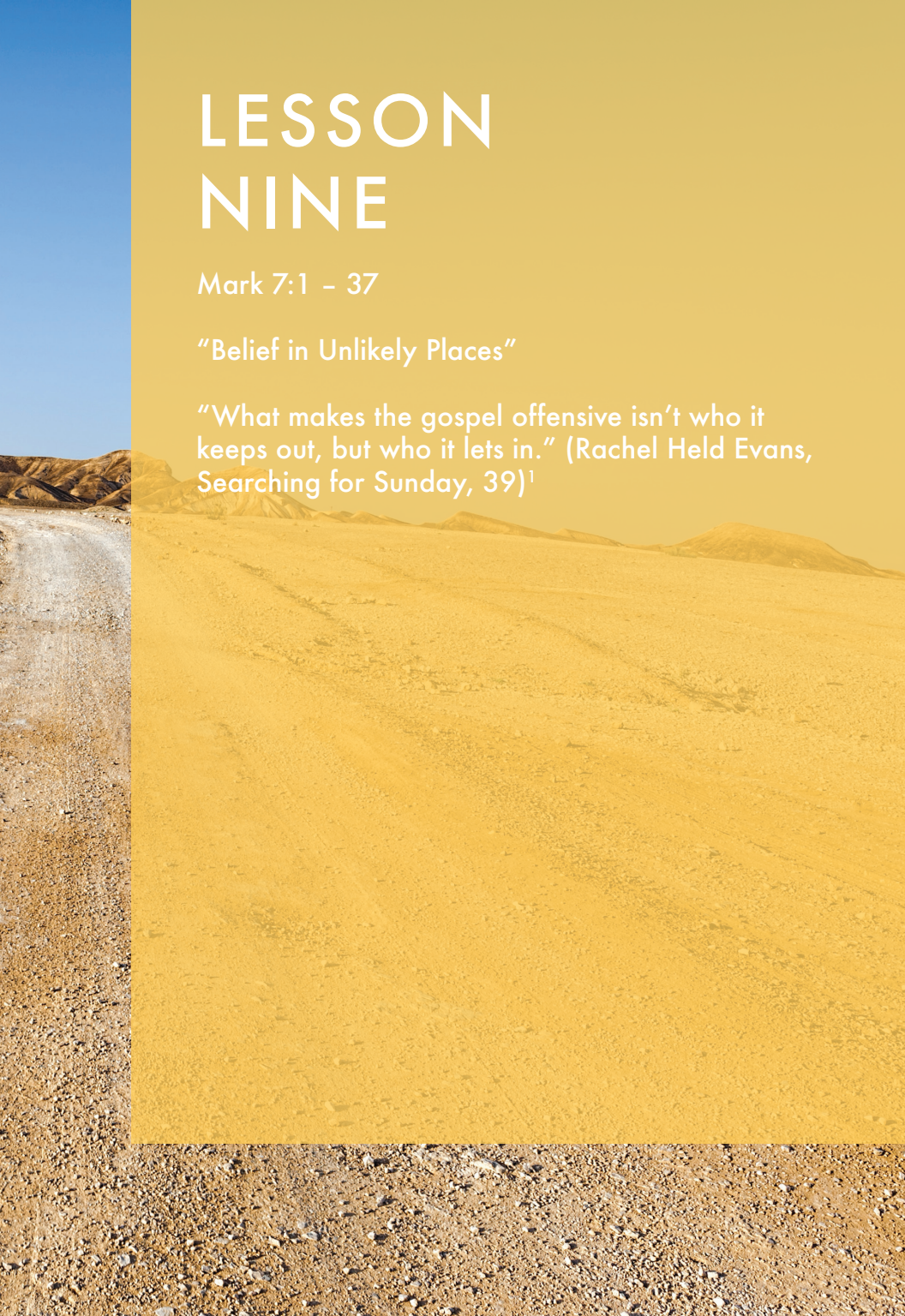


LESSON NINE

Mark 7:1 – 37

“Belief in Unlikely Places”

“What makes the gospel offensive isn’t who it keeps out, but who it lets in.” (Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, 39)¹



STARTER: Excerpt from Philip Yancey's What's So Amazing About Grace?

"After studying the various theories, I have come up with an all encompassing principle that, I believe, expresses the essence of the Old Testament laws on uncleanness: No Oddballs Allowed ...

