

ON THE MOVE WITH JESUS, IN MARK

A unique, verse-by-verse,
life-application commentary
by Terran Williams

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ABOUT THIS COMMENTARY

YOU MAY OWN A BIBLE, BUT DOES YOUR BIBLE OWN YOU?

It's not enough to own a Bible. Our Bible should own us. After all, it is the main way God speaks to us.

Did you know that God put every verse in the Bible so that your mind could be totally renewed, so that your life could be deeply changed, and so that your calling could be fulfilled? (See 2 Timothy 3:16-17 if you're not persuaded.) That's why reading the whole Bible again and again is one of the most important things we can do.

Sometimes, however, the Bible is hard to understand. That's why commentaries are so useful. Most commentaries help you understand the *technical* meaning of each verse. These commentaries do a little of that too, but more than that, they focus on the meaning of each verse *for our lives now*.

WHAT'S UNIQUE ABOUT THIS COMMENTARY?

Most importantly, it helps you to find *the meaning for your life now* in every single verse of the Gospel of Mark.

It is written with 21st century everyday people in mind.

It builds on the scholarship of brilliant theologians and commentaries, but doesn't focus on the exhausting technicalities that fill most commentaries.

It comes with a Group Guide so that you can explore Mark along with others.

A SUGGESTED APPROACH TO GOING THROUGH MARK

Make time every day. Allocate as much time as you need to really hear from God for your life. Read until you are full – don't just *snack* on the Bible, rather enjoy a *solid meal*.

Take your time as you go through Mark, starting at chapter one. It doesn't matter if you do the whole Bible in a year, or in five years, just as long as you're *steadily* moving through it.

Trust God to speak to you every time you read the Bible. Expect to receive just what you need for each day. Invite the Holy Spirit to be your primary teacher as you read.

Keep two questions in your mind as you read: 1) What do these verses mean? 2) What do they mean for my life now? *If you can't find solid answers to either of these two important questions then refer to this commentary.*

Carry into your day what you sense God saying to you. Perhaps write down the main things you sense God telling you each day. Pray to God about what he has just said to you. Make any needed adjustments in your heart and life as God reveals more and more of his Word, will and ways to you.

MAIN SOURCES USED

Special thanks to (and warm commendations of) ...

The 'Today's New International Version' Bible (which is the updated version of the NIV)

Michael Eaton's Preaching through the Bible: Mark

Tom Wright's Mark for Everyone

Donald Guthrie's New Bible Commentary: Third Edition

David Guzik's online commentary (www.enduringword.com)

ABOUT THE GOSPEL OF MARK

God has given us four windows into the earthly life of Jesus. They are the Gospels. Each author captures a different aspect of Jesus. Mark's Gospel is the shortest, and was also the one written first. It appears that the Gospels of Luke and Matthew used Mark as a major source in the writing of their own Gospels.

"Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). That means that though Mark describes the life of Jesus 2000 years ago, his character and wisdom and power are still available to us. His earthly disciples knew him physically, but we get to know Jesus with the help of the Spirit. Though we don't know everything we'd like to know about Jesus' life on earth, God made sure we'd know enough for the Holy Spirit to give us insight into, so that we too can say that we "know" Jesus.

The Gospel is written by Mark. Mark was the son of a widow named Mary whose home was used by the earliest Christians (see Acts 12:12). Mark was friends with the apostle Peter, from whom he no doubt drew most of his information. He wrote it fairly soon after the events described, probably in the AD50s.

One thing that sticks out in the Gospel of Mark is its pace. Again and again, the word "immediately" is used (40 times in fact!). We see Jesus packing a whole bunch of travel, ministry and teaching into short periods of time. Jesus is a man on the move. That's why this commentary is titled, *On the move with Jesus in Mark*.

OUTLINE OF THE GOSPEL OF MARK

1:1-20 - The beginning of Jesus' ministry

1:21-3:6 - Jesus' authority begins to arouse opposition

3:7-6:13 - Jesus withdraws to teach his disciples

6:14-8:26 - A further outreach with even greater rejection

8:27-10:52 - Jesus teaches his disciples while travelling to Jerusalem

11:1-15:47 - Entry into Jerusalem and the events that led to his death

16:1-8 - Jesus rises from the dead

16:9-20 - A later addition to the Gospel

EXPERIENCING JESUS:

THERE ARE FOUR MAIN WAYS THAT GOD SEEMS TO SPEAK TO US THROUGH THE GOSPELS.



1) In some parts of Mark, God highlights to us the wonderful and awesome uniqueness of Christ as Lord and Saviour. When we read these sections, we realize that we certainly can't imitate him in these regards. All we can do is bow down in humility, trust and surrender. Insights based on these parts are colour-coded blue.



2) In other parts of this Gospel, God reveals aspects of Jesus' character and ministry that we can imitate. We can literally be inspired to follow his example. And amazingly, we have the Spirit of Christ in us making it possible to actually do just that. Insights based on these parts are colour-coded green.



3) In yet other parts of this book, God reveals to us pure wisdom through the recorded teachings of Jesus to his disciples, and to the crowds, and to us. Insights based on these parts are colour-coded red.



4) Lastly, the Gospels at times allow us to see Christ through the eyes of people, whether friends or foes. By looking at how these people responded to Christ, we can learn both how and how not to respond to Jesus ourselves. Insights based on these parts are colour-coded orange.

MARK CHAPTER ONE

ICON SUMMARY: the four main ways God speaks to us through the Gospels



something about Jesus' uniqueness and Lordship that shows he is worthy of our devotion, trust and surrender



something about Jesus' character or ministry that we can imitate



something Jesus taught that we can understand or apply to our lives



insights we can apply based on the way various people responded to him

JESUS PREPARES FOR MINISTRY (1:1-9)

John the Baptist prepares the way

1 The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God,



A NEW DAY DAWNED ON THIS PLANET WHEN JESUS ARRIVED.

This verse tells us where the story begins. The phrase “the good news” can also be translated “the Gospel”. The Gospel essentially is that Jesus is the Messiah! It’s the news that God has acted decisively in the coming of Jesus, and that since his coming everything is different.

That’s where it begins for all of us: we hear the “good news” that God has done something to change the world, and to change us in unimaginable ways. It already has been done. All we need to do is believe it. It’s not a philosophy, which we have to study. It’s not a challenge, which we have to strive to do. It’s not an experience, which we have to feel. It’s news – great news – and all we have to do is believe it.

² as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

*“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way” [Malachi 3:1]—*

³ “a voice of one calling in the wilderness,

*‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him’.” [Isaiah 40:3]*

⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.



GOD WOKE THE WORLD UP TO THE ANTICIPATION OF THE SOON-TO-COME MESSIAH.

Sometimes a new day starts very gently. Other times, a striking shaft of light or a frightening alarm clock wake us up. That captures John the Baptist's ministry – he “woke people up” to the reality that the Messiah was coming soon, and that they'd better get ready.

Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 are two verses that prophesied that a special prophet would usher in the Messiah. It turns out that Jesus' own cousin, John, was that man.

For centuries, the Jews had been waiting for the Messiah to come. They didn't really know what to expect, although the majority of them assumed that the Messiah would be a political one, who would deliver them from their long history of political oppression at the hands of the Romans. There was much curiosity about the Messiah – would he be an ordinary person, or would it be God himself coming (see v3)? John the Baptist was not totally sure either, but one thing he knew for sure: The Messiah was interested in changing their hearts and lifestyles. In other words, he was going to be a *spiritual* Messiah. John called Jewish people to be baptized as a way of turning their lives away from sin and towards God. But why was John telling them to be baptized? The probable answer is that, in the mind of Jews at that time, baptism was a symbol of how the Jews historically had fled from Egypt and had crossed through the Red Sea and, in so doing, had turned toward God and the promised land. As they got baptized they would turn their backs on all the competing attractions in life, and would turn toward God and the promised Messiah with fresh devotion.

In verse 6 we see that John was an eccentric prophet – much like the travelling Elijah of old. His life was totally devoted to calling people to get ready for the coming Messiah. Jesus was soon to come – first to the Jews – and then to the whole world. God was getting them ready, waking them up. As John preached his message, it “rang true” in their hearts. They sensed he was telling the truth, and they freshly turned away from their sins, and turned towards God in anticipation. A revival seemed to break out in the countryside (v5). The “red carpet” was being laid in the hearts of people, so that when Jesus came, they would be ready.

To this day, God is often at work in individual people, and in groups of people, to get them ready for his coming – so that when the message about Jesus is preached they respond whole-heartedly.

To this day, we also get to be like John the Baptist, pointing them toward Christ who is ready to come into their lives.

⁷And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸I baptize you with [or ‘in’] water, but he will baptize you with [or ‘in’] the Holy Spirit.”



JESUS DESIRES TO PLUNGE YOU INTO THE SPIRIT'S PRESENCE AND POWER.

John was an impressive figure who spoke powerfully in the Spirit and was able to cut people to the heart with his words, turning lives around. But he emphasized that he was nothing compared to the one who was far more powerful than him, the one who was deserving of far more honour and respect than himself.

As John plunged people into water it symbolized two things – one in the past, and one in the future. In the past, it spoke of the leaving of Egypt for the Promised Land. In the future, it spoke of how the Messiah would plunge people, not just in water, but in his Holy Spirit.

The fascinating thing is that Jesus never baptized (or plunged) anyone in the Spirit during his earthly life. It was only when he was exalted to the right hand of God that he began to pour out his Spirit, plunging believers into an experience of the Spirit's presence and power. This happened at Pentecost first (see Acts 2:1-4). Although the audience who heard John promise this plunging of the Spirit would have to wait for years to experience this for themselves, we – in the 21st century – have the amazing privilege of experiencing the Holy Spirit's immediate, empowering presence.

THE BAPTISM AND TESTING OF JESUS (1:9-14)

The baptism and testing of Jesus

⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.



JESUS' WATER BAPTISM CARRIES AT LEAST THREE MEANINGS FOR YOUR LIFE.

Why did Jesus submit to John's baptism "of repentance for the forgiveness of sin" (see verse 4)? He didn't need to repent of any sin. There are three main reasons he did this. First, he was setting an example for us to follow. Jesus and his disciples would baptize many people during his life. He would then instruct that all his followers throughout the centuries get baptized in his name (Matthew 28:19) as a form of initiation into the community of his disciples, and into the adventure of following him. Second, he was endorsing John's ministry. It was his way of saying, "Yes, this man who baptizes me really is the front-runner of the Messiah" (see 1:2). Third, he was identifying with the very human people he intended to save. Jesus wasn't aloof when he came to this planet; he was fully human, one of us. Although he didn't sin like us, he deeply empathized with our weaknesses and temptations.

We can learn three things for ourselves from Jesus' baptism: First, and most importantly, we need to get baptized in water as a form of obedience to him. Second, we need to submit ourselves to God-given leaders before we can expect a ministry of

our own (in which case we would still be wise to submit ourselves to God-given leaders). Third, we need to identify with the people we serve. We don't serve them from afar, but we 'get in there' and experience life alongside them.

¹⁰ Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."



YOU DESPERATELY NEED TO BE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT.

When the Bible speaks of heaven it doesn't speak of a far-off realm. It speaks of God being right here, right now. It speaks of God's spiritual reality hidden behind the curtain of physical reality. Heaven therefore speaks of the spiritual realm that immediately surrounds us. As Jesus came out of the water, the curtain between physical and spiritual reality was torn, and God made himself tangibly present to Jesus.

The Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove. Luke says that the Spirit literally took on the form of a dove (Luke 3:22). Doves speak of purity, innocence, peacefulness and gentleness. The Spirit is pure, innocent, peaceful and gentle.

In verse 8, we read that Jesus would one day "baptize people with the Holy Spirit". The word "baptism" can be translated "engulf, saturate, plunge and dunk". It speaks of an experience. Interestingly, two verses later, Jesus himself has a powerful experience of the Holy Spirit. It's not hard to see that the experience of the Spirit that Jesus would one day lead people into was connected to his own experience of the Spirit.

Why do we need to be filled with the Spirit? First, it's the Spirit's infilling *that allows us to experience the Father's undeserved love and affirmation*. Ephesians 1:5 tells us that when we put our trust in Christ we are adopted as his children. And John 17:26 tells us that the same love the Father gave to Jesus his son, he also gives to us as his adopted children. Think about that – it is as though the words, "This is my son / daughter whom I love" are spoken over us at the moment of our salvation. But it is not enough for us to just know this in our heads. God wants us to experience it in our hearts too. That's why Paul, in Galatians 4:6, connects Jesus' *experience* of the Father's love and affirmation with our *experience* of the Father's love and affirmation: "Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father'." Jesus in this sense is setting an example for us of enjoying the Father's love and affirmation. If he needed this then how much more do we need it? Second, it's the Spirit's infilling *that empowers us for ministry*. Jesus was being empowered for his ministry. Only once he was filled with the Spirit's power, did he dare launch into public ministry. If he, the all-powerful Son of God, needed the Spirit's power in ministry, how much more do we need the Spirit's power?

Luke captures a little detail about Jesus' baptism that the other Gospels don't: it says "and as he was praying ... the Spirit descended." In other words, Jesus seemed to specifically *asking* for the Spirit's power. If he asked, how much more should we ask God?



AT HIS BAPTISM, GOD ANOINTED AND ANNOUNCED JESUS TO BE THE PROMISED MESSIAH-KING.

Although there are similarities between Jesus' experience of the Spirit and ours, we must remember that his is unique in that his baptism was God's announcing him and anointing him as the earth's true king.

To understand this, we need to go back to king David. God did something interesting with him: he anointed (with oil, which also represented the Spirit's empowering) and announced him king in front of a few witnesses (who didn't understand fully what was happening), long before he actually ruled over the nation (see 1 Samuel 16:1,13). God had decided that he was Israel's true king and let him know. It took years before David eventually ruled the whole of Israel. In the same way, God was announcing Jesus as heaven and earth's true king, in front of a few witnesses (who didn't understand what was happening) and anointing him with the Spirit's power, before he would actually start ruling.

The main reason we know that this was Jesus' anointing as king is because of the words that came from heaven (or from "the spiritual realm"): "You are my Son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased." Why did God speak these words over Jesus? The most likely reason is that, other than describing the eternal love between the Father and the Son, it was a moment of kingly inauguration. Jesus was being made king. We can be sure of this, because the words strongly echo two well-known, ancient prophecies about the coming Messiah-king:

- o Psalm 2:6-8: "I have installed my King on Zion ... You are my Son, today I have become your Father. Ask of me and I will make the nations your inheritance ... You will rule them."
- o Isaiah 42:1: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight. I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations."

The main ministry of Jesus was to launch his kingdom (as we will see in verse 14 and 15), but it all started at this moment when God announced him as king.

Interestingly, eventually the disciples would understand that he really was the Christ (which is Greek for the "anointed Messiah-king") and their message to the world would be: "Jesus is Christ and Lord", which really is a way of saying, "Jesus is heaven and earth's true king. Bow down to him. Entrust your life to him. Give him your total allegiance."

¹² At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, 13 and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted [or tested] by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.



GOD ALLOWS YOU TO GO THROUGH DIFFICULT AND TEMPTING TIMES AS A WAY OF PREPARING YOU FOR MINISTRY.

The Spirit of God would soon lead Jesus into public ministry (see Luke 4:14) but before he was ready, he needed to go through some testing, so the Spirit first led him into the desert where he would experience the difficult circumstances of hunger, loneliness and danger (being surrounded by wild animals (v13)). In this vulnerable state he would also experience Satan tempting and taunting him.

Notice that it was not God tempting Jesus. James 1:13 makes it clear that God does not tempt us. However, God does *allow* us to be tempted. For example, God allows Job to be tested by the devil (see Job 2:1-6) and Jesus allows Peter to be tested by the devil (see Luke 22:31), but always for a greater purpose.

But why did God want Jesus to experience this difficulty and testing? There are two reasons: First, it was because he was showing us, the followers of Jesus, a very important insight: *secret victory over temptations precedes God releasing us into public ministry*. If we cannot be trusted in secret to do the will of God, then we cannot be trusted in public to do the will of God. Second, it was because he was showing us that *to the degree we are dependent on him to that degree we are also usable by him*. In the desert Jesus was hungry, endangered and tempted yet God gave him everything he needed to survive: God provided the Scriptures he needed to overcome the lies (as the Gospels of Matthew and Luke show), God provided the angels to protect him from the wild animals (much like he provided animals to protect Daniel in the lion's den). Probably more than anything else, it was his Father's words of love and promise (in verse 11) that carried him through this difficult time.

GOD IS DOING SOMETHING NEW (1:14-15)

Jesus announces the good news

¹⁴ After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ¹⁵ "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"



BE OPEN TO GOD GUIDING YOU THROUGH BOTH THE SPIRIT AND THROUGH CIRCUMSTANCES.

Jesus knew that when John's ministry of announcing the coming Messiah was over (and the moment he was put in prison it was over), it was time for him to go public,

which he did (v14). It's interesting to see that Jesus made decisions based on the Spirit leading him (verse 12), but also, he discerned the hand of God in circumstances, such as John's arrest. God still speaks to us, Jesus' followers, in the same way. We need to be open to God guiding us through both the still, small voice of the Spirit and through discerning his timing and his leading through changes in circumstances.



GOD IS DOING SOMETHING NEW, AND IT'S JUST SO WONDERFUL!

Jesus came as a messenger of "good news" (mentioned twice – v14,15) of God. In other words, he was delivering a message from God. This was his message: "The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

What does it mean that "the time has come"? It means that there had been a long history of expectation in Israel that God will act in a new way for the good of Israel and for the good of the world. They had, through the prophecies of the Old Testament, an expectation that God would one day overthrow the kingdoms of this world that were doing great harm to the people and would himself begin to rule with justice, peace, mercy and power. Jesus was saying, "This is the moment of fulfilment. Finally, and how privileged you are to be alive in this day, God is bringing in a new day."

CS Lewis in *The Chronicles of Narnia* describes the effect on Narnia when Aslan (who represents Christ) comes. Before he comes, Narnia is frozen over with winter and ice and fear. But then, as Aslan comes, suddenly the sun comes up, the ice begins to thaw and flowers begin to blossom. CS Lewis writes this: *'Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight. At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more. And when he bares his teeth, winter meets its death. And when he shakes his mane, we have spring again.'* CS Lewis catches the mood of Christ's coming – it's a spring-time.

Fascinatingly, Jesus announces his kingdom in Galilee (v14). Is this significant? Absolutely. Isaiah, chapter 9, connects the reign of the coming king (see v7) with "Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea" (v1). It's significant because these verses show Jesus fulfilling yet another prophesy.



GOD IS DOING SOMETHING NEW, AND HE'S DOING IT THROUGH JESUS.

What does he mean when he speaks about the arrival of the kingdom of God?

God had always been king of the universe and the world. But he had promised through the prophets that there would come a day when he would send to this world his Messiah-king (see Psalm 2:6-12, and Isaiah 9:2-7 for example) who would usher in a new age of justice, righteousness, healing, peace, joy and more. In this sense, God would *intensify* his rule in the world. He would become a far more hands-on king who would not only carry the title of king, would actually start turning the world around. The coming of the Messiah would signify the coming of God himself to the

planet. The Messiah-king on earth would both represent and partner closely with the God-king in heaven (for example, see Psalm 2:11 and 12 for an example of how people are called to both serve the LORD (that is God) and the Messiah-king at the same time).

Jesus was *directly* saying, "God is doing something new. The new age has arrived. God is beginning to rule. The world will never be the same again." But he was also *indirectly* saying something, and it would take time for people to figure out that this is what he meant: "The Messiah-king has arrived, *and I am he*. God is ushering in this new age *through me*. My kingdom is God's kingdom, and God's kingdom is my kingdom."



GOD IS DOING SOMETHING NEW, BUT IT WILL ONLY BE COMPLETED IN THE FUTURE.

Note that Jesus didn't say, "The kingdom of God has fully arrived." By using the phrase "at hand" he implies that it has only started to come, but much more is still coming. Let's explore this thought.

Through a study of the Scriptures the Jews would have understood that there were two main phases or ages in history: 1) the present age and 2) the future age.

1) ***The present fallen age*** is marked by rebellion against God, brokenness in every area of life, and by promise.

- By "rebellion against God" I mean that people and cultures everywhere don't know who God really is and, if religious, they merely have a "form of religion but deny its true power". Therefore, through ignorance about God they live in sin in every aspect of life.
- By "brokenness in every area of life" I mean that there is injustice and corruption politically, divisiveness and hatred socially, sickness and addiction physically, despair and anxiety emotionally, warped ideas and negativity mentally, indifference or deception spiritually, abuse and neglect ecologically and the list goes on.
- By "promise" I mean that since the coming of Abraham God began to speak of a better day for the world, a day when his kingdom would be ushered in. And even before the coming of Jesus this brought the Jewish nation hope when their circumstances were dire.

