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Introduction

With all literature it is important to keep the author in mind as one reads; we want to be sensitive to what the author is telling us. This, I believe, is especially true in the Gospels, where each author paints a different picture of Jesus and of his life.¹ Unfortunately in many Christian circles this does not happen; rather, the four Gospels are lumped together in a misguided attempt to find a historical truth. For example, watch a movie like Mel Gibson's *The Passion* or *The Greatest Story Ever Told*; these films portray the common understanding of Jesus' passion, but, do so by pulling together all four Gospel narratives.² Why is this important? Because each author sees Jesus differently, he talks differently and acts differently in each Gospel. When we conflate the Gospel stories we dull the picture they give us of Jesus and his ministry. In this notebook we will use the other Gospel's on occasion to enhance our understanding of Mark; but, we must be conscience of Mark's message, and relying on other Gospels to "fill in" the gaps of Mark can easily cloud what Mark is trying to say.

Mark, indeed none of the Gospels, is not interested in telling us an unbiased history of Jesus. Mark encountered Jesus and understood the meaning of his life, and wants to tell us that story. Mark tells the events of Jesus' life in such a way as to help clarify his life for us. The Gospel then becomes "spiritual glasses" giving us details arranged in a way to help us understand Jesus in perspective.

The Origins of Mark

We begin by saying that like the other three Gospels in the NT this Gospel was written anonymously, and we do not know who the author was. That being said, Church tradition has held that John Mark, known to us as a traveling companion (and the reason for the breakup) of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 12:12, 25; 15:37), later wrote the Gospel as a scribe to the Apostle Peter. Eusebius writing in the 4th century AD, cites Papias who wrote 110-140 AD, (and citing "The Elder") as his source for this tradition.ⁱ According to this, Mark never followed Jesus; he did, though, sit and record Peter's sermons about Jesus and after Peter's death he compiled them into the Gospel. There are few other serious contenders for authorship and it is safe to give credit to Mark. One area where Papias and Eusebius might be wrong is that Mark may have contributed more to "authoring" the book than simply writing down Peter's sermons. We will discuss this more below (The Literature of the Gospel), but, Mark's Gospel weaves the stories of Jesus into a brilliant display.

If we accept the story of Mark's authorship, then it seems most likely that he would have written the Gospel in or around Rome, 65-75 AD. Peter was executed in Rome in the mid 60's and it is most likely that Mark would have written after this as a way of preserving the Apostle's memories. It is also likely that he wrote prior to the fall of Jerusalem 70 AD, if it were

¹ Christian tradition has assigned representatives to each of the Gospels: Matthew- a man, Mark- a lion, Luke- an ox, John- an eagle. These symbols are meant to represent the different styles of the authors

² I once compared Mel Gibson's *Passion* with the Gospels, I was surprised by what I saw when I watched the movie comparing it explicitly to the Biblical text.

written after one would expect to find some reference to the destruction of the Temple. Most scholars agree there are no veiled references to this event in Mark (unlike Matthew and Luke both written in the 70's or 80's). Another major reason for writing the book is to support the Christians of Rome. Tacitus tells us that after the fire of Rome 64 AD Nero blamed the Christians and began persecuting them.ⁱⁱ Christians were betraying other Christians (Mk 13:5-23), how was the Church to respond? Mark's story has a theme of a persecuted Jesus, abandoned by everyone, yet, willing to forgive and reconcile. This is a message to Christians uncertain of how to handle persecution. And, right in the middle of the story Peter, the Heroic leader of the Church in Rome, recently martyred.

The Literature of the Gospel

What kind of book did Mark write? While it seems like the answer is obvious, a gospel, it is not quite that easy, because we must first define what a Gospel is. In simplest terms, a gospel is a sacred history, which uses as its theme the life of Jesus of Nazareth. The idea of Gospels being a "sacred" history is necessary to understanding what the Gospels are trying to say. The reader of the Gospels must not try to put them into the format of modern history, they are vastly different. The Gospels are trying to reveal God's work in the world, which includes history, but, is not confined to history. Mark is attempting to reveal the person of Jesus (Christology) and our path to relationship with him (discipleship). This means we should not be bothered if Mark omits details, condenses the story, or, views the events from one side. If Mark's story does not line up with the other Gospel's at points, we should not be concerned, and each of the Gospel writers is telling a unique story. Historical events, then, are the basis for the story, but, Mark is going to use them (or omit them) as he sees best to convey his message of Christ and discipleship.

Mark's Gospel is short and sharp; if he fails to supply detail, it is because he does not want to bog down his message. Mark's narrative is a speed read, he consistently uses the word "immediately" to push the narrative toward the ultimate conclusion, the crucifixion. Many professors teaching on Mark will have their students read the Gospel in one sitting, simply to help capture this pace (this is a very easy exercise it takes about 1-2hrs). Another way to capture this feeling is to watch a performed version where the actor recites the Gospel (I highly recommend Max McLean's version on video). The nature of a Bible study naturally chops up the book and slows it down so it is a good idea for any reader to be familiar with the pace going into the study.

Themes

1. The Messianic Secret- It is often noted that aside from 1:1 Mark makes very little of Jesus' identity until 14:62. Mark wants the reader to follow with him as he unfolds Jesus' identity, first as a miracle worker and teacher, and later as the Selected One, Israel's Messiah. Mark will hint at Jesus' identity but he does want the readers to come to their own conclusions without his direct involvement.

2. **Inept disciples-** While we understand the disciples to be wonderful examples of the Christian life, Mark often portrays them in a negative light. We are expected to see that the disciples are just like us, capable of getting it wrong and ultimately we are forced to ask what happened that they became the disciples of history. Though Mark does not explicitly answer the question, he leaves open the implication that it was the Resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit. As we read the Gospel we learn as the disciples learn, and hopefully, grow as they grow, and become what they were.

3. **Reign of God-** or “the kingdom of God”. This phrase appears over and over and is the goal Jesus is seeking. While modern Christianity often associates God’s Reign with “end times” and the destruction of the earth, Mark reveals it has already begun and Jesus was working to further God’s reign. For Mark God’s reign has begun and we are to expand it, rather, than anticipate it.

4. **Immediacy-** It is often noted that Mark moves very quickly, that is until Jesus’ final week. The pace of the Gospel helps to highlight Jesus’ mission. The first ten chapters appear as a quick introduction for the culmination of Jesus’ work in his confrontation with the powers of the world (particularly the Jewish world). Mark helps us see the significance of Jesus’ life and death simply by his use of words like “immediately.”

5. **Hebrew Scriptures-** perhaps somewhat overlooked in Mark, but, important to all New Testament books, is their use of the Old Testament. Mark carefully uses the Scriptures to interpret Jesus’ life, and help provide us with context. It is important to reflect on what passages Mark calls our attention toward so we can understand what Mark thinks of Jesus and the new Christian world.

Chapter 1: part 1

^{1:1}The beginning of the victory proclamation of Jesus God's Selected One, God's Son. ²As it has been written by Isaiah the prophet:

*Look, I send my messenger ahead of you,
One to prepare your path.*

³*A voice resounding in the desert,
"Prepare the path of the Lord,
Make his road straight."*

⁴Now, John the Baptizer was in the desert announcing a baptism for transformation according to the pardoning of sins. ⁵Everyone from the Judean countryside and even Jerusalem, was coming out to him, and were baptized by him in the Jordan River, and confessing their sins. ⁶John was clothed in camel's hair with a leather belt around him; and he ate locusts and wild honey.

⁷He was proclaiming, "One greater than myself is coming after me, I am not worthy, so much as to untie the lace of his sandal! ⁸I, I baptize you in water; but he, he will baptize you in the Holy Spirit!"

⁹Now, at that time, Jesus of Nazareth, in Galilee came and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰Immediately, on coming up from the water he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit, as a dove, descending upon him. ¹¹with a voice from the heavens, "You are my son the beloved, I delight in you.

¹²Immediately after, the Holy Spirit drove him into the desert. ¹³He was in the desert forty days, being tested by Satan; he was with the beasts, while angels attended to him.

Commentary

The first thirteen verses of Mark work as a prologue, introducing the main character and giving us some necessary background so we can interpret the story which follows. Mark provides both geographical context (by the Jordan River near Galilee) and theological context. We are told from the outset that this is the story of the victory proclamation of Jesus who is the "Selected One" and God's Son. Mark intends to tell the story of this proclamation and force the reader to decide whether or not he is right to ascribe these titles to Jesus.

Vv 1-3: The word translated here as "victory proclamation" is usually rendered "good news" or "gospel".³ Most translators opt to translate the word literally; however, by the time Mark wrote the word had taken the meaning of the proclamation of an official regarding an event to be celebrated, like a victory or the birthday of the emperor. Mark expressly connects the proclamation of Jesus to the quote from Isaiah in verses 2-3, as a summary of God's coming rule (hence, "Victory"). The title "Selected One" used for Jesus also reminds us of God's victory; usually translated "Christ" or "Messiah" the title refers to one anointed with oil for a special position, either king or priest.

³ Gospel derives from the Middle English "good spell", spell being equivalent to news.

The quote in verses 2-3 is a combination of Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3, though attributed only to Isaiah. The quote refers to a messenger heralding the news of the returning king, in this case God, and commanding the people to prepare the roads in advance of his coming. Two words from the quote are going to come to bear later, “wilderness” and “paths”. Within the prologue the wilderness factors into both John and Jesus’ ministries; while, the “path” to God becomes a theme throughout the book.

Vv 4-8: By immediately describing John the Baptizer, Mark is associating him with the “voice” of verse 2. This identification is enhanced by Mark’s locating John in the wilderness where the “voice” is to be. This brings up an interesting point; who is the “Lord” of verse 3? John proclaims repentance toward God, but, is clearly presented as a forerunner to Jesus. While the original verses refer to God, Mark seems to want to place Jesus in the position of Lord (he at least leaves this possibility open). By Mark’s time it was common to identify Jesus as Lord (see especially Paul’s use in 1 Cor. 8:6). This gives us a third high title for Jesus in the first three verses, stressing his importance to Mark. The same is true of John’s message in verses 7-8, we are probably meant to read Jesus, but the original audience could easily have understood this message to be about God. The term “greater” in verse 7 is very generic, lacking any qualifier that would help us understand where the coming one is greater than John; there is no specific way this individual is better, just better. As for the reference to untying sandals, it is very common to use such anthropomorphic language for God. Mark will commonly allow the reader to have insight that the characters in the story do not have, giving us the benefit of knowing what is happening where the characters are in the dark.

Though ritual washing was common in Jewish society, the idea of baptism was not, and seems to be a Christian idea, perhaps invented by John. In the OT ritual washings were used to purify people and objects after being contaminated by something like death or disease. John’s baptism is revolutionary for it proclaims to be a symbolic act that moves people away from sin and makes them ready to receive God. John’s baptism seems to restore in a way not claimed by other ritual cleansings. Baptism also ushered in the beginning of a transformative process of life. John wanted people to commit their lives to finding God and thus, be transformed into this journey.