Jesus appeared on earth, just as Palestine was experiencing a religious revival. The Pharisees, for example, spelled out precise rules for staying clean: never enter the home of a Gentile, never dine with sinners, perform no work on the Sabbath, wash your hands seven times before eating. Thus when rumors spread that Jesus could be the long awaited Messiah, pious Jews were more scandalized than galvanized. Had he not touched unclean persons, such as those suffering from leprosy? Had he not let a woman of ill repute wash his feet with her hair? He dined with tax collectors - one even joined his inner circle of the Twelve - and was notoriously lax about the rules of ritual cleanness and Sabbath observance ... Jesus' approach to 'unclean' people dismayed his countrymen and, in the end, helped to get him crucified. In essence, Jesus canceled the cherished principle of the Old Testament, No Oddballs Allowed, replacing it with a new rule of grace: 'We're all oddballs, but God loves us anyhow.'

In his social contacts as well, Jesus overturned Jewish categories of 'clean' and 'unclean.' Luke 8, for example, records three incidents in quick succession that, taken together, must have confirmed the Pharisees' misgiving about Jesus. First, Jesus sails into a region populated by Gentiles, healing a naked madman and commissions him as a missionary to his hometown. Next we see Jesus touched by a woman with a twelve-year hemorrhage, a 'female problem' that has disqualified her from worship and no doubt caused her much shame. (The Pharisees taught that such illnesses came about because of a person's sin; Jesus directly contradicted them.) From there Jesus proceeds to the home of a synagogue ruler whose daughter has just died. Already 'unclean' from the Gentile madman and hemorrhaging woman, Jesus enters the inner room and touches the corpse.

Levitical laws guarded against contagion: contact with a sick person, a Gentile, a corpse, certain kinds of animals, or even mildew and mold would contaminate a person. Jesus reversed the process: rather than becoming contaminated, he made the other person whole. The naked madman did not pollute Jesus; he got healed. The pitiful woman with the flow of blood did not shame Jesus and make him unclean; she went away whole. The twelve-year-old dead girl did not contaminate Jesus; she was resurrected.

I sense in Jesus' approach a fulfillment, not an abolition, of the Old Testament laws. God had 'hallowed' creation by separating the sacred from the profane, the clean from the unclean. Jesus did not cancel out the hallowing principle, rather he changed its source.

We ourselves can be agents of God's holiness, for God now dwells within us. In the midst of an unclean world we can stride, as Jesus did, seeking ways to be a source of holiness. The sick and the maimed are for us not hot spots of contamination but potential reservoirs of God's mercy. We are called upon to extend that mercy, to be conveyers of grace, not avoiders of contagion. Like Jesus, we can help make the 'unclean' clean."²

Warm Up Questions

1. What is the weirdest food you have ever eaten?
Would you try it again?
2. What are "unclean" (unacceptable) foods to our society?
Who are "unclean" (unacceptable) people in our society?

Understanding the Text

Step one: Observation - What do we see?

Every time we read the Bible, the first thing we should ask is, "What do we see?" Read the text aloud during your group. Place yourself into the original audience and ask questions (who, what, where, when, how).

Read Mark 7:1 – 37 aloud.

Share observations together. What stands out? What do you notice?

Step two: Interpretation - What does it mean?

The goal is to understand the original author's intended meaning to the original audience. This requires research and discussion on the original readers' cultural and historical background. This is where it is beneficial to dig into a commentary or Bible dictionary, or to listen to a sermon. We are careful NOT to begin our study by asking, "What does this passage mean to me?" That question is application, not interpretation. There is only one meaning of the text – the author's intended meaning. Until we understand the meaning of the text we will not apply the text correctly to our lives.

Background

Cleanliness and Uncleanliness

Chapter 7 opens with yet another controversy between the Pharisees and religious leaders and Jesus and his disciples. The Pharisees notice that Jesus' disciples are not following the Jewish ritual purity practice of proper handwashing, and challenge them on this point (7:1-5).³ Yet what appears initially to be a dispute over proper handwashing is actually reflective of a much deeper disagreement between Jesus and the Pharisees. Jesus accuses the Pharisees: "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions" (7:8).

The ritual washings the Pharisees refer to are not prescribed in Old Testament (Torah) law, but in the Jewish oral tradition. This oral tradition, the Mishnah, was formulated by Jews after the reception of the Old Testament law from God, and outlines in precise detail how to live out Torah law. Over time, following the oral tradition came to be an integral part of Jewish culture, even a distinctive of Jews from the Gentiles. The heightened importance of this human-created oral tradition put it on par with the God-given Old Testament law. It is this distortion of priorities which Jesus challenges.⁴

Jesus provides a concrete example of how the Pharisees implement this precedence of oral tradition over Torah law through the example of Corban, a vow that comes not from Old Testament law but from the oral tradition. Corban is "a gift devoted to God" (7:11). Devoting and vowing a portion of one's wealth to God meant this portion was reserved exclusively for God and not available for anyone else, including one's parents. Even in the event that one's parents encountered great need, the binding nature of this vow prevented the wealth from being dispersed to the needy parents. By strictly following this human tradition of Corban, children were then violating the 5th Commandment to honor one's father and mother (Exod. 20:12) and were, in essence, acting immorally towards their parents. In this way, human tradition was taking precedence over the law given by God and having damaging repercussions.⁵

Jesus continues the discussion of proper washing, now within the framework of redefining uncleanliness and cleanliness.

