

MeadowBrook Church | Fall 2021

lifeGROUP

Life together for the Kingdom of God



THE GOSPEL OF MARK

FOLLOWING THE GOOD SHEPHERD, PART ONE



MeadowBrook
CHURCH

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THE GOSPEL OF MARK

FOLLOWING THE GOOD SHEPHERD, PART ONE

In his gospel account, Mark portrays Jesus the Good Shepherd in action. Swiftly moving through the earthly ministry of Christ, we see the Son of God made flesh bear with his faltering disciples in grace and humility. Christ is the authoritative one, yet he came to serve. He is the Son of God, yet he suffered as the Son of Man. He is altogether holy, yet he called sinners unto himself and patiently walked with them until they finally understood the reality of who he was and what he came to do.

He was and is the Good Shepherd who laid his life down for his sheep and took it up again that his followers might experience the abundance of life with him.

My prayer for this study is that you would come to know Jesus more intimately. In doing so, my hope is that you might better reflect his character and rejoice in his presence.



Hunter Hindsman

Life Group Minister

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*All lessons are edited for content and compiled by Hunter Hindsman

Introduction to Mark

September 05, 2021

Author: John Mark, with strong ties to Peter

Mark's Audience:

It is likely that Mark's audience is Gentiles situated in Rome (Andreas Köstenberger). Many reasons support this idea, namely that:

- He translated Aramaic terms and explained the intricacies of Jewish laws and customs, which would have been unnecessary for a Jewish audience (see Mark 15:22 & 7:3-5).
- Mark's connection to Peter traditionally ties its context to Rome.
- Mark specifically highlights the conversion of the Roman Centurion, which potentially suggests an evangelistic purpose to Gentiles. The gospel was for all—even Roman soldiers.
- Mark strongly emphasizes the authority of Jesus as the Son of God, which counters the authority Caesar claimed for himself, something a Jewish audience would not have recognized.

Mark's Theme:

“The ultimate purpose and theme of Mark is to present and defend Jesus’ universal call to discipleship.” ESV Study Bible

“The primary purpose of Mark’s high-speed narrative is to portray Jesus as the mighty Messiah and Son of God... [whose] role as Messiah is to suffer and die.” Mark Strauss

“The preeminent theological theme in Mark’s gospel is that Jesus is the miracle-working, authoritative Son of God.” Köstenberger

The gospel of Mark presents Jesus of Nazareth as the authoritative Son of God, the king of the Kingdom of God, whose path to glory was through freely submitting to the humiliation of the cross—marking the path for all who would follow him.

Organization and Narrative Features:

The first half of Mark demonstrates Jesus as the authoritative Son of God, while the second half demonstrates him as the suffering Son of Man. Mark is fast-paced (notice how many times he uses the word “immediately”), but his stories are often longer and include more detail than parallel accounts.

Also, when reporting narratives, Mark often uses repetition, particularly in sets of three, to make his point as well as “sandwiching one event between the beginning and end of another. The two events are related to the same theme and serve to interpret one another” (Strauss).

On Reading the Gospels

Before we discuss how to read the gospel of Mark well, let's define some terms. To read the gospel of Mark vertically means to read only Mark's story without giving any attention to the other gospels. To read horizontally means to compare and contrast Mark's account with other gospels. To read harmoniously seeks to blend the narratives together into a single narrative. Now that we understand these terms, let's ask the question: how should we study the gospels?

First, I argue that the harmonious reading should be avoided. While it may be helpful to some degree, the harmonious reading divorces the content of the gospel from the intent of the author and the context in which it was written. For example, Mark might include a narrative that Matthew includes to make an entirely different point than Matthew is seeking to make. To harmoniously read the gospels then would miss the point of Mark (and Matthew), the specific gospel we are seeking to study.

So, how should we read them? I believe the best way to read the gospels is to read them vertically, informed by a horizontal reading. What I mean is that we examine how Mark uniquely presents the narrative and person of Jesus Christ. Then we look at other accounts in order that we might better appreciate the uniqueness of Mark's account, not to come to some harmonious narrative. In short, we want to teach and study Mark's perspective when we teach and study Mark, not Matthew's, Luke's, nor John's.

Secondly, we want to respect the genre of Scripture we are reading. Primarily, we are reading a gospel, meaning that we are reading a historical biography that is seeking to make a theological point. Gospels are not like biographies we read today. Mark is not concerned with a correct chronology or a detailed presentation of the entirety of the life of Jesus. He includes some details and narratives, while excluding others, to make a point. This does not mean that what he is writing is not historical. It is. These things happened. All it means is that his presentation of these factual details does not conform to the modern forms we have grown to expect when reading a biography. Additionally, we must respect the variety of genres within the gospel. Some aspects are didactic, meaning Jesus is teaching and that we receive it as instruction. Some sections are parables, some apocalyptic. Others are stories, meaning there are characters, settings, plots, etc. All of this should inform and direct the way we read, study, and interpret the Gospel of Mark.

Reading the gospels as stories:

JT Pennington's Ten Steps

1. Isolate the story.
2. Read it multiple times.
3. Identify the setting and the characters.
4. Observe the story.
5. Isolate the different scenes.
6. Analyze the narrative.
 - What's the tension?
 - What's the climactic event?
 - What's the resolution/outcome?
 - What's the following action/interpretation?
7. Place in context: immediate, book, and canonical
8. Summarize the narrative.
9. Articulate how God is revealed in Christ.
10. Apply to your life: What needs to be emulated? What needs to be avoided?

The Message of Mark

Jesus is the authoritative Son of God.

Mark's portrait of Jesus both highlights his full humanity and his full divinity. As the God-Man, the incarnate Son of God, he possesses all authority as Lord of Creation and the long anticipated King. To follow him is to submit to his Lordship. Read Mark Strauss's comments on Jesus' authority in Mark:

“Everything Jesus does, he does with authority. When he calls four fishermen to follow him—men immersed in lives, families, and livelihoods—they leave everything to follow him. Jesus also teaches with great authority and exercises authority over natural and supernatural enemies alike. He heals the sick, casts out demons, and raises the dead. He controls the forces of nature, calming the storm and feeding thousands with a few loaves and fishes. The purpose of these miracles is not to gain popularity but to demonstrate that he is acting and speaking with the authority of God alone. Most profound, Jesus claims prerogatives of God alone. He forgives sins, discerns the thoughts of his opponents, claims lordship over the Sabbath, and apparently overrules Old Testament dietary laws. [Mark] emphasizes this sense of authority by noting the awed reactions of those who encounter Jesus.”

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
(Mark 1:1 ESV)

And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” (Mark 15:39 ESV)

The Kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe in the Gospel.

Jesus as King is establishing his kingdom and invites others to enter through repentant faith in the gospel. (More on this next week).

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” (Mark 1:14-15 ESV)

As the Son of Man, Jesus is Isaiah’s Suffering Servant.

The irony of Mark’s portrait of Jesus as the authoritative Son of God is that he also presents him as the suffering servant. Three times Jesus foretells of his suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection, explicitly stating that he, “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.” Jesus possessed all authority, but he did not use that authority for personal gain and ease. He demonstrated that authority and fulfilled his purpose as the one who served others in his life and would suffer and die in the place of sinners.

But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. (Isaiah 53:5 ESV)

Disciples of Christ are to follow the same humble path their Lord did.

Jesus set the example, and he expected his disciples to follow in his footsteps. In multiple places, Jesus corrects his disciples and calls them to the higher path of humility and service.

⁴² And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ⁴³ But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. (Mark 10:42-44 ESV)

Major Takeaways

There are obviously many takeaways from the Gospel of Mark, but these three should be the ones to which we consistently draw our attention:

- 1. Submit all of yourself to the Son of God. Hold nothing back.***
- 2. Live for the Kingdom of God, which is both at hand and still to come. (Pursue justice and endure in hope).***
- 3. Embrace the humility of Christ.***

Reflection

How can you prepare your heart for this study of the Gospel of Mark?

What are you excited about studying?

Meet Your King

Mark 1:1-15 | September 12, 2021

In your preparation to go on vacation, when do you start packing? If you are married, does your spouse have the same routine?

Read Mark 1:1-15

What about the characters, the setting, the scenes, the narrative, etc. stand out to you?

Some of my favorite stories, either in film or novel, jump right into the action sequence of the narrative. The chapter opens, the reel starts to roll, and immediately you find yourself in the swirl of action, pulled into the lives of the characters.

The gospel of Mark begins in this way. Before you can even catch your breath, John's ministry has run its course. Jesus is already in his second year of ministry, having been baptized and tempted in the wilderness, proclaiming the good news of God's kingdom. You and I, as the reader, are thrust right into a swift current that carries us to the very end.

From the onset, however, Mark acclimates the reader with key aspects of the nature of Christ and his ministry. Three simple questions—what was John's purpose, who is Jesus, and what is his message—anchor us into the message of Mark regarding Jesus of Nazareth.

What was John's purpose?

Ultimately, John's purpose was to fade into the background as the Son burst into the foreground. Three images or types help picture the transition. The first type pictures the Roman highway builder who paved roads for the emperor, the second is the wilderness, and the third calls back to the Elijah/Elisha relationship. Like viewing an artistic masterpiece from different angles, each image emphasizes various hues and strokes that add to the richness of the entire picture. Read these commentators' insights into each image:

John made straight the way for the King.

“The highways of John's native land were winding, twisting affairs... The Romans, for whom Mark wrote, scoffed at such archaic trails. They built magnificent roads throughout their empire. Their great “interstates” ran dead straight, scorning all obstacles. Did a river or gorge stand in the way? Their engineers bridged it. Was a mountain astride the path? The Romans moved it or cut right through it. The emperor's business demanded haste. The straighter the road, the swifter his couriers could ride or his legions march.”
— John Phillips

John prepared the people for the second Exodus.

“The summons to be baptized in the Jordan meant that Israel must come once more to the wilderness. As Israel long ago had been separated from Egypt by a pilgrimage through the waters of the Red Sea, the nation is exhorted again to experience separation...”

the people are called to a second exodus in preparation for a new covenant with God. Both John’s call to repentance and his baptism are intelligible as aspects of the prophetic tradition which expected the final salvation to be unveiled in the wilderness.” William Lane

John passed the mantle to the one who would do greater ministry.

“Elijah and Elisha are types of the transition of leadership from John the Baptist to Jesus Christ. Elijah and John the Baptist announce judgment; call Israel to repentance and are followed by the common people; dress alike in their protests against materialism; confront an ambivalent king (Ahab and Herod) and a blood-thirsty queen; are rejected by authorities immediately after their victories; question God’s calling; and designate a greater successor. But now let’s really swim by comparing Elisha and the Lord Jesus. Both are designated by a prophet, whom the general populace recognized as a true prophet. Both receive the Spirit on the other side of the Jordan (2 Kings 2:7-15; John 1:28); are surrounded by more disciples than their predecessors; are itinerant miracle workers; give life in a land of death; cleanse lepers (2 Kings 5; Mark 1:40-45); heal the sick (2 Kings 4:34-35; Mark 8:22-25); defy gravity (2 Kings 6:6; Matt. 14:22-33); reverse death by raising dead sons and restoring them to their mothers (2 Kings 4: 1-7; Luke 7:11-17); help widows in desperate circumstances; are kinsman redeemers to save from slavery (2 Kings 4:1-7; Luke 4:19); feed the hungry (2 Kings 4:1-7; Mark 8:1-12); minister to the Gentiles (2 Kings 5:1-16); prepare (2 Kings 6:20-23) and sit at table with sinners (Luke 5:29); lead captives (2 Kings 6:18-20; Eph, 4:7-8); have a covetous disciple (Gehazi and Judas); end their lives in a life-giving tomb from which people flee (2 Kings 13:20-21; Mark 16:1-8).” – Bruce Waltke

As we look at John, what example is there for us to follow?

First, we should work hard to make straight the path for Christ’s gospel. Talk to people with patience in order to help them discard any and all boundaries that might prevent them from submitting to the good news of Jesus Christ. Second, point people to the ultimate Second Exodus where we will leave this temporary wilderness behind and enter into the promised New Jerusalem in the New Earth with our King. Lastly, let us not minister in our strength, but in the power of Christ who lives in us. The ministry we can do is worthless; however, the ministry, Christ can do through us is eternally worthy.

Pause and Discuss

Specifically, how are you confronted with John’s example, that is where are you needing to change in light of what we have read thus far?

Who is Jesus? The Christ, the Son of the Living God

In the dual account of Jesus' baptism and temptation, brief as they may be, these events pack a heavy one-two punch, for in these two stories we find the fulfillment of humanity as it was supposed to be and the eternal Son of God in the flesh. No greater reality could ever be known.

In the descent of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is publicly displayed to be the Christ, the Anointed One who would be the Deliverer and King of his people. Then, as he is driven into the wilderness by the Spirit, the garden temptation is recreated. Unlike Adam, who failed to exercise dominion over the serpent and his lies, Jesus exercises rightful dominion over the wild beasts and refuses to yield to Satan's temptation. The image of God in humanity is perfectly revealed in his sinless exercising of dominion. Jesus is the one with whom the Father is well pleased.

However, Jesus is not just any man. He is the beloved Son of God. While there was a specific point in time when the second person of the Trinity took on flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God has no beginning. He is co-equal, co-eternal with God through whom and for whom everything that was made was made.

As Peter would so powerfully confess later in this gospel, Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. He is the fullness of God made flesh and all that humanity was meant to be. He is our hope, our King, our salvation, our everything.

What is his message?

Jesus, being the Word of God, did not merely appear. He came on the scene with a message. His message is simple and can be broken down many different ways, but Mark broke it down simply in verse 15. Jesus' message then is the same today, and it is as such:

The time is fulfilled...

Everything in Creation and everything God had revealed comes to its head in the person of Jesus Christ. From the largest expansions in the cosmos to the innermost longings of a single soul, all finds its purpose and fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Every iota, every precept, every prophecy, every type, every sacrifice and office, every jot and tittle of God's Word moves one to Jesus. It all comes together in Christ.

The kingdom of God is at hand...

"Jesus' kingdom has to do with his reign in the lives of his people; it is a spiritual realm and not a political organization." – Warren Wiersbe

With the coming of the King came the coming of the Kingdom. Now, the kingdom was the topic of many prophetic utterances in the Old Testament. The Kingdom is the peaceful result of the Son of God reigning over his people. Ultimately, it finds its fulfillment in the new earth after Christ's millennial reign, but it is a present reality for all those in Christ today. What does this mean for us today? It means a lot of things, but let me offer these four implications:

- To be in Christ's kingdom means to live submitted to his reign. No longer are you the captain of your own soul, no longer is your belly your god, nor your heart your navigator. Christ and his Word is the authority over your life.
- To be in Christ's kingdom means all other allegiances are second. You are a kingdom citizen first, not an American, not a Republican not a Democrat, not a member of the AEA, not a _____. Christ comes before all political allegiances and fits nicely into no earthly "tribe."
- To be in Christ's kingdom means to promote his justice that results in peace. Christ's reign will be marked by perfect justice that results in perfect peace. We should pursue such justice for the oppressed and marginalized, be it for the unborn, ethnic minorities, immigrants, or those in poverty. We must concern ourselves with justice.
- To be in Christ's kingdom means to reflect the character of the King. Jesus came not to be served, but to serve. As citizens in his kingdom, we too must take up the servant's mantle and humbly lay our lives down in service to others.