Mark’s use of “everyone” in verse 5 is clearly hyperbole, meant to portray John’s effectiveness in preparing the way for Jesus. The statement is meant to infer that John did everything he was supposed to do and that people all over Judea were ready for Jesus to enter the stage. That being said, we do know that John’s preaching was incredibly popular both from other passages in Mark (6:14-29, 11:27-31), and also from Josephus. We should not think that the language, though embellished, is simply meant to push the story, with no grounding in history.

John’s attire is meant to reflect his role as a prophet, and resembles that of Elijah described in 2 Kings 1:8. Mark implies, here, what Jesus will later state explicitly (9:12-13), John is the fulfillment of Malachi 4:5, where the prophet announces that Elijah will proceed God’s Selected One. John’s life of strict asceticism undermines, at least in part, the dominant Jewish religious

structure of the time. John announces that God and salvation are found in the wilderness, while the priests were saying God is only found in the Temple and its supporting practices.

In making a distinction between his baptism and the one to come, John may be referencing Joel 2 (also Jeremiah 31:31-34), which Peter does on Pentecost in Acts 2. If so Mark is again reassigning the work of God to Jesus (see above). There is also an implication that with the coming of the greater one, John's baptism will be overwritten, which we see in Acts 19:1-6. In this passage we see that not only is John's baptism not effectual for receiving the Holy Spirit; but, one must be baptized within the Christian tradition to be in position to receive the gift. Acts 19 shows us that water and Spirit are not meant to be contrary; rather, we see John's baptism is incomplete, something to which John himself alludes.

Vv 9-11: The opening of this paragraph, though smoothed out in English, is a distinctly Biblical way of talking; literally it says, "And it happened in those days (that) Jesus came." Mark is here intentionally using the style of the Old Testament. We should infer from this that Mark is about to introduce something that is, at least for him, a clear continuation of the work of God. Though John is an important character, and given significant weight, Mark may be using this opening to give Jesus an even greater position.

More than likely, John is active somewhere in the southern Jordan valley, relatively close to Jerusalem. This region is distinctly within the district known as Judea, and makes the geographic title "of Nazareth, in Galilee" even more important. Galilee (the northern part of Israel at the time) was seen as less Jewish, because the people of the region had more interaction with gentiles. Nazareth itself was a very insignificant community, and it would have been likely many around John that day had never heard of it. Unlike John (or even Matthew & Luke) who portrays a very dramatic event that would have awed everyone present, Mark is very underwhelming. Mark has set the reader up with his introduction to see a great event unfold; but, for those involved this would have been just another day.

We are not told why Jesus, who is to bring a greater baptism, submits to John's; though, it is clear that it is important. Mark seems less concerned with the why and more concerned with what comes next. Matthew tries to resolve this problem (Mt. 3:14-15); Mark is content to allow this be a mystery of God and marvel in what happens next. Jesus, by participating in John's baptism, is giving his support to John's message. It appears that supporting John's message was a necessary first step for Jesus' own ministry.

Here we see the first of many (37 in all) uses of the adverb "immediately" in the Gospel. It is often said that Mark's use of immediately has two major benefits. 1 it lends a sense of vivid realism to the stories. When you hear, "Immediately, on coming up..." you tend to picture Jesus' head breaking through the water to a spectacular vision. "Immediately" has a definite color to it that enhances the story. 2 Mark seems to want to rush to the end of the story, and repeatedly using "immediately" helps the reader feel this sense of being hurried to the end.

This rushed feeling helps create a sense of excitement for the reader, like someone telling a story repeatedly saying, “And then... And then....”

Notice the vision is for Jesus only, he saw and he heard, no one else. We know that something mystical and supernatural happened, but, to those on the shoreline nothing was out of the ordinary. This event parallels that of Ezekiel who receives a heavenly vision with a summons from God (Ez. 1:1). There may also be a reference to Isaiah 63:19 where the prophet prays that God will tear open the heavens and descend. There is no prior Biblical reference to God or the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, making this scene very distinctive. What we do see is Jesus filled with the Spirit by which he will baptize the people into God’s reign (though importantly we never see him “baptize” anyone).

The voice Jesus hears is obviously the voice of God, which obviously makes the declaration significant. The declaration, most probably, reflects a combination of Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1, both considered Messianic prophecies. As such, it draws together two different visions of the Messiah (Selected One). Psalm 2 refers to God’s chosen king who is to rule in God’s stead. Isaiah 42 speaks of God’s servant who, in a very peaceful way, serves God and through that service ushers in God’s reign. The concept of “beloved” carries the weight of the phrase, since it implies a unique relationship to God. This is Isaac’s relationship to Abraham in Genesis 22:2, a favored position, different from the position that others can attain. In the case of Isaac it meant that the Covenant would be carried through him and that he would be Abraham’s sole heir. In the case of Jesus, it means that he alone has a unique relationship with God, and though, we might be properly called children of God, we cannot gain the same relationship as Jesus.

Vv 12-13: In the last paragraph we saw the Spirit fill Jesus, now we see the Spirit lead Jesus. Much is made that the word “drove out” is the same word used when Jesus “drives out” demons, but it might be overplaying the word to suggest that Mark made any real connection. Rather I would suggest that Mark used the word simply to show that Jesus was compelled to go deeper into the wilderness; Mark is again giving us a vivid picture. Rather, we should understand that the major theme of the paragraph is the wilderness itself. In the Old Testament the wilderness was both a place of demons (Lev. 16:10) and a place to find God (1 Kgs. 19). What we see is a spiritual pilgrimage reminiscent of Moses (Ex. 24:18) and Elijah (1 Kgs. 19:8); Jesus goes to a place to prepare for his public ministry deepening his experience with God.

The wilderness, free from humanity, is a place where spiritual beings operate unbound, one will encounter angels and demons. With this in mind, we should notice the verb tenses of the paragraph. There are two active verbs in the paragraph and the subject of each is positive. The Spirit leads Jesus and the angels attend to Jesus, while, Jesus the animals and even Satan are simply there, subjects of passive verbs. Mark highlights God’s power, in that, where everyone else is passive God can be active. The sequence of the clauses also seems to highlight this protection of God. The Spirit drives (positive), Satan tests (negative) with the animals (negative

Is. 13:21-22, 34:13-14 present wild animals as representing a dangerous situation), and Angels take care of (positive), playing out what the Psalmist expresses in Psalm 23:4 “Though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no danger because you are with me, your rod and staff comfort me.”

It is not clear how the angels attend to Jesus, but it is quite possible that they provide him with food and drink, which would draw an even closer parallel to Elijah’s story. Given the mention of wild animals, we could see the angels as protecting Jesus from them as in Daniel 6:22. The specific provision, though, is less important than the fact that God’s servants were there to protect Jesus in his time of trial.

In the wilderness Jesus is with the Wild beasts a reflection of Genesis 2 where Adam lives in harmony with beasts. Mark wants us to see that in Jesus the original ideal of creation is restored. Also, in placing both beasts and angels in the line Mark is implicitly telling the reader that Jesus has authority over heaven (the realm of angels) and Earth (the abode of beasts).

Questions

1. Obviously terms like “Gospel” and “Christ” are important for the Church today; but, how should the Church work to explain these terms to congregants, and should Bible translators work to be more creative in their rendering of such “churchy” terms?
2. How does such militaristic and empire-based language affect your understanding of the Church and God’s people in relation to the rest of the world? How does it alter any notations of patriotism you might have?
3. When you consider the popularity of John’s asceticism, and his message, does it make you reevaluate your own lifestyle?
4. We all like to think we would not miss Jesus, would recognize God in him; but if his baptism looked like every other day do you think you might miss it? How can you adapt your life, so you are less likely to be blind to God’s work?
5. Jesus went into the wilderness for forty days to prepare himself spiritually, how do you prepare for your ministry? Is there any sense of God’s servants attending to you?

Chapter 1: part 2

¹⁴Then, after John was handed over, Jesus entered Galilee, announcing God's victory proclamation. ¹⁵Saying, "The time is fulfilled, and God's reign draws near, be transformed and have confidence in in the victory proclamation."

¹⁶While walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he spied Simon and Andrew Simon's brother throwing nets into the Sea- because they were fishers. ¹⁷Jesus said to them, "Follow me! I will make into fishers of people." ¹⁸Immediately, they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹Going a little further, he saw James Zebedee's son with John his brother they were in a boat preparing nets. ²⁰Immediately, he called to them; leaving their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired hands, they followed after him.

²¹Then they entered Capernaum, and immediately, on the Sabbath, he entered into the synagogue and taught. ²²They were amazed by his teaching; because he was teaching them possessing authority, and unlike the scribes.

²³Immediately, a man with an evil spirit, who was in their synagogue, screamed out. ²⁴He said, "What is between you and us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? We know who you are, the holy one of God." ²⁵Jesus scolded him saying, "Silence! Come out of him!" ²⁶The evil spirit convulsed him, and with a loud scream came out of him. ²⁷Everyone was dumbfounded and debated among themselves, "What was that!" A new teaching, and authority; he even commands the evil spirits and they obey him?" ²⁸Immediately, the report of him spread everywhere in the surrounding region of Galilee.

Commentary

In this section we see the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, Mark has taken us out of the wilderness and placed us in Galilee. We see three distinct aspects of Jesus' ministry unfold here: leader, teacher, and healer. Mark, as we saw above, already believes Jesus is the Selected One; what he is going to do is lay out the characteristics of Jesus and allow the reader to choose whether or not Mark is right. We are being asked, like the disciples, do you want to follow this man? In this section we are introduced to the two major themes of Mark "who is Jesus" and "what is discipleship"; we are presented with some brief encounters showing glimpses of Jesus and the first words on discipleship.

Vv 14-15: It is very significant that Mark identifies John's status before Jesus'. First we note the idea that John was handed over, this same word will be used when Judas hands Jesus over. Mark does not imply that one of John's disciples betrayed him, rather, he wants to create a theme that God's messengers are not recognized by the world, and unites their fates by using the word "handed over". This phrase also establishes that John's mission is complete, and the way is therefore prepared. Mark is then able to shift all focus away from John and toward Jesus.

Jesus returns to Galilee after his time in the wilderness; he is moving to the people, and back home. What does Jesus do on returning to Galilee? He preaches. The same verb is used of

John in verse 4, and we are to see Jesus as continuing the mission John began. One think is different, though, the message Jesus preaches is different from that of John. John advocated people be pardoned of sins and transformed in baptism so they would be ready for the “greater one” who was coming. Jesus is saying be transformed and live in God’s reign which is now here, “the time is fulfilled”, everything anticipated in the previous section is come (hope you’re ready). By making Jesus’ first act to preach, Mark establishes the tenor of Jesus’ entire ministry. Everything Jesus does in the Gospel from here is to be seen in the light of this proclamation. Everything about Jesus is now consistent with the reign of God. Given this we cannot see Jesus in these verses as simply standing behind a pulpit, but, we must see him in the light of the path his life takes from this point forward.