Uncleanliness does not result from external behaviors, Jesus asserts, but from the state of one's heart. In contrast to the Pharisees' belief that uncleanliness results from violating law and tradition, Jesus teaches that the heart is the origin of uncleanliness. Therefore purity comes not by participating in certain behaviors, but from a changed heart. And these internal attitudes of the heart have external implications. Dawn Wilhelm writes that "holiness is a matter of individual attitudes and actions that have profoundly social consequences."⁷ All of the vices Jesus lists in 7:21-22 have social ramifications. What comes from people's hearts affects their relationships with others and with God.

The Syrophenician Woman

Jesus then travels to "the vicinity of Tyre," (7:24), a Gentile territory. This would have been profoundly unexpected and strange for Jesus, the Messiah, to enter Gentile territory, as the Jewish concept of Messiah did not include anything to do with Gentiles.

Yet in this unlikely location Jesus encounters a woman of great faith. Jesus' attempts to conceal his presence are foiled when a Syrophenician woman finds him, desperate for Jesus' healing of her demon-possessed daughter (7:24-26). The fact that she was a woman, a (unclean) Gentile, in a (unclean) Gentile territory with a (unclean) demon-possessed daughter made her an especially unlikely candidate for interaction with and healing from Jesus. Yet she approaches Jesus with profound respect, falling at his feet, pleading for her daughter.⁸

Jesus' initial response to the woman seems odd and nearly harsh: "First let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs'" (7:27). Here, Jesus equates the Jews to the children who are eating at the table and the Gentiles to the dogs waiting for scraps of food.

Salvation will come first and primarily to the Jews, Jesus tells the woman, not first to the Gentiles, who are derogatorily compared with dogs.

Because the woman is a Gentile, not part of the group which Jesus gives priority, he does not immediately heal the woman's daughter. Perhaps Jesus also waits to heal the woman's daughter until she shows a confession of faith. Throughout Mark, miraculous healings are accompanied by faith. Mark Strauss writes that "Jesus is being intentionally provocative, seeking to draw out a response of persistent faith from the woman. He wants her to claim what is rightfully hers — the opportunity to participate in the eschatological salvation available through Jesus the Messiah. While Jesus 'loses' the debate, he is delighted to do so, since his purpose is to provoke even greater faith."⁹

Jesus' response has the intended reaction. While maintaining "intense respect" for Jesus, the woman counters his response and demonstrates her faith.¹⁰ "Yes, Lord," she replied, "but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (7:28). The woman's response is both a statement of great humility and of trust in the abundance of God's mercy. It is significant that the woman acknowledges the primacy of Israel in God's plan of salvation. Her response does not deny that the children (Jews) eat first or eat the better food. She does not challenge or reject the way that God has chosen to reveal himself, first to the Jews and then the Gentiles, but "accepts the priority of [Jesus'] mission to the people of Israel."¹¹

Yet, while still acknowledging this, she also believes in the abundance of God's mercy and his kingdom that can and should include more than just the children at the table: "the priority of Israel in Jesus' mission does not imply the exclusion of the Gentiles."¹² The woman trusts that God's mercy is so generous and overflowing that it can and will extend to her, an outsider.

Jesus, moved by this confident and witty profession of faith, heals the woman's daughter. She has the last word in this argument. She spars with Jesus and wins, the "only person in Scripture" to do this.¹³ How ironic that such a significant declaration of faith comes from the least likely of candidates: a Gentile woman.

The woman's faith is even more profound against the contrast of the men (both the Pharisees and disciples) from the section prior who, despite their closeness to Jesus both in relationship and proximity, still lack understanding (7:17-19). Whereas the Pharisees and even the disciples at times are consumed with following the law and are blind to what is immediately before them – Jesus Christ, the Messiah – this Gentile woman clearly sees Jesus before her and responds in faith. The kingdom of God continues to come and advance in the least likely of places.¹⁴

Deaf and Mute Man

Jesus continues on and is met with a man who can neither hear nor speak. Taking the man aside, showing that Jesus saw this man "not simply a problem but a unique individual," Jesus heals him by touching the man's tongue, and putting his spit in the man's ears.¹⁵

