

# Lessons on Mark

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## Dedication

To our friends from the Becoming Closer class, for their constant encouragement and support.

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## Prepare the Way - Mark 1:1-8

Mark's Gospel is perhaps the most suited for modern America. It is short and condensed; it is full of action; and it leaves to the reader much to be done.

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY; THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.'" John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. John was clothed with camel's hair and *wore* a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey. And he was preaching, and saying, "After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals. "I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

(Mark 1:1-8)

### Lessons from John the Baptist

The person and life of John the Baptist contain rich lessons for us. Because we have such a short set of passages concerning his life – and because he is such a fulfillment of prophecy – we tend to read past his own life. But there are things worth our time here.

#### Written in the prophet

What distracts most readers – especially those with footnotes in their Bibles – is that this passage is heavily cross-referenced to the Old Testament. Many modern Christians have a fascination with prophecy, especially Revelation. But there are some older lessons here too:

- ✚ Do we accord the Scripture its proper place of honor in our lives? John was obedient to the prophecies concerning his role. The world would look at his actions as being those of great sacrifice – a sacrifice which did not result in his own glory, but the glory of Christ. Do we as Christians take the Scripture seriously? Do we listen when it speaks? Or is it something to be carried to church on Sunday only? Can you recall a time recently when the Scripture convicted you?
- ✚ Speaking of prophecy: how many of us are thrilled to hear of events in Israel that bear out our particular interpretation of Revelation – but are not so disposed to hear the prophets proclaiming the day of wrath to come? If we believe what is written in the prophets, should we not act like it? Should not our lives be filled with repentance and good works?

#### Character of the messenger

Each of us, like it or not, is an ambassador of Christ. We need to see the character of this messenger who was sent before our Lord. Why? Because we may be the one “sent before the Lord” to someone else. Our lives may be the spark which some evangelist uses to bring out the fire of the Spirit.

- ✦ It is not clear to modern readers, but those of this time would have understood it. John, in the description of his clothing and certainly in his chosen locale, is rejecting materialism. Materialism is so common in our day that many Christians take it as obvious that they must have the new Mercedes (or whatever). Indeed, with the payments being so high, they consider themselves poor as a result. This is not the example before us.
- ✦ This man's life is one of sacrifice for the kingdom of God. Is that something that could be said of us? Have you ever made the conscious decision to forego some pleasure so that others might benefit?
- ✦ The crowds saw the life of the man in the desert. They saw a man who was, as we say today, "walking the walk, not just talking the talk." They believed his message because the man and the message were one. Can we say that?

One of my students gave me the key to understanding how we apply this to our lives. She spoke of Thomas à Kempis, a monk (the author of *The Imitation of Christ*), saying, "I just can't understand being a monk. What good could it be?" Thomas provides the answer himself:

IF YOU wish peace and concord with others, you must learn to break your will in many things. To live in monasteries or religious communities, to remain there without complaint, and to persevere faithfully till death is no small matter. Blessed indeed is he who there lives a good life and there ends his days in happiness.

If you would persevere in seeking perfection, you must consider yourself a pilgrim, an exile on earth. If you would become a religious, you must be content to seem a fool for the sake of Christ. Habit and tonsure change a man but little; it is the change of life, the complete mortification of passions that endow a true religious.

He who seeks anything but God alone and the salvation of his soul will find only trouble and grief, and he who does not try to become the least, the servant of all, cannot remain at peace for long.

You have come to serve, not to rule. You must understand, too, that you have been called to suffer and to work, not to idle and gossip away your time. Here men are tried as gold in a furnace. Here no man can remain unless he desires with all his heart to humble himself before God.

The ascetic life is not an easy one. But consider: being a fool for Christ? Seeking God and salvation? Service, suffering and work, not idleness and gossip? Humility? Are these not virtues worthy of emulation?

#### **Messenger, not message**

As I told my little leaguers, "keep your eye on the ball." We need to remember that we are the messengers, the ambassadors of reconciliation – but it is Jesus Christ who is the message.

- ✦ "If I be lifted up" – if we keep him as the core, the focus and the soul of our lives, lifting him up in our words and actions, then others will see him. They will not be concerned with our imperfections (which are soon enough discovered.) They will see Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God – and then the choice must be made.

- ✚ Who is the message? The Christ. The one who came to be the living sacrifice for our sins. That's the Gospel, which means "good news."
- ✚ Who is the message? The Son of God. The one who is the bridge between us and God.

### Preparing the way – for others, in the church

John the Baptist had one purpose: to prepare the way. We too are called to "prepare the way" – for others in the church.

#### Voice in the wilderness

The phrase has passed into the English language as a figure of speech meaning one who is not listened to. But this is not the case; it really means one who is speaking that which is uncomfortable to hear. Are you willing to be such a voice?

- ✚ Consider, for the moment, church discipline. It is an unpopular thing; no one wants to be the one who confronts another with sin. Indeed, the church as a whole is unwilling to apply it in our day. It is "uncomfortable." But does that make it unnecessary?
- ✚ Think also of your own comfort zone. Who is the person who will go up to the man wearing the leather jacket with the Harley-Davidson logo and welcome him to the church? If not you, then who? Somebody has to be first.

#### Baptism of the Holy Spirit

In searching for how this applies to us in the church, I came across two passages which struck me. In each we see a way in which the Holy Spirit tends to the church:

- ✚ If we are genuinely baptized in the Holy Spirit, we will be careful to keep his laws.<sup>1</sup> John's life modeled that for us. Do our lives model that for others?
- ✚ If we are genuinely baptized in the Holy Spirit, we will know that we belong to "one body"<sup>2</sup>. Do we make every effort to preserve the unity of the church?

### Preparing the way in our daily lives

If Christ genuinely is to live in my life, I need to "prepare the way." How do I do that? John tells us here:

#### Repentance

In a parallel passage<sup>3</sup> John warns his hearers to "produce fruit in keeping with repentance." Repentance is not just saying you're sorry; it's a change in the way you conduct your life. Many of us are very good at driving down the wrong road and repeating, "Yep – this is the wrong road, all right. I sure am sorry to be on the wrong road." What kind of fruit comes from repentance? John gives us two examples:

- ✚ First, he tells us, is sharing with the poor. He phrases this in a way foreign to modern Christians. He tells us that if you have two coats, and your neighbor has none, you should give him one of them. That strikes us as odd in a check and credit card society, but there is a lesson there. Repentance

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<sup>1</sup> Ezekiel 36:27

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:13

<sup>3</sup> Luke 3:8

brings you around to the point of sharing *what you already have*. Most of us are willing to share the excess. Few of us are willing to share what we've already possessed.

- ✚ The second fruit is that of personal honesty. In our dealings with all others we are to be rigorously honest. There is no sense of get along and go along in the Gospel.

### Confession

Because of the split between Protestant and Catholic, the evangelical churches do not emphasize (often do not even teach) the need for confession. But from the earliest days of the church confession has been a requirement. Why?

- ✚ It is a very important way of confessing Christ before men – and that is a requirement of all Christians.<sup>4</sup> By making your confession public, you make it clear that you do so in Godly fear – and so uphold your Lord as being indeed the Son of God.
- ✚ It is essential as part of clearing out the barrier of sin between you and your Lord. Indeed, James tells us<sup>5</sup> that it is prerequisite to divine healing.
- ✚ It is also a source of unity in the church. If we confess to one another, then we are implicitly calling on one another for help.

### Straight Paths

Have you ever considered yourself as needing to clear the path between you and Christ? Repentance and confession are part of that. But we can also look at “straight paths” as representing the way we should live our lives. Do you “walk the straight and narrow?” That phrase is much despised, but our Lord honors those who walk in straight paths. Consider the virtues of “straightness”:

- ✚ Do people take you at your word – or do they have to ask, “What did he really mean by that?” Which kind of person do you want to work with?
- ✚ Can people count on you to do the right thing without being asked or reminded? Are they sure that you wouldn't cheat them?
- ✚ Does your path point straight – to Jesus?

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<sup>4</sup> See Matthew 10:32-33

<sup>5</sup> James 5:14-16

## The Baptism of Christ - Mark 1:9-15

Within these few verses is revealed the very nature of Christ.

(Mark 1:9-15 NIV) At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. {10} 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." {12} At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, {13} and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him. {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 is near. Repent and believe the good news!"

### The Outward Signs

Sometimes, God just has to put up a sign post for us. When important things are happening – and the advent of Christ is *the* important thing in human history – God must explain it to his beloved children.

### The baptism

It often puzzles Christians: John is preaching a gospel of repentance. Jesus comes to him to be baptized; but Jesus is sinless – why the need? Even John sees it that way, in the other Gospels.

- ✚ The principle is that of identification. Jesus is identifying with us. He is proclaiming that he is fully man, and therefore (since sinless) an acceptable sacrifice. No longer is God the voice on the mountain but a man like us. The method of identification? Baptism.
- ✚ Which is for the purpose of our identification with him. He, God, became man so that we – by identification – might become like God (eternal, for example). How is that identification accomplished? By baptism.

### The anointing of the Spirit

The original language here makes it clear that the Spirit is not a bird. Rather, the Spirit, unseen, descends like a dove. Why is this done?

- ✚ This is again an identification with us, for after the Resurrection we will receive the Holy Spirit. In that sense, we see a preview of what is to come.
- ✚ It states that heaven is torn open; well it might be. The Spirit comes upon whom He pleases, but God is one. The barrier between heaven and earth – whatever it might be – cannot stop the unity of God.
- ✚ This may also be seen as an anointing – as the oil (often a symbol of the Spirit) flows down from above, so does the Spirit. But see in what form! The form is like a dove – the symbol to this day of peace.

### God's voice

The unity of God requires that all three persons be present, and so the voice of God is heard. We see in this three things:

- ✚ First, we see the divine approval of Christ. God is commissioning the greatest of his prophets.
- ✚ Next, we see the statement of relationship. It is to make very clear that this is not the relationship of the Old Testament, but rather the closest of relationships.

- ✚ Finally – we are commanded to hear him. Sometimes you just need to make sure there is no room for interpretation.

### The Nature of the Trinity

Permit me to re-use a model that might make more sense than some others. As human beings we have a great deal of difficulty in the saying that God is three, yet one. It's because we think that such a thing cannot be. But we have examples even in our own lives of this; I borrowed this one from Dorothy Sayers.

Consider that you are a mystery writer (which she was). First there is the idea for the book – locked up in your head where no one can see it. You might say, "I've a great idea for a new book!" You write it down; it gets published (well, some writers do get published) and out comes the incarnation: the published work. If the work is great enough, it may actually have an effect on peoples' lives. That would parallel the Spirit working in us.

So saying, let us consider the three persons in the Trinity.

#### God the Father

Aquinas put it well: the essence of God is his existence. Surely he *must* exist, and exist forever – for nothing ever caused its own existence. Therefore all that has existence must have been created by the one who is existence.

What do we know about this existence? When we say, "God is" – it's the way he introduced himself to Moses<sup>6</sup> - what do we find?

- ✚ God is "one"<sup>7</sup>
- ✚ God is spirit<sup>8</sup>
- ✚ God is love<sup>9</sup>

All of these are his attributes; so we say that God is his attributes. He is perfectly love, for example – the source, the author, the exemplar of love. But his attributes come in two varieties:

- ✚ There are those which relate to his holiness – righteousness, justice, faithfulness, truth.
- ✚ There are those which relate to his love – such as his tender mercy.

So what, then, can God do with mankind? The righteous, holy God can have nothing to do with us. The loving God yearns to take us in his arms. His "oneness" says he cannot do both. But God is one – in three.

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<sup>6</sup> Exodus 3:14

<sup>7</sup> Deuteronomy 6:4

<sup>8</sup> John 4:24

<sup>9</sup> 1 John 4:8

## Jesus Christ

The solution to the problem is found in Jesus, at the Cross. He is the mediator – perhaps we might say the bridge – between man and God. He is the solution to this dilemma about God.

- ✚ Jesus is fully man – just like us. He knows our pains; and (being sinless) is fit to pay the price for our sins.
- ✚ Jesus is fully God.<sup>10</sup> So our bridge is firmly anchored – here and in heaven.

How is this done? Through the atonement. Our sins are as a debt to be paid – and we are the paupers who cannot pay them. But God sends his son to be the payment for those sins, and thus our relationship to God can be restored on the basis of the righteousness and sacrifice of Christ. God's holiness is satisfied; his love is fulfilled.

But then what? Surely it is not sufficient to see salvation and live unchanged; if we are crossing over the bridge from sin to holiness we must change. For that, there is the Holy Spirit.

## The Holy Spirit

The primary purpose of the Spirit is simple: He is here to convict the world of sin and judgment to come.<sup>11</sup>

- ✚ For the unbeliever, this is to provoke a decision to accept the atonement – to identify with Jesus Christ as we said it before.
- ✚ For the believer, it is to provoke repentance, that we might remain clean before God.

But there are other purposes as well:

- ✚ We need a little help at this! We need someone to go to God the Father on our behalf, appealing in ways that humans are not capable of. That is a function of the Holy Spirit.<sup>12</sup>
- ✚ We also need the action of the Holy Spirit in our lives – not only to remind us to repentance but to assure us that our faith is not in vain. Therefore He is the guarantee of our own eternal life.<sup>13</sup>

This – as we said – must produce change in our lives. If we cross over from darkness to light, it should show clearly. How? Is this not the fruit of the Spirit?<sup>14</sup>

## The First Year

In this very brief account Mark skips over the first year of Jesus' ministry. We know this from the parallel accounts; it is likely that Mark, being a friend of Peter, starts his detail from when Peter joined Jesus. But before this year can happen, we have a strange event – the temptation in the wilderness.

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<sup>10</sup> Hebrews 1:3

<sup>11</sup> John 16:8-11

<sup>12</sup> Romans 8:26-27

<sup>13</sup> Ephesians 1:13-14

<sup>14</sup> Galatians 5:22-23

### Fully human

If there is anything which defines “human”, it’s temptation. Christ is fully human, like us, and therefore is tempted, like us. The level of the temptation is matching to his stature as a man – none of us is ever tempted beyond what we can bear – and therefore is much greater than anything we could bear. But it is very human: we see the temptations of the flesh, the world and the spirit.

But notice something that is absent here. The Father and the Spirit are present at the baptism, but they appear to be absent in the wilderness. God often does that to us. It is like letting a little child take a few steps on his own; in no other way will he learn to walk. Jesus does this for forty days. He understands our temptations.

### Fully Divine

The Spirit sent him into the wilderness. The one who is fully divine always listens to the commands of God, even when the change of location looks really bleak. It is the mark of the divine nature of Christ that he went willingly where the Spirit sent him.

The temptation – Mark doesn’t mention the details here – is over, and we see another aspect of the divine nature of Christ. If you are one of God’s children, after the temptation comes the comfort. In this instance, in the form of angels. And who knows? Maybe some of us have entertained angels unaware – as they were comforting us.

### The result

The time has come. Jesus begins his preaching ministry. There is no sense of waiting, holding back or delay. It’s just “get on with it.” What then does our Lord preach?

- ✚ First, he preaches “good news.” The barrier between man and God is about to be destroyed. The long awaited Messiah is here. That God would come among men – and prove to be the man among men – is indeed good news.
- ✚ He preaches the kingdom of God. Note: not the democracy of God, or the cult society of God; the kingdom of God. There is no question of who is monarch; the only question is, “who is citizen?”
- ✚ Citizenship in the kingdom of heaven is to be had, not for a price but for a process: repent and believe.

Do we see it as good news? Do we see it with the authority of God in it? Are we really the children of the kingdom of God?

## “How Greedy a Thing Is Fishing” - Mark 1:16-20

This passage is often quoted in reference to evangelism. In this lesson, however, I would have you consider another aspect to it. The four men who are called here are always listed as the first of the disciples. They are the closest friends Jesus had on this earth. How does one become a close friend of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the Living God? Let us look and see.

Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." As He was going along by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed Him. Going on a little farther, He saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who were also in the boat mending the nets. Immediately He called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went away to follow Him. They \*went into Capernaum; and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and *began* to teach.

(Mark 1:14-21)

### The character of the friends

It would be foolish to suppose that Jesus selected his best friends at random. We must suppose that he gave it some thought; indeed, that this is a divine selection. From that we may learn a few things.

#### Faith and obedience

The first remarkable thing about this call is the quiet acceptance of these four. There is, in this account (Luke gives more detail) no detail about casting of the nets. Mark's judgment was that this was unimportant; the call was important. In that we see the primacy of faith.

Sadly, most of us see faith as an end result, not as a starting point. We see it as something we hope God will give us, if we work at it long enough. How does one show such faith as this? By the simple act of obedience. As Bonhoeffer pointed out, we all know that only those who believe, obey. But it is equally true that only those who obey can believe. By the act of obedience they commit themselves to faith.

Faith, it seems, comes in varying degrees – even among the closest friends of Jesus. You will recall that when the women told the disciples about the Resurrection, John and Peter raced to the tomb. Peter went in first – but wondered. John believed. Jesus loved them both.

#### Personality

It's hard for us to think otherwise. We commonly have the impression that certain types of people make "good Christians." The impression is conveyed because our eyes see certain types of

people as good Christians – most of whom can speak in public rather well. But it would be naïve to conclude that public speaking is a prerequisite to being a friend of Jesus Christ.

Peter, we know, is the man of action. This is the one who sees his Lord walking on the water and wants to do the same. At the last encounter, it is Peter who jumps into the lake to go to him first. Action first, thought later (maybe never) – that’s Peter. Heart and strength are his strong points.

John is much more contemplative. Though not particularly a scholar (that’s Paul) he is a deep thinking man. To this man is accorded the title, “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” His is not so much intellectual skill as mystic vision. If Paul is the representative of those who love with the mind, then John is the one who loves with the soul. Apparently, the friends of Christ come in all types. That is a comfort.

### Men of labor

One thing such men have in common: they are honest laborers at their craft. This is not always the case – Matthew, also known as Levi, was a prize skunk – but for those closest to the Carpenter, hard work is a necessity.

It is not just hard work; it is diligence. These men are mending their nets, taking care of their equipment. Jesus wants those who will take care of his church. Faithful in small things, they will be faithful in much – and an example for us.

### Men of power?

One thing these friends of Jesus are not: men of power. These are not the rich and famous, the influential – the shakers and movers of the day. With twelve unarmed men Jesus would turn the world upside down. Not one of them was a man of power. Why?

- ✦ First, so that God’s glory might be seen. Anyone who examines the church from the world’s view must be struck that its beginnings were made by those who were so few and powerless.
- ✦ Next, so that our own pride might not overwhelm us. To be so close to the Lord of Creation would be a temptation to pride – so we must be able to look back at our roots and know that he chose us.
- ✦ Finally, so that He may be lifted up. Nobody pays attention to a fisherman’s tale – but if Christ be lifted up, he will draw all to him.

### The One who calls

We must also understand the very nature of the one who makes the call.

### My call, my family

If you will note what the disciples did *not* do, it will be clearer. They did not consult with their families, in particular with their father – who owned the boat! This call is one which is above such considerations.

But that does not mean that the heartstrings were not pulled. Can you imagine James and John leaving their father – who by now is rather old, in the standards of the time – in the hands of the hired help? The call to serve the Lord cost the house of Zebedee rather severely, and perhaps dad paid the biggest price. It is a fact: if you would be the friend of Christ, your family will appear to suffer for it.

How, then, can we say that following the call of Christ is a good thing, if the family suffers for it? It is a matter of authority.

All authority is given to Christ; in particular, all moral authority – the definition of right and wrong – is his, by his very nature. The very authority that tells you to care for your parents is the same authority that says he takes precedence over them. So when the call comes – and eventually it will come for most of us – to choose Christ over our families, the choice should be clear. Painful – but clear.

### The second call

It is not clear from this account, but this is the second time Jesus has called the disciples. The first was before John the Baptist was thrown in prison. Evidently the fishermen went back to the boat after John was arrested. Peter in particular likes fishing; after the Resurrection, it was what was on his mind. As Chrysostom said, “You know how greedy a thing fishing is.”

But the desire of our Lord is that all might be saved; he is, as some have called, him, Lord of the Second Chance. So he does not just hint that it would be OK to come back; he calls. It is in his very nature to stand at the door and knock.

It is also his very nature to forgive and restore those who answer the call. Remember how he restored Peter at the Sea of Galilee after the Resurrection? You may think you were called once, but now it is too late. Consider again: your Lord may return to you and call again. Be listening.

### Fear not

Luke’s account includes the story of the huge catch they make at Christ’s command – and Peter’s reaction. He was afraid, because he was a sinner. But Christ’s call comes with the injunction, “Fear Not.”

- ✚ Some of us are afraid because we have the cares of this world on our minds. What shall we eat, if we follow him? It is foolishness and lack of faith! Is the one who created all things so powerless to feed and clothe you?
- ✚ More often, we care what other people will think of us. We might get the reputation of being a fanatic. Consider: if you are a child of the most high God, should you care? Does your ultimate approval depend upon the vote of the fashion police, or upon your Lord?
- ✚ Once in a while we get the chance to see the opposition clearly. We know that being a friend of Christ is to be enemy to the world – and the world is very powerful. Do we really believe that “greater is he that is in me than he that is in the world?”

### Follow me

The call is personal. It is not to a system of doctrine; it is not to a particular group of people; it is a call to follow Jesus, the Christ. Beside this call, what else could matter?

### The call

For almost two thousand years men have been hearing this call. It has attracted the weak and the mighty, the rich and the poor, from all tribes and tongues. Often it has resulted in sacrifice and death, willingly faced. In western civilization, if you want a suicide squad, you must put a noble task before noble men.

### The promises

It's interesting. Peter and Andrew are told that they will be fishers of men; a great promise. James and John receive no promise at all. But the promises of Jesus Christ are indeed awesome.

- ✚ There is the promise of the work in this life – a challenge that dwarfs all others. The Christian must – quite literally – be willing to take on the world.
- ✚ There is the promise of reward in the life to come.
- ✚ There is also this promise: that Jesus will be with you, every step of the way.

The truth is rather simple: you can buy good performance with money, prestige and power. That's the world's method. Christ offers instead the pearl of great price, which costs us everything we have. There are no half measures here.

### Fishers of men

What does it mean, to be fishers of men? A clue is given to us in the word used for the net. This word is used only in this context. It is a huge net, shaped like a giant balloon. You use it when you want to catch all the fish in a given area. You throw it out, wait until it balloons out, and then drag it in – and then separate the fish, good from the bad. The kingdom is like that; we will bring in those whose love for Jesus fades quickly; we will face those who will not listen; we will deal with those who endure only until it gets risky. Our job is to use the net; he'll sort it all out at the end.

### Their fates

It seems that our Lord rather customizes things. We know the fates of three of these men:

- ✚ James was beheaded – rather early in the history of the church.
- ✚ Peter was crucified upside down, as an old man.
- ✚ John lived through much persecution to a ripe old age (approaching 100) and died a natural death.

Who can say what the fate of a man might be? Only God, who works all things for the good of those who love him.

### Tests for us

Would you want to be a friend of Jesus, the Christ? There are some simple tests in this passage:

- ✚ What is your character? Are you faithful in little? Hard working? A man of faith and obedience?
- ✚ How do you see Jesus – as a nice guy handing out celestial candy bars, or as the Lord of All? Including you?
- ✚ Are you willing to hear the call he makes to you? “Softly and tenderly” says one hymn; he stands at the door and knocks. Will you listen?

## The Example of Christ - Mark 1:21-45

Sometimes we learn best just by watching what the Master does. We shall see in his words, his actions and by inference his inner life some of what we as Christians should be doing.

They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, "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!" **"Be quiet!"** said Jesus sternly. **"Come out of him!"** The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. 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." News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee. As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her. So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them. That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, 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. 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. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!" Jesus replied, **"Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come."** So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons. A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. **"I am willing,"** he said. **"Be clean!"** Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured. Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: **"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."** 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.

(Mark 1:21-45)

### Words

You often hear that we should be Christians in action, not words. There is truth in that; we should not be "mouth-Christians" only. But that does not mean that we should keep silent. Indeed, we are commanded to proclaim him.

### Teaching

The key to teaching the Gospel is simply this: authority. If the teacher is to be successful, he must teach with the authority of Christ. That is how Christ taught, as we see here. What does that mean?

- ✦ It means we must teach the truth as best we see it without fear – for greater is He...
- ✦ It means we must teach the truth in obedience – as one under authority – and not simply as head knowledge.

- ✚ It means we must teach it without “enhancing” it. It is the Gospel as delivered by God to man; it is in every sense sacred.
- ✚ It means we must teach it as the Authority would – for the benefit of our hearers, not to puff ourselves up.

Theophylact, the ancient writer, commented here that Jesus taught by rebuke, not by flattery, as the Pharisees did. As teacher, a man must remember who is Lord.

### Preaching

“That is why I have come,” says our Lord – to preach. To preach what? The Good News of the Kingdom of God.

- ✚ It is good news because it tells us who Jesus is – the Messiah, the Son of God.
- ✚ It is good news because it tells us what Jesus did – his sacrifice on the Cross for our sins.
- ✚ It is good news because it tells us how we can receive salvation.

### Our response

Most will say, “I am neither teacher nor preacher.” But consider if these are not indeed requirements on all Christians:

- ✚ Are you not commanded to have a ready answer to all who question you about the faith?
- ✚ Are you not commanded to be the first step in church discipline, the prompt correction of your brother or sister?
- ✚ Are you not commanded to share the Gospel with all, wherever you go?

### Actions

Christ suits action to words, and so should we. We can learn much from two types of actions seen here: healing and casting out demons.

### Healing

If there is a consistent lesson in the healings of Jesus, it is the role of faith. Sometimes we miss, however, our Lord’s response. The leper says, “If you are willing...” – the implication is clear. He knows the Lord can heal; he’s afraid that he won’t.

Our Lord’s reply is comforting: “I am willing.” Remember that in this day most believed that if you became ill, it was likely enough a punishment for sin; therefore the leper must have been sinner indeed, or so he would have thought.

Our Lord does not stop at that – he touches the leper. It may seem a little thing to us today, but in that time it would make him ceremonially unclean until the following evening. Our Lord’s healings did not always happen with a touch; the leper would certainly understand why he would not want to touch. So why?

- ✚ First, to show one and all who is Lord – even over the Law.
- ✚ Next, the Son of Man shows himself – for which of us has not been comforted by someone’s touch?

It might then seem contradictory to send the man to the priest to offer sacrifices. But aside from the theology (Christ had not yet been crucified; the old covenant is still in effect) there is the human side of this. The leper is an outcast; until he presents these sacrifices and is certified clean, he cannot rejoin the synagogue. Our Lord knows we need such things.

### **Casting out demons**

(The word translated “evil” is actually “unclean” – evil being closer to what we would understand today).

The modern Christian casts a squinty eye at the concept of demons. We don’t see them; we don’t see their effects; maybe this was some form of disease???? But ask the missionary about such things and you will get a different answer. Satan’s lie to the modern man is this: “I don’t exist; so all that stuff in the Bible about me is false; therefore the Bible is false.” But the father of lies does not hesitate to say to those who’ve never read the Bible, “I am stronger than any god these foreigners proclaim.” But here we see the truth.