Notice that we use the word “reign” instead of the more frequent “kingdom”; “kingdom” has the connotation of a geographic area, while “reign” is a term of power. Mark, I believe, wants us to associate with God’s absolute authority over our lives, which Jesus is announcing as present. Often we get the idea of “kingdom” into our heads and look for God to establish a geographical “Christian Nation.” Jesus wants us to understand that God reign in our lives and that we are trying to extend that reign to the lives of others, not over a land mass.

Vv16-20: Now that we have a brief overview of Jesus’ message it is time to meet those onto whom, he will pass the message. Though, no doubt, these men were pious Jews, they are in no way what one would expect for disciples. The two sets of brothers called are common laborers with no political connections or theological training, the two things one would expect from those ushering in God’s reign. It should be mentioned that Zebedee was left with the hired workers, implying they were at least fishers of some means, able to hire on additional staff. We first meet Simon and Andrew, who are working, casting nets; it should be obvious what their occupation was, but, Mark tells us anyway, probably to make the pun with “fishers of people”. Both sets of brothers are presented working, and James and John are presented with their father, the implication is that all four are making a serious sacrifice to follow Jesus, livelihood and family. While 1:30 and frequent use of boats indicate these were not permanent divorces, they are still powerful representations of the role of Jesus within the lives of these and all disciples.

Jesus’ words are striking the statement “Follow me” has the force of an imperative, commanding the men, who likewise, are ready to respond. The disciples’ response to this command shows the necessity of being prepared for God’s announcement. We are seeing the message of John and Jesus played out in story form. Likewise, the metaphor of fishers is interesting since it implies the disciples will be responsible for bringing in people. Jeremiah 16:16 also speaks of God sending out fishers, but, these are to remove the wicked from the people so they may be judged. Jesus is essentially turning the metaphor on its ear, making what was a negative a positive. It is somewhat unnatural for fishers to rescue fish by catching them, but, that is the picture we are presented with. James and John are called with parallel language to that of Simon and Andrew; but, “called” and “after him” become language used by

Christians to describe their life with Jesus. It could be that Mark is intentionally using this language to remind us that we are all in the position of Zebedee's sons. Another theme may be running through the calling; both Simon and Andrew are Greek names,⁴ while James and John are Hebrew, is Mark trying to clue us in (however subtly) that Jesus is for all?

Vv 21-22: Jesus' first action after gathering his first disciples is to enter a synagogue and teach. Capernaum was a relatively large town on the Sea of Galilee and will become a kind of base of operations for Jesus. One must be allowed to teach in a synagogue, implying that Jesus had done this before, or at least he had a reputation as someone who could be trusted.⁵ As we have seen above, Mark is very careful about what he includes and the order he presents events; so, to have Jesus' first true public action to be teaching leads us to think it is very important. The location and time of Jesus' teaching also give us significant clues to his ministry.

Jesus enters the synagogue (place of worship) on the Sabbath (time of worship), telling us that Jesus' teachings approve of and work within worship. Later, Jesus will redefine worship, to an extent; but, the basic meaning and theme of will remain as a fixture with him. Mark has already indicated that Jesus' primary ministry is to announce the Reign of God, here he shows us Jesus' primary tool for announcing is teaching. Teaching can be a negative for some people, but, it implies helping a student learn the material, sitting near and answering questions. It can be summed up in understanding that our word for education comes from Latin "to lead out". This is Jesus' ministry to lead out of sin into righteousness and the reign of God.

Mark does not tell us what Jesus taught (presumably this is the same teachings we will see later in the Gospel). What is key for us is that Jesus has "authority" and not like the religious (and therefore legal) scholars of the day, the scribes. This wows the synagogue and, probably, wins Jesus new fans. We are not told what Jesus' authority is; but, Mark is obviously referring back to unique status of Jesus the Selected One. It is likely that those present in the synagogue that day were not completely sure what amazed them, but clearly recognized a unique power of God.

Vv 23-28: Mark's use of "Immediately" to begin this paragraph provides a graphic interruption from the preceding narrative, in the same way the man interrupted Jesus' teaching. The picture is frightening, a worship service interrupted by an evil spirit's screams (imagine being the person in front of or beside the man). The spirit is presented is clearly distinct from the man, but, in clear control of his body. It is popular today to place evil spirit or demons (a term Mark will also use) in the category of mental illness. This may be a valid diagnosis; but, we should resist making too much of this opinion.⁶ Identifying these spirits as mental illness

⁴ Simon is closely related to the Hebrew name Simeon, but, it is a Greek spelling, likewise Peter is the Greek version of the name Cephas (which Paul uses e.g. Galatians 2:10).

⁵ It is completely possible this is his first appearance in the synagogue since his baptism, which should make us reflect about the meaning of the Spirit descending and his time in the wilderness.

⁶ I do not give evil spirits much consideration; but, I have seen enough and heard enough stories that I am not ready to completely rule out their existence.

undermines Mark's use of them as characters. Mark places them in the story in part to reveal what is going on behind the scenes, within the spiritual realm.

The spirit leads the conversation, "what is between you and us" is a way of saying "leave", or more appropriately "you don't belong here". Notice the use of the plural "us" the spirit seems to be making a statement not about the specific location; but, implying Jesus has no business with any such spirit. The spirit continues using Jesus' name, and later adding a title. In the Old Testament and in Jewish exorcist sources naming has a significant function; naming someone, or a demon, was a sign that one had some level of control over the named. Thus, the spirit may be trying to gain a measure of control over Jesus. There is a note of irony in the evil spirit knowingly accosting the holy one. "Have you come here to destroy us" also poses an opportunity for some conversation, what was the spirit's motive in saying this? Does he ask in curiosity "What is your purpose in coming", derision, "You think you can destroy us", trying to escape, "I know your mission and it is not to worry about us"?

Jesus' reaction to all of this seems rather calm, if stern. Jesus makes two simple demands of the demon, not to talk (literally be muzzled) and leave. The demon tries to disobey the orders, this is the description in verse 26 of convulsion and screams, but to no avail. The spirit cannot resist Jesus and with no further interaction disappears from the narrative.

For the second time the crowd is stunned by Jesus (that must have been a service to remember). It is easy to imagine that a crowd that was astounded by Jesus' teachings might have hit the ceiling when this happened. Exorcisms seem to be a fairly common occurrence at the time; but, they always had specific formulas that had to be followed. There are glimpses of such formulas in Acts 19:13-20 where the sons of Sceva create one calling on Jesus and Paul. This is why the people, though believing in exorcisms, are amazed by the spirit's obedience to Jesus, he never used any formula, incantation or charm. Jesus has no need of such approaches he simply commands and the spirit obeys. This must have been a truly dazzling event, even if people were used to such activities.

It appears that the crowd was unsure of what to make of the events of the day; but, after discussing among themselves saw Jesus' teaching and power over demons as connected. The same power that gave Jesus unique authority to teach gave him authority to command demons as he saw fit. We cannot divide teaching and power, as if to say, "He's a captivating speaker, and a powerful exorcist." What captivated the people was the weight of Jesus' teaching and that the same weight manifested itself in a powerful way. This is an astute observation by the congregation, later congregations will misattribute his abilities to demons and seek to undermine his teachings. We should seek to emulate this congregation who respects God and recognizes true authority.

Mark closes the paragraph showing that as Jesus' arrival in town and the confrontation by the evil spirit were sudden, now, just as suddenly, everyone in Galilee has heard of Jesus. Jesus is now a local celebrity and will be thrust into the spotlight. Remember this event happened on

the Sabbath and so represents some amount of liberty; since, Jews would have been restricted in how far they could travel and Galilee is a fairly large region. But, it is surely not an overstatement to say that news about Jesus spread fast.

Questions

1. We see Jesus' move toward a populated region, which is perhaps slightly forgotten by the religious elite. Is this a move we should imitate, if so how, literally, symbolically? Or how does Jesus' relocation affect our calling? (Remember it was his home)
2. Jesus calls us to be transformed people placing confidence in God's proclamation. What does this mean in your life, what does it mean that God's reign has dawned in your life?
3. Have you ever had to leave livelihood or family to follow Jesus, what does "Follow me" mean to you in your life now? Do you need to leave anything behind?
4. Mark clearly connects Jesus' ministry to worship and a worshiping community, does this connection impact your ideas about worship, its purpose and power?
5. What is the relationship between teaching and acts of power, are such actions possible for us, and if so how do we gain such authority, if not, what does authority mean for us?

Chapter 1 part 3

²⁹Immediately, he left the synagogue and came to Simon and Andrew's house, along with James and John. ³⁰Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they immediately told him about her. ³¹Coming to her, he lifted her up by the hand, and the fever broke, and she attended to him.

³²Now in the evening, at sunset, they brought him all who were sick or demon possessed. ³³The whole city gathered together at the door. ³⁴He healed many who were sick with various diseases, and drove out many demons; never allowing the demons to speak, because they knew him.

³⁵Early in the morning, while it was still dark, he left and went to a deserted place, there he prayed. ³⁶Later, Simon and those with him pursued him. ³⁷Finding him, they said to him, "Everyone is seeking you." ³⁸He said to them, "Let's go elsewhere, into the surrounding towns. So that there also I might preach, for this is the reason I came."

³⁹Preaching, he came into every one of the synagogues in Galilee, while driving out demons. ⁴⁰Now a leper approached him, calling out to him saying, "If you desire you can cleanse me." ⁴¹Aggravated by him, he stretched out his hand to touch him, and said, "I desire, be clean!" ⁴²Immediately, the leprosy left him and he was cleansed. ⁴³Immediately, he sternly warned him and sent him away; ⁴⁴saying, "Say nothing to no one, but, go present yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded as witness to them." ⁴⁵But going away he announced it to everyone, and spread the word; so that, he was no longer able to go openly into any town, but was out in the desert regions, and many went out to him.

Commentary

Though we have split this section from the preceding one, it is simply to make the sections more manageable. The opening of verse 29 shows that this scene flows out of and continues the preceding encounter. We see Jesus' power further identified in his ability to heal, healing is not the same as exorcism, since the former is working within nature and the latter against malignant forces. Thus, this section should also be seen as a further clarification of Jesus' "teaching with authority" mentioned in 1:22. This section will become important for how Jesus is treated, and how people respond to his ministry going forward.

Vv29-31: After his success in the synagogue, Jesus goes to the home of Simon and Andrew, along with, presumably, his only other disciples James and John. While both Matthew 8:14 and Luke 4:38 identify the house as Simon's, Mark indicates that it belonged to both brothers. It would have been very common for an extended family, like the one portrayed here, to live together.