At that time it was common to believe that saliva had "medicinal and magical properties."¹⁶ This man is not healed due to Jesus' magical spit, however. Perhaps Jesus chose to heal this way, by putting his fingers in the man's ears and touching his tongue, so that the man, who was deaf and mute, could sense and feel Jesus entering into his world to bring healing. Method aside, it was Jesus' authoritative declaration which brought healing.¹⁷

Those present at the miraculous healing "were overwhelmed with amazement" (7:37). However, once again, Jesus commands the people to refrain from talking about this miracle, as he likely wants to define his identity of Messiah primarily through the lens of his death and resurrection, an event yet to come. But again this command is not heeded and Jesus' reputation as healer and miracle worker continues to spread.¹⁸

Group Questions

1. Why were the Pharisees upset with Jesus' disciples?

2. For what is Jesus rebuking the religious leaders (specifically Mark 7:6 – 13)? Why does Jesus react so strongly towards them?

3. How does Jesus define "unclean" in this chapter? What are the things that make people unclean?

4. What do we learn about Jesus from this chapter? Who does Jesus think he is that he audaciously says, "Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them" (7:15-16)?

5. What is the significance of the woman in 7:24-30 being Greek? Why is she an unusual recipient of Jesus' healing? What does the woman ask Jesus for? Why does Jesus respond the way he does to the woman? How does the woman interact with Jesus? For what is she commended? What is so incredible about the answer the woman gives to Jesus?

6. How does the story of the woman (7:24-30) relate to the previous story with Pharisees (7:1-23)?

7. Why does Jesus heal the deaf and mute man in such a strange way?

Step three: Application – How does it work?

It is the person who not only knows God's Word, but also obeys His Word that truly loves Him (John 14:21). Application of God's Word to our lives involves identifying the specific instructions from the text and making a plan to obey them. The questions below will identify some specific items to consider for your life.

1. In this chapter, Jesus cautions about prioritizing tradition over God himself. What are some of Waterstone's traditions? How do we avoid elevating traditions over the heart of God?

2. In 7:20-23, Jesus says that behavior results from a particular heart posture. What comes out of your heart? What does that reveal about you?

3. How does Jesus' pursuit of the "outsiders" shape or frame the way you see the kingdom of God? What sorts of people were included in God's kingdom in this section? How are we pursuing these same "kingdom values" as a church?

Group Prayer

The Syrophenician woman engaged in open, honest dialogue with Jesus. Spend some time (about 5-10 minutes, or longer) in your group, each individually writing out a prayer to God. You can engage this in silence or with music in the background. Tell him what you are thinking and feeling.

What are you anxious about? For what are you overwhelmed with gratitude? "Spar" with God if you have to.

Group leaders: when ready, close the group in this prayer from Psalm 51 (NLT), read together:

10 Create in me a clean heart, O God.
Renew a loyal spirit within me.

- 11 Do not banish me from your presence,
and don't take your Holy Spirit from me.
- 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and make me willing to obey you.

Additional Resources

See the Bible Project's short video, "Holiness," for an excellent overview of the idea of cleanliness and uncleanness throughout Scripture: <https://youtu.be/l9vn5UvHvM>.

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- 1 Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2015), 39.
- 2 Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 150-155.
- 3 The fact that Mark provides a parenthetical here in vs.3-4 about the nature of ritual washing supports the idea that his audience was likely non-Jewish, and probably Gentile (Bock, *Mark*, 221).
- 4 Edwards offers an excellent overview of the nature of ritual cleanliness and its history (*The Gospel According to Mark*, 205-208); Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 122.
- 5 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 211; Bock, *Mark*, 223; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 251.
- 6 Bock, *Mark*, 226. By declaring that nothing outside a person can make them unclean, Jesus is claiming authority over the Torah (7:15; 18-19).
- 7 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 125; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 258; 254-255; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 214.
- 8 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 217-218; Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 128.
- 9 Strauss, *Mark*, 313; Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 129; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 262.
- 10 Bock, *Mark*, 228.
- 11 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 129; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 221.
- 12 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 220; "The story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman is of great theological significance for Mark. This Gentile woman is not offered a separate revelation of God or a righteousness apart from Israel. She fully accepts the authenticity and uniqueness of God's revelation to Israel. So fully does she appreciate that revelation that she trusts its superabundance to spill over and include her people and others like her. This reminded Mark's readers, as it does us today, that salvation is offered to the world, both to Jews and to estranged Gentiles like this woman, through Jesus who fulfills God's revelation to Israel (Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 222).
- 13 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 128. Lane beautifully describes the interaction between Jesus and the woman, writing that "the irresistible confidence of the woman in Jesus delighted him" (*The Gospel According to Mark*, 263).
- 14 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 216; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 259; Bock, *Mark*, 229.
- 15 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 225.
- 16 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 132.
- 17 Bock writes, "He can both see and feel Jesus act, even though he cannot hear what Jesus says" (*Mark*, 231); Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 266-267; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 225-226.
- 18 See Introduction for more on Jesus' silence surrounding his identity.