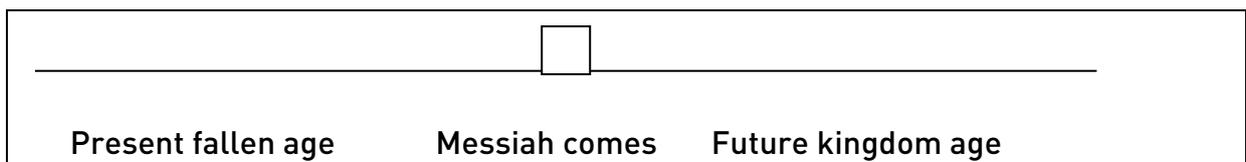
2) ***The future kingdom age*** is marked by true worship of God, wholeness in every area of life, and by fulfilment.

- By "true worship of God" I mean that people and cultures everywhere would come to know who God really is, and that they would live for his glory, and according to his direction.
- By "wholeness in every area of life" I mean that there would be justice and integrity politically, unity and love socially, health and freedom from addiction physically, joy and peace emotionally, clarity and hope mentally,

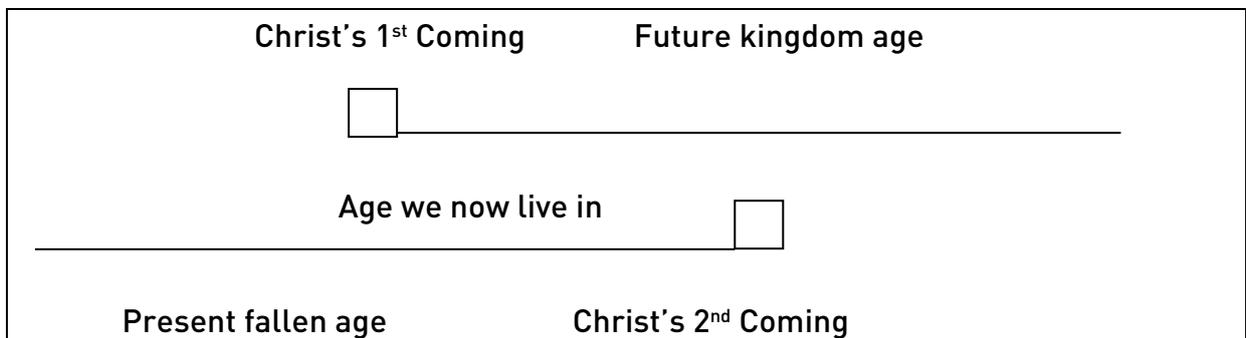
passion and reality spiritually, service and compassion ecologically – and so much more!

- By “fulfilment” I mean that all the promises would be fulfilled, and instead of having to look to the future for a better day, people would be able to enjoy all God had for them in the present.

But here is where the Jews of Jesus’ time went wrong: they thought that the Messiah would immediately end the present fallen age, and would immediately replace it with the future kingdom age. Their understanding looked something like this...



But this isn’t what happened. This was the surprise “twist” in God’s working in the world: Jesus, at his first coming, started the future kingdom age in the midst of the present fallen age. But only at his second coming will he totally end the present age, and fully bring in the future age. In other words, between the first and second comings of Jesus (the time we now live in) we live in an age of overlap. So, what really has happened looks like this...



That is why as Christians we are “caught between the ages”. Through passionate and persevering faith in and obedience to Christ, we already experience “in breakings” of the kingdom in the forms of changed lives, answered prayer, miraculously healed bodies, impacted political systems, renewed minds, renewed cultures and more. But we still live in a world full of sin and brokenness. Not all are healed. Not all prayers are answered. To use Paul’s words, we experience the apparent contradiction of having “access to the treasure of God’s power” even while we live “in jars made of clay” (i.e. in fragile, tempt-able bodies and minds). To use the words of the writer of Hebrews, even though we do not experience *all* of the coming age, we get to “taste” *some* of the powers of the coming age.

But the Jews of Jesus’ day didn’t understand that there would be two comings, and an overlap of ages. So, when Jesus eventually declared himself to be the Messiah,

they couldn't believe it because they had put all their hopes in a Messiah who would liberate them politically from the oppression of Rome. Their wrong expectations blinded them to the fact that the Messiah would come, first as a personal and spiritual Messiah (in his first coming) and then as a political Messiah (in his second coming).



GOD IS DOING SOMETHING NEW, AND YOU'RE URGENTLY INVITED TO GET IN ON IT.

Jesus doesn't just announce the arrival of the kingdom. He makes it clear that a person doesn't automatically connect to this kingdom. He says the kingdom is "at hand" meaning "within reach" which is a strong invitation to intentionally and thoughtfully take hold of it, to connect to it. And he tells us how. *First, we must repent.* In this context, this means "a transfer of allegiance from whatever else we were clinging, to a new allegiance to God and his rule". Jesus was in effect saying, "Give God your wholehearted loyalty. Bow down before him – and his Messiah-king – as your king. Yield yourself to his will. Entrust yourself to his care." *Second, we must believe the good news.* Such great news could easily be rejected as a fairytale. Or it could be embraced as the truth. Jesus insists that a new age really has arrived on this planet – and it has happened with his own coming – and that we should believe this.

Here are two analogies of what I mean by "get in on what God is doing in this world through Jesus":

Analogy one: Electricity had always been present in this world in the form of lightning, for example, but it had also been beyond our reach. Similarly, God has always been king but in some ways his kingdom had been distant from us because of our sinfulness. But then a way was found for electricity to become available to us, and power-lines began to be built through towns. Similarly, Jesus came to make the kingdom of God accessible and available to us. When power-lines were first built in ancient towns, people had a choice to connect their homes to it or not. The choice was theirs. In the same way, we have a choice to connect to God's royal power or not. And, in the same way that life with electricity is way superior to life without it, so life connected to the leadership and royal power of God is superior to life without it.

Analogy two: David was God's chosen man to be king over the Israelites. God chose him as king in 1 Samuel 16:1. But he was first recognized as king by a minority of Israelites in Judah (see 2 Samuel 2:4), whereas the rest of Israel didn't recognize him as king yet. However, his subjects made it clear to the rest of Israel that the time would come when he would rule them too, and that the sooner everyone aligned themselves to him the better. This was their good news: "The kingdom of David is at hand. Give your allegiance to him." They were sure that he would be the best king Israel ever had, and that submitting to him would bring national blessing. People were invited to get in on David's leadership. Just like they said, seven years later he ruled over the whole of Israel (see 2 Samuel 5:3-5). And he ushered them into a golden age. In the same way Christ one day – in the new heavens and the new earth –

will rule without rival. But already now his kingdom grows as every new life submits to his leadership and is entrusted to his care. And the message goes out, "The kingdom of God and Christ is advancing. They will eventually rule completely. The sooner you align yourself the better."

What does this mean for us? Firstly, we need to bow down before Christ, heaven and earth's true king. We need to entrust our lives to his leadership and care. But, once we're happily surrendered to him, our goal as Christians is to so co-operate with Christ that we experience as much of the future kingdom age as we can now, and that we "advance" his kingdom in our times and in our part of the world by bringing heaven to earth. Jesus taught us to live our lives in such a way that "God's kingdom comes, and God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven." Let's plug into his kingdom electricity. Let's spread the word of Christ's inevitable and ultimate reign of the universe. Let's taste the powers of the coming age. Let's not miss out on what God is doing in the world through Jesus, partly and progressively now but fully and climactically when he returns!

FOLLOWING JESUS (1:16-20)

Jesus calls his first disciples

¹⁶ As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." ¹⁸ At once they left their nets and followed him.

¹⁹ When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. ²⁰ Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.



FOLLOWING JESUS BEGINS WHEN JESUS CALLS YOU PERSONALLY.

Jesus called these two sets of brothers. To Simon and Andrew, he said, "Come, follow me." And he called James and John and they followed him.

Christians are described as those who have received a calling (see Ephesians 4:1) from Christ to trust him. To this day, Christ calls people to trust him and to follow him. He does this through the Spirit. Without this call to salvation, we cannot even respond to Christ. Which is why every salvation is far more than a choice of a person; it's the result of a miraculous call of God to the heart.

However, God usually repeats and deepens his call in our lives to trust in and follow Jesus, and the call can become more defined over time.



FOLLOWING JESUS MEANS YOU DEFINE YOURSELF AS HIS DISCIPLE.

Although Jesus never described himself as a rabbi, people seemed to recognize that he was one (see John 3:2). But was he really a rabbi of sorts? The answer seems to be yes.

The most learned Jewish men would often, at the age of 30, become rabbis, which was a title of honour to the most respected teachers of the Jewish faith. Jesus had just turned 30. And, although we don't know his level of learning accurately, he was clearly brilliant at age 12 already (see Luke 2:46,47). Most likely, he had continued in his diligent study of the Scriptures. We must remember that Jesus, although being fully God, was fully human which means that his profound knowledge of the Old Testament, and his rich interpretation of it, came through years of diligent study. His insight into Scripture was not all supernaturally "uploaded" into him. Most of it came through diligent study.

There were two main kinds of rabbis. There were the Torah rabbis, who would simply teach text-book style the information that was passed on to them. And then there were the exceptionally rare and gifted Authority rabbis. These rabbis did not only pass on the information passed on to them, but would teach new teachings, offer new interpretations. They would say things like, "You have heard it said, but I say to you..." Jesus was clearly an Authority rabbi because about 20 times in the Gospels he says the words, "You have heard it said, but I say to you." In Matthew 7:28,29 we read that "the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law."

These rabbis would then take on some disciples whom they would live their lives with and teach. The goal of a disciple was not only to know what their rabbi knew, but to learn how to be like their rabbi through sustained exposure to their teaching and example. It appears that these young Jewish men (probably around or under the age of 20) agreed to "follow Jesus" as their rabbi. They gave themselves to become like him through sustained exposure to his teachings and his example. During this time these young men would literally define themselves as "disciples" of so-and-so.

(For more insight into what it means that Jesus was a rabbi, click on the data file on this site: www.followtherabbi.com/Brix?pageID=1499)

The most commonly used name for Christians in the New Testament is "disciples". A disciple of Jesus is someone who gives themselves - through sustained exposure to his presence, words and example - to becoming more like him in character, insight and ministry. And it comes through entrusting our lives totally to his leadership as the dominant priority of our lives.



FOLLOWING JESUS MEANS YOU'RE LEARNING HOW TO LIVE IN AND DEMONSTRATE THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

In a sense, any expert in any field (e.g. academic, sport, art, business etc) could train up some “disciples” in order to mentor them in the same level of insight and competence in that field. When Jesus calls people to be his disciples, what field is he the expert in? The answer is: *he is the expert in living in and demonstrating God's kingdom*. That is what he seeks to impart to his disciples.

Jesus had just made it clear that he was coming to make God's kingdom accessible to all (verse 14,15). Through his example and teachings, he would show us how to *live in* his kingdom. And through his ministry to people, he would show us how to *demonstrate* the kingdom of God.

As disciples of Jesus, we need to give ourselves to prayerfully reading and re-reading the Gospels with the two questions in mind:

- 1) As I look at his life example and teachings, what can I learn about living in God's kingdom?
- 2) As I look at the way he ministered to people, what can I learn about demonstrating God's kingdom to others?



FOLLOWING JESUS USUALLY INVOLVES A COST.

In Jesus' time, every family had a trade, and the father would raise his sons in the same trade. A trade could stay in the family for centuries. So, when these men left the family business to become full-time disciples of Jesus they were paying a great price. It was a real step of faith.

This echoes God's original call to Abraham in Genesis 12:1, “Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.”

Whenever we choose to follow Jesus it means that we will have to leave something behind. And what empowers us to make this decision is the trustworthiness and authority of the One who calls us.



FOLLOWING JESUS IS EMBRACING CHRIST'S CALL TO ADVENTURE AND MISSION.

Probably Simon and Andrew, as well as James and John, had been in a crowd that would have already heard Jesus' invitation: “The time has come. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the good news.” If this is so, it would have been clear to these men that Jesus believed he was launching something amazing and new on this planet and that God was with him. And it means that they believed that Jesus was right and that they were the first ones “to get in on what God was doing in the world through Jesus”.

Jesus' words, "Come follow me ... and I will send you out to fish for people" were in every way a call to mission and adventure. Jesus was not saying following him would be easy, but he was insisting that it would be worth it.

These disciples made a decision to join Jesus in the most exciting thing happening in the history of the world: the launch of God's kingdom on earth which would then also lead to the birth of the church. They didn't know where their lives were going, but they chose to entrust their lives to the leadership of Christ. And what an adventure it turned out to be.

To this day, that invitation to join Christ in what he is doing in this world goes out to us.

We should also note that this mission and adventure is also a mission and adventure in community with other disciples. Interestingly, these twelve disciples following Jesus were the church in embryonic form. Later they would lead churches themselves, and would invite others to experience what they were experiencing here. When we look at what they experienced we realize that church is essentially a community of disciples of Jesus on an adventurous mission. There is no higher privilege than joining the ranks of Christ-followers.



FOLLOWING JESUS IS A JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY.

When the disciples started following Jesus they probably saw him as a rabbi who was on the edge of something new that God was doing. They had no idea at the time that he was the Messiah-king, nor that he was God visiting this planet, nor that his mission on earth would climax with a terrible death and a stunning resurrection. They had no idea that they would be trained to lead the church in its first few decades, and would travel far and wide as the name of Jesus would spread across the then-known world. Those revelations would only come later.

Similarly, when we start to follow Jesus we don't necessarily know that much about him nor precisely where he is taking us, but we do know enough to trust him with our lives anyway, confident that all these insights will unfold in due time.

THE KINGDOM COMES (1:21-45)



JESUS SEEKS TO TRAIN YOU TO LIVE IN AND ADVANCE GOD'S KINGDOM.

Jesus had announced the presence of God's kingdom (in verse 14,15). Then, before he started his public ministry, he recruited some disciples whom he could train to live in and minister God's kingdom (v16-20). From this point on, he starts the training of his disciples.

We must not miss this. All the time Jesus was doing his teaching, his healing, his socializing, his planning, his praying, his relaxing, his teaming, he was modelling to the disciples what life in the kingdom looks like. On the one hand, he was ministering

to the crowds and on the other hand, he was training his disciples. This means that if we want to be his disciples too, we need to prayerfully read and re-read the Gospels and catch the same lessons and insights that they were catching.

Jesus drives out an evil spirit

²¹ They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. ²² The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.



THE KINGDOM COMES IN AUTHORITATIVE TEACHING.

Jesus spoke in the power of the Spirit. He spoke God's truth. He taught in a way that was life-changing and life-giving. People were "arrested" by the sheer force of his words. This was very different to the "teachers of the law" who would speak intellectually and would have to back up what they were saying with quotations from famous rabbis and well-known Scriptures. Jesus would say things like, "You have heard it said, but I say to you..." In the Gospels there are 80 times when Jesus says, "I tell you the truth..." He spoke with profound conviction.

As Jesus' disciples, we need to allow God's kingdom to advance in our own lives by receiving Spirit-empowered teaching. But we also, especially those so gifted, need to learn to advance God's kingdom in others through Spirit-empowered, life-giving teaching. There are two differences between Jesus' teaching and ours though: 1) Jesus had authority in himself, whereas our authority is in Jesus. 2) Jesus could teach new truth, whereas we are bound to re-teach his truths. The only spiritual truth we have is the truth handed down to us by Jesus and his apostles.

²³ Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out,

²⁴ "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?

I know who you are—the Holy One of God!"

²⁵ "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" ²⁶ The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

²⁷ The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him."

²⁸ News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.



THE KINGDOM COMES IN AUTHORITY OVER THE REALM OF EVIL SPIRITS.

This reminds us of Acts 10:38, which says, “God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and with power, and he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil.”

As Jesus’ disciples, we too are given authority over the realm of evil spirits. Jesus’ authority was in himself, whereas our authority over darkness is in Jesus. We too can move in the power of the Spirit to set people free from the power of the evil one.

Interestingly, the people did not yet recognize that Jesus was the Messiah, but the demons did: “I know who you are – the Holy One of God!” Similarly, Acts 19:15 makes it clear that evil spirits are able to discern not just Jesus’ authority, but also any God-given authority we have.

Jesus heals many

²⁹ As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. ³⁰ Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they immediately told Jesus about her. ³¹ So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.

³² That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. ³³ The whole town gathered at the door, ³⁴ and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.



THE KINGDOM COMES IN THE HEALING OF THE SICK.

Obviously Jesus healed Simon’s mother-in-law (which interestingly reveals that Simon Peter was married) because he cared. But there are two other reasons that he did: 1) He healed her because Simon and Andrew seemed to ask him to do it (v30). Jesus still responds to prayer with healing power. 2) He healed her so that she could get back to work (v31). As God’s servants we should trust him to restore us to the health we need to fruitfully serve him.

We see that Jesus healed individuals that he seemed to approach. But also many approached him (v32,33).

Today, we need to demonstrate the presence of the kingdom through praying for the sick. Jesus had authority in himself to heal, whereas our authority to heal is in Jesus.

Jesus prays in a solitary place

³⁵ Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.



THE KINGDOM COMES THROUGH YOUR PRAYERFUL DEPENDENCE ON THE SPIRIT.

The busier Jesus got, the more he prayed. The more demands that were being made on his life, the greater demand he put on his Father and the Spirit to guide, strengthen and empower him.

This verse reminds us that, in the main, Jesus' ministry didn't flow out of the fact that he was God-on-earth. We must remember that he had "emptied himself" of the privileges of his divinity (see Philippians 2:6,7). Instead, most of his ministry he operated as a man filled with the Spirit. Although he had experienced a powerful baptism of power many weeks before (see 1:11) and had spent 40 days in the desert praying (see 1:12,13), he still needed to keep coming back to his power source. And he did this through getting up early in the morning, and going to pray on his own.

If Jesus, though he was the Son of God, needed to pray, how much more do we need to pray? It's in the secret place of prayer that we will find the wisdom, the strength and the power we need to live in and demonstrate God's kingdom.

³⁶ Simon and his companions went to look for him, ³⁷ and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!"

³⁸ Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." ³⁹ So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.



THE KINGDOM COMES AS YOU PUT GOD'S WHISPERED LEADINGS ABOVE THE THUNDERING DEMANDS OF PEOPLE.

We've already seen the voice of the devil trying to take Jesus off course (1:12,13), but now we see the voice of people trying to take Jesus off course. The temptation for Jesus would be to set up his ministry in Capernaum – and just revel in the glory of the success and popularity he was experiencing. The crowds were demanding that he minister to them. And even Peter assumed that Jesus should do as they wanted. But Jesus has been in the secret place of prayer. He had obviously freshly experienced his Father instructing him to move on. So when Peter makes the demand Jesus can say a firm but gentle "no".

Today, we desperately need to learn to put God's whispered leadings above the thundering demands of people. It's the way the kingdom advances in and through our lives.



THE KINGDOM SEEMS TO COME IN WAVES OF VARYING INTENSITY.

Fascinatingly, verses 21-39 capture a single 24-hour period in the ministry of Jesus. It's as though the author, Mark, is showing us just how much Jesus was on the move in his public ministry. We too need to be willing to work hard as we see Christ's kingdom come.

No doubt there were periods of time when his ministry intensity and pace really slowed down. But these verses seem to show that the kingdom advanced through the ministry of Jesus in waves with lulls in between. We too need to discern the intensity of the season we're in – and be ready to ride waves of ministry opportunity and wait out the lulls that help us recover and prepare for the next wave.

Jesus heals a man with leprosy

⁴⁰ A man with leprosy [or “an infectious skin disease”] came to him and begged him on his knees, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.”

⁴¹ Jesus was indignant [or “filled with compassion”]. He reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” ⁴² Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed.

⁴³ Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: ⁴⁴ “See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.” ⁴⁵ Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.



THE ADVANCEMENT OF THE KINGDOM CAN EXPERIENCE SETBACKS THROUGH YOUR DISOBEDIENCE.

Many people are full of compassion, but don't have the authority to do anything about it. Other people have the authority to set people free, but don't have the compassion to motivate them. Jesus, as we see in this story, has both!

Interestingly, we see that Jesus ministers healing in different ways at different times. Here we see that he combines touch with a command of healing (see v41).