On entering the house, Jesus is told of Simon's mother-in-law's condition; Mark tells us she had a fever, but this is a generic term and we have no idea the seriousness of the situation. It might be that the disciples told Jesus as a curtesy, warning a guest of a potential disease; but it is more likely that they told Jesus in order that he could work in the situation. It must be

remembered that healing was forbidden on the Sabbath (3:1-6), so we must ask were the disciples' intentions that Jesus act immediately or after the Sabbath. Notice the intimacy of the scene, alone in the house with the family, Jesus goes to the woman's bedside and lifts her by the hand. Unlike the evil spirit, whom he merely spoke to, Jesus uses physical touch as part of the healing strategy. We will see this pattern again later, words used to exorcise demons and physical touch used to heal natural diseases. Jesus' touch brings the desired result and the woman immediately begins to "attend" to Jesus. The word has the meaning of provide food for a person, and what we are to see is that Simon's mother-in-law returns to her duties around the house, including cooking for the guest. There is no timeline connected to this action, and we may infer that her service was not a one-time event, but that she began to provide for him regularly. Simon's mother-in-law must be regarded as a disciple, and a model for us; after being lifted by Jesus she takes efforts to serve him as she can.

vv 32-34: "Sundown" is an important marker in this passage, because it brings to an end the Sabbath that started with Jesus teaching in the synagogue. Because evening is listed before morning in Genesis 1 Jews have traditionally held that days begin in the evening. The fact that these people waited until the Sabbath was over to bring the sick to Jesus underscores their piety. It is unclear whether they did it out of respect for Jesus' celebration of the Sabbath or fear of themselves violating a Sabbath statute by bringing someone to a healer. Again we see Mark use some level of hyperbole in saying that everyone who was sick or demon possessed was brought out that night. The use of "all" underscores that these works of power became a frequent occurrence in Jesus' ministry. The verse also helps capture how wide reaching Jesus' ministry was; while Mark likes to talk of individual cases (1:23-28, 1:29-31) these general statements remind us that Jesus did far more than he could detail (John 20:30-31).

Mark continues to make a distinction between sick and possessed, noting that both were present and that Jesus continued to heal each. Jesus is willing and able to deal with any situation brought to him and the crowds have brought many. Though Mark only indicates that Jesus healed many people, we should assume he healed all who were brought to him. Mark gives us no reason to believe that Jesus did not help everyone present.⁷

Verse 34 offers us a glimpse in to the motives of Jesus; while it could be that Jesus did not want the demons to gain any authority over him by saying his name (see above 1:23-28) there is a better answer. Many commentators believe that Jesus (and Mark) were protecting his identity as Selected One from being known. This is called Mark's "Messianic Secret", hinting at but never confirming who Jesus is. Look at how the crowds responded when they saw his power what would they have done if they had understood Jesus to be the Selected One (see Introduction) and thought he would be their king? This was a politically restless time with

⁷ The use of "all" in verse 31 is qualified by disease, while "many" in verse 34 is unqualified simply referring to a large number of healings.

revolt bubbling under the surface, If Jesus, as a powerful healer, would have been publicly declared a king by the people in Galilee, chaos may well have broken out.

Vv 35-38: The following morning, Jesus leaves town to find a place to pray. Mark highlights Jesus' desire to be alone after a very long, very productive previous day. Notice Jesus is out before the sun, heading to a place where no one else will be, he does not want to be seen or interrupted. Notice that Jesus does not relax after his triumphs, he is out early ready for the day. Though Mark does not make a habit of showing Jesus isolating himself for prayer, as Luke does, we should see significance in the fact that Jesus is shown in prayer both before and after his first actions in ministry. We are to infer that Jesus spent significant amounts of time in prayer and that it was essential for his life and work.

The disciples' reaction cannot be passed by quickly, it sets a trend that Mark will use throughout the story. First we see that Peter is the only pursuer listed by name. This may be because Mark is relating Peter's version of the story and thus telling it from Peter's perspective. Peter becomes the lead character among the disciples and is usually the one that falls the hardest. Here we can assume that he is accompanied by Andrew, James, and John (probably no one else). The word "pursue" is no very common in the Bible and means "search diligently for" with undertones of being frustrated. It appears the disciples seem to know where Jesus is, implying that Jesus has gone to the same spot before. Spiritual formation experts talk about establishing a rhythm to our devotional lives, including setting specific times and places for prayer and maintaining them. This consistency helps one encounter God in deeper ways. It would appear that Jesus followed this practice by seeking a rhythm to which we only have glimpses.

You can almost hear the frustration in the disciples' voices as they remind Jesus that he started an incredible ministry the previous day. Jesus immediately rebuffs the disciples' ideas intending to leave, and head somewhere else. Mark will develop this theme more, the disciples have one plan, but, Jesus has another, which makes the disciples look somewhat foolish. In this scene the disciples, logically, want Jesus to continue to capitalize on a very successful healing ministry, continue to build his popularity, and presumably position himself as a public leader through these miracles. Jesus, though, wants to continue teaching and wants to relocate away from the fawning crowds. Jesus understands the popular ministry is not always (usually?) the right ministry. We will see this pattern play out in the Gospel, Jesus walking away from healing in order to teach. Jesus never seeks out someone to heal, rather, those in need seek him out. It might be assumed that Jesus wanted to take his message to all Judea and Galilee so he had to leave Capernaum; but, it seems more likely that he realized the people would not pay as close attention to his teachings because they would focus on the actions. Jesus appears to want to keep his purpose unclouded by peripheral ministries.

Vv 39-45: What Jesus sets out to do in verse 38 he does in verse 39; he goes from synagogue to synagogue reenacting the scene from 1:21-28. Nothing is written about specific encounters; we are to recognize that Jesus is continuing a pattern he has previously established as his

ministry. He proclaims God's reign while destroying the reign of evil. The word translated "preach" in verses 38, 39 is the same word translated "announce" in 1:14-15, implying that Jesus is doing what he set out to do from the beginning.

While Jesus is going from place to place teaching Jesus encounters a leper who desires healing.⁸ Leviticus 13-14 details the response society is to give to lepers (both contagious and noncontagious). The man presumably has a contagious form of a skin disease, since he appears to be living outside civilization, and is eager to be healed.

Jesus' reaction poses some difficulty, we are unsure whether Mark originally wrote "compassion" or "anger."⁹ Most English translations use "compassion", but, my feeling is that this is the less authentic word. If this is true our question must be why is Jesus frustrated with the man? Some have argued that Jesus is upset by the man's use of "if" saying Jesus wants faith without a conditional statement. Others think that in prostrating himself the man grabbed Jesus and thus presumed to go too far. Neither of these seem correct since they reflect a politeness one would expect to see from a man outcast from society who wants to be restored. Some think Jesus is angry at how society is treating leprosy people, or more appropriately, failing to help. The leprosy were not allowed to live in normal society (Lev 14-15), and, few took any care to help them. Family might leave food for an individual but the leprosy were mostly left to fend for themselves once they left civilization. Though this last is possible, Jesus is only angry in Mark when people fail to understand and put into practice his teaching (3:5, 10:14); so, it seems possible that Mark is reading Jesus' reactions to the end of the story back into their encounter. Jesus is going to order the man to silence after the healing, an order the man will blatantly disobey. Is it possible that Jesus willingly healed the man but was later frustrated by his actions, and when the story is retold by the disciples the aggravation was inserted at the beginning? Whatever the reason Jesus was aggravated, we should recognize he was still willing to heal this man, and not simply heal, but, to work in a compassionate way.

Mark wants us to pay special attention to the means Jesus used to heal the man. It is redundant to say "stretched out his hand" and "touched him", Mark wants to make sure you understand what Jesus is doing. Leprosy made a person unclean and that impurity was spread to anyone who touched the person (at least temporarily). Jesus is risking purity to touch the man, this becomes a sign of true compassion. We often fail to realize Jesus was as susceptible to disease as we are, he easily could have contracted the man's disease; touching the man was a bold step.

⁸ The Bible uses "leprosy" to denote a number of skin diseases and we cannot be sure which disease is referred to.

⁹ Manuscripts use one of two Greek words and while "compassion" is used in more manuscripts "anger" is used in otherwise very accurate ones, and it is hard to account for a scribe writing "anger" when it was not original. "Compassion" is used so often of Jesus it is easy to imagine a scribe hearing or reading "anger" and writing compassion. For a longer treatment see commentaries by R. T. France, William Lane, John R. Donahue, or James Edwards.

The back to back use of “Immediately” to open verses 42 and 43 give us the picture that as Jesus touched the man he started to warn him and the disease cleared. The stern warning is again somewhat harsh language and could even be translated “barked at him”, there is a good deal of emotion behind the word. Jesus seems reluctant to have his reputation as a healer spread any further. We may also be seeing what agitated Jesus in the first place, individuals wanting healed, but, with a lack of interest in God’s reign. Since healing is part of God’s reign it is hard to give the theory much weight, but, since healing is only part of God’s reign we can entertain it.

Not only does Jesus’ warning betray a desire for secrecy, it shows he has a strict concern for the law. While he is willing to make himself ritually impure, he makes sure to command the man to keep with the requirements Leviticus details for cleansing. Jesus will reinterpret the law and frequently sacrifice purity, but, he never undermines the law, nor diminishes God’s purity.

The man disobeys Jesus and spreads the report to the point Jesus cannot enter a town without being mobbed. Forced to stay in the wilderness Jesus is still sought out by many people, and, though popular, Jesus seems less than thrilled with the type of popularity. Mark leaves Jesus in the wilderness here but in the next scene he is heading back into Capernaum, has the fervor waned or does Mark mean to say that Jesus cannot permanently reside in towns any longer because of his popularity? We are not told but we do see Jesus has quickly made his reputation and is now dealing with the consequences.

Questions

1. Why does Jesus use physical touch as a remedy for illness when he could obviously simply speak and heal people as he did in casting out the demon in the preceding story?
2. Jesus seems to have established a place and time of prayer which helped focus him on God, what rhythm have you set to your devotional life to help you grow closer to God?
3. Jesus seems to have left the popular (and needed) ministry, healing, to stay true to what God wanted of him, what ministry do you think God is calling you to and how are you staying true to it?
4. Jesus shows a remarkable level of compassion with the man with leprosy, while the man shows a stunning lack of obedience, how does this interchange make you think about your dealings with Jesus and your attempts to be like Jesus dealing with others?
5. Unlike the previous section, here we see Jesus moving his ministry away from people (see question 2), Why would he make that move, and how does it alter your perception of Jesus’ (and your) ministry from the last section?

Chapter 2: part 1

^{2:1}He returned to Capernaum, and it was reported, “He is at home.” ²Many gathered together so there was no room outside, and no one could get to the door; he spoke to them the word. ³A group of four came to him carrying a paralyzed man. ⁴Not being able to get near him because of the crowd, they began tearing off the roof where he was; they dug a hole to let down the mattress on which the paralyzed man was laying. ⁵Jesus, seeing their confidence, said to the paralyzed man, “Child, your sins are pardoned.” ⁶Now, some of the scribes were there saying among themselves, ⁷“Who is he to say such a thing! Blasphemy! Who can pardon sins except God?” ⁸Immediately, Jesus understood in his spirit what they were thinking and said to them, “Why do you think such things? ⁹What is simpler to say to the paralyzed, ‘Your sins are pardoned’ or to say, ‘Get up, pick up your mattress and walk?’ ¹⁰But, so you can know the Son of Adam has the authority to pardon sins on earth,”- he said to the paralyzed man- ¹¹“To you, I say, Get up! Pick up your mattress, and go to your own house!” ¹²And he got up; immediately picked up his mattress and left in front of everyone. It amazed everyone, and they glorified God saying, “We have never seen anything like this.”