Repent and believe in the gospel.

This is the central message to the world. One cannot be a citizen of his kingdom, united with him through faith, apart from this. Jesus, the eternal Son of God, took on full humanity for us and for our salvation, living the perfect life we are called to live but fail miserably at doing. He died in our stead for our sins, bearing the curse of death in our place, being laid in the tomb, but raised on the third day in victory. He is now ascended to be with his Father until the day he returns to judge the living and the dead. All those who turn from their sins and believe in Jesus and his work on their behalf, surrendering their lives to his Lordship will enjoy eternal life with him. Whereas all who reject him will be cast aside to eternal punishment.

The Trinity

We believe in One God, who exists in three distinct persons, co-equal and co-eternal.

The Father is God.

The Son is God.

The Spirit is God.

The Father is not the Son.

The Son is not the Spirit.

The Spirit is not the Father.

We worship God in Trinity and Trinity in unity.

Kent Hughes: The Baptism of the Holy Spirit

“[John] told them he had drenched them with water which was only external, but One would come who would drench them in the Holy Spirit, which was intrinsically internal. What a beautiful metaphor for the work of the Holy Spirit! When we are baptized with the Holy Spirit, he permeates every part of us... When he drenches your life with his, you are changed!”

Family Application

This week, on two separate occasions, take the time to read (1) Mark 1:9-11 and (2) Mark 1:14-15, and use them as teaching moments to ground your family in the person of Jesus Christ and his gospel message.

John Phillips: Time Jump

“Between verses 13 and 14, we must make room for a whole year. During this period, the Lord performed his first signs and miracles and gave some of his earliest teaching. He traveled, too, between Galilee and Judea. The miracles were performed mostly in Galilee, and the teaching was given primarily in Judea. This period has been called the ‘year of obscurity,’ and we would know little or nothing about it were not for the gospel of John.”

Fishers of Men

Mark 1:16-20 | September 19, 2021

In your own words, what does Jesus mean when he calls his disciples to be a fisher of men?

Read Mark 1:16-20

What about the characters, the setting, the scenes, the narrative, etc. stand out to you?

Jesus calls us to himself to make us fishers of men.

While walking the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus identifies a couple of brother fishermen, Simon and Andrew calls them to travel with him saying, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” What did he mean by that?

Oftentimes, this call of Christ is discussed strictly in terms of being “soul winners” or evangelists in that instead of catching fish, they will now “catch” men, i.e. be used by God to simply share the gospel and see people respond. While being a fisher of men is certainly not less than sharing the gospel with others, it is much, much more.

“There is much more to fishing than just catching fish. The same is true for catching men.”

Certainly, Jesus calls these men and us to share the good news of salvation by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. His desire then and now is that many would come to faith, and thus be saved from their sin and its eternal consequences. Christ desires the lost to know and possess eternal life with the God who created them for his glory (Isaiah 43:7). In fact, the main reason Jesus has enlisted these fishermen is so that they might join him in this "soul winning" ministry. However, truncating Jesus' call in Mark 1:17 to merely the event of evangelism disservices what Jesus is actually calling these men to be. Rather, this oversimplification produces ill-equipped men who wear their Columbia fishing shirt but in fact know nothing of catching real fish nor what to do if they actually caught one.

Why is that? If you are a fisherman, you know there is much more to fishing than simply catching fish. Depending on what type of fishing you are doing, you need to have the right gear. You must know the environment, the species of fish which you hope to catch, the times and seasons in which it is best to catch those fish, as well as knowledge of what type of bait would lure them in. If you are fishing with nets, as Peter and Andrew likely were, you need to know where to cast the net and which time is the right time, not to mention learning the proper techniques, how to maintain the equipment, how to clean the fish, how to recognize which fish are not good, etc. There is much more on which seasoned fishermen could teach us about catching fish, but I think we get the picture—there is more to fishing than just catching fish.

The same is true for catching men. Like those who make their living on fishing, Jesus was inviting them to a life of fishing for men—one that he would produce in them. Jesus was calling them to much more than an evangelism campaign; he was inviting them into a discipling relationship with himself as their teacher. These guys were to follow Jesus wherever he went as he proclaimed the good news of the Kingdom, and Jesus would train them in what it meant to follow him and how to lead and train others to follow him as well. He would make them fishers of men, which involves not only evangelizing the lost, but the entirety of the Christian life. The disciples preached the gospel, but they also grew in their love and devotion for the Lord and one another as they learned what it meant to serve God with humility. There was much more to their life and relationship with Jesus than simply going around and giving a Gospel presentation to anyone who would listen. Oftentimes, their "fishing" ministry began there, but it never ended there.

Resources for Living a Disciple's Life:

- "The Master Plan of Evangelism" by Robert Coleman
- "The Lost Art of Disciple-making" by LeRoy Eims
- "Christian Beliefs" by Wayne Grudem
- "Tell the Truth" by Brian Metzger
- "A Praying Life" by Paul Miller
- "Don't Waste Your Life" by John Piper
- "Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life" by Donald Whitney

The Life of the Disciple

So, what did these disciples' lives look like? Simply put, they spent time with Jesus and learned to love as he loved. They broke bread with Christ, enjoyed quality time with him, and learned from his teaching. They observed his life: his interactions with people, his love, his compassion, his concern for the poor and needy, his contentment, his faithfulness in the mundane, his trust in God, his boldness, his gentleness, his intentionality, his wisdom, his prayer life, his love for his Father—they observed it all. They also learned to minister. Jesus involved them in his ministry. They helped feed the hungry, cast out demons, and proclaim the gospel in the countryside. Ultimately, the earthly ministry of Christ to be carried out in the power of the Holy Spirit was given to them:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20 ESV)

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1:8 ESV)

We see this further lived out in the book of Acts and the rest of the New Testament. The disciples are making disciples, planting churches, and shepherding those churches to the glory of God and the upbuilding of the body of Christ. They lived out the all-encompassing life of a disciple of Jesus Christ. They loved God, they loved his people, they loved their neighbor, and they made the gospel known, discipling those who received it in good doctrine as they warned of those who sought to destroy the treasure they had found in Christ. They were equipped with the knowledge, gear, and skills of the trade of disciple-making and they went to work. In short, they were fishers of men, for their Lord had made them so.

How does the work of God in the disciple and our responsibility to walk in obedience reveal itself in Jesus' command?

Which part of the all-encompassing life of the disciple do you find most challenging? Why?

What Will Our Response to Him Be?

In response to Jesus' invitation, Simon and Andrew “immediately they left their nets and followed him” (v. 18). James and John likewise “left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.” (v. 20). These two sets of brothers decided that Jesus was, one, trustworthy and, two, worth laying aside everything, including economic security, for they perceived that Jesus was worth it.

David Platt says that following Jesus means to “live with radical abandonment for His glory,” meaning that nothing is off the table, not our comfort, not our careers, not our possessions, not our friends nor our safety, certainly not our sin, and, to a certain

degree as defined by other Scripture, not even our family. Now before you think to yourself, “David, that is way too radical”, look at his next statement:

“Now let me be very careful here: I am not saying, and I would not say based on the whole of the New Testament, that all followers of Jesus must lose their careers, sell or give away all their possessions, leave their families behind, and physically die for the gospel. But the New Testament is absolutely clear that for all who follow Jesus, comfort and certainty in this world are no longer your concerns...Your possessions are not your own, and you forsake material pleasure in their world in order to live for eternal treasure in the world to come. And this could mean that you sell or give away everything you have. After all, position is no longer your priority...The costly call to abandon everything for Jesus can be stated another way. We lay down all things so that we live for one thing: to honor the King.” (David Platt, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in Matthew, p. 82)

Ultimately, a fisher of men and women lives not for their own glory and comfort, but for Christ and his kingdom. He is number one, always and forever.

So, the question now comes to us:

How will we respond to Jesus’ invitation for us to follow him, that he might us become fishers of men?

Is he worth it for us to lay down our self-satisfying and self-glorifying desires for all that we have and follow Jesus with everything we have? He most certainly is, but does your heart believe he is?

If your answer is yes, what specific action is the Lord calling you to in response to this passage?

Seven Commands of Christ

1. Love God (Matthew 22:37-38)
2. Love Others (Matthew 22:39-40)
3. Love the Church (John 13:34-35)
4. Obeying Christ’s Commands (John 14:15, 21, 23)
5. Be His Witnesses (Acts 1:8)
6. Proclaim the Gospel (Mark 16:15)
7. Make Disciples (Matthew 28:18-20)

*There are other explicit scriptural commands of what the Christian life is to look like, but these are a great starting points.

Family Application

“What does your dad do?” “Where does your mom work?” These are common questions our kids might receive from a new friend at school or a teacher. Questions that, most likely, your kids could answer easily for they have heard you talk about your profession and seen you doing it.

However, assuming they knew what the following question meant, would they be able to confidently answer their friend if they were asked: “Is your mom or dad a fisher of men?” Would your children perceive for both yourself and for them a desire to be fishers of men? Would it be clear to them that you are living in obedience to Jesus’ call to be fishers of men, perhaps as clear as taking up the call of whatever it is you do for work during the week?

I mention these not to make you feel guilty. All of us fall short of Jesus’ call here. But these are healthy questions to consider from time to time, because all of us get off-track with the earthly priorities of this world rather than choosing the heavenly priorities of the kingdom.

If you would like to be a fisher of men as Jesus has called you to be, a great place to start is with the young men and women in your own home. Here are four ways to start this process:

1. Pray for them and with them regularly.
2. Model bible reading, evangelism, and regular involvement and ministry in the body of Christ.
3. Share the gospel with your children and invest the truth of God’s Word in them.
4. Tell them plainly your desire for them to be disciples of Jesus who make other disciples of Jesus often.

Living Restored

Mark 1:21-2:12 | September 26, 2021

What is the worst injury you have ever recovered from? What happened? Would you ever want to go through that again?

Read Mark 1:21-2:12

What about the characters, the setting, the scenes, the narrative, etc. stand out to you?

Bird's Eye View: Jesus forgives and restores.

Jesus' formal ministry has begun, and we notice how Mark, as he does throughout his gospel, communicates with precision. Every story has a purpose. In this section, episodes of healing pop up in a number of places. With both Mark's precision and repetition in mind, we must ask why Mark tells these stories in the first place? What is special about these stories to cause Mark to include them?

In this section, Mark makes crystal clear the fact that Jesus is the authoritative one. Mark displays the authority Christ has over sin, flesh, darkness, and the world—and this authority would not be challenged. On the other hand, we see how Jesus repeatedly wields his authority to bring about both forgiveness and healing in the lives of others. Unlike many who possess authority today, Jesus is a good leader. He is moved by compassion for the well-being of his people. Jesus is mighty to save. He is mighty to heal. He is mighty to forgive.

Jesus did not limit his ministry but sought to extend to a variety of people throughout the entire region. He healed the man with the unclean spirit, Peter's mother-in-law, the leper, the paralytic, and the unidentified multitude. Jesus met the people where they were and worked to reach them. In this passage, we see how Jesus put in the miles to reach his people.

When the individual stories are taken together, one notices a pattern arising: God's restoration follows God's forgiveness that comes by grace through faith—a faith that manifests itself in persistence (the paralytic), boldness (the leper), and service (the mother-in-law).

Toward the end of this section, opposition arises among the religious leaders. What is interesting is that they had problems with his forgiveness. This is interesting because even today so many have problems with the mercy of Christ. It may not present the same way as it did in the scribes and Pharisees, but the incredulity that Jesus would forgive remains the same. Some have the same arrogant attitude towards others as the Pharisees, but often many non-believers and even a large number of disciples of Christ at times do not believe that Jesus can forgive them. They wrongly believe their specific sins preclude them from knowing God's redemptive work through Jesus. This is false, however. You cannot out-sin the mercy of God. Where sin abounds, God's transforming grace abounds all the more. By faith, cast yourself upon his mercy and walk in his restoration.

Pause and Discuss

What problems do we tend to have with forgiveness?

What sinful practices do you need to confess to Christ and finally leave behind?

Why is it important to link together God's forgiveness and his restoration?

Consider This:

Could you imagine the demon-possessed man longing to be in darkness again, the paralytic crippled again, the leper unclean again? Of course not. Why, then, do we sometimes long for the sin from which we have been delivered?

Light overcomes darkness.

As soon as Jesus came into Capernaum, he was invited to teach in the synagogue. At this point, his reputation preceded him greatly as this was not his first ministry event in the area. When the man with the unclean spirit spoke to Jesus, he did so in opposition and rightly recognized Jesus' deity and authority. In a foolhardy demonstration, the demon shouted out the identity of Christ in what might have been an attempt to defend itself or derail Jesus' mission. Jesus immediately silenced him.

Jesus' words contain so much power and authority that the unclean spirit had no choice but to obey. His authority caused a physical reaction in the demon to "cry out with a loud voice" as it departed from the man. "Jesus makes no appeals to a supernatural power and does not rattle off a litany of powerful names. He simply commands, and the demons flee." (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary) Jesus establishes his authority within the populace.

Today, in a world filled with so much darkness—much of which is unseen—it's a good reminder that these forces of darkness do not outrank the authority of Christ.

Faith in Action: Three Pictures of Active Faith

1. Faith Serves.

Upon his return from teaching, Jesus finds Simon Peter's mother-in-law bed-ridden with a fever. In that culture, Peter's mother-in-law living with them likely meant she had gone through some difficult circumstances. This helps us understand the severity of the illness, because someone in this situation would help keep up with day-to-day needs. The picture here is that Peter's mother-in-law was extremely sick—until Jesus healed her. After being restored by Christ, she immediately started to serve, offering Jesus and his disciples an opportunity to rest and prepare her home before the locals who arrived after the sun went down on the Sabbath.

We cannot help but see a pattern with Peter's mother-in-law that applies to us as well. The flow is clear: (a) She was sick, (b) Jesus healed her, (3) she served Christ, and (4) used her home so that more people could experience Christ's healing. This is exactly the pattern we see in our own walk with Christ. We were born sick with sin, but Jesus healed us by his grace and empowers us to do good works for his Kingdom. As a result, others come to know him as a result of our ministry. And the cycle repeats.

We are restored to serve as we stay near to our Lord. We are called to serve Jesus as Peter's mother-in-law did, so that the lost may be found and this broken world might know the restoration of the Kingdom.