- ✚ These evil spirits fear him. Why? Is it because they cannot be forgiven? Or is it because they have knowledge – but not love?
- ✚ One thing is certain: when Christ comes, the evil one must flee.
- ✚ Note that the man shook when the demon came out of him. Our Lord permits this – as pain is often permitted – so that others might see what was truly happening.
- ✚ But in no sense will Christ allow the testimony of these demons on his behalf. It is an important lesson in purity.

### **Our response**

There are great examples in here:

- ✚ Simon’s mother-in-law rises from her sickbed – to serve. “Saved to serve” as the Scots used to say – can we be that?
- ✚ The man with leprosy was told to bring the ceremonial offerings as a testimony – to the priests and those around. Do we take the healings we see and proclaim them as testimony to the world?
- ✚ The shame of leprosy did not stop the leper from coming to Christ; is there something of which we are ashamed so much that we cannot bring it to him?

Aquinas said that “those things men wonder at they soon divulge.” Perhaps we have lost our sense of wonder at the mighty works of God.

### **The Inner Life**

Tucked away in the Gospel of action is the evidence of the inner life. So many of us “don’t have time for prayer.” So few of us even understand the contemplative life and its virtues. Our Lord sets us an example.

### Time and place

Why did our Lord go out, early in the morning, into a quiet place in the desert? Perhaps it was (as ancient writers suggest) exemplary – setting an example for us, that we should do likewise. Perhaps too it is because he is the Son of man – fully human, and human beings need this.

Note that he went alone. Even in the garden of Gethsemane he prayed alone, though he took his inner disciples with him. We need that alone time in prayer.

We need it in contemplation too. We need to “think through” the things in our life, not in formal prayer but in meditation upon his word, pondering it in our hearts. Why do we hear nothing about the contemplative life?

- ✚ The American evangelical church often portrays an attitude of “check your brains at the door, this is a matter of the heart.” Our Lord never said that; he insisted on heart, soul, mind and strength.
- ✚ Often, too, we see contemplation as the province of the Roman Catholic – especially the monk. We see Christianity as a group exercise – loud on Sunday morning.
- ✚ The world tells us that we haven’t time for contemplation – just look at your calendar. What are your priorities?
- ✚ Christ tells you that he did it; he found time alone; so can you.  
Did you ever wonder why churches offer retreats? Maybe it’s to meet a basic spiritual need.

### The world will intrude

One thing you can count on in that quiet time with God, whether in prayer, or contemplation – or preparing a Bible lesson: the world will interrupt as often as possible. As soon as the Sabbath was over, the crowds came to Jesus.

I’m sure they were polite about it. The intruders usually are. They usually have “just one more thing” they need. That’s one reason I do my prayers at night – the intruders have less of a chance late at night.

There is a sense of “divine appointment” that must be achieved here. If you make your time with God a sacred ritual, unthinking, he will send the intruders to you. But if you do not make the time available, your spiritual life will fall apart. So do not make it a hard and fast regulation; rather, make it your spiritual habit. Then when the times of divine appointment conflict with your time of contemplation and prayer, you will know which is right to do – just as Jesus did here. See how the crowds prompt him – to go and preach in other villages?

### Our response

- ✚ There is a reason for church retreats; you need them. Consider well that opportunity.
- ✚ Each week you have the brief opportunity of contemplation – at the time of Communion.
- ✚ Most important of all: set a daily time and place for your Lord. It should be a time of contemplation and prayer, least likely of interruptions.

## The Authority of Jesus - Mark 2

Mark brings us three vignettes which outline the authority of our Lord.

### Lord over Sin

A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralyzed man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, **"Son, your sins are forgiven."** Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, **"Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"** 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? Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..."** He said to the paralytic, **"I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home."** 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!"**  
(Mark 2:1-12)

### Why am I still alive?

Let me begin this section with a letter from a friend named Don. Don is serving the end of a long sentence for some very serious crimes. He has just received what for him is good news: he has been declared a mentally disordered offender. It's good news to him because it means he will be paroled to a state mental institution – instead of the streets. It's good news for the rest of us too, for in his present state he would be a "threat to society." In part of his letter, he wrote this:

"I still want to write more things about my way of life; that God has still kept me alive and allowed me to go through (for some reason, I can't guess why). Do you both think that it was important for me to go through 12 years of weird things, then live and survive on the streets and juvenile halls and hospitals? To be a better man after 40 years old. I sure can't figure why or what reason why I'm still alive and still a little sane, through all the drugs, crime, prison and the little true freedom..."

(I've cleaned up the spelling and most of the grammar, but the incoherency is in the original). It is not pertinent for you to know his catalog of childhood horror and life of crime. It is sufficient to know that asking "why I'm still alive" is not an idle question. If anyone's life could make that question worthwhile, his is the life.

Our paralytic might have asked that too. Why am I still alive? I can't move; other people have to take care of me every day. Why?

I had to write back to Don. I told him the details of my recent eye surgery, and then said this:

The reason I went into a lot of detail in this, Don, is to answer one of your questions. You said you couldn't figure out why – what reason – you're still alive. Don, I don't know the reason for this eye surgery. It sure hasn't helped my vision any great amount. It's a big pain (think about having stitches in your eyeball). When the first surgery came up, I asked God to make it the *last* surgery. It wasn't. When the second one came up, we asked God to make that one the last. I don't know if the third one is really the last one; but so far that's the case.

Don, for the life of me I can not tell you why God put me through this. He sure hasn't explained it to me! That's pretty much His way of doing things. He just allows things to happen, and he doesn't explain it. But over time people have found some reasons for these things.

- ✚ Do you remember the story in the Bible of the man who was born blind? Jesus' disciples asked Him whose fault it was – the man, or his parents. He had been blind for 37 years. Jesus answered and said it was neither – the reason he was born blind was so that the disciples might see the glory of God when Jesus healed him. 37 years – so that somebody else might get the message. Sounds unfair, doesn't it? But remember – that man will spend all of eternity with God. What's 37 years compared to all of eternity?
- ✚ You can also look at it this way: God will permit no evil unless there is a way to make a greater good out of it. Sometimes these things are just his way of testing us to see if we really mean to do things right. God isn't going to hold you accountable to the same level he holds me. Why? He knows what you've been through. But he is going to hold you accountable for doing the right things you know to do. Maybe what he's trying to teach you – and the world – is this: it doesn't matter how messed up you are. He's still God, and He can handle it. There is no human being so bad that God cannot redeem them. Remember: things that are over your head are still under His feet.
- ✚ One last thing: you're looking at it from "now." I don't know how it will look tomorrow, but think about how things looked to you when you got to this prison. Things have gotten better since then, haven't they? It's the same with me. I don't like the fact that my right eye is blurry. But it's a lot better than it was last week. Remember, God isn't through with you yet. What He might have in mind, I don't know. But if you will stay faithful to Him, He will work His purposes through you. And when He returns you will see a very different picture.

I hope this helps, Don. Sometimes we say to ourselves, "God, I just don't see how you're going to make anything good out of this." Just remember, He never said you'd see how – He just said He'd do it.

Paralysis of the body is earthly; sin is a disease of the soul, and is eternal. But take heart; Jesus is Lord over sin, and He is the hope that abides.

#### The role of faith

"Faith is full of inventions," said Spurgeon. Look at this man's friends. Perhaps they were the ones of faith; they certainly took it to extremes. (If you don't think so, remember it wasn't their roof they were digging through). Sometimes we are told, "just have faith." As if it were a magic cure!

- ✚ Faith is not a commodity – but points at a person, Jesus, the Christ. Having faith that "something will turn up" is not the same thing.
- ✚ Faith is not faith unless it results in action – they dug through the roof.

✦ Faith is not faith unless it takes action based upon the person of Jesus. Not faith in a system of belief; faith in the person, Jesus. Faith says, "I know this Jesus; I know he will do what I ask."

In nothing is this more important than the matter of sin. Sin is the eternal disease and must be cured. So then, we are right to ask – can he cure it?

#### Authority over sins

The Pharisees here, to give them their due, have a logical point. Only those who are the offended can forgive. I cannot forgive you for what you did to someone else. But it is equally clear that God can forgive all – for any sin is first an offense against him and his righteousness. And since none of us can approach God with clean hands by our own righteousness, we are forced to accept that forgiveness for others – for he is the righteous judge.

Ah – but it's easy to say, "you are forgiven." Roman Catholic priests do it all the time. But how do we know that God agrees? That's the point of "take up your mat and go home." If God follows the words of Jesus with such a miracle, who can deny the authority? God would certainly not allow a bogus forgiveness to be followed by such a healing.

So there we have it: Jesus has the authority to forgive sins. But some of us would say, "That's all right – on a small scale. What about those of us who've lived a life of sin, thoroughly corrupted?"

#### Lord over sinners

The Holy Bible, New International Version

Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. 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. 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. 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"?" 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."** (Mark 2:13-17)

#### What's a quote sinner

The New International Version is using an early form of political correctness in this passage. The argument is that there is really no difference between those who commit only a few sins (and try to live a righteous life) and those who commit all they please with no effort at righteousness. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God – so there is no difference.

However, this is a distinction which we understand instinctively. We have the idea that God is going to treat those who try to be righteous a lot better than those who don't. They had the same idea, formalized in the law. The righteous, to be sure, sinned – but when they thought they did, they brought the appropriate sacrifices to the Temple. The 'sinners' gave up on trying.

It's those quote sinners – from now on, 'sinners' – that we will be talking about in this section. Levi (he's also called Matthew, and wrote the Gospel of that name) is just such a prize. He's a tax collector.

Now, being an IRS agent in our time wins you no friends. But in this time it was much worse. A tax collector was a toad for the invading, conquering Romans. He made his living largely by extracting excess taxes from the people, and pocketing the difference between that and what the Romans got. If you want to know the social stature, think of a drug dealer today. He may drive a nice car, have lots of money – but we aren't going to let him join the country club. And he certainly isn't dating my daughter.

Now you know what a 'sinner' is.

### Respectability and righteousness

In many ways respectability parallels righteousness. Certain sins are socially acceptable; greed, when properly disguised as "being an entrepreneur," will be greeted warmly. When found in the drug dealer, it is not. Sometimes we make the mistake of substituting respectability for righteousness.

The idea permeates our culture. My son is a lawyer. He tells me that social status among lawyers is determined by their clientele. Corporate attorneys are at the top of the scale; below them are the divorce court specialists, and at the bottom are the criminal lawyers. Note that there is no real difference in function; just in respectability.

We use respectability as a social club. This can be good – a sense of shame can motivate you to improve your behavior. But it has the drawback that it must exclude some. That runs contrary to our Lord's will: that all might be saved. So in this passage Jesus makes it clear: He came to seek and save the lost, all of them.

### Lord over "who I am"

Can I go back to Don for a moment? One of his great, burning desires is to "get out into society." By that he does not mean just release from prison; he calls that "back on the streets." He longs – as do most of us – for the approval and acceptance of others. He's worried about how to behave "in society." Can you imagine how he would value someone who would be his guide to such?

Levi could. For the first time in his adult life someone who was righteous, if not exactly respectable, said, "come with me." Be included in my band of followers. Levi's reaction is simple: he wants to share such a wonderful blessing – so he invites all his fellow rats to dinner to meet the man. Respectable society protests; surely this Jesus has *some* sense of dignity?

He has the dignity befitting the King of Kings – and the one who came to serve. He has his mission and will stick to it. But in calling Levi he makes it clear: he is Lord not only over sin – but sinners. He is capable of dealing not only with what you've done *but who you are*.

Think about that for a moment. Can you list all the sins in your life? No. But can you tell God what kind of person you really are? He can deal with that too. He can say to the drug dealer, "I came looking for you – to seek and save the lost. You too are invited in."

Christ now extends this dominion – to the righteous.

### Lord even of righteousness

“I’m preaching on the subject of sin,” said the preacher. “I’m against it.”

Most of us are. Most of us are (if I may modify the form a bit) the quote righteous, hereafter ‘righteous.’ We shall define those as the people who try their best to do what is right, attempting to live a righteous life. Jesus is Lord over these as well:

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?" 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. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast. No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins."** One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" He answered, **"Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? 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."** Then he said to them, **"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."**

**(Mark 2:18-28)**

There is nothing wrong with being ‘righteous.’ We’re not talking about hypocrites here; we’re talking about those who try to be righteous as best they can. That’s a good thing. But as Oswald Chambers observed, “the good is often the enemy of the best.”

In this passage Jesus makes a claim that is every bit as astounding as his claim to forgive sins. He claims to be Lord “even of the Sabbath.” Here is a man whose simple presence sets aside the Law of Moses, given by the finger of God on Mount Sinai. Keeping the Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments. The “violation” here is one of interpretation, but Jesus does not correct the interpretation. Rather, he points out an example from the Old Testament – and lets them draw the appropriate conclusions.

### Lord over the law-keepers

If the Law is over me, and Jesus is over the Law, then Jesus is over me – that should be clear. So then, those who strive for righteousness should see in Jesus the ultimate fulfillment of their desires – the one who is righteousness itself.

This also should clear up one other little fallacy. He is Lord over righteousness – therefore, whatever righteous things I have done, not one of them create any obligation in him. He is righteousness itself. We owe him, not the other way around.

### **Born Again**

So what, then, does Christ expect of the 'righteous'? Please note that 'sinners' were called to repentance. But as Jesus tells us here, it's the sick that need the doctor.

Only once does Christ meet a 'righteous' man who seriously asks the question. His name is Nicodemus. To the 'sinner' Jesus says, "repent." To the 'righteous' he says, "You must be born again." Throw out the attempt at righteousness; accept the gift of the Holy Spirit – and start again. This time, Follow Me.

## Reactions to Jesus - Mark 3

To give them credit, the enemies of Jesus never saw him as a man who gave room for indecision. You were either for him or against him. The reactions to Jesus, logical and illogical, we shall see in this chapter.

Another time he went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. 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. Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, **"Stand up in front of everyone."** Then Jesus asked them, **"Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?"** But they remained silent. 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. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus. Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lake, and a large crowd from Galilee followed. 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. Because of the crowd he told his disciples to have a small boat ready for him, to keep the people from crowding him. For he had healed many, so that those with diseases were pushing forward to touch him. Whenever the evil spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God." But he gave them strict orders not to tell who he was. Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve—designating them apostles—that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons. These are the twelve he appointed: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means Sons of Thunder); Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind." And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebub! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons." So Jesus called them and spoke to them in parables: **"How can Satan drive out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come. In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can rob his house. I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin."** He said this because they were saying, "He has an evil spirit." Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you." **"Who are my mother and my brothers?"** he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, **"Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."**  
(Mark 3:1-35)

### Misunderstanding

Some people, while intending the best, simply do misunderstand Jesus. They don't "get it." For such people Jesus provides logical argument. Indeed, it is hard to see how to miss the logic, for Christ is (as C. S. Lewis cogently put it), "liar, lunatic or Lord."

### The man is insane

It's worth noting that this is no academic or learned judgment. One can almost picture Mary – note the circumstances; she had heard that the boy wasn't eating right – thought he must be insane. (I suspect my mother might have the same reaction with me, if I gave up eating). The answer to such an argument is simply to examine the facts.

- ✚ Read his words. Do these sound like the words of a raving lunatic? No, they are the words of a man deeply in touch with God. They flow with shrewdness at times; deep sorrow at others – indeed, there is no shallowness in the entire canon. So the man is eminently sane.
- ✚ Until you read who he claims to be – God in the flesh; the Son of God. But to quote that eminent psychiatrist, Leo Durocher, “it ain't braggin' if you can do it.” Upon his teaching you must proclaim him sane; therefore, you must consider his claim to be God in the same light.

### The man is demon possessed

Not an argument you hear much in logical, modern circles – for we don't, in general, believe in demons. But the people of this time certainly knew them, and knew them as fact, not just abstract belief. The evidence is still available in third world countries.

Jesus does not condemn these people for this. The fact that he conducts logical argument with them (instead of starting out, “You hypocrites!”) tells us that they were sincere. They were also sincerely wrong. And it does matter what you believe.

His argument is quite simple. If Satan is going around throwing out demons, it's an act of self-destruction. Not likely, that. But if it's not Satan, then who's doing the throwing? Only one who is stronger than Satan. That narrows the field a bit.

### What to do about it

We, as Christians, may meet with honest doubt. This should be an occasion for joy, for true honest doubt is susceptible to fact. We should take the example of our Lord:

- ✚ First, he is patient with such souls. He does not condemn them for lack of understanding or knowledge; he enlightens them. Sometimes it takes a while, but his mercy (and his patience) endure forever.
- ✚ Through it all, he maintains his insistence on *who He is*. There is no suggestion of compromise. It is eternally important that we decide: just who is this Jesus of Nazareth? Indeed, it may well be argued that along side this, there are no other questions.
- ✚ Why? In acknowledging and living by the true answer to that question there is salvation.

### Those who understand

Life is complicated. It is complicated often enough by those who understand perfectly; they just don't like the answer given. It's not politically correct; so we'll just change the definition of truth. Jesus treats such very differently.

## Demons and terror

It's interesting to note that the agents of Satan, the demons, immediately begin to announce who Jesus is – and that Jesus immediately tells them to shut up. The principle is simple: when dealing with those who know the truth and have chosen to live in opposition to it, there can be neither compromise nor coalition. As the Psalmist records God saying it,

**But to the wicked, God says: "What right have you to recite my laws or take my covenant on your lips?"**  
(Psalms 50:16)

Sometimes you just have to draw the line in the sand.

## Pharisees and pride

Rarely do we see one so far gone in evil as to require that (though it does happen). It is more common to see the form of righteousness which denies the power of righteousness. These are the Pharisees in this day; their distinguishing characteristic is pride. It will serve to mark those with the same problem today. Christ does not honor their righteousness.

✚ Rather, he is grieved at the stubbornness of their hearts. The matter is one of will. Either a man will attempt to rule his own life, or give it over to God. There is no middle ground. Pride can be used to produce a form of righteousness – but it is still a sin.

✚ He is angry at them, for they are the wicked. God's wrath is his permanent attitude towards those who defy him – even while using his name.

You think that pride is OK? Look what it drives these men to do. It pushes them into an unholy coalition. They are the keepers of the law, in detail. They make alliance with a political party (think of every hack politician you've ever known). They make common cause with men who disgust them.

The objective of that alliance? Pious murder.

## The unforgivable sin

Which brings us to a topic that has puzzled Christians for generations: the unforgivable sin. Just what is it? It is "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit." Note, please, that blasphemy against Jesus can be forgiven. Why then is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit unforgivable?

Perhaps it's easiest to understand from a step by step, process point of view. No matter how you construct the path to salvation (many people have much to say about this) there is one step which is included in everyone's short list of steps: repentance. Consider, then, that the work of the Holy Spirit is to convict the world of sin and judgment – which is certainly preliminary to repentance. One does not repent if there is no sin; there is no need. One would not repent if there were no judgment; for there would be no consequences to sin. So if you will not repent, you are (in effect) saying that sin or judgment (or both) are not real – which the Holy Spirit (the spirit of truth) affirms. No conviction, no repentance. No repentance, no salvation.

## The great divide

When confronted with "lunatic, liar or Lord" the world looks for another option. It's worth our time to confront some of these and expose them for what they are.

## A sharp pointed stake fence

Jesus did not intend for us to have a middle ground. He did not intend for us to regard him as a “great teacher” – only. His explicit claim is to be God. Two approaches to this have been developed:

- ✚ One says, “what about all the other great teachers who have appeared?” Well, to begin with, none of them claimed to be God. Jesus did. You may examine the claims as you like; Jesus is unique. So every religion (e.g., Bahai) that claims this must fudge the evidence – or the process of reasoning about it.
- ✚ The other says that the records must be wrong. Jesus just could not possibly have said that. That’s the contention of the “Jesus seminar.” But see the circular reasoning: He couldn’t have said it, so the records are wrong. The records are wrong, he didn’t say it. (There is a reason liberal Christianity is declining in numbers.)
- ✚ You may try to sit on the fence if you like. You will find it is made of sharp, pointed stakes.

### Those who follow him

But for those who make the right decision, things look very different.

- ✚ Those who follow him are those who are *called*. Not those who decided, in the grandeur of their own pride, to condescend to give Jesus a little help. Those who have received the divine call, and respond to it.
- ✚ They are also the *wanted*. We need not force our way into the kingdom of heaven; God wants us in it. (How wonderful to be wanted somewhere!)
- ✚ We are called, in one way, *on the mountainside*. We are in the world, but not of the world. The Christian life is indeed different. It is the life lived close to God.

But one thing is required of us: we must come to him. He will stand outside and knock – but we must come to him. The decision must be made, not just assumed to be there. Going to church and feeling pious is no substitute for saying, “Yes Lord, I believe.”

### The rewards

The Apostles were given the reward of a great work. Some of us don’t see things quite that way, but we are part of that great work. In this life we have the satisfaction of knowing, “I count. I’m on the team, and my work is important.”

Indeed, it is greater than that. Those who follow Christ become heirs to the kingdom of God with him. We become brother and sister to the Son of God, and follow him into glory.

## Parabolic Flight - Mark 4:1-34

Do you remember one particular teacher from high school? Usually when we do, it's because he or she made us so miserable. But every now and then you come across an instructor who is memorable because their lessons made everything so clear. Not only the lessons were clear; our ability to remember them was great – because the lessons included those homey little stories that caused us to remember.

Jesus taught like that. As far as we know, he never went to the college professor style of lecture. He intended to be understood – by those who would listen.

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. He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: **"Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times."** Then Jesus said, **"He who has ears to hear, let him hear."** When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. 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 so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!"** Then Jesus said to them, **"Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? The farmer sows the word. 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. Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. 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. Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; 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. Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown."** 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? For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."** **"Consider carefully what you hear," he continued. "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him."** He also said, **"This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."** Again he said, **"What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade."** With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

(Mark 4:1-34)

## Why parables?

Jesus taught so often in parables we have come to think that he invented them. It is not so; it is a very old teaching device. He was the master of the parable, however, for his message needed to fit into every human mind. Why parables?

- ✦ Some of us just can't understand heavenly things. We don't "get it." So Jesus uses earthly things, things we can understand, to help us understand.
- ✦ Often, the intellectual approach leaves people cold. There is an emotional point to these parables; Jesus intends to rouse the hearer from apathy.
- ✦ Parables are used so that everyone *can* understand – but no one is forced to understand. He stands at the door and knocks; even in his teaching.
- ✦ For those who *will not* understand, the parable leaves a way out. God intends that by our own free will we should come to him. With a parable, you can hear, but not listen. So it is that those who will not understand will be judged by what they have refused to hear, not by the difficulty of hearing.
- ✦ Finally, so that we might see the example. If our Lord chose the simple things as instructional aids, we can do the same.

## The Parable of the Sower

This is a story that would have been very familiar to his hearers. Agriculture in those days was close to all; everyone would have seen such a sight. Our Lord points out three who do not receive the word:

### Along the path

A little background is necessary. In those times agricultural fields would have been divided into sections just large enough that a man could sow seed on them by hand. Between such sections would be a path, just wide enough to walk on. As a man walked down this path, he would scatter the grain on both sides, thus sowing his crop. After many years, this path would be hard ground indeed – though its native makeup would be the same as the field.

- ✦ Note that it is the path that is resistant. The sower swings his arms in a broad arc, distributing seed on both sides of the path. It is not possible to selectively leave out the path. The problem is the hardness of the path, not the seed or the sower. Have you ever had kids that just wouldn't listen?
- ✦ The seed, however, is actively taken away by the birds. If you reject the word of God, Satan will soon see to it that it's not around to bother you any more.

### Rocky places

We still, to this day, refer to some people as being "shallow." The phrase comes from this passage. What's interesting is that the ground here represents people, and there are those who are so shallow as to prohibit anything more than "flash in the pan" Christianity. Christ becomes one more fad, one more fashion.

I have a prize example of such. She used to work with me. She had found salvation in everything from EST to country-western dancing. One day she came in complaining that her latest live-in boyfriend had left her. She moaned on and on about how all she was looking for was someone who would be faithful to her. I asked her how likely Prince Charming was to enter the Silver Bullet Saloon. I pointed out to her how many men she had had; and therefore how many women they had had. From such she expected to find a faithful man? Wasn't it obvious that faithful men went to church, not the

bar? “Oh no, I tried that once.” When she had been there for about two weeks, she decided that it just couldn’t work. After all, it was so much easier to get a man in the bar.

On a personal note, such people are very frustrating for the Bible teacher, too.

### *Amidst the thorns*

It often seems silly, but this is the problem with most would-be Christians. They fall victim to thorns.

- ✦ There is the thorn of worry. This is a thorn that pierces with sting and bleeding. But consider: how many of you are convinced that a man could make sufficient money just with a cardboard sign and bucket? If our society provides that well, what justifies worry? How much more will God do for his children? This is a thorn that cuts deep, forcing our attention away from God.
- ✦ There is the deceitfulness of wealth. Things look good; the money is coming in. Money is potent but not sovereign. Indeed, God will often arrange things so that those with money will be facing problems money can’t solve. It’s his way of bringing us home. This is a thorn which bleeds, but without the sting. That way we won’t notice ourselves bleeding to death.
- ✦ Much of what we call worry is actually desire, the worst of all thorns. This is a thorn which festers, infects and brings the body into fever. Who among has not felt desire? When the next promotion, the new car, the new wife become our driving passion, God soon fades. He fades without pain, without bleeding – but with a fever that consumes us.

Notice one thing in all this: the seed fails not because of the Sower but because of the ground. It is the Sower’s wish that all might be saved.

### *Consider carefully what you hear*

Why? Because what you hear is what you repeat, and what you repeat soon becomes what you are. You select the important things in your life; God will take your selection and use it as your measurement on judgment day. So often we are harsh with others and lax upon ourselves! God will be as lax with us as we are with others.

### *You are the light*

Whatever you choose to listen to, becomes you. And you – the real you – is always on display. You think not? Try to deceive your children with your righteousness. If you are not genuine, it will show.

Therefore, consider carefully what you listen to. It’s going to show.

### *The kingdom, naturally*

Often time we use our measuring stick in the wrong way. We take responsibility for that which belongs to God. When things don’t go the way we think that God would like, we blame ourselves. We act, in other words, like everything in the church was completely up to us.

It is not so. That’s the point of that parable; God gives the increase. We’re just responsible for what we hear; what we say; what we do.

### **Mustard seed**

The example would have been clear to his hearers. Mustard is a very small seed – the smallest known to these people – but it produces the largest plant in the herb garden of the time. It is from our small beginnings that God will give the increase. In time, others will come to know the shade and shelter of that which God made great.

### **Keep it simple, stupid**

I hope this lesson has been one of divine simplicity. Why is this simplicity important for God's people? Why such a gift for the obvious?

- ✚ If you genuinely understand something, you should be able to explain it simply. So our explanations of the faith should be simple – and deep.
- ✚ God intends us for the simple life. Worry, wealth and desire are complicated; they require scheming and plotting. But the simple life in Christ requires only obedience.
- ✚ If we live our lives in such simplicity, it will be known. We are lights to the world. What will they see in us?