¹³He again left and went to the sea, and great crowds came to him, and he taught them. ¹⁴Going along he saw Levi the son of Alpheus sitting in his tax-booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he rose and followed him.

¹⁵Now he reclined with him in his house, and many tax-collectors and sinners were with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many following him. ¹⁶Now, the scribes and the Pharisees saw he ate with sinners and tax-collectors and said to his disciples, “What? He eats with tax-collectors and sinners!” ¹⁷Jesus overheard and said to them, “The well have no need of a doctor, but, the sick do, I did not come to call the righteous, rather, sinners.”

Commentary

The two stories in this section begin with Jesus reentering Capernaum after a time away from towns. The stories are not related except that in each Jesus brings out the need of spiritual healing from sin. We are also introduced to scribes and Pharisees two groups who will oppose Jesus for the remainder of his ministry. In the first story we see Jesus sought out for healing while in the second we see Jesus seeking a new pupil; thus, maintaining the theme of seeking to teach and being found to heal.

vv 1-12: We are not told how long Jesus has been away from Capernaum, but, long enough to cause a sensation when it is discovered that he is back. Presumably Jesus has been gone long enough for some of the hysteria to die down, but, not so long as to be forgotten. Moreover, the fact that Jesus’ arrival must be “reported” suggests he did not come into the village openly, and, was presumably not looking to teach. Jesus’ intentions are quickly thwarted by a crowd gathering around to listen to him. Houses were small and streets narrow in first century Judea, so it would not take a large crowd to fill the house and surrounding street. Nonetheless we do see a relatively large group of people drawn out by the rumor that Jesus has returned.

Into this scene four individuals carry a fifth on a small mattress. While Jesus is preaching the Gospel below the four carry this man up the exterior staircase and set him on the roof. We can almost see these men pushing into the crowd, and then, realizing they cannot get into the house, changing directions and heading for the stairs. The roofs of houses like this one were sturdy flat roofs meant to support weight. People would often work on the roof, especially in activities that required things to be dried; and in hot weather the roof was often the only cool place to sleep. The four friends then proceed to tear off the roof, which was made of strong wooden beams, thatched with reeds, and covered in a mud plaster; not an easy job. When that is done they tie ropes to the bed and lower it into the middle of the room. We are not told what happened inside the house, did people stop listening, did Jesus stop teaching, or did they run for cover at the sounds of the roof being deconstructed above them?

The confidence Jesus sees in these individuals implies an expectation that Jesus can and will heal the paralyzed man. It is probable that Jesus means all five of the men when Mark says “their”, since all five are involved in the scene. We do not know what Jesus associates with faith in these men, was it their urgency in coming, the work they are willing to put in to see Jesus, or, is it something else that Mark does not tell us? Jesus understands their earnestness and responds with compassion. He calls the man “child”, he makes him part of the family, this is a very old way to talk except within the Church. It is likely that this was Jesus’ first encounter with the man, and straightaway he gives him a significant place.

Jesus’ response to the party is completely unexpected, these four men have brought a fifth to be healed not to be forgiven, why did Jesus respond with forgiveness. While it is true that sin and disease are linked in the Old Testament (2 Ch. 7:13-14; Is. 38:16-17, 53:4-6), we are hard pressed to see a connection here. Some, and this is especially true at the popular level, believe Jesus knew this man had obvious sin in his life that needed to be forgiven. Some think that Jesus is looking to pick an argument with the scribes who were sitting in the room. Others think that the man was so caught up in his sin causing his disease that he needed assurance of forgiveness before he could be healed. None of these answers fits very well into the story; it would be a stretch to say Jesus knew the man’s heart, and that he needed pardon. Likewise, it is hard to see Jesus calling out the scribes at this point in his career, and if the man never speaks in the story and it is impossible to know his thoughts. Rather, I think, we should read this as Mark intentionally uniting the two themes of spiritual and physical healing. In other words, Jesus brings complete restoration to humanity through the grace of God’s Reign. It then makes sense that Jesus leads with pardon, because God’s gracious pardon of sins paves the way for physical restoration.

It should not surprise us that legal experts are sitting in the house listening to Jesus; nor, do we have to understand them as hostile to Jesus. The scribes are probably interested to hear what such a noted teacher has to say about the law. Their reaction to Jesus is precisely what we would expect, they are stricken by the fact that any teacher would dare pronounce forgiveness of sins.

While some translations seem to give Jesus the ability to read minds in his confrontation with the scribes, there is no reason to think it was difficult to interpret the scribes' reaction. It would probably been very obvious what the scribes thought of Jesus pronouncing pardon, even if they kept fairly quiet. Mark seems to indicate that this small group began to speak to each other, or, at least become animated. There is no stretch of the imagination to think that Jesus would have been checking to see the reaction of the scribes and even if he did not hear them it might not have been hard to gage their reaction. While there is no hostility in this confrontation, it seems that Jesus made a calculated decision engage the scribes that day.

Jesus' question to the scribes of "which is easier" reflects his understanding that it is more difficult to heal a person than to pronounce a word of forgiveness; but, that both rest in the same authority. Jesus claims that both healing and forgiveness come from God and that God has given him authority for both. We should not take this comment to suggest that the only reason Jesus is healing the man is to prove a point to the scribes and without their questioning he would have left the man on his bed. Rather, Jesus heals from his compassion, he is simply redirecting the focus after the circumstances have changed.

The title Son of Adam is a Hebrew expression *ben-adam*; originally this was simply an expression used to underscore a person's humanity, particularly when contrasted to God (Jer. 49:18, 33; Eze. 3:1-25). Jesus' use of the phrase, though, reflects Daniel 7 where a being "like a son of humans"¹⁰ descends to take charge over the earthly reign of the Ancient of Days (God). It was not common to use this title for the Jewish "Selected One" (Messiah) in Jesus' time, so it is likely that many would not have caught on to what Jesus was saying. Jesus was claiming a unique authority, the same authority (the power of God) that is given to the character in Daniel. The dialogue asserts that the scribes, who are supposed to know the Scriptures do not recognize the authority of God when they see it, and now, Jesus will work in power so that they are left no choice but to recognize him.

The healing is immediate and public, a man who could not walk suddenly gets up and walks out of the room as if nothing was wrong. We are not told the scribes' reaction to the healing, but, just like the reaction to the first unclean spirit driven out (1:27) the crowd is amazed and recognizes the power of God at work in Jesus.

vv 13-17: Just like in the calling of the first disciples (1:16-20), the action shifts to the seashore, where he meets Levi. One noticeable difference between the two stories is that this time Jesus has a noticeable crowd following him. It is not obvious why Levi is by the sea (taxing travelers?), but, the setting does provide a link between his calling and that of the previous four disciples, suggesting he is their equal (though not part of the inner circle of Simon, James, and John). His profession, though, would certainly have led to so questions by the public. Fishers

¹⁰ Daniel is written in Aramaic and the expression used in the verse is *bar ish*. It should be noted that scholars debate over whether Jesus is taking this title for himself or means a more generic "humanity", but, it seems unlikely that Jesus would use such a distinctive phrase if he did not intend to capture the nuance of Daniel.

may have been an unusual choice for disciples, but, they were thought of as honest and hardworking. Tax-collectors are never popular people, but, Levi was working for Herod Antipas an unpopular Roman puppet king. While some tax-collectors, particularly those that collected the imperial taxes for Rome, had reputations for dishonesty, we have no reason to suspect Levi of such a character flaw. Clearly Levi is a man of more than moderate means, and is popular among some circles, judging by the feast he holds.

The party Levi throws for Jesus is a broad mixture of people and a large event. Mark mentions that the disciples (the first appearance of the term for Jesus' followers) and Levi's fellow tax-collectors, and potentially another group of sinners. The word "sinner" refers to anyone who does not participate in the Jewish religious life and may refer to the tax-collectors or it may be a second group also present. The language Mark uses to describe the meal may indicate that he wants us to see this as the feast which was to announce the coming of the Selected One. This feast was for the people of God to celebrate God's reign coming to earth.

The Pharisees and Scribes see this action and are outraged, understanding that to eat with someone is to claim them as a friend and at least in part condone their lifestyle. While inclusion is a typical part of Western culture today, there are still groups most cultures do like their members associating with. Jesus, by eating with Levi and company, is threatening to lower his moral standing within the community (especially the religious community). Notice the statement is addressed not to Jesus, but, to his disciples. Was Jesus in the house, a place the religious elites might not want to go to question him? Do they want to undermine Jesus' authority with his disciples? Or perhaps, they are simply complaining behind Jesus' back simply to complain and gossip.

Jesus' response is what we would expect from him, and, the meaning is apparent, at least in part. We noted above the connection between physical and spiritual healing, here, Jesus makes the connection even more explicit by comparing his work to that of a doctor. Many Christians interpret this passage with Paul's understanding that everyone sins and needs Jesus (Rom. 5:12) and that Jesus was referring to those who recognize their sin (unlike the Pharisees). Rather, we should probably see some level of hyperbole in this statement. Jesus is not dividing people into righteous and sinners, but, saying when a person (or persons) are ready for repentance he needs to be with them and their social/religious station is meaningless. Levi and his company are looking for God, so Jesus must reveal God to them. We must ask did the Pharisees accept Jesus' explanation (they would never object to sinners coming to God). Or, was there problem the fact that Jesus took these individuals into fellowship before they had performed the religious rites required at the Temple. If this is the case then the real argument is that the Pharisees want Jesus to show more respect to the religious establishment. Again, it may be that Jesus' explanation of his purpose in eating with the group was enough and the Pharisees accepted his purpose; Mark is more concerned about establishing who Jesus is than what the religious elite think of him at this point.

Questions

1. Jesus easily recognizes the faith of the group who came to see him, how can someone recognize your confidence in Jesus' authority? How could your confidence grow?
2. Levi was a wealthy and potentially influential man, but, socially and religiously he was looked down on, what does it say that Jesus wanted this man with him, that Levi wanted to travel with Jesus, and how do you suppose the other disciples reacted to Levi, how would you?
3. The Pharisees fail to love a group of people they think wants nothing to do with God, Jesus loves and transforms one of this number into his disciple, what groups do you have trouble loving, and can you think of ways you might try to love them more?
4. In both stories we are left without knowing how the opponents of Jesus reacted to his words, while Mark is more concerned with telling us who Jesus is, what do you think were the reactions of these opponents, what do you think the rumors about Jesus said, and how would you react to these events?
5. Both of these stories point toward a relationship between spiritual healing and physical healing, what does this relationship mean for Christians what should we expect from God in spiritual, emotional, and physical healing?

Chapter 2: Part 2

¹⁸Now, John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting, and some came to him and said, "Why is it John's disciples and the Pharisees' disciples fast, but, your disciples do not fast?"
¹⁹Jesus responded, "The groomsmen are not able to fast with the groom present, are they? As long as the groom is present they cannot fast. ²⁰But the time is coming when the groom will be taken away, then, at that time they will fast." ²¹No one patches an old garment by sewing on a piece of un-shrunken clothe; the patch will tear away, the new from the old, and the hole will be worse off. ²²Nor does anyone put new wine into old skins; because the wine will rupture the skins and both will be lost, rather, new wine is put into new skins."