Why did Jesus give this man the strong warning to be silent about his miracle? The first reason is that he was thinking of the welfare of the man. Once you were branded a leper it would be difficult for people to see you differently, so Jesus counselled him to go through the proper Jewish system that would show everyone that he was really healed (v44). The second reason is that Jesus did not want to draw too much public attention, especially from the Jewish authorities (which is why he chose Galilee not Jerusalem as the starting point for his ministry).

But sadly the man ignored his instruction. As a result for a while Jesus' ministry faced the setback that came from the unhelpful levels of popularity and from attracting the eye of the religious authorities. All because of this man's disobedience to him. This story sadly shows how at times we can experience the *benefits* of the kingdom (in healing, for example) without submitting to the *authority* of the kingdom. Jesus is interested in our full obedience to him.

MARK CHAPTER TWO

JESUS FORGIVES AND HEALS A PARALYZED MAN (2:1-12)

Jesus forgives and heals a paralyzed man

¹ A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. ² They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. ³ Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. ⁴ Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. ⁵ When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."



APPROACH JESUS WITH FAITH AND DETERMINATION.

Throughout the Gospels the thing that Jesus most positively responds to in those he ministers to is their faith. Similarly, in this story it is the faith of the paralyzed man's friends that Jesus recognizes. Nothing seems to draw the power out of Jesus into our lives and our situations like our readiness to believe that Christ can do something that no one else can.

But throughout the Gospels faith evidences itself in determination. These four men make a huge effort to get their friend close enough to Christ to be healed. Jesus has the roof of his home (yes it was his home – see verse 1) ripped open. Instead of taking offence, he sees all of their effort and determination as a sign that they really do trust in him. (As a little aside, perhaps his comment, "Your sins are forgiven" included a playful reference to the fact that this man had just broken Jesus' roof.)

We too need to approach Jesus with faith, believing that he is ready to extend grace and miracle-working power toward our lives. We need to learn how to get close enough to Christ in prayer and worship that he is able to minister to the depth of our lives. And we need to be ready to present other people whom we love in prayer to Jesus, asking him to work in their lives too.



TEAM TOGETHER WITH OTHERS IN BRINGING PEOPLE TO CHRIST.

These verses serve as a metaphor of evangelism. One of the discoveries of so many Christians is that when it comes to helping our friends who don't yet know Jesus (our friends who are unforgiven and crippled spiritually), it usually takes a team effort and a lot of determination. Here we see four men working together, motivated by their love for their friend, thinking to themselves, "If we can just get this person close enough to Jesus to hear his teaching, or maybe to experience his touch, then we're sure his life will be spiritually transformed."

Don't give up on trying to bring your unforgiven, spiritually crippled friends to Christ. They may not want to come, or be able to come to him. But God can use you – and your partnership with other Christians – to get them close enough to Christ to find their footing in him.

⁶ Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, ⁷ “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

⁸ Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, “Why are you thinking these things?”



REPENT OF A CRITICAL SPIRIT.

Our hearts so easily lead us astray. The question Jesus asks in verse 8 can also be translated, ‘Why do your hearts tell you to think like that?’ This describes a critical heart (or spirit): we look for what is wrong in a situation or in a person, and we find the reasons to take offence at them. In our minds it makes perfect sense that we should be concerned or offended by the way another person acts or handles a situation, but what we fail to see is our own sinful instinct in the first place to look for what’s wrong with them. A critical spirit blinds us to what Christ may be doing – and in this situation Christ was moving wonderfully in a person’s life. A common way that critical attitudes undermine what God is doing today is when some people in a church become critical of the leaders, and keep on looking for what’s wrong in the way they do things or handle situations, instead of looking at all the wonderful things God may be doing.



BE READY TO DISCERN (WITH THE HELP OF THE SPIRIT) THE HEART-ATTITUDES OF PEOPLE.

Jesus was neither critical nor suspicious of people. However, he was discerning. In verse 5 we’re told that he discerned faith in the men. Surprisingly, as he looked at the crippled man, he saw a heart riddled with shame and guilt and knew instinctively (with the help of the Spirit, of course) that this man needed forgiveness before he needed a healed body. In verse 8 we see that “immediately Jesus knew in his spirit” what some people were thinking. This knowledge was instantaneous, supernatural and came from the Holy Spirit. He discerned a critical unbelieving attitude in people.

We too need to be open to the Spirit giving us discernment of where people are at. We need to be ready to discern levels of faith, feelings of guilt in people, and tendencies to be critical and unbelieving. Until we know where people are at, we won’t be able to minister effectively to them.

⁹ Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk’? ¹⁰ But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” So he said to the man, ¹¹ “I tell you, get up, take

your mat and go home.”¹² He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”

CHRIST IS READY TO FORGIVE YOUR SINS.

People may think that their greatest need is healing, but by far our greatest need is forgiveness. Yes, we may be sick or broken physically. And we certainly need physical healing. But when we have sinned, and God is counting our sins against us, then by far our greatest need is forgiveness. Everyone would have thought all this paralytic man needed was physical healing. But Jesus knew that even more important than that, the man needed spiritual healing – the healing that comes from having our sins forgiven.

Everyone who trusts in Christ has their sins forgiven by Jesus. In other words, we can be totally spiritually healed. And sometimes Christ will heal us physically too. But he doesn't always. Encouragingly, if he doesn't grant us physical healing in this life, we are promised resurrection bodies for all eternity.

It's interesting that Jesus uses crippled-ness as a picture of our sin. Sin really does cripple us. It cripples our hearts. It cripples our relationship with God. It cripples our relationships with others. It undermines the purpose and glory of our human potential.

But then he uses the miracle as a picture of the forgiveness he gives. His forgiveness is instantaneous, easily received, as a result of the undeserved kindness of Christ. Jesus' forgiveness can get us on our feet spiritually. It can restore us to the life he intends for us.

BECOMING A FRIEND OF NON-RELIGIOUS PEOPLE (2:13-17)

Jesus calls Levi and eats with sinners

¹³ Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. ¹⁴ As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. “Follow me,” Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.



DON'T THINK ANY KIND OF PERSON IS BEYOND CHRIST'S REACH.

Jesus lived in Capernaum (see 2:1). He would go out on short-term ministry trips to the surrounding regions (as he had in 1:38). Once again he goes on a trip to the Sea of Galilee (here called “the lake”) outside of his town.

While on this ministry trip he calls another person to be his disciple: Levi, also called Matthew. In the same way that the four previous disciples had responded

immediately (see 1:16-20), so Levi decided to follow Jesus too. What's interesting about Levi is that, for whatever reason, he was a tax collector. It was his job to take tax from people and, usually keeping a portion of it, to give most of it to Herod and the Romans. This made him very unpopular, especially with the religious community who deeply despised both Herod and the Romans. That's what is so surprising for him: while everyone was judgmentally rejecting him, Jesus graciously chose him. This unexpected acceptance from and new friendship with a religious figure like Jesus must have shocked him to the core.

We too need to reach out to all kinds of people. No one is beyond the scope of his grace, nor beyond his power to reach.

¹⁵ While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.



HELP NEW BELIEVERS TO MAXIMISE THEIR OPPORTUNITY TO REACH OUT.

The moment Levi chooses to receive Christ's gracious invitation he throws a dinner party and seeks to introduce all his friends to Jesus too. He chooses a celebration meal to capture the sheer joy of his new friendship with Jesus.

This is still true today. The people who have the most opportunity to reach others for Christ are those who have only recently received Christ themselves. This is because all their relationships are in tact. Commonly – and this shouldn't be – people seem to lose touch with and therefore lose influence with unchurched friends and family. When a person finds Christ we need to help them reach out to their friends and family as soon as possible. That's what Jesus and the disciples were doing with Levi.

¹⁶ When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

¹⁷ On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."



GRACIOUSLY SOCIALIZE WITH ALL KINDS OF PEOPLE.

The Pharisees were religious. Jesus wasn't. He was something altogether different. Consider the difference between religion and Jesus...

Religion causes us to look down on the immoral. Jesus causes us to love the immoral. Religion teaches us to avoid the irreligious. Jesus calls us to befriend them. Why is this? The reason is that religion causes us to focus on the judgment of God,

and his readiness to punish all those who ignore his ways. Whereas Jesus urges us to focus on the grace of God, and his readiness to lovingly, non-judgmentally reach out to those who don't yet know him.

The irony is that the Pharisees actually thought they were quite fine, and that sinners and tax collectors were not. They were proud, and their pride blinded them to just how sick they really were. After all, everyone is a sinner, though there are two broad categories of sinner: there are the respectable, usually religious sinners, and there are the not-so-respectable, usually non-religious sinners. The fascinating thing is that the non-religious, non-respectable sinners were the first to admit they were sinners, which is possibly why they gravitated toward the Saviour.

Did Jesus sin when he spent time with sinners? Of course not. He never endorsed sin in anyone, but he had a way of separating the sinner from their sin. He had a way of enjoying their company even when he didn't enjoy their lifestyle. He had a way of being liked by them, even when he was not like them.

Notice that as Jesus was being a friend of sinners, he was also teaching his disciples (who were with him – see verse 16) to do the same. And he calls for the same from us.

THE NEW THING THAT CHRIST IS DOING (2:18-22)

Jesus questioned about fasting

¹⁸ Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?"

¹⁹ Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. ²⁰ But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.



CHRIST'S KINGDOM IS A PARTY.

God was doing something new through Jesus. For one, he was introducing a non-legalistic spirituality marked by joy. John's disciples and the Pharisees' disciples rigidly fasted on set days, especially on calendar days that marked tragedies that the Israelites of old had experienced. Their fasting was generally marked with mourning and introspective penitence. But Jesus didn't lead his disciples to fast on these days and he didn't lead them to fast rigidly.

But why did he do this? He gives the reason in verse 19: it's generally not appropriate to fast during times of God's wonderful blessing – and his presence with them. The kingdom of God, which had come to the earth through him, was a time of wonderful, unusual blessing. The more appropriate response was joy, festivity and celebration.



FASTING SHOULD BE AT APPROPRIATE TIMES AND SHOULD BE FUTURE-FOCUSED.

Jesus did teach elsewhere (Matthew 6:16) that fasting is good and necessary from time to time. But here he gives two guidelines for fasting:

1) Fasting should happen at appropriate times. Jesus compared himself to a bridegroom at a wedding feast. Later the church would be described as “the bride of Christ” because of Jesus calling himself the bridegroom. His love for us should be marked by joy and celebration instead of sadness and mourning. (Up until the time of Jesus’ coming, fasting was always marked by sadness and mourning.)

2) Fasting should be a way of inviting God’s intervention in difficult times. Jesus warned that there would be difficult times for his followers in the future. These difficult times would happen when he would be “taken from them” (verse 20). (And Jesus was “taken from them” when he was arrested, for example. In a larger sense, he was “taken from them” when he returned to his Father.) Jesus was saying that there would be times where life in his kingdom would seem to face some setbacks, and challenges – and that the best thing to do then would be to fast. But this fasting was not a way of mourning the past (as it mainly was in the history of the Jews up until his coming). Rather, it was a way of inviting God’s interventions in the future. Fasting then is a major expression of our dependence on God’s willingness and ability to intervene with kingdom power in the unfolding story of the church.

²¹ “No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If they do, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. ²² And people do not pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins.”



NEW MOVES OF GOD CALL FOR NEW WAYS OF THINKING, LIVING AND COMMUNITY-STRUCTURING.

God was doing something new in the world through Jesus. It was different to anything he had done before – even different to what he had just done through John the Baptist. The followers of Jesus were discovering a new spirituality marked with great joy, love, freedom, grace and power. Rigid disciplines and numerous religious laws and rituals were absent from the life Jesus was leading his disciples into. Life in the kingdom that Christ had launched called for totally new ways of thinking, living and structuring as God’s people. Jesus gives two analogies to make this point:

1) The new cloth sewed onto the old garment; and

2) The new wine in the old wineskin. Both of these analogies make the same point:

The new thing God is doing is incompatible with the old thing that either God once did or humans introduced in the form of tradition, and if you try join God’s new thing with the old thing you will probably ruin both.

A person who becomes a Christian needs to understand that living in Christ's kingdom is different from any other approach to life, spirituality and community. It calls for a totally different way of thinking and living, and of structuring our communities.

This truth can also be applied to the various new things that God has been doing in the church throughout history, and will continue to do. Every now and then it seems God sovereignly gives birth to a new movement in the church. These movements usually discover that if they try to neatly fit into existing structures, then both the existing structure and the new movement will be damaged. The better option is usually to create a new structure that gives unhindered expression to the new movement.

CHRIST'S LIBERATING LEADERSHIP (2:23-3:6)

Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath

²³ One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. ²⁴ The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

²⁵ He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? ²⁶ In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions."



JESUS SOMETIMES CLAIMED IN CODED WAYS TO BE THE MESSIAH-KING.

Jesus' growing reputation was bringing him under the watchful eye of the Pharisees, who served as the religious and moral watch dogs of Jewish society.

The law of Moses made working on the Sabbath illegal. And picking grain was what some people did for work, so it was illegal in the eyes of the Pharisees to pick grain on the Sabbath. This is an example of what legalists so often do – they take a clear instruction of God and they add to it. Jesus wasn't really breaking the law of Moses at all – but they accused him of doing just that.

His response is surprising. You would think he would just say, "No we didn't break the law of Moses at all, we just broke your distorted version of the law of Moses." Instead he refers to 1 Samuel 21:1-6 where David and his men broke a ritual law (which declared it wrong for anyone but priests to eat the consecrated bread) because they were hungry. Jesus, although he had not broken a true law, seems to suggest that he could have broken a ritual law if he wanted. But how could he say this?

The answer lies in noticing what he's doing by using this story of David eating the bread. He is putting himself on a par with David, who at the time of the story had already been marked by God as the true king and yet had not been recognized as true

king. Isn't that the same situation Jesus is in – he has already been marked by God as the Messiah-king (at his baptism, see 1:11) but hasn't been recognized as the Messiah-king yet? In a sense Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah-king, but in a coded way, almost in the form of a riddle.

27 Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath."



INSTITUTIONS AND LAWS ARE MEANT TO BENEFIT NOT REPRESS PEOPLE AND SOCIETY.

An institution and law is an acceptable norm in society. It's either written in the law of the country, or it's just something that everyone knows to be right – even if it isn't really right. Every culture, every country, every church, every family embraces acceptable norms. Jesus, in this verse, insists that these institutions and norms must truly be for the best of the people and the society as a whole. He warned against norms and institutions that damaged and dehumanized people and society.

Jesus was making a radical claim – he was saying that the Sabbath (which is a kind of institution) was never meant to be a rigid law that dehumanized or deprived people of God's best for them. Rather it was meant to serve them and benefit them in certain ways. The Pharisees had forgotten that behind all of God's instructions was not a petty God who liked to assign arbitrary rules to people, but a loving Father who wanted what is truly best for his people.

We need to be ready to challenge man-made institutions and laws that are repressive to people and society. However, we cannot ever challenge the clearly revealed will of God that comes to us through properly interpreting the Scriptures. But we must be gracious and humane in how we guide people to apply these God-given instructions.

28 So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."



IN CHRIST'S KINGDOM, YOU'RE RELEASED FROM THE SABBATH (AND FROM THE REST OF THE LAW OF MOSES, FOR THAT MATTER).

When Jesus called himself "the Son of man" (v28) he was referring to the Messianic figure in Daniel 7:13 who would be enthroned and usher in the kingdom. The question is, "In this coming kingdom, would the law of Moses still be binding on people?" Jesus said no. He did so by making a powerful claim: that he had a higher authority than the law of Moses. He claimed to be the Lord of the Sabbath.

If we are in Christ's kingdom, the law of Moses is no longer binding on us. We are now under the authority of Christ, not the law of Moses. Elsewhere the Bible shows

that when Jesus died and when his Spirit was poured out, he was introducing a new kingdom where the Sabbath, along with the other 613 laws of Moses, wouldn't be binding. Amazingly, he replaced the Sabbath with himself. He doesn't directly state this here, but he infers it. Later this will become clear, especially in Paul's letter to the Galatians.

MARK CHAPTER THREE

Jesus heals on the Sabbath

¹ Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. ² Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. ³ Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone."

⁴ Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?"



EMBRACE A SPIRITUALITY THAT IS LIFE-GIVING AND LIBERATING, NOT LIFE-SAPPING AND LEGALISTIC.

The Pharisees were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus. They knew that he had healed people. They couldn't stop that. They were hoping he would heal someone on the Sabbath, because this would, in their eyes, show that he was disobedient to their traditions, which insisted that no work was allowed to be done on this day.

Eventually the day came when Jesus healed someone on the Sabbath. He knew it would cause a stir. So he tried to reason with them by reminding them of the heart behind the Sabbath law. The true heart behind the Sabbath was that it reminded people that they were God's own people. After all, God had rested on the seventh day of creation. In the Jewish mind it also spoke of the promise of a new day when God would rescue his people from bondage to foreign powers. In other words, the Sabbath really spoke of creation and hope. Yet the Pharisees had turned it into a condemning meaningless law. Jesus suggested that the real heart behind the Sabbath was that it was an opportunity to do good, and to save life. It was never meant to harm anyone.

Jesus was busy launching his kingdom, which was introducing the future age of God's new world. Jesus was literally on the cutting edge of God's recreation of the world. The heart of life in his kingdom is that we should learn to do good, and to bring life as we partner with him in the advancement of his kingdom. Above all, God really cares about the welfare of his creation and his people. He's not seeking to bind us up in life-sapping, destructive legalism. He wants to see life and liberty freely restoring the lives of broken people.

But they remained silent. ⁵ He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored.



RELIGION CAN BE A REALLY UGLY THING.

Jesus tried to evoke their sympathy for the man with the shrivelled hand by calling him forward. Jesus tried to reason with them that true spirituality was life-giving and liberating, not life-destroying and legalistic. But sadly, they remained silent. Although they couldn't refute his logic, they hardened their heart (v5) and refused to receive it.

The impact their hard-hearts had on Jesus was anger and deep distress. Their lack of compassion did not undermine his compassion. He healed the man with a command, "Stretch out your hand."

Religion can be an ugly thing. It is cold, callous and uncaring. But true spirituality is compassionate, tender-hearted and courageously life-giving.

⁶ Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.



AS YOU ADVANCE THE KINGDOM OF LIGHT, YOU CAN EXPECT A REACTION FROM THE KINGDOM OF DARKNESS.

In Mark 1:45 we see that Jesus had quickly become very popular, but along with this favour of the people, rose the suspicion of the Pharisees. They charged him of blasphemy (2:7). They criticized his choice of company (2:16). They complained about him not fasting (2:18). They accused him of Sabbath-breaking (2:24). Eventually there was a sustained hatred of Jesus (3:2). And then the hostility reached a terrible conclusion: the determination to kill him.

The Pharisees were the moral and religious watchdogs of the Jews. But they were self-appointed and unofficial and therefore lacked power. Usually they despised those who supported King Herod (i.e. the Herodians), but in their hatred of Jesus they began to plot with them, since they had legal power.

We see that as the kingdom of light advances, a back-lash of the kingdom of darkness can be expected in the form of unjust persecution, irrational hatred and the swaying of the powers-that-be to stand against us. Of course, behind all of this back-lash is the kingdom of darkness.

RAISING LEADERS, SETTING PEOPLE FREE AND STARTING A NEW FAMILY (3:8-35)

Crowds follow Jesus

⁷ Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lake, and a large crowd from Galilee followed. ⁸ When they heard all he was doing, many people came to him from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon. ⁹ Because of the crowd he told his disciples to have a small boat ready for him, to keep the people from crowding him. ¹⁰ For he had healed many, so that those with diseases

were pushing forward to touch him. ¹¹ Whenever the evil [a] spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God." ¹² But he gave them strict orders not to tell others about him.

Jesus appoints the Twelve

¹³ Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. ¹⁴ He appointed twelve [designating them apostles] that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach ¹⁵ and to have authority to drive out demons. ¹⁶ These are the twelve he appointed: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter), ¹⁷ James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means "sons of thunder"), ¹⁸ Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot ¹⁹ and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.



IF YOU'RE A LEADER IN CHRIST'S KINGDOM, THEN MULTIPLY YOURSELF BY IDENTIFYING AND TRAINING UP OTHER LEADERS.

Jesus was drawing more and more people who were drawn to his signs and wonders ministry (v7-12). His ability to heal people and set people free from afflicting demons drew crowds of people to him from all over his region of the world. He even had to climb in a boat and preach to those on shore because the demand was so great (v9).