## The Uses of Adversity - Mark 4:35-41

You will be kind enough to pardon me for beginning with a war story. Many years ago, when I was a young boy, I lived in paradise. When your father is a soldier, living on a proving ground is paradise. Airplanes, tanks, artillery, helicopters were an everyday sight to me.

The government obtained Jefferson Proving Ground by buying a large chunk of Southern Indiana, fencing it off, and firing artillery into it. The farms and such were left as they were, and many things grew wild there. Including blackberries.

My uncle and his family came down from Ohio to visit us. My father instructed them all on the dangers of artillery rounds not yet exploded – the base was very strict about this, these things are dangerous – but his instruction was met with a pleasant smile. No one was concerned.

We went out to pick blackberries. Have you ever been in a blackberry bramble? Then you know that it doesn't move very quickly. But this day it parted – like the Red Sea for Moses. My uncle let out a yell and began running back down the road.

We ran with him. One of the things you learn on a proving ground is to run when the other guy does – you can always ask questions later. But when we were out of breath, all we could get out of him was, "I think we've picked enough today."

That's a perfectly natural reaction for a man who has just kicked a sixteen inch (diameter), 2700 pound artillery shell. I suspect he would have had a great deal of understanding for the disciples in our Scripture for the day:

That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, **"Let us go over to the other side."** Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. 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?" He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, **"Quiet! Be still!"** Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, **"Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"** They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"  
(Mark 4:35-41)

Why is this incident given? I suggest three reasons that the disciples were put through this experience:

- ✚ That they might see Christ's power
- ✚ That their faith might increase
- ✚ That they might have peace

### That you might see his power

#### What Christ expected them to understand

Let's begin with some clarity. Christ expected these people to understand who he is – namely, God in the flesh. Which implies the following:

- ✦ He is the creator of all things. Far above all the power we can imagine, he is the one through whom all things were made, from nothing.
- ✦ He is the sustainer of the universe. It operates by fixed laws because his character is eternal.
- ✦ He is, therefore, Lord of all things.
  - He expected them to know that – and act upon that belief.

### The superiority of Christ

Of course, we see that they did not act upon that belief. I suspect they thought him one of the great prophets. But see how he displays his superiority over all those of the Old Testament:

- ✦ Moses parted the Red Sea – with the staff empowered by God.
- ✦ Joshua parted the Jordan – with the Ark of the Covenant.
- ✦ Elisha parted the Jordan – with the cloak fallen from Elijah.
  - Jesus calmed the sea – with a word of command. All these others showed that they relied on the power of God, given by some token. Jesus alone does it by himself.

He does it in his characteristic style: by word. It is written that by the word of God the worlds came into being. There is a play on words in that; for Christ is the Word. So in this instance he shows them the power of the Word.

### Calm confidence

I am reminded of Slowpoke Rodriguez, the cousin of Speedy Gonzalez. He was the “slowest mouse in Old Mexico.” Sylvester the Cat, hearing this, went straight for him. Unfortunately, as Sylvester found out about one heartbeat too late, “Slowpoke Rodriguez – he pack a gun.”

Is there anything that betokens power like calm confidence? The one without power is nervous; the one who is confident of power is calm and confident. Can there be any greater evidence of the calm confidence than sleeping through this storm? As the old hymn put it, “No water can swallow the ship where lies the master of ocean and earth and sky.”

### That your faith might increase

#### How we reproach God in time of trouble

It is amazing how confident we are that we need not trouble with God when things are going well – after all, we have everything under control, right? But when things go astray, we are quick to let him know that he’s been falling down on the job. The disciples did that here.

Jesus was asleep at the stern of the boat. The disciples, like us, judged by appearances. They thought they had the solution – let’s get all hands on deck here and start bailing the boat!

This is a sure sign that peace is not in us. Can you not picture the fretful anxiety of the disciples? They’re fishermen. They know how to handle a small boat. Things are getting out of control (their control) and they point the finger of blame. So often, we do the same.

### Why does God permit such danger

Our usual question (they just wanted help with the boat) is this: why did God let me get into this situation? Isn't he supposed to protect me from things like this? God might make reply to that along these lines:

- ✚ Just where is it written that you will have no trouble in this life? He promised you no such thing.
- ✚ Besides, what are the difficulties of this life compared to life eternal? If he needs you to go through troubles so that your faith will increase, isn't that a trivial price to pay?
- ✚ Further, were you listening to him when times were good? Probably not. You had everything under control; why would you? So he permitted things to get out of your control – so you could see his.

### Sometimes alone

Did you notice that only the disciples saw this? There were other ships nearby; they saw the effect, but only the disciples saw the cause. This was a private lesson.

Sometimes we go through the crisis in our lives alone. The church is commanded to come along side; our brothers in Christ are commanded to help, but some things we go through alone. Why?

- ✚ One reason is so that we might learn about ourselves – our weakness, in particular.
- ✚ Another reason is this: we need to learn to rely upon Jesus, and him alone.
- ✚ Why that? Will you face death in a crowd, or alone?

Want an example? I had my angioplasty in a town far from home. The clerk at the hotel, the ambulance attendants, the doctors and nurses all were kind and caring – but I was alone. Even my coworkers had no idea where I was. That first day and night I had no one to rely upon but Jesus. I needed no one else.

### That you might experience peace

#### The world's way

Have you ever noticed that worry is contagious? Worry is the world's way of handling problems which are beyond your strength.

- ✚ First, you have to worry about all possible outcomes – at once. It could be cancer, heart disease, bubonic plague – but not all at once. But you have to worry about all of them.
- ✚ Next, we act as if worry itself could do anything. It's Satan's counterfeit. We should take such action as we can; but having done what we can, we should leave the rest to God.
- ✚ Often, worry prevents good work. By the act of worrying, we omit doing what we can. It is a great weapon for Satan.

#### God's way

God would have you take a different series of steps:

- ✚ First, do the good you know to do. If there are steps within your power, take them – and commit the rest of the work to God.
- ✚ Consider well: do you really need to know what's going to happen? So often it is true that the end result would make no difference to our actions. So do what's right and leave the result to God.

- ✦ And, as one dear friend put it, “You might as well give your troubles to the Lord. He’s going to be up all night anyway.”

### *The Master’s calm*

See how the Master provides this peace for us:

- ✦ It is by his voice. We are told that his sheep will know his voice. If we are listening to him – in prayer, in study, in worship – we can hear him. It’s a matter of listening. Some of us are so busy telling him how to handle things we don’t have time to listen.
- ✦ The peace comes “at once.” It comes with the realization that God has the matter in his hands. Things that are over our heads are under his feet.
- ✦ As always, this is the result of faith. If you have faith in Him, his peace will surely be yours.  
The wind and the waves obey the Man; will you?

## Ask – You Shall Receive - Mark 5

Funny, isn't it – our view of Jesus Christ is almost a self-fulfilling prophecy. Those who expect little or nothing from Him find their attitude quite confirmed. Here are some examples from the Scripture – from which we hope to learn.

They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an evil spirit came from the tombs to meet him. This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him any more, not even with a chain. 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. Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. He shouted at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won't torture me!" For Jesus had said to him, "**Come out of this man, you evil spirit!**" Then Jesus asked him, "**What is your name?**" "My name is Legion," he replied, "for we are many." And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area. A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. The demons begged Jesus, "Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them." 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. Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. 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. Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man—and told about the pigs as well. Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region. As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. Jesus did not let him, but said, "**Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.**" 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. 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. Then one of the synagogue rulers, named Jairus, came there. Seeing Jesus, he fell at his feet and 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." So Jesus went with him. A large crowd followed and pressed around him. And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. 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. When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering. At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "**Who touched my clothes?**" "You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, "**Who touched me?**" But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. He said to her, "**Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.**" While Jesus was still speaking, some men came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue ruler. "Your daughter is dead," they said. "Why bother the teacher any more?" Ignoring what they said, Jesus told the synagogue ruler, "**Don't be afraid; just believe.**" He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. When they came to the home of the synagogue ruler, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. He went in and said to them, "**Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep.**" But they laughed at him. 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. He

took her by the hand and said to her, "*Talitha koum!*" (which means, "*Little girl, I say to you, get up!*"). Immediately the girl stood up and walked around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat.

(Mark 5:1-43)

In this lesson, please note four types of people:

- ✚ The mourners – who know that Jesus can do nothing
- ✚ The herdsmen – who want Jesus to do nothing
- ✚ The ruler – who thinks Jesus might be able to do something
- ✚ The woman – who knows Jesus can do all she wants

Each of these we must examine in terms of their attitude, their request of Jesus, and his reaction.

### The Mourners – Those Who Know

A bit of local culture must come first. In this time, there were people who were paid mourners. You hired them to do the proper weeping and wailing at a funeral. If it sounds strange, remember that we hire funeral homes. One thing is sure: you don't call these people unless someone has died.

#### Their attitude

Their attitude is simple: we're the ones in the know. We know the story; we'll tell you the answer, God.

You may not think that applies to Christians today. But give some thought to it:

- ✚ Have you ever given God detailed instructions on how to handle some crisis in your life - or more importantly, in someone else's life? As if He couldn't figure out what to do?
- ✚ Have you ever gone to prayer just to list your complaints? Some of us are so bitter that our prayers are nothing more than a complaint session. We never ask anything; we complain about everything. Is it any wonder that we receive nothing?

#### Their request

What request? They don't ask anything of Jesus. Why?

- ✚ Because they are so "wise." They are so wise that they will decide who is God – for whatever purpose is at hand. God is God on Sunday mornings, when we need a beautiful worship service to be proud of. But Monday He's not so convenient.
- ✚ Ultimately, if you decide who is God, day by day, the truth is that you have made yourself your own little god.

### Jesus' Response

In one sense Jesus proves that these people are right. They expected that he could do nothing – and that's just about what they get. It's self-fulfilling prophecy.

But in another sense he gives them what they need. He gives them a sign, if they will only see it. Here, it is the awakening of the dead girl. In our time His signs are numerous; if the church is active.

## The Herdsmen

Have a little sympathy for these guys; they didn't ask for trouble.

### Their attitude

- ✚ These are the people who are content with the status quo. It's a quiet life. The house is good; the car is running fine; the kids aren't in trouble with the law; life is good. Why are you bothering me, Jesus?
- ✚ All they want to do is make a buck – or more precisely, a few more bucks. They're not asking for riches, nor for miracles – just a little more. These guys are herding swine – forbidden to the Jews. I'm sure they could rationalize it in their minds. After all, it's profitable, and I need the money. It's not like I was eating the pork, after all.
- ✚ They're willing to tolerate the evil around them – the demoniac, after all, lived nearby – as long as it isn't personal. Hey, what's the problem? I've never had an abortion, personally (not surprising, considering I'm "him.") As long as the pornography's in plain brown wrappers, what's the problem?
- ✚ Most of all, they don't want to feel guilty. Don't remind us about that pork.

### Their request

Their request is simple: go away. Do we ever act like that?

- ✚ Do we ask Christ to hide in the church? Stay where he belongs – out of our lives and in the sanctuary?
- ✚ Most particularly, do we want him to let sleeping worms lie? Not to bother us about the guilt on our consciences?

### Jesus' response

Jesus gives them exactly what they ask for. He goes away. It is sad to think of it that way, but if the things of this world crowd Him out of your life, He will go away.

But He will leave someone behind – a witness. Miracles you don't care about; signs you will not see. So he leaves behind a person, a witness. If you want to know if you're a herdsman, check around for the witness in your life.

### The ruler

Here's one of the nice guys. He resembles a lot of us.

### His attitude

He's a man of little faith – but not "no faith." He's educated in the Scriptures, and he knows the "theoretical" answers to the questions. We may conclude from the fact that Christ does not rebuke him (as he did the Pharisees) that this man is indeed a righteous man. His life is full of good works – but something is missing. That something is a full and complete faith.

There's one other thing: he's come to a crisis in his life. His daughter is dying.

### His request

He knows what he wants – his daughter's life. He also knows the "right way" to get it – by asking God. It's important to remember here: little faith is not the same thing as no faith. He's asking in the little faith he has for the great thing he wants most of all. Sound familiar?

### Jesus' response

Jesus gives him a three-fold response:

- ✚ First – by way of the woman who was bleeding – he gives him an example of the faith he should have, and its results. He strengthens the little faith to make it grow.
- ✚ Next, by his explicit command, he removes the fear that blocks that faith from growing.
- ✚ Finally, he grants his request.

There's a pattern there for us. Look for the examples around us, and let our faith be strengthened. Listen to his command: do not be afraid. Then look for his blessing.

### The Woman

You need to understand the desperation of this woman. A woman in her monthly period was considered ceremonially unclean. For that time of the month, she could not participate in the synagogue, the center of life in a Jewish village. But for this woman, her "period" never ended. She would be unclean – an outcast – all the time. She was slowly bleeding to death – alone.

### Her attitude

Her attitude is a joy to behold. She has that great faith.

- ✚ Note that having that faith still means she waits until God's moment for healing. It is not a magic talisman; it is faith.
- ✚ She puts it simply: "if only." She knows the character of God; the question is whether or not she can get close enough. How many of us desire to get "close enough" to God?
- ✚ Ultimately, she does not consider anyone's opinion (the virtue of being an outcast) but acts on faith. Action still counts.

### Jesus' response

Jesus' response can be summed up in the name of God: I Am. She has relied on his eternal, unchanging nature – the nature of God. She knows that God is good; that he is merciful.

That might just be a solid definition of faith: to rely on the nature of God. He does not change; yesterday, today or forever. What changes is our reliance on Him.

Note this: no explicit action by Christ is required. Her faith alone, when in touch with his nature, is sufficient. He is God in the flesh; therefore, He will heal.

## Roses Grow Best - Mark 6:1-13

It is a curious fact: roses grow best when bedded down in manure. Often we see failure and rejection. We see it so often one might think we know what to do about it – but it seems we don't. In this passage Christ shows us the method of handling failure and rejection.

- ✦ Out of failure and rejection in Nazareth, he sends his disciples forth.
- ✦ They go out in evangelism, to return to him.
- ✦ When they return, it is a time of quiet and rest.

One key to understanding the way of Christ is to recognize that no evil comes that he cannot use it to create a greater good.

### Ashes of Disaster

A song put it this way: "from the ashes of disaster grow the roses of success." Here is a tale that begins that way:

Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. 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, that he even does miracles! 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?" And they took offense at him. Jesus said to them, **"Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor."** He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith. Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village.

(Mark 6:1-6)

### Why did He bother?

Surely, one asks, Jesus knew that he would be rejected? Indeed, the other Gospel accounts make it clear that the townspeople of Nazareth chased him out, intending to stone him. So why did he bother with these people?

- ✦ First, there will be the Judgment Day. In his own home town, people might have said, "Why didn't you come back to speak to us? We would have believed." There is a sense that everyone should have at least one chance to hear the Gospel.
- ✦ But he works no great number of miracles among them – due to their lack of faith. Perhaps this is a mercy; he knew they would reject him – the smallness of the miracles lessens the blame.
- ✦ Most of all we know this: it is God's will that none should perish. They had to go through the rejection.
- ✦ For us, however, it is the beginning of an example – how to deal with rejection.

### Expect it

Some think it easier to bear pain when you know it's coming. Others would like to be surprised. Christ gives us the first technique; it's just that some of us ignore the warnings. We are going to be ridiculed and rejected, even in our own families.

In one way, however, we should see this as a form of release. By their rejection, we can see ourselves as having made the decision. We have chosen Christ over the dearest things of this world. It is an agony; but it is also a liberation.

### Shaking dust

As we will see in the next section, there is a sense of giving up on someone here. It is as if we say, "Well, I tried to convince you – now I'm moving on." Why would God want us to do that? Wouldn't he want us to persist indefinitely?

- ✦ There is a sense of urgency to the Gospel. If you think of it this way, Satan can use a family member to tie you down. You spend all your time working on one person when there are others you need to touch.
- ✦ Sometimes the Lord parts you from that person – so that someone else will touch him. You might just be in the way.
- ✦ Most of all, there is this: you must decide whether family is more important than Christ. If he tells you to move on, move on.

### The work of the disciple

Let's see how Jesus sends his men out:

And he was amazed at their lack of faith. Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village. Calling the Twelve to him, he sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits. These were his instructions: **"Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra tunic. Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. 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."** They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.

(Mark 6:6-13)

Perhaps you haven't thought of it this way, but this is an example of the humility of Jesus. He is the source of their power over the sick and the demons, but he shares that power with his disciples. It is his intention that his disciples will do the work that he does – within their limits. The atonement at the Cross is his alone.

### In pairs

Christ sends us out in pairs for good reason, and we should heed him.

- ✦ First, that we might strengthen one another. Living the Christian life is not an easy task. We should not be so arrogant as to think we are capable of doing it all by ourselves.
- ✦ Indeed, we will need our partner – for correction. All of us sin; all of us go off in wrong-headed directions. How much easier for us (and I suspect for God as well) to be corrected by a friend and partner – than to be corrected by God working in the world.
- ✦ Moreover, going two by two makes us more credible in the eyes of the world. We instinctively distrust one lone idiot. But when two witnesses say they've seen something, we tend to take it more seriously.

### Take only

In his instructions to his disciples, he gives us an example of how the Christian should go through this world – and why. This rather limited list of goods makes for a light backpack. The going should be all the easier for it.

- ✚ It shows that we trust in God. The rations in your pack tell everyone how long you think you're going before resupply. We need to show the world that we trust God for our daily bread.
- ✚ By our example we show our disdain for riches – and point the world to true riches. If I am unimpressed by your diamond ring and how it sparkles, perhaps that means I think other things much more valuable.
- ✚ As we do our work for Christ, remember that we do not seek the payment of men, but the reward of God. Matthew in this passage adds the injunction that "the laborer is worthy of his hire." The world is not impressed by the hireling.

### Same house

We are to stay in the same house – which means that we are to be content with what we have. The constant desire for "more" has ruined many a Christian.

- ✚ By our actions we are to show the world the constancy of the Christian. It is not so much that it is good to be poor as it is good to thank God for what you have.
- ✚ There is a particular peril to the preacher in this. If he is a charming man, it's possible for him to dine – quite well – at a different house each night. We seldom hear of gluttony as a sin any more, but the temptation is still there.
- ✚ When the Christian does receive, he should do so with thanksgiving and praise to God. God knows your needs, and provides well above them. (He certainly has with me!)

### Returning to the Fountain

The Christian life also includes the time of rest. See how this is done.

The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. 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."**  
(Mark 6:30-31)

### Reported all

Isn't it a natural thing to report back in at the end of a trip? But one might argue that God knows what they did; why the report?

- ✚ First, your Lord does want to hear from you – it's called fellowship. It is the desire of his heart that you fellowship with him.
- ✚ Next, so that he might instruct and correct you in a positive way. If you go to him, laying your activities before him, he can then correct you gently.
- ✚ Beyond correction there is praise; it gives him an opportunity to say, "well done." We all need that some times.

### Quiet place

Most of us understand that we need a quiet place for prayer; it's not that we can't pray without it, it's just that it helps avoid distractions. But there is more to it than that:

- ✦ If you wanted a romantic evening with your lover, would you choose a bus stop? No, you'd choose something like a quiet restaurant. You choose the place of prayer, the place of intimate fellowship with God. What does that place say about your attitude?
- ✦ There is also a sense of honor involved here: it's as if to say, I take this so seriously as to set aside a specific time and place for it.

### Rest

When our children were younger, my wife used to say, "Rest is a four letter word. That's why I'm not allowed any." But if you are genuinely working for Christ, rest is part of the regimen. If you're working, you need it. If you don't get it, perhaps you're not working.

Rest is the reflection of his care for you. It comes when you check in for the day (or whenever) and go to that quiet place. In it, he prepares you to go out again – until he comes.

## Three Sinners - Mark 6:14-29

To understand this story – which has been portrayed on stage many times – you need a little history lesson first. There are a bunch of “Herods” in the New Testament. It gets a little confusing, so I will introduce only a few to you:

- ✚ Herod the Great is the father of the Herod in this passage. He’s the one mentioned in the story of the nativity. He’s the one who dealt with the Wise Men – and slaughtered all the children under the age of two. That will tell you pretty quickly just what kind of family we’re dealing with. He’s a contemporary of Cleopatra, by the way – who tried to take over his kingdom via Mark Anthony.
- ✚ Herod Antipas – that’s the Herod in this passage – is his son. Dad willed him the rule of Galilee. His two brothers got the rest of the kingdom. One of them was so bad he was deposed by the Romans, who made Judea an Imperial Colony (hence we get, eventually, Pontius Pilate). The other brother was Philip, who was Herodias’ first husband.
- ✚ Herodias – she’s a relative of all these folks by way of Herod the Great’s father – divorced Philip for political reasons (her father was King Aretas, and he seems to have arranged it). By all contemporary accounts, she was a very good looking woman.
- ✚ Salome – her name is not mentioned in the Bible, we get it from history – is Herodias daughter. It is in some doubt, but most scholars feel she is the daughter of Philip, not Herod Antipas. She would be a young teen at this time.

“Nothing is ever a total loss – it can always be used as a bad example.” This bunch fits that proverb quite well.

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." Others said, "He is Elijah." And still others claimed, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago." But when Herod heard this, he said, "John, the man I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!" 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. For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, 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. 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. 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." And he promised her with an oath, "Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom." She went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" "The head of John the Baptist," she answered. 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." The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

(Mark 6:14-29)

## Salome

In the movies, she's usually portrayed as a misled, innocent little thing. It goes well in Hollywood, but it's not Salome.

### Her mother's apprentice

Her mother, as we shall see, is an evil, scheming woman – who has taught her daughter well. There's a lesson or two in that.

- ✚ First, how important it is to remember the example! This child grew up in a palace of intrigue; how could she help but learn it?
- ✚ Second, it shows us how values are formed in children. Principles are the stands which cost us something; can you imagine this girl sacrificing anything for the sake of principle? Her mother never did.
- ✚ This is particularly important, I think, in girls.

I remember it well: my daughter (at this writing, 18 years old) was two years old when I first saw the wiggle and the wink. She smiled at me when she did it. I thought to myself, "There's only one woman in the world with the right to look at me that way – what am I going to do with two?" Can you see now how she wrapped Herod around her little finger? Perhaps the way a wife treats her husband is of some influence on her daughters.

### "Pretty girls just seem to find out early..."

... how to open doors with just a smile. I live next to a college campus. My wife works there, so I frequently walk through the campus to meet her. When I do, I often see young women we refer to as "advertising." We categorize them in three types:

- ✚ "For sale" – obviously showing off their bodies.
- ✚ "For sale or rent" – not just that, but clearly are looking for tonight's bed partner.
- ✚ "Hourly rates" – I leave to your imagination.

These young women have given in to the temptation to use sexuality as a tool. Tools are just that: tools. Each tool has a right use. The right use of sexuality is to please a husband so that the marriage may be solid. Abused – we can see the result. Evidently the abuse is not just a modern phenomenon.

### "Right now"

She doesn't want his head tomorrow, or when convenient – but right now. Why?

- ✚ She's sized up Herod pretty accurately. She doesn't want to give him time to repent.
- ✚ Besides, when you're a young teenager, everything is right now.
- ✚ But most of all, it's because Mom wants it.

How often do we give in to the strong personalities in our families, at the expense of the weak ones?

## Herodias

Usually cast as the villainess (I'd love to see Walt Disney's treatment of this woman), Herodias is the power behind the throne, or so it seemed. We can see something of ourselves in her.

### Nursed a grudge

It's well put. She didn't just have one, she nursed it. A grudge can be quite frail – at first.

- ✚ It's the great danger of anger, that you nurse it in the night until it consumes you.
- ✚ We often do so, thinking "no harm can come of it." But the harm is there, just waiting for the right circumstances. Nurse the grudge long enough, the tempting moment will come to put grudge into action. This usually has consequences with long term regret.
- ✚ The end result of the grudge may appear to be John the Baptist's head – but it also is the bitterness in her heart.

### Rich man's war

During our Civil War, the Confederate soldiers often said that it was "a rich man's war and a poor man's fight." My mother used to put it this way, in settling our childish squabbles: "This is a case of let's you and him fight." We are ever inclined to send someone else to do the dirty work. There are two points in here to remember:

- ✚ In this extreme, her own daughter was pushed to commit murder so that Mother might have her revenge. This shows how a grudge can override even the closest of family ties – yet another reason to give it up.
- ✚ Often we send an emissary to carry out our wishes – because if we went ourselves, we might have to face the trouble. By sending her daughter, she didn't have to touch things. The grudge stays intact.

### The trophy

It's not sufficient that the man be killed. She wants his head – a trophy. Here is a sign of a depraved mind.

- ✚ First, it is the desire of pride. Pride is essentially competitive. I win – which means you must lose. The desire to see the other guy lose is the core of this.
- ✚ More than that, we need to be able to crow about it. We need to be able to strut our victory to show the world that we are better than the loser.

If you think this doesn't apply to us, have you ever felt the need to get a better car, bigger boat, nicer house than someone else in your family? Or at work? Perhaps this sin isn't confined to the pages of the Bible.

### Herod

The man is fascinating; all actors know that the villain is the best part of the play (see Macbeth).

### The man is not his own master

He may be a king, but he is not a ruler. Others rule over him, whether he likes it or not. Think not?

- ✚ Why is John in prison? Herod likes to listen to this guy, he respects him and thinks him a holy man. But he has this wife.... And whatever Lola wants, Lola gets.
- ✚ How did he get this wife? History tells us that he snagged her from his brother – because of his lust for her.

- ✚ Why does he kill John the Baptist? Listen to the excuse: his oath. Listen to the reason: the peer pressure from his guests.

#### **Moth to the flame**

Herod is a moth to the flame; whatever attracts him he hovers about. He respects John; he imprisons him. He resents John; he listens to him. Perhaps it's like Teddy Roosevelt said of Taft: he means well – feebly. Courage is still the foundation of virtue.

#### **The fear of the holy**

One thing Herod is sure of: John is holy. Herod fears that. He gives us two evidences of that:

- ✚ His reaction to Jesus – his nemesis is back.
- ✚ He beheaded John in his cell – not at the banquet. He feared John's tongue.  
How many of us are like that? We fear and respect that which is holy – but refuse to take the courage to become holy ourselves.

#### **Lessons for us**

I leave you with three questions for your soul:

- ✚ Are you dealing with others by manipulation, or in honesty?
- ✚ Are you living the life of bitterness, or repentance and forgiveness?
- ✚ Are you ruled by yourself, by others, or by Jesus Christ?

Salome no doubt had her excuses. Herodias probably did too; Herod even tendered his. Remember that excuses and forgiveness are opposite ways of dealing with sin. You must pick one or the other.

## Hardness of Heart - Mark 6:32-56

For some reason these passages are often studied separately. This should not be, I think – because verse 52 clearly links the two events told here.

So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. 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. 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. Send the people away so they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat." But he answered, "**You give them something to eat.**" They said to him, "That would take eight months of a man's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?" "**How many loaves do you have?**" he asked. "**Go and see.**" When they found out, they said, "Five—and two fish." Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. 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. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand. Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray. When evening came, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. About the fourth watch of the night he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, because they all saw him and were terrified. Immediately he spoke to them and said, "**Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.**" Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened. When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there. As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognized Jesus. They ran throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. 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.