²³Now, on they were going through a grain field, and his disciples where going down the path picking the grain. ²⁴the Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" ²⁵He responded, "Have you never read what David did when he was in need, when he and those with him were hungry? ²⁶He went into the House of God, when Abiathar was head priest, and he ate the bread of the presence, which it is not lawful to eat, except by priests, he also gave it to those with him to eat." ²⁷He continued, "The Sabbath is for humanity; not, humanity for the Sabbath. ²⁸Thus, the Son of Adam, is lord even of the Sabbath."

^{3:1}He again entered a synagogue, where there was a man with a shriveled hand. ²They watched him intently, to know if he would heal him on the Sabbath, so they could accuse him. ³He said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand in the middle." ⁴He asked them, "Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath or to harm, to save life, or to kill?" But they were silent. ⁵He looked around at them in anger, deeply sorrowed by the how hard their hearts were. He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand!" He stretched it out and his hand was restored. ⁶The Pharisees left immediately to counsel with Herod's people in order to destroy him.

Commentary

This section continues the confrontation with the religious elites. The clash that began over questions of authority when Jesus healed the paralyzed man has grown and reveals that we are seeing two competing structures. Jesus is setting up a model for coming to God different from what the Pharisees have taught and now that Jesus has become popular, this distinction is coming to the fore. While there are no other links to the stories above the thematic link provides us a window into the minds of Jesus' opponents and the eventual rationale for his arrest.

vv 18-22: The first thing we should notice is the contrast between the situation in this paragraph and that of the preceding story. In the encounter with Levi, the Pharisees questioned Jesus' religious commitment because he dared feast with tax-collectors. In this story Jesus' disciples are questioned because they failed to fast properly. It was only strictly necessary for Jews to fast on certain high holidays, but, by the time of Jesus many Pharisees fasted twice weekly, and it is presumable that John's disciples followed this practice. It is common for religious renewal movements to place responsibilities on their members which go beyond the strict laws of the religion. These additional rules help to reinforce the commitment being made to God. We see this in monastic orders' commitments to poverty, chastity, and

obedience; also in movements such as the early Wesleyan movement, which had strict rules governing attendance at meetings, giving, and other religious obligations. We have a tendency to read this confrontation as if Jesus is denying the value of fasting and taking away the Jewish obligation; but, Jesus' response is more complex than that. We should also notice that it is "some" who ask Jesus about fasting; it may be that people are observing the difference in Jesus' movement and are sincere about wanting to know Jesus' motives. We sometimes read hostility into this passage, as if the Pharisees and John's disciples are looking down on Jesus. Rather, I think we can read this section as people honestly asking why, if Jesus is promoting a renewal movement, he does not mandate his disciples practice this discipline.

Jesus responds with a parable comparing his ministry to a wedding celebration; here we note that the preceding paragraph also showed people misunderstanding why Jesus would celebrate. Jesus concedes there is a time and place for fasting, and it is coming, but, this is not that time or place. The celebration of Jesus' coming, just like a wedding, will not last forever, at some point those celebrating return to a new normal. When this new normal happens for the Church then it will be an appropriate time to fast. We also see here the first hint that Jesus anticipates his leaving. The verb used seems to indicate some level of force making him leave, but, it is hard to assume he completely understood what was ahead of him.

The two illustrating parables unite to paint a clear picture of what Jesus expects will happen if his interpretation of God's reign is simply scabbed on the existing religious structure. Jesus is proclaiming a radically new teaching, as we have repeatedly seen, and this new teaching must be formed into a new container. Thus, rather than trying to teach within the Pharisee's (or John's) system of discipline, Jesus is in the process of creating his own. Jesus' new power cannot be contained in the old customs, just like fermenting wine, will rupture old, dry skins, or a patch will tear old cloth when it shrinks. We often think, here, of old customs cracking, but, the key is not age but condition. The wine skins are dry, the cloth is shrunk, if our customs are properly understood and used, they can be like conditioned leather, eternally supple. Fasting simply out of habit is like feasting from habit, old and tired; fasting and feasting out of the power of God is fresh and new. Using a 2,000 year old liturgy of the Church can be fresh and new if understood rightly, and a praise song written yesterday can be tired if done in dead routine. Jesus is commenting that a fast done because it is tradition and no other reason will not stand up to his power; but, a fast done to capture the power of God, even if it is traditional and customary, will lead one to God.

vv 23-28: Unlike the previous section, where we do not necessarily see any hostility or direct conflict, this scene presents direct resistance to Jesus by the Pharisees. Jesus and his disciples are walking next to a grain field, and the disciples are presumably snacking on the grain next to the road. We are not told how the disciples are violating the Sabbath; simply that their actions are contrary to Jewish law. It is important to understand that above all else there were two marks of Jewish faith, circumcision and Sabbath, and to break these commands was to forfeit the entire law. At that time Jews were so concerned with violating Sabbath that they

developed a complex structure of rules designed to help people maintain Sabbath, and it appears the disciples violated one of these (which one(s) is debatable). These rules were designed to help prevent people from unintentionally violating God's word. Jesus' reaction is to say that we need to pay attention to the reason for the Sabbath and what it means, and follow conscience from there. Jesus does not disregard the Sabbath; rather, he affirms it while confirming we should not be slaves to it. This goes along with his teaching on fasting, we are to use Sabbath to grow closer to God not as some religious obligation. Sabbath is not about what one can and cannot do; it is about resting in God and allowing others the same rest.

Jesus makes a somewhat strange comparison to David's eating of the bread of presence (1 Sam. 21:1-9), in defense of his disciples. In 1 Samuel, David goes to Abimelech the priest and asks for the bread (which only priests may eat) for him and his men. One may understand this took place on the Sabbath, when the bread was changed, and he is asking for the old bread (but this connection is not obvious). David's actions clearly violate God's expectations of the bread, Exodus 25:30, Leviticus 24:5-9, which raises the question as to why Jesus would use the scene. It is possible that Jesus (and others of the time?) recognized that David, as God's anointed acted within the spirit of the law, and that on this authority he was able to eat the bread and give it to those with him.

We must discuss the fact that Mark has Jesus say Abiathar was priest and 1 Samuel says Abimelech. Did Mark make a mistake listing the wrong priest? 1 Samuel lists Abiathar as Abimelech's son, but, 2 Samuel 8:17 has this reversed and Abimelech is the son, which would make Abiathar the priest involved. This is really a trivial point to the discussion at hand, but, should be recognized. The point of the story is David's actions the name of the high priest does not matter.

Jesus continues the theme of authority by again highlighting the title Son of Adam, the individual sent by God to commence God's reign and given unique authority on earth. Thus, Jesus' ability to reinterpret the Sabbath is grounded in his unique relationship with God. Just like David using his authority as God's anointed to gain food for his followers, so Jesus also may gain food for his followers through his authority. Jesus is the lord/master of the Sabbath and as such governs how it is to be celebrated and observed.

vv 1-6: This paragraph continues the theme of the preceding encounter, at least in theme. It is unclear whether or not this event takes place on the same day with the same Pharisees. It is possible that the Pharisees encountered Jesus and his disciples walking to the synagogue and followed him in; it is also possible that this is the same synagogue where Jesus cast out the evil spirit (1:23-28) since Mark refers to "the town" which might indicate Capernaum. . Now it is possible, that the Pharisees arranged for the man to be conspicuous that day, intentionally trying to goad Jesus, though, it is equally probable they simply saw him in the crowd and recognized the possibility for healing. Jesus, though, obviously wants to force the issue; he brings the man forward and intentionally heals him in front of everyone. Again, Jesus is healing to further his teaching, he seeks to teach and heals along the way. It was common for different

factions within Judaism to debate the interpretation of Scripture and how to maintain it. Jesus though does not seem to want to debate, his actions demonstrate he wants to issue a challenge. While we naturally side with Jesus in this struggle, imagine being a Pharisee who has studied the Law your whole life. This challenge would probably been seen as a little insulting, though, We see from the paragraph above there is already hostility (even if that was a separate incident).

Healing was only allowed on the Sabbath if it was deemed a medical emergency, so we see in Jesus' question a direct challenge to the established understanding, since a paralyzed hand is not an emergency. Jesus is rooting his action in Deuteronomy 30:14-15 which indicates that the entire law, including the Sabbath, is meant to produce good not evil, life not death. Jesus is not rejecting Sabbath, but, he is allowing that things done on Sabbath should bring life and health to the community. There is also, I believe, and implicit understanding that healing of this sort comes from God, and that to heal means some level of acknowledgment and compliance from God. What Jesus is teaching us is that Sabbath is about restoring humanity and creation to Eden not about what is or is not labor.

At the end of this section battle lines are drawn, Jesus is upset with the Pharisees inability to hear him, and the Pharisees are conspiring to kill Jesus. Jesus is naturally upset that people are not listening to him; but, even more so the religious leaders are failing to hear his understanding of the Law. The Pharisees seem concerned about authority and the pride of place they enjoy, and not about truly understanding God. This pride leads them to conspire with the ruling elites against this new popular movement.

Questions

1. What place does fasting have in your life, and what place do you think it should have in the life of today's Church?
2. Jesus says that his new teaching cannot be contained in tired customs or disciplines, do you have any disciplines in your life which need revitalized? Do you need to find new disciplines?
3. The Pharisees are quick to call out the disciples for violating Sabbath, how should you handle a situation when a member of your congregation is struggling, or doing something harmful to their relationship with God?
4. The Pharisees fail to acknowledge Jesus' question (even if it was rhetorical) and refuse to enter into discussion, how do you handle people who raise objections to your belief structures?
5. Much of this section deals with appropriate celebration of the Sabbath, how important is Sabbath to you, how do you maintain Sabbath in your home?

Chapter 3

⁷Jesus, with his disciples, withdrew from the town to the sea, a large throng from Galilee followed him. Also, a large throng from Judea, ⁸Jerusalem, from Idumea, and from across the Jordan, even from Tyre and Sidon, who had heard what he was doing, gathered around him. ⁹He told his disciples to prepare a small boat for him, so the multitude could not crowd him. ¹⁰He healed many, so the sick pressed in upon him to touch him. ¹¹When the evil spirits perceived him they would fall before him, and scream saying, “You are God’s Son!” ¹²He would severely scold them, so they would not reveal who is was.

¹³He went into the mountains, and summoned those he wanted, and they came to him. ¹⁴He made the Twelve, to be with him and he sent them to preach. ¹⁵He gave them authority to drive out demons. ¹⁶He appointed the Twelve, Simon who he named Peter, ¹⁷James the son of Zebedee and John, James’ brother, these he named Boanerges (which means “sons of Thunder”), ¹⁸Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Alpheus, Thaddeus, Simon the Cananaean, ¹⁹and Judas Iscariot, the one who handed him over.

²⁰He would go into a house and such a great crowd came with him, they would not be able to eat their bread. ²¹His family, hearing about him, came to get him, because they said, “He is mad.”

²²The Scribes came down from Jerusalem saying, “He is possessed by Beelzebub, it is by the chief of demons he drives out demons!”