LESSON TEN

Mark 8:1 – 30

“Who do you say that I am?”

“On the day after Jesus’ death, it looked as if whatever small mark he left on the world would rapidly disappear. Instead, his impact on human history has been unparalleled. After his disappearance from earth, the days of his unusual influence began ... Rightly seen, this effect on past and current history will cause any thoughtful person - apart from their religious ideas about Christianity - to ask, ‘Who was this man?’”
(John Ortberg, *Who Is This Man?*)¹

STARTER: Excerpt from Kingdom Come

"I remember watching the old Errol Flynn version of Robin Hood. Good King Richard is off fighting the war, so the land is under the rule of wicked Prince John. Corruption and injustice are rampant. The cries of the poor and oppressed are unheeded by Prince John and his officials. So Robin and his merry men spend their time robbing from the rich and giving to the poor. One day, an entourage of men come traveling through Sherwood Forest. Robin and his men swoop down on the traveling party and begin to relieve them of their worldly goods. The man who seems to be leading the party steps forward and begins to pull off his outer cloak and hood. Behold, atop his head is a crown, and his chest is emblazoned with the coat of arms of King Richard! Good King Richard has returned! Robin and his men quickly fall to their knees. 'Sire, we did not know!' . . .

This story hinges on the identity of the man leading the party and the authority that comes with his identity. Once Robin Hood and his merry men understand that they are attacking King Richard, who is the one with the authority to depose of the wicked Prince John, everything changes.²

Warm Up Questions

1. What hope would it have brought you, if you were with Robin Hood and his merry men, to encounter the return of King Richard?

2. Who has played the biggest role in your life in terms of shaping you to be the person you are today? Why?

Understanding the Text

Step one: Observation - What do we see?

Every time we read the Bible, the first thing we should ask is, "What do we see?" Read the text aloud during your group. Place yourself into the original audience and ask questions (who, what, where, when, how).

Read Mark 8:1 – 30 aloud.

Share observations together. What stands out? What do you notice?

Step two: Interpretation - What does it mean?

The goal is to understand the original author's intended meaning to the original audience. This requires research and discussion on the original readers' cultural and historical background. This is where it is beneficial to dig into a commentary or Bible dictionary, or to listen to a sermon. We are careful NOT to begin our study by asking, "What does this passage mean to me?" That question is application, not interpretation. There is only one meaning of the text – the author's intended meaning. Until we understand the meaning of the text we will not apply the text correctly to our lives.

Background

The first eight chapters of Mark introduces its readers to Jesus, a man who casts out demons, teaches the Scriptures with authority, stills raging storms with simple commands, brings little girls back to life, heals those who are sick, blind, mute, paralyzed and plagued with leprosy, feeds large crowds with meager provisions, banter with a Gentile woman, claims to forgive sins, teaches about a new kingdom, strolls across the water, hangs out with questionable company, and redefines Jewish ideas of Sabbath and cleanliness.

The entire book so far teems with the question: who is this man? What is implicit in Mark thus far is finally made explicit in chapter 8. The tension of the story resolves as Jesus asks this question of his disciples and they declare: "You are the Christ" (8:29). This is a question that each person must answer: who do you say that Jesus is?

Feeding of the 4,000

Chapter 8 opens with another crowd scene. Jesus has been teaching this crowd for three days, and now, in his compassion, he desires to feed them as well. Jesus cares deeply not only for their spiritual needs but also for their physical needs. Locating seven loaves of bread and a few fish, Jesus multiplies this meager amount into a feast for 4,000. There is a "superabundance" of food, with even seven large basketfuls left over (8:8).³

The similarities between this miraculous feeding story and the miraculous feeding story in Mark 6:32-44 are extensive, causing some to question whether the Mark 8 account is the Mark 6 story repeated. However, most evangelical scholars believe this story is a distinct event from the Mark 6 story. The disciples' disbelief and lack of understanding (8:4; 17-21) surrounding this event does not prove this is not the second time Jesus has miraculously multiplied food. The theme of the disciples' lack of understanding of Jesus is consistent throughout Mark, and it is not altogether surprising that their lack of understanding persists even to a scenario in which they have witnessed Jesus act miraculously before.⁴

The Pharisees Demand a Sign

After the miraculous feast, Jesus retreats from the crowd and, instead of finding solace, is confronted with the Pharisees who demand a sign. Because Jesus has been performing miracles during his entire ministry thus far, some of which the Pharisees were witness to, it is likely that here the Pharisees are asking of Jesus something more particular, perhaps asking “that he demonstrate the legitimacy of his actions.”⁵

It is possible the Pharisees still believe Jesus is acting with evil authority (3:22) and want him to prove the true source of his authority. This request, though, reflects the Pharisees’ hard hearts.