2. Faith draws near with boldness.

The interaction between Christ and the leper story is a beautiful example of God's redemptive work and how we can approach Jesus through prayer. Hebrews 4:16 says: *"Let us then with confidence (boldness) draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."* In those days, leprosy was traditionally believed to be divine punishment for sin that could only be healed once they were forgiven by God. Along with this, Lepers lived lives of pain and separation. The leper was in great pain; in the climate, and their general lack of good cleanliness, these skin diseases were aggressive and debilitating. Besides the pain and decay of their bodies, those with leprosy were ostracized and removed from society. Not only did they live out their days in agony, but they also lived it apart from the rest of the world.

This man understood contamination and all that it meant for him both physically and socially, and yet he was bold enough to approach Jesus in his unclean state. Though it was openly discouraged for a leper to approach anyone, he knew his only hope would be Jesus. The leper knew Jesus to be capable to heal his condition and yearned for him to be willing.

In healing the leper, Jesus both demonstrates his divinity and the very heart of God. He makes clean the unclean. He touches the untouchable. He welcomes the outcast. He lifts up the lowly. He is gracious and merciful, turning aside none who approach him in faith.

3. Faith perseveres.

The four friends and the paralytic by implication demonstrate the persistence that defines genuine faith. In vv. 3 and 4, when the four men realized there was no way through the crowd, they removed the roof and lowered him. Like the father taking his pregnant wife who is in labor to the hospital, these friends recognized the urgency and the need, so they persisted.

In many ways, our salvation secured by Christ reveals itself in our persistence in faith. Persistent faith—that is saving faith—continues to press toward Christ no matter the obstacle (even if there are some bumps and redirections along the way).

Once the paralytic was lowered, instead of healing him immediately, Jesus forgave his sins. Similar to the interaction with the leper, Jesus acted with purpose. At that time, most made the connection between physical infirmities and one's sins. Jesus, being the Son of God, dealt with both. In doing this, Jesus reveals his divinity to those who would receive it, he delineates between the symptom (paralysis – brokenness of sin in general) and the disease (sin), and demonstrates how those who come to him in faith receive both forgiveness and restoration.

This total healing will reveal itself fully in the resurrection of the dead at the coming of our Lord.

Putting it into Practice:

God's healing follows his forgiveness offered to those who approach his Son in faith. This healing then produces a heart of service that seeks to bring healing to others. Our response to this passage could be many things, but I hope that we would all walk away with a deeper desire to persistently pursue Jesus, boldly pour ourselves out before Him, give ourselves in service, and recognize His authority in everything. In doing this, our lives will be forever changed. The restoration of Christ simply makes life better. Jesus' forgiveness takes us to a place we can only imagine—a fulfilled life in the presence of our Almighty Creator who loves us.

Early and Alone - Make the Time to Pray

In verse 35 we see that Jesus woke up early and went and prayed by himself. This is the morning after he preached in the synagogue, cast out the demon, healed Simon-Peter's mother-in-law, healed and cast out demons on into the night, and we know that Jesus is exhausted. Yet we see the Scripture state that Jesus started his day by "rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark..." Without coffee from Cafe 59, Jesus got out of bed early in order to spend time with his Father in prayer. Three things to consider about Jesus' prayer life: (1) he changed locations away from potential distractions, (2) he went by himself, and (3) he went out early before the daily requirements hit him.

What is a good location for you to pray?

What is a good time for you to pray?

Voices from the Past

Origen (c. 184 - 253) on Christ Touching the Leper

"And why did he touch him, since the law forbade the touching of a leper? He touched him to show that "all things are clean to the clean." Because the filth that is in one person does not adhere to others, nor does external uncleanness defile the clean of heart. So he touches him in his untouchability, that he might instruct us in humility; that he might teach us that we should despise no one, or abhor them, or regard them as pitiable, because of some wound of their body or some blemish for which they might be called to render an account...So, stretching forth his hand to touch, the leprosy immediately departs. The hand of the Lord is found to have touched not a leper, but a body made clean! Let us consider here, beloved, if there be anyone here that has the taint of leprosy in his soul, or the contamination of guilt in his heart? If he has, instantly adoring God, let him say: "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.""

The Heart of the Lawgiver

Mark 2:13-3:6 | October 03, 2021

What is the funniest question you recall hearing a child ask?

Read Mark 2:13-3:6

What about the characters, the setting, the scenes, the narrative, etc. stand out to you?

Children often ask questions. Why? Why not? Why do I have to go to bed now? Questions, questions, questions. Adults ask their share of questions too. Why are things like this? Why aren't they as they should be? Some questions arise from a desire to know more and reflect curiosity springing from an honest heart. Other questions however seep up from a heart of rebellion.

In Mark 2-3, we see the religious asking questions of the latter category. Like a cloaked dagger, their questions futilely stab the air as they seek to bring accusation against Jesus: Why is he...? Why doesn't he...? All of their questions pertained to their traditions and laws, each missing both the spirit of the law of God and the heart of the lawgiver. Their misunderstanding and unbelief in who Jesus was and what He came to do was the problem. As we go through this section, we will see the heart of the Lawgiver as He confronts each question with divine care and clarity. In the end, we'll be left beholding the wonder of the Gospel.

Christ calls and transforms.

The call of Levi was strikingly different from the call of the first four disciples, at least from the standpoint of the religious leaders. Peter, Andrew, James, and John were not without sin. They were fishermen and probably pretty rough characters. Peter was prone to cursing, and James and John to anger (the sons of thunder), but when Jesus called Levi, it was a slap in the face to the Jewish leaders and people because of his profession as a tax collector and his sinful lifestyle. A tax collector was an ally to the Roman government and thus hated and regarded as a traitor to his own people. Levi spent his life extorting others on behalf of the enemy—as his pockets grew fatter while his countrymen's slimmer. Something changed, however, when Jesus called him. (Praise the Lord for his transforming mercy!) Levi began sharing and distributing his wealth, and left behind the "lucrative" life of the tax collector for something far more valuable: the life of a disciple of Jesus Christ. What once was insignificant, now, by divine call, had become most important.

Many changes come about when a person is called to salvation, but one stands out: a life of taking becomes a life of giving. Instead of holding onto the comfort of like-minded friends, we give ourselves to the reaching of the lost with the message of the gospel. Instead of holding onto whatever high opinion we have ourselves, we lay it down and embrace the cross of Christ. Instead of hoarding up possessions for this world only, we give generously for the advancement of the kingdom. Truly, those who respond

to Jesus' call are radically transformed and join Christ in his mission. We have a duty to be a light in the darkness around us and to take chances on the lost. Jesus rejected the 'religious' groups who both thought they needed no transformation nor sought out those who needed to know the Lord. The heart of the lawgiver is the heart of the physician. We are all born sick with sin and need of healing, as both Levi and the Pharisees were. The good news is that the power of God through the gospel heals broken sinners. Self-righteousness leaves one in their fatal condition.

Pause and Discuss: How does Jesus' call on our life shape our priorities? Give specific examples.

Works-based faith is dead faith.

Jesus was confronted by people who were curious as to why he and his disciples were not fasting while others were. Their confusion arose due to the fact they did not know who was standing before them. One does not fast in the halls of the king on the day of his wedding. They feast! Fasting demonstrates a yearning, a lack of righteousness rather than a merit of righteousness. This type of fasting is good and to be expected of followers of Christ (2:20, cf. Matt. 6). Today, we long to be in Christ's physical presence and possess the fullness of the holiness he gives us. Jesus' bridegroom illustration highlighted something magnificent. At that time, the bridegroom was there to inaugurate the glorious epoch of the New Covenant in God's salvation. It was no time for fasting. His earthly life and ministry were to be a joyous occasion, not a time to mourn and fast. What a tremendous blessing it must have been for the people to be able to draw near to the Lord's physical presence and walk with Him while He was in this world. That day is coming for us as well.

In the illustration of the new patch and new wine, Jesus taught the meaning of His mission would not fit into the old system of the law. The Levitical law foreshadowed who was standing right in front of them. The New Covenant would not work under the Levitical system of the law. The old wineskin would burst, the old cloth rip, if Jesus' new gospel was added to it. For Jesus, the lawgiver, was also the law's fulfillment. He did not discard it, but lived it out perfectly that he might do what the law could not do: forgive sinners and make them new, with the law written on their very hearts by the Spirit. The system of sacrifices always pointed to a greater sacrifice—Jesus' substitutionary death on the cross.

Unfortunately, the Jewish leaders missed the glorious point of the law for they added so many of their own traditions that the spirit of the Law was completely missed. The freedom of the Gospel could not fit in the old, rigid vessels the Pharisees had constructed. Those who submitted to the call of Christ would possess a hunger to grow in Christ and His Word. They would devote themselves to expanding His kingdom unhindered by the dead trappings of works-based, man-made religion. The Law was never meant to be a means of earning salvation, but highlighting one's need of salvation from Yahweh. People have always related to the Lord by his grace through faith.

This was true of Abraham, of Moses, and of us today. The joy of the disciple is not found in trying to earn righteousness by the Law, but in resting and living in the righteousness freely theirs through faith in Christ.

There are always those trying to infiltrate churches with works based theology—both in the early church and today. The heart of the Lawgiver commands us to reject this way of thinking and live in the joyful presence of the bridegroom who gives new wine and clothes us in new garments.

Pause and Discuss: How do we practice rest? How do we labor in the rest God provides?

Where are you longing for rest? Do you need spiritual rest, mental rest, or physical rest—or all three? How can you find that rest in Christ, the Lord of the Sabbath?

Jesus came to do good to others.

Lastly, Jesus was confronted with two issues: there is a man with a withered hand in the synagogue on the Sabbath wanting to be healed and there were the Pharisees with withered hearts eager to accuse Jesus. Jesus wastes no time. He calls the man forward and asks the Pharisees a question about the law. They of course remain silent. Jesus, then, looks at them with anger, grieves their hardness of hearts, and heals the man on the Sabbath. This should have been a joyous occasion, but it was simply another display of sin-hardened hearts. The man with a withered hand reached out to God and was healed; the Pharisees rejected the Lawgiver for their own understandings of the law and remained sin-sick. They missed another point of the law they so loved. They missed the fact that the law was meant to move the people of God to do good, not harm, to bring healing, not leave the community in brokenness. Jesus, the giver and fulfillment of the law, chose to do good while observing the Sabbath, instead of using tradition as a cover for apathy. May we do likewise.

ESV Study Bible Note: Eating with Sinners

“To recline at table indicates personal acceptance and cordiality. When dining formally in a home, guests reclined on a couch that stretched around three sides of a room. The host took the central place surrounded by a U-shaped series of tables. The most honored guests reclined on either side of the host, with the guests’ heads toward the tables and their feet toward the wall. Tax collectors and sinners conveys the Pharisaic perspective that both groups disregard the Law of Moses (on the Pharisees, see note on John 1:24). According to Pharisaic interpretation, Jesus is to keep himself “clean” from such people (see Lev. 10:10; 12:1–15:33). **Jesus pursues a third path: personal purity and the fellowship of mercy.**”

Following Jesus

Mark 3:7-35 | October 10, 2021

Have you ever traveled with your family through a crowded city or transportation center? What was that experience like?

Read Mark 3:7-35

What about the characters, the setting, the scenes, the narrative, etc. stand out to you?

Several years ago, I (Eric) was fortunate enough to travel on a mission trip with a businessman who traveled frequently. Because his job required him to travel often he had access to a VIP Lounge. After we checked in at the airport we went to this special door. My friend showed them a special card and added my name as his guest. We went inside the lounge and there were meals, snacks, and soft drinks. It had great Wi-Fi and complementary showers. Now, I couldn't enter here on my own. But because I was with my friend, I was invited in. It was like I was part of his family. I was able to enjoy all the perks because I was with him.

Earlier, in chapter 1, Jesus invited people to follow him. Now, in Mark 3, we see a new stage of Jesus' ministry. Jesus is telling people how they can be part of his family. At the conclusion of the chapter Jesus says that whoever does the will of God is his family. He calls twelve of his followers to come meet with him on a mountain. There Jesus appoints these men to be his apostles. He equips them to go out and preach the Gospel and cast out demons.

But people from all over were following Jesus. They followed him for different reasons. The crowds followed Jesus because they wanted something immediate. The demons recognized Jesus was the Son of God but Jesus would not allow them to speak. Meanwhile the religious leaders followed Jesus and accused him of working with Satan. Jesus' family went looking for him because they thought he had lost his mind. Ironically, they wanted to rescue him.

Today, people still pursue Jesus for different reasons. Some are like the crowds. They want Jesus to work in their lives immediately. But they aren't really interested in being obedient. Some people want to attack Jesus or create a Jesus that lets them do what they want. They make things up about Jesus to fit their agenda.

But Jesus invited in those who would be obedient. Today, Jesus is still inviting us to follow him in obedience. John 14:23 says, "Jesus answered him, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." John 14:23

The people wanted Jesus to do miracles for them, but he came to reveal God.

People followed Jesus everywhere he went. They came from everywhere. There were so many people that there was a boat standing by to keep Jesus from being crushed by the crowd.

Jesus was teaching and healing. But the people were not interested in Jesus' teaching as much as they were his miracles. The sick were desperately seeking healing and Jesus shows his love and kindness by healing them.

Many were possessed by demons and unclean spirits. Jesus cast those spirits out. These spirits proclaimed Jesus as the Son of God. But this was not an act of worship. It was either fear or the desire to control him. Jesus would not let them speak because the time had not yet come for this revelation.

Today people often want Jesus to work in their lives. They want him to bless them and their families. They want him to deliver them from hardships and difficulties. They want all the immediate things Jesus can do for them.

But they don't want to listen to him. They don't want to obey him. They don't want to meditate on his Word. They just want immediate results according to their will and their timeline. Sadly, they miss what Jesus has for them—which is far greater than whatever they have concocted in their mind.

Pause and Discuss: The crowds were interested in Jesus, but only in his miracles. Why were they more interested in his healing than in his teaching? How do we avoid the same attitude?

“Their crying out “You are the Son of God” is best understood as a futile attempt to render him harmless. These cries of recognition were designed to control him and to strip him of his power, in accordance with the conception that knowledge of the precise name or quality of a person confers mastery over him.” The Expositor's Bible Commentary.

Jesus called 12 ordinary men and empowered them to change the world (little by little). He can do the same with you.

Jesus withdrew from the crowds and went to a place of solitude. He called 12 of his disciples to come with him and they did. Jesus appointed twelve men whom he named apostles, which means one who is sent.

Mark begins with Simon Peter and concludes with Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus. Some, like Peter, James and John, we know a lot of about. Some, like James the son of Alphaeus and Thaddaeus, we know very little. Jesus appointed these men to preach and teach the Good News.

There was nothing special about these 12 men. They were ordinary with varied levels of education and backgrounds. Each of them were deeply flawed. But Jesus called them. Jesus empowered them. The calling made them special.