(Mark 6:32-56)

### Testing

Test: the school child's least favorite word. Alas, it is a fact of life, the test is always with us.

#### Why does God allow us to be tested?

Consider the situation from our usual point of view. We don't like to be tested. When God permits a testing in our lives, we are quick to complain. We ask to be delivered immediately. As I write this, I have recently received the news that my right eye will continue to be useless for another three months – and then we'll see whether or not any sight can be restored to it. One might consider that God is testing me; my first question is, "Why?"

- ✚ Consider it from the teacher's point of view. The test is designed to tell the teacher how successful the teaching has been. This seems unlikely in God's case; he ought to know. After all, he is omniscient. So it must be something else.

- ✦ One possibility is this: motivation. Nothing motivates the student to study as much as the knowledge that there will be a test. It's difficult for us to see that in life, but perhaps we should. Maybe we should prepare ourselves for life's difficulties – since we know they will come. (Do you buy health insurance? Maybe you should invest in some patience, too).
- ✦ Sometimes the small test is preparation for the big one. They give final exams, you know. Perhaps the trials you're going through are only there to prepare you for a greater examination later – and a greater triumph. Is there any ecstasy like knowing you aced the test?
- ✦ Perhaps the greatest reason of all is this: in testing, God introduces you to yourself. You get to know your limits, your failings and your strengths. Did you pass the beggar by? What does that say of your Christian charity?

### Why we don't like testing

Testing has a number of drawbacks – at least, from our point of view. But are they really so bad?

- ✦ Testing implies suffering – and no one likes that. But consider it in a different light: your Lord suffered. The one you love, the lover of your soul, suffered for you. Are you so unwilling to suffer for Him?
- ✦ Testing implies work. We're lazy. But again – are we always that way? No, if we see a good result as the end, we're willing to work. Perhaps the problem is not the work so much as our view of the objective of the work.
- ✦ Testing implies fear – have you ever panicked on a test? We fear failure. But are we not in the hands of the one truly benevolent teacher, who has every desire for us to succeed? Surely testing at his hands is most likely to produce success – if we cooperate.

### The gold mine

The core of the matter is this: we resent being tested because we have lost sight of the rewards of success. What are those rewards?

- ✦ We are counted worthy to be a part of the kingdom of God.<sup>15</sup>
- ✦ Such testing produces perseverance, which ultimately leads to maturity and completeness of the faith.<sup>16</sup>

We need to realize that God allows such testing, but he does not tempt us.<sup>17</sup> He does not want us to turn to evil, but wants us to pass the test and grow in the faith. So why then do we so stoutly resist this?

It is because of the hardness of our hearts – the point Jesus is making to the disciples here. We're in need of an attitude adjustment.

### Hardness of Heart

Ask most Christians if they are hard-hearted and they will deny it vigorously. It's like disease: sometimes it's pretty obvious (a broken arm), sometimes it's not. We need to examine the symptoms to see if they fit. Let's do so, from the obvious to the subtle:

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<sup>15</sup> 2 Thessalonians 1:3-5

<sup>16</sup> James 1:2-8

<sup>17</sup> James 1:12-18

### The obvious – the fountain of evil

If you're in this category, the checklist is pretty simple:

- ✚ Are you living the sensual life? The life in which your bodily desires always come first? Sometimes it's sex; sometimes (surprise!) it's food. Gluttony is a sin, though not as common as our waistlines would pronounce.
- ✚ Are you living the worldly life? This is pretty common too – the new car, the new boat, the new house; do these come first in your life? Check your check book; the truth is there.
- ✚ Worst of all is pride. If you're proud that you're not hard-hearted, you have a serious problem. Most Christians know this; it's pretty obvious. But I'd hate to skip it – it's just possible you missed it.

### The not-so-obvious - Blindness

I recently lost the sight of one eye, at least temporarily. I wander around with an eye patch. Occasionally, I embarrass myself by bumping into someone on my right side. So I understand about blindness, a little.

- ✚ The first sign is the wayward wandering. It's that lack of attention to your Christian life. It's not so much on purpose as it is by accident – but accident that could have been prevented by prayer and study. Usually, it's bumping into other people, offending them when you should have been pleasing them.
- ✚ Another sign of blindness is in what you believe. Some of the blind will believe anything they are taught. I encourage my students to test my words in class (and they do). Why? So that they will not believe just anything they hear, but rather will seek out the truth.
- ✚ One form of blindness is selective vision. We can see what we want to see, but other things are invisible. We often see the love of God, but miss his righteousness. Want a test? The beggar on the street corner often provides one.

### The subtle – double vision

This is perhaps the worst form of blindness, for the Christian doesn't recognize it as such. It often happens that people afflicted with this are quite capable of looking and sounding pious. But here are a couple of indicators:

- ✚ Do you have a positive opinion of someone on Sunday and a negative one on Monday? Telling people what they want to hear? Just depends on who is listening?
- ✚ Are you the kind of "friend" who always seems to stir up trouble? A word to this one, another to that one, and soon there's a lovely fight going on. And, having started it, you cluck-cluck over the result.

Some of us are outraged on Sunday and complacent on Monday. We're all in favor of marriage and family life today – but tomorrow we are reasonable people who can't see any objection to homosexuality. The result is evil in your life. So what can you do about it?

### Lessons for Us

May I offer you an analogy? This is somewhat like a form of cancer. It may be hard to diagnose, painful to treat – and after treatment, something to be watched. Let's look at all three steps.

## Diagnosis

How do I know if I have this hardness of heart?

- ✚ What's your conscience saying? If the answer is that you haven't heard from it in years, then you really have a problem. But if the answer is, "I don't listen to it – on that subject", then you know where the problem is.
- ✚ How about prayer? Is there some area of your life that you will not take to God in prayer? This is one reason I write my prayers in a journal – it forces me to look at myself and admit just what it is that I don't want to talk to God about.
- ✚ If the internal evidence won't work, God will provide external evidence. Others will speak to you about it (God created wives, you know). Maybe there's a reason she repeats herself.

## Treatment

Now what? Suppose you decide that you have the problem; what do you do about it?

- ✚ First, explicitly ask the Holy Spirit for help. Ask Him to come into your life in complete fullness. (In short, go to the Doctor).
- ✚ Next, surrender. First you must surrender the difficulty to God, telling him that you know that only he can deal with it. Then you must surrender yourself to him, putting yourself completely in his hands. (Cooperate with the surgeon).
- ✚ Finally, be prepared: there will be another test. You will face this again. Watch the results of that test; he wants you to be encouraged by it. (There will be more lab work).

## Living the change

Many victims of cancer will tell you it is not cured, but survived. How do you survive, then?

- ✚ Remember, God will provide another test. Do not be disappointed when it arrives, nor surprised.
- ✚ Rather, you should prepare for it. You've identified the problem, taken it to him – have you rehearsed what you're going to do the next time it pops up?
- ✚ Finally, grow in that test. If you fail, resolve to try again. If you succeed, rejoice – and give God the glory.

## Unclean - Mark 7:1-30

It is a peculiar fact: Jesus dealt with any number of sins in kindness and gentleness – but the Pharisees he treated with wrath and contempt. Why is this?

- ✦ The Pharisees were committing the unforgivable sin. They saw righteousness and called it evil, so that they might consider themselves sinless.
- ✦ They took upon themselves the authority God had given to the prophets. They were dragging his name in the mud.
- ✦ Worse yet, they added their regulations to the burden of God's people.

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were "unclean," that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. 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.) 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 'unclean' hands?" He replied, **"Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."** And he said to them: **"You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban' (that is, a gift devoted to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that."** Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, **"Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.'" [If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.]** After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. **"Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body."** (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean.") He went on: **"What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'"**

(Mark 7:1-23)

## Unclean

This business of being unclean can be hard to understand. Think of it this way: it is the shadow of sin. It is the portrayal of what sin is like.

Sin is caused by...

Being unclean is caused by any number of things in the Old Testament. It is useful to classify them.

- ✦ First, there are forms of being unclean in the body. These forms would include leprosy, a woman's menstrual discharge and others. There are lessons in this. First, this shows the nature of sin as proceeding from within. (In other words, the devil did not make you do it). Also, these sins may be completely visible or invisible – so we are cautioned not to judge others, for the appearance may be fine but the disease within.
- ✦ There are other forms which relate to touching something – for example, a dead body. If you will, the unclean person was in the wrong place (as in, where somebody just died). We understand that in terms of sin also. Your mother taught you that bad company corrupts good morals; therefore you should watch the company you keep. This also applies to geography; there are some places that most Christians should not go.
- ✦ Eating certain foods was another source of uncleanness. This is a relatively easy one to see in sin; have you been reading Playboy again?

### Crime and Punishment

Lest you think this to be something which is ceremonial only, remember that God gave these regulations to the Jews for a purpose. We should have a sense of remaining clean, in God.

- ✦ We may not think so, but to be unclean is to be guilty.<sup>18</sup> It doesn't matter whether or not you are aware of it.
- ✦ The prescribed punishment for one who is unclean (and will not cleanse himself) is that he is to cut off from his people. Isn't that a picture of how Christ will cleanse the church at his second coming? Even now, we are told to excommunicate those who disobey willfully.
- ✦ Uncleanness is removed from a person on the completion of two things: washing and sacrifice. This is clearly the picture of baptism and communion.

### Passover and being unclean

In the Old Testament, Moses was confronted once with a tough theological problem.<sup>19</sup> The Jews were commanded to celebrate the Passover. But some of them came to Moses with the problem: they were unclean because they had just buried someone. Should they celebrate the Passover or not?

Moses passed the buck – to God. God's answer was that they should celebrate indeed – but on the same day the next month. This shows us, in shadow, that the Christ (the Passover Lamb for all the world) is above the commands of the Law.

### Diagnosis

How can we know if we are suffering from this disease of the Pharisees? It's not easy to tell; especially if we're talented at keeping up appearances.

### The example

The example in the Scripture here needs a bit of explaining. Corban means that which has been dedicated to God. This had become quite a racket at the time (and it's been used nicely since). Often a man would decide upon a pious act of giving to the synagogue some property or money he owned. As is common in our time, the gift could be made effective at the death of the owner. To this day churches

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<sup>18</sup> Leviticus 5:2-3

<sup>19</sup> Numbers 9:6-13

and religious institutions will solicit such charity. The custom had arisen, however, that once this decision was made it was irrevocable.

See the problem coming: suppose I'm a young man with aged parents to support. Suppose I think I have better things to do with the money. By dedicating everything to God, I can use it my lifetime, not be burdened with my parents – and still appear pious.

Most of us don't have this problem today.

#### More general symptoms

There are four things you should look for in yourself, if you wish to discover this. These four are the internal methods.

- ✦ Justification by works. Some of us have an area in our lives which we desperately want to keep from God. One way to do this is to pile up good works somewhere else so that they will balance out. God does not look at it that way – even though we do.
- ✦ Another method is outward obedience. Go to church on Sunday, give money, sing in the choir – and never let anyone know what's going on inside your head.
- ✦ A third version – worse than the previous – is the glory hog. Outward obedience hopes to go unnoticed; the glory hog wants praise for his righteousness.
- ✦ Neglecting the truth. If you will not go to God in prayer; if you will not read the Scripture and ponder its truth, this hypocrisy cannot be far away.

#### Examine the results

It's an old categorization but still useful.

- ✦ *Sins of the flesh* – the sins of the body. These are lust, adultery and fornication, as listed here. Not mentioned is gluttony.
- ✦ *Sins of the world* – things such as greed, envy, malice.
- ✦ *Arrogance*

Why does Christ give us this list? He wants us to examine our outward lives to see if these are present. If so, it's a certainty that your inward life is not right with him. We see next: what we can do about it.

#### The Cure is found in Christ

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. 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. The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter. **"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 their dogs."** "Yes, Lord," she replied, "but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he told her, **"For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter."** She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. (Mark 7:24-30)

### The woman

The woman here is a model of one who truly seeks Christ. This incident takes place in a different locale, but it appears to be a continuation of the previous thought. At the very least, it follows logically. The Pharisees got it wrong; she got it right.

- ✚ First, note that she begs. She knows she has no standing before this man; her plea is entirely that of one begging. The Christ is under no obligation to her. Likewise, Christ is under no obligation to us, no matter what good things we have done.
- ✚ Next, she pleads not only for herself but more for her daughter. It is the Christian's duty to intercede for others.
- ✚ She comes to him in faith. This is the essential for anyone who goes before the throne of God.
- ✚ Finally, she accepts the humbling that God gives her. It is in such humbling that God's great works are done.

### Self examination

Some questions to ask yourself:

- ✚ How is your thinking? Is it in accord with Christ? Or do you harbor thoughts of greed, malice, envy or lust?
- ✚ What are you watching? What's coming into your mind through your eyes, feeding your soul?
- ✚ What are you doing? Is your life a testimony to God, or is it "Sundays only?"

## Three Views of Christ - Mark 8

Who Jesus appears to be depends greatly upon the one doing the looking. He is God; he therefore cannot be fully comprehended by mortal man. But, as has been said, the whole human being is the proper instrument for seeing God. We shall see three views here.

During those days another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said, **"I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance."** His disciples answered, "But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?" **"How many loaves do you have?"** Jesus asked. "Seven," they replied. 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. They had a few small fish as well; he gave thanks for them also and told the disciples to distribute them. The people ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. About four thousand men were present. And having sent them away, he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the region of Dalmanutha. The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test him, they asked him for a sign from heaven. He sighed deeply and said, **"Why does this generation ask for a miraculous sign? I tell you the truth, no sign will be given to it."** Then he left them, got back into the boat and crossed to the other side. The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat. **"Be careful,"** Jesus warned them. **"Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod."** They discussed this with one another and said, "It is because we have no bread." 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? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?"** "Twelve," they replied. **"And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?"** They answered, "Seven." He said to them, **"Do you still not understand?"** They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. 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?"** He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around." 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. Jesus sent him home, saying, **"Don't go into the village."** Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, **"Who do people say I am?"** They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." **"But what about you?"** he asked. **"Who do you say I am?"** Peter answered, "You are the Christ." Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him. He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 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 things of God, but the things of men."** Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: **"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."**

(Mark 8:1-38)

## The view from the Pharisees

### “Show us a sign”

It is the demand of the cynic in every generation. In essence, the cynic tells God to put up or shut up. But can you not see that such an argument has effect only between equals? If a little child makes that statement to me, I am not very inclined to produce what he demands. Who, indeed, are we to give orders to God? But isn't that just what this is?

Such a demand conveys a complete misunderstanding of God. It also lights up the issue of faith. The cynic says, show me the miracles and then I'll believe. He wants a relationship where trust is not needed, and a god who is not personal – but can be manipulated. God is not a trained monkey to perform at our command.

Indeed, God's miracles are for God's purposes. He chooses when and where, at his pleasure. Sometimes you just have to be in the right place at the right time.

### “Sighed deeply”

The phrase is often translated, “groaned.” It's Christ's reaction to the Pharisees and their hardened hearts. His reaction is different to different people:

- ✚ For hypocrites like these, he uses shock tactics. He calls them hypocrites to their faces, shows them how they exasperate God.
- ✚ For the skeptical, he issues a challenge. Note that he does not cater to the skeptics every whim; but he does tell him to seek, so that he might find.
- ✚ For the tender hearted, he issues the soft and gentle invitation.

### Leaven of the Pharisees

You've heard the parable of how one bad apple can ruin the whole barrel. I've never seen a barrel of apples, so I couldn't say. But I'm told it's true.

A more contemporary example might be this: how many parts have to be broken before your car won't run? Not very many; sometimes it takes only one. And when one breaks, it often stresses the next one so that it, too, breaks.

That's what the doctrine of the hypocrite does to the church, and why Jesus is so strict about this. It's that creeping disease of “almost the right thing.” It spreads far too quickly and is difficult to wipe out.

### Leaving it uncorrected

One thing you should note: Jesus leaves these people in their sins. Why?

- ✚ First, because they are adept at halfway measures. Jesus wants all of you, and will take nothing less.
- ✚ Also, because of the hardness of their hearts. Some molds have to be broken.

## View of the halfhearted

It's tragic how many people stick one foot into the kingdom of God. God is nice on Sundays, but the rest of the week he's a nuisance. If you'll look at this second feeding, you'll note that Jesus does not rebuke his disciples for their lack of faith – but for their lack of understanding. That's typical. Faith cannot be forced upon anyone, for faith is a trust relationship – and that implies risk. All Christ can do is provide the evidence; the disciples then must decide what to do about it.

### So many baskets

Jesus makes a point of asking them how many baskets they took up – both this time and at the prior one. Why? Why did he ask that question?

- ✚ Some hold that the number of baskets has significance. Twelve is the number of the tribes of Israel; seven is the number of perfection.
- ✚ Others hold that this is simply the number of baskets they had with them. Remember Elijah and the oil that wouldn't stop flowing until they ran out of containers?
- ✚ One thing is clear – the disciples just didn't get it. Truth sometimes must be taught in its own order, and they weren't ready yet (as Peter shows).

### Get behind me, Satan

Remember that the word "Satan" can also be translated, "accuser." Peter here is doing something that many of us love to do: giving God directions. How we love to tell God how to do something! But stop and think:

- ✚ Jesus here connects this as being a work of the devil. It is just that; for the devil's sin is pride. His fall came when he decided that he would be like God.
- ✚ More commonly, it is a sign of an immature understanding of the faith. We need to go on from the simple into the mature.

### Questions to ask

Look at the questions Christ asks here – they are instructive as well as being good for self-examination.

- ✚ "Don't you understand?" – have you used your brains lately? So often we hear that the church wants us to check our brains at the door. But it is not so.
- ✚ "Are your hearts hardened?" – is it just a case that you don't want to understand? Because you already have another answer?
- ✚ "Do you have eyes to see?" - how many times have you told your children to pay attention? Listen to the echo here.
- ✚ "Don't you remember?" – how often our faith would be strengthened if we would remember all the things he has done for us.

## View of the disciple

OK, let's get past the cynic and the immature disciple. Suppose you are one who is mature in the faith; is there anything to learn in this passage? Perhaps we can learn by asking questions. Here are four:

### Why didn't he heal the blind man on the first try?

Some will tell you that Jesus power was limited, so he had to do it twice. But I think there is an easier explanation – or two.

- ✦ It is most likely that this is a reflection of the lack of faith found in his village. This is sufficient to explain all.
- ✦ It is also just possible that our Lord is telling us something here. We are so impatient with him; we ask for healing and when it isn't complete instantly, we despair. We should remember this man.

### Why did he send the blind man home?

- ✦ Perhaps it's a case of not wanting popular acclaim. He is already troubled by the crowds around him. They make it difficult for him to properly instruct his disciples.
- ✦ More likely, it is to avoid upsetting the timetable of God. He must die as the Passover lamb, not be rushed into becoming King immediately.
- ✦ There is also a personal issue. This man's faith is weak. To send him into the village to explain all might have been cruel.

In all this we see one principle: It's important to follow God's directions as accurately as possible. God has his purposes, but does not reveal them to us.

### Who do you say I am?

Compared to this, there is no other question. There are only three answers possible to anyone who studies the Scriptures: liar, lunatic or Lord. The world would like to see him as one of the prophets, a great man – but he did not offer them that choice.

### What should we do?

I submit there are four lessons for us here:

- ✦ First, we must be on our guard for those minor heresies that so destroy a church. Study the Scriptures diligently – so you can correct my mistakes.
- ✦ Next, we must deny ourselves. We must give up the right to "be me." In return, we get the privilege of "being in Him."
- ✦ That means that we must take up the Cross. God has some burden for each of us to bear; just because it's not particularly convenient doesn't mean it's not yours. Take it up, willingly.
- ✦ And above all: follow Jesus. Let your love for Him abound, follow where he leads, fearing no evil.

## The Transfiguration - Mark 9:1-13

The concept of “glory” is little understood today. We refer to the American flag as “Old Glory,” but do we really know what that means? It was not always so vague. Webster’s Dictionary – the 1913 edition – defines it in these ways:

- ✦ praise, honor or distinction.
- ✦ the attributes which bring about praise, or
- ✦ the presence of God. (Usually in the sense of meeting him at death).

The reason we have lost the sense of this word is because we are now a nation of cynics. We know the price of everything and the value of nothing. Everything is reduced to dollars; nothing is worthy of praise, honor or distinction in and of itself.

This is a peril to Christians. It means that we have lost the sense of the glory of God – those things about God which are intrinsically praiseworthy. We are willing to praise him for what he has done for us, but not for what he is. I don’t think God is any the less for this; but we are.

In this we find the explanation of the Scripture passage for this lesson: we are about to encounter the glory of God.

And he said to them, **"I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power."** After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.) Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what "rising from the dead" meant. And they asked him, "Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?" Jesus replied, **"To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things. Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected? But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him."**  
(Mark 9:1-13)

### Why?

To the modern mind this passage seems very strange. It certainly frightened the three disciples mentioned here. I suspect our reaction is more along the lines of “why?”

### Why only the three disciples?

There is a purpose to that. Jesus does not want his divine glory revealed before the Crucifixion. There should be no possibility that the people would make him king by force or by acclamation. So the matter must be kept quiet until the resurrection.

You might think that all twelve disciples would obey his commands in this. Jesus is taking no chances on that. He has arranged the minimum number of witnesses under Jewish Law. The number is both necessary and sufficient.

#### Why the wait?

You'll note that it's about a week after Peter makes the Great Confession. (One account has 6 days, another 8 – depends on how you count the days.) There are two reasons for that:

- ✚ Christ does not want to create dissension and jealousy within the ranks of the disciples. By delaying, he disconnects the confession and the transfiguration in their minds. As we shall soon see, there is already contention in the ranks.
- ✚ It is also a lesson to us. When we make a commitment to God, we often expect God to blow away the obstacles - instantly. But we need to learn to wait for his timing.

#### Why does he foretell the Crucifixion here?

Go back to the dictionary definition – number two. Glory is that which gains praise. It is by the atonement that Christ is exalted.<sup>20</sup> He is connecting his atonement with his glory. His actions – his death on the Cross – bring him glory. We should recognize this and praise this.

#### Why Moses and Elijah?

There are a number of reasons why these two were selected:

- ✚ At a simple level, this is the solid answer to “some say.” Some people said Jesus was Elijah or one of the prophets. Here we see the difference in honor given.
- ✚ They are also here to refute the charge that Jesus violates the Law. Indeed, the chief lawgiver is Moses; his presence certifies this fact.
- ✚ More than that, this shows Christ's power over the living and the dead. You will recall that Moses died before entering the promised land; now at last he sets foot on that land. Christ has granted his great desire. Elijah is the man who never died, and Christ summons him.
- ✚ Taken together, these men represent “the Law and the Prophets” – the entirety of the Old Testament way. Christ is preparing the disciples for the idea that the old order is going to pass away.
- ✚ Finally, that these disciples might see the glory in the Cross to come.

#### Why did they leave?

Their disappearance is no mystery. It is so that the disciples will see the superiority of Christ before God. It is a symbol of the end of the Law and the beginning of the new covenant.

#### Why the Transfiguration at all?

This seems the most difficult of questions – until you look at it in the light of the Cross. The Cross is a painful, humiliating death. It was considered by all of the time to be a disgraceful end. Indeed, it was devised for just that purpose. By this moment of glory Jesus balances the shame of the Cross with the glory of God in the hearts of the disciples. It is by the Cross that Christ earns the same glory on earth that he had in heaven.

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<sup>20</sup> Philippians 2:8-9

## Man's reaction

### Fear

Whenever man sees the glory of heavenly things, the usual reaction is fear. Note how Christ relieves that fear by his calm presence. He is Lord of All.

Peter's reply – about building three shelters – is a completely human reaction to the glory of God. He knows that it's important to do *something* – but he doesn't know just what to do. Some authors place this event around the time of the Feast of Tabernacles; if so, it would seem to be an appropriate "religious" thing to do. Note that Christ does not reject this; God the Father does. Why? Jesus is fully human; the feast of Tabernacles is intended for humans. But here, transfigured, it is not appropriate. Lest the humble servant, the Messiah, reject this aspect of the Law (and be misunderstood) God the Father pronounces upon it.

### Three Tabernacles (shelters)

There is no question about it: we would rather spend our time on the mountain top with Jesus than in the valley with sinners. Why?

- ✚ On the mountain top we perceive no threat. There are no challenges to our faith, and we feel at ease.
- ✚ On the mountain top there is no labor or weariness.
- ✚ On the mountain top there is nothing to depress us – no "downers" so to speak.

So we want to stay on the mountain top. But if we are to be partakers of the glory of Christ we must do as he did – return to the plains below. If we suffer with him, we shall reign with him. That must be done in the plains below.

### Tell no man...

We are an impatient lot. Christ instructs these disciples that they are to tell no one until after the resurrection. The injunction is necessary for God's timetable, but also it is a lesson to us. We need to learn to wait upon the Lord. (We're not very good at this; how many times has someone figured out the date of the second coming?)

### God says...

We go from man's reaction to God's action. God says little here, but each phrase is worth the trouble of digging into.

### My beloved son

In this simple phrase we have the statement of the relationship of Jesus of Nazareth to God Almighty.

- ✚ They are the same in essence – which is existence. Both have existed forever, from before time (for time is God's creation too).
- ✚ They have (and indeed are) the same attributes – righteousness, truth, wisdom and even love.
- ✚ The fact that God is love carries with it the clear idea that Jesus must be his beloved son; no other relationship than love is possible. More than that (I hope you can see this) the fact that God is love means that God *must* be plural in persons – for there is no love if there is only one person.

### Well pleased

This carries two thoughts for us:

- ✚ It implies that the actions of Jesus of Nazareth are approved by God; he finds them pleasing. “Pleasing” is from the same root as “pleasant” – look this up in the Old Testament. You’ll be surprised how often it refers to the pleasant aroma of sacrifice on the altar. It is by doing God’s will – in the atonement – that Jesus is pleasing to God.
- ✚ It also means that his actions are example for us. We are Christians; little imitators of Christ.

### Hear Him

How can I hear my Master’s voice?

- ✚ I can hear him through the Scriptures – daily reading in the Bible.
- ✚ I can hear him in prayer. Luke, in the parallel passage, tells us that they went up on this mountain to pray.

### If I be lifted up

We began this lesson with glory. If we will “lift him up” – that is, give Christ the glory he deserves in our lives – he will draw all men to him. More than that; if we give glory to him in our lives by imitating him in his suffering and sacrifice, we shall share that glory by reigning with him when he comes again.

## Faith, Humility and Care - Mark 9:14-50

We shall take today's Scripture in its pieces, for the sake of the lesson. But do remember these things all happened on the same day, in very short order. They are connected; they tell us of life in the kingdom.

### Faith

When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him. **"What are you arguing with them about?"** he asked. A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not." **"O unbelieving generation,"** Jesus replied, **"how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me."** So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the boy's father, **"How long has he been like this?"** "From childhood," he answered. "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." **"If you can?"** said Jesus. **"Everything is possible for him who believes."** Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. **"You deaf and mute spirit,"** he said, **"I command you, come out of him and never enter him again."** The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up. After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" He replied, **"This kind can come out only by prayer."**  
(Mark 9:14-29)

### Arguing with the Pharisees

Recall that we are talking here of the "other disciples" – the ones who did not see the Transfiguration. As is often the case, we can see the difficulty the disciples are having not by what they are doing but by what they are not doing. They are arguing with people. They are concentrating on winning the argument, and so sacrifice healing for debating points.

