

THE GOSPEL OF MARK

A YALE BIBLE STUDY

with Allen Hilton

Session Five – Who is Jesus and How Do We Follow Him?

Mark 8.22—10.52

“When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

“I have decided to follow Jesus,” says the old hymn.

“Where You go, I’ll go

Where You stay, I’ll stay

When You move, I’ll move

I will follow...” says the contemporary Christian artist.

Our music reflects the centuries of faithful folk who have longed to become and be disciples of the One from Nazareth. In Mark, the first opportunities go to fishermen on the Sea of Galilee (1.16-20) and a tax collector in a seaside village (2.12-13). Then, pretty soon (almost “immediately”), some from the masses who flock to see him surely begin to wonder whether they’ll get the call, and exactly what it means to fall in line behind this mysterious, wonder-working teacher called Jesus.

The answer doesn’t come as quickly as the question. Have you noticed as you’ve read that Jesus doesn’t say anything about what it is to follow him – other than a cryptic “I will make you fish for people” – through this whole first half the book? Don’t get me wrong: he has covered his share of ground. Jesus has announced that,

- the Kingdom of God has come and repentance is the appropriate response (1.14-15),
- God’s forgiveness is on offer through the Son of Man (3rd person reference to self – 2.1-11),
- He is like a doctor, treating people who need help (2.17),

- Sabbath is made for humanity and not the other way around (2.27),
- Son of Man (3rd-person reference to self) has authority over Sabbath (2.28),
- Sabbath is built for doing good (3.1-6),
- his power is from above (not below) (3.19-26),
- he's here to "bind the [evil powers that he here calls the] strongman" and take his stuff (3.27-30),
- his true family are those who do God's will (3.31-35),
- there was this seed-thrower... (4.1-9),
- parables are sometimes meant to be mysterious (4.12),
- a lamp used properly shines widely (4.21-25),
- the Kingdom is like grain growing unnoticed (4.26-29)
- the Kingdom is like a tiny seed that grows to remarkable size (4.30-32),
- prophets don't receive their due in their hometown (6.1-6)
- missionaries ought to be hosted well (6.6-13),
- the way people do purity gets things backward sometimes (7.1-23),
- a sign-seeking generation will be disappointed (8.11-13), and
- somehow his folks are supposed to watch out for yeasty Pharisees and Herodians (8.14-15)

So, we've learned a whole lot about Jesus (Christology), a bit about the Kingdom, a bit about the way God things about things (theology), and a bit about the way the world goes (wisdom). What we have not yet heard much about is what we ought to do if we want to sign on for Jesus' Way. We haven't heard what it is to be a disciple.

Discipleship comes front and center midway through chapter eight. Let's beam in and see what Jesus says!

The Starting Point: Who is Jesus?

The middle schooler asks, "What does Heather/Henry think of me?" or "Do I look good in this outfit?" or "Do these glasses make me look like a nerd?"

Politicians ask, "Do people like my policies?" or "How many percentage points have we gained in the district?"

Jesus asks a more substantive question, "Who do people say that I am?" He knows they've been curious. His own disciples asked the question out loud in that barely-aflloat boat after the storm. "Who is this...?!?" It turns out that public opinion has landed on a category: Jesus is a prophet – like (the harried-by-Ahab Elijah or (the recently-deceased-at-the-hands-of-Herod) John the Baptist, or one of the other (often-persecuted-or-killed) prophets. I imagine Israel's prophets had trouble buying life insurance, given their pre-existing condition of dangerous vocation.

Jesus does not comment on his disciples' public opinion report. Instead, he asks an uncomfortably direct question: "Who do you say that I am?"

Mark doesn't usually narrate delays or hemming and hawing or awkwardness, but we must imagine some. It's the kind of question that sends people looking at their shoes for a moment. Then the brashest among them, Peter, clears his throat and answers:

You're the Messiah!

How do you imagine Peter here (multiple choice):

- tentative, like a mediocre algebra student who isn't sure of his proof;
- fully confident that his answer is correct, like the curve-buster who studies all the time;
- other.

That word "Messiah" meant different things to different people, as you know. We'll discover a bit about Peter's level of confidence and his definition of this important title in a moment. For now, we should give him points for being brave enough to venture an answer.