Instead of receiving the truth about who Jesus is with an open heart, “the Pharisees’ lack of faith renders them unable to see the reign of God already present among them.”⁶ Thus any miraculous healing - elements of this reign of God – will not convince these hard hearts. Jesus knows that miracles will not convince the Pharisees to faith or soften their hearts, so refuses their requests and leaves.

Disciples, Bread, and Disbelief

The Pharisees are not the only ones with hard hearts, however. The disciples, despite the significant amount of time they have spent with Jesus thus far, still do not yet fully understand who Jesus is or the nature of his earthy mission. In this section, Jesus is exasperated with his disciples as they misinterpret Jesus’ statement about dangerous yeast of the Pharisees and Herod to be a comment about their lack of food preparation for their journey.⁷ Jesus rouses his disciples from their trivial conversation with five rapid-fire questions: ““Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don’t you remember?”” (8:17-18). Using this as a teaching moment, Jesus exposes the disciples’ persistent lack of understanding.⁸ Though the disciples had witnessed amazing things, their lack of recognition of the significance of these events and what they meant about who Jesus is put them in danger of being hard-hearted.

Close association and familiarity with Jesus does not protect them against hardness of heart towards Jesus. In fact, familiarity with Jesus can even “inoculate” against recognizing the radical nature of the person and work of Jesus Christ and being receptive in faith, making them “every bit as susceptible to hardness of heart as the religious and political leaders who are threatened by Jesus’ power and authority.”⁹

Healing of the Blind Man

Jesus healing the blind man at Bethsaida is a unique healing account for several reasons. First, this is the only healing story where Jesus asks the person he’s healing the status of his condition. After Jesus touches the man for the first time, he asks him, “Do you see anything?” (8:23). This is atypical of Jesus’ interactions with other sick individuals. Secondly, Jesus does not heal the blind man immediately, but through a progression of Jesus twice laying his hands on the man, another irregular behavior on Jesus’ part. This does not indicate that Jesus is losing his power or is incapable of returning sight to a blind man (in fact, he has performed much more difficult miracles), but perhaps the uniqueness of this account symbolically shows the disciples’ own journey from blindness to a clearer vision of who Jesus is.¹⁰

Many commentators suggest that Mark placed this story about the blind man seeing immediately before the disciples’ confession of Jesus Christ (8:27-30) as a symbol of the disciples’ progression from their blindness towards seeing clearly who Jesus is. Just as the blind man traveled on a continuum from being blind, to seeing poorly, to seeing clearly, so the disciples experience a “gradual dawning of understanding” as they come to see clearly who Jesus is.¹¹

While some aspects of this healing account are unique, the closing of the story is quite familiar. Again, as in many other of Jesus’ miraculous demonstrations in Mark, Jesus commands silence surrounding the miracle just performed. Dawn Wilhelm writes that Jesus “is not eager for people to see the immediate results of the blind man’s healing without knowing more of what it means to follow the one who healed him.”¹²

Jesus knows that stories of his miraculous healings taken in isolation from the reality of who he is and the nature of true discipleship will lead to false conclusions. So, yet again, he calls for silence.

“You are the Christ!”

The opening verse of Mark sets the stage for who Jesus is (1:1). The next eight chapters, however, depict humans confused, frustrated, frightened, and amazed as they attempt to figure out who Jesus is. Jesus’ behavior and teaching gives glimpses of who he is and the nature of his kingdom, but women and men continue to remain largely perplexed about Jesus. The tension builds throughout Mark as more and more wrestle with this question, progressing to a climax in this section, 8:27-30. Resolution comes with Peter’s famous declaration that Jesus is the Christ. After eight long chapters of journeying with Jesus, the disciples finally start to see who Jesus is.

As Jesus and his disciples continue on their way, Jesus questions them about the rumors surrounding his identity. “Who do people say I am?”, Jesus asks (8:27). Knowing that it is easier and safer to answer questions on behalf of others, Jesus starts with this question. A prophet was a popular supposition, the disciples reported, as was John the Baptist or Elijah (8:28). Jesus then moves to a more direct question, “But what about you? . . . Who do you say I am?” (8:29), urging them past safe replies to “risk a personal confession” about who Jesus is.¹³ Then Peter, who speaks “on behalf of the twelve,” answers definitively and significantly: “You are the Christ” (8:29).¹⁴ This is a momentous declaration. It shows not only that the disciples believe Jesus is special, unique from the prophets, but it also shows that the disciples are making an active choice to see Jesus for who he is and to follow him.