But he knew that he alone could not minister to them, so he did something brilliant - he chose a team of leaders-in-training who eventually would be able to do what he was doing. This way his kingdom-advancing impact would be multiplied beyond his physical location and even beyond his time on the earth. By raising up leaders who were like him, his ministry would be extended to other places and to future generations.

Similarly today, the opportunities are far too great for the present kingdom leaders to cope with. They need to multiply themselves into others so that their impact is multiplied.

As we analyze his strategy for raising up leaders, we notice a few things:

1) *It's the responsibility of leaders to make new leaders.* Jesus, despite all the demands placed on him, doesn't hope that someone else will raise up leaders. He embraces the work that only he can do. After all, only leaders can raise up new leaders.

2) *Leaders should pray about which potential leaders to invest their lives in.* Jesus "went up onto the mountain" where he most likely prayed about who he would invite into his training programme (see Luke 6:12). We shouldn't just judge on what we can see, but also on what we can discern with the help of God.

3) *Leaders should train up other leaders through spending lots of time with them, and by exposing them consistently to their example of life, teaching and ministry.* Jesus called people "to himself" (v13) to "be with him" (v14). For three years, he spent almost all

his time with the disciples. He hardly ever ministered without them present with him. It seems Jesus used the following strategy of raising up leaders:

- He did it and they watched.
- He let them do it and he watched.
- He left and they still did it.

4) Leaders need to communicate expectations to their trainees. Jesus made it clear to those twelve that after a while (he didn't say how long) they would be sent out without him, and they would need to continue doing the work he had started (v14-16). This communication of expectation would have made them so much hungrier to learn all they could from Jesus. Leaders today need to train people up to eventually function on their own and continue doing the work that had been modelled to them.

5) The best training for leadership is followership. It's amazing that God trained up the twelve apostles to be leaders by first teaching them to follow another person. If we aren't willing to follow another person, then we aren't worthy to lead others. The Bible gives us other examples, such as: Joshua, who became a great leader through following Moses; David, who became a great leader through first following Samuel and Saul; Nehemiah, who became a great leader by following the King he served; and Paul, who became a great leader by first following Barnabas.

6) Another great training ground is to be trained in the context of a team (v16-18). Jesus didn't raise up solitary leaders, but rather a team of leaders. Being trained in the context of a team is powerful because it provides peers; it exposes character issues; and together everyone achieves more.

7) Leaders need to be realistic about the fact that some trainees will disappoint them deeply. Even Jesus poured out his life for three years into Judas who would eventually betray him.

Jesus accused by his family and by teachers of the law

²⁰ Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. ²¹ When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind."

²² And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons."

²³ So Jesus called them over to him and began to speak to them in parables: "How can Satan drive out Satan? ²⁴ If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵ If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. ²⁶ And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come.

²⁷ In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house without first tying him up. Then he can plunder the strong man's house.



JESUS USES HIS AUTHORITY OVER SATAN TO SET PEOPLE FREE FROM SATAN'S POWER.

Jesus was moving in a miraculous power. It was the power of the kingdom. But people found it difficult to believe that God was really using him as much as it seemed. So different people came up with alternate explanations. His own family (of mothers, brothers and sisters) said that he had gone mad (v21). And the theological experts said that it was the devil's power (Beelzebub was the arch-demon) that he was operating in (v22).

Jesus counter-argues the claim of the theological experts that he was operating in demonic power by explaining that since demons are being cast out, it can't be Satan doing it, because that would destroy his own kingdom (v23-26).

Then, in verse 27, he tells them his true relation to Satan. He explains that, far from being in partnership with Satan, he is radically opposed to and attacking Satan. Satan is like a strong man who guards a house full of captives. Satan does have a kingdom, but all those in his kingdom he holds by force and by deception. But Jesus is "the stronger one" (remember how John described Jesus as "the one stronger than me" 1:6 – in other words, as one more powerful). Jesus has a greater strength and authority than Satan. He had already defeated him in the desert, for example (1:13). He used that power and authority over Satan to set the captives free from Satan's deceptive and destructive power. This was most obviously seen in his ability to cast out demons.

Amazingly, Jesus wants us, his disciples, to also set the captives free by exercising powerful authority over Satan (see Luke 10:19). Jesus still sets people free, but he now does it through his disciples who live and minister under his authority, and with his delegated power and authority.

²⁸ Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven all their sins and all the blasphemies they utter. ²⁹ But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven, but is guilty of an eternal sin. ³⁰ He said this because they were saying, "He has an evil spirit."



REJECTING CHRIST MEANS THAT YOU REMAIN UNFORGIVEN.

Christ is ready to forgive us of anything we've done if we put our trust in him (v28). But there is one thing that makes it impossible for him to forgive us – and that is "the eternal sin" of "blaspheming against the Holy Spirit". But what does this mean? It simply refers to a non-Christian person who, even though they have seen the reality and power of the Spirit of Jesus with their very own eyes, refuses to accept that Jesus is real.

Jesus is saying this to the people who refused to accept that he really was moving in the Holy Spirit power of God (v30). He was warning them that if they rejected him, and the fact that he and God were partnering together, then they could never have their sins forgiven.

The surest way of not being forgiven is to hard-heartedly reject Christ and his offer of forgiveness, even though he has revealed himself to you with great power.

It must be noted that a Christian can never commit this sin. Only a non-Christian can. It's when they become so hardened in their unbelief that they shut out the possibility of ever trusting in Christ. We must, however, be careful of writing off someone who seems to have committed this sin. As we see in the story of Paul's salvation (Acts 9:1-5), Christ can win over the most resistant people when we least expect it.

³¹ Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. ³² A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you."

³³ "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked.

³⁴ Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!" ³⁵ Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."



THE CLOSER YOU GET TO CHRIST, THE CLOSER YOU GET TO FELLOW BELIEVERS.

Mary, Jesus' mother, had brought his brothers all the way from Nazareth to Capernaum to try get him to stop what he was doing. They were persuaded that he was insane (see v21). They must have believed that it would be best for him and for the family (perhaps they felt he was dishonouring the family name) if he stopped what he was doing and came home.

This is an interesting picture. We see Jesus inside with a bunch of people who have given their trust and allegiance to him. And then we have some people outside who have not. This gives rise to the language of "insiders" and "outsiders" (see Mark 4:11 and 1 Thessalonians 4:12 as examples). "Insiders" are those disciples who have decided to trust and follow Jesus – and to do his will (v35). "Outsiders" are those who, for whatever reason, have not yet moved towards Christ with faith and obedience.

Jesus is saying in these verses that his real family, the people with whom he feels the strongest connection, are not his physical family but his spiritual family.

In the same way, as we discover the wonders of Christ and begin to live our lives for him, we will soon find that we feel a stronger connection to fellow believers than we do to those who don't yet know Christ. If we're "inside", we have more in common with those "inside" than we have with those "outside", even if some of the "outsiders" are our own family.

It must be noted though that Jesus was not telling people to abandon and reject their physical families. Sadly, this is how many Christian sects have misinterpreted this text, and they have done great damage.

It was this teaching of Jesus that surely helped the early church after he was gone to describe the church as a family, for that is what it is. It's a spiritual family, where the closer we get to Jesus, the closer we also get to each other.



THE MORE THE CHURCH IS PERSECUTED THE MORE INTENSE THE SENSE OF FAMILY BECOMES.

There is another insight here, and it surely is one of the points that Mark is trying to make by telling this story here. Mark has told us since chapter two about the build-up of persecution from the Pharisees and the religious authorities, and now even from family members. And then, at the height of being misunderstood and ridiculed, Jesus tells them that they are his true family.

The point is this, and it's something that the church has re-discovered throughout history: the more pressure the church comes under, the greater the possibility to experience the richest relationships imaginable. Tough times don't only drive us closer to Christ. They also drive us closer to each other with deeper and deeper levels of affection and commitment.

MARK CHAPTER FOUR

THE KINGDOM COMES DEPENDING ON OUR RESPONSIVENESS (4:1-25)

The parable of the sower

¹ Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. ² He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: ³ "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times."

⁹ Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."



IF YOU'RE A TEACHER, MORE OFTEN USE SOME OF JESUS' TEACHING METHODS.

On his ministry trips from Capernaum, Jesus would heal bodies, but he was more interested in changing lives. That's why he wouldn't just heal, he would also teach the crowds. He again went out onto a boat (v1) and used it as his platform to teach the people on the shore (see 3:9).

He used to teach in parables (v2). The word means "to put down two things side by side". Jesus would often put down something natural that existed in everyday life and use it to draw out a spiritual meaning. He would start with something known and then move people onto something unknown.

The Gospels use the word "parable" to refer to anything that was not straightforward and literal in the teachings of Jesus. It includes allegories (like the one mentioned in these verses (v2-8)), sayings, stories that illustrate a spiritual truth, and questions to make us think. It's the opposite of ordinary, straightforward teaching.

Jesus was a master communicator. He would take people from what was known to what was not yet known. He would use the natural to introduce people to the spiritual. He would penetrate people's hearts and consciences by speaking with pictures. He would ask questions, and often responded to questions with questions. He would capture truth in one-liner sayings that would then play around in the hearer's mind, having a long-term impact.

It's interesting that today we most commonly answer questions rather than ask questions, and we speak rationally around the facts, rather than speak to the heart with stories. We would do well to imitate some of Jesus' teaching methods.

¹⁰ When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. ¹¹ He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables ¹² so that,

*"they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,
and ever hearing but never understanding;
otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!"*

YOUR RESPONSIVENESS (OR LACK OF IT) DETERMINES HOW MUCH JESUS IS WILLING TO REVEAL OF HIMSELF AND HIS KINGDOM TO YOU.

There were two kinds of people according to Jesus. First, there were those on the inside, which consisted of those who were his disciples, who showed a deep interest in him as well as a willingness to do God's will (as 3:35 puts it). They are here described as "the Twelve and the others around him" (v10). And then there were those on the outside (v10), who showed a superficial interest in Jesus. Insiders were willing to have their lives impacted by Jesus, whereas outsiders were not.

It seems that Jesus spoke in parables as a way of separating the insiders from the outsiders. To the insiders he would give the meaning of the parables (as he is about to in verses 14-20), but he wouldn't explain the meaning to the outsiders.

But why does he withhold the meaning from the outsiders? His answer is to quote Isaiah 6:9: "They may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!" These words are often misunderstood to mean that Jesus is saying, "I don't want to tell them the meaning just in case they believe, and I wouldn't want that to happen." This is, of course, not the right interpretation. Rather what he means with these words is, "Though these people see and hear my message, they fail to understand it and receive its benefit in their lives." In other words, Jesus doesn't tell them the meaning of his parables, because it would be wasted entirely on them. They are blind and deaf to God and nothing he could do or say, for now at least, could change that. He wasn't trying to blind them to the meaning of the parables. He was suggesting they were already blind. When we think that so many of the people who had already been exposed to his teachings and deeds were ready to kill him (3:6) and had even accused him of insanity (3:21) and demon-possession (3:22), we understand that many of these people were spiritually blind and deaf.

The point is that Jesus is more likely to reveal himself and the deep meaning of his teachings to people who "have ears to ear" than he is to people who don't (v9). Our level of responsiveness determines how much Jesus is willing to reveal to us. This same truth is echoed in John 7:17 where Jesus says, "Anyone who is willing to do God's will be able to discern whether my teaching is my own or whether it really

comes from God.” In other words, our ability to receive revelation from Jesus is determined by our *prior* willingness to be impacted by it.

13 Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? 14 The farmer sows the word. 15 Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. 16 Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. 17 But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. 18 Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; 19 but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. 20 Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.”



THE WAY YOU RESPOND TO WHAT JESUS IS SAYING TO YOU DETERMINES HOW MUCH YOUR LIFE WILL BE IMPACTED BY HIM.

There are four ways to receive the message of what God is doing in Jesus: with a closed heart, a careless heart, a crowded heart or a cultivated heart. We should make sure we are the fourth kind.

Verse 14 says, “The farmer sows the word.” The farmer is whoever communicates God’s message, whether it’s God himself, Jesus or any other person. The “word” that the farmer was sowing (preaching) probably refers to Jesus’ main message to the people which is recorded in 1:15: “The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news.” The word is essentially the good news that “God is doing something new in Jesus, and you’re invited to get in on it”. See the commentary under 1:14,15 to understand why this is an apt summary of Jesus’ good news to the world.

Jesus explains that this good news - that God is doing something new in the world - will have varying effects on people who hear it. He speaks of four kinds of people (whom he compares to four kinds of soil).

1) Some people immediately forget the good news (v15). Although they hear it, it fails to penetrate them in anyway. Satan keeps them from receiving it. These people have *closed* hearts.

2) Some people happily receive the message but in a very shallow, temporary way (v16,17). They hear it, and are happy about it. It seems like they have responded, but the test of time and trouble quickly show that they haven’t really received the message at all – it never really took root in their lives. These people have *careless* hearts.

3) Some people do genuinely receive the message, but they fail to bear the fruit of the message in their lives because of distractions and wrong priorities (v18,19). The kingdom does take root to a degree in this person's life, but they fail to give this new plant of what God is doing in their life the priority it deserves – and instead focus their lives on worries, wealth and all the good things this world provides. These people have *crowded* hearts.

4) Some people receive the message and give themselves to cultivating the new thing God is doing in their life through Jesus, and produce great fruitfulness (v20). These people have *cultivated* hearts.

The parable of the lamp

²¹ He said to them, "Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand?"²² For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open.²³ If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear."

Mark 4:1 tells us about Jesus' teaching from the boat on the water's edge on a certain day. Jesus told his first parable (v1-9). Then Mark breaks from the flow of Jesus' message, and inserts verses 10-20 in which Jesus later explained the meaning of this first parable to his disciples. However, verse 21-32 tells us the content of the rest of his teaching on the lake, which consists of several other parables.



IT IS SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS (AND NOT GOD'S UNWILLINGNESS TO REVEAL CHRIST) THAT EXPLAINS WHY SO MANY PEOPLE HAVE FAILED TO SEE THE LIGHT OF CHRIST.

God has nothing to hide. He has the power to reveal Jesus. God has always had plans to reveal his Son, the Messiah, to the world as its true king. This started at his baptism (1:11). But then slowly but surely God reveals this to people. In the course of Jesus' ministry more and more people would come to realize who he was. Then, after Jesus ascended to heaven, even more people would come to understand who Jesus is. Ultimately, everyone will acknowledge that Jesus is heaven and earth's true king (but many of them will realise it too late) (see Philippians 2:9-11).

Jesus is telling this parable to let insiders know that God is not keeping this secret at all. God has no reason to hide Christ from the world.

Then why do so few people see the light of Christ? The answer Jesus has been giving in these lake parables is that the poor responsiveness of unbelieving human hearts has blinded them to the reality of Christ. That's why he repeats the line he said in verse 9 again here in verse 23: "He who has ears to hear, let them hear."

²⁴ “Consider carefully what you hear,” he continued. “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. ²⁵ Those who have will be given more; as for those who do not have, even what they have will be taken from them.”



THE MEASURE OF YOUR RESPONSIVENESS DETERMINES GOD’S MEASURE OF REVELATION TO YOU.

Verses 24-25 are really a further explanation of the parable of the lamp mentioned in verses 21-23.

Jesus is urging the crowd and his disciples to listen carefully to his teachings. He is hoping that they respond to it with their full attention.

What does Jesus mean by “with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (v24)? Given the context, he means, “The measure of responsiveness with which you listen to me, is the measure of revelation of myself and my teachings I can give you.” He even uses the phrase “and even more” (v24) to say that he gives us more revelation than our responsiveness deserves.

What does Jesus mean by verse 25? He is saying that those who have a revelation of Christ and his kingdom will continue to grow in their revelation, whereas those who have failed to receive any revelation of Christ and his kingdom will lose even the very little they have.

We need to note that we’re either increasing or decreasing our current level of revelation. In the words of Michael Eaton, “No one stays stationary in the kingdom of God. Either they are increasing or decreasing in their experience of Christ’s blessing.”

THE KINGDOM COMES BECAUSE GOD SOVEREIGNLY WILLS IT (4:26-34)

The parable of the growing seed

²⁶ He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹ As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”



CHRIST’S KINGDOM SUPERNATURALLY RESULTS IN SPIRITUAL GROWTH IN YOUR LIFE.

In verse 13 Jesus suggested that the first parable (the one about the sower) was the key to understanding all the other parables. Because of this we know that the “seed”

mentioned here (v26) is the message of the kingdom. It is the “word from God” that announces the new thing God is doing in the world through Jesus. In a broader sense, the seed represents the Bible and its entire message.

This parable describes the impact of the word of God on our lives. It tells us how the kingdom comes in our lives, and how spiritual growth happens. We notice a few things:

1) God's word is like a seed that produces life in us. It's not our ability to nurture that life through watering and cultivation that's the main thing (although, of course, this helps). Primarily, spiritual growth happens in us because of the power and the life resident in the word itself. The seed is the source of the life. Peter, one of the disciples would later echo this teaching of Christ by saying, “You have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Peter 1:23).

2) Spiritual growth is a mystery. In verse 27 it says that growth happens “though he does not know how”. We cannot analyze and explain spiritual growth, we can only observe that it's happening. We must never take a mechanical approach to spiritual growth as if the law of cause and effect explains everything. It doesn't. God's work in our lives is largely mysterious.

3) Spiritual growth happens all by itself. The opening three words of verse 28 say, “All by itself.” The Greek word is “automatos” from where we get the word “automatically”. Although we can do what we can to nurture and cultivate the life of God at work in our lives, we cannot create or control it. The life of God in us has a life of its own.

4) Spiritual growth in us will eventually be obvious to all (v29). The seed first produces a tiny, easily overlooked plant, but eventually the plant is fully developed and ready for harvest. Its grain can even be enjoyed by others. Similarly, God works in our lives slowly but surely, so that though many may overlook what God is doing in our lives at first, eventually it will be impossible to miss.

The parable of the mustard seed

³⁰ Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it?³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth.³² Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”



CHRIST'S KINGDOM WILL ULTIMATELY BECOME THE GREATEST REALITY OF HISTORY.

Jesus' question in verse 30 seems to be a deliberate echo of Isaiah 40:18 which says, “To whom, then will you compare God? What picture can you compare him to?” Isaiah 40 seeks to give people a vision of how glorious God is, despite all that seems to be going wrong in the world, and despite how few people seem to know it. Similarly,

Jesus in this parable wants us to get a greater vision of God and his power to rule the world and determine the course of history through the coming of his kingdom.

Jesus made a promise in these verses that despite the smallness of his Galilean ministry, eventually the whole world would be impacted by his coming. And 2000 years later, we have seen some of the fulfilment of his promise. Jesus' life and ministry were exceptionally small-scale against the back-drop of history. Yet he came to plant the kingdom of God in history. His message was simple: "The kingdom of God is at hand – repent and believe the good news." As people began to believe this message, their lives were changed, and more and more people began to believe and experience the new thing God is doing in the world through Jesus. The world we live in is very different in many ways because Jesus came. And his influence will not fade away. By the time Jesus comes again, the whole world will have been undeniably influenced by him.

We can be sure that the new thing God is doing in this world will continue to grow and grow so that more and more people, and more and more cultures, will experience the wonderful shelter and fruitfulness of his kingdom.

In this parable Jesus is again 'in code' suggesting that he is the Messiah. Ezekiel 17:23 and Daniel 4:12 both prophesied that one day the kingdom of God, ushered in by the Messiah, would be like a beautiful tree that would provide shelter and fruit for all creatures.

In the first two parables of Mark 4, Jesus emphasized that the kingdom of God comes depending on our responsiveness to it, but in the last two parables Jesus highlights that the kingdom of God is coming regardless of our responsiveness. This is very encouraging. Ultimately, it's not our responsiveness but God's sovereign power that will get the job done of establishing his kingdom in our lives and on our planet.

³³ With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. ³⁴ He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.



JESUS' MESSAGE WAS TOO EXPLOSIVE TO GO FULLY PUBLIC WITH TOO SOON.

Jesus, especially in the early stages of his ministry, spoke in parables because his message was so explosive that it needed to be hidden until the time was right.

There were two kinds of people according to Jesus. First, there were those on the inside (which consisted of those who were his disciples, who showed a deep interest in him as well as a willingness to do God's will - as 3:35 puts it). Second, there were those on the outside (v10) who showed a superficial interest in Jesus. Insiders were willing to have their lives impacted by Jesus, whereas outsiders were not.

Jesus spoke in parables as a way of separating the insiders from the outsiders. To the insiders he would give the meaning of the parables (as he did in verses 14-20) but he wouldn't explain the meaning to the outsiders.