As a Christian, Jesus has called you as well. The same Spirit who empowered these 12 men empowers you. Jesus will equip and empower you to accomplish his purposes. He will use you to go out into the world and share the Gospel. It may be around the world or next door. ***Will you be obedient and allow the One who has called you to use you to accomplish his purposes?***

The religious leaders call Jesus a demon, but Jesus reveals Himself to be greater than Satan.

The religious leaders come down and see Jesus ministering to the multitudes. He is healing the sick and casting out demons. They reject Jesus' teaching but they cannot deny the authenticity of his miracles. They accuse Jesus of either being possessed by a demon or working with Satan.

Jesus counters their accusations with reason. Why would Satan work against himself? Then Jesus used three examples: the divided kingdom (v24), the divided house (v25), and the binding of the strong man by a stronger one. The religious leaders tried to tear Jesus down, but Jesus flipped their argument on its head. Satan is strong, but Jesus is stronger.

The religious leaders are seen as foolish here. But how often do we question Jesus' power? How many times are we in a circumstance when we wonder if Jesus can work in a difficult situation? We may not accuse him of working with Satan, but by doubting him, we question his omnipotence.

In verse 29, Jesus says that whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness and is guilty of an eternal sin. Today we know the only thing that condemns someone to Hell is the rejection of Jesus as Savior and Lord. To blaspheme means slander or defiance. To defy and rebel against God is to reject him. Rejection of Jesus leads someone to eternal separation in Hell.

However, we can be encouraged because of verse 28. Jesus stands ready to forgive all who will call upon his name and ask forgiveness. No sin outruns God's mercy when we approach Jesus for forgiveness. He forgives all our iniquity. Jesus died on the cross for our sin and bore the entirety of the punishment meant for us.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:9, ESV

"Never in the annals of history has there been an age like it. There they go! A dozen men, clothed with godlike power, marching here and there throughout that little land, a microcosm of the whole wide world, to spread the word that the kingdom of God was at hand." John Phillips

Jesus makes his disciples family.

Jesus' family had heard about all that was going on. They were worried that he was overwhelmed. He couldn't even eat because of the crowds, so there was genuine family concern.

They went wrong however in their questioning of his sanity. They worried about his mental state. They did not view Jesus as the Messiah. They went to him so that they could take him by force. They wanted to take him home and care for him. Jesus' family did not understand.

When they arrive Jesus is with a group of people, and his family can't get to him. Jesus is told they are looking for him. Then Jesus tells the crowd that whoever does the will of God is his brother, sister, and mother. Obedience to God brings you into the family of God.

It's not that Jesus didn't care about his family. He made provisions for his mother while he was on the cross. Jesus is saying that everyone who does the will of God will be part of his family. It is an invitation to everyone who will be obedient.

Families are important. But as Christians we must have a greater allegiance to God. Jesus said in Luke 14:26, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." This may seem harsh. But Jesus says that when we obey God, we get to be part of his family. Our devotion and obedience to God above our family, in fact, is the best thing we could ever do for those closest to us.

My (Eric's) Family Story

"When I was a child I grew up in a small Alabama town where my father was the pastor of a successful church. When I was 12 years old my parents were called by God to leave Alabama and move to Uruguay to be missionaries. This was challenging. My siblings and I were 12, 9, and 6. Grandparents were not happy. Uruguay was a challenging place to do ministry. There was great risk.

However, God had called them. They were obedient. And now, I can tell you that God blessed our family. Yes, we faced challenges and hardships. But God took care of us. Today both my siblings and myself are grateful that my parents chose obedience."

What are the implications in Christ making you a part of God's family?

Kingdom Parables, Part One

Mark 4:1-20 | October 17, 2021

Throughout his ministry, Jesus often taught important truths about the Kingdom of God through parables (brief stories grounded in everyday life that reveal deep truths). In these, Jesus covered many topics of significant importance for us today. Who will inherit the Kingdom of God? How does one receive it? How will the Kingdom be brought according to God's divine plan? How should the citizens of this Kingdom act? All of these questions are dealt with in the parables, and the profound teachings contained in these parables continues to be relevant to this day. If we have the ears to hear, they show us how we can find entry into the Kingdom. In doing this, the parables also create in us a longing for the fullness of the Kingdom and teach us how to live faithfully as its citizens today.

A few tips on parables:

- **Be careful not to read too little or too much into them.** Parables many times are allegorical, in that the characters in the story refer to something else. For example, the parable of the sower is not about farming techniques. There is an intended deeper meaning to the story. On the other hand, we want to make sure we interpret the characters in a way the original authors would have intended.
- **There is not a universal symbol code.** Just because birds refer to Satan in the Parable of the Sower does not mean birds refer to Satan in the Parable of the Mustard Seed. Sometimes certain things refer to same thing in different parables, but it is not a guarantee. Let the context of each parable determine how you interpret its parts.
- **The Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven do not refer to different Kingdoms.** These terms can be and should be viewed as being interchangeable and reflective of the individual author's preference.
- **Sometimes parables have multiple levels of meaning.** Like Old Testament prophecies, parables sometimes function like bifocals—pertaining both to the current context as well as the future. These shades of meaning are not contradictory to one another, but differ in terms of degree. For example, the Parable of the Seed growing likely has meaning to a lesser degree for gospel ministry in the church, while the greatest degree of meaning is found in Christ's earthly ministry and his future return.
- **If Jesus interprets a parable for you, that is its meaning.**
- **The parables, by design, both reveal and obscure truth to the hearts of men.** The parable's meaning (and significance) is hidden from those who reject Christ, while those who trust in Christ will understand and live out its meaning.

Profiling the Parable of the Sower: The Sower, the Seed, and the Four Plants

While teaching on a boat, Jesus employed parables to expound upon the Kingdom of God. The first focuses on a sower sowing seed to varying results. Four are highlighted: seed picked up by birds (4:4), quick-blooming plants that lack rootedness (4:5-7), small plants that are choked by thorns and thistles, (4:7), and finally those that yield a successful crop to various degrees (4:8). Jesus makes it clear in his explanation that the sower is the one who delivers the word of God, specifically the gospel, and the four results refer to how people respond to the gospel in different ways. The biggest question needed to be answered is this: does this parable highlight three types of Christians or only one? The answer requires a look at both the context of the parable and the larger context of the New Testament. Many indicators point toward there only being one genuine Christian in the parable of the Sower. The second and third categories are those who appear outwardly for a season to be Christians, but in reality, were never disciples of Christ in the first place. (Again, this goes back to the nature of parables. We do not want to read too much or too little into them. Sprouting does not refer to genuine conversion in this story; fruit-bearing does.)

Both the immediate context of the parable, the broader context of the gospels, and the context of the entirety of Scripture support this conclusion. First, Jesus only speaks favorably of the last category of response. Second, in other places in the gospel Jesus has highlighted three important truths: only those who endure to the end will be saved (Matt. 10:22, Mk. 13:13), trees that do not bear fruit will be cut down and cast into the fire (Matt. 7:19), and one cannot serve both God and money (Matt. 6:24). All three condemn responses two and three. Not to even mention the rest of the New Testament which explicitly condemns those who would fall into categories 2 and 3. Only the fourth response that receives the word, endures in growth, and produces fruit is a genuine disciple of Christ.

With this in mind, let's examine more closely pieces of the puzzle that is this parable:

The Seed: The Word of God

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the good news of the Kingdom. It proclaims that Jesus is the eternal Son of God who took on flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Being fully God and fully Man, he fulfilled the Old Testament, perfectly living out God's law as the son of Abraham and the son of David. He is the one through whom all the families of the world are blessed and the King whose reign will have no end. Having lived for our righteousness, he suffered under Pontius Pilate and died for our sins—bearing the curse of death in our place at the hands of wicked men. He was buried, and on the third day he rose from the grave in victory, ascending to be with his Father until the day he returns to judge the living and the dead. All those who repent of their sins and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved and enjoy eternal life with their Maker and King.

This message demands a response. How one responds to it determines everything. Either one treasures Christ above this world and all that is in it, following him as Lord, or they do not.

Have you truly received the gospel message? If not, will you today?

Response 1: Hardened Hearts

The seed that is taken by birds are those who are immediately prevented by Satan from having their hearts changed. This is the sad reality for some. For a variety of reasons, the gospel simply leaves them unmoved. We must pray for these individuals, asking the Spirit to shine the light of his gospel into their hearts that they might repent and believe in the Lord Jesus.

Remember: the perspective of this parable is from the end after everything has played itself out. While the birds might snatch the seed today, they might not tomorrow. Never give up on the lost. As Pastor Randy has said, do not merely wish for their salvation, but persistently pray for salvation and show them the beauty of Jesus Christ and his gospel.

Response 2: Shallow “Faith”

The seed that does not take root are those people who are blown to and fro by the troubles of life or persecution. They demonstrate that “shallow faith” is not biblical faith at all. They may seem to be excited about the gospel, but the reality is they could be just as excited about some other teaching in just a short time. There is no depth. There is no contemplation, no counting the cost, no denying of self. Just a cheap grace gospel that elevates forgiveness without repentance, Jesus as Savior, but not Lord, and self-preservation over self-denial.

This cheap gospel tickles the ears and is worth nothing. Do not be deceived.

Response 3: Misplaced Affections

The seed choked out by thorns are those people too concerned with the world’s cares. In the end, they leave God, at whose right hand are pleasures forevermore, for the fleeting pleasures this world has to offer. These people believe they can serve two masters, be a friend of God and a friend of this world, but their idolatrous heart kills the faux faith that never truly found the treasure buried in the field. This is a particular pitfall that ensnares the affluent within a culture filled with Christianese. In other words, this is a particular pitfall for those of you reading these words. Is Christ your treasure? Have you been deceived? You cannot be a friend of God and a friend of the world. Leave behind the cheap thrills of this life and lay hold of the eternal joy that is found in Christ Jesus.

Response 4: The Disciple of Christ

The last of the seed comprises those who received the word of God and bear fruit. These, and these alone, are genuine disciples of Jesus Christ. They have received the gospel in faith and the Spirit is at work in their life manifesting his power in varying degrees of fruitfulness. This fruitfulness is both the transformation of one’s character and the multiplication of one’s faith through evangelism and discipleship. Fruitfulness proves out faith.

Are you a genuine disciple of Jesus?

Application for the Disciple:

Here's the thing: Genuine disciples of Christ still at times display characteristics of the first three responses. We have not yet arrived in terms of character transformation. There are areas where our hearts are hardened, our faith is shallow, and our affections misplaced. This lesson is an opportunity to repent of those postures and embrace genuine faith to greater and greater degrees.

The Sower: The Minister of the Word

When understanding the sower, we must recognize both a divine element and a human element to this character. Ultimately, the sower is Christ. He announced the good news, but he has sent all his disciples into the world to proclaim his good news as his ministers. Even then, however, it is the Spirit making his appeal through us, convicting the hearts of men through our prayer and gospel proclamation. How should we apply this understanding of the sower?

First, we must recognize that Christ alone possesses the good news of God. Too often we look in all the wrong places for what only Jesus can offer. Christ alone can satisfy. Look to him. Second, we must be sowers of the gospel message, spreading the word of salvation broadly to those who would hear us, patiently leaving the results to God and giving up on no one.

Jesus later reveals to His disciples that such a parable is employed to hide the mysteries of the Kingdom of God to “those who are outside”, (4:11) due to the unrepentant being without their right senses and clouded in sin.

Voices from the Past

C.S. Lewis (1898 - 1963) “The Weight of Glory”

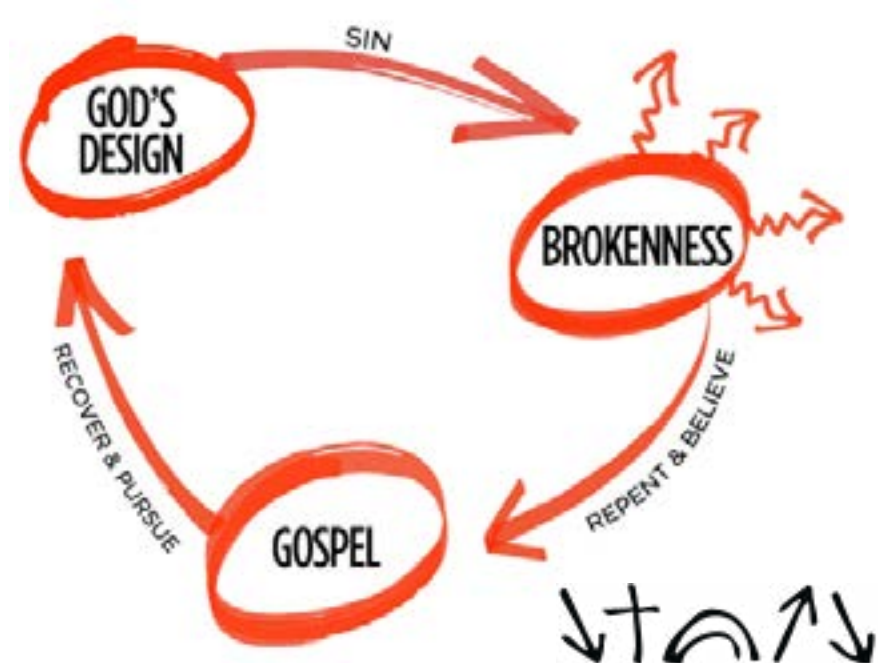
“It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.” C.S. Lewis

The Purpose of the Parables – ESV Study Bible

“Since Isa. 6:9–10 describes the hard-hardheartedness of Israel, its citation here emphasizes the fact that Jesus speaks the parables to outsiders as a form of prophetic warning. Jesus warns of the serious consequences for all, both Gentiles and Jews, who do not open their hearts to him. And yet, there is still room for repentance.”

“Most of us have chosen heaven over hell, but not many of us have chosen heaven over earth.”

– Erik Reed



Kingdom Parables, Part Two

Mark 4:21-34 | October 24, 2021

Throughout his ministry, Jesus often taught important truths about the Kingdom of God through parables (brief stories grounded in everyday life that reveal deep truths). In these, Jesus covered many topics of significant importance for us today. Who will inherit the Kingdom of God? How does one receive it? How will the Kingdom be brought according to God's divine plan? How should the citizens of this Kingdom act? All of these questions are dealt with in the parables, and the profound teachings contained in these parables continues to be relevant to this day. If we have the ears to hear, they show us how we can find entry into the Kingdom. In doing this, the parables also create in us a longing for the fullness of the Kingdom and teach us how to live faithfully as its citizens today.