Though recognizing Jesus as prophet was a popular conception at the time, the disciples realize that he is not just a prophet, but someone greater. Yet because the prophets in Judaism were well-regarded and honored, the common association of Jesus with the prophets shows that much of the public eye regarded him quite favorably.

So while many did not view Jesus derogatorily, seeing him merely as a prophet was also not enough: "To say that Jesus is like Elijah, John the Baptist, or a great prophet – or, as we so often he is the greatest teacher or moral example who ever lived – may seem like an honor and compliment, but it is ultimately to deny his uniqueness and to press him into the service of old categories."¹⁵ For the disciples to declare that Jesus was the Christ was a risky confession. Yet they also knew this title accurately reflected Jesus' identity. To believe that Jesus was a prophet, or in today's terms, to believe that he is a good teacher and moral leader, is to maintain a safe, but wrong, understanding of Jesus. Jesus comes teaching not merely how to live a good life, but completely flips the world upside down in bringing salvation and wholeness to every facet of people's lives and societies. Following this type of Savior demands radical confession and sacrifice. Anything less denies the reality of who Jesus is.

While the disciples accurately identify Jesus as the Christ, this title is not without risks. The title "Christ" is also translated "Messiah," a title which "bore significant political expectation."¹⁶ Jews believed the Messiah would deliver the nation of Israel from her oppressors (at that time, Rome) and restore Israel to freedom and autonomy. However, Jesus' mission as Messiah was far from including anything close to a political coup d'état. Though he was the Messiah, Jesus' messiahship differed drastically from any traditional understandings of Messiah. By using this title, he risked perpetuating deep confusion and frustration about his identity among the Jews as he would inevitably fail to meet Jewish political expectations of the Messiah. So once again, Jesus commands the disciples to remain silent about his identity (8:30).¹⁷

Even for the disciples to use this title involves liability. The disciples certainly see Jesus more clearly at this point than they have so far in Mark, but they still do not fully understand who he is (just like the blind man from 8:22-26, the disciples' clear sight comes through a process).

The disciples are not immune from the temptation to remake Jesus in their own image and heap political expectations on Jesus (which they do shortly after this section, as the thought of a suffering and dying Messiah is totally and completely incongruent with who they understand Jesus the Messiah to be [8:31-33]¹⁸). William Lane concludes, "The disciples as yet had no way of knowing what conception Jesus had of his messianic vocation and it was imperative that they should not be allowed to fill the content of the term with their own dreams."¹⁹

Up until this point the disciples have remained largely passive, safe in the realm of entertaining questions and doubt and fear about Jesus. Yet here "the disciples . . . move from the status of passive recipients to active participants."²⁰ Mark has shown throughout his Gospel that following Jesus involves active faith and active participation in his kingdom and that no encounter with Jesus leaves a person unchanged. Some, like the Pharisees, engage with the reality of Jesus and consistently choose to reject and deny the truth right in front of them. Some, like the demon possessed man (5:1-20), the bleeding woman (5:21-34), the Syrophenician woman (7:24-30) and others, encounter Jesus and receive him in faith. Here the disciples make an active declaration of belief in Jesus Christ, modeling once again the active decision that follows an encounter with Jesus.

"Who do you say that I am?" is a question that demands an answer for each person who encounters Jesus. Responding as the Pharisees did, in antagonism towards Jesus or ignoring him and becoming apathetic to his radical nature and kingdom, is an option. Or, choosing to embrace Jesus in faith and pursue a life of discipleship is another alternative. James Edwards summarizes well: "At some point the colleagues of Jesus – and everyone who has heard his name – must look deep within Jesus and deep within themselves and risk a decision that will entail either a commitment to or a severance from the identity and mission of this Jesus."²¹ Encountering the reality of who Jesus is demands a decision. The only question that remains is what that decision will be.

Group Questions

1. 8:1-30 is a series of stories where the disciples just do not understand who Jesus is until the very end. What is it that they do not understand? What do they finally understand at the end of the section? Why is this so momentous?

2. Why does Jesus adamantly refuse to give the Pharisees a sign? What other proof might Jesus give them to prove he's the Messiah? Would those 'other proofs' actually change their minds about Jesus?

3. What are the five questions Jesus asks the disciples in 8:17-18? What is the basis of his frustration with the disciples? What is Jesus' goal in asking those questions?

4. How does the healing of the blind man show that the disciples are starting to see more clearly?

5. Who does Peter and the disciples declare Jesus to be? Who do they identify that he is not?

6. Why does Jesus tell his disciples to not tell anyone about his true identity as Messiah?

Step three: Application - How does it work?