But why did he do this? The first answer is given by Jesus' quote of Isaiah 6:9 (see verses 10-12 plus commentary). But there is another reason that he spoke in parables at this stage of his ministry. *It's because he didn't want to prematurely reveal himself to the crowds as the real Messiah.* We must remember that not even Jesus' disciples at this stage understood that he is the Messiah, although they might have suspected it. If word got out that he was claiming to be the king of Israel, it would be no time before King Herod, the Romans and the Jewish authorities would be trying to put an end to him. Jesus seemed to be caught in the tension of a compassionate desire to reach the multitudes, but at the same time to withhold his true identity until they were ready to hear it. In this sense, he wasn't trying to hide the meaning of his teaching from them, it was just that what he was trying to say was so explosive that saying it in parables was the only way he could say it, at this stage.

It's fascinating that not even the insiders understood the meaning of the parables at this time. This is why in verse 11 he said, "I have given you the secret of the kingdom of God." You would think that he would say, "I have revealed to you the secret of the kingdom" but he doesn't say that. It's as though the parables were landmines being planted in the minds of the disciples, so that at a later date they would have an explosive revelation of the real meaning.

WHEN STORMS COME (4:35-41)

Jesus calms the storm

³⁵ *That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side."* ³⁶ *Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him.* ³⁷ *A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped.* ³⁸ *Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"*

³⁹ *He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.*

⁴⁰ *He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"*

⁴¹ *They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"*



TRUST CHRIST WHEN THE STORMS OF LIFE COME.

The storms of life are inevitable (v37). It's interesting that it isn't their disobedience that got them into a storm (as happened with Jonah in the Old Testament), but their

obedience to Christ. Things will go wrong for obedient disciples. Jesus doesn't promise a life of ease.

Christ allows storms in our lives so that we rely on him. Listen to Spurgeon's commentary on these verses: "I am afraid, too, that we rely too much upon ourselves. The secret of strength in faith in Christ is having no faith in ourselves. I am inclined to think that the secret of weak faith in God is our having a good deal of self-reliance; but when you cannot trust yourselves, then you hang upon Christ, and cling to him as your only hope; then you give the grip of a sinking man, and there is no hold like that."

A lack of trust in Christ is shown when we forget how loving and powerful he is. In verse 37 the disciples accuse Jesus, "Don't you care?" We must never interpret storms as Christ's failure to care for us. Rather we should remember just how loving and powerful he is, to care for us in the midst of the storm.

A lack of trust results in fear in our lives. Jesus wasn't disturbed by the storm itself, but rather by the effect of the storm on the disciples. He asked them, "Why are you afraid?" A lack of trust is what breeds fear in our lives. The antidote to fear is faith.

The key to trusting Christ is to remember his promises. In verse 35, Jesus made an indirect promise, "Let us go over to the other side." The disciples should have said to themselves, "It may seem like we're going to drown, but we will never drown because Jesus said we would get to the other side." Similarly, we need to hold onto specific promises God has given us in the Scriptures or in whatever way.

Another key to trusting Christ is to affirm his presence. The reason that they should have known that their boat wouldn't sink is that Jesus was in their boat. In the words of Marshall Morgan, "There are many Christians today who seem to think the boat is going down! I am tired of the wailing of some of my friends who take that view. The boat cannot go down. Jesus is on board."

We should follow Christ's example of faith. Jesus slept on the boat not only because he was tired, but also because he trusted his father to look after him. And when he was awake he simply took authority over the storm.



CHRIST IS MASTER OF THE UNIVERSE.

Jesus alone is the Messiah and Son of God who had authority to do this (see verse 41). There's a funny but true story Gayle Erwin tells of a boat trip across the Sea of Galilee with a tour group when the wind, rain and waves began to kick up. A young man on the boat thought "What Would Jesus Do?" and stood up to rebuke the storm. When he spoke out, "Peace, be still" the rain and wind kept coming but the engine of the boat immediately cut out. I tell this humorous story to show that Jesus alone has the power to command an instant weather change.

Jesus was fully human. We see this in the way he falls asleep on the boat exhausted after a day of intensive teaching. But then suddenly, we see another side to Jesus. He wakes up and rules the waves. We see Christ operating in divine power. Psalm 89:9

says of God, "You rule the raging sea. When waves rise up, you still them." Christ was doing here what only God can do. Christ was fully human yet at the same time fully God. He uniquely combines compassion and power, humanity and deity.

Here we have an early picture of how Christ will one day wrap up human history and usher in the new heavens and the new earth. He is Lord of the universe.

It's fascinating that the disciples went from being afraid of the storm (v40) to being terrified of Christ himself (v41). By this stage they may have begun to suspect that he was more than a teacher (v38) and that he was also the Messiah. However, they were far from realizing that he was God in the flesh (see John 1:1 and 1:14). That revelation would come later. By now they were catching glimpses of Christ's divine power. No wonder they were terrified. Wouldn't you be terrified if someone you knew suddenly commanded the weather and it immediately obeyed?

MARK CHAPTER FIVE

JESUS SETS A MAN FREE (5:1-20)

Jesus Restores a Demon-Possessed Man

¹ They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. [a]² When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an evil spirit came from the tombs to meet him. ³ This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. ⁴ For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. ⁵ Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

⁶ When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. ⁷ He shouted at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God's name don't torture me!" ⁸ For Jesus had said to him, "Come out of this man, you evil spirit!"



SATAN SEEKS TO WRECK LIVES.

This man is an extreme case of demon-possession. He is caught up with the theme of death (as seen in his choice of living in tombs (v2)). He isolates himself and has superhuman strength (v3,4). He is tormented and self-destructive (v5).

Demon-possession is still a reality today. However, we must avoid assuming that anyone marked by some of the traits listed above is possessed. There are often psychological reasons that explain these things too.

Although not many people today are demon-possessed (where evil spirits live within a person), certainly many more people are demon-oppressed (where evil spirits persistently afflict a person).

We aren't told what he did to be inhabited by demons, but we can speculate that he must have invited them in either knowingly or unknowingly. One way to open our lives to demons is involvement in the occult (which is attempting to attain supernatural power or knowledge through any means other than Christ).

Why does the demon shout out the name of Jesus (v7)? One theologian explains: "The full address is not a confession of Jesus' dignity, but a desperate attempt to gain control over him or to render him harmless, in accordance with the common assumption of the period that the use of the precise name of an adversary gave one mastery over him."

Jesus said that Satan seeks to lie, kill and destroy. This man is an extreme example of the devastation Satan can bring to a person, but he has far more subtle ways of destroying us: deception, intimidation, condemnation and temptation. Satan moved this man toward death (by the tombs). Today, he still seeks to move people toward death. 1 John 5:19 speaks of Satan holding onto people, keeping them from the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

⁹ Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?"

My name is Legion," he replied, "for we are many." ¹⁰ And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.

¹¹ A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. ¹² The demons begged Jesus, "Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them." ¹³ He gave them permission, and the evil spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

¹⁴ Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. ¹⁵ When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid.



JESUS HAS AUTHORITY TO SET PEOPLE FREE.

The events of this story are amazing. A legion of demons. A drowning herd of pigs. A curious crowd. A man set free.

Surely the emphasis of this story is that the man "who had been possessed" is now sitting there "in his right mind". He had previously been running and falling in a frenzy of craziness, now he is "sitting there". He had been naked, but now he is dressed.

The crowd, who knew all about this man no doubt (see verses 3,4) are shocked to the core that Jesus has set him free. People had tried to chain him. But Jesus set him free.

If Jesus can set someone like this free, then there is no one on this earth beyond hope, beyond his reach, beyond his power to liberate.

¹⁶ Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man—and told about the pigs as well. ¹⁷ Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.



NEVER REJECT THE LIGHT.

These people should have been so awed by the compassion and power of Christ to set this man free, but instead they were irritated by the way he had come and changed things. They clearly didn't care much for the man; all they cared for was the loss of their animals.

Why did Jesus allow the pigs to die? We must remember that Jesus was a Jewish man, and that many of these people were Jewish too. Pigs were forbidden animals for Jews to herd. And that's probably why Jesus in this situation allowed them to die in the place of the man (v13).

We must all choose: do we want our pigs (i.e. those aspects of our lifestyle that are forbidden by Christ) or do we want Christ? We cannot have both. Sadly, many reject the light of Christ and embrace darkness instead. Jesus speaks of this in John 3:19,20 when he says, "Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds are evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed."

¹⁸ As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. ¹⁹ Jesus did not let him, but said, "Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." ²⁰ So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.



TELL PEOPLE WHAT JESUS HAS DONE FOR YOU.

The Decapolis is the name for the 10 towns east of the Jordan that were mainly non-Jewish (Gentile) cities. Jesus restricted his own earthly ministry to the nation of Israel, but eventually he would launch an international mission too (see Matthew 28:18-20). But here already, he sends out a missionary to an area of the world outside of Israel.

The apostle Paul is often called "the apostle to the Gentiles" but perhaps the first person who actually deserved this title was this very man. He was the first missionary to the Gentiles.

Jesus instructs him very simply: "Go home (i.e. to your home region) and tell people how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you (v19)." The man does just that and all the people he tells are amazed (v20). It seems this man started off telling first his family and friends in his home town, but then thought to himself, "Let me tell some of the people I know in surrounding towns."

Today, we are given the same instruction: tell people what Jesus has mercifully done for you. This is sometimes called our "testimony". Essentially it is the story (or stories) of all the ways that Jesus has positively impacted our lives, despite the fact that we never deserved it.

EXPERIENCING JESUS' RESCUING POWER (5:21-43)

Jesus raises a dead girl and heals a sick woman

²¹ When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake. ²² Then one of the synagogue leaders, named Jairus, came, and when he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet. ²³ He

pleaded earnestly with him, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live." ²⁴ So Jesus went with him.

A large crowd followed and pressed around him. ²⁵ And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. ²⁶ She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. ²⁷ When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak ...



THE BEST THING TO DO WHEN IN DISTRESS IS GO TO JESUS.

Imagine being a father of a 12-year-old girl whose life is slipping away like sand through a sieve. And there's nothing you can do about it.

Imagine being a woman who has had severe vaginal bleeding for 12 years, and despite all the doctors you've visited and all the money you've spent (every last cent!) nothing has helped. To make it worse, under Jewish law, a woman with blood discharge was unclean and not allowed to touch anyone, not even her own husband (she would have been forced to divorce him and leave home) and certainly not a religious leader of any kind.

Jesus encountered two such people. The reason he encountered them is not that he went looking for them, but because they came looking for him.

Distress today is just as real. We face all kinds of problems: financial, relational, circumstantial, physical, emotional. And to this day, despite all our medical and self-help breakthroughs, much of our stress and problems are simply unsolvable. Diseases remain incurable. Divorce still happens. Emotional breakdowns happen. Life is hard still.

Instead of allowing their pain to drive them away from Jesus (which so often happens) they let their pain drive them towards Jesus. Jairus falls at his feet. And the woman, who is too afraid to go public with what's wrong with her, secretly touches him. Let us follow their example in our pain. Let us run to Jesus. Let us throw ourselves at his feet. Let us reach out and touch him.

²⁷ When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, ²⁸ because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." ²⁹ Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.

³⁰ At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?"

³¹ "You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?' "

³² But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. ³³ Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. ³⁴ He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."



INVITE JESUS' RESCUING POWER INTO YOUR LIFE AND SITUATION THROUGH FAITH.

This is a most amazing story. People are thronging around Jesus touching him. But suddenly he feels "power go out from him". He immediately discerns that someone has been healed. And he wants to know who.

This reminds us of Luke 5:17 which says that "the power of the Lord was present for Jesus to heal". That verse and this one (v30) together suggest that a current of spiritual power flowed from Jesus when he healed people. Profound.

Why did Jesus want to know who touched him? There are many reasons? Perhaps, knowing that a miracle had just happened, he wanted to boost Jairus' faith (as they headed toward his dying daughter). Another reason is that he wanted to take the opportunity to meet the person he had just healed (because it was not just power but also love that flowed from him). Certainly, he spoke to her with tenderness and affirmation, even calling her "daughter". Can you imagine how affirmed she was by his words? Instead of rebuking her for touching him (and she was trembling with fear that this would happen-v33), he affirmed her.

The main reason that Jesus wanted to know who touched him, however, is that he wanted to use it as an object lesson: *it is faith that conducts the rescuing power of Christ.*

This is true not only of healing or receiving help from Christ, but also of salvation. In the words of Spurgeon, "It's not every contact with Christ that saves men; it is the arousing of yourself to come near to him, the determinate, the personal, resolute, believing touch of Jesus Christ which saves."

From the examples of Jairus and this woman we see that faith expresses itself through our:

- *Coming to Christ in prayer* (the man came to Jesus (v22) as did the woman (v27)).
- *Desperation and humility* (Jairus "fell at his feet" (v22) and the woman thought to herself "if I just touch his clothes ..." (v28)).
- *A bold request* (Jairus "pleaded earnestly" with Jesus (v23)).
- *A bold action* (the woman touched him (v29)).

³⁵ While Jesus was still speaking, some people came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. “Your daughter is dead,” they said. “Why bother the teacher anymore?”

³⁶ Overhearing [could possibly also be translated, ‘ignoring’] what they said, Jesus told him, “Don’t be afraid; just believe.”

³⁷ He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. ³⁸ When they came to the home of the synagogue leader, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. ³⁹ He went in and said to them, “Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep.” ⁴⁰ But they laughed at him.



IF YOU FACE A SETBACK, DON'T STEP BACK — GOD'S PLANNING YOUR COMEBACK.

Jairus was trusting Jesus to heal his daughter but faced several setbacks. For one, the healing incident of the bleeding woman really slowed Jesus down. You can imagine Jairus getting frustrated as he waited while this was happening. Another setback is that he heard a report that his daughter was dead (v25). Can you imagine the terrible gloom that would have come over him at that moment? Another setback was the overwhelmingly loud sound of people crying because the girl had already died. Yet another setback is that the people laughed in ridicule at his attempts to get Jesus to heal her.

Still today, we may be on a path of trusting Christ in some way. We may have experienced Jesus' assurances in a certain area of our lives. But then we face setbacks such as a delay, bad news or the negative emotions and faithlessness of people around us. Setbacks are real, and can be expected.

But notice that Jesus gives Jairus two strong encouragements: “Don’t be afraid; just believe” (v36) and “This child is not dead but asleep.” Still today, when Jesus has genuinely promised us something, we can expect his encouragements when we face setbacks. It’s as though he’s saying to us, “In this setback, don’t step back — I’m planning your comeback.”

After he put them all out, he took the child’s father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. ⁴¹ He took her by the hand and said to her, “Talitha koum!” (which means “Little girl, I say to you, get up!”). ⁴² Immediately the girl stood up and began to walk around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. ⁴³ He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat.



JESUS HAS POWER AND AUTHORITY OVER DANGERS, DEMONS, DISEASE AND DEATH.

We must remember that the events recorded in 4-5:43 took place over a period of about two days.

In 4:1-34 Jesus teaches by the eastern side of the lake from a boat just offshore. He teaches on the theme of the kingdom of God and how, through our openness to Jesus, it advances in our lives and in our world. *We see that Jesus' authority and power can be experienced if we open ourselves to his grace and authority.*

Then 4:35-41 describes how *the evening of that same day* they were caught in the storm. *We see that Jesus has authority and power over dangers.*

Then 5:1-20 describes how the next morning on the western side of the lake he sets free the demonized man. *We see that Jesus has authority and power over demons.*

Then 5:21-34 speaks of how, on his return to the western side of the lake, he heals the bleeding woman. *We see that Jesus has authority and power over disease.*

Then 5:35-43 shows how, immediately afterwards, he raises the little girl from the dead with that command, "Talitha kum". Everyone is rightly astonished (v42). *We see that Jesus has authority and power over death.*

What is the learning? We are invited to experience Christ's life-changing power. It is real. If we have any doubt that Jesus' kingdom power is available to us, just ponder these four back-to-back events in which Jesus reveals that he has power and authority over dangers, demons, disease and death. Let us worship him. Let us trust him. Let us yield our lives to him entirely.

MARK CHAPTER SIX

BEWARE OF UNBELIEF (6:1-6A)

A prophet without honour

¹ *Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. ² When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed.*

“Where did this man get these things?” they asked. “What’s this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing?”



BEWARE OF UNBELIEF ESPECIALLY WHEN CONSIDERING WHO JESUS IS.

Although he had grown up in Nazareth, we’re told that when he began his public ministry he had moved to nearby Capernaum (see 2:1), possibly staying in Simon Peter’s house (see 1:29) or maybe renting his own. Now some time later, he returns to his hometown of Nazareth, along with his disciples.

He begins to teach in the synagogue — and they are amazed by his apparently newfound wisdom. And they probably have heard of the miracles he has done in nearby Capernaum and by the lake of Galilee. And what’s more, he left as a single man but has come back as a rabbi with his own disciples.

Although verse 2 says that they were amazed, we will soon find out it is the amazement of unbelief (see verse 6). This is so tragic since his God-given power and authority is so obvious.

There is a difference between doubt and unbelief. Doubt is the *struggle* to believe. Unbelief is the *refusal* to believe. What we have here is unbelief. Despite all the evidence, they refuse to believe. God is merciful to those who doubt (see Jude 23), but he doesn’t deal kindly with our unbelief.

³ *Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?”*



JESUS UNDERSTANDS THE STRAINS OF FAMILY LIFE AND WORK LIFE.

In his first 30 years, Jesus must have given himself to prayer, the study of the Scriptures, and to involvement in the synagogue. But he certainly did far more than that.

For starters, he was a hard-working man. We're told that Jesus had been a carpenter. But the word can also be translated "construction worker". It is wonderful to think that of all the professions God could have chosen for Jesus to have when he came to this earth, he chose that of a carpenter, someone who builds and restores things. When he stopped his work as a carpenter, and started his public ministry, he stayed in the building and restoring business, only this time it was people's lives, not blocks of wood or rock that he worked on.

And, he was a family man. Presumably his father, Joseph, had died many years before, and he had financially supported his family until the youngest children were able to support themselves and Mary. Notice that, despite a common teaching of parts of the worldwide church, Mary did have other children after Jesus came. She didn't remain a virgin. Notice also that Jesus grew up in a household of at least eight people once his father had died. He lived with his mother, his four brothers and at least two sisters.

Hebrews 4:15 highlights that as we approach Jesus we must remember that he deeply empathizes with the weaknesses, challenges and temptations of everyday life, because he lived the full human life.

Most of our difficulties in life happen in the area of our relationships, especially with family members, and in the area of our work life with all its challenges. Jesus understands. Feel confident in asking him for grace and mercy to cope and even thrive in these areas of life (see Hebrews 4:16).



CHRIST IS ABLE TO REACH OUR FAMILY MEMBERS WHO ARE FAR FROM HIM.

Jesus' own family did not believe that he was anything more than an ordinary man. Probably, they struggled to believe that he really was a rabbi, and they refused to believe he was the Messiah launching the kingdom of God on earth (see 3:21,31,32).

But amazingly we know that eventually his mother would become a leader in his movement, and James would lead the church of Jerusalem and would write the letter of James, and Judas would even write the letter of Jude. At some point after his resurrection they would eventually believe. We don't know what happened with the others.

Be encouraged: you may have friends and family that seem so far from Christ. Keep on praying. Don't give up hope. Christ can reach them yet.

And they took offence at him. ⁴ Jesus said to them, "Only in their own towns, among their relatives and in their own homes are prophets without honour."



BEWARE OF THE UNBELIEF THAT SO EASILY GROWS IN THE SEEDBED OF FAMILIARITY.

Despite the amazing wisdom and power of Jesus — and their first response was amazement (v2) — they now take offence at him.

In verse 3, we see them taking offence by the way they call him “carpenter” (in other words suggesting that he wasn’t a real rabbi) and “Mary’s son” (they’re rubbing in his face the fact that he grew up without a father).

But why did they take offence at him? Why did they refuse to believe? It was because of familiarity. Faith and revelation comes to those who are humble and teachable. But, sadly, familiarity, the feeling that we’ve already figured this all out, goes hand in hand with pride and a refusal to be taught. And faith and revelation don’t come to us when we’re proud and unteachable.

Be very careful of the pride and arrogance that result from assuming you’ve already figured everything out. Beware of becoming an expert in anything, because our very sense of being an expert can blind us to anything new.

⁵ He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. ⁶ He was amazed at their lack of faith.



BEWARE OF UNBELIEF BECAUSE IT HINDERS THE COMING OF THE KINGDOM IN OUR LIVES AND SITUATIONS.