The argument, clearly, concerns the demon possessed boy. Recall that the Pharisees most certainly believe in demon possession; they believe in exorcism – they just don't believe in Jesus. They are, however, experienced debaters. They have managed to get the argument on their own terms here; debate, rather than action.

The simple fact of the matter is this: Without prayer equals without power. Rather than debate these people, they should have gone to their heavenly Father for aid.

### Christ's approach

As Jesus approaches this knotty little argument, we see his approach to the problem. It is very different from the Pharisees and the disciples.

- ✦ First, by asking what they are arguing about, he simply points out the absurdity. They are arguing over this exorcism. Either the disciples can do it, or they must appeal to Christ. What's to argue about?
- ✦ Having displayed the disciples' problem, he next goes on to tell them the solution – and to give vent to his disappointment with them. The matter is one of faith, he tells them.
- ✦ But such a statement is not sufficient for the boy's father. "If you can help" arises, a statement which challenges both Christ's power and his love. Christ's response is simply to ask for the smallest of obedience: bring the boy here.

### If

The statement is a classic; it reflects the view of so many of us. I believe (I really do, Lord) – but I need some help with it. There is just enough faith here to allow that it is possible.

- ✦ Note, please, that this is not the cynic demanding a sign, for no such sign is given the cynic. The father genuinely believes.
- ✦ His mistake is to doubt "whether or not." He is asking the wrong question. The right question is "Who is this Jesus?" If he is not from God, all the belief in the world will not help. If he is, then praise God.
- ✦ Remember the three Hebrew children in the fiery furnace? Their faith extended beyond circumstance; whether God chose to save or not, He is still God.

The matter is rather simple for most of us. We believe – and we'd be a lot happier about it if God gave us the power to work miracles. But remember: power in us, that's magic. Power in Him, that's faith.

### Humility

They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, **"The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise."** But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it. They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, **"What were you arguing about on the road?"** But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, **"If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."** He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, **"Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."**  
(Mark 9:30-37)

### The example of humility

As the Transfiguration showed his glory, his death on the cross showed his humility. Jesus died the death of a despised criminal. He has now chosen to take his disciples away from the crowds to teach them. Teach them what? Humility. You cannot help but contrast his humility in going to death on a cross – which is what he is talking about – with their pride in being first.

How often our pride is an embarrassment to us! Is it not like God to puncture our pride when it surfaces?

### Teaching with formality

There is a certain style to the lesson. He does not ask them what they are arguing about while they are arguing about it, on the road, with the crowds near by. He waits until they are behind closed doors. If you need to have your pride punctured, it is best done gently.

He then sits down. This is the picture of a rabbi holding a formal time of instruction. We still speak of people who “take the chair” of a meeting, meaning to take charge of. If you need to have your pride punctured, it is best done with dignity.

The lesson is short (pun intended) and to the point. He takes a convenient example at hand, a small child. In those days children were held to be the lowest members of society (a position now reserved for Junior High students). The example is clear to them. If you need your pride punctured, it is best done with a practical example.

### The lesson itself

The lesson is remarkably economical in words. Christ lays out three principles of conduct in the kingdom of God:

- ✚ First, it is a kingdom of servants. If you follow the website on which these lessons are posted, you will notice a page marked “Web Servant.” Most sites have a page for the Webmaster; but this is not appropriate for the kingdom of God – in which there is but one true master.
- ✚ Next, that kingdom extends to “all who will.” One’s status in society, high or low, makes no difference.
- ✚ Indeed, it makes so little difference that we can safely say that many who now appear to be in high position will be found to be in low position. Indeed, finding the best “team player” is often difficult. Finding the worst usually is not.

### Who the work is for

If the work is lowly (and it often is) we should consider who we’re working for – the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. It just appears to be for the church nursery.

- ✚ If the task seems a low one, we should do it nonetheless – for the task is for the highest.
- ✚ The task therefore deserves to be done as well as possible. Give of your best to the Master, as the old hymn says.
- ✚ The task also therefore deserves to be done cheerfully, as God loves a cheerful giver.

### Inclusive care

"Teacher," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us." **"Do not stop him,"** Jesus said. **"No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward. "And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out, [where "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched. ] And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell, [where "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched. ] And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out.**

**It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched." Everyone will be salted with fire. "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other."**

**(Mark 9:38-50)**

#### For and against

Christ here lays out another principle of life in the kingdom of God. It's binary, as the computer types would say. You're in, or you're out. How is this?

- ✚ Christ, by his very nature, by the claims he makes about who He is, forces this choice. You cannot mildly approve of Jesus Christ.
- ✚ Because of this nature – in or out – we are not to judge others. If they are not Christ's servant, then our mission is to evangelize them. We need know nothing more than the fact that they are sinners like us. If they are Christ's servants, who are we to judge them?
- ✚ More commonly, however, do we put barriers in the way of Christ's servants. You cannot serve Jesus unless you are a member of the right church; worshiping in the right way. All this is pain to the Lord who prayed that we might be one.

#### Caring for the least

Now that we understand "in and out," we can see why we are commanded to care for even the least in the kingdom of heaven. We don't really know who will truly be the least (or most) when Christ returns, but we do know his command is to care for all of our fellow Christians.

Look at it this way: suppose you do a favor for one of my children. For example, one friend got my son a summer job during his college years. My son should be grateful; I certainly am. Now if I (a sinner) can understand such gratitude for good things, how much more does this apply to Christ, and to God the Father?

#### No half way

Of all the principles of the kingdom of God, this is likely the least popular. Christ puts up with no half way measures. He gives you three examples here:

- ✚ "foot" – it is better for you to stay away from some places than to wind up in hell. For most of us there are such places. Some have signs on the door saying "adults only." Others have signs in our hearts.
- ✚ "hand" – it is better for you to avoid doing some things than to wind up in hell. Some of us are not to be trusted with a drink in our hands. Some of us are not to be trusted with money in them either.
- ✚ "eye" – it is better for you not to gaze upon some things than to wind up in hell. Pornography is not a victimless crime.

#### The principle of "salt"

Jesus sums it up: have salt in yourselves and be at peace with each other. Salt?

- ✚ In the Old Testament it was a symbol of purification (we still gargle with salt water). We need to keep ourselves pure – not half way pure.

- ✚ In the Old Testament grain offerings which were “first fruits” were salted. We need to present our first and best to our Lord.
- ✚ In the New Testament, we are told<sup>21</sup> that our speech is to be seasoned with salt – meaning that it should be full of grace.

In these things we can find peace in the kingdom of God. By keeping ourselves pure; by doing our best for our Lord; and by keeping our speech gracious and kind we keep peace in the kingdom.

### Summary

These look like isolated instances, but I think not. The basic call to follow Jesus is rooted firmly in faith. If you will walk with him, you will walk in humility. You will share that walk with many others of many different views; maintain peace with them in your purity, best work and gracious speech.

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<sup>21</sup> Colossians 4:6

## On Divorce - Mark 10:1-12

This passage used to be one of the most unpopular ones in the New Testament. Now it is simply one of the most commonly ignored.

Jesus then left that place and went into the region of Judea and across the Jordan. Again crowds of people came to him, and as was his custom, he taught them. Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" **"What did Moses command you?"** he replied. They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away." **"It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,"** Jesus replied. **"But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."** When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. He answered, **"Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery."**  
(Mark 10:1-12)

### Then and Now

One of the "reasons" for ignoring this passage given is that "things are different today." So let's look at then and now – and see how different they really are.

#### Then

The question being debated was rather a hot one at the time. It seems there were two rabbinical schools of thought.

- ✚ The school of Shammai said that the only acceptable reason for divorce was adultery. (Kindly remember that women had no say in this; so therefore this meant *her* adultery).
- ✚ The school of Hillel was much more liberal in this matter. If a wife displeased her husband, she could be divorced.

What does "displeased" mean? Here are some examples of what a wife might do to displease her husband:

- ✚ Spoil his dinner
- ✚ Go about with her hair down
- ✚ Speak to other men in the street
- ✚ Be heard quarreling one house away (a "brawling woman")
- ✚ Speak disrespectfully of his parents
- ✚ And other grievous offenses.

It gets worse. Some time later the school of Akiva came along. They held that displeasing your husband included the situation where he found a woman who was prettier.

What protection had the woman in all this? Only this: if she was divorced, she must be given her dowry back. I suppose this made it more pleasant when providing a large dowry.

### Situation today

It is fashionable for the Christian today to decry the morality of the world around him. What a terrible time we live in! But did you know that the rate of divorce among born again Christians (evangelicals and fundamentalists, the people of the Bible) is actually *higher* than in the general population? There are many excuses which might be brought forward – and have been. My observation is this: we are very quick to find excuses. Here are a few:

- ✚ “Well, the church attracts people in trouble. A lot of them come to church because of the problems in their marriage.”
- ✚ “It must be some other denomination.”
- ✚ “That’s mostly in California” (often said in Tennessee).
- ✚ “It’s only because Christians get married – the other folks never even bothered with marriage.”

But are these things really the cause? Have we looked at ourselves lately?

- ✚ Is there any real stigma to being divorced? If you’re a clergyman, there might be. But for the average couple in the pews, no one would be so impolite as to suggest that divorce could be sinful.
- ✚ More to the point perhaps is this: when was the last time you saw or heard of church discipline being enforced in the matter of divorce? In fact, when was the last time you saw church discipline applied to anyone in the pews?
- ✚ Listen to our sermons. We tell our women that submission doesn’t mean submission, it merely means respect. We tell our men to love their wives – but it doesn’t seem to be a really important point, now does it? In fact, the church in general has absorbed the marital values of the world for all members except the clergy – and that exception is weakening.

If you’d like the measure of how bad this is, consider this. The seven promises of a Promise Keeper – the greatest men’s movement of our time – include:

3. A Promise Keeper is committed to practicing spiritual, moral, ethical, and sexual purity.
4. A Promise Keeper is committed to building strong marriages and families through love, protection and biblical values.

We live in a time where this needs to be made explicit. I cannot imagine a movement like this in my grandfather’s time. It is good that we have it; but having it shows we need it so much.

### Christ’s view

Christ, in essence, says Shammai got it right. For a Christian, divorce should be unthinkable except in cases of adultery. Having said that, there are two other things we should note.

- ✦ We are told to hate the sin and love the sinner. This is not easy (except when the sinner is you). It is required. The distinction needs to be made.
- ✦ We need also to make it clear that to be a Christian is to admit to being a sinner.
- ✦ We also need to strive to heal marriages, not break them up. Even in the case of adultery, God told the husband to buy back the wife. You can find the story in the Old Testament – look up Hosea.

### God's view of divorce

Christ now lays out for the disciples the view that God the Father takes of marriage and divorce. He begins by going back to first principles.

#### First Principles – the view from Genesis

However else you wish to take the story of Adam and Eve, it is clear that it is meant to be taken as symbolic of the human race. We are supposed to learn something from it!

- ✦ First, we are made “in his image.” As such, we are to imitate his character (as children imitate their fathers). He is love; he is faithfulness. We, therefore, are to love and be faithful. This story alone would sanctify marriage.
- ✦ Next, he made us “male and female.” Yes, I know that the politically correct have proclaimed that there are seven genders, not two. Let me be economical about it: they’re wrong. The distinction of male and female is to be preserved.
- ✦ Finally, we are “one flesh.” That is the measure of care we are to have for each other. My body is not my own; it belongs to my wife, I am just the steward of it. It cannot be used for things opposed to her and our marriage.

#### Prophetic View

As time went on God revealed more of his will on the subject of marriage to the prophets.

- ✦ He explicitly equates idolatry with adultery. In so doing, we see the beginnings of the picture of the church and her relationship to Jesus Christ. It is as if God had taken the living canvas of our bodies and painted on them a picture of his love for the church.
- ✦ God is shown to be love. Adultery shatters that relationship. God makes it clear, high and low, that adultery is not to be done. There is no favoritism in this; remember David and Bathsheba?
- ✦ Interestingly, he proclaims this: once divorced, there is no going back.<sup>22</sup> Once the shattered marriage is acknowledged, it’s over.

#### New Testament View

The view of the Old Testament is carried forward and enhanced.

- ✦ Christ explicitly makes it clear that “one flesh” is meant to apply to married couples.
- ✦ In so doing, he makes divorce unthinkable except for adultery.
- ✦ Paul – in line with the equivalence of idolatry and adultery – allows the additional exception of the non-Christian spouse abandoning the marriage.

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<sup>22</sup> Deuteronomy 24:1-4

## Why are we in this mess? How do we get out?

### We're in this mess because

We have a complete lack of faith. You don't think so?

- ✦ We go about securing divorce in calm confidence – because we believe that either God is powerless, or he doesn't care. When we go through divorce, the last thing either party stumbles upon is the idea that God would not approve and do something about it.
- ✦ We think we are the exception to the rules. We know much more about how difficult our situation is; God obviously would approve.
- ✦ We fail to perceive his love – and our duty to imitate it. How often we hear from one partner or the other the burning desire to vindicate themselves! “Tell him/her that I'm right” is usually the first thing heard in a marital counseling session. God did not vindicate his righteousness by destroying the sinners of this world. He displayed his love on the Cross instead.

In short, we do not fear God, we do not obey God, we do not imitate God.

### We're in this mess because

We are moral hypocrites. You don't think so?

- ✦ Consider your workplace. If a stranger walked in and observed your workplace all day (minus the cute Christian posters) could he tell who were the Christians by their actions? Could he tell that you are a Christian?
- ✦ “I don't want to get involved.” Suppose a Christian couple, friends of yours, began to have serious marital difficulties. What would you do? What have you done?
- ✦ After the divorce, do we accept the situation as normal? Isn't it the case that the divorced move on to another local church, or another Bible Fellowship in the church, and continue as if nothing had happened?

### What should we do?

- ✦ Is your marriage a sound one? Then praise God for it, and thank him for it. Continue to work at making it sound; recommit yourself to your partner for life.
- ✦ Is your marriage in trouble? Then begin by humbling yourself before your God. Ask for his powerful aid; when you do, recommit yourself to your partner for life. Go to the church and ask for help. Don't vindicate yourself; the knowledge of who pulled the trigger will not stop the bleeding.
- ✦ Has your marriage already ended in divorce? Then humble yourself before God and – I know this is not going to be popular – *tell him that you have sinned*. Admit that he is right; adultery is the only real cause of divorce. Then commit yourself to him, either to staying out of marriage or, as appropriate, making your next marriage your life long one.

If you happen to be one of those souls who knows of a marriage in trouble, then take the first step of church discipline. Talk to them. Support them in love; rebuke them in private. Like Christ, stand at the door and knock. Be a source of strength to both of them, encouraging them to seek the aid of both God and man.

## Entrance Exam - Mark 10:13-52

As I write this, my daughter is a senior in High School. As she wishes to get into college, she has taken a variety of entrance examinations which are supposed to enable the colleges to sort the good from the bad.

The kingdom of God, it appears, has its own form of entrance exam. Like all other things of God, it is not the same as the world's way. In the world's view, you must have the right answers to the questions. In the kingdom, you must have the right questions.

Ready for the exam? We begin with a warm-up answer.

### Little Children

People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, **"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."** And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.  
(Mark 10:13-16)

To understand the passage better, listen to a story from the great Supreme Court Justice, Oliver Wendell Holmes. Holmes had fought at the battle of Gettysburg. One day a man approached him and asked to shake his hand. He told Holmes, "You have no idea how it feels to shake the hand of man who fought at Gettysburg." As this was in the 1930s you might understand the feeling. But Holmes corrected him: "Yes I do. When I was your age I had the privilege of shaking the hand of a man who had been with Washington at Valley Forge."

Something of a similar nature was happening here. It was the custom of the time for a great rabbi to put his hands on small children and bless them. The disciples, however, saw this as an intrusion. It's interesting that they cared more for Christ's dignity than he himself did. So he corrects them, and gives us our first entrance test: like a little child. What does that mean?

*"Simple, with understanding."*

The phrase comes from Chrysostom. It means that we have no "hidden agenda" with God. We are not coming to him in prayer, for example, so that we can feel good enough that we don't need to repent.

Christ told us to be wise as serpents, harmless as doves. The point is the same one here. If you've ever had a two year old, you realize that nothing is hidden. They simply don't have the ability. They do, of course, have the "Gimme pig" syndrome. But it is a naïve, honest grasping – not one where the purpose is hidden. Let your yes be yes and your no be no.

### *A wise child knows its own mother*

Think of it this way: if you took a baby (that's what the disciples were objecting to) and offered the child a choice between its mother in rags and a queen in royal clothing and crown, the child will unhesitatingly choose its mother. A wise child knows its own mother, and our mother is the church.

Those of the Middle Ages often used the phrase, "Our mother, the church." We need to prefer our family – however poor it appears – to the world.

More than that, the child comes to its mother not on the basis of accomplishment but on the basis of love. It is not our greatness that causes the family of God to take us in – rather it is the greatness of God's love for the church, and the church loving us in turn. The kingdom is not earned; it is received.

#### Nature and intent

Little children behave this way naturally – which means that as adults we don't. Our natural behavior is quite opposite. Therefore we must train ourselves to imitate the children – coming to God with no guile, preferring the church to the world. It's a skill; we must practice it.

#### No One is Good

Christ now meets the man who wants to join up. He's a good man – which means it's very difficult for him to pass the entrance exam. He knows the answers. The questions, on the other hand, are much more difficult for him.

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" **"Why do you call me good?"** Jesus answered. **"No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.'"** "Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy." Jesus looked at him and loved him. **"One thing you lack,"** he said. **"Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."** At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, **"How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"** The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, **"Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."** The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, **"With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."** Peter said to him, "We have left everything to follow you!" **"I tell you the truth,"** Jesus replied, **"no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first."**

(Mark 10:17-31 NIV)

For us to understand this passage correctly, we must remember a few things.

- ✚ To the Jew of this time, wealth was a sign of God's favor. If you live in an agricultural society – and crops depend on weather – this is a natural belief. The disciples concluded that this man was indeed favored by God.
- ✚ We must also know that wealth is a tyrant. Some people own their money; others are owned by it.

### Who is this Jesus?

The man has approached this Jesus as he would a wise rabbi. He has not been disrespectful; indeed, he has shown all the propriety required – or so he thinks. The only difficulty is that he hasn't asked the right question: who is this Jesus?

- ✦ Jesus does not challenge his claim to having kept the commandments. The man is, by our standards, a righteous man. This makes it more difficult to get into the kingdom. Those who have little goodness have little trouble in throwing it away and taking on the righteousness of Christ.
- ✦ How can this be? Simply this: the good is the enemy of the best. Were his righteous acts good? Yes. Are they sufficient? No. Did he ask these questions? No.
- ✦ This is Jesus, the Christ – God in the flesh. If you are going to follow him, you must (as he told you) count the cost.

### Wrong Questions

The man has a gift for asking the wrong questions.

- ✦ He asks "what must I do" instead of "what must I receive?"
- ✦ He asks "what do I lack" instead of "what must I give up?"

Interestingly, he asks about eternal life. But did you notice that Jesus did not answer that question? He tells him instead how to lay up treasure in heaven. This man is given the priceless opportunity of sacrificing all. The kingdom of God, you see, costs you all you have and are – and gives you all you need and can be.

### For the disciples

The disciples, naturally, are stunned by all this. The kid is, after all, one of the good guys. But Christ opens their eyes: It's extremely difficult to get into the kingdom of God. It's so difficult that even a good man, richly blessed by God, can't do it – on his own. So God must provide a way for him.

### Influence with the King

I don't think it's an accident that James and John now ask what they do. If you can't get in by doing good, by merit clearly recognized by God, it means that the door is not open – unless, of course, you have inside influence.

They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. **"We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."** Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask." **"What do you want me to do for you?"** he asked. They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." **"You don't know what you are asking,"** Jesus said. **"Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"** "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, **"You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."** When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Jesus called them together and said, **"You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead,**

**whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."**  
(Mark 10:32-45 NIV)

This would be funny if it weren't tragic. Look at the first three verses: Jesus is clearly telling them of his Crucifixion. If your Lord and Master receives this treatment, what should you expect?

The kingdom of God is a kingdom of servants. Christ came to serve. If you are not willing to do that, then the kingdom door will remain shut for you. Here are two more exam questions:

- ✦ Can you drink the cup?
- ✦ Can you be baptized with the baptism?

In short, can you handle the suffering and the persecution? It is no accident that the world decries "those weirdo right wing fundamentalists." This is normal. Adjust.

**Me too!**

What makes this passage really light up human behavior is the behavior of the other ten disciples. Jesus has just explained to them the nature of the kingdom – received as a child, in which you give up everything (surrender yourself) and serve as he served, being persecuted as he was – and the disciples are mad because they didn't in line fast enough!

Here is the glory of the kingdom. It is who you know – Jesus Christ. It is what you do – service and sacrifice. It is the opposite of the world's way. Christ's invitation is "take up your cross and follow me." How foolish, then, we are when we check on how elegant our position is going to be.

### **Begging**

It may appear to be an afterthought on the days lessons, but I think not. If we are to enter the kingdom of God, we must say we are blind and beg to see.

Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (that is, the Son of Timaeus), was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stopped and said, "**Call him.**" So they called to the blind man, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you." Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. "**What do you want me to do for you?**" Jesus asked him. The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see." "**Go,**" said Jesus, "**your faith has healed you.**" Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.  
(Mark 10:46-52 NIV)

It's almost a picture of how we enter the kingdom of God. We are sitting by the road, begging. Begging? Yes, for all the truly important things in life. Jesus walks by – and the world tells you to stop shouting, ignore all that racket and get back to your begging.

You don't understand all things. In fact, the only thing you have a real grasp on is that you are blind – and that somewhere out there in the blackness is someone who can lift that blindness. When

that Someone answers you – read the passage again – you throw aside the things of comfort (the cloak) and come to him.

There it is, the entrance exam for the kingdom of heaven.

- ✚ Like a little child, in faith, throw aside your hidden agenda and come. Prefer him to all else, and he will bless you.
- ✚ Be prepared not only to throw away the evils of your life – but also the good things too. There is no halfway on the road to the kingdom.
- ✚ Count the cost. The kingdom is not about pomp and pride, but sacrifice, service and suffering.
- ✚ Are you blind? Then beg – and he will restore you.

It is a curious thing. Blind Bartimaeus calls for his sight, and gets it. He gets it just in time to see the Triumphal Entry – and then the Cross, the tomb, the Resurrection. Let Christ open your eyes; you will see great things.

## The Triumphal Entry - Mark 11:1-11

(Note: it is important to read the other accounts of the Triumphal Entry, as they include certain details that Mark left out.)

We now come to the last week of Christ's earthly ministry. As with the other Gospels, we still have a substantial amount of text left. On balance, the Gospels devote about half the text to the final week. It begins with the Triumphal Entry:

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, saying to them, **"Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.'"** They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, some people standing there asked, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" "Hosanna in the highest!" Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

(Mark 11:1-11 NIV)

### Play Ball

Suppose, for the moment, that you were from another planet. You have a grasp of the language, but no learning on our customs, traditions and pleasures. You see a crowd going into a stadium, and you follow along to see your very first baseball game. What would you see; how would you react?

### The National Anthem

From the loudspeakers come two bars of music. Everyone stands and turns to look in a particular direction. It appears they are looking at a piece of colored cloth on a pole. Most place their hand over their heart. At the end of the two bars, everyone begins singing a tune which seems well beyond the capacity of the average human being. What is going on here?

- ✚ *Ritual* – the singing of the National Anthem is a ritual. It is an affirmation of patriotism. It recollects a war long since over, but mostly it is a way of uniting the crowd. Standing, hands over heart – all these are ritual movements meant to portray a meaning. Ritual unites, but it also proclaims certain things to be true.
- ✚ *Symbolism* – that colored cloth (the flag, obviously) clearly cannot be the object of their devotion. It must, therefore, represent something else which is not easily portrayed. The meaning of the symbol depends largely upon the experiences of those who see it. To our interplanetary visitor, it means nothing. To a veteran, it may be of deep significance. Interestingly, all agree on what it means, yet all have a different experience of it.

### Hand signals

You now note that various individuals, clad in three differing uniforms, take the field. Those guys in black seem to be obsessed with making gestures with their hands. Sometimes the crowd applauds; other times they boo. There seems to be no connection between the gesture and the reaction. What's going on here?

- ✚ *Open signals* – the signals of the umpires are open to all. Balls and strikes, safe and out, these are ways of conveying the decision to the crowd.
- ✚ *Secret signals* – the coaches along the side of the infield have signals too. But these are supposed to be kept secret, as they are meant for one team only. To understand these, you would have to be a member of one of the teams.

### Pattern of the game

Most curious of all seems to be the pattern of the game. It evidently has no clock. They change sides suddenly, but all players seem to know when to do this.

- ✚ *Prescribed* – it's clear that the rules for this game are prescribed somewhere. There must be a rule book. Somehow or other everyone knew to stand up half way through the seventh inning.
- ✚ *Not predestined* – it's equally clear that this is no stage performance. The players attempt to perform as best they can, but obviously no one has predestined the results.

A curious game, baseball.

### Triumphal Entry

The Triumphal Entry is a fixture in most churches. Palm Sunday comes around, and little children are given long palm branches (and a stern injunction not to hit other small children with them). This gives the kids something to do during the services and provokes any number of cute pictures. Most churches skip the part with the donkey (donkeys are not amenable to indoor cleanliness). But do we get the meaning of the entry?

### Rituals and symbols

Just like the singing of the National Anthem and the flag on the pole, this passage uses ritual and symbols to show meaning:

- ✚ See that colt? You'll note that it is the symbol of a King coming in peace. (Kings coming in war ride a horse). Jesus is offering himself to the Jews as their king, in the lineage of David.
- ✚ It's not entirely obvious at first reading, but if you will map out the route Jesus takes to get here, it's clear that he went from the southwestern corner of Jerusalem, out one gate to Bethphage – a village near the Mount of Olives – to come through a particular gate. That gate is the Eastern gate (now called the Golden Gate). We know from Ezekiel that this gate is the one through which "the Prince" will ride. Jesus is presenting himself as Prince of Peace.

That last may take a bit more explaining. Ezekiel (44<sup>th</sup> chapter) describes a Temple not yet built. Premillennialists insist that this is the Temple that will exist during the Millennium. Whether or not this is a fulfillment (at least in part) of this prophecy cannot be stated for certain. But that gate had the significance mentioned. We still say that we "orient" ourselves. The original meaning of that word was to face east – towards the Orient.

Curiously, and in accord with Ezekiel, this gate is now shut permanently. It is blocked with masonry. This prophecy is so important that in 1917, when General Allenby (British Army) conquered Jerusalem, he came in using a gate on the western side. It did no good. Postmillennialists (who know that 1917 is a crucial year in their timetable) immediately seized upon the event as being prophetic fulfillment. Mayhap it is. The British occupation of Palestine ended with the establishment of modern Israel.