A few tips on parables:

- **Be careful not to read too little or too much into them.** Parables many times are allegorical, in that the characters in the story refer to something else. For example, the parable of the sower is not about farming techniques. There is an intended deeper meaning to the story. On the other hand, we want to make sure we interpret the characters in a way the original authors would have intended.
- **There is not a universal symbol code.** Just because birds refer to Satan in the Parable of the Sower does not mean birds refer to Satan in the Parable of the Mustard Seed. Sometimes certain things refer to same thing in different parables, but it is not a guarantee. Let the context of each parable determine how you interpret its parts.
- **The Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven do not refer to different Kingdoms.** These terms can be and should be viewed as being interchangeable and reflective of the individual author's preference.
- **Sometimes parables have multiple levels of meaning.** Like Old Testament prophecies, parables sometimes function like bifocals—pertaining both to the current context as well as the future. These shades of meaning are not contradictory to one another, but differ in terms of degree. For example, the Parable of the Seed growing likely has meaning to a lesser degree for gospel ministry in the church, while the greatest degree of meaning is found in Christ's earthly ministry and his future return.
- **If Jesus interprets a parable for you, that is its meaning.**
- **The parables, by design, both reveal and obscure truth to the hearts of men.** The parable's meaning (and significance) is hidden from those who reject Christ, while those who trust in Christ will understand and live out its meaning.

Let the Light Shine!

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12 ESV)

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. (Matthew 5:14 ESV)

Jesus is the light of the world; his Kingdom is the Kingdom of light and he has made his followers to be light as well. This idea is what Jesus is getting at in this second parable. There are multiple layers to the significance to this light. Let’s take each of them in turn.

First, the Kingdom at that time, and in some ways even today, is not on full display. It was not until the resurrection, and in some ways the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, that the disciples fully understood the nature of their King and the reality of the Kingdom. Today, we experience this in part. The Kingdom is both an “already” and a “not yet.” Christ has established his spiritual Kingdom on earth as evidenced by his church and reigns on his throne over all Creation. However, the Kingdom has not been fully manifested to all the world as it will be one day. The intention of Christ in coming was not to keep his Kingdom hidden, but to reveal it. Truly, one day all the world will see the glory of the Kingdom and its most Holy King.

Second, Kingdom citizens are to shed the light of the good news of the Kingdom. We have the most glorious message about the most radiant King. Let’s share it. Who buys a lamp and sticks it under a basket? No one. Who has been saved by the gospel but never shares its message of hope with others? Unfortunately, quite a few. May it not be so of the Kingdom citizens at MeadowBrook.

Third, Kingdom citizens are to live in the light of Kingdom holiness, exposing the darkness where secret sins thrive both in our lives and in the church. The church is to be upholders and lovers of justice. We do not cover up sin. We expose it, freely confessing our own to the Lord and a select number of our brothers and sisters in the faith and openly fighting against the hidden deeds that lurk in the dark. This of course is an imperfect struggle, but one we must pick up regardless.

Lastly, though closely related to the third layer, you cannot fool God. The light of the King at the coming of the fullness of his Kingdom will reveal all. Nothing you do in secret will be unknown. Judgment is coming. May you find forgiveness and shelter in the Rock of Ages, Jesus Christ.

Why is it difficult to be a light? How can we find support in this call?

Have ears to hear.

Last week, our passage highlighted how parables obscure truth from the hard-hearted. This week we see how parables reveal truth to the heart of faith—but not without effort. Jesus encourages his disciples to pay attention. As with any lamp, the measure of light is proportionate to the measure of oil.

But as Jesus is so fond of doing, he takes what is little and miraculously multiplies it beyond its natural ability. When we ask the Lord for wisdom and to teach us by his Spirit and apply ourselves to the study of his words, the Lord blesses us with a measure of understanding and transformation that far exceeds the measure of effort we put in. However, this comes with a warning. Those who neglect to pay attention to the teachings of Christ, even what they have will be taken away from them when they are cast into the lake of fire.

How does this change the way we approach Bible study?

How does faith and prayer compliment studying the Scriptures?

When and how will you apply yourself in the study of the Bible?

Minister the word in faithfulness; leave the results to God.

Interpretations of this parable have varied throughout the years. One could interpret it Christocentrically, (that is seeing the plot referring mainly to the person and work of Jesus Christ). In doing this, one would read the sowing as Jesus' earthly ministry, the sleeping and rising as referring to his death and resurrection, and the harvest to his second coming.

However, I believe the ignorance of the sower works against this interpretation, and while that interpretation is biblically faithful to God's story of redemption, it perhaps reads too much into this parable, and misses the encouragement Jesus was offering his disciples.

The other interpretation focuses on the disciples of Christ whom he has just charged to let their light shine. If you are like me, you have a tendency to focus on results. It's one of the reasons I actually enjoy mowing the lawn. There is immediate gratification as I see my labor translate into the results of a crisp, well (or decently-well) manicured lawn. Gospel ministry is not like that. The results are not best recognized in the moment, but when one reflects on how God has been working. The problem is sometimes even then it is hard to see the results. This reality of the blurriness of our vision when it comes to seeing the fruit of our ministry makes this parable so encouraging to me and I hope it is for you as well.

First, our labor is one of faithful persistence. I have already touched on this, but simply knowing that the results are not expected to be immediate helps us persevere when we are not seeing fruit. Second, we are not responsible for the sprouting nor the growth, though we participate in both processes. This takes a huge burden off our shoulders. Our job is not to convert or transform people. That is above our pay grade. We plant seeds and work to support the growth. The Lord does the heavy lifting. Lastly, the bounty of our labor will not be known until the harvest, that is the coming of our Lord. We will know some of the fruitfulness of our work, but not near the full picture. This should excite us for in that day we will rejoice over how the Lord took our feeble offerings and turned them into something beautiful.

Be shade for those around you.

Jesus' Kingdom started small, but it quickly grew into something far surpassing our understanding—and it is still growing! As the Kingdom grows, Jesus likens it to a tree that comes from the mustard seed and provides shade for the birds so that they might make their nests. This highlights another aspect of our mission as the church. We've already focused on the primary task of proclaiming the good news and making disciples of Christ. However, the church is also to foreshadow the coming restoration of the Kingdom where all Creation will be restored. Our ministry is not merely spiritual, but physical as well. As the exiles sent to Babylon, we too are to seek the welfare of our community.

As the church, we are able to be a part of Christ's restoring ministry through both our gospel proclamation and our social action, shining light into the darkness and providing shade for our fellow man. A word of warning: if we elevate belonging to temporary political alignments over our belonging to the Kingdom of God we will miss this type of ministry. Neither the Democrat nor Republican Party fits fully into God's Kingdom. After all our allegiance is first and foremost to Christ and his Kingdom. There will be times where we break with the temporary in favor of the eternal. May the Lord give us the courage to do so.

Voices from the Past:

John Stott in the Lausanne Covenant (1974) on the Evangelical Christian and Social Responsibility

We affirm that God is both the Creator and the Judge of all men. We therefore should share his concern for justice and reconciliation throughout human society and for the liberation of men and women from every kind of oppression. Because men and women are made in the image of God, every person, regardless of race, religion, colour, culture, class, sex or age, has an intrinsic dignity because of which he or she should be respected and served, not exploited. Here too we express penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive. Although reconciliation with other people is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and Man, our love for our neighbour and our obedience to Jesus Christ. The message of salvation implies also a message of judgment upon every form of alienation, oppression and discrimination, and we should not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist. When people receive Christ they are born again into his Kingdom and must seek not only to exhibit but also to spread its righteousness in the midst of an unrighteous world. The salvation we claim should be transforming us in the totality of our personal and social responsibilities. Faith without works is dead.

Confidence in Fearful Times

Mark 4:35-41 | October 31, 2021

The following lesson is adapted from Pastor Randy's sermon on this passage delivered on March 28, 2021.

Icebreaker: What was your biggest fear as a kid?

Context: Wrung Out

After a day filled with ministry and challenges, Jesus was exhausted as evening approached. Earlier in the day, he and the disciples returned to their home base in the seaside town of Capernaum. Likely, this was Peter's house, which offered a place to sleep, eat, and minister. While there, a crowd gathered so large and needy with sickness and demonic spirits that Jesus and his disciples didn't have time to eat a meal.

Then Jesus' family showed up. His brothers did not understand Jesus' life and ministry. To them, it seemed odd for him to give so much of himself. On top of that, his teaching was so unique, his miracles unexplainable, and his itinerant lifestyle miles removed from their own, much more stable lifestyle. They thought he was out of his mind. Thinking themselves to be good brothers, they wanted to wrangle him home and bring him under their care and control. Of course, there was nothing wrong with Jesus' mental state, but there were plenty of issues with his siblings' hearts. Though Jesus' brothers believed and actively ministered in his name after the resurrection, at this point they lacked faith and worked against God's Spirit as they openly denied Jesus as Messiah.

If that was not enough, the scribes arrived in attack mode, claiming that Jesus' power was from Beelzebub, the prince of demons. It was an attempt to discredit him in front of the crowd, but Jesus quickly revealed the foolishness of such a claim.

All the while, the throngs of people proved to be unrelenting. Jesus was a novelty to some, a fascinating teacher to others, and for those in desperate need of healing, he was the answer to their greatest needs. They pushed and clamored to get close to him, to hear him, and touch him.

The Lord and the disciples, then, walked to the water's edge, away from Peter's home. The open shoreline allowed even more people to gather around as he stood on the rocky coast to teach and minister. As the people pressed in closer, Jesus stepped into a boat, pushed back a bit in the water, sat down, and continued his teaching. There, he taught some of the great parables recorded in the Bible.

For those of us going through stressful and challenging seasons, it is important to note that:

Jesus was not put out with people, even as they clamored.

- He saw them as sheep without a shepherd, needing care, spiritual nutrition, and guidance.
- He understood himself as a physician, eager to offer compassion and healing as only God could.

- As a teacher, Jesus knew that the people needed life-changing truth, and he provided it freely and perfectly.

To say that the day was busy and challenging is an understatement. From sunrise to sunset, ministry swirled about Jesus non-stop—providing not even the time to eat. Like wringing a damp rag of its last drop of water, the day left them all physically, mentally, and emotionally drained. So, with the hot Middle East sun setting, Jesus said to the disciples, “Let us go across to the other side.”

Narrative: Flailing in the Wind

The disciples set sail, heading across the lake about five miles to the Gerasenes. Jesus stretched out with a pillow in the boat’s stern, probably on a bench where the person responsible for sailing the boat held fast to the rudder. Some from the crowd, who had access to boats, rowed or set sail, too, following closely behind.

What began as a peaceful, calm respite from an arduous day quickly turned into a troublesome storm so great that seasoned fishermen believed they would die.

The Sea of Galilee is 628 feet below sea level. Mountains surround it with ravines and valleys cutting through them, funneling wind to the water below. The cool air above sweeps down as the warm moist air rises, causing violent storms to form with little warning.

When conditions are just right, the wind from above rushes on the bowl of water, causing it to churn violently. Matthew used the word *seismos* to describe the stormy conditions while Jesus and the others were crossing the lake. It was as if an earthquake was occurring in the water.

Imagine yourself in the vessel as the darkness of night surrounds you. Suddenly, straight-line winds scream against you, waves thrash wildly against the boat, and water pours into it faster than you can bail it out. Any given wave might be the one to sweep you into the violent lake. The unrelenting wall of water seems just as likely to sink the vessel as you sit flailing about in the fierce wind driving against you. Fear rises from your stomach into your throat as you frantically realize that you may not make it through this night alive.

With voices crying, wind screaming, rain pelting, and water filling, you and the others in the boat look to Jesus, who has astonishingly remained asleep during the storm and chaos. Mixed with fear and panic, you rush back to the stern and wake Jesus. With a tone of shock and rebuke, you scream out, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

The disciples did not know that God would use the horrific storm and experience to teach them about Jesus and his power in their lives.

Jesus awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!”

Instantly, the wind and sea were calm. Jesus’ voice replaced the deafening noise of the wind.

Stunned, you hear the Lord say to you and the others in the boat and those in the boats close by, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?”

That is the question of the moment. Jesus asked it to his disciples in that boat and the Spirit asks it to us today. As we seek to consider this question, let’s guide our course with two truths and ask four questions that will help us steady our faith in the Lord.

God’s glory is certain.

The narrative ends well, with peaceful waters, and, more importantly, the disciples and others understanding the power and rule of Jesus Christ more than ever. However, like the earlier parts of the day, not everything went according to the disciples’ plan.

One truth remained constant. Everything about this day in the life of the Lord revealed his glory. From the night and morning spent in Peter’s home to Jesus’ own family challenging his well-being to religious leaders accusing him of being empowered by a demon, everything revealed more of Jesus’ character. From interacting with people on the shoreline, to talking to the crowd from a boat, to stilling the turbulent wind and waves, Jesus revealed his glory. From the disciples’ shock about the Lord’s family, to their bewilderment at the scribes’ accusations, to their rebuke for Jesus sleeping while a storm raged against them, the disciples learned about God’s glory in adversity.

They were learning a lifelong lesson: God’s glory is certain even when our life seems to be flailing in the wind.

Storms in life are necessary.

There is much to learn about Jesus in the good and bad experiences of life. He reveals himself through all aspects of life. Our present struggles are nothing compared to God’s wondrous glory being revealed and yet to be revealed in Heaven.

Even when we cannot see his glory amidst our troubles, we can be confident that we will have a different perspective from Heaven. From that vantage point, we will understand Jesus’ redemptive provision during our most difficult days on earth.

Storms in life are necessary because you and I cannot grow spiritually without experiencing storms—troubles, failures, crises, sufferings, and the like. James 1:2-4 makes clear that we will be perfected, lacking nothing, through God’s use of trials in our lives.

Storms reveal our weaknesses and our misguided beliefs and ways. They point us to total dependence on Jesus.

Pause and Discuss: What storms life cause you to fear? How have you seen God grow you during past storms? How does that affect the way we view current and future storms?

Hear Jesus ask: “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?”

Jesus wasn’t asking them about their faith regarding an outcome; that would make safety and security the object of their faith. No. They were not to put their trust in something so fleeting. They were to put their faith in the eternal Son of God made flesh for their salvation.

Like the disciples, we must center our faith on Jesus, trusting that *for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28 ESV)*

Pause and Discuss: Why is the difference between putting your faith in Jesus and not a specific outcome so crucial to navigating life's storms?

Four Questions to ask to Anchor Your Faith:

1. What does Jesus know that I do not?

Jesus knew that they would arrive at the Gerasenes to minister to a man possessed by demons. He knew that he would die on a cross, not the Sea of Galilee, so that he might be resurrected. Lastly, Christ knew that the Spirit of God, the Heavenly Father, and he could not be separated. He slept well in that confidence.

2. What conclusions have I made that have been/are wrong?

They wrongly concluded that they were going to die because of the storm. (None of the people in the boats would die before God's appointed time. Psalm 139:16 states that God has written every day of our lives before one of them came about. This is true of any stricken with fear over sickness or calamity.)

Then, they thought Jesus to be ignorant of the strength and deadly capability of the storm. As Creator, there is nothing about creation that is unknown to Jesus. The Lord knows the coming and going, with everything in between, of every living being—even the common sparrow—and he knew this storm would not take their lives. Executioners in the not so distant future would do that for most of them, but not this night.