Time and again Jesus emphasised that faith is the best way to experience the power of the kingdom in our lives and situations (see 2:5, 4:40, 5:34, 5:36 for example). It’s not that he needed faith to perform miracles (after all, he healed many people when there was no sign of faith (see 3:5 for example). It’s that he usually chose to work miracles when there was faith.

Our refusal to believe can massively hinder the coming of the kingdom in our lives. For example, think about the way miracles are happening so numerous in the name of Jesus in those parts of the world which are ready to believe (in Africa, rural China and South America), whereas they aren’t happening as much where people, through intellectual pride and the rejection of a supernatural realm, refuse to believe (in Europe, America and Australia).

In Luke 7:9 we’re told that Jesus was amazed by the faith of a non-Jewish man. But here we’re told that he was amazed by the lack of faith (or more accurately, the refusal to believe) of Jewish people. Interestingly, both faith and unbelief amaze Jesus. He is moved positively by our faith, and negatively by our lack of it.

SENT OUT BY CHRIST (6:6B-13)

Jesus sends out the Twelve

Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village. ⁷ Calling the Twelve to him, he began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits.



OPPOSITION TO GOD'S WORK IS AN IDEAL OPPORTUNITY TO EXPAND GOD'S WORK.

As we read the gospel of Mark we notice a pattern. God's work through John the baptizer was met with radical opposition, and at this point Jesus launched his ministry (1:14). Death threats on Christ's life caused him to appoint the Twelve (see the connection between 3:6,7 and 13). Now rejection in his home town causes him to move on and send out the Twelve (v6,7). In the book of Acts we see that the church continued this same pattern (see Acts 8:1 and 4 for example).

This is true today: the much-feared opposition to God's work through our lives and churches may mark an opportunity for a new wave of God's work through us. Let us not be discouraged. The setback may just be God's call to step up our ministry impact.



CHRIST CALLS YOU CLOSER TO HIMSELF BEFORE HE SENDS YOU OUT.

The theme of being "sent" is a major one in the gospel of Mark so far. We see God sending John the baptizer (1:2). We see the Spirit sending Jesus (1:12). And then we see Jesus, on two occasions, promising to send the disciples out (1:17 and 3:14). Now, he actually sends them out.

Today, to be a Christian is to be a "sent one". The Greek word for send is "apostolos" from where we get the words, apostle and apostolic. The Latin translation is "mission" from where we get the words mission, missional and missionary. Every Christian needs to see themselves as sent out by Christ — not necessarily to another land, but into the context in which we find ourselves.

But notice that before Jesus sends his disciples out he always calls them to himself first (1:17, 3:14 and 6:7). This says something. It tells us that intimate relationship with Christ precedes being sent out. It says that mission flows out of worship. Today, the closer we draw to Christ, the more power and authority and conviction we will have as "sent ones".



CHRIST CALLS YOU TO TEAM TOGETHER WITH OTHER DISCIPLES.

Jesus sends them out in pairs. Even he never ventured out on a solitary mission (he always had his disciples with him). So when he sends people out he does not send them out alone. They are to minister in team with others. This teaming together will

provide the encouragement, protection, companionship and support they so desperately need on the mission.

Today, we must learn how to build friendship with and partner with other disciples on a similar mission to ours. The mission is simply too important to embark on in isolation.

⁸ *These were his instructions: "Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. ⁹ Wear sandals but not an extra shirt. ¹⁰ Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town.*



BEFORE EMBARKING ON A MISSION TRIP, GIVE BOTH PRACTICAL AND SPIRITUAL THOUGHT TO HOW YOU WILL SURVIVE.

Why would Jesus tell them to take nothing with them, and to rely on local hospitality? (However, he did instruct them to take a staff and sandals, both vital for the amount of travel they would be doing.) There are several reasons it seems:

- He wanted them to learn how to be dependent on God to provide for them. If they didn't know how to trust God themselves for their everyday needs, then how could they so confidently instruct others to trust in God?
- The reason he told them not to take a bag is probably because he didn't want people to associate them with the travelling philosophers and religious leaders who would carry along with them a "begging bag". Although they needed help, Jesus never instructed them to beg or even ask for financial help.
- He wanted to give Israel, the people of God, an opportunity to provide for the disciples.
- The mission was very urgent and brief, so little was needed.

When we go on mission trips, do these instructions still apply?

- We must remember that Israel, despite their hardened hearts, were still God's people. These men were not involved in ministry to totally unsympathetic pagan people, but to God's people. That's why, when the apostles, decades later, would go on mission trips to totally pagan lands they would provide for themselves (see 3 John 7 for example). The principle today is therefore this: when ministering to a church, the receiving church should provide financial support, but when involved in pioneer evangelism, the sending church provides support.
- The other insight is that we need far less "stuff" than we imagine we do, to succeed on a mission trip. This is just the counsel needed today in a culture of great dependence of stuff to survive.

In these three verses, Jesus was instructing them, and those of us who get to go on mission trips, to give both practical and spiritual thought to how we will survive.

¹¹ And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave, as a testimony against them.

 **YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR COMMUNICATING GOD'S MESSAGE TO PEOPLE, BUT YOU AREN'T RESPONSIBLE FOR HOW THEY RESPOND TO THAT MESSAGE.**

Jesus anticipated that the disciples wouldn't have a favourable response to their message in every town. He told them to shake the dust off their feet when they left. Why? Firstly, because it was a warning of the judgment that the town was still under, because they had failed to listen to the gracious message of the disciples. It was as if they were saying to the town, "We came into this town to call you to God's grace. But you have rejected it, and therefore remain under his judgment." Secondly, it would help the disciples not to carry the responsibility for how people responded to their message. It was their responsibility to communicate the message as persuasively as possible, but then it was the people's responsibility to respond to it. Shaking the dust off their feet would help them to move on without beating up on themselves for the apparent failure.

¹² They went out and preached that people should repent. ¹³ They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.

 **ANNOUNCE AND DEMONSTRATE THE NEW THING GOD IS DOING IN THE WORLD THROUGH JESUS.**

What was their message? We're told here that they preached that "people should repent". Luke 10:9 gives us more detail: they were to announce that "The kingdom of God is at hand." In other words, they repeated Jesus' main message (1:15): "The time has come. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the good news." Said in other words, their message was, "God is doing something new! Don't miss out! Prepare yourself — change your way of thinking and your approach to life!" It would be a year or two before the new thing God was doing would make more sense (once Jesus was crucified, resurrected and exalted), but for now they were to get ready for it.

But Jesus didn't just instruct them to announce the new thing God was doing. He also instructed them to demonstrate its presence through casting out evil and healing the sick.

Today, the instruction stands: we as Christ's disciples must announce the new and urgent thing God is doing in the world through Jesus, and call people to get in on it,

and also demonstrate just how real God's involvement is through demonstrations of power. And he promises to give us the power and authority we need to do just that.

HEALTHCARE AND GOSPEL PROCLAMATION CAN GO HAND IN HAND.

The point I make here is clearly not what Mark had in mind when he wrote this gospel, but I include it as an encouragement for the millions of Christian healthcare workers in the world.

One of the amazing things that God seems to have done in the recent history of the church is to send out Christian medical workers all over the world who combine healthcare and the preaching of the Gospel. This is not an entirely new thing though. We see this in the way that the disciples anointed people with oil. The oil represented the power of God, but it also represented medicine. (Galen, the ancient great Greek doctor, said, "Oil is the best of all instruments for healing diseased bodies.") Therefore, in a not-so-literal sense, the Gospel-proclaiming messengers were also healthcare workers. Be encouraged if that's your call.

REPENT OR ELSE ... (6:14-29)

John the baptizer beheaded

¹⁴ King Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name had become well known. Some were saying, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him."

¹⁵ Others said, "He is Elijah."

And still others claimed, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago."

¹⁶ But when Herod heard this, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!"

THERE ARE SO MANY OPINIONS ABOUT WHO JESUS REALLY WAS AND IS, BUT SO MANY OF THEM ARE PLAIN WRONG.

People were trying to figure out who Jesus was. Some believed that he was John the baptizer resurrected from the dead. Others believed that he was the return of Elijah (because of the promise of Malachi 4:5). Some believed that he was a prophet.

In the midst of all these claims, Herod evaluated the evidence and came to a conclusion about Jesus that was totally wrong — he believed that Jesus was the resurrection of John. This was because his perspective was influenced by his own experiences (he was riddled with guilt for murdering John).

Still today, there are multiple theories and opinions about who and what Jesus was, and is. And each person needs to make a decision about the truth. But they also need to be humble enough to admit that our so-called conviction about Jesus was or could be wrong, as Herod was. And we can be wrong about Jesus because we're influenced by a whole bunch of possibly negative experiences instead of honest objective rationality, again as Herod was.



IF YOU DON'T REPENT OF YOUR SIN YOU MAY BE GIVEN MORE CHANCES TO REPENT, BUT EVENTUALLY IT WILL BE TOO LATE.

The events of verses 17-29 happened before the event recorded in verses 14-16. In verses 17-29 we see that Herod has already radically hardened his heart to God's message and God's messengers. You would think that God wouldn't give him another chance, but God is merciful once again. He allows the message that God is graciously and powerfully doing something new in the world through Jesus to reach the ears of Herod. All Herod has to do is humbly repent and believe this message, and send for Jesus (and he has the power to do that). But instead he hardens his heart even to this message. He doesn't send for Jesus at all. It seems like this was his last chance. We're told that later Herod would encounter Jesus, but then it was too late: Jesus wouldn't let any more of God's word be spoken to Herod. And Herod would reject Jesus entirely (see Luke 23:7-12).

God's mercy is surprisingly enduring. But it has a limit. If we harden our hearts repeatedly to the message God is speaking to us eventually he will stop speaking to us entirely.

¹⁷ For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. ¹⁸ For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." ¹⁹ So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, ²⁰ because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him.



IF YOU DON'T REPENT OF YOUR SIN, IT WILL PROGRESSIVELY HARDEN YOUR HEART.

Herod Antipas (one of the sons of Herod the Great spoken of in Matthew 2:1-20) ruled over Galilee and was at work in the development of the temple.

He had committed a great sin. He had murdered his wife (the princess of a great king to the East) and had stolen Herodias from Philip, her former husband and his very own brother!

John courageously confronted Herod regarding this evil, calling him to repent. But instead of repenting, Herod arrested John.

But still it seemed that John kept on preaching to Herod. William Lane, a theologian, speaks of Herod's growing hardness of heart like this: "More weak than cruel, Herod listened to John with an undeniable fascination. John's word left him perplexed, and in anguish. Yet he found a strange pleasure in the authoritative preaching of this holy man, whose stringent life gave added power to his probing word. Too weak to follow John's counsel, he nevertheless had to listen but refused to do anything about it."

Herod felt guilty but refused to acknowledge his guilt. He seems to have protected John the baptizer from his wife (who wanted him dead) as a way of making him feel better about himself.

We must repent of sin rather than refuse to repent. The longer we refuse, the harder our heart becomes.

²¹ Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. ²² When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the girl, "Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you." ²³ And he promised her with an oath, "Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom."

²⁴ She went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?"

"The head of John the Baptist," she answered.

²⁵ At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: "I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter."

²⁶ The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷ So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, ²⁸ and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. ²⁹ On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.



IF YOU DON'T REPENT OF YOUR SIN, THAT SIN WILL LEAD TO MORE AND MORE SIN.

Herodias and Herod had sinned. They had been challenged to repent. But they refused. As a result they became increasingly entangled in their own sin. Here we see how it leads to the murder of an innocent prophet. But there were so many different kinds of sin in their lives simply because they would not repent. There was the nursing of a grudge and deep murderous hatred (v19). There was one person manipulating another (Herodias tricked Herod into murdering John). There was the fear of what people would think (v26). There was the corrupting of an innocent third party, Herodias' daughter who was complicit in the execution of John.

The longer it takes for us to repent of a sin, the greater the web of that sin grows in our lives. Unrepented-of sin begets more and more sin.

Other than God's judgment of the couple, history tells us that they did reap the consequences of their sin eventually. The devastated father of Herod's late wife, who he killed, was a king who defeated Herod in battle. Ten years after the murder of John, Herod and Herodias were banished to the Roman province of Gaul where they committed suicide. The lesson is clear: if we don't repent of our sin it leads to death.

THE FEEDING OF FIVE THOUSAND (6:30-44)

Jesus feeds the five thousand

³⁰ The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. ³¹ Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." ³² So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.



MAKE SURE THAT YOU REST AFTER AN INTENSIVE TIME OF WORK AND/OR MINISTRY.

The disciples had been on a nationwide ministry trip. They returned with stories of both revivals and persecutions. They must have been exhausted. But when they returned it didn't stop. So many people were clamouring for their attention that they were missing meals. Jesus intervened and invited them to get away with him for some rest.

Today, we must learn to rest. We would be wise to schedule a few days of rest after a season of great stress and intensity. The best way to rest is to get away from all the demands, to calm down and to spend time with Jesus.

In the coming verse we will see that their plans to rest were interrupted and it never happened. This reminds us that rest is something we should pursue but not get bent

out of shape if it doesn't happen. In those times, we should dig deep and trust Christ for the grace we need to carry on, weary as we may feel.

³³ But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. ³⁴ When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.



THE BEST GIFT YOU CAN GIVE TO PEOPLE IS GOD'S WORD.

Jesus saw a large crowd and was filled with compassion for them. He noticed that they needed shepherding. So what did he do? Did he sign them up for a social welfare programme? Did he schedule some counselling time with them? No, he taught them. He spoke God's word to them.

Today, what we all need — more than anything — is the word of God preached to us. Nothing else has the power to so nourish, free, equip and guide our lives. To the degree that we truly want what is best for us, we will devour God's word. To the degree we want the best for those around us, we will communicate to them God's word.

³⁵ By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. "This is a remote place," they said, "and it's already very late. ³⁶ Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat." ³⁷ But he answered, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "That would take almost 200 denarii (about a year's wages)! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?"



EXPECT GREAT THINGS FROM GOD AND ATTEMPT GREAT THINGS FOR GOD.

Jesus no doubt planned to perform the miracle recorded in verses 38-44. He saw this as an opportunity to demonstrate the abundant resourcefulness of God's kingdom, the new thing God was doing in the world through him. As an agent of the kingdom, he was constantly on the lookout for such opportunities.

It seems that he wanted his disciples to see the needy situation not just in a logical problem-solving way (which is the way they did see it), but rather through the eyes of faith and kingdom-opportunity. It's almost as though he first gave them the chance to trust God for a miracle.

We mustn't always assume a logical problem-solving view of things. Rather, our default setting should be a readiness to discern what God might be up to in a situation. Instead of seeing a problem to be solved through human effort, we should be open to the possibility that this is a problem that can be solved through God's grace and power. We should be ready to expect great things from God and to attempt great things for God. If at times we fail in this, we don't need to be discouraged — even the disciples often failed to do this.

³⁸ *"How many loaves do you have?" he asked. "Go and see."*

When they found out, they said, "Five—and two fish."

³⁹ *Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass.* ⁴⁰ *So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties.* ⁴¹ *Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all.* ⁴² *They all ate and were satisfied,* ⁴³ *and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish.* ⁴⁴ *The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.*



CHRIST CAN USE THE LITTLE YOU HAVE TO ACCOMPLISH HIS GREAT PURPOSES THROUGH YOU.

There must have been at least 10 000 people including women and children (we're told there were 5 000 *men*). After everyone is fed fish and bread there were 12 baskets of food left over. Christ performed an amazing miracle!

But what makes this miracle so amazing is two things: 1) *He used the little that the disciples had* (which amounted to five loaves and two fish). To this day, we mustn't let our little education, our little resources, our little capabilities, or even our little experiences disqualify us from attempting great things for Christ and expecting great things from Christ. This story vividly shows that Christ will take whatever we have, as little as it may seem, and do something with it. The first and most important thing is that we put everything we have, little as it is, in his hands. 2) *The miracle happened in the hands of the disciples, not in the hands of Jesus.* The first thing they did was to put it in the hands of Jesus, but then he put it back in their hands. It was as the disciples handed out the bread and fish that the miraculous multiplication happened. Today, we can trust Christ to multiply the little we have to accomplish something great. It's not like we just pray and then Jesus does the miracle. No, as this story shows, often it's as we obediently do the will of God with diligence and faith, that we experience God doing supernatural things through us in the lives of others.



THE MAIN POINT OF THIS EVENT IS THAT CHRIST IS THE MESSIAH-KING.

This story is full of clues that Jesus hoped the disciples would pick up on (verse 52 will show us that they missed it however). Let's look at these clues:

- Mark mentioned three times that this large gathering of people happened in the desert or wilderness (v31,32 and 35). Did this echo another event?
- Jesus saw that they were like sheep without a shepherd (v34). Throughout the Old Testament, kings are described as the shepherds of their people. We have just seen that Herod is doing a poor job of being king, and these people need a king who actually cares about them. But who?
- Jesus organized the people into groups of fifties and hundreds (v40). Was this just a bit of logistics or did it mean something?
- He fed them all (v42). Again, did this echo another event?

What did these clues point to? They pointed to the fact that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah-King:

- The Israelites had also once gathered in the thousands in a desert.
- During that time Moses prayed for a leader for the people "so that the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd" (Numbers 27:17). Jesus was this leader, this king, this shepherd. Jesus even led them to green grass (v39), much like a shepherd would do for his sheep.
- In that wilderness time Moses appointed men to be in charge of groups of hundreds and fifties (see Exodus 18:21).
- At that time manna fell from the sky to feed the people. God supernaturally fed the people.

The point is this: Jesus is the fulfilment of Israel's hopes. Israel had long been waiting for the Messiah, the one who would usher in the new age of the kingdom. Jesus, greater than Moses even (and certainly greater than king Herod mentioned in the previous story), was that Messiah. He was full of power, full of love and ushering in the restoring, providing and liberating kingdom of God into this world. It's only in Mark 8 that the disciples will eventually grasp that he is the Messiah, but already now Jesus is dropping hints, so to speak, but they're missing them entirely.

Christ the earth's true king, was long exiled by the rebellion of humanity, but returned to take his rightful place in the person of Jesus. Still today his kingdom grows despite the resistance of sinful human hearts. But eventually his kingdom will overcome all resistance, either through grace (if we repent and believe) or through judgment (if we fail to repent and believe).

JESUS AND THE DIFFICULTIES WE FACE (6:45-55)

Jesus walks on the water

⁴⁵ Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. ⁴⁶ After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.



THE BUSIER YOU GET THE MORE YOU NEED TO PRAY.

Jesus had hoped to get away to go pray in verse 31, but we see in verse 33 that a surprise gathering of thousands made it impossible. But at the end of the day Jesus knew that he had to spend time alone with his Father to pray. So he dismissed the crowd and sent his disciples away. He understood that if he was always available to every person who made a ministry demand on him, eventually he wouldn't have much to offer anyone. So he pro-actively got alone to pray. He also must have been exhausted physically, but he knew that in this situation he needed prayer more than he needed sleep.

The lesson for us today is clear: regardless of the demands we face, we need the courage to often get away and spend time with God. Nothing can so restore our souls as this. Besides, if we are always available to people eventually we will not have anything to give them from God. It's in prayer that we find the resources we need to give people in ministry. (If you're not persuaded that this is true, notice how in the coming day (recorded in verses 53-56) how powerfully Jesus would minister. It seems that Mark draws attention to Jesus' pattern of "public ministry followed by private prayer followed by public ministry" so as to persuade us that *prayer really is the secret of power in ministry*.)

⁴⁷ When evening came, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. ⁴⁸ He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them.



CHRIST IS WATCHING YOUR OBEDIENCE EVEN WHEN YOU FEEL IT'S NOT GETTING YOU ANYWHERE.

We see that Jesus instructed his disciples to get into the boat and head for Bethsaida. But they were straining against the wind. They must have felt desperate. Little did they know that the one who had instructed them to take the journey was watching. In the words of Spurgeon: "The apostolic crew rowed, and rowed, and rowed, and it was no fault of theirs that they made no progress, 'for the wind was contrary unto them.' The Christian man may make little or no headway, and yet it may be no fault of his, for the wind is contrary. Our good Lord will take the will for the deed, and reckon our

progress, not by our apparent advance, but by the hearty intent with which we tug at the oars.”

Shortly before dawn he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them,⁴⁹ but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out,⁵⁰ because they all saw him and were terrified. Immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”⁵¹ Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down.



CHRIST IS WITH YOU IN YOUR DIFFICULTIES EVEN WHEN YOU FAIL TO REALIZE IT.