Make of it what you may: Jesus wanted to enter through that gate. He proclaimed himself “the Prince.”

### Signals

Just like in our baseball game, there are signals being used here:

- ✚ One is the “Conqueror’s Psalm.” It’s from Psalm 118. It was sung as Judas Maccabeus entered the city in triumph. This, then, is entry in triumph.
- ✚ The disciples and the crowd shout “Hosanna.” The word means “save now.” So this signals that Jesus is coming as Savior.
- ✚ Palm branches? Cloaks on the ground? This is the traditional welcome given to a King.

### Pattern and prophecy

All happens according to God’s plan; but all happens as people do it of their own free will. Just as our baseball game has nine innings, three strikes and you’re out, so this portrayal has its pattern as well. It comes from prophecy. Recall that colt. Do you see that it has never been put to agricultural use? If you will go back into Numbers, chapter 19, you will see the significance of that. Such an animal was required as a sacrifice for purification of the Tabernacle – a forerunner of the Temple. Jesus is presenting himself – at the time of Passover – as the Sacrifice which makes atonement for sin.

### Application

Well, all this is interesting stuff (I hope) – but what good is it? Its use is simply this: in the Triumphal Entry our Lord presents himself to the Jews (and thus to us) in several roles. We need to ask ourselves how we see him – and do we respond to him in those roles.

### Savior

“Hosanna.” Most of us connect the word savior with Jesus. But do we really feel ourselves in need of a savior? Some – whose lives have been wrecked – know this feeling intimately. But for many of us the attitude is one of good works. We feel that our good deeds outweigh the evil we have done, and God will be generous in rewarding that. The sense that we are all sinners is something which is downplayed in much of the church today. We forget: the only acceptable sacrifice for God is the pure one. Only Jesus can make atonement for us.

We’re in the position of a counterfeiter caught in the act – who asks a few minutes to print up some more bills to pay his fine. The Judge is not amused.

### King

It's difficult for modern Americans to accept anyone, even Jesus, as King. We have trouble with the word "Lord." We are so used to the idea that no one has that right (1776 and all that). But human beings need righteous authority in their lives.

So here's the test: do you feel any call to obedience to Christ? Or are his commands useful in justifying what you had planned to do anyway – and ignored when convenient?

### Prophet

Suppose, for a moment, I could tell you the price of any stock on the market – a year from today. Do you suppose my advice would be sought? My purchases carefully watched? Count on it.

That Jesus is a prophet is acknowledged. But do we consider him in that role? A prophet is one who "foretells and forthtells." Do we listen to his warnings? Over and over he gives us instruction in righteousness.

More than that: he has prophesied his return. On that day all will be revealed. Are we ready for it?

### Creator

(Parallel accounts indicate Jesus' words that the stones would cry out if his disciples were silent.)

There are two ways in which we ignore this about Jesus. One, in aggregate, is the way in which we are mistreating his planet. But more important for the individual Christian is this: we are often guilty of treating Jesus as "buddy." We forget that we are the pot in his potter's hands. The matter is one of respect merging into awe. Do we see him as the Almighty Creator?

### Sacrifice

Of all things we miss, this is surely the most grievous. Every week we take Communion, just to remember that sacrifice. He who had no sin became sin for us. Do we have any sense of gratitude for that? Amazing grace, how sweet the sound.

If you really want a personal relationship with someone, you must know quite a bit about them – who they really are. Jesus here presents himself as Savior, King, Prophet, Creator and Sacrifice. If we truly wish to be his friend, we will *begin* by acknowledging this.

## The Wrath of God - Mark 11:12-33

It seems that God has an attitude problem – towards the wicked. That permanent attitude (for God is eternal) is known as the wrath of God. Its penalties are delayed until the Day of Wrath – but he The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, **"May no one ever eat fruit from you again."** And his disciples heard him say it. On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, **"Is it not written: "'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'"** The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching. When evening came, they went out of the city. In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!" **"Have faith in God,"** Jesus answered. **"I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."** *[But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your sins.]* They arrived again in Jerusalem, and while Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you authority to do this?" Jesus replied, **"I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism—was it from heaven, or from men? Tell me!"** They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'From men'..." (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.) So they answered Jesus, "We don't know." Jesus said, **"Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."**  
(Mark 11:12-33 NIV)

### The character of God

You will please forgive me if I begin this lesson with a bit of review. It makes it much easier to understand one of the most difficult sections of Scripture. We need to review the character of God.

#### Righteousness

Do you believe that the universe is a moral place? By that I mean a place where "what goes around, comes around?" If you're like most human beings, you hold two contradictory beliefs:

- ✚ First, you believe that righteousness will ultimately prevail – that so and so is going to get what's coming to him. It's a matter of justice. Interestingly, this belief is common across almost all religions.
- ✚ But you also believe there are people who do not get what they deserve (either in good things or bad things). Some people die fat, happy and wicked; others die in righteousness and pain. There's a reason for this belief. It is rooted in the character of God:
  - ✚ God is *pure* righteousness. There is in Him no taint of sin, as there would be with us.

- ✚ God is *uncompromising* righteousness. He cannot compromise. As one old preacher put it, “God is angry with the wicked all day long.”

This tells us that “just desserts” have only been delayed (God is eternal, he has plenty of time.) At Christ’s return we shall see the Judgment. But we need to remember that this will not be a change in God’s attitude – only the final act of it.

### Mercy

Christians know that God is merciful. Again, we must consider the character of God. God is merciful “all the time.” His mercy is pure. His mercy is without limit.

- ✚ The purity of that mercy is shown at the Cross; only the sacrifice of the sinless would do.
- ✚ The depth of that mercy is also shown at the Cross – “no greater love.”

Mercy, however, carries with it one intrinsic characteristic: it must be asked for. The defiant do not receive it; the humble do – if they will but ask.

### Power

It is trite to say God is omnipotent. But we need to recognize that point. It brings out the question, “If God is righteous and omnipotent, what are all these rotten people doing here when there are lightning bolts left?” We need to remember that in mercy he has delayed things until the Day of Wrath. But there are two things in today’s Scripture which bear on the subject of power:

- ✚ First, did you ever notice how righteousness reinforces power? The wicked know who they are, and when confronted, flee.
- ✚ God shares that same power with us – for his righteous purposes.

### Three Examples

Do recall the lesson on symbolism regarding the Triumphal Entry. This set of events happens immediately afterwards. The symbolic method of teaching is still in session.

#### The fig tree

The first and obvious question is, “Why?” We know of no evil done by the fig tree! The answer is more clearly seen when you look at this as a symbolic event.

- ✚ The fig tree is used frequently in the Old Testament as a symbol for the nation of Israel. We shall follow this line of thinking.
- ✚ It is obvious, therefore, that Jesus is teaching his disciples his power over the house of Israel.
- ✚ The root of the lesson is simple: no fruit.

Jesus takes the symbol for Israel and deals with it. He has already taught them the parable of the tree without fruit, and now he makes the lesson come alive, visually. In this the disciples see the power of our Lord – which, by the way, should teach them that he is going to the Cross voluntarily. His power is sufficient to prevent the Cross; but it was for the Cross he came.

The lesson? No fruit, no more tree. In AD 70 the Romans sacked Jerusalem and dispersed the Jews over the face of the earth. The fig tree bore no fruit, and it was withered. Matthew tells us the tree was withered from the root up – the fate of any who will not have Jesus as their true vine.

## Cleansing the Temple

Are “things” holy? Can a place be holy? Can objects be holy?

Indeed, they can. If God sets them apart, they are holy. All through the Old Testament this concept is reinforced. God sets the Jews apart, they are his, therefore they are holy. Dishes, candlesticks – all manner of things are declared to be holy. Holy means to be set apart for God.

So we see that Jesus’ anger is reserved for those who misuse the things set apart for God. It is a sin against holiness.

It is indeed a grievous thing. We can understand this better by examining a principle that all of us hold: sins against the innocent are more grievous than sins against the guilty. For example, if two drunks get into a brawl, and one beats the other nearly dead, that is an evil thing. The police will be called. But if that same drunk beats a small child like that, we are much more outraged, and call for more severe penalties. Why? Because sin against the innocent is more grievous.

The same thing applies here. The Pharisees and such are the keepers of the Temple. By their swindling the pilgrims who have come to God’s holy place they are abusing their authority – and sinning against the innocent. It is an outrage, and Jesus treats it as such.

Notice, too, that this is blasphemy. Blasphemy, we are told, is “taking the Lord’s name in vain.” It is not just obscenity using his name; here, it’s much worse. In this instance we have people who have said, “God commands,” when in fact he has not. This is a terrible sin, and Jesus acts against it properly.

We often miss this fact: Judgment begins with the house of the Lord. To those who claim to be God’s people God will apply his measure of justice. Better to be an open sinner than one who piously spouts “the will of God” in his own thoughts.

## By what authority

There is a curious paradox here. The Pharisees complain to Jesus about the children who are praising him in the Triumphal Entry – but offer no objection to his cleansing of the Temple. Only afterwards do they question his actions. The reason? Righteousness in action is very powerful; children are not.

That – it is obvious to see – is the problem the Pharisees have. They understand that all legitimate authority must somehow stem from God, who is righteous. They see that righteousness in his Son. Not until Jesus allows it will they use superior force to take him. Until then, He is the authority they dare not challenge directly.

But they can attempt to undermine that authority. That’s their attempt here. It hasn’t changed in two thousand years. When you speak of righteousness, do you ever hear “What about the Salem witch trials?” The argument being that those upholding the right are not perfect – and therefore should shut up.

## What shall we do?

There is no sense in reciting all this if you are not willing to make changes in your life. What would Jesus have us do?

### Confession

Evangelicals are curiously silent on this point. Confession of sin is almost never a sermon topic; it sounds too “Catholic.” But confession is required:

- ✚ It’s almost as if Jesus were saying to the Pharisees (and remotely, to us), “I won’t tell you what I know to be true until you confess what you know to be true.” A personal relationship must have truth to thrive.
- ✚ Indeed, is it not a characteristic of the best personal relationships that we share our secrets? Including the ones we’re ashamed of?
- ✚ Most of all, confession is necessary to restore righteousness.

### Prayer

Christ’s words on prayer here sound unbelievable. But you need to remember that the entire lesson has been one based on symbolism. Where would we find a mountain and a sea in symbolism? Take a look at the second chapter of Daniel. The sea represents the people of the world; the stone is our Lord Jesus Christ. We will indeed take that stone and – by faith – cast it into the sea.

So sure of this is Christ that he tells us to pray – in the past tense! Pray as if your prayers were granted; this is great faith indeed.

### Forgiveness

We must remember that God is righteous. If we are to approach him, we must be righteous too. That comes from Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross; but we put it into effect by confession (see above) and forgiveness. Remember that mercy must be asked for? His condition for mercy is that we extend it to others.

This is just – righteous, if you will. In forgiving others I proclaim to God that I beg his mercy *in accordance with his righteousness*. Forgiving others is “fair” when I ask for forgiveness for myself. I can ask forgiveness with confidence when I forgive others – basing myself on the righteousness of God.

More than that: it shows that I am a child of God, for children imitate their parents.

### Faith

Distinguish, please, between magic and faith. Magic says, “If I just really believe, and say the right words, I will get what I want.” Bill Cosby gave us the antidote to this. He once had a comedy routine about learning karate. The instruction manual on how to break a brick told him to “think right through the brick.” So he was thinking right through the brick when he hit. Unfortunately, the brick was thinking “Oh no you’re not.”

The prayer of faith is God’s way of letting his power flow through us. If you want mountains moved, they will have to go where God wants them to.

Tie it all together: By confessing our sins, asking for mercy (and giving it freely to others) we have the ability to tap into both the power and mercy of God. It must be done in faith – but so doing brings us into harmony with his purposes.

## Accusation and Defense - Mark 12

The chapter of the Scripture we are examining today contains at least two of the more quoted sections: the Widow's mite ("small coin" in this version) and "Render unto Caesar". What is often missed is that these stories are set in the same day of Jesus' ministry. There is a consistent thread running through this chapter: wholehearted devotion to Christ.

### Accusation

**He then began to speak to them in parables: "A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed. "He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, 'They will respect my son.' "But the tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. "What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. Haven't you read this scripture: "'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?" Then they looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away.**

(Mark 12:1-12 NIV)

In this parable Christ presents his accusation against the Jewish nation. The indictment includes three points:

- ✚ *The very existence of Israel is a gift from God.* He is the one who spoke with Abraham. There were many others he could have picked. He could have dealt with another nation; nothing requires that Moses lead them to the promised land. But God had decided to do this – and so he gave them the gift. It is the gift of being the people of God. It comes with its own God-given territory. By implication, Christ is saying that they misused this gift – a complaint made frequently by God in the Old Testament.
- ✚ *The Jews have rejected the prophets.* Over and over we see this in the Old Testament. To become a prophet was to cancel your life insurance and health insurance. Despite the miraculous signs and the call to repentance, the prophets were, by and large, a beaten and rejected lot. That's one heck of a reception for those sent by God to the people of God. The closest modern parallel I can give you might be this: Suppose your pastor began to speak on the sin of divorce. After worship one Sunday, a group of divorced members of the church meet him in the parking lot and "pound a little sense into him." If you can see the ingratitude and defiance, you understand the charge against the Jews.
- ✚ *The nation will now kill its Messiah, the Son of God.* Here Jesus explicitly tells them that they will kill the Son of God, the Messiah. This, of course, is the ultimate ingratitude. The consequences of this to the Jewish nation will be severe and long lasting.

Ultimately, as Jesus here foretells, will come the Last Judgment. What will God say then? It will be the final word. But at this moment the Jews rise to present their defenses to the charges made.

### The Defense

If you will, there are three defenses presented. Two are rejected; the third, adopted.

## Defense of the Pharisees

It is well to review who the Pharisees are – at least in our terminology. They are the right-wing fundamentalists of their day. They are highly legalistic. Here is their counterattack:

Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?" But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. **"Why are you trying to trap me?"** he asked. **"Bring me a denarius and let me look at it."** They brought the coin, and he asked them, **"Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?"** "Caesar's," they replied. Then Jesus said to them, **"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."** And they were amazed at him.

(Mark 12:13-17 NIV)

It is tempting to launch into a discussion of church and state here. (You can find that on the web site in the life of Christ series). But first, see the style of the defense – so you can recognize it in your own life.

- ✦ *Seeking partial obedience.* Somewhere in the dim recesses of the conscience these men know that they are not up to what God has called them to be. They therefore must substitute partial obedience for whole-hearted devotion. To do this, they must have an excuse for the obedience which is omitted. The Roman government supplies this to them. They now have an excuse.
- ✦ *Hypocritical praise.* Their praise for Jesus is not an oversight or accident. If you are going to substitute partial obedience for the whole, then the keeper of the whole obedience must somehow be snared into joining you. A modern parallel is the man who walks out of the church saying, "Great sermon, pastor!" while thinking of all the good reasons he can ignore the warning that sermon brought.
- ✦ *Scriptural distortion.* Here is a key attitude. I know the answer, now I need to go find the Scripture to support it. This takes the Word of God and turns it into a collection of excuses.

## Defense of the Sadducees

The Sadducees are the left wing, politically correct thinkers of their day. Their defense is interesting in that it is the intellectual puzzle of the piece. They view themselves as (obviously) much more intelligent than those right wing fundamentalist types. To prove it, they trot out one of their intellectual puzzles in an air of smug certainty. If the Pharisees are holier-than-thou, the Sadducees are more intellectual-than-thou.

Then the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. "Teacher," they said, "Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and have children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first one married and died without leaving any children. The second one married the widow, but he also died, leaving no child. It was the same with the third. In fact, none of the seven left any children. Last of all, the woman died too. At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?" Jesus replied, **"Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. Now about the dead rising—have you not read in the book of Moses, in the account of the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!"**

## (Mark 12:18-27 NIV)

Jesus trims this argument nicely. He tells us what's wrong with this defense as well:

- ✦ *They deny the power of God.* This is the first and most crucial error. Those in our time who “re-interpret” the Bible start with the assumption that the miraculous must be a “later legend.” God goes from omnipotent to nice guy (who can be safely ignored).
- ✦ *They deny the authority of the Scriptures.* Again, a common error. In our time the “Minimalists” start with the assumption that the Scriptures must be wrong (since they contain within miracles) and then say, “What evidence do you have?” They might remember that the Bible was gathered together so that we might have one convenient place in which to find all the evidence. The evidence so carefully gathered and protected is now a convenient container for the trash.
- ✦ *They substitute man's opinions for God's word.* It is blasphemy. Blasphemy – “taking the Lord's name in vain” – is not so much idle obscenity as it is statements like this: “A kind and loving God would surely not disapprove of my divorce, especially when my girlfriend makes me so happy. God wants me to be happy, after all, and as long as I'm doing this for love, it will be approved by God, I'm sure.”

### The honest man

It is a mistake to assume that all the Jewish scholars here were blasphemers or hypocrites.

Meet an honest man:

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" **"The most important one,"** answered Jesus, **"is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."** "Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, **"You are not far from the kingdom of God."** And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

## (Mark 12:28-34 NIV)

See the honest man's reaction to this accusation. There is no defense; there is only the question: “What would God have me do?” This man understands that God's plan must be simple enough for the simpleton but wise enough for the greatest of minds. That can only be if there is a “bottom line” where intellectual strength and simple heart can meet.

Christ gives him, in simple words quoted from the Old Testament, his answer. It comes down to this:

- ✦ *Love God first.* Without this, where will you get the strength to carry out any other commandment?
- ✦ *Then love your neighbor as yourself.* If not carried into practical application, your love of God is a delusion.

## What God Wants

That last man was “not far from the kingdom.” Jesus now proceeds to give him and the disciples three lessons in just what God wants.

### Believe in Jesus

Sometimes we miss this one. God wants us to put our trust in Jesus, the Christ. This is the pragmatic form of loving God:

**While Jesus was teaching in the temple courts, he asked, "How is it that the teachers of the law say that the Christ is the son of David? David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared: "'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.'" David himself calls him 'Lord.' How then can he be his son?" The large crowd listened to him with delight.**  
(Mark 12:35-37 NIV)

It's Jesus turn to pose the intellectual parable. In it we can see just how we are to love God in the person of his son Jesus.

- ✦ *Love him as Messiah (Christ).* We see here the idea of the one who came to redeem. He came that we might have our sins forgiven; for that we owe him our love.
- ✦ *Love him as the fulfillment of prophecy* – even prophecy yet to come. Our love for him should be based upon fact. The facts are scattered throughout the Old Testament; they are the prophecies he fulfilled when he came – or will fulfill when he returns. Honor God in this.
- ✦ *Love him as Lord.* So many of us are willing to have a Savior; we might even acknowledge him as the fulfillment of 1500 years of prophecy. But until you love him as lord you have not really known the man.

### Beware of the legalists

Christ next gives us fair warning: his church is going to have trouble from within, the legalists:

**As he taught, Jesus said, "Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely."**  
(Mark 12:38-40 NIV)

How do you tell the difference between someone who is devoted to God and a hypocrite? Jesus gives you three tests:

- ✦ *Recognize the love of praise.* It's a mistake to assume that hypocrites are always after the money. There are few who can turn their hypocrisy into profit, but many who can swell up like a sponge under a waterfall of praise.
- ✦ *Recognize the greed.* Here's the killer question: what would you do to become rich? These men were appointed custodians over a man's estate – and would turn his widow out of the house to sell it for a profit.
- ✦ *Beware* – these men will be punished severely. In this, Christ warns us about becoming such as these.

## Devotion

Jesus concludes his lesson with an illustration – right before their eyes.

Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, **"I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."**  
(Mark 12:41-44 NIV)

Here at last Christ gives us the positive example. Please note that this is an act of devotion. The act of devotion has two aspects:

- ✚ First, an act of devotion seems to the world to be completely excessive. This woman gave all she had. Note that she had two coins. She could have placed only one in the offering. Most of us would not have objected if she passed the containers for offering without putting in anything.
- ✚ Next, it must be something that the world would say has little to no value. The coins she sticks in would, in our day, be worth (for example) a quarter.

If you can see the world's view of giving to excess and producing little or no value to it, then you see the point of devotion. God will take that devotion and multiply it.

This is the thread that runs through the entire chapter. Jesus challenges them with the memory of the prophets, rejected by a half – hearted Israel. The Pharisees want to substitute a fussy legalism; the Sadducees want to substitute man's good intentions.

God rejects both: he is seeking worshipers who will worship him in Spirit and in truth. Those who are devoted to him – no matter how small their resources – are those he will recognize as being his own on Judgment Day.

## Right Questions - Mark 13

If there is any one topic which is taught with more fervor (and venom) than the return of Christ, I do not want to teach it. Prophecy in the Bible stirs up deep emotions in the partisans of the various theories of interpretation. Of those controversies, none is more heated than the debate over when Jesus is returning.

Which, if you think about it for a minute, is rather silly. Jesus told us that only God the Father knows the time. Indeed, in today's Scripture, see how *little* Jesus says about future events – and how much more concerned he is to find us watchful.

As he was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!" "Do you see all these great buildings?" replied Jesus. "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?" Jesus said to them: "Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and will deceive many. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains. You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. When you see 'the abomination that causes desolation' standing where it does not belong—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the roof of his house go down or enter the house to take anything out. Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that this will not take place in winter, because those will be days of distress unequalled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now—and never to be equaled again. If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive. But for the sake of the elect, whom he has chosen, he has shortened them. At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'Look, there he is!' do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles to deceive the elect—if that were possible. So be on your guard; I have told you everything ahead of time. But in those days, following that distress, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken." At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens. Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—

**whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: "Watch!"**  
(Mark 13:1-37 NIV)

## Interpretation

It is useless to start such a lesson without at least examining the prophetic content. The curiosity of the average Christian pops up and asks, "When do you think he is returning?" My answer is always the same: soon. Why?

### Short and long views

One of the most frustrating things about interpretation of the prophecies of the Bible is simply that the same prophecy may have a short and long view. For example, it's generally held that the "abomination that causes desolation" was adapted from an earlier sacrilege (which led to the Maccabean revolt). Most scholars think this prophecy was filled in the short view in AD 70 when Roman forces sacked Jerusalem. Others hold that it will be seen again – after the construction of the Millennial Temple. The date for that latter event is undetermined.

Another example: the "days of distress." Many identify these days as being synonymous with the Great Tribulation in Revelation. Again, depending upon your interpretation, that is either the Diocletian persecution or an event yet to come.

Translation itself can become a victim of one's view of prophecy. Look at verse 30. See the phrase "this generation?" It can be interpreted (and translated) differently depending upon your point of view:

- ✚ If you hold that this passage is talking about the Roman sack of Jerusalem (and nothing more) then "this generation" means the people walking about with Jesus.
- ✚ If you hold the views commonly associated with pre-millennialism, it means that whatever generation sees such destruction will see the return. This is why many writers "know" that Jesus will return before the year 2017 – because that would be one generation (70 years) from the founding of modern Israel.
- ✚ The word for generation can also be translated as "race." This could be a prophecy that the Jewish people will not disappear as a people before the Lord's return.

### Impact of prophecy

What makes this task more difficult is that people want to know not only what is prophesied but "what it means" – the impact on them in their daily lives. By way of example, let's suppose that passage really did reflect on the sack of Jerusalem. What Jesus did not tell us is this: it would serve as the baseline point of separation between the Jewish church and the non-Jewish church. Read through Acts; a common problem is that the Apostles (who are Jewish) preach to the Gentiles – who are not under the Law. Just what parts, if any, of the Old Testament Law would apply to the Gentiles?

The sack of Jerusalem ended the Old Testament sacrifice system. That was not prophesied. I suspect the disciples assumed that after the destruction the Jews would (as they had before) build

again. Instead, they were dispersed all over the world. The system of sacrifices was gone; it no longer appeared as an alternative to the Christian.

Interestingly, this destruction took place 40 years after the earliest date for the Crucifixion. Here again: one generation. In the sight of that generation it happened – but could they have foreseen the consequences? I doubt it.

### Trigger Events

It is the habit of God not to tell us more than is good for us. In this passage he gives three “trigger events” and mentions one other time period.

The trigger events are:

- ✚ The preaching of the Gospel to all nations. In some views this is already fulfilled. “Nations” in this context would refer to the nations in the Roman Empire (everyone outside would be “tribes.”) Other views take it in the sense we would have it today.
- ✚ The “abomination of desolation” will be set up in the Temple. As discussed, this could be what happened in AD 70, or it could be something which happens in the future.
- ✚ Finally, there are astronomical signs. Until recently, these were interpreted as signs not in the heavens but in politics (remember Joseph’s dream?)

All of these things we are told to watch for. In addition, there is one other period mentioned here – the “day of distress.” It is generally agreed that this is synonymous with the Tribulation (or part of it).

So, keeping our eyes open to what might be happening around us, we come to the point:

*Knowing when Christ will return is trivial compared to being ready for it.* Think of it this way: the soldier does not know when the next battle will be, or where the next war will be. The soldier, however, trains for war all the time. That way, he will be ready.

### Until then, Instructions

The real question, then, is what do we do until He returns?

#### Signs in the world around us

It’s important to know the difference between an event which has significance in prophecy and one which is simply overwhelming at the time. Jesus tells us quite specifically these things:

- ✚ Many people will show up, preaching in the name of Christ, who will attempt to lead the church astray.
- ✚ Some of those people will have the ability to simulate miracles, too.

It’s interesting to note that some of these people have turned up in the midst of crisis. In crisis we seek a solution, and the thought that God has returned (or is about to) is wonderfully comforting. So we need to see those events which are NOT prophetic:

- ✚ War
- ✚ Rumor of War (remember the Cold War?)
- ✚ Earthquake (or, I suppose, any other disaster in nature)

## ✚ Famine.

Those are pretty heavy events – and Christ simply says, “Expect it.” Don’t think too much of it.

### Signs to individuals

Christ now outlines for us what we should expect, and what to do about it. First, as individuals, we must be on our guard. In particular, we should

✚ Expect to get into trouble with the civil authorities for preaching Jesus Christ.

✚ But – it’s encouragement – he tells us that when you are on trial for the Gospel, the Spirit will provide the words. (Good news for those with butterflies.)

On a more personal level, we should expect to be betrayed and hated. Our Lord went through this. He was betrayed by a friend. We are told here that we will be betrayed by our own children, or our own parents and so on. This is hard to take. But Christ makes it clear. He is God. You will worship him, and him alone, or you cannot be his disciple. He comes first.

Christ also tells us that we will be hated. Many of us see that venom today from those who are “politically correct.” It sometimes surprises us to see the bitterness of hatred people hold just because we are Christians. We should take it as a badge of honor.

More than that- we need to remember that we are betrayed and suffering only until he comes – which is “soon.”

### Encouragement

This sounds so much like pessimism that it’s important to point out the encouragement that Christ gives us here.

✚ *His prophecy is sure.* The sack of Jerusalem was prophesied; it came as directed.

✚ *The Holy Spirit is in us.* If you are a Christian, the Holy Spirit is not only the comforter but also the deposit of God – guaranteeing you a share in the victory.