²³He responded with a parable, saying, “How can Satan drive out Satan? ²⁴An empire divided cannot stand it must collapse. ²⁵Also, a house divided cannot stand. ²⁶If Satan revolts against himself he cannot stand, his end is come. ²⁷No one is able to enter the house of a strong person, and rob it, except if the person is subdued, then the house may be robbed. ²⁸Truly, I tell you all of humanity’s sins may be pardoned, even blasphemy; ²⁹except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, this will never be pardoned, the guilty always bear that sin.” ³⁰Because they said he has an evil spirit.-

³¹His mother and brothers came and standing outside sent him a message. ³²With a crowd seated around him, they said, “Look, your mother and brothers are outside seeking you.” ³³He answered them, “Who are my mother and brothers?” ³⁴And scanning the crowd seated around him he said, “Look, my mother and brothers! ³⁵Those who will do what God desires, those are my brothers and sisters and mother.”

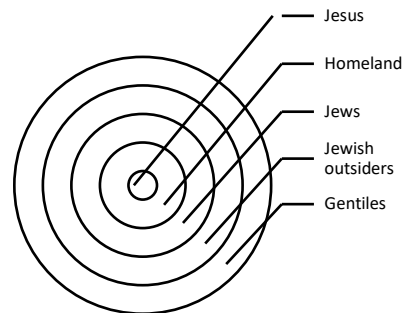
Commentary

Jesus has just weathered his first real opposition in the form of the Pharisees questions concerning apparent laxity in keeping the Sabbath. This section reminds us just how popular Jesus was as a teacher and healer. We see that despite his run-in with the religious authorities he is still recognized as a popular leader. We also see Jesus beginning to organize his followers into a movement beyond his own person. The conflict and crowds prompt Jesus to begin the process of organizing and preparing his movement to expand beyond his personal charisma. Lines are drawn as Jesus begins to become a target of criticism clearly defining who is with him

and who is not. This section sets up for us the contrast of those who understand and stand with Jesus and those who will condemn him, and their relationship with him.

vv 7-12: In the previous section we saw Jesus run into his first real conflict, a spat over the observance of Sabbath with the Pharisees. While nothing in the language necessitates this scene follows immediately after the conflict, we can assume that Jesus' actions are, at least in part, a response to what happened in 3:1-6. We should probably read Jesus' move to the sea as a strategic withdrawal; understanding that he needs to remove himself from the conflict with the Pharisees to move forward. The "throng" pressing around Jesus is exceptional, both in size and tenacity. Note the shift in words from "crowd" used everywhere else in Mark, to "throng" in this one passage. Not only has the confrontation not hindered Jesus, but, it seems his influence is growing.

We have seen large crowds before (1:5, 33; 2:2, 13); and, Mark seems to want us to remember two of these. In 2:13, Jesus is along the sea coast with a crowd when he adds Levi to his band of disciples. Also, in 1:5, crowds from all over Israel come out to see John baptizing in the wilderness. In this section we see Jesus by the sea, and crowds from all over coming to see him. Verses 7-8 represent one long complex sentence accounting for the visitors to Jesus. We need to notice the concentric circles Mark draws around Jesus beginning with his homeland of Galilee. Galilee was the region of Nazareth and Capernaum the two towns identified with Jesus, these are his people, his first audience. These people have followed Jesus from the beginning and Mark now distinguishes them from the other crowds. Now added to that people from all over Israel are coming to see Jesus, just as they did to see John (1:5). Mark goes on, proving the words of John that Jesus is greater (1:7-8), people from Idumea come to Jesus. Idumea was a Jewish region politically, but, like Samaria was seen as not pure religiously. The Jews looked down on these people as somehow missing out on being God's people. Lastly Tyre and Sidon are purely Gentile and pagan (at least from a literary perspective). There probably was a large Jewish community in these cities, but, they represent pagan rulers. Notice how Mark is telling us the entire world is drawn to Jesus as he is teaching and healing by the sea.



We see two purposes for coming to Jesus in the crowd, healing and exorcism. We are given a descriptive and ironic picture of the crowd. The physically ill are bulling their way to Jesus in an attempt to touch him, and be cured from their diseases; in fact, we can almost see the Black Friday shopping crowd falling over each other trying to grasp hold of Jesus and gain healing. Again we see physical touch linked to healing (and again not to exorcism), these people need to touch Jesus and are about to crush him to do it. They press so hard that he is forced to climb into a boat so as not to be crushed. In the context of the story we can understand Jesus as

teaching, it is not made explicit and we see no reason to assume that he moved away from the crowd for any other reason than personal safety. This begs the question, is Mark trying to show a reverent crowd consumed with finding God's healing, or a crowd obsessed with the magic healing found in this man? There may not be a right answer to this question, and Mark might be showing God's power to transform even those who come for the wrong reasons.

The ironic part of this story is the reaction of the demons (who as usual speak instead of their human hosts). They show the utmost respect for Jesus, recognizing his identity where the crowds and Pharisees fail. Again the demons are no threat to Jesus and we are left with the impression that expelling them is a simple thing. What is interesting is they identify Jesus as God's Son, a term with even more power and authority than "Holy One" (1:24). The demons, unlike everyone else in the story, seem to be gaining an ever more accurate picture of Jesus and his nature. But, Jesus does not allow them to speak, does not allow them to promote this message; does he not want demonic spokespersons, or, does he not want the world to know his identity at this time?

vv 13-19: Unlike 1:35 where Jesus goes away to pray, there are no connections between this paragraph and the preceding one. Rather we simply understand that Jesus left the shore at some point. The retreat into the mountains is very deliberate, and as Mark tells us, he summons certain people to him. Jesus is ready to organize his following, creating an inner circle responsible for maintaining his teachings, and to help him manage the crowds and spread his proclamation. In short, this group is to carry out Jesus' ministry when he is not physically present, an extremely high honor. We should notice that both verse 14 and 16 use the term "the Twelve", and both of these references come before the names of those in the group, indicating the group may have been more important than the members. Jesus picks twelve individuals; theologically significant as representing the twelve tribes of Israel. In this group of twelve we see represented a New Israel founded around Jesus.¹¹

An interesting side note to this incident is that Jesus gives the disciples which will make up the innermost circle nicknames. Peter (stone) is not a name in either Greek or Aramaic, nor is "Sons of thunder", which is not used anywhere else in the NT to describe James and John. Unlike Matthew (Mt. 16:18), Mark does not explain why Jesus called Simon "Peter", which leads to an interesting possibility. Thunder is loud, brash, and arrogant; stone is hard and dense, is Jesus describing three closest disciples in negative terms? Mark seems to present these characters in negative ways throughout the book. What would be interesting about this is these individuals were personally known to Mark's first readers, and were not remembered that way. First those first readers such a negative view of these spiritual giants would have been shocking, and would reinforce the change of heart possible with Jesus. This is by no means a definite interpretation, but, is something we should think about. Simon comes to Jesus hardheaded (hardhearted?) and their intimate relationship transforms him into the

¹¹ This is confirmed by Luke listing James the son of Judas instead of Thaddeus (Lk. 6:14) and the disciples replacing Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:13) to preserve "The Twelve".

compassionate leader of the church in Rome. Also of note, where is Levi in the list, the only other disciple to be shown in a call story is not mentioned. Tradition equates Levi and Matthew as the same individual. Also, James is listed as the son of Alphaeus, was he a brother to Levi, or, was this a different family? The title Cananaean attached to Simon probably refers to the Aramaic word for patriot and relates to zealot used by Luke to describe him. Mark tips his hand slightly telling us that Jesus will be handed over by Judas, and though we do not know what that will mean at this point, it does remind us of John the Baptizer who is no longer in the picture.

In this remote setting Jesus gives to his followers the authority which was previously his alone (1:22, 27; 2:10), authority which will be exercised later. We could debate the role of authority and discipleship in the Church today, but, at this point in the story Mark does not give us many answers. Mark has, though, created three distinct groups, the opposition to Jesus, the large crowds who do not seem to understand Jesus beyond his works of power, and the disciples who are Jesus' inner circle and possess his authority. Mark is always asking "Who is Jesus", but, now is setting the stage for new questions, "What does it mean to be an insider", and "What camp to you belong in".

vv 21-30: Verse 21 picks up on verses 7-12 and Jesus' overwhelming popularity, which at this point is interrupting his life, to the point that he can hardly gain a moment to himself. Even physical necessities, like eating, have become difficult because of the crowds wanting to see him. In the midst of this his family arrives, believing he has gone crazy, in order to take him home and away from the circus surrounding him. We are not told much about the family's rationale, simply they believe Jesus is out of his mind, and they need to intervene. It is significant that Jesus' family does not believe in him, especially considering at least two of his brothers (James and Jude) became prominent in the early church (and wrote epistles), as well as his mother. This is somewhat embarrassing that these early leaders did not understand Jesus at first. But, like the disciples above, Mark may include this very humanizing picture of Jesus' family precisely to encourage believers to aspire to grow with Christ.

The next paragraph finds more confrontation, this time from the Scribes, and it is even uglier than what Jesus' family was saying. These are not the Scribes we have seen earlier, a group who were based in Galilee, these Scribes came from Jerusalem and they came to fight. The way verse 22 is worded shows the Scribes were not making a onetime comment while watching Jesus perform an exorcism, this was a rumor they started about him as their official policy. Word of Jesus has spread to Jerusalem, and the authorities do not like what they are hearing so they have come to handle the situation. The difference between Scribes and Pharisees is one of position, the Scribes, in all likelihood belonged to the Pharisees' party, they were the Pharisees experts in Jewish law and custom. The Scribes were responsible for understanding and interpreting the Jewish Bible and commentaries on it. Their presence indicates that decision about Jesus' understanding of the Scripture needs to be reached, and they are the ones for the job. While demon possession and madness were near kin in the philosophy of the

time, they were distinct and demon possession is a far more serious accusation. So though Jesus' family is worried about him, the Scribes are going a step further.

We often think the accusation of the Scribes has no merit (based on Jesus' response), but, when we consider the hierarchical structure demons were thought to have, it makes sense that a high ranking demon would have authority to command a low ranking demon.¹² Jesus' response in verses 23-26 asks why demons would be divided. What would be the endgame for one demon to drive out another? One demon driving out another would mean they are in chaos and their hierarchy is about to collapse. Obviously this was not happening, and so in this parable Jesus is forcing his attackers to reconsider their position without attacking them or directly responding to their allegations. After all, the Scribes are not attacking one exorcism, but, Jesus' ministry as an exorcist; Jesus has driven out several demons and this is inexplicable if he is doing it by Satan's power. Jesus' response is brilliant since he never contradicts the Scribes, which would have been very bad for him; rather, he points out where their position breaks down.

Jesus goes on the offensive in verse 27, within the context it is easy to understand that he is referring to his own binding of Satan, who is represented in the strong person. Jesus is not only saying he is not working with Satan, but, that he is stronger than Satan, and plundering his possessions. It is important to keep Jesus' words strictly within the context; Jesus is not saying the world belongs to Satan. Jesus is referring to exorcism as taking away something from Satan, and even here we should not understand him to strictly mean these people belong to Satan. Understanding people under demonic control (let alone the entire world) as property of Satan, is to grant him far too much power. The Scribes have accused Jesus of working for Satan in performing exorcisms, Jesus is responding that he is greater than Satan and in exorcism is taking away from Satan the things he had previously controlled.