Many devotional writers have spoken of “the dark night of the soul”. It describes those times in our lives when it seems that Christ has abandoned us, and especially when we needed him most. We feel all alone as we face an adversity that threatens to destroy us. The disciples probably felt the same. They were used to the comforting presence of Jesus with them, but this time he had abandoned them when they needed him most.

And over and above this they thought they saw a ghost! But it wasn’t a ghost at all. It was Jesus. It turns out that Jesus, obviously motivated by compassion, had gone out to them, walking on water. It turns out that Christ, far from turning his back on them, was moving towards them all the time. And he joined them. What a relief it must have been to have Christ in the boat with them.

When we face the dark night of the soul let us draw strength from this event. Christ watches. Christ moves towards us. Though we may fail to recognize his presence, he is with us. Soon enough the storm will subside and Christ’s calming presence will again fill us with the strength, assurance and courage we need. Wait patiently.

They were completely amazed,⁵² for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.



UNTIL YOU REALIZE THAT JESUS IS THE MESSIAH-KING YOU WILL BE OVERLY AMAZED BY THE MIRACLES HE PERFORMED (AND STILL PERFORMS).

Jesus kept on doing amazing miracles. The day before he had fed thousands with a mere five loaves and two fish. But all the miracles pointed to something, and it appears that the disciples were missing it all. The main point was that the long-awaited Messiah who would usher in the new age of the kingdom had actually arrived — and it was Jesus. Only in Mark 8 will they eventually have their eyes opened to this, but for now their hearts seemed to be hardened to the possibility. The give-away

miracle that oozed clues to the fact that he was the Messiah had occurred just the day before — the feeding of the thousands (see the second point in the commentary under verses 38-44 for more). If they had realized that Jesus is the Messiah-king then they wouldn't have been so amazed by this miracle of water-walking. As long as they thought that Jesus was a mere rabbi used by God, or merely a prophet or a miracle-worker, they would fail to grasp the true identity and size of the person they were following. And that's what was happening.

⁵³ When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there. ⁵⁴ As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognized Jesus. ⁵⁵ They ran throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶ And wherever he went—into villages, towns or countryside—they placed the sick in the marketplaces. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched him were healed.



AFTER THE DIFFICULTY COMES THE BLESSING.

Mark has told us of two storms that the disciples endured: the one in 4:35-41 and the one mentioned in 6:45-51. But notice that Mark also tells how immediately after these difficult faith-testing times came a season of great success and blessing. (Mark 5 tells of the amazing miracles that happened in the day immediately following the storm; and these verses (v53-56) speak of great kingdom advancement in the coming days.)

Draw courage from this pattern: after persevering through the difficulties we can expect greater ministry fruitfulness. It seems that Christ uses the difficulties we face to prepare us for the blessing that follows.

MARK CHAPTER SEVEN

RELIGIOSITY VERSUS TRUE CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY (7:1-23)

That which defiles

¹ The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus ² and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. ³ (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. ⁴ When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

⁵ So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?"



DIFFERENT CULTURES AND RELIGIONS CREATE DIFFERENT RITUALS AND CUSTOMS THAT PEOPLE OF THAT CULTURE OR RELIGION ARE EXPECTED TO OBEY.

In verse 1 we see that a delegation of Pharisees and theological experts were sent all the way from Jerusalem to critique the ministry of Jesus. It appears that they had made up their minds beforehand that he was a bad man that would bring harm to the people of Israel.

The Pharisees and the theological experts were a very religious bunch. They taught and modelled that all Jews should seek to be a good Jew, a Jew that is pure and holy, and not corrupted by sin. This seemed good enough, but the problem is how they measured "a good Jew". Tragically, like so many cultures and religions, they created a long list of petty superstitious practices that showed that you were different, committed and pure. Ritualistic hand washing (which was not essentially about hygiene but rather about being pure, and being a good Jew) was an example.

Where did this law come from? It seems that they reasoned that since priests needed to ceremonially clean themselves before entering the tabernacle that a good Jew would also ceremonially clean himself before doing many things, such as eating. As trite as this may sound to us, many Jews had even been martyred because of their refusal to eat food without first cleaning their hands. So it was accepted as right and good for all Jews to do, and certainly something God would want all to do.

But Jesus didn't believe that God wanted Jews to wash their hands before they ate, so he led his disciples to ignore that cultural law. And this is where the conflict raged. It seemed in the eyes of this delegation that Jesus was not a good Jew, and he was disobedient to God.

Today, we must be weary of doing things just because people insist that "God wants it done" and "it shows you're a good Christian". We should rather check out in God's

word whether it really needs to be done, and try to discern what motivates people to do this.

⁶ He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

*"These people honour me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.*



IT IS POSSIBLE TO DO AND SAY ALL THE RIGHT THINGS BUT TO DO IT FOR THE WRONG REASONS.

Jesus responds to their question (in verse 5) with a quote from Isaiah 29:13).

It seems that the goal of the Pharisees was to do and say all the right things, but they had lost sight of the far more important reality: intimacy with and heart-devotion to God. They spoke highly about God and they spoke reverently to God, but the problem was that their hearts were not hungry for and loving toward God at all.

Jesus called them "hypocrites" which simply means "mask-wearing actors". Jesus had probably been exposed to the theatre in a town near to Nazareth where he grew up and could have seen dramas that consisted of mask-wearing actors. He used them as a metaphor of people who do and say all the right things but on the inside there is something else happening. In other words he was saying that they were more motivated by looking religious and earning respect as a godly person than they were about knowing and pleasing God. They were more interested in projecting an image than they were about intimacy with God.

Today, we face the same danger. We can do and say all the right things but we can be motivated by the wrong things, such as a desire to look godly to others and earn a reputation of spirituality. Christ insists that a deep-heart love for and knowledge of God is what should motivate us to say and do the right things.

⁷ *They worship me in vain;*

their teachings are merely human rules.' [Isaiah 29:13]

⁸ *You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions."*



IT'S POSSIBLE TO THINK THAT YOU'RE OBEYING AND PROMOTING GOD'S WILL WHEN YOU'RE JUST OBEYING AND PROMOTING THE RULES OF A RELIGIOUS SUBCULTURE.

Jesus insisted that the kind of Jewish life and faith that the Pharisees practised and promoted was really a deviation from the original life and faith taught in the Scriptures. It seems that they were more devoted to defending the convictions of their religious subculture than they were about finding out and living out the clear teachings of the Scriptures.

Today, it's possible for us to have a list of all the things that a good Christian should do, and somehow to come up with a list that is more reflective of the values of our current religious sub-culture than of what the New Testament clearly teaches us. This obviously doesn't mean that our religious subculture is wrong on every point, but we must explore the Scriptures and find out from it what *really* makes a good Christian in God's eyes. The Bible not our context's latest spin on Christianity should be the source of our convictions, values and practices.

⁹ And he continued, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe (or 'set up') your own traditions!"¹⁰ For Moses said, 'Honour your father and mother' [Exodus 20:12], and, 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death' [Exodus 21:17].¹¹ But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)—¹² then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. ¹³ Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that."



IT'S POSSIBLE TO FIND RELIGIOUS EXCUSES TO DISOBEY THE CLEAR TEACHINGS OF THE BIBLE.

The thing about man-made religion is that many small inconveniences and sacrifices are imposed on its followers, but no significantly large sacrifices are called for, especially those that cut against the grain of our selfishness.

This was the case of the Pharisees. They were willing to wash their hands before every meal — and sometimes even before courses — but they weren't willing to financially support their parents. Exodus 20:12 clearly taught that parents should be honoured and by implication should be supported in their old age. But instead of doing this, they introduced a religious practice whereby you could simply say the word, "Corban" over your possessions, thereby saying that they now belong to God not to them. But here was the trick: they could still use what now belonged to God, but it was no longer theirs to give away.

Today, we're in danger of a faith that inconveniences us very shallowly, just enough to make us feel like we're "good Christians" but to not live out the more consuming instructions like expressing God's love and justice in the world. And, somehow or other we will find a few verses (taken out of context no doubt) and a few one-liners that will justify our disobedience.

¹⁴ Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. ¹⁵⁻¹⁶ Nothing outside you can defile you by going into you. Rather, it is what comes out of you that defiles you."

¹⁷ After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. ¹⁸ "Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters you from the outside can defile you? ¹⁹ For it doesn't go into your heart but into your stomach, and then out of your body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.) ²⁰ He went on: "What comes out of you is what defiles you. ²¹ For from within, out of your hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. ²³ All these evils come from inside and defile you."



IT'S POSSIBLE TO EMBRACE A RELIGIOSITY THAT NEVER REALLY PENETRATES AND TRANSFORMS THE HEART.

We must remember that Jesus' neglect of the petty rules of the Pharisees was jeopardising his safety (see 3:6). So, to take the explosive edge off what he was saying, he introduced them to a short saying (recorded in verses 15 and 16) to make his point.

Later he explains: things like a failure to wash your hands or to avoid certain forbidden foods can't really corrupt and defile us in the sight of God (v18-19). But what can and does corrupt us in God's sight is what is already in us: the sinfulness in our hearts, in the depth of our beings. Jesus describes 13 kinds of evil that find their origin in our hearts (v20-23). Commenting on these verses Spurgeon says, "The source from which these rivers of pollution proceed is the natural heart of man. Sin is not a splash of mud upon man's exterior, it is a filth generated within himself."

What was so wrong with the Pharisee's emphasis on purification washings? According to Jesus it wrongly created the impression that you could somehow become a more godly person through a little external ritual, whereas he was pursuing a far deeper godliness, a godliness of the heart. Although he didn't at this stage tell us how this deep godliness would come about, he made it clear that we needed to first acknowledge how deeply corrupted our own hearts really are.

Jesus was saying that it's possible to have a kind of religiosity that doesn't penetrate or transform us deep in our hearts. And if it fails to do that, then it really is worthless. We mustn't miss what a radical statement Jesus is making here. William Barclay

comments, “Although it may not seem so to us now, this passage, when it was first spoken, was well-nigh the most revolutionary passage in the New Testament.”



JESUS SUBTLY OVER-RULED THE FOOD LAWS THAT MOSES HAD GIVEN ISRAEL.

In verse 19, Jesus said, “For it doesn’t go into your heart but into your stomach, and then out of your body.” Mark commented on this adding, “In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.”

We have already seen how in 2:28 Jesus declared himself Lord of the Sabbath. Now he does the same about the food laws that were so part of the belief system of the Jews, because of their obedience to the law of Moses.

Jesus wasn’t overtly saying that the food laws no longer mattered, but he was saying that in ‘seed-form’ – meaning that a thought was planted that would later develop in their minds. That is what happened. Later on, after he left, his disciples realized that Jesus was in fact setting them free from the law of Moses entirely. No doubt Peter would have remembered this teaching of Christ when, much later, he would have a heavenly vision that convinced him that there is no such thing as a food that defiles you (see Acts 10:9-15).



YOU’RE A SINNER IN DESPERATE NEED OF A SAVIOUR WHO CAN SET YOU FREE FROM BOTH THE GUILT AND THE POWER OF YOUR SIN.

Just think how sinful the Pharisees were. They were highly critical of Jesus possibly because of how jealous and bitter they were because of his success. And yet they felt great about themselves because, unlike Jesus and his disciples, they always washed their hands. Jesus’ point in verses 21-23 that the human heart is deeply corrupted was so evident even in them, the so-called “righteous” people of the day. And if there’s no hope for the so-called righteous people, then nor is there hope for those who know that they are unrighteous.

It seems that Jesus touches us at the point of our sin, and then leaves us hanging. It should cause us to ask, “Then what is the solution?” How do we deal with the sinfulness — its power and its guilt — in our hearts? And, of course, that’s where this Gospel is going. If we fast-forward, we know that Jesus died and rose again from the dead, and in so doing has provided two gifts to those who trust him: the gift of forgiveness (where our hearts are wiped clean of guilt) and the gift of new life (where we are given a new heart, a new centre, and a new well-spring of godly desire)!

JESUS PERFORMS A MIRACLE FOR TWO DIFFERENT GENTILES (7:24-35)

In verse 19 above we see that Jesus was challenging the very way that Jews saw the world: clean versus unclean. The mentality of the first century Jew was to refuse to make contact with anything unclean, whether it was a kind of food, or whether it was a sick person, or whether it was a Gentile. It comes then as no co-incidence that his next two miracles are performed for Gentiles. He was showing that, with regard to the coming of his kingdom, it was not the clean (that which pleased God) which was corrupted by the unclean (that which was believed to displease God) but rather that the clean (in this case Jesus) could in fact restore the so-called unclean (in this case the Gentiles).

Jesus honours a Syrophenician woman's faith

²⁴ Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. ²⁵ In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came and fell at his feet. ²⁶ The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

²⁷ "First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."



JESUS CAME FIRST AS MESSIAH TO THE JEWS AND THEN AS MESSIAH TO THE WORLD.

Things were heating up for Jesus. His family and home town had rejected him (6:3). Herod had become suspicious of him (6:16). The Pharisees and teachers of the law were after him with murderous intent (3:6 and 7:1). So he decided to lay low a while and went about 100 km north of Galilee to Tyre, a Gentile region (v24). He also probably took this as an opportunity to let his disciples feed on him, so to speak (v27).

A Gentile woman heard he was in town and pleaded with him to set her daughter free from a demon (v26).

His response is fascinating: "First let the children eat all they want for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs" (v27).

- He effectively says "no". He does it with a bit of humorous, teasing banter that she is after all, a little (the Greek adds the diminutive) "dog". In that day Jews called Gentiles dogs. The fact that he calls her a "little" dog is a form of affection and playfulness not insult upon insult. It turns out that Jesus wasn't as politically correct as we may have thought. Notice Jesus' humour!
- Why did Jesus say bread was for the children? What did he mean? The children referred to the Jews of Israel, the children of Abraham. Jesus

understood his earthly mission as being a Messiah to the Jews (see Matthew 15:24). Of course, his long-range plan was to be Messiah to all the nations of the world (which is why Mark records that it would be a Gentile man who would recognize that Jesus is the Messiah when he was crucified (see Mark 15:39)). But his immediate plan was to redeem the nation of Israel. Only once he had been crucified and exalted, and, ruling from heaven, had begun to pour out his Spirit, would he broaden his focus to the entire world. That's why he tells the woman that he is focussed on the children for now.

- o (As a side note on this point, we can learn from Christ the importance of focus. Once we know what it is we're meant to do, we will also know what it is we're *not* meant to do. As in this story, this doesn't mean we rigidly refuse all opportunities outside of our focus, but most times we certainly must refuse all opportunities that could side-track us from our central priority and call.)

²⁸ "Lord," she replied, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." ²⁹ Then he told her, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰ She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.



MOVE THE POWERFUL ARM OF CHRIST IN PRAYER.

John Wesley said that prayer is the slender nerve that moves the powerful arm of Christ. We have a helpful picture of effective prayer in these verses. We can learn from her example of prayer in several ways:

Though Jesus delays the answer to our prayer, we should persist in prayer. In Luke 18:1 Jesus taught that we should always pray and not give up. Here we see a woman doing just that. Jesus, as we have seen in the point above, basically had said no to her request. But notice that she refuses to accept his no. She persists with words to the effect of, 'Yes, Lord but...' (v28).

We should argue with God on the basis of his mercy. As Michael Eaton says, "Great faith always reasons with God. It may argue with God using his promises. Or it may argue with God on the basis of his character." This is exactly what the woman does here. She turns Jesus' picture of a father giving the bread to the children not the dog around by saying that a merciful father will still scatter at least a few crumbs to the dogs too.

We should pray with faith and humility. Although the words "faith" and "humility" are not found in these verses, it's clear that this woman had a rich supply of both. The fact that she fell at his feet (v25) demonstrates humility. The fact that she even approached him at all shows faith.

We should pray until assurance comes. Great intercessors often give the counsel that we should persevere in asking God for something until we sense God speaking to our hearts with assurance that our prayers have been answered, and at that point we can stop asking and start thanking in advance for the answer to our prayer. This woman did just that. She kept on asking until Jesus gave her assurance of an answer to her prayer (v29).

Jesus heals a deaf and mute man

³¹ Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. ³² There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged Jesus to place his hand on him.

³³ After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. ³⁴ He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "Ephphatha!" (which means "Be opened!"). ³⁵ At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly.

³⁶ Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. ³⁷ People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."



IF YOU MINISTER IN HEALING POWER, BE READY TO ADJUST YOUR MINISTRY METHOD AS THE SPIRIT LEADS AND AS THE OCCASION NECESSITATES.

Christ can use any believer to minister healing to another. And we all need to be available to him if he were to choose to do so. However, the Bible shows that certain people are gifted by God to move in healing power far more regularly. These people can learn so much from Christ about how to minister healing to people.

One of the most notable things is that every healing of Christ was distinct from all the rest:

- Sometimes he healed because of the faith of the person who received the healing. Sometimes it was the faith of the friends or family of the person. And sometimes it seems Christ exercised the faith (as Michael Eaton argues) to heal people.
- Sometimes he approached people to heal them. Sometimes they approached him and he healed them. Sometimes other people approached Jesus on behalf of the sick.
- Usually Jesus healed people who were in front of him, but sometimes he healed people from a distance.

- Sometimes he healed people through a touch, and sometime there was no touch. Sometimes he healed people with a word and sometimes there was no word. It's interesting that Jesus never asked the Father to heal — he rather commanded a healing (however James 5:14,15 shows that it's normal for Christians to ask God to heal people).
- Sometimes he employed unusual methods in his healing as he did here. It seems that he was led by the Spirit differently on different occasions. In this situation he can't talk to the man, so he uses touch (he touches the tongue which needs to start speaking, and the ears which need to start hearing) to help the man have faith for what Christ is doing. Eaton suggests that Jesus' spitting signals to the man that he intends to get the man's tongue working. He also looks up to heaven to let the man know that the healing power is from above. And he sighs in such a way that his facial expression communicates to the deaf man the sheer volume and intensity of his healing word.

Today, we must be weary of trusting in any one method for healing but be open to the unique leading of the Spirit, as well as the unique situation as we seek to minister healing to people.



THE RECORDED HEALINGS OF JESUS IN THE GOSPELS ARE AMAZINGLY ENCOURAGING TO US TODAY.

Every time we read of a healing that Christ performed while on earth we can be encouraged in several different ways:

- 1) *The healings of Christ encourage us that, since the coming of Christ, we live in the new age of the kingdom of God.* (See commentary under 1:14-16 for more.) This particular healing is a fulfilment of Isaiah 35:5-6 which promised that the opening of blind eyes, the unstopping of deaf ears and the singing of once-mute tongues would characterize the presence of the kingdom age. The kingdom is here. God is doing a new thing, ever since Jesus' coming. What a wonderful time to be alive!
- 2) *The healings of Christ in the gospels encourage us to expect Christ to still heal people today.* All the miracles of Jesus were signs that the new age of the kingdom had begun and was breaking into the present age. Still today, Christ (who is the same yesterday, today and forever) and his kingdom are here and continue to break in.
- 3) *The recorded healings in the gospels encourage us by giving us a preview of our heavenly resurrection bodies.* All those who trust in Christ will ultimately receive resurrection bodies in the new heaven and new earth, when his kingdom has fully come! Although our bodies are prone to sickness and decay in this life, in the next Jesus will heal and restore us completely and eternally!
- 4) *Christ's healings encourage us to trust in Christ's loving ability to powerfully intervene in every area of our lives and situations.* A healing is a clear evidence of Christ's intervention for the good of a person — and each healing tells us that Christ is willing and able to intervene for our good in all the other areas of our lives as well. If he can do the most difficult thing, namely heal our bodies, then he certainly can intervene for

good in our emotions, our relationships, our situation, our finances and so much more.

Verse 37 tells us that the people in his day were overwhelmed by amazement at Jesus. Still today, the healings we read of in the gospels can have the same effect on us! Surely Christ does everything well!

MARK CHAPTER EIGHT

THE LOAVES AND THE YEAST (8:1-21)

Jesus feeds the four thousand

¹ During those days another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said, ² "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. ³ If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance." ⁴ His disciples answered, "But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?" ⁵ "How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked. "Seven," they replied.



CARE ABOUT THE OVERALL WELFARE OF PEOPLE IN OUR WORLD.

The sharp edge of what Jesus was doing was spiritual. Steadily the gospel of Mark is moving toward the cross, where Jesus purchased forgiveness and salvation for humankind. That's why as Christians by far our greatest concern is the spiritual welfare of the people in our world.

But when we look at Jesus' example here, we realize that Jesus had a more holistic vision. Of course Jesus cares about the spiritual welfare of every person in this world, but that does not mean he doesn't care about the overall welfare of people.