✚ *God will cut short the days.* He knows how miserable it will be; he will therefore make them short so that we have a hope of enduring them. This is another sign of God’s mercy.

✚ *Christ’s words will never pass away.* No matter how much the world rages against him, his kingdom is forever. His words are eternal – and given to you.

✚ *Christ will return in power.* Then we will know the date. We will also know our Lord.

Until then? Watch!

## Aroma - Mark 14:1-11

The subject today concerns perfume and other, less delightful aromas. Think to yourself; can you recall any good memories that are associated with an aroma? (I'm partial to the mixed aroma of Thanksgiving dinner, and I'm all in favor of a barbeque.) Aroma clings to the memory, as it does in this passage of Scripture:

Now the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some sly way to arrest Jesus and kill him. "But not during the Feast," they said, "or the people may riot." While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head. Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor." And they rebuked her harshly. "Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her." Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

(Mark 14:1-11 NIV)

## The Cardinal's Cathedral

The Roman Catholic Church in Los Angeles is in the process of constructing a new cathedral. For those of you not acquainted with the regulations on this, a cathedral is required as the parish church of an archbishop or cardinal. Now, Los Angeles had one – called St. Vibiana's – but Cardinal Mahoney decided that it made more sense to build a new one that to try to renovate (and earthquake proof) the old one.

It is not my purpose to decide whether or not this was a wise decision. But to say that the Cardinal has met with opposition is a mild understatement. There is a tribe of Indians who claim the new cathedral will be built on their ancient, sacred burial grounds. (Readers not acquainted with the phenomenon should understand that ever since the Federal government decided that all Indian tribes were entitled to a reservation – and the state government has decided that any reservation can have a casino – we have seen the "reemergence" of many tribes thought long extinct.) More cogently, there is a great deal of opposition within the church to this expenditure. A pointed contrast is made between the opulence of the cathedral (it will have more translucent alabaster for windows than any other building in the world) and the poverty of the area surrounding it. Fingers are pointing in all directions.

This is not confined to the Roman Catholic branch of the faith. Several years ago Dr. Schuller built the Crystal Cathedral – with about the same reaction. Indeed, this controversy is not strange to our rather fundamentalist brotherhood. Some years ago we attended Westwood Hills Christian Church – which is a very good replica of a cathedral in France.

It is in this context that I remind you of the characteristics of an act of devotion:

- ✚ It must be very expensive to the giver
- ✚ It must appear to the world to be worth very little
- ✚ It must stem from a deep love of Jesus.

As to whether or not the new cathedral meets these tests, I could not say. But I can say that the objections were very much predictable. Our section of Mark documents the very same thing.

One thing in this fascinates me: the contrast between Mary and Martha. At the first encounter we find that Mary listens while Martha serves. To the shock of all the pragmatic people in the world, Jesus commends Mary, not Martha. The distinction remains in this last incident. Martha serves; Mary pours out the perfume on Jesus' body.

Built into this situation is an observation that might surprise many of you. Martha looks like she's the devoted one – but it's really Mary. We are ambivalent about such gestures. Why? Because you can do a lot of work in the church to cover up – even to yourself – the fact that you are only half-hearted in your service to Christ. Sometimes “being practical” is being lukewarm. You don't think so? Have you ever seen a proposal to spend the church's money turned down because we can't afford it?

### The character of devotion

The devoted Christian is seldom encouraged these days. We live in a time of “good enough.” This is a pity, for the life of the devoted Christian is a life of joy. Look at it this way: have you ever been told you “have to” do something? Of course – but that phrase has more than one meaning:

- ✚ You can say “I have to do that” because someone is pointing a gun to your head. The consequences of failure are very high – so your motivation is fear. Effective? Yes, but not very pleasant.
- ✚ You can say “I have to do that” because you know it's your duty to do it. Something like jury duty – you approve of its being done, especially when done by someone other than yourself. Effective? Yes – but what drudgery.
- ✚ You can say “I have to do that” because of the sheer joy that springs from the love of the work, or of the person you're doing it for. Effective, and indeed a joy to perform.

That last attitude is the “I have to” that springs from devotion.

Devotion is characterized by some unusual thoughts in this passage:

- ✚ *A Beautiful Thing* – there is a sense in which the act of devotion just “fits” – it has that sense of being the right extravagance at the right time. It's that sense of timing some men have when they bring home a dozen roses to a wife who knows that the romance has gone out of her life. No value, but beauty, that is the key.
- ✚ *Timely* – the act is just before Jesus' death. We can see in it that Mary has done this at precisely the right time
- ✚ *It is all inclusive* – Mary had nothing else so precious, one would think, and so the act was everything she could do.
- ✚ *Insightful* – her devotion matched his thought; he was going to the Cross; she was anointing him for burial.

Mary sat at Jesus' feet while Martha served. She chose the high, hard road of devotion – and got her sister's rebuke for it. She anointed her Lord, and was rebuked again. Those on the high road to Christ often make excellent targets.

### Reaction of Others

You might think that most Christians would approve of devotion to Christ. They do – as long as they're not exposed to it. Mother Theresa was just fine in Calcutta; when she came over here to raise funds, it got a little sticky. Why do we react this way?

- ✚ We often get a bad case of the "should 'as". We can usually think of any number of more pragmatic things to do with the money.
- ✚ But don't you see that this is a lack of faith? We are reasoning as the world reasons when we do this. We are saying that our devotion to God must be suppressed – because we can't afford it. It would be very interesting to see what would happen to the church if we suddenly became devoted.
- ✚ This often rises to the point of anger. Judas betrayal was triggered by this event.

### Cover for our own sins

Let's face it: devotion in other Christians is embarrassing to us. Oh, it's OK for the preacher to pray a little more than we do (it's his job, we expect it). But something like this would be downright embarrassing. It shows us up; it's grandstanding, or worse it's letting the ego run riot.

Do you see the problem? We're worried about what other people will think of us if we were to become devoted to our Lord. But to see it in black and white just might be the cure. If we decided we didn't care what other people think – only what Jesus thinks about it – our actions and attitudes would change drastically.

### Smarter than God

There is a worse case. It can happen that we decide that we know better than God in something. We won't usually put it in those words, but we simply say, "Here, let me handle that. I know how." But consider:

- ✚ Acts of devotion are closely related to the power of the Holy Spirit which indwells us. Why would you quench the Spirit?
- ✚ Isn't this, really, our pride talking? That we thank God for the help he gives us, but really we can take care of it ourselves.

### Our Devotion

To become a devoted Christian is to seek the pearl of great price:

The Holy Bible, New International Version

<sup>45</sup>"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls.

<sup>46</sup>When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

(Matthew 13:45-46)

I would challenge you this morning: is your life one of prudent balancing, or have you understood this parable? If your life is in “balance” then you have not sought this pearl. The kingdom of God is not sought halfheartedly.

Why is it that we are so lukewarm? I submit that it is because we do not believe God will reward those who seek him.<sup>23</sup> It’s OK to have God handed to us – but seeking him with all our heart is too much like work.

Perhaps this is why we have so much trouble seeing ourselves as children of God. The God some worship is powerless; his worship is feeble at best. The Jesus of the Scriptures is completely different. His challenge is this: put everything you cherish in second place, and be devoted to me. Then see if your blessings can be contained in one single life.

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<sup>23</sup> Hebrews 11:6

## Betrayal - Selections from Mark 14

The word “betrayed” carries with it the fiercest of human emotions. It happens to all of us at some time; often, we carry the scars for the rest of our lives. Consider these examples of betrayal which are so commonplace:

- ✚ The newspapers carry stories of priests who have molested young boys serving as altar boys.
- ✚ Our prisons contain men who were sexually assaulted – by their parents when they were but children.
- ✚ Many, many marriages have ended on the announcement of adultery.

When these things happen, it produces an anguish which often causes the victim to say that no one understands the feeling. There is one who understands; Jesus, the Christ – who was betrayed. He was betrayed by Judas and denied by Peter; in his hour of torment he was left alone to die.

Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

(Mark 14:10-11 NIV)

When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve. While they were reclining at the table eating, he said, **"I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me."** They were saddened, and one by one they said to him, "Surely not I?" **"It is one of the Twelve,"** he replied, **"one who dips bread into the bowl with me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born."**

(Mark 14:17-21 NIV)

When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. **"You will all fall away,"** Jesus told them, **"for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.' But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."** Peter declared, "Even if all fall away, I will not." **"I tell you the truth,"** Jesus answered, **"today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times."** But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the others said the same.

(Mark 14:26-31 NIV)

Returning the third time, he said to them, **"Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"** Just as he was speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, appeared. With him was a crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders. Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard." Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him. The men seized Jesus and arrested him. Then one of those standing near drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. **"Am I leading a rebellion,"** said Jesus, **"that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I was with**

you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled." Then everyone deserted him and fled.

(Mark 14:41-50 NIV)

While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by. When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him. "You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus," she said. But he denied it. "I don't know or understand what you're talking about," he said, and went out into the entryway. When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, "This fellow is one of them." Again he denied it. After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." He began to call down curses on himself, and he swore to them, "I don't know this man you're talking about." Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: "**Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times.**" And he broke down and wept.

(Mark 14:66-72 NIV)

### Betrayal by Malice

There is a curious parallel to Judas found in the Old Testament. His name is Ahithophel. He was a counselor to King David, who betrayed him during Absalom's rebellion. Another counselor, Hushai, thwarted Ahithophel's plan. The Scripture sums it up this way: Ahithophel was the king's counselor; Hushai was the king's friend.

The night in which King David was betrayed, Ahithophel advised Absalom to pursue David quickly, before he regained military strength. To force the issue, he told Absalom to have sex with the concubines David had left behind to tend to the palace – and to do so publicly. When his plans failed, he committed suicide, as Judas did. Look and learn:

- ✚ The sign of the betrayer: he counsels sin. He advises you to do that which is wrong.
- ✚ The man is one who pulls strings – and when the strings break, he commits suicide rather than face the one he betrayed.

### The betrayer's motives

We look at Judas and shake our puzzled heads and ask, "Why?" Why indeed. Here are some of the reasons Judas had:

- ✚ *Bitterness* – Judas was the outsider in the band of disciples. He was the only one who was not from Galilee; he is always mentioned last in the lists of the disciples. If you think yourself important when you are not, this bitterness can gnaw at you.
- ✚ *Fear* – the authorities have not been silent on this; the opposition is – in the world's view – very strong. Sometimes we like to be sure we're on the winning side. Our loyalty is to victory, not truth.
- ✚ *Shame* – have you ever noticed how Satan will take some past sin and continue to drag it up – hoping to motivate you to do something else wrong to cover your shame?
- ✚ *Pride* – perhaps Jesus did not take Judas' wise advice. Often our pride drives us to sin when we think we are not being heard.

- ✚ *The addiction of avarice* – we know that Judas stole from the money bag the disciples kept in common. I have known one whose addiction to heroin caused him to kiss his wife goodbye – as he reached around into her purse, stole the money she had saved as first and last month’s rent, and left his wife and baby to starve on the streets. Avarice can have the same addictive nature.
- ✚ *Satan* – while we must give him a foothold, when he gets one, he takes the maximum advantage of it.

### The cruelty of betrayal

Jesus, the Christ, the only sinless person to walk this earth, was betrayed – with a kiss. The gesture of affection, the normal greeting from a host in his home, that’s what Judas used. To be betrayed is bad enough; to be betrayed while your betrayer professes love for you – that carries a bitter sting. Why the kiss? Scholars have speculated that perhaps Judas thought Jesus would be forced into calling down heaven’s angels to establish his kingdom . Who can say? But this much is certain: those who betray by malice are capable of any low act.

We can see one thing clearly in this. Like attracts like; or as we might say, birds of a feather flock together. Judas was evil; ultimately he was drawn to evil people.

It is for this reason that Jesus sends Judas out on his errand of betrayal before the supper begins; he is stressing that none but the faithful should participate. Which brings us to those who denied our Lord – like Peter.

### Denial by weakness

When reading this passage you cannot miss one thing: Peter’s weakness. Look at the character of his accuser: a house maid. Women in this time were most certainly second class citizens; Peter could have stood upon his dignity and told her to shut up. But his weakness has now flowered. Even a servant girl can be his accuser, and his only defense is denial.

Why does God permit this? Simply this: If we are to serve the Lord with all our heart, should we not know the limits of that heart? After all, if we do not measure ourselves, then we may be overmatched. Better to admit first that we are not capable (and ask God for strength to prevail) than to be overborne and beg God for aid.

### Spirit willing, flesh weak

We often think how strong our faith would be if we were only to see the risen Christ. Peter, James and John saw Christ transfigured. Surely this would have been sufficient for us, right?

But in the cold of the night, with only a little fire for light and heat, Peter finds his love for Jesus balanced against his fears. There is only one cure for this: the perfect love which drives out fear. Peter did not yet have that love. Soon he would be fearless – but not this night.

### Return of the sinner

Note, please, that Christ returns Peter to the fold. How does this happen?

- ✚ It begins with the anguish of the betrayer. Judas still tries to be righteous on his own merits, all the way to the end. Peter breaks down and admits he is not righteous.

- ✚ For those who will admit their sin, our Lord provides forgiveness. The one who denied him three times that night will become the one all the other disciples look to as their leader.
- ✚ It is not just forgiveness, however, that our Lord provides. He gives us another lesson in the faith when he follows forgiveness with reconciliation. So often we hear, “I forgave that dirty so-and-so,” when it means forgiveness without reconciliation. Our Lord wants us to do as He did. That means reconciliation, too.

There is a strong parallel in our time. Many marriages shipwreck on the rock of adultery. We are taught that “having an affair” is enlightening. Satan’s oldest lie! I have seen the couples where this has happened. The bitterness is strong, and only God’s love flowing through our reconciliation can restore such a marriage.

### God’s Power

In no other section of the Scripture do we see God’s power so clearly displayed as at the Crucifixion. You might think otherwise, but consider: is it not the mark of true strength to condescend to weakness? A father is greatly stronger than his infant son; the true father of strength is gentle. We see God’s strength here too.

### God’s providence

Note that in the smallest of details God has provided for this act. Judas, the betrayer, is foreknown – but God’s providence outreaches his plot.

- ✚ As if to say to Judas, “I know about it,” Christ tells him to be on his way. All is prophesied, long ago.
- ✚ Even in the smallest details, God provides. (Read again how they found the upper room).
- ✚ So perfect is his providence that he even arranges for the betrayer to leave the room *before* he institutes the new covenant.

### Announcement

Indeed, God’s providence is so great that Jesus announces the existence of the betrayer. Why?

- ✚ First, that the betrayer might have a chance for repentance.
- ✚ Second, so that the other disciples would see that this was not out of God’s control – but within his plan.
- ✚ Finally, it shows God’s method: He overcomes evil with good.

### Carnal to fall, devilish to stay fallen

Christ knows that we are weak and likely to fall. He knows that this weakness is particularly a problem when we are alone (which is another reason he provided us with the church).

Look at the disciples here: each one asks, “Is it I?” We know in our own hearts that we are sinners. We know we are capable of betrayal.

- ✚ It is best not to sin at all; but our Lord knows our weakness.
- ✚ When we sin, we need not stay there – but asking our Lord’s mercy, we can return to his fellowship.

### He knows how you feel

Some may ask why Jesus went through this. Surely all the answers to that would fill many books. But there is one reason for which I am particularly glad. This was written for our daily devotional; it seems appropriate for an ending to today's lesson.

Have you ever been down to the point where the government had to get someone else to carry your load? A welfare case? Simon of Cyrene carried the cross for Him. He knows how you feel.

Have you ever been down to the point where those around you can think of nothing more to say than, "Buddy, I'll buy you a drink?" They offered Jesus drugged wine. He knows how you feel.

Have you ever been to the point where the world takes away even your clothes? Have you had to watch total strangers pick through what used to be your clothes? Bankruptcy and the last garage sale, perhaps? They gambled for His clothes. He knows how you feel.

Have you ever been in trouble with the law? To the point where the criminals around you gave you a hard time about it? They crucified him between two thieves, and even they insulted Him. He knows how you feel.

Have you ever been the victim of the insults of the mob? Just those looking on, laughing at you and calling you names? "Come down from the cross," they called to Him. He knows how you feel.

Have you ever had the "righteous" people insult you, calling you names and letting the world know just how rotten they think you are? Even the religious leaders insulted Him on the cross. He knows how you feel.

He knows how you feel, for it all happened to Him. Even though He had lived the sinless life, deserving none of this, that's how they treated Him. So when you feel the world coming down on top of you, whether you deserve it or not, remember: He knows how you feel.

Take your troubles to Him. Go to Him in prayer and tell Him how it is within the depths of your soul. There is nothing you can say that He does not understand, for He is human just like us. There is nothing He cannot comprehend, for He is God. There is nothing He cannot forgive, for He went to the cross for you, that you might be forgiven. There is no hurt too deep for the Christ, by whose wounds you are healed. Love, in its purest form, awaits you. He knows how you feel.

## The Lord's Supper - Mark 14 (various)

Because we take communion each week it is easy to assume that we all understand just what this means. But that doesn't mean it's not worth the time to review it.

### Preparations

On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples asked him, "Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?" So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, **"Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. Say to the owner of the house he enters, 'The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large upper room, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there."** The disciples left, went into the city and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.

(Mark 14:12-16 NIV)

### Providence

God has a rather dry sense of humor. It is so dry that many pious commentators just can't seem to find it. They need look no further than this passage.

It rather reminds me of Jesus' method of paying the Temple tax. You will recall how he told Peter to throw his line into the lake, open the mouth of the first fish he caught – and there would be a coin sufficient to pay both Peter's tax and his own.

The same style is shown here. Luke's account gives us a specific name to the type of water jar – it's rather a large one, with two handles. That's a good sign for the disciples, because Jerusalem is crammed to the walls with tourists in town to celebrate Passover. The upper room could have been arranged beforehand; a man with sixty pounds of water on his shoulder is a little too much. Especially when it will be the first one.

Though we deny it, God takes charge of every detail of our lives (which is one reason we are taught to give thanks in all things). Why, then, do we have such trouble with this? We are willing to accept the grand things of Scripture (like the Resurrection) but balk at God's providence in our daily lives. Why?

Perhaps it is this: we want to be in complete control of our lives. If we can't be in complete control, then we want to yield as little control as we must. So it's OK for God to take charge of the freeway (when we're on it) – but our driving is our own.

A side note: what is the man doing with that water jar? Is it just possible that this water jar is the one which Jesus will use in washing the disciples' feet? Our God works all things together for the good of those who love him.

### Foreknowledge

Please remember that to know something before it happens is not the same as making it happen that way. There is a difference between foreknowledge and predestination.

Some may quibble with this, but it's likely enough that Jesus' method of finding the room – and displaying his foreknowledge – is meant to comfort the disciples. If he knows who will be walking by just at the moment you enter the city, surely he knows all the “big things” as well. It is a comfort – I know that he knows.

### God of the small things

Sometimes we reject the God of the small things – the God whose providence rules our lives. It could be that this is our pride – but it's also possible that it is our humility. We reason, “after all, why would God be interested in such a small thing as that?”

To say such a thing is to deny the omnipotence of God. It is as if we had said, “Yes, he's powerful in making the events of history – but either not able or not willing to intervene in my life.” Not able? Is there anything too hard for him? Not willing? Consider the lilies of the field.

Sometimes we are too rational for our own good.

### The Passover

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, **"Take it; this is my body."** Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it. **"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,"** he said to them. **"I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God."**

(Mark 14:22-25 NIV)

It is a familiar passage. But we must give it full consideration, and not be led astray by the frequent repetition.

### Similarities

It is hard to miss the deliberate similarity between Passover and Communion:

- ✚ The lamb to be eaten at Passover was to be “without defect.” Jesus was our sinless sacrifice, as John has it, the Lamb of God.
- ✚ The house was to be purged of yeast, a symbol of sin. This is also symbolic of our Lord's sinlessness.
- ✚ Blood was to be applied to the door posts and lintel so that the angel of death would “pass over” that house. We know that it is by the blood of Christ that we are saved, that judgment “passes over” us. Interestingly, it was applied using hyssop, which was also used during the Crucifixion.
- ✚ Only the circumcised (whether Jew or alien) could partake of the Passover. Similarly, only the baptized believer should partake of the Lord's Supper – but it is open to all such.
- ✚ The Jew was instructed not to break any bones of the lamb – just as none of Christ's bones were broken.
- ✚ Interestingly, the Jew was instructed to leave none of the meat until morning – he was to burn it up if necessary. Just as Christ stayed on the cross only for the one day, Good Friday.
- ✚ All the people were to participate, with no exceptions. It was not sufficient for the religious rulers to condemn Christ; they had to get the crowd with them. Remember how they said, “His blood be on us and on our children?”

- ✦ They were to eat the meal in haste, clothed for a journey. We are to eat it until he comes again – a coming about which we are warned to be ready.
- ✦ And like the ancient Jew, God “passes over” us in judgment, not for our merit or good works, but because of his grace.  
(All stolen from a previous lesson – but worth the repetition).

### Nature of symbolic worship

The nature of communion – the most common form of symbolic worship – provokes one of three reactions in most believers:

- ✦ There are those who deny any symbolic meaning whatever – all the while quoting the Bible in those passages which make it clear that this is the highest form of symbolism. I recall one choir leader, called upon to provide the communion meditation, saying “Communion is not a ritual.” Which misses the mark widely. Why? Because we fear to be accused of taking it in an unworthy manner; to some, all ritual is empty ritual.
- ✦ There are those accept the symbolic meaning – as token only. You hear them saying, “this represents Christ’s blood.” Yes, there is meaning, but no, there is nothing beyond the meaning. It appears as a convenient memory aid in remembering Christ’s sacrifice – nothing more.
- ✦ There are those who are capable of accepting the “thick” side of Christianity. When Christ says, “This is my body,” he didn’t mean “this represents my body.” He said what he meant – in some sense, this is my body. It clearly is not in the literal sense (a crude view of transubstantiation). But that does not preclude the mystic sense.

### Preparation – for the Son of Man

When I was in the army, nothing so irritated us as having a Saturday parade. Why all this fuss? The army was trying to get into my head (quite unsuccessfully) that we were a team, moving together. We were having teamwork drilled into us (literally).

There is a sense that the Passover this night is preparation for the Son of Man. Consider this: being sinless makes you fit for the ultimate Passover sacrifice. But it doesn’t make you fit to be a brain surgeon (not that he would have need of that!) There is a sense in which Jesus was made fit for his task. As the writer of Hebrews put it:

**Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him**  
(Hebrews 5:8-9 NIV)

How can the Son of God have any need of being “made perfect?” It means that he was fitted for the task. That task was to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. For that task the Son of Man would need to be perfected – by obedience. In this instance, by living through the ceremony which foreshadowed his sacrifice.

Note one thing: he was afraid. Evidently perfection does not preclude fear.

### In the Garden

They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, **"Sit here while I pray."** He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and

troubled. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch." Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him. Returning the third time, he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"  
(Mark 14:32-42 NIV)

### Possible

What does it mean when we say something is possible?

- ✚ Within our own natural limits, it means that something has a probability of occurring – even if it's a slight possibility.
- ✚ It can also mean that the event is consistent with natural law.  
But in neither sense can we apply the word possible to God – for he arranges all things, and nothing is impossible with him.

So in the spiritual sense, it comes down to this: Is it in God's will? Not just "Is this what He wants?" but "is it consistent with his purposes?" Most of our prayers fall in that latter category: we want something which is not forbidden, but might not be very probable. The key is that little phrase, "in God's will." That's what Jesus is asking for on this night.

### Fear

I find it greatly comforting that Jesus was in agony on this night – that he showed the genuine fear that I would have experienced. It means that he understands when I am afraid. It is proof that he is "fully man." (And it is heresy to deny that.)

But "being afraid" and "chickening out" are two different things. So the question arises: how did Christ conquer this fear?

- ✚ "For God so loved the world..." – as the Scripture has it, perfect love casts our fear. This is the power by which he overcame that fear of death.
- ✚ The mechanism he used to implement that power was obedience. It is through his obedience that he was made perfect to be the Lamb of God.  
There's a lesson in this for us. Fear is not sovereign. Love, acting in obedience, is.

### The weakness of the flesh

The three who saw him transfigured just a few weeks earlier now fail him. The flesh is indeed weak. This is one reason we fear; after all, if we were invincible in our bodies, what would we fear?

How, then, do we overcome our fears? Love, acting through obedience – just as our Lord did. The victory has been won at Calvary. Some day – perhaps very soon – we shall have that invincible

body. We will testify through the ages that love does indeed cast out fear. The greatest love, that of God, cast out the greatest fear of man, that of death. We need but obedience to claim that victory.

## Means Well Feebly - Mark 15:1-15

The phrase originates with Teddy Roosevelt; he said it of William Howard Taft – calling him a man who “means well feebly.” We are all familiar with the person who says all the right things, but cannot be counted on when things get tough. He might as well have said it of Pontius Pilate, for that is the man’s character.

Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, reached a decision. They bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate. "Are you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate. "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. The chief priests accused him of many things. So again Pilate asked him, "Aren't you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of." But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed. Now it was the custom at the Feast to release a prisoner whom the people requested. A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did. "Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate, knowing it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead. "What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked them. "Crucify him!" they shouted. "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!" Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

(Mark 15:1-15 NIV)

### The Failure of Pontius Pilate

By all contemporary accounts the man was an able administrator. No one could say this was a soft assignment; the Jews were constantly harboring revolt against the Romans. Rome was none too generous with troops for a provincial governor (troops cost money). So Pilate was expected to thread his way through the maze of Jewish politics, keeping a firm hand on the country, and seeing to it that taxes were collected, order kept and Roman citizens treated with proper respect. The best we can say of the man is this: he was an able bureaucrat. How, then, did he fail?

#### Warnings

It’s not as if the man wasn’t warned.

- ✚ First, he was warned by the Roman sense of justice. The Romans were great builders but not great philosophers. They had, however, a keen sense of justice. As Paul found out, a Roman citizen had every right to expect honest judgment from a Roman court. It’s just that sometimes it’s not very convenient. That squeezes men; plastic or steel will soon be shown.
- ✚ Next, if nothing else, he had his own conscience to warn him. Now it may be that before becoming a bureaucrat you must have your conscience surgically removed. Pilate, however, displays all the emotions of a man whose conscience is telling him one thing and his political instinct another.
- ✚ Finally, in the other Gospels, we find that Pilate’s wife had a dream about the man. These things were taken most seriously in those days. Her advice from the start was for him to have nothing to do with the situation. Unfortunately for his reputation, Pilate got in too deep too quickly to come out with honor.

### Political maneuvers

The man is an experienced politician. There being no babies to kiss, he came up with three attempts to distance himself from Jesus.

- ✦ First, he proposes a compromise. He will have the man flogged publicly (always an edifying spectacle for the populace) and then released. But the priests are clearly not satisfied. They've grasped the fact that Pilate can be moved to get along and go along. Their commitment to their cause is much greater than his commitment to justice – and they know it.
- ✦ So, he adopts the "Poison Pill" defense. It's customary at Passover for the governor to release a prisoner (a demonstration of Rome's sweet reasonableness). Which would you rather have: the known villain Barabbas, or this fellow Jesus?
- ✦ Finally, when all else fails, he attempts to transfer the guilt (and particularly the shame) of this kangaroo court to the Jews. He ceremonially washes his hands of the matter. The Jews of the mob accept this – and bring condemnation upon themselves.

It's curious. In the Old Testament, Aaron was to bring two goats to the Tabernacle for a sin offering. He cast lots, and one goat became God's goat – and was sacrificed. The other became the scapegoat – and was released into the wilderness, free.

### Saw – but wouldn't take the risk

Pilate is no amateur at this. His failure is not one of poor recognition but of a complete lack of willingness to take the ultimate risk.

- ✦ He knew quite well that the accusations were false. He also knew the motive: envy. He spots that immediately, and tries to use it. He hoped to produce shame in the priests. It didn't work.
- ✦ Justice – he believed in that. But only until it got risky. After all, the worst man in office can do more than the best man out of office, right?
- ✦ His real problem is this: he is so accustomed to half measures, compromises and sweet dealings that he is not willing to risk all on the innocence of one man. He saw his duty, and failed it.

My father put it this way: "If a man's principles don't cost him anything, they're not worth much."

### How does the Christian deal with such injustice?

American Christians view all this as so much history. We're convinced that persecution is something that happens to Christians in Ethiopia. We are happy to pray for them; might even chip in a buck or two for their relief – but it's not our problem.

Yet.

### Window on church and state

Our Lord gives us the model for dealing with state persecution: innocent suffering. He does this despite the fact that Pilate's authority comes, ultimately, from God (a point he makes clear in the account in John's Gospel). Now, if the ultimate authority submits himself to such persecution, upon what grounds do we refuse to suffer?

If you will see it, our Lord here gives us the method for dealing with persecution. We will acknowledge God and bring glory to him by suffering silently.

### The silence that screams “Shame!”

Note that there is only one question to which Jesus gives an answer: “Are you the king of the Jews?” Why this particular item, rather than defending himself against the charges of the Jews? I submit this: in no other question do we see the glory of God revealed. But it is God’s purpose that Jesus go to the cross. Only where the glory of God is involved does he speak. For the rest, silence screams “Shame!” at his accusers.

In effect, having proclaimed himself as the “I AM” of Scripture, he then lets his silence convict his accusers. It’s as if he said to Pilate, “Just listen to their accusations, and see if it makes sense to you.” Pilate gets the point – that’s why he washes his hands.

### All to God

We look at this and tend to view it as being something we admire, but would never do. Our first reaction is to hire the best lawyer we can afford. How is it that, as Americans, our reaction is so different than that of Christ?

- ✚ Americans are “action people.” We view our Christianity as something we “do.” We do not see it as something which “is.” But it is exactly that difference which defines things temporal and things eternal. All the things of God “are” – for his name is “I AM”. Doing is this world. Our view is too short; we see this life only.

- ✚ It brings up a question: am I willing to endure suffering for the sake of others? If my suffering (or even death) brought about someone else’s salvation, that would be a grand imitation of Christ. But would I do it? Only if I am fully committed to Christ. Partial commitment will find an excuse.

The question is not hypothetical. Even now the forces of this world are gathering to make true Christianity something to be hunted down and destroyed. As I write this, there are those who cannot get a job unless they are willing to proclaim the righteousness of homosexuality, and this is just the beginning.

How about us?

Do we see any echoes of our own character here in this story?

### Rationalization

Pilate, in a sense, transferred the guilt and shame to the Jews when he washed his hands. It reminds me of the probably apocryphal tour guide in Jerusalem. When asked what changed when the Jews took the city in 1967, he said, “Before, I told people that this is the spot where the Jews crucified Jesus. Now, I tell them it’s the spot where the Romans crucified Jesus.”

Why do we rationalize like that? Because we want to go along with the crowd. We want to be esteemed, to be appreciated, to feel that we fit in. We practice this a lot – and so we are very good at it.

Like Pilate, however, there comes a time of choice. We must select either the partial commitment to Christ which this world tolerates (and even encourages), or the complete

commitment to Christ which is sure to be resented (and may be persecuted as well). We can rationalize, or we can be devoted.

### Feelings and Facts

One thing is clear in this episode: Pilate cannot transfer the guilt. But he can transfer the shame. He can walk away from this episode feeling good about himself. What's the difference?

- ✦ Feelings, such as shame, are usually the right reaction to facts. But not always. When we rationalize as Pilate did, we eliminate the shame. We feel good.
- ✦ But we're not innocent. Guilt is not just a matter of emotions – but rather it is a fact. It's a fact that we must deal with, either in accepting Christ's atonement, or rejecting it.
- ✦ But beware of one thing: long abuse dulls the conscience and quenches the Spirit. If you keep on rationalizing, eventually all sense of shame disappears. The fact of guilt, however, remains.

### What God will do

In writing this lesson, I have avoided one question: why do we rationalize? Why do we seek the compromise? Why do we refuse to accept suffering?

- ✦ We will not suffer because we do not really believe God is able. If we saw our suffering as a key unlocking salvation for others, we might be more willing. If we saw in our suffering an offense which God would punish, we might be more willing. But if we see our God as one who would not really interfere in the affairs of church and state, we then must rely on our own resources. If you're on your own, why would you want to suffer?
- ✦ We don't believe He is able to move in our affairs because we are not 100% committed to him. We picture him as we know ourselves to be: partially committed, and willing to drop the matter as soon as the going gets rough. Our lack of commitment makes us see our Lord as powerless.
- ✦ We need to remember how this story turned out. The Jews handed Jesus over to the Romans for crucifixion. In AD 70, God handed the Jews over to those same Romans – to be crushed, their Temple burned and to be scattered all over the face of the globe.

So then, let us gather our courage together. Relying on our Lord, let us be willing to suffer all things for the Lover of our souls.

## The Crucifixion - Mark 15:16-47

The events of the Crucifixion are familiar to all Christians. Indeed, the peril of the lesson is that the teacher repeats himself to the point of being dull – on the most important subject. This should not be. We begin by letting the Bible speak for itself.

The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. And they began to call out to him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him. A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross. They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull). Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get. It was the third hour when they crucified him. The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS. They crucified two robbers with him, one on his right and one on his left, [*and the scripture was fulfilled which says, "He was counted with the lawless ones."*] Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!" In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him. At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*"—which means, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" When some of those standing near heard this, they said, "Listen, he's calling Elijah." One man ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down," he said. With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there. It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached, Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph. So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid.

(Mark 15:16-47 NIV)

### Events before the Cross (Mark's view)

Mark has selected certain events with which he portrays the Crucifixion. It is not my intention to provide a complete view of this event, but rather to look through Mark's eyes, asking, "Why did he include that?"

### Flogging

Mark begins with the flogging. It may surprise you, but the flogging is an act of mercy – and efficiency. A man simply nailed to the cross might take many days to die – days which would occupy soldiers to make sure the man wasn't removed from the cross by friends. During those many days, the victim would suffer constantly. Flogging shortened the suffering.

What's that to us? Perhaps in our own lives God has led us through suffering. We ask why; it just may be that this is the shortest path to God's desire. By suffering Christ was fitted for God's purpose; we should expect the same.

### Mockery – the crown of thorns

Capital punishment in America has a rather antiseptic air about it. It is dignified, almost formal. This is the exception in history. Executions have usually been public affairs presented for the entertainment of the populace. The soldiers here are doing no more than they would have done with any other prisoner. They let loose the full venom of the human spirit.

Note, please, how our Lord endures it. In silence. It is his way of answering the mocker. It is a lesson for us, as well. We often want to answer a fool according to his folly. Our Lord here brings out the power of silence. Our silence signals the end of reasonable discussion and the beginning of mockery. It is very difficult to do, but in the end such silence speaks louder than any words.

### Simon of Cyrene carries the cross

To understand this you need a little historical background. First, this procession with the victim carrying his cross (and the placard announcing his crime) was a feature of Roman justice. Justice? Yes indeed. If someone in the crowd knew of a reason that the man should not be crucified, he was commanded to speak up. In theory, at least, this prevented the execution of an innocent man.

Sometimes, however, the flogging was so severe that it meant the victim could not carry the cross. In this instance the Roman soldier used his authority. Part of being a Roman conquest was the fact that a soldier could compel someone to carry a burden for about a mile – taxation by sweat, so to speak. He could not compel a citizen to do this – but a conquered subject could be compelled. (This is the source of the statement about a man compelling you to go one mile, you go two). That's what's happening here.

Can you look at this instance and not see the point? We are the "Simon" of our time. The world looks at us and says, "Carry Jesus' burden." Indeed, that is our privilege. We are the body of Christ, and therefore we must carry his burdens. He carried the sins of the world with Him. We must at least be willing to carry the lesser burdens. It is surprising sometimes to see how many Christians are willing to do this – until it becomes inconvenient.

### On the Cross

Mark's selection of events on the Cross gives us these:

### The placard

Isn't it interesting that Pontius Pilate got it right? The other accounts tell us that the Jewish leaders argued with him about this placard. Mark simply records its existence. It is one of those fine details by which God exhibits his sovereignty.

Have you ever been "labeled?" Put in a pigeon hole by the way the world works? It can be very frustrating. Children in school often find this. One teacher writes down a negative comment on the "permanent record" (how we feared that when I was a child!) and from then on it becomes absolute truth – even if the child changes. In this instance the accusation is indeed a proud title.

But consider: do we confine God in our lives this way? Do we place a label on his shirt and say, "thus far – and no farther?"

### Between two thieves

Have you ever been in a jail? A prison, perhaps? It is something with which my wife and I have become familiar. There is a certain hardness in the cruel clang of the doors. Jails are at the same time kept very clean – so that the air of scum confined will penetrate all the better. My wife, after her first trip to visit someone in prison, said "I want to go back to the hotel room, take off all my clothes and burn them, and take a shower."

Jesus went through that same feeling. The feeling of being thrown together with the scum of the earth. The King of Kings endured that for us. Is it any wonder, then, that one of the tests for entry into the kingdom is whether or not we have visited those in prison? If he – who arranges all things – could go through this, which of us is too good to visit prisoners?

### Mockery of the people

Ideas go in and out of fashion – which has nothing to do whatever with their truth. The mood of the crowd has turned against Jesus, and some of those who shouted "Hosanna" just a week ago are now mocking him.

It's a lesson for us. One week things are going well, and we pat ourselves on the back for doing things right. Next week we are out of fashion – do we then blame ourselves? Or do we continue to do what is right, whether we are praised for it or blamed for it?

### Mocked by the priests

In every generation there are those who are the "intellectual leaders." It is amazing how each generation has two consistent ideas:

- ✚ The previous generations, unenlightened by our wisdom, got it wrong, and
- ✚ We got it right.

These priests had the entire Old Testament before them – and could not see the Christ when he came. But are we much better? There are those in the church who have "discovered" that homosexuality is not sin (a fact which escaped the notice of a hundred generations of Christians). Indeed, there are those in our own church who have "discovered" that the roles of husband and wife

are interchangeable. These are the people who mock the old-fashioned sort who read the Bible to find truth, not their own opinions. Have we progressed?

## Death

### The cry of despair

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It is one of those passages which gives theology a bad name. Let’s take it at face value: it is the cry of the one who had no sin yet became sin itself – so that we might appear sinless before God.

It is a horrible cry. Have you ever heard a small child crying out in terror for her mother? If you can hear the rising panic in the voice of a child like that, you have an echo of what has happened here. The one source of all good has been cut off; this is truly the cry of the hopeless. He went through that – for us.

### The loud cry

We know from other Gospels that the cry was, “It is finished.” Mark does not give the words, only that it was a loud one. What can we learn from that? Certainly this: Jesus death was a voluntary one. He came for that purpose. A man who is dying a natural death (especially one being crucified) does not have a loud cry as his last word. No, it’s a feeble whisper. But Jesus dies as he must – willingly.

It brings up a question: He died for you, voluntarily. What do you do, voluntarily, for Him?

## Reaction

There are four reactions observed in Mark’s Gospel:

### Centurion

The centurion could hardly have been unaware of the struggle surrounding the death of Christ. He would know that this was another of what seemed an endless series of haggings over the minutest of things. His reaction at first must have been one of a man carrying out an unpleasant (but all too familiar) task.

See the change: At the end, the centurion knows that Jesus must be the Son of God. Please note one thing: it is not the resurrection which changes the man’s mind. It is Christ’s death. The manner in which he died was that of God.

I wonder; do we ever think on that? Do we ever realize that Christ died like God? If God (in the flesh) dies this horrible death – and does it in such a way as to convince a hard nosed Army sergeant – what impact does it have on us?

### The women

Of all the followers of Jesus, only the women remain to the end. They say nothing; they are just there. They see him die; they know he is dead. Then they have a task – embalming the body. It seems so hopeless, yet they are there.

How about us? Are we Christians only as long as everything is upbeat and cheerful? Or do we press on, doing what we can, even in the times of despair? It is likely enough that we will soon get an answer to that question.

### Joseph of Arimathea

One of the enigmas of the New Testament is this man. See how he is emboldened by Christ's death! Just at the point where things appear to be hopeless, he comes forward. We know from other Scriptures that he was a secret disciple. Secret, because he would lose his position in the Sanhedrin if he proclaimed it publicly. That doesn't speak very well of the man, does it?

But now – when all appears truly hopeless – he shows himself to be devoted. He does something that the world would say is foolish. Perhaps he is trying to atone for the cowardice of secret discipleship. One thing is certain: the death of Christ changed Joseph radically.

How about us? Does his death – his sacrifice – change us? If not, why not?

### The curtain

There is one final witness. It is the curtain in the Temple that hides the Holy of Holies. It is torn – starting at the top. The meaning is clear: God himself has torn it, opening up the way for all who believe to have direct access to him.

That rip in the cloth – which changes our access to God – was very costly. The price was willingly paid so that you and I might have eternal life. I leave you with one last question: do our lives show it?

“His shame took away our shame

His bonds made us free

By the thorny crown of His head we have obtained the crown of the Kingdom

By His wounds we are healed”

## Women at the Tomb - Mark 16:1-11

It is a little noted fact: the first people to discover the Resurrection were women. Indeed, the first one to see the Risen Lord was a woman who had suffered through demon possession.

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid. [When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it.

(Mark 16:1-11 NIV)

### The Women

In the various Gospel accounts we have record of more than the three mentioned here. However, as we have followed Mark's account, we shall look only at these three.

#### Mary Magdalene

To understand Mary Magdalene you need only think of the stigma attached to mental illness today. I leave it to you: just how comfortable would you feel around someone whom you knew as a one-time raving maniac? Mary's case was worst than most. In small town Palestine she would be a well known figure. She'd be the one locked up in a mental hospital today, behind thick glass and steel doors.

But great forgiveness produces great love, and Mary Magdalene loved her Lord very much. We know two other things about her:

- ✚ She, like several other women, supported Jesus out of her own purse while he was in his three year ministry. This was not unknown in their time, and was considered a pious act.
- ✚ She and some of the others traveled with him and his band of disciples.

#### Mary, mother of James

There are six women named Mary in the New Testament. Of this one we know only this: her son wrote the book of James in the New Testament. This is not James the Apostle, who died first among them. It is likely enough that she too supported and followed Jesus on his preaching expeditions.

#### Salome

This name is a bit deceiving, in that we think of Herodias' daughter who danced before Herod. This is not the same woman – because this woman is the mother of James and John, the sons of

Zebedee. Confused yet? She is most noted for her attempt to use her influence on Jesus to have her sons sitting at the right and left hand of Christ when he comes in power in his kingdom.

So we have another traveler with Jesus, this time an older woman. It is not unlikely that she played the role of “Mom” to the younger women on tour.

#### The least of these...

Little do we know of them, yet they were first at the empty tomb. In their society they would be regarded as of little worth.

- ✚ They have taken on the task of embalming a dead body. That makes them ceremonially unclean.
- ✚ Worse, the body in question was a victim of crucifixion. The body itself would be mangled in the flogging. The victim of crucifixion would not be something which would recommend itself to society. This is the same reaction you get when you tell someone you’re visiting a friend in prison – they’re a little suspicious of people who have such friends.
- ✚ They are at the bottom of the social ladder, and they have taken on this unpleasant task voluntarily. So it is that the last shall be first, and the first, last.

#### First to see Jesus

It escapes many of the learned writers, but I suspect someone eventually asked the question: why were these women permitted to be the first witnesses of the Resurrection?

#### Prepared to deal with death

Perhaps it is because they have come prepared to deal with death – just as Jesus prepared to deal with it.

- ✚ In a sense, it is where ultimate realism meets ultimate reality. The ultimate in realism for us is to stare death in the face, seeing its horrors. The ultimate reality is Jesus, who has conquered death. They were prepared for the worst; Jesus showed them the best.
- ✚ They prepared as a servant would. Jesus, the Servant-King, honored those who were prepared to serve. (It is interesting that none of the disciples would touch this little problem).
- ✚ Finally, there is an act of kindness in this towards one whom Jesus loves. In that time Jesus would normally have been embalmed by his mother, or perhaps sisters. These women spared Mary the agony of embalming the body of her firstborn.

#### Obedience

You don’t have to be a Christian long before you hear the word obedience – and learn how important it is. See how obedience is rewarded here!

- ✚ Likely enough they see it as an unpleasant chore, but note that there is no complaining.
- ✚ Like good servants, they do not postpone the unpleasant, but get there as soon as possible under the law.

#### Faith

Faith? Surely one cannot believe they had any faith left. After all, they were coming to embalm the body, not witness the Resurrection. But we forget something: the stone. There is a massive stone in front of the tomb, one well beyond their strength. *But they went to the tomb anyway.* They had no

faith in the Resurrection at all. But they had faith that God would somehow solve this problem for them.

- ✦ It is a characteristic of living faith: you know that if God commands, God will supply. If he says embalm, he will find someone to move the stone.
- ✦ Just because we can't see how he's going to do it doesn't mean that he can't. He never told us we'd see it; he just told us to do.  
God is not limited by your vision; he limits you in accord with your faith.

### Little things

In the grand scheme of things this is not a major event. People die every day. Something has to be done with the bodies. The women did not expect praise or reward, likely enough. But see how the extravagance of God takes a little thing and rewards it most richly.

### Reaction

Perhaps it's the pitch of women's voices. Anyone who can talk three times as fast as I can is naturally going to cause some suspicion. But note that these women are no more ready to believe the Resurrection than the men.

### The Angel

The angel announces the good news to them – after the obligatory “fear not”, angels being terrifying in general. How do the women react? They run away. Even the word of an angel of God is not sufficient to overcome their fear and their certainty that death is unconquerable.

What a proof of the Resurrection! These women were not about to be taken in. Their immediate reaction is to run for help. So they go get Peter and John, who run back with them. John believes; Peter wonders. But they are not the only actors on our stage.

### Mary Magdalene returns to the tomb

We must reference John's account to hear the end of the story:

Then the disciples went back to their homes, but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. "Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.  
(John 20:10-18 NIV)

### Crying at the tomb

None of us could fault the woman for what she is doing. She has come to embalm a body – a sad enough task – and now she can't find the body. The angels ask her why, and her answer is plain enough. Just tell me what you did with the body and I'll take care of it from there.

Note that she answers the angels – but does not truly answer the voice clouded by her tears. She does not pay too much attention to this “gardener.” She is to the point where her pain and her tears have taken charge. Matters are at their worst for her.

Until she turns, hearing the word, “Mary.” Jesus calls her name; she turns and nothing is ever the same again. Mark's account tells us that she will tell the disciples about this – and not be believed. But it does not matter now.

### Repentance

There is a distinct parallel here. When things are just so messed up that we have no idea what to do (but we know it's going to be very unpleasant) – through the haze of our tears Jesus calls. He calls each of us, knowing us by name. The call is to repentance; the call is to eternal life. If you will turn and hear his voice, you can cling to him. But you have to turn towards him first.

Remember this when you do: it is just as the angels said. He is not here; He is Risen. And nothing has been the same since.

## Good News - Mark 16:12-20

We come to the end of Mark's Gospel. This is the 29<sup>th</sup> lesson in the series – and even at that it seems to be too soon to leave. But endings often have lessons of their own, as we shall see:

Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either. Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen. He said to them, **"Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well."** After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.]  
(Mark 16:12-20 NIV)

### The Rebuke

It is well known to those who follow Christ: he whom Christ loves, Christ disciplines and rebukes.<sup>24</sup> Often we resent the discipline and ignore the rebuke. But as we shall see, we are not the ones in control.

- ✚ Our Lord rebukes the disciples for their lack of faith. Not for the first time, his love for his own causes him to point out their failure. We may not like it – but it is a sign of his love.<sup>25</sup>
- ✚ Mark expresses it this way: “stubborn refusal.” The problem is not the disciples unwillingness to change; it's their stubbornness. Sometimes stupidity becomes a matter of principle.
- ✚ But see that even in this grave matter, Christ brings a greater good out of evil. Had the disciples been quick to believe, we might wonder about the truth of the resurrection. They too would benefit; they would not say, “I must be in great favor with God; I saw the resurrected Lord.” Every time the words would form in their mouths, they would have to remember how stubbornly they refused to believe.

“They should have known better.” Yes, it looks so simple from this side of the resurrection. It is a lesson in human nature; even after three years with Jesus, faith was still hard to come by.

### The Great Commission

Mark's version of the great commission is somewhat different than other writers. We need to remember that exact quotation may not be implied here. As usual, Mark gets down to the basics quickly.

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<sup>24</sup> Revelation 3:19

<sup>25</sup> A personal note: My right eye does not function correctly. From the circumstances I have inferred this is God disciplining me. The eye patch that stares back at me from the mirror is a reminder, both of my sins and his love.

### The basics – Who? Where? What?

The disciples are told to preach the Gospel. We often use the word “share” today, but the command is “preach.” The Greek word might also be translated “herald.” To put it shortly, they are to go out and in as public a place as they may find they are to tell the world about Jesus Christ.

- ✚ To whom? To all the world. The Greek word used here is *ethnos*, which can also be translated tribe. It is the root word of our word “ethnic”. Some hold that until every tribe hears the word, Christ will not come. Who can say? But one thing is certain: the church is to carry the message to all.
- ✚ Where? In our age of air travel it is easy to say, “the whole world.” But look at it from a first century perspective. The Roman empire was huge enough – so the task looked impossible. But Christ provides even for that; miraculous signs to authenticate the heralds of the Gospel.
- ✚ What? Ah, now that is a troublesome question. Just exactly are we supposed to preach? Here it is called “good news.” Often in the Scripture we see the phrase, “the good news of the kingdom.” We are to preach the kingdom of God – not our own interpretation of it.

### Steps in the process

If you’d like to start a rousing argument, get a bunch of evangelicals from different church names and ask them to lay out the minimum requirements for salvation. You won’t have to wait long for the sparks.

- ✚ Here, Mark gives us two criteria: belief and baptism. Belief we must understand in the active sense (believe and do) as opposed to the intellectual sense (believe alone). Baptism is the initiation rite of all Christians.
- ✚ But what about the other steps? Where’s repentance? Where’s confession? Surely these are required, and various groups will come forward with selected passages. Surely one thing is clear: this is not clear.
- ✚ This points up the problem. There is no one passage of Scripture which lays out the complete process of salvation. There may be a reason for that: perhaps it cannot be pigeon-holed into a process. Perhaps we’re not dealing with a process, but a Person.

### What about Aunt Tillie?

I suspect each of us, if we looked hard enough, could find an Aunt Tillie in our family tree. Aunt Tillie (God rest her soul) was a devout and faithful Christian, evidenced by her piety and good works. Unfortunately for either us or Aunt Tillie, she was in the wrong congregation. Alas, she was sprinkled, or she was baptized as an infant and confirmed. So the question arises, “Is Aunt Tillie in heaven?”

There are two questions confused in that:

- ✚ What is the minimum that a man must do to be saved?
- ✚ Is the specific person (Tillie) in heaven?

You can see how the answer to the second would limit or expand the answer to the first. If Tillie is in heaven, even though she was sprinkled, then sprinkling is OK with Christ, right?

Wrong. If you want the right answers, you have to ask the right questions. If you ask the minimum a man can do, you asked the wrong question. What's the right question? "What must I do?"<sup>26</sup>

Mark in this passage gives us two "must do" things.

- ✚ Believe. Do not ask "believe what?" if you are looking for the minimum.
- ✚ Be baptized. This is the greatest change in life a man can make; surely it should be marked in time. This is that marker.

### The Ascension

No fact in Scripture provides greater evidence of the Resurrection than the change in the disciples. In a very short time they went from fear to boldness, and then turned the world upside down.

But the Resurrection brings with it a problem. The church has always taught that Christ was raised in a physical body. Indeed, the body in question is somehow connected with the body laid in the tomb. And that poses a problem.

If the Risen Lord were some form of ghost he could fade in and out of the story of the church. But Jesus has a body, and if He leaves, the body leaves. Jesus must leave so that the Holy Spirit will come. But how to do it?

Human beings need to mark such things. We have funerals. Funerals are not for the dead but the living. They help the living mark and go through the transition in life. Such a transition – though completely joyful – happens here. If you have a body, and you're leaving, you have to go someplace.

Where then? To sit at the right hand of God.

- ✚ "Seated" implies that he is equal with God the Father. Even today it is impolite to sit in the presence of royalty without specific command.
- ✚ "Right hand" implies that he is first in importance in the kingdom. We still use the phrase "right hand man."
- ✚ But not forever; for he is returning in similar manner.

### Gone – but not gone

His body is gone, but his body is still here. That body is the church, the visible presence of Christ on earth. We are his body; therefore we must perform his tasks.

- ✚ As He preached the good news of the kingdom, so must we.
- ✚ He did works of healing and feeding the poor; so must we.
- ✚ In short, our lives are to be lived in "the imitation of Christ."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> OK, so you're worried about Aunt Tillie. Just remember: she is now God's problem. He needs no assistance from you. Admission to the Kingdom is personal – and the person you need to know is Jesus, the Christ.

<sup>27</sup> And for those of you who've never heard the phrase, you should know WWJD – what would Jesus do?

You'll notice that nowhere in this lesson have we said, "Just exactly what is the good news?" That's a question that has pushed many a debate. But may I share with you one of the better answers? It comes from Dorothy Sayers:

"The right Faith is, that we believe that Jesus Christ is God *and* Man. Perfect God and perfect Man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting. Who, although He be God and Man, yet He is not two, but one Christ." There is the essential doctrine, of which the whole elaborate structure of Christian faith and morals is only the logical consequence.

Now, we may call that doctrine exhilarating or we may call it devastating; we may call it revelation or we may call it rubbish; but if we call it dull then words have no meaning at all. That God should play the tyrant over man is a dismal story of unrelieved oppression; that man should play the tyrant over man is the usual dreary record of human futility; but that man should play the tyrant over God and find Him a better man than himself is an astonishing drama indeed. Any journalist, hearing it for the first time, would recognize it as news, and good news at that; though we are apt to forget that the word Gospel ever meant anything so sensational.

Perhaps the drama is played out now, and Jesus is safely dead and buried. Perhaps. It is ironical and entertaining to consider that once at least in the world's history those words might have been spoken with complete conviction, and that was upon the eve of the Resurrection.