Jesus begins the next paragraph in a very solemn manner, "truly" or literally "Amen" shows that Jesus is putting himself on oath about the veracity of the statement he is making. Jesus wants to make sure his hearers understand the absolute nature of the statement he is making. Jesus then makes two universal statements, first that all sins may be pardoned, then that one sin will never be pardoned. If all can be pardoned, how is it one may never be pardoned; and if even blasphemy can be pardoned, how will those that blaspheme carry it with them? Blasphemy in its technical sense is to either, misuse God's name, or, to attribute the things of God to a source other than God (this is the charge leveled against Jesus in 2:6); in a general sense it means to abusive or slander someone. Too often we hear talk of the "unpardonable sin", as if God cannot pardon, this is poor theology, which Jesus debunks in verse 28. In this verse "blasphemy" is a technical term referring to abuse or slander against God, the same charge we see in verse 29. Thus, the sin is pardonable and we need to look closer at what Jesus is saying. Verse 30 shows us that Jesus' words are meant to be addressing the Scribes who have mislabeled Jesus' actions as the work of Satan. We can then infer that Jesus is saying that

¹² We also see this philosophy at work in C. S. Lewis *Screwtape Letters* a must read, not to understand demons but to understand ourselves.

attributing God's work to Satan shows an inability to distinguish the work of God. This lack of understanding about God will lead one away from God, and though this sin can be forgiven the person committing it will never recognize the sin and give God the opportunity to pardon it. When we declare a sin "unpardonable" we are limiting God's mercy and forgiveness, something we have no right to do; we must recognize God's forgiveness is unlimited even if people cannot accept it.

vv 31-35: This paragraph takes us back to verse 21 with Jesus' family coming to find him; Mark is not relating a second story, he is elaborating the first one. Grammatically, Mark is using an *inclusio*¹³, or, what is called a "Markan sandwich" where Mark inserts a second story into the middle of the first. This technique highlights the rejection of Jesus, and combined with the dramatic acceptance in the first half of the section, clearly draws lines between those accepting and rejecting Jesus' claims. We are not told why Jesus' family is waiting outside; were they embarrassed to walk in, or perhaps the crowd was too large (3:20) and they were forced to stay outside. By keeping the family outside, Mark creates a physical contrast inside and outside, those who want to hear Jesus and those who want to remove Jesus.

The real focus of the paragraph is Jesus' reply to the news that his family is outside, news probably delivered by the crowd itself. Jesus, at least symbolically, rejects his family in favor of those seated around him. Jesus redefines family to mean those who live within God's reign as he preaches it. This is a radical move, saying that our closest relationships should be with those inside the church even above parents and siblings. Mark has established that Jesus is a unique figure, so we cannot take too literally that we are to be equal with him as siblings. However, we should understand that he is establishing a bond between Christians that should not be taken lightly.

It is also important to notice that while only his mother and brothers have come to retrieve him he talks of "sisters". Jesus is intentionally and overtly giving women a share in his ministry. In Greek the term "brothers" can refer to multiple male siblings, or, as in Paul's letters, it can be gender inclusive, referring to all siblings. Jesus is expressly adding the term "sisters", deliberately giving women an equal share in the new family. There is no other reason Jesus would have added "sisters", in fact, the statement would have been more rhetorically balanced without the word (and potentially could have included women). Jesus' statement would have been radical in his time and speaks to an underlying concern with the way society was conducting itself at the time. It is often argued (from inside and outside the Church) that the Bible is misogynistic and belittles women, but, this passage shows us that Jesus took steps to raise the status of women. Some will object he did not go far enough, but, to speak too radically is a surefire way to make sure no one listens. We should ask ourselves, why Jesus and Mark deliberately used such language.

¹³ *Inclusio* is Latin for inclusion and refers to a segment of a story opened and closed with common words phrases or ideas to help the reader understand the unity and theme of the section.

Questions

1. We are shown a picture of the world coming to Jesus, do you see this picture playing out today? How? How are you presenting Jesus that might be affecting this?
2. While the demons continue to recognize Jesus for who he is, the rest of the crowds seem to be blinded to everything but Jesus' healings, how obvious do you think the power and work of God is in our lives, and how do you work to perceive this work?
3. Jesus is clearly establishing a meaning to "Disciple" what does this word mean to you, and how do you live it out in your life?
4. Jesus warns that the Scribes were unable to see the things which kept them from accepting God, what steps might we take to ensure we do not have such blind spots, preventing us from seeing God's reign?
5. Do you take Jesus' attitudes toward family seriously, what are your closest relationships and how can you draw closer to those in your congregation?

Chapter 4: part 1

^{4:1}Again he was teaching by the sea and such a large crowd gathered around him that he climbed into a boat and sat down and the whole crowd gathered on the shore next to the sea. ²He offered them many parables, and he taught them saying: ³“Listen! See, an individual came out to sow seed. ⁴Now, one of the seed fell on to the path, and the birds came and ate it. ⁵Another fell on rocky ground, where it sprang up quickly, because there was little soil. ⁶But when the sun hit its height, it scorched the plants, and they withered from a lack of roots. ⁷Yet another fell among the thistle, and the thistle grew up and choked it and it did not produce fruit. ⁸But some other fell in rich soil, producing thirty, sixty, and even one hundred times over.” ⁹ He said, “Let those who have an ear, hear.”

¹⁰When they were alone, the twelve and those around him asked him about the parable and its meaning. ¹¹He told them, “You have been given the secrets of God’s reign, but, to those outside everything is in parables, ¹²so:

*Seeing they can see and not perceive,
Hearing they can hear and not understand,
Or else they might turn around and are pardoned!”*

¹³He continued, “You don’t understand the parable? How then will you understand any parable? ¹⁴The one sowing sows the word. ¹⁵This is the meaning of the path; where the word is sown, and is heard, immediately, Satan comes and takes away what was sown in them. ¹⁶This is the meaning of the rocky soil; when the word is heard, immediately, it is received with joy. ¹⁷But, it does not have root; it is temporary, because when trials or persecutions happen because of the word, immediately, this one deserts. ¹⁸Others are that sown among the thistle; these ones have heard the word, ¹⁹then the worries of life, and the allure of money and the desire for things enter and choke out the word, so it becomes fruitless. ²⁰But these are the ones sown in rich soil; these hear the word and welcome it, and produce thirty, sixty, even one hundred fold.”

Commentary

This section begins with Jesus in a familiar setting, the seashore; in fact, this section begins in a fashion similar to 3:7, Jesus is being crowded by the sea and must get into a boat. The major difference between the two sections is Jesus’ occupation, in chapter 3 he is healing, while here he is teaching. Here we are provided with our first extended look at Jesus’ teaching in Mark, and it is important that this teaching is on discipleship and God’s reign. We also see that those disciples which Jesus separated from the crowd receive an added blessing and additional teaching from Jesus.

Vv 1-9: Mark tells us, Jesus taught the crowds using parables and the parable of the sower dominates this section. It is first important to identify the role of a parables in general before trying to understand this one. Parables are generically speaking “wisdom teachings” and can take many forms. We most commonly associate parables with stories designed as allegories on life; but, parables also can include proverbs, aphorisms, and riddles. We often assume that parables are meant to give flesh to or humanize an otherwise detached concept (i.e. imitate the

Good Samaritan); but, parables are not necessarily meant to be easy to understand. Parables are used to provide a background for people to think about complicated ideas; parables are not easy to understand and must be pondered about over time. Parables are often meant to shock an audience and encourage listeners to think about an uncomfortable idea. Parables can also produce multiple solutions, even when, like here, one is provided. Jesus gives an interpretation to the parable of 4:1-9, but, we should understand the interpretation as a jumping off point not as the complete and only solution to the riddle. Jesus desires that we think through the problem of God's reign, what it looks like and how it has come into the world (or failed to?). To truly "hear" what Jesus has told us, we are obliged to sit with this parable on our minds pondering the issues associated with both the parable and the solution. Mark's gospel is not conducive to lingering, he wants to move quickly; but, in these teaching sections we must either pause now or bookmark them for later, they cannot be hurried.

Right from the start, Jesus clues us in that this message is going to be important; "listen" and "see" function as synonyms for "pay attention", and the sensory nature of the words gives them more weight. Jesus wants us to lend our entire selves to comprehending this message, eyes forward, ears perked, you do not want to miss this. While the person who sows the seed is mentioned, this person is not very important to the story, rather just a vehicle to begin the tale. Notice from verse 4 onward the sower is not mentioned, it is the seed that falls not is thrown, the seed and the ground are the major players in this story; therefore, identifying the sower is pointless; this is reinforced by verse 14 which interprets the meaning of the seed, not the sower.

As we read through the parable we should begin by noticing the parallel progressions in the seed which is unproductive and that which is productive. Many readers want to identify four groups of seed, three which fail and one that succeeds, unfortunately, this reading lacks careful attention to the text. The text presents two distinct groups of three; the first unproductive and the second productive. Notice the singular nouns used of the unproductive seeds and the plural used of the good seeds; obviously, Jesus wants to highlight that there is at least as much productive seed as unproductive, and probably more. Now we move to the progressions, we see in the unproductive seed the first does nothing, the second begins to grow and quickly dies, the third grows, but, without producing any fruit. The progression in the second group is more obvious, it gives three levels of production, balancing the three unproductive. We can quibble about whether these production estimates are normal or overwhelming for the time, but, it is more important to notice all of the good soil is productive while all of the bad is unproductive.

The parable ends with Jesus reaffirming the need to "hear" the meaning of the story. This is a classic way for a prophet to address the people with an oracle of God (cf. Deut. 29:4, Jer. 25:4). Bracketing the parable with commands to hear would have caught people's attention (obviously it caught the disciples') and potentially shows why, of all the things Jesus taught about this is the one Mark leads with and is one of the few to be recorded at all.

Vv 10-12: The whole of verses 10-20 is a digression from the story, revealing what happened sometime later, but, inserted here give additional context to the parable above. We can tell it is a digression because verse 10 talks about being alone and verse 21 continues the parable narrative, meaning that Mark wants to use the later discussion to highlight this parable as important. A small group consisting of the twelve and other disciples question Jesus as to the parable's meaning. Now before we get Jesus' interpretation we get a further digression into the nature of parables in general, including a quote of Isaiah 6:9-10. The fact that Mark felt it necessary to include this comment on parables between the parable and its interpretation suggests that he felt this quote shed light on the interpretation of the parable. Another clue to the importance of this statement is the recurring theme of hearing. Notice again that the parable starts with a call to hear, and concludes with another appeal for the audience to understand, this theme of hearing (along with seeing) is picked up in Isaiah for understanding God's message. The Isaiah quote shows that parables are a two edged sword, allowing those within God's reign to understand that reign even more, while shrouding that same reign in mystery to those outside. This clear