In this event we see him full of compassion (v2) for a large crowd of people — many of them non-Jews (since he's still in the region of Tyre and Sidon). But Jesus doesn't just have compassion for them. He also tries to get his disciples to share his concern for them (v3). And more than that he suggests that the disciples need to do something about it (v5).

Still today in an age of poverty, hunger and injustice, Christ wants us, his disciples, to share his deep-felt concern for the overall welfare of people in the world. And still today he asks us to do something about it.

⁶ He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people, and they did so. ⁷ They had a few small fish as well; he gave thanks for them also and told the disciples to distribute them. ⁸ The people ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. ⁹ About four thousand were present. And having sent them away, ¹⁰ he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the region of Dalmanutha.



CHRIST'S TRACK RECORD OF FAITHFULNESS TOWARDS US SHOULD CAUSE US TO BE FULL OF FAITH FOR HIS FUTURE FAITHFULNESS.

It has probably only been a few weeks or months since Christ miraculously provided for the 5000 (see 6:33-44). Now, a similar situation arises and Christ again comes to the disciples and asks them what can be done. Of course, the response he was hoping for was, "Jesus, you have fed more people than this before. Can you not miraculously provide again?" But that's not how they respond at all. Verse 4 shows that it doesn't even cross their minds. Sadly, they had forgotten about what Christ had done in the past, and because of that failed to trust him to do it again.

Similarly today, most whole-hearted disciples of Jesus can honestly look back and see the track record of the goodness of Christ in their lives (after all Jesus promised this in Matthew 6:33). But sadly, we so often forget Jesus' grace and provision for us up till now, and when a challenge arises we don't trust him to graciously intervene and provide again. Let us look back and remember, and then look forward and trust.

¹¹ The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test him, they asked him for a sign from heaven. ¹² He sighed deeply and said, "Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to it." ¹³ Then he left them, got back into the boat and crossed to the other side.



CHRIST GENERALLY DOESN'T DO MIRACLES WHEN THERE'S AN UNWILLINGNESS TO BELIEVE.

Verse 12 tells us that Jesus sighed or groaned in deep frustration. What frustrated him so much? It seems he was frustrated by the sheer hardness of heart in the Pharisees. In spite of all the signs he'd already given them, they asked for an even more spectacular sign. They were "testing" him (v11). But Jesus refused. After all, his miracles were not done with the intention of convincing hardened non-believers. Instead his miracles demonstrated his mercy and his power to people who were, generally speaking, ready to believe.

Today, Christ doesn't perform miracles to overcome an unwillingness to believe. Rather miracles seem to flow where there is a readiness to believe.

¹⁴ The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat. ¹⁵ "Be careful," Jesus warned them. "Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod."



BEWARE OF HAVING YOUR VIEW OF GOD AND WHAT HE'S DOING IN THE WORLD TAINTED BY THE CULTURE, RATHER THAN FORMED BY CHRIST AND THE SCRIPTURES.

Both the Pharisees and Herod had two things in common. Firstly, they had already made up their minds about Jesus and refused to humbly trust in him. Secondly, they had a radically different kingdom-vision to Jesus. The Pharisees it seems were hoping for a political liberator Messiah who would set the nation free from the power of Rome and its corrupting influences. Herod himself was hoping to be seen as part of a line of loved Jewish kings who caused the nation to prosper under his leadership. (Of course, he was too self-absorbed to ever become such a king.)

Jesus warned his disciples against the “yeast” of Herod and the Pharisees. By yeast he means “subtle influences”. When he told his disciples to be careful of the influence of Herod and the Pharisees it was as though he were saying, “Be careful that you don’t tend towards unbelief (and prematurely make up your mind about me), and be careful that you don’t think the coming kingdom of God is primarily a political one led by a literal, political Messiah.” In other words he was warning them not to have their hearts or their thinking about what God was doing corrupted or distorted by the Pharisees and Herod.

Today, we need to make sure that we aren’t corrupted by the prevailing culture’s scepticism, and view of what God is up to in this world. In the Western context, if we fail to be careful about this danger, we will tend to become increasingly unbelieving, perhaps rejecting the idea of God and the supernatural altogether, or sentimental about God, perhaps thinking, “God just wants to make this world a better place for all to live in.” Of course, if we start thinking like this it shows that it is our culture, not Christ and the Scriptures, that is shaping our heart-attitudes and belief systems about God.

¹⁶ They discussed this with one another and said, “It is because we have no bread.” ¹⁷ Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: “Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? ¹⁸ Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don’t you remember? ¹⁹ When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?” “Twelve,” they replied. ²⁰ “And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?” They answered, “Seven.” ²¹ He said to them, “Do you still not understand?”



JESUS LONGS FOR US TO DISCOVER WHO HE WAS AND IS.

The main revelation that Jesus wanted the disciples to have was that he was the long-awaited Messiah of Israel and of the world. But he took an unusual approach to getting this message across: instead of just coming out and telling them, he gave them clue after clue in his teachings, and in his miracles. Two repeat miracles in particular (the feeding of the 5000 and the feeding of the 4000) were full of signs that he was the Messiah (see the point in the commentary of 6:38-44 that says, “The main point of this event is that Jesus is the Messiah-king”).

He was encouraging them to reflect on those two miracles. He was urging them to open their spiritual eyes and ears to see and hear what they need to see and hear. He challenged them with the question, “Do you still not understand?”

Today, still — even though a person can hear the words, “Jesus is the Son of God, Jesus is the Christ / Messiah of the world,” they can still take a long time to really “get” it, to see it for themselves. But, if we follow the “clues” that he leaves us, it soon becomes clear enough.

THE MIRACLE OF OPENED EYES (8:22-30)

Jesus heals a blind man at Bethsaida

²² They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. ²³ He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man’s eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, “Do you see anything?” ²⁴ He looked up and said, “I see people; they look like trees walking around.” ²⁵ Once more Jesus put his hands on the man’s eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. ²⁶ Jesus sent him home, saying, “Don’t even go into the village.”



SOMETIMES JESUS HEALS PROGRESSIVELY AND NOT INSTANTLY.

Verses 22-26 tell us the only account of Jesus healing someone progressively rather than instantly. We see a two-stage healing.

When praying for Christ to heal people today we can learn from Christ some things: Sometimes it’s good to get alone with the person we’re praying for (v23). We can ask people if anything is happening as we pray for them (v23). We can be encouraged by even partial results (v24). We can persevere until the healing is complete (v25).

Why did he put spit on the man's eyes? Possibly this was just a very practical thing to do — chances are that his eyelids were stuck together with gum, and they needed to be opened up. The real miracle, however, was the restoration of sight. Also possibly, this was just another spontaneous method of ministering healing as the Spirit led him.

Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah

²⁷ Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?" ²⁸ They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." ²⁹ "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah." ³⁰ Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.



IT TAKES A MIRACLE FOR US TO SEE WHO JESUS REALLY WAS AND IS.

These two stories (verses 22-26 and verses 27-30) are the climax revelation of the gospel of Mark. They serve as the turning point of the entire story.

The most important thing to see is how Mark puts these stories — the opening of a man's physical eyes and the opening of the disciples' spiritual eyes — side by side.

Notice the parallel between the opening of the one man's physical eyes and the opening of the disciples' spiritual eyes:

- *Both the man and the disciples were blind.* The man was blind (v22) and the disciples were blind (in verse 18 Jesus told the disciples they were spiritually blind to who he was and what was happening).
- *Jesus took both away from the crowds to restore their sight.* He took the blind man outside the village (v23). And he took the disciples eastward to Caesarea Philippi on a several-day journey (v27).
- *He progressively opened their eyes.* The blind man received a two-stage healing (v24,25). And for two years Jesus had been "dropping hints" through his teachings and miracles that he was the Messiah. The man could only see Jesus clearly after the second stage of healing. And the disciples could only see Jesus clearly after the second year of travelling with Christ.
- *He asked them what they saw.* He asked the blind man what he could see (v23). And he asked the disciples how they saw him (twice, in fact, in verses 27 and 29). (To understand the disciples' answer to Jesus in verse 28, see the commentary on 6:14-16.)
- He asked both to keep the miracle of their new "vision" a secret. The blind man was warned not to tell anyone (v26) as were the disciples (v30).

Wonderfully, we see how all the miracles of Christ point to this pivotal revelation: Jesus is the Christ. Jesus is the Messiah.)

The point Mark is making by putting these stories side by side is this: it takes a miracle for the human heart to see who Jesus really is and was, a miracle of spiritual sight. That's why Matthew tells us that Jesus responded to their confession of him as Messiah like this, "Blessed are you for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven." (Matthew 16:17)



JESUS DIDN'T WANT HIS DISCIPLES, OR ANYONE, TO PREMATURELY IDENTIFY HIM AS MESSIAH.

Verse 30 says that Jesus warned the disciples not to tell anyone about their newfound revelation that Jesus was the Messiah.

Why was Jesus so secretive about the fact that he was the Messiah? It's because he didn't want to prematurely let people know that he was claiming to be the Messiah because that would almost certainly get the attention of the Pharisees and Herod and the Caesar of Rome, who would very quickly put an end to him (and his time had not yet come). After all, the prevailing understanding of the Messiah was a man who would overthrow Roman oppression, powerfully rebuild the Temple and restore the nation to great justice and prosperity under his unrivalled rule. No wonder the powers of the day would have moved strongly in on anyone claiming to be such a man.

But why did Jesus not tell his disciples earlier that he was the Messiah? It seems that he wanted his disciples to discover that he was the Messiah, rather than simply be told that he was the Messiah. It seems that Jesus knew that when a person discovers something they are far more likely to own that truth than if someone merely tells them. What a joy it must have been for Jesus when, a few days or weeks later, "the penny finally dropped" in the heart of one them (v29).

THE CROSS-CENTERED LIFE (8:31-38)

Jesus predicts his death

³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.



AMAZINGLY, JESUS THE GREAT KING IS ALSO JESUS THE SUFFERING SERVANT.

The moment the disciples realized and confessed that Jesus was the Messiah (v29) he took them deeper into his confidence, and introduced a new emphasis in his teaching, namely his coming death (v31).

Jesus, in 2:10, had already called himself “the Son of Man”. The phrase meant two things. Firstly, it simply meant a “human being”. But secondly, and this is the meaning Jesus picks up on, he implies that he is the fulfilment of Daniel 7:13, which speaks of a human being “coming with the clouds of heaven to the Ancient of Days” and there receiving power, glory and authority to rule all the nations of the world forever. In fact, it was descriptions like these that made many people expect the Messiah to be one who would set up a political kingdom. William Barclay said that this description made many people of Jesus’ day think the Messiah would be “a great, super-human figure crashing into history to remake the world and in the end to vindicate God’s people, being the most destructive conqueror in history, smashing his enemies into utter extinction”. In other words, in the minds of people the Messiah was to be overwhelmingly great and powerful.

But Jesus did something shocking. He claimed to be this great Son of Man but then, in the same breath, said that he would suffer, be rejected and killed. That would be the equivalent of a person running for presidency and near the end of their campaign saying, “But I must first lose the vote and be killed.”

When he said that he would be rejected and would suffer and die, Jesus was referring to other less-attractive prophecies about the Messiah, the passages that people typically overlooked, prophecies like Isaiah 53, which speaks of the Suffering Servant, the person who experiences the greatest humiliation before they experience the greatest exaltation.

And that was Jesus’ point: the real Messiah is the fulfilment of both Daniel 7 (the great Son of Man) and Isaiah 53 (the Suffering Servant). He combined both identities in himself. He is both the Lion of Judah, roaring with unrivalled authority, and the Lamb of God, helplessly being led to his terrible death.

³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”



BE CAREFUL NOT TO UNKNOWINGLY UNDERMINE WHAT GOD IS DOING.

Jesus had just days or weeks before warned the disciples about being corrupted by the yeast of the Pharisees and Herod (see commentary on 8:14,15). It turns out that Peter had been corrupted in that he was ready to embrace a Messiah who was the Great King, but not a Messiah who was also the Suffering Servant. He had subtly been influenced by the culture of his day's vision of the Messiah.

It's fascinating that just minutes before Peter had received and communicated a profound revelation from God (v29 and Matthew 16:17). But not moments later, he receives and communicates a deceptive revelation from the devil himself, which also happened to be the mindset of the day; that Jesus doesn't need to go to the cross at all.

Interestingly, Peter tried to secretly rebuke Jesus (v32) only to be immediately, and publicly, rebuked in return (v33). And Jesus tells him what he got wrong: "You do not have the concerns of God in mind, only human concerns." In other words, Peter was simply not discerning what God was up to, and seemed to approach the subject of Jesus' death from a totally human perspective. (We can imagine him whispering to Jesus, "Jesus, you really must stop speaking about suffering and death — you can avoid that and you're demoralizing us!") And because he failed to discern what God was up to, he was vulnerable to the devil's lie.

This story should humble us all. Just because there have been times that we have heard God clearly, as Peter had, it doesn't mean that we can't totally misunderstand what God is up to, and without even realizing it, be used by the devil to try undermine what God is doing.

The way of the cross

³⁴ *Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."*



CHRIST CALLS YOU TO GIVE YOUR LIFE TO HIM *TOTALLY*.

The cross of Jesus is both the way of Christ saving us, and the way of us following Christ. In other words, it serves as the means of salvation and the symbol of discipleship. In this verse Jesus is speaking about how the cross is the symbol of discipleship. Notice a few things about his call to discipleship:

1) *All are invited to be disciples.* Notice that he isn't just speaking to the disciples but to the crowds as well. The word "whoever" is totally inclusive of everyone.

2) *To be his disciple we need to "deny ourselves".* Warren Wiersbe comments on this verse: "Denying self is not the same as self-denial. We practice self-denial when, for a good purpose, we occasionally give up things or activities. But we deny self when

we surrender ourselves to Christ and determine to obey His will.”

To deny ourselves also means that, in our quest to follow Christ, we rebel against the offers of the world, the sinful nature, and the devil.

3) *To be his disciple we need to “take up our cross”.* What does this mean? It refers to a willingness to suffer if need be, and a willingness to lay down our lives in love for others:

- The cross, more than anything else, was a symbol of execution. So Jesus was effectively saying, “come and die with me”. Dietrich Boenhoffer said of this verse, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him, ‘Come and die.’ ” Jesus is saying that we need to lay down our lives totally as we trust and obey him. To take up our cross we’re willing to suffer and die through martyrdom if need be. (Although most of us will not die as martyrs, according to statistics in 2007, every day over 500 Christians die as martyrs, so these words are as relevant today as ever.)
- But we need to also remember that the cross is Christ’s path of love. Jesus died on the cross because he loved us. And wonderfully, through the cross his life flows toward us. So he didn’t waste his life, rather he invested his life in love. (In John 12:24 Jesus compared his own going to the cross to being a seed planted in the ground in order to “produce many more seeds”.) So when we’re told to “take up our cross” it means lay your life down for the good of others, so that life flows through your life to them.

4) *To be his disciple we need to “follow” him.* Michael Eaton says that this simply means “involvement in the work of God’s kingdom”. It means continuing the kingdom-advancing ministry of Jesus in this world.

³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life [or ‘soul’] will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your life [or ‘soul’]? ³⁷ Or what can you give in exchange for your life [or ‘soul’]?



THE SUREST WAY TO WASTE YOUR LIFE IS TO *NOT* FOLLOW JESUS.

In verse 31, Jesus said that his own path to resurrection glory and honour as the Son of Man was to go through the suffering and death of the cross. In these verses he is inviting us to experience a similar, but different in many ways, resurrection glory and honour. And he’s telling us that we need to go through the same path as him: the path of “losing our lives” for him and for the advancement of the Gospel (v35).

Jesus is making it clear that each one of us has to choose between two paths: 1) the path of radically living our lives for Jesus and the advancement of the Gospel (v35); or 2) the path of pursuing self-preservation (this is what he means by “whoever wants to

save their life”) and the temporary things that this world offers (this is what he means by the attempt to “gain the whole world”).

In effect, Jesus says it will cost us something to follow him (ie path 1) but it will cost us far more if we don't (ie path 2). The cost of path 2 is that we will “lose” (v35) and “forfeit” (v36) our very lives. This is not Jesus' way of saying we'll go to hell when we die, but rather his way of saying that we'll waste our precious one-and-only life on this earth. (Notice how Jesus suggests that our lives are worth more than all the wealth in the world (v36) and that life is so valuable that it can't be measured in monetary terms (v37)).

CT Studd, a famous sportsman turned missionary, once said, “Only one life will soon be past, and only what's done for Christ will last.” Jesus similarly is saying that we should live a life of whole-hearted devotion to him and service to others (advancing the Gospel) rather than a life of self-preservation. He is saying that we should enrich our lives with things of eternal value, rather than diminish our lives with the pursuit of things of only temporary value.

³⁸ If any of you are ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of you when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.”



FAIL TO HONOUR CHRIST AND HE WILL FAIL TO HONOUR YOU.

Christ warns us, his disciples, not to be ashamed of him and his words. He gives the reason that we may be tempted to be ashamed of him and the Gospel: the world is sinful and adulterous. In other words, they may not be that excited about our message, our obedience to Christ, or our challenge to them. The word “adulterous” refers to the way people run after lesser things rather than him. Instead of loving God, this world loves things like comfort, money, sex, power, fame, career, family and much more.

When will “the Son of Man come in his Father's glory with the angels”? Most people assume this refers to Christ's second coming when he comes from God, however Michael Eaton argues persuasively that it doesn't necessarily mean that. Rather, it's a reference to Daniel 7:13, which doesn't describe the Son of Man coming *from* God, but rather *to* God. In other words, Jesus is most likely referring to his exaltation, when he leaves this earth and approaches God. Of course this has already happened, when Jesus left the earth.

So what Jesus is saying in verse 38 is this: “Soon I will be exalted. I won't be with you. However, I will watch over you, eager to see you succeed by promoting the Gospel, and ready to honour and reward you for doing so. But if, because of fear of people, you fail to do so, I will be disappointed, and won't be able to honour and reward you at all.”

9:1 And he said to them, “Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.”

(9:1 is directly linked to the previous verses so I have included it here)



THE EXALTATION OF JESUS HAS ENABLED US TO EXPERIENCE A MORE POWERFUL PHASE OF HIS KINGDOM THAN WAS POSSIBLE EVEN DURING HIS EARTHLY MINISTRY.

Two questions surface as read this verse. Firstly, what does Jesus mean when he says, “some who are standing here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come”? Answer: it’s simply a figure of speech that means “within your generation, the kingdom of God will come”.

Secondly, what does Jesus mean when he says that within this generation many will “see that the kingdom of God has come with power?” Note firstly that Jesus suggested that the kingdom of God hadn’t yet come in power. But we know that in 1:14,15 Jesus announced the presence of the kingdom and started demonstrating its reality by casting out demons and healing the sick. So we have seen the kingdom powerfully coming already! So when Jesus said this (9:1) it’s as if he was saying, “You haven’t seen anything yet.” He was therefore promising that there was another phase in the kingdom that would soon unfold, a phase even more powerful than the one he had introduced in his earthly ministry.

The key to understanding this verse is to look at the section of verses immediately before. In 8:31 and 38 he spoke of himself as the Son of Man which would make them think of Daniel 7:13. He even quoted part of Daniel 7:13 in 8:38 when he spoke of himself coming in his Father’s glory with angels. As stated in the commentary of 8:38, “Most people assume this refers to Christ’s second coming when he comes from God, however Michael Eaton argues persuasively that it doesn’t necessarily mean that. Rather, it’s a reference to Daniel 7:13 which doesn’t describe the Son of Man coming *from* God, but rather *to* God. In other words, Jesus is most likely referring to his exaltation, when he leaves this earth and approaches God.” The point is this: *Jesus was saying that at the time of his exaltation, his kingdom power would become far more evident to us than it had been while he was on the earth.*

But was Jesus’ promise fulfilled? The answer is a breathtaking, faith-boosting “yes”! Within a year or two, on the Day of Pentecost (spoken of in Acts 2), thousands of people in one day “saw the kingdom of God come with power”. On this day the Spirit was poured out and thousands of people were saved! Peter would say of the experience, “Exalted to the right hand of God, Jesus has ... poured out (the Holy Spirit) as you now see and hear” (Acts 2:33). Jesus also described this outpouring beforehand as them receiving “power” (Acts 1:8).

Still today, every time there is an outpouring of the Spirit and people are saved we can say both that “we have seen the kingdom coming with power” and that “Jesus certainly has been exalted to the right hand of God — just look at the evidence: his power to change lives!”