It is the person who not only knows God's Word, but also obeys His Word that truly loves Him (John 14:21). Application of God's Word to our lives involves identifying the specific instructions from the text and making a plan to obey them. The questions below will identify some specific items to consider for your life.

1. In 8:18-21, Jesus encourages his disciples to remember what he has done in the past as the basis for their faith and understanding in him. How do you put into practice active remembrance of what God has done for you? How does or should Waterstone actively remember God's merciful actions of provision and goodness? How can we help encourage one another to actively remember what God has done (even during these past 10 weeks studying Mark)?

2. "Who do you say that I am?" is a critical question that each person who has encountered Jesus answers in some way. Who does our culture say Jesus is? Who does our church say Jesus is?

3. Commentator James Edwards writes, "At some point the colleagues of Jesus – and everyone who has heard his name – must look deep within Jesus and deep within themselves and risk a decision that will entail either a commitment to or a severance from the identity and mission of this Jesus."²² At the beginning of this series, who did you understand Jesus to be? Who do you understand Jesus to be after studying Mark 1-8:30? Has that understanding changed? Why or why not? At this time, where would you place yourself along a spectrum of disbelief in Jesus, partial belief, and full belief and trust in Jesus?

Group Prayer

Spend some time praying for each other in your small group, those attending Waterstone, those in the Denver community, and throughout the world, that they would know deeply who Jesus is, respond in faith and trust to him, and radically follow Jesus. Close with this prayer of thanksgiving, taken from the The Book of Common Prayer.

(Group members take turns reading each non-bolded line; read together the bolded sections).

Let us give thanks to God our Father for all his gifts so freely bestowed upon us.

For the beauty and wonder of your creation, in earth and sky and sea,

We thank you, Lord.

For all that is gracious in the lives of men and women, revealing the image of Christ,

We thank you, Lord.

For our daily food and drink, our homes and families, and our friends,

We thank you, Lord.

For minds to think, and hearts to love, and hands to serve,

We thank you, Lord.

For health and strength to work, and leisure to rest and play,

We thank you, Lord.

For the brave and courageous, who are patient in suffering and faithful in adversity,

We thank you, Lord.

For all valiant seekers after truth, liberty, and justice,

We thank you, Lord.

For the communion of saints, in all times and places,

We thank you, Lord.

Above all, we thank you for your Son Jesus Christ; for the truth of his Word and the example of his life; for his steadfast obedience, by which he overcame temptation; for his dying, through which he overcame death; and for his rising to life again, in which we are raised to the life of your kingdom,

To him be praise and glory, with you, O Father, and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever. Amen.²³

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- 1 John Ortberg, *Who is This Man? The Unpredictable Impact of the Inescapable Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 11.
 - 2 Allen Mitsuo Wakabayashi, *Kingdom Come: How Jesus Wants to Change the World* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2003), 32.
 - 3 Bock, *Mark*, 234; 233; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 272-274; Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 136. Scholars are undecided about where exactly this miracle took place, and it's also unclear the exact make-up of the crowd, although many believe there was a mixture of Jews and Gentiles present.
 - 4 Stein, *Mark*, 364-365; Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 136; Bock, *Mark*, 233. Lane also points out that the fact that Jesus refers to two separate incidents of miraculous feeding (8:19-20) points to this conclusion as well (*The Gospel According to Mark*, 272).
 - 5 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 277; 278.
 - 6 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 137.
 - 7 The metaphor of yeast is often a negative metaphor, seen as something pernicious which can have extensive ramifications, as yeast is kneaded into bread, affecting the entire loaf (see 1 Cor. 6:6-8 and Gal. 5:9) (Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 238; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 280; Bock, *Mark*, 236; Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 138).
 - 8 Stein writes that "the questions of Jesus are furthermore not primarily intended to condemn but to enlighten and teach" (*Mark*, 384).
 - 9 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 239; Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 139.
 - 10 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 285; Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 146.
 - 11 Bock, *Mark*, 240; 238-240; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 244; Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 147.
- It is important to note that not all commentators support this symbolic interpretation of this healing miracle. Stein argues that miracle accounts in Mark serve the purpose of illuminating who Jesus is. Taking a symbolic interpretation of the healing of this blind man does not fit this model. He asserts that this miracle is rather a contrast of the disciples' blindness to the blind man seeing (*Stein, Mark*, 389; 394).
- 12 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 147.
 - 13 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 247.
 - 14 Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, 151.
 - 15 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 247-248.
 - 16 Bock, *Mark*, 242.
 - 17 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 291.
 - 18 Bock adds, "their view of who the Messiah is will need reshaping" (*Mark*, 242).
 - 19 Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 292.
 - 20 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 248.
 - 21 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 248.
 - 22 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 248.
 - 23 The Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation and The Seabury Press, 1977), 836-837.

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