When Jesus hears Peter's reply, he says something very familiar:

He sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. (8.30)

We've learned to hear Jesus' shushing as an affirmative. But the apparently-successful algebra student doesn't go to his seat quietly, because the teacher has more to say about the answer:

He began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. (8.31)

The narrator adds that Jesus said this "with *PARRESIA*", which our English translators render as "openly" (NRSV, KJV) or "plainly" (NIV, NASB, ESV). The word started as "freedom to speak", a virtue of Athenian democracy. As Greece gave way to Rome, and Roman Republic gave way to Roman Empire, the term evolved from a political right into a moral virtue. In some usages, it continued to cover free or flowing speech (plainly or openly), but in other circles it began to describe bold or courageous speech (see Acts 4.13).

Let's review:

- popular opinion has it that Jesus is a prophet, most of whom eventually meet a violent end.
- Peter has it that Jesus is the Messiah, which usually pictures a ruler like David;
- Jesus says, "Yes" to Messiah as a status and (implicitly) "Yes" to prophet as a prediction of his future suffering.

- Mark writes in Rome where people who speak freely/boldly before tyrants usually meet a violent end.

In that context, neither the translation that Jesus spoke this “openly” (not in secret) nor that he spoke it “plainly” (without ambiguity) quite captures the danger his content summons.

What’s the payoff here? Even though Jesus speaks these things before a friendly audience (as opposed to tyrants), our narrator may be saying that Jesus spoke this painful future “bravely”. If so, that courage comes in handy with the exchange that follows; because we learn pretty quickly that Peter had another kind of Messiah in mind. “Peter rebuked Jesus” (*EPITIMAO*) for even suggesting that plight for Messiah. He clearly has in mind a conqueror of a different sort. But the teacher now sits the student down, because, when he shows how he got his answer, it turns out he has it wrong after all.

“Jesus...rebuked Peter. (EPITMAO) ‘Get behind me, Satan!’ he said. ‘You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.’”

Of all the things you want to hear from the mouth of Jesus, this is not one. Jesus is ready to face the danger. Peter wants to take it away. Jesus calls him “Satan” – Tempter. Six chapters down the road, in a poignant Gethsemane moment, Jesus will ask the same question of God: “Father, take this cup from me...” (14.36)

What does Mark accomplish with this brief moment in our narrative? Danger is in the air. It began in 3.6, when we heard that Pharisees and Herodians began to plot Jesus’ demise; but the impending danger gets much more specific and real here. As we saw last week, the disciples seem oblivious to this deepening – not only here, but in the second and third “passion predictions” that lie ahead in chapters 9 and 10. But for Mark’s original audience and for us – in fact, for all who know where this story is headed – the exchange between Jesus and Peter becomes a poignant moment of access to Jesus’ resolve and vision: he will be the Messiah who suffers.

Jesus’ Death and the Shape of Discipleship

For many of us who either pastor or lay-lead congregations or other Christian groups, the daily question in an attendance-challenged age is simple: how do we entice people to attend our event/come to worship/join our church? It taxes our creativity and tempts us to coax. “No, our church is really fun. We have great pot lucks/camps/kids programs/youth groups.” We market and brand and woo and hope.

Disciples Descend Part I

After letting his closest disciples in on his own perilous journey ahead (or trying to, at least), Jesus widens the circle and answers the question we – Gospel characters, Mark’s audience, and

21st-century Yale Bible Study students – have all been waiting for (“he called the crowd to him”):

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.

Discipleship = Self-Denial and the Specter of Death. That is grim. Discipleship is about losing life? What terrible marketing! Who will sign up?

Jesus continues:

What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?

Here Jesus shifts the system of value from Peter’s “human concerns” to “the concerns of God.” So, the people who will sign up, the following Jesus seems keen on drawing, are people who make that profound shift. In the group of disciples, in Mark’s original audience, and among our 21st-century lot, these are hard words to hear. One wonders how things will go for all three of those groups as we read on.

Transfiguration – “Who Is Jesus?” Revisited

We’ve heard who the people think Jesus is (prophet) and who Peter (and the disciples?) think Jesus is (Rome-conquering Messiah). We’re even getting a bead on who Jesus says he is (Suffering Messiah). Given the difficult implications of Jesus’ vision for the people who follow him – along with the temptation of his disciples, Mark’s audience, and us to tune out or question Jesus’ claim – it seems not at all coincidental that the next voice we hear will be God’s confirmation.