Lastly, they assumed that Jesus was not aware of their plight or worse, that he did not care. We often make the same assumption when we find ourselves in difficulty. "If Jesus loved me, he would not let this happen. If Jesus genuinely cared, I wouldn't experience the loss and pain. Jesus doesn't know what I am going through." As it did with the disciples, these assumptions miss the mark of truth. What we are certain of is:

- In Christ, we are never alone.
- Jesus knows what is happening; by his Spirit, he walks with through the crisis with you. He knows your pain, hurt, and sorrow.
- There is not a detail in our lives for which Heaven is not giving apt attention.
- Even though the outcome is uncertain for you, it is not uncertain to the Lord—even if the outcome is death. He knows how he is the remedy, the reconciler, and even the avenger to what is happening to you.

3. Am I doubting Jesus' power?

They did not know that Jesus had all authority in heaven and on earth. Facing and experiencing the storm, it seemed overwhelmingly powerful—the most powerful force. In reality, the all-powerful Creator and Sustainer of the sea was in the boat. The wind, sea, waves, and everything in and around them belonged to Jesus. He could make demands and commands of his creation as he saw fitting. The disciples were ignorant of this reality.

¹⁵ *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.*

¹⁶ *For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.* ¹⁷ *And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Colossians 1:15-17 ESV)*

4. What incites fear, and thus impotent faith, in my own heart?

Submit your fear to the one whose power invokes greater fear. Faith that gives us confidence during fearful times is based on the Bible's revelation about the power, love, and promises of God that are in Jesus. Trust in the power of Jesus. Trust in his love for you. Trust in his promises. When you do, you'll know that he is with you during the storm.

And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mark 4:41 ESV)

Pause and Discuss: Which of these four questions confronted your own faith?

Demons, Pigs, and Mercy

Mark 5:1-20 | November 07, 2021

Whether literal demons (evil spirits) or figurative demons (evil habits), Christ is able to mercifully deliver people from all bondage. What testimonies of deliverance have you heard that prove God's power to save?

Read Mark 5:1-20

What about the characters, the setting, the scenes, the narrative, etc. stand out to you?

As this chapter opens, Jesus and the disciples are arriving on the Eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, heading toward the "Decapolis" (a region comprising of ten Greek cities). The first person they encounter is a man possessed not with one demon, but a whole host of them. In a futile exchange, these demons face off against Christ. All of them are expelled from the man, possessing a huge herd of swine that stampedes straight into the sea. Recoiling from the loss of the animals and the power in front of them, the locals beg Jesus to leave, despite the visible proof of an effective exorcism in their midst!

Christ transcends all his creation and exercises full authority over the spiritual and physical world.

The demoniac they encounter would terrify anyone who encountered him. He possessed an unbelievable level of strength, bore scars all over his skin, and lived in tortured seclusion in a graveyard. However, neither his strength nor his grotesque afflictions intimidate Christ. He simply, yet boldly commands the unclean spirits to come out! Of course, this isn't the only instance of Jesus casting out demons. He does so in several other places, for "a prime purpose of Jesus' earthly ministry was to overcome the power of Satan.

This victorious ministry included His conquest of the demonic realm. This explains the fierce conflict between Jesus and these evil spirits while He was on earth” (F.F. Bruce). Jesus never has difficulty, nor does he show a hint of vulnerability, in dealing with demons. He is the Son of God through whom all things in heaven and on earth were made. What power does a creature have over the Creator? Jesus demonstrates his authority over evil spirits, and then transfers that authority to His disciples—an authority absolutely necessary for the task. Just read Acts 19:13-17!

Demonic oppression is one thing, but “in demon possession”—which cannot occur for those indwelt by the Holy Spirit—“a demon actually enters a human body and becomes dominant in controlling the person. This control includes that person’s voice as well as the demon’s propensity to seek embodiment” (J.F. Walvoord). So many demons had possessed this poor man that they could accurately refer to themselves as an army: “The Latin word “Legion” commonly known in Palestine, denoted a Roman army regiment of about 6,000 soldiers, though it probably also meant a very large number. To people under Roman domination the word no doubt suggested great strength and oppression” (J.F. Walvoord)

The man wasn’t living, only existing in a perpetual onslaught of demonic activity. That would change when a force stronger than his tormentors arrived! Regardless of how fearsome this “legion” was, it could never oppose the power of God. Jesus exhibits that very power, and also shows His authority over physical creation by allowing the demons to enter the pigs.

But why don’t we see dramatic showdowns like these today, in our region? It may be that demons largely resort to “quieter” activity in the Western world because it is now so given to a rejection of the existence of the supernatural. Quiet activity plays in Satan’s favor to keep everyone in unbelief. The major fruit of demonic labor is making everyone dismissive of the truth (or accepting of a counterfeit of it), assured of their own righteousness, and unmotivated regarding true worship and following Christ. Now this certainly is present in our sphere, and a good reminder that the warfare we wage is not against flesh and blood. We need Christ to move, meaning we must move to our knees and to his Word.

As we live lives committed to Christ, we can take comfort in knowing there is nothing in creation that escapes His authority. Furthermore, there is no sinner so disfigured and unclean as to be unhealable. Evil powers may even join forces, but they cannot win!

The Armor of God

The armor belongs to God and is given freely to you as a gift. However, it is a gift we must actively receive and lay hold of through faith. Additionally, we need to lay hold of all of God’s armor. He is giving out the entire set. To embrace one but not another is the height of folly—just as it would be on a physical battlefield. This age is evil. Sometimes the enemy puts extra pressure upon the children of God through temptation or persecution—and we know it’s only going to get worse. If we are to stand in this evil day and the evil days to come, then we must put on God’s armor.

Evil must be properly identified and handled, using God's means.

What's truly amazing about this passage is the audacity of the demons, as they not only oppose God but play games with Him to try and keep the body of their victim! The dialogue between Christ and the unclean spirits is fascinating, when one understands more about their techniques. "Ancient listeners to this account would have recognized the irony that these demons attempt to resist exorcism with gimmicks from an exorcist's bag of tricks. They attempt to control Jesus by pronouncing aloud his holy name. Knowing the names of demons was believed to give one control over them. Ironically, they try to invoke the name of God to protect themselves" (C.E. Arnold).

When addressing Christ, they recognize His divinity, yet refuse to honor him as God. In fact, they loathed him for it. A good reminder to us today that our enemy—and our very sin—hates our God and hates us. We should expect nothing else.

Jesus did not ignore his opponent nor did he dismiss the legion as a non-issue. The Son of God recognized the need in that moment to confront and engage his enemies. Likewise, as odd as it may seem to Western minds, we cannot expect to be able to simply dismiss our spiritual enemies. We must wear the armor of God, and live and think as those engaged in combat, for a battle rages on! Furthermore, we must call false teachings and sinful practices what they are: demonic corruptions of the beauty and truth of God. We must never settle for the attitude of the day that sees everything as "just another way of doing things." When Jesus sent the demons into the herd of pigs, it was as if to say, "you are unclean spirits, and it suits you to go into unclean animals!" God's word is our ultimate guide to help us understand what is truly evil and how to deal with it when it appears. Only a fool would say, "there is no evil among us!"

Discrepancy Between Matthew and Mark

Matthew, Mark, and Luke each highlight this story for different purposes. In Matthew, two demon-possessed men are in view in this miracle, whereas, in Luke and Mark only one appears in the narrative. Why? We do not know. Mark, who is likely a source for Luke's account, chose to focus on different details, namely the response of the one. It is unwise to speculate with any sort of dogmatism about the other man, but perhaps he represents the danger of desiring deliverance without fidelity. Either way, he was healed just the same which is a good reminder to us that we are to minister in love to others regardless of their response.

Christ is a far better Master than our old one.

The Scriptures do not tell us how this demoniac arrived in that horrendous condition, but he certainly did not get there overnight. Was he a reject or outlaw who had turned to the occult as a last resort? Had he lived a successful life beforehand?

Was he a victim of a long string of tragedies, whose desperate and impoverished situation left him practically a walking corpse, ready for demons to infest? We don't know, but it's clear that the demons within him didn't care for his well-being. On the other hand, Christ is the "Good Shepherd," and "the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (Jn. 10:11). Regarding his flock, Jesus says that "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand" (Jn 10:28). Can you imagine experiencing the drastic, instantaneous change from Legion as lord, to Christ as Lord? My prayer is not only that you can imagine it, but that you have experienced it firsthand through the salvation from sin offered freely in the person of Jesus Christ. Sin again and again proves to be a shoddy path that leaves its travelers in dismay and darkness.

This encounter was surely the defining moment of that man's life! Sadly, the village that saw and heard his transformation did not celebrate with him at all. It's the same today: whenever there is a true conversion, there will be varying reactions to the transforming power of Jesus. There's no guarantee the working of God will take place without any discomfort. Sometimes our allegiance to Christ means experiencing rejection from others. After all, Christ came not "to bring peace, but a sword...to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law" (Mt. 10:34-35). Still, it is infinitely worth whatever sacrifice a person must make to be made right with God. What is it like to live with assurance that no one can snatch you out of the Lord's hand? Is there any better Master for mankind than Jesus Christ?

Pause and Discuss: Which masters do people routinely substitute for Christ?

We have work to do.

It's a beautiful thing that this redeemed demoniac desires to be with his new master, as the mercy shown to him was unlike anything he had known before. But Jesus sends him back home, to tell "how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." Isn't that just like us? We long to be in the physical presence of our beloved Savior—which is far better—but according to his superior wisdom and sovereignty, we reside in this broken world ever-confident of his presence with us as we seek to carry out his mission. We have work to do. We are to "proclaim the excellencies of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9).

In Philippians 1:22-26, the Apostle Paul writes about being torn between staying and departing. But this tension is resolved by his realization that staying is more profitable to the kingdom of God. We must not lose sight of the big picture of redemption, in which Christ is the heavenly Head and we are his body on earth (1 Cor. 12:27). Jesus said "if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (Jn. 14:3). As we labor in faith, we look forward to this day.

The Might of Christ in the Pigs

John Piper

“The herd is called large so that when the demons go out from the [demoniac] into the herd and they all perish, we get the very clear sense of how big, how large, how serious [the] bondage was, and how even this was no problem for Jesus.

The fact that the demons pleaded to be sent into the pigs shows how much they hated roaming about in the world without any habitation. This seems to point to how evil they are, and how the maximizing of their evil comes from entering into any kind of being they can get their hands on to ruin their lives.

The demons could not have seen that their new habitation, the pigs, would suddenly run down the hill and all drown because if, in fact, they saw that coming, they wouldn’t have asked for it. That’s not what they were trying to do; they were trying to get a new place to live and do damage, not a place to be destroyed in the sea.

And from what we know of Jesus in the Gospels, he would have known what was about to happen, so that what they feared — namely, that he was here ahead of time to begin their final judgment — was, in fact, true. He had not let them escape into some lesser being for the misery they had brought on this couple of men, but he had appointed them to depart, as it turns out, without any habitation. The fact that it was lost in the sea points to the fact that he was sentencing them probably to the abyss.”

Eager Proactivity in Ministry

Entering Gentile territory, Christ models an eager proactivity in ministry for us to follow, and the passage ends with the healed demoniac doing that himself. The last two words we read are, “everyone marveled.” That was God’s purpose, as always: His glory in redemption! Don’t you think we should likewise say something or do something about what God has done? Why would anyone be quiet about embracing Jesus as Savior and Lord?

Encounters with the Source of Life

Mark 5:21-43 | November 14, 2021

Read Mark 5:21-43

What about the characters, the setting, the scenes, the narrative, etc. stand out to you?

In this chapter, Jesus and his disciples return to the Western shore of Galilee, where a multitude again surrounds them. That’s when the news of a deathly sick little girl reaches the ears of Jesus, carried on the lips of her father, a ruler of the synagogue named Jairus. He pleads with Jesus to come and “lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live.”

However, he is delayed in reaching this girl, being interrupted by a woman who had been sick for as long as Jairus' daughter had been alive! Having heard about Jesus, she acts in faith by reaching for his garment. The moment she touches it, she is healed. When the Lord finally arrives at the home of Jairus, his twelve-year-old daughter is already dead, but with a word and a touch, he raises her to life.

God does not show partiality.

What we need to see in this doubly miraculous account is that the two people seeking Jesus' help were extreme opposites. "Jairus is a male leader of the synagogue and Mark identifies him by name. The woman with the flow of blood is nameless, and her complaint renders her ritually unclean, making her unfit to enter into a synagogue or the temple. The two individuals come from opposite ends of the social and purity spectrum" (C.E. Arnold). Yet, neither of them receives priority on Jesus' schedule! In fact, the person far higher on the ladder of perceived importance was interrupted by the person lower. From this, we learn that no one is too small or too outcast to escape the Lord's attention; and moreover, the individual is never obscured by the crowd, no matter the size. Christ models repetitively that "many who are first will be last, and the last first," (Mk. 10:31). Everyone who believes receives the same generous gift of salvation from above, without favoritism.

Another thing we need to see is how 'scandalous' it is for Jesus to have conversation with the sickly woman in this setting. In Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus, Jeremias explains that in the sinful custom of that time "a woman was expected to remain unobserved in public... It was [considered] disgraceful for a scholar to speak with a woman in the street" (J. Jeremias). But Jesus, the Wisdom of God, and the woman not only converse, Jesus calls her "Daughter." "The affectionate title, Daughter (it's only recorded use by Jesus) signified her new relationship with him" (J.F. Walvoord). On this day, the kingdom of God grows by at least one, despite the best laid efforts of backwards customs!

Jesus' treatment of women was revolutionary. We see the same treatment in his care for the twelve-year-old girl. Unfortunately and appallingly, "it was typical that joy reigned at the birth of a boy, while the birth of a daughter was often greeted with indifference, even with sorrow" (J. Jeremias). But not so with Jesus. Every life, male or female, is fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God. Jesus set aside his day for this unnamed girl and moved toward her for her healing. Jesus demonstrates his compassion and consideration for all people, regardless of what sinful society says of them.

People often feel insignificant. We all know what it feels like to be ignored, as an individual or as members of an ignored group, some of us more than others. However, with God, everyone shows up on his radar. Why is this? Because "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). You will not find a person not made in God's image, and thus, you will not find a person outside his attention and love.

Our Value as Human Beings

The value of human beings is found solely in the fact we are made in the image of God. Intellect, athletic ability, money, weight, relationship status, career, gender, sin, nor race adds to or detracts from the simple truth that each of us are fearfully and wonderfully made.

This has many implications for us, but let's focus on these three:

1. Prejudice is not only counter to the gospel, which is for all, but the very fabric of Creation itself. It should be as far away from the hearts of God's people as possible.
2. Pray for all people for their salvation.
3. Love your neighbor as yourself—even those you might consider your enemies.

No faith, no blessing, no salvation.

Jairus shows faith in Christ, and he responds to that faith by addressing his need. Yet, following behind him is a woman by no means the picture of health, also ready to express faith. She is pale, weary-looking, and bundled in clothing to keep warm due to the sensation of coldness that comes with having low blood counts. But how will she demonstrate faith? It makes a lot more sense how the diseased woman does this when one understands that “in popular belief, the clothes of holy men, and especially the fringes, were thought to possess miraculous power” (C.E. Arnold). Of course, there is nothing miraculous about the clothing of Jesus - only his Person. He knew this, and wanted to make sure she did as well. He stops everything, identifies her, calls her daughter, and proclaims to her that her faith in him has made her well.

We only have divine help when we “call upon his name” (Ps. 105:1), for “without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Heb. 11:6). Jesus “does all the work” in this glorious passage, but not without those seeking him out first showing faith! Did the mourners at the home of Jairus show any faith in Christ? We read that “they laughed at him,” and that's probably why he didn't allow them to watch. If you want to experience the full glory of Christ in salvation ultimately revealed in the resurrection, you must come to him in faith.

In contrast with the blessedness of faith is the sin of unbelief, which is no small matter to God. Unbelief is just as deadly a sin now as it was in ancient times. In his sermon “The Method of Grace,” the revival preacher George Whitefield said unbelief “is the reigning, damning sin of the Christian world and yet the Christian world seldom will ever think of it” and that “we mistake a historical faith for a true faith, wrought in the heart by the Spirit of God.” That hits close to home! We not only live in an unbelieving world - there are many churches around us full of unbelieving members. Can anyone be saved from God's wrath without actually placing faith in him and repenting? Can anyone receive blessing and favor from God without placing faith in him? Remember: Faith is not in the outcome. The outcome is in the Lord's hands. Our faith is in Jesus.

Pause and Discuss: How are the woman and Jairus both pictures of active faith? What is the relationship between faith and action? How do they reinforce one another?

The unapproachable God approached us.

The single most important attribute of God for us to grasp is that he is “holy, holy, holy” (Is. 6:3). In the Old Testament, we find strict codes of worship and living that God’s covenant people were to follow, and these designated what was “clean” and “unclean.”

Regarding this woman with the flow of blood (a menstrual disorder), her “condition was abnormal, making her unclean all the time. It would not have been kept secret in a small village society. She was subject to regulations listed in Leviticus 15:25-31, which sought to prevent impurity from infringing on the realm of God’s holiness. As a bearer of such impurity, she was not permitted to participate in the religious feasts or enter the temple precincts, and she was excluded from normal social interaction for twelve years. Such an affliction must have caused her physical, psychological, social and economic suffering” (C.E. Arnold).

That would seem unfair, but God’s law required so much of her. Although somewhat strange to our ears, those were not arbitrary rules, but likely served the purpose of keeping his chosen people as healthy as possible - as a woman’s menstrual flow or a man’s seminal discharge could carry certain spreadable diseases. After all, such bodily processes are totally natural, as designed by God. Still, the woman’s touch should have rendered Jesus ritually unclean until the evening, as would be the case with him touching the dead body of that little girl. But that’s the glory of Christ, is it not? He makes forever clean the unclean by taking their uncleanness on himself, yet remaining forever pure! We could never do anything to cleanse ourselves of our unrighteousness, but “for our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). We must realize that it is through Christ and not works that we are saved (see Eph. 2:8-9) and brought near to God. It’s all God’s mercy. Mercy should fill our thoughts, flow from our lips, and guide our worship.

Christ is risen, and is “the Resurrection and the Life.”

It was not an uncommon thing for Jairus’ daughter to be deathly ill, as the “child mortality rate was high in this era. Sixty percent of children who survived childbirth died by their mid-teens.” In that horribly dark setting, Christ appeared to conquer death once and for all. Jesus said of Jairus’ daughter that she was “not dead but sleeping,” and he spoke of Lazarus in the same way (Jn. 11:11-15). From our mortal perspective, death is death - but from God’s perspective, death is really no more than sleep, as he is God over “the resurrection of life,” and “the resurrection of judgment” (Jn. 5:29).

So, when we encounter death we should follow Jesus’ words here: “do not fear, only believe.” How does it change one’s thinking and living to know that Christ is risen and shares his “risen-ness” with us? We may not see the miraculous healings and resurrections we read about here, but Christ still continues his restorative ministry today through his church. The healing reconciliation with God and newness of life he offers are available for “all who believe” (Rom. 3:22).

Voices from the Past:

Excerpt from The Nicene Creed (325 AD)

[We believe] in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven; he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and was made human. He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried. The third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures. He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead. His kingdom will never end.

Jairus' Daughter and the Christian Life

1. We were dead in our sins, but by God's grace we receive abundant and eternal life.
2. We are empowered by Christ to walk in his ways by his indwelling Spirit.
3. We are nourished by the spiritual food of communion with Christ in his Word and his Church.

⁵¹ Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." ⁵⁵ "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" ⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:51-58 ESV)

Reality Check

Mark 6:1-29 | November 21, 2021

Has there been a time when you received a reality check? What was the circumstance?

Read Mark 6:1-29

What about the characters, the setting, the scenes, the narrative, etc. stand out to you?

Expect opposition as you live for the glory of God.

The people of Nazareth—like so many today—knew Jesus the man, but completely missed the Son of God. To them he was an uneducated carpenter's son whose teaching was not worth listening to. Not only did they not receive it, "they took offense at him." The eternal Word of the Father, the source of all wisdom and reason, was derided as a nobody in his own hometown. They recognized the uniqueness of his teaching and his miracles, but opposed him nonetheless because of their lack of faith. This is important: if Jesus himself received opposition from those who witnessed more of his perfectly righteous life than anyone else, then we can expect to receive this same treatment. (Note: There are two types of opposition, one for sake of righteousness and the other on account of being a jerk. When opposed, since we are not sinless as Christ was, we need to make sure it's a case of the former and not the latter).

In John 15:18-21 Jesus warns his disciples that persecution will be in their lives because they follow the one the world wished to persecute, Jesus our Master. However, in the midst of great opposition and burden, we can have peace because Christ has overcome the world (John 16:33). Not only can we have an enduring peace throughout hardship, but we can also have joy. Jesus said in Matthew 5:11-12, Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. As we have been joined together with Christ through faith, we are also, therefore, joined with him in the world's persecution.

Reflect and Discuss: How do we prepare for persecution?

You cannot discard faith.

God, in his providence, has designed salvation so that his sovereignty and man's will works hand in hand. In Mark 6:5-6 we see this to be the case – he could do no mighty work there... because of their unbelief. Notice how Jesus' reaction to the townsmen's unbelief (v. 6) reflects their reaction to Christ's teachings (v. 2). If our response to Christ and his teaching is rejection, then his response to us will be the same (Matt. 10:32-33). According to his mercy, God has sovereignly appointed some for eternal life, yet at the same time only those who humble themselves and come to Christ in surrendered faith will be saved (see Acts 13:43-48). God has his work in salvation. We have ours. We don't have to understand it fully, but we should not diminish either. Both are vital.

Counter-cultural Teachings of Christ

The teachings of Jesus were scandalous in the eyes of his fellow Nazarenes. “The word translated “took offense” is *skandalizomai*, a member of the word group from which the English word “scandal” is derived. His teachings were counter-cultural then and have remained to this day. The biblical understanding of marriage, the authority and sovereignty of God, the creation account, keeping ourselves sexually pure until marriage, and the total depravity of man are all offensive to this culture. Let us not shy away in fear of opposition, instead let us stand firm on biblical truths with all humility.

Faith—specifically faith in Jesus Christ—then, stands at the core of the Christian life. We enter into the Christian life through faith in Christ and we live lives of faith in the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us. Both the beginning of our salvation and the continuing of our salvation are the work of God, but they are not solely the work of God—that is we have a role to play, and that role is faith. We participate through faith as we ground our work in the work of God.

Do you want to be saved from sin and death? Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, who died for your sins and rose again that you might be forgiven and enjoy eternal life with him.

Do you wanted to be delivered from sin’s influence in your life? By faith, draw near to God as you crucify the old self and lay hold of the new nature you have in Christ.

Do you want to see the lost awakened to new life? Believe that God desires all people to be saved, he is already working in ways you cannot see, and he hears your prayers for salvation. Then, share the gospel believing that it is the power of God for salvation.

Believe in Jesus. Believe his Word. Know his Spirit dwells within you and the very nature of Christ flows through your veins. Live by faith in this glorious reality. May it not be said of MeadowBrook that he could not do a mighty work here because of our unbelief.

The Lord provides for our needs.

Faith is also important for us in the hardships of our life and mission. As Christ sent off his disciples, he left them with a list of things not to bring with them. Typically, when packing for a trip, you have long lists of things you cannot forget to have with you. Why did Jesus tell the disciples to leave behind things that were common, if not crucial, for travel? In this particular instance, Jesus desired to teach his disciples how intimately the Lord knows every detail of their lives and how he meets their every need. This first missionary journey was an opportunity to practice faith in all they had seen in and been taught by Jesus, and as a result, they witnessed the utter faithfulness of God. As they relied on the Lord’s provision, he met their needs as they arose. More missionary journeys were to come where they would be able to bring supplies, but their reliance on Christ would be just the same. Jesus was preparing his disciples to lay the foundation of his church—a job that would require their total dependence on the Lord.

After experiencing the faithfulness of God during a time when they had no other option, they returned to Jesus full of joy and excitement to share with him all that God had done (Mark 6:30). There will be several times in our lives where we feel the immediacy of our need. Our circumstances feel as if we have nothing but what's on our back. Whether that's the loss of a job, repeating a seemingly hopeless conversation with a straying loved one, infertility, lack of purpose, or one of the many dark nights of the soul, we all go through situations where we are forced to recognize our total reliance on God.

The disciples needed God's care in one way, John in an entirely different way. Both had to rely on God. God provided for them both, albeit with vastly different outcomes. Our hope is not in the outcome, but in our loving Lord who raises the dead. So, when we are in these situations, we can settle here: God is with you. God is for your good and his glory. God is in control. He knows what he is doing, and he will provide according to his wisdom—in both death and deliverance.

The Bible speaks often of how the various trials we meet in this life will result in joy, maturity, steadfastness, and hope, as well as praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ (James 1, Romans 5, 1 Peter 1). As we rely on Christ's provision and goodness through various trials, we will experience the joy of knowing God and being known by the Son of God who shared in our sufferings. May this create in us endurance and hope.

Reflect and Discuss

How have you experienced the faithfulness of God to provide your needs in your life?

How does reflecting on the past faithfulness of God give us hope in present trials?

How does the promise of heaven and everlasting life with God instill endurance in you?

John is the forerunner of Christ – our resurrected King.

John the Baptist was a faithful man of God whose purpose in ministry was to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 3:2, ESV). He knew that his ministry was meant to point others towards the one who is mightier than [he], whose sandals [he is] not worthy to carry (Matt 3:11, ESV). Even in his death, he points to the greater one who can save.

We read in Mark 6:29 that upon hearing of John's death, his disciples came and laid his body in a tomb. This is similar to the language in Mark 15:46, talking about Christ's burial. As we know, Jesus' story does not end with his burial like John's does. We know that only three days later, Jesus gloriously rises from the dead. It is only because of Jesus' resurrection that John, and anyone else who believes in Jesus as Savior and Lord, will rise from the dead unto glory and righteousness!

John's life was not about himself, his follower count, nor the renown of his name. His entire purpose was to proclaim the only name that can save – Jesus of Nazareth.

John's confidence to proclaim truth as he confronted Herod's sin did not come from within himself, but it came from his understanding of his place in God's story and its glorious final chapter. There is more joy, more confidence, more glory when we lay down our life, our will, for Jesus and the kingdom of heaven. May our message to others and our lives proclaim as John's did – Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. May our faith in this truth strengthen us as we face the brokenness in this world.

Reflect and Discuss

***What is the relationship between repentance and courage?
How has the Lord grown your faith through adversity?***

Jon Bloom: Unbelieving Family Members

“So as we assess the role our weak, stumbling witness plays in our family members’ unbelief, let’s remember Jesus — not even a perfect witness guarantees that loved ones will see and embrace the gospel. We must humble ourselves and repent when we sin. But let’s remember that the god of this world and indwelling sin is what blinds the minds of unbelievers (2 Corinthians 4:4).

The story of Jesus’ brothers can actually give us hope for our loved ones. At the time his brothers claimed that Jesus was “out of his mind” (Mark 3:21), it must have appeared very unlikely that they would ever become his disciples. But eventually they did! And not only followers, but leaders and martyrs in the early church.

The God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” shone in their hearts “to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of” their brother, Jesus (2 Corinthians 4:6).

So take heart! Don’t give up praying for unbelieving family members. Don’t take their resistance as the final word. They may yet believe, and be used significantly in the kingdom!

And while they resist, or if they have died apparently unbelieving, we can trust them to the Judge of all the earth who will be perfectly just (Genesis 18:25). Jesus does not promise that every parent, sibling, or child of a Christian will believe, but he does painfully promise that some families will divide over him (Matthew 10:34–39). We can trust him when it happens.

It is moving to hear James refer to his brother as “our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory” (James 2:1). Can you imagine what this phrase meant for James? “The Lord of glory” had once slept beside him, ate at his dinner table, played with his friends, spoke to him like a brother, endured his unbelief, paid the debt of his sin, and then brought him to faith. It may have taken 20 to 30 years of faithful, prayerful witness by the Son of God, but the miracle occurred: his brothers believed. May the Lord of glory grant the same grace to our beloved unbelievers.”

<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/jesus-also-had-unbelieving-family-members>

Do you recognize Jesus?

Mark 6:30-56 | November 28, 2021

Who is the most famous person you have ever met? How did that meeting come about?

Read Mark 6:30-56

What about the characters, the setting, the scenes, the narrative, etc. stand out to you?

There is a running joke regarding the pro-skater Tony Hawk: no one recognizes him in public. If you do not know of Tony Hawk, he is the Michael Jordan (or LeBron James if you like to be wrong) of skateboarding. What's funny is that most people say he looks like Tony Hawk but don't recognize him to actually be Tony Hawk—and this oftentimes happens in skate parks!

In Mark 6:30-56, Mark details three stories that carry a dual emphasis. First, Mark reveals Jesus as the greater Moses, the promised Messiah who is none other than God in the flesh who heals and satisfies his people. The second is the disciples being utterly oblivious to that fact. Like skaters who fail to recognize Tony Hawk, Jesus' disciples should have been the first ones to recognize Jesus. However, as Mark's gospel makes abundantly clear, this was simply not the case. The good news is that for all but one of them, they ultimately did recognize him and went on to great ministry in his name throughout the world. Gratefully—for them and for us—the Lord was patient with their ignorance.

The significance of these narratives and how they reveal Christ has significant implications for both the church today and for eternity. Let's look at three ways Jesus is revealed in these narratives:

Jesus is the greater Moses who gathers, orders, and satisfies his people through the apostolic teaching.

This is the only miracle Jesus does—outside of the resurrection—that is recorded in all four gospels (Brooks). The feeding of the 5000 is important, both to the Spirit who inspired the gospels and to the early church. Much could be gleaned from this miracle, but I want to focus on how it specifically reveals Christ as the Greater Moses.

Moses was top-dog in the Old Testament. He was used by God to bring salvation in the exodus. He received the Law from God and delivered it to the people. These not only stand at the very beginning of the Bible but also form the framework by which the remainder of the Older Testament was to be read and understood. If you do not know the Law, you will miss the significance of the historical narratives, the psalms, the proverbs, and the prophetic utterances of the Old Testament. Honestly, you'll miss much of the significance of the New Testament as well. Moses recognized that there was a prophet coming after him who would be far superior. In this story, Mark is revealing that prophet to be none other than Jesus Christ.

Mark makes many parallels to Moses in this narrative: the setting of the wilderness (Exodus 16:1), the reference to Jesus viewing his fellow misguided Israelites as being sheep without a shepherd (Numbers 27:15-17), the disrespect of Jesus' disciples (Exodus 16:2), the grouping of people into fifties and hundreds (Exodus 18:21), and the provision of bread (Exodus 16:14-18). Mark labors to communicate to his reader through these parallels (and contrasts) that Jesus is in fact the greater Moses, the one promised of old.

As the greater Moses, Jesus gathered the people to himself rather than turn them away and ordered them that they might receive the bread he was providing from his disciples. This was no mere practicality; this was significant and points to the local church. The church is ultimately God's gathered people. It is the congregation of those the Lord has gathered unto himself—those shepherdless sheep in need of the satisfaction God freely provides. He did not turn us away but joyfully brought us near through the message of the gospel—or in other words the apostolic teaching. In the reception of this gospel message, we now know abundant satisfaction as the people of that desert feast were satisfied.

However, the significance is not merely for the church age, but for the age that is to come. After the Lord gathers his people to himself, he will take his place on the throne of his kingdom and feast with his people—not in the wilderness but in the capital. The satisfaction that will be known then will persist for eternity, ever-full, yet ever-increasing. In that day, we will know nothing of want spiritually, emotionally, mentally, or physically. We will be perfectly and completely satisfied in Christ.

What does it mean for Christ to satisfy someone?

How does one develop this taste for the bread Christ provides?

Jesus is the Great I AM, God in the flesh who encourages us.

Jesus immediately dismisses his disciples, then the crowd, so that he could spend time with his Father in prayerful solitude. Afterwards he sees his disciples struggling on the Sea and begins to walk on the water toward them. It is unclear what is meant by the phrase “he meant to pass by them.” On one hand, it could be an example of the humanity of Christ in a Philippians 2 manner, or on the other, it could be a reference to an intentional passing by in order to be seen. Either way the point remains: the disciples, upon seeing him, should have immediately recognized him as God in the flesh. Commentator Kent Hughes notes that, “Jesus' approach seems to be a conscious appropriation of the description of God in the Book of Job.”

God is wise and all-powerful. Who has opposed him and come out unharmed? ... He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea. (Job 9:4, 8 CSB)

Even Jesus' response to his fearful disciples indicates this truth. Jesus says "Take heart. I am. Do not be afraid." (my translation). What the ESV translates as "It is I" are actually only two words—specifically the same two Greek words used to translate the Hebrew expression of God's self-revelation to Moses in the burning bush: I AM. Mark then records the disciples lack of understanding about both this incidence and the feeding of the 5000, and how this lack of understanding corresponded with a hardness of heart.

They missed the fact they were staring at God in the flesh. Again, this carries over the idea of Jesus being the greater Moses. Moses was God's spokesperson, Jesus is God himself, fully made flesh. Both the humanity and deity of Jesus are vital. He possesses the fullness of the divine nature as the second person of the Trinity and in being born to the Virgin Mary he took on the fullness of human nature, yet both are united in one person, Jesus Christ. Only God could forgive sins, yet only a man could fulfill God's law and bear the curse of sin as a substitute. To diminish either the humanity or deity of Christ is to depart from the gospel.

Thankfully, as the God-Man, Jesus did not condemn his followers. He comforted them. This is such good news for us today, for we know that there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. We experience conviction. We are challenged, but we are not condemned and know we have eternal life. No external circumstance should provoke us to fear. We can always take heart in our God and brother Jesus Christ.

Why is it important for Jesus to be both fully God and fully man? How does that encourage us?

Jesus is our Great Healer.

Mark contrasts the disciples' lack of recognition with the immediate recognition of who Jesus was by the townspeople. Upon that recognition, they acted. They scoured the surrounding area and brought the sick to him that they might be healed. They knew the healer, so they brought the sick.

This should both comfort us and guide us in ministry. In the economy of God, Jesus was only offering a preview of the physical healing to come in the fullness of his kingdom. We can experience his healing today in part by being fully healed of the disease of sin with the hope that every illness and death will ultimately be defeated at the restoration of all things. Knowing that our God is a God who heals, it is good to ask him for such healing—as long as we ground our faith not in a certain outcome but in the one who heals. Lastly, the model of Christ the Great Healer should guide our ministry. As the towns people brought the sick to Jesus, we should labor intensely to bring the lost to Christ. They have an illness only he can cure. Bring them to the Great Physician!

Who is the Lord placing in your life that you might proclaim to them the message of eternal life in Jesus Christ?

Take time to pray for and invite them to one of our upcoming Christmas services: either Sunday Mornings, the Nights of Worship, or Christmas Eve. And do not forget to ask God to give you an opportunity and the boldness to share your faith with them!

Seven Principles for Ministry

Remember: if you are saved, Christ has made you a minister of the gospel. Everyone in Christ is a minister. Ministry is not the work of a select few or “the staff.” Ministry is the work of the entire body of Christ.

The narrative of Mark 6 provides many principles for effective ministry. Here are seven of them:

- 1. Rest is important, plan it.** God did not create you to be God. You are not all-powerful. You cannot do everything. You need rest.
- 2. People are more important.** Your plans for rest may not be what God has planned for you. Nothing is an excuse for lack of compassion to your fellow man.
- 3. Prayerful solitude is vital to ministry among others.** To be effective with others, you need time alone with the Triune God. Jesus pulled away, setting an example for us to follow.
- 4. We must do the work, but only Jesus makes it effective.** The disciples fed the 5000, but they really did not feed the 5000. They passed out the bread and fish, but Jesus did the real work. Labor hard but in faith, knowing that apart from Christ you can do nothing.
- 5. Organize your work.** The disciples did not feed the 5000 haphazardly. They ordered them into groups, had them sit, and then began to work. Planning is helpful to conducting ministry. Avoiding planning is not more spiritual. Oftentimes it’s just laziness.
- 6. Feed the people the bread of life.** John makes explicit the connection between the bread and the person giving the bread. Jesus is the bread of life. Feed others that good bread, not the junk food of your own opinions.
- 7. Bring the sick to Jesus!** Evangelize the lost. Plain and simple. Know the gospel and share it.

AG Sertillanges on Solitude

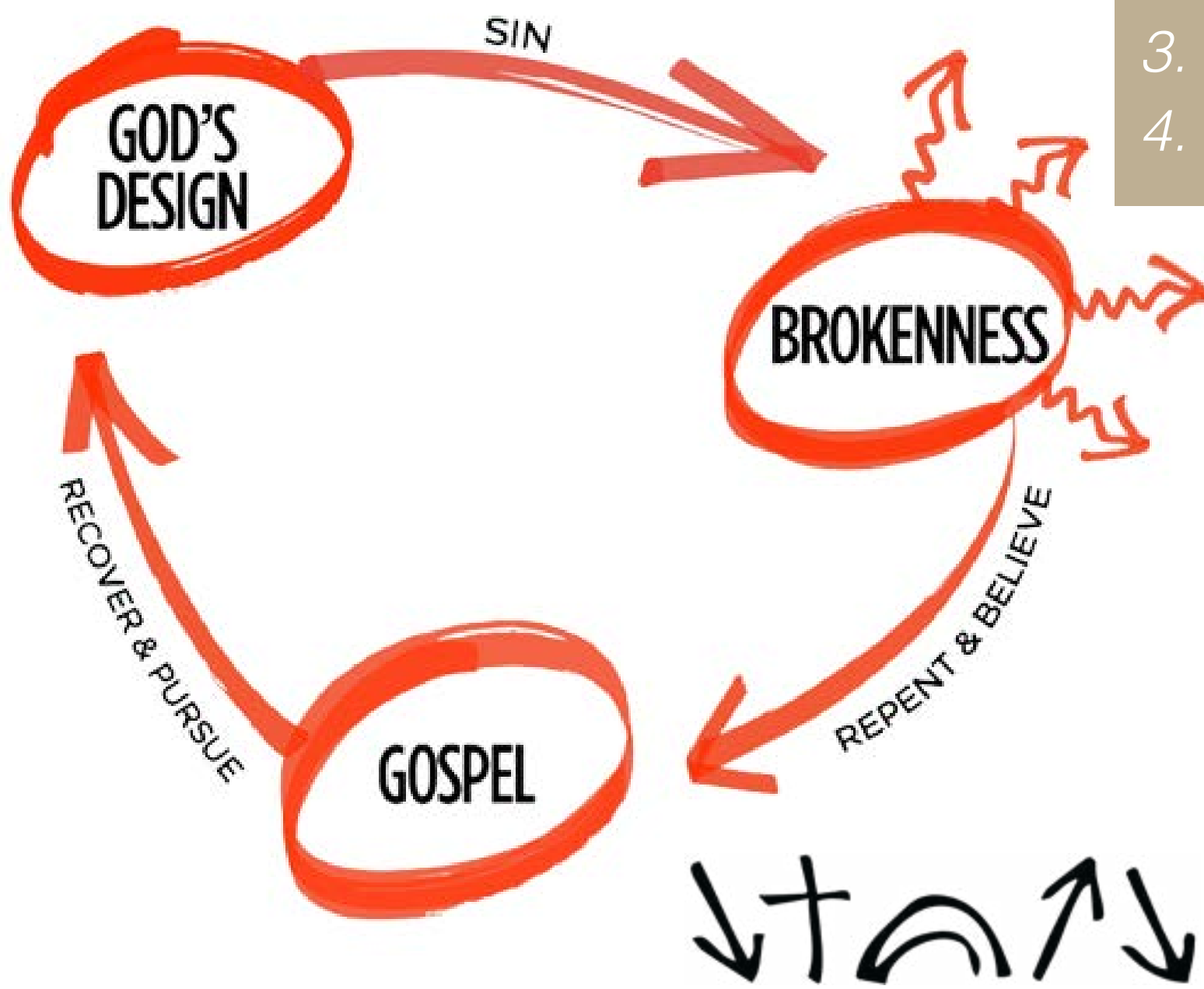
“Jesus shows us truly that one can be entirely recollected, and entirely devoted to others—entirely given to men and living entirely in God. He preserved His solitude: He touched the crowd only with a soul of silence, to which His words were like a narrow doorway for the interchanges of divine charity.”

Thinking Well

The disciples in this story lacked understanding that was reflective of the hardness of hearts. This makes a connection between the mind and the heart. Both are to be used to love God, and thus love others. The mind and heart are not enemies, but friends. Read the connection John Piper makes on this subject:

“Thinking is dangerous and indispensable. Without a profound work of grace in the heart, knowledge—the fruit of thinking—puffs up. But with that grace, thinking opens the door of humble knowledge. And that knowledge is the fuel of the fire of love for God and man. If we turn away from serious thinking in our pursuit of God, that fire will eventually go out.”

Appendix: How to Share the Gospel



Brokenness...

1. With God.
2. With Self.
3. With Others.
4. With Creation.

³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, (1 Corinthians 15:3-4 ESV)

²¹ And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, ²³ if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister. (Colossians 1:21-23 ESV)

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21 ESV)

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16 ESV)

Appendix: How to Share the Gospel

Sharing your faith can be intimidating. Nothing makes me as nervous as entering into a conversation where I know I am planning to share the gospel. This feeling is amplified many times over if the person is close to me. Certainly, I believe spiritual warfare is at work here, but also fear. Fear of losing a relationship. Fear of rejection. Fear of appearing stupid. Fear of saying the wrong things.

None of those fears are from the Lord.

So, with that said, how do we overcome this inertia pulling us to inaction? I believe these three practices will help shake us out of idleness and into action:

1. Pray for God's help and for opportunities to share our faith.
2. Pray specifically for lost people by name.
3. Practice sharing your faith.

We have the only message of eternal salvation in the world, and God has sovereignly ordained to redeem his people through the prayer and evangelistic efforts of his church. This world is in darkness. We know the cure. And no one else is there to tell them. We must pick up the mantle and do the work of the evangelist.

Assuming you know how to perform steps 1 and 2, let's focus on step 3: practicing sharing your faith. How does one practice? What do we practice? How often do we practice and with whom?

Well, with someone close to you (a spouse, or fellow Life Group member) and as often as needed, practice by focusing on the following three movements needed in a gospel conversation.

Movement One: The Transition

This is perhaps the hardest movement to make. You're in conversation and you want to move it to the gospel. How can you do this? There are many ways, but my favorite way is inspired by a quote from Augustine, which states in prayer that "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee." So, to transition to the gospel is to identify the restlessness and then transition to the source of rest. They might be sharing a personal struggle, an exasperation, or simply a mild complaint. Any element of brokenness is an opportunity to point to the mender of all things. It may look something like this:

I am so sorry that X is happening. I remember when I was going through (X or a situation similar to X). It was disorienting. But do you mind me sharing with you what helped me find peace?

Movement Two: The Gospel

Now you share the gospel. You highlight God's good design in creation, mankind's rebellion, the resulting brokenness, the solution offered in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the eternal Son of God who took on full humanity for our redemption, the Son who lived for our righteousness and died for our sins, who bore our curse in his death, but was raised by the Spirit of God on the third day, who is now in the presence of the Father and who is coming back again to judge the living and the dead. Now, all those who turn from their sins and surrender in faith to Jesus, the Christ, the Son of Living God will be saved and receive eternal life. The Spirit of God will take up residence within them, giving them new life, and when Jesus returns, will be raised as Jesus was raised and live forever in his new creation. I like to use Three Circles to guide this conversation but any tool or no tool can be used. The key is to verbally share the message of salvation.

Movement Three: The Invitation

Finally, you want to invite them to respond. No need to pressure, but give them an opportunity to trust in Jesus as both Savior and Lord and call upon his name for salvation. If they do respond in faith, encourage them to take the next step of believer's baptism.



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MeadowBrook seeks to CONNECT people to Christ and His church, GROW them as disciples to be disciplers, and equip them to SERVE through missions, ministry, and worship, all to GLORIFY God.

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