The transfiguration may be familiar to you: Jesus invites Peter (recently called Satan), James, and John (both soon to prove how utterly oblivious they are to the shape of true discipleship) on a little hike up the hill. Then three big things happen in rapid succession:

- Jesus suddenly starts to turn bright;
- Elijah and Moses suddenly show up; and
- These two luminaries have a little chat with Jesus.

It’s no wonder Peter, James, and John are “frightened.” In a way, this is even stranger than the storm at sea. They reach for words: “Shall we make a fort?”

Then comes the sound of another character whom Moses (Sinai), Elijah (Moriah), Jesus (baptism), Mark’s audience, and we (baptism) have all heard before:

“a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud, ‘This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!’”

To Peter, James, and John the voice is new and surely at least as frightening as the first three things they’ve seen. If they came away from Caesarea Philippi wondering, “Has Jesus got this die-in-Jerusalem-and-call-disciples-to-carry-crosses picture wrong?”, this should drive home the point. Jesus’ vision and resolve receive the divine endorsement when God’s voice from above resounds: “Listen to him!”

Discipleship Themes Played Out

If the Caesarea Philippi session becomes Ground Zero for discipleship, the whole rest of Jesus’ time with the disciples continues its themes.

Disciples Descend II

Jesus’ dire prediction of his earthly future will reappear twice more, his disciples will miss the point twice more (as we saw last session), and Jesus will grab the teachable moment to clear up some things about his vision for them.

After Jesus offers his second “passion prediction” on the road with his disciples (9.31-32), they respond with a little light chatter.

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.

Never one to miss an opportunity, Jesus immediately counters their instinctive desire for prestige:

Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.” (9.33-35)

They seek to rise to the top. Jesus calls them to descend.

“We” Is Wider Than We Think

Intellectual property has become a thing. In an information age, everyone from high school teachers with apps to sniff out their students’ plagiarism, to hard-and software company lawyers, paid to chase down copy-cat products wants to clarify who owns words and technology and ideas.

Jesus’ disciples have the same worry, and Jesus answers with another discipleship principle:

“Teacher,” said John, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.”

In his classic business study, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't*, author Jim Collins notices that successful leaders routinely show they do not care who gets the credit. They just want the job done well. He could be describing Jesus, who quickly corrects his disciples' turf-protecting instinct:

“Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “For 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. (9.38-40)

“Whoever is not against us is for us.” A second discipleship principle.

Value the Vulnerable

With the next three speeches, Jesus comes alongside people whose staying power is threatened.

1. The Group's Responsibility to the Vulnerable One
If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea. (9.42)
2. The Vulnerable One's Responsibility
If your hand causes you to stumble, 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. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, 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. (9.43-47)
3. The Spouse's Responsibility
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.” (10.10-12)

Jesus calls disciples to protect “little ones”, calls “little ones” to take responsibility, and calls spouses to keep their commitment to one another. Especially for women, divorce was a direct road to financial destitution.

Disciples Descend III

In this crucial preparation for Jerusalem (8.22—10.52), Jesus never lets too much time pass between his effort to reroute his prestige-seeking disciples downward. The most extended

version of this comes on the homestretch of this sequence, where he makes kids the literal poster children of the Kingdom (10.13-16), calls a wealthy man to give up his earthly-concerned stuff (10.17-31) and then, in the crowning episodes, juxtaposes the ascent-minded sons of Zebedee to a rightly-humble blind man. In this space, we'll focus on James and John's gaffe next to Bartimaeus (10.35-40 and 46-52). Between the two episodes Jesus presents a most vivid picture of his Way and his purpose.

The familiar story of James and John doesn't need much summary. After Jesus once again foretells his suffering and death, this time in its most agonizing detail (10.32-34), the brothers skip the sentimentality and advance straightway to the business of self-serving-wish-making:

"Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."

Jesus responds as we would expect:

"What do you want me to do for you?"

Of course, they request the prime seats flanking him "in his glory".

The request is ironic in the Gospel: they don't know that they are asking for the two crosses that flank Jesus on Calvary. Jesus sees their oblivion and challenges their wish. The story is vivid and revealing.

Mark's narrator has another other story loaded and ready to be put side-by-side with James and John's: ironically, the tale of a blind man who sees better than the brother's do.

We've found the narrator adept at signaling parallels. Remember how the two synagogue scenes of 1.21-28 and 3.1-6 pulled themselves together by the word "again"? And remember how the two feeding stories pulled themselves together by Jesus' impatience with the disciples' failure to discern his power in the second one? Here the narrator signals the parallel with the precise repetition of Jesus' response.

Blind Bartimaeus has been begging for a while on that Jericho Road, but he "sees" his opportunity when Jesus comes through, and he won't be denied:

He began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

The disciples don't get it. They run interference between Bart and Jesus (as they had with the children). But Jesus ultimately welcomes him with words that are very familiar:

"What do you want me to do for you?"

When Bartimaeus answers, “I want to see!”, he wins the showdown with the brothers, because the seeing he seeks is not merely physical. We realize this when the narrator completes the scene with telling words: “He followed Jesus on the way.” (10.52)

Leading up to this pivotal passage, Mark has subtly littered *our* way with “the way” (Greek: HE HODOS) – possibly without us even really noticing. After a very early cameo in the Gospel, the phrase appears a handful of times in precisely this section on discipleship

- “The Way of the Lord” first appeared as in Mark’s stage set for John the Baptist. (1.3)
- “On the way” through the villages of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks the disciples who the public and they think he is and then predicts his passion the first time. (8.27)
- “On the way” to Capernaum, as Jesus predicts his passion a second time, the disciples ironically argue about who is greatest and Jesus calls them on it. (9.34)
- The rich young man accosts Jesus as he sets out “on the way”. (10.17)
- “On the way” up to Jerusalem, Jesus predicts his death for a third time before James and John make their request. (10.32)

By the time the one who “wants to see” gets his sight, he’s ready to follow Jesus “on the way” and really see. (10.52)

After James and John’s wish to ascend and before Bartimaeus’ decision to walk the way and descend, Jesus calls his disciples close and sets the vision of cross-shaped living:

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.

The claim is clear: descent – the decision to serve rather than be served, to eschew lordly superiority – is the way of discipleship. What do disciples do? They get under people, rather than climbing over them.

One last note of divine irony. Jesus who knows his disciples (and Mark’s audience, and us). He has three times watched them answer his vivid portrait of descent to the cross and grave with oblivious disregard. They are very keen on being great. So how does he phrase the vision: “whoever wants to become great among you...and whoever wants to be first...” Instead of an over-optimistic extinguishing of the competitive instinct, Jesus reroutes Peter’s “Messiah’s conquer” and the disciples “who’s the greatest?” and James and John’s “seats of honor” and our own versions of that: “If you seek greatness, here’s what it looks like: serve and sacrifice for others.”

Bad marketing? Or an invitation to robust human community? Either way, it’s the Way of disciples.

For Next Time

26OCT20 Bright Lights, Big City (Mark 11.1—14.2)

Sometimes we forget that Jesus was a country boy, born to a small-town family and raised in the hill country of Galilee. In these chapters, Mark's Jesus takes his only trip to Jerusalem, the largest city in ancient Palestine, and the power center for Roman and Jewish authorities. It's no wonder Jesus' country disciples marvel, "Whoa! Look at the size of these buildings!" (Mark 13.1) In this session, we'll notice the conflict that arises when Jesus brings his vision and his followers into this hornet's nest of power.

Preparation:

- Read the famous account of Jesus' entry to Jerusalem (11.1-11). There's a whole lot of symbolism in it. What do Jesus' followers think the event means? What does he seem to want it to mean?
- What is Jesus trying to get done when he raises a ruckus in the Temple (11.15-19)
- Who wins the extended, multi-member conflict of Mark 12? What do we learn about the Jewish leaders who question Jesus? What do we learn about Jesus and his purposes?
- Mark 13 features the famous "Little Apocalypse" because it features mysterious knowledge about the future and a divine judgment on the ways of earth. People often take it out of its context and compare it to Revelation and other apocalypses. We'll read it in context. How have chapters 11—12 prepared the disciples (and us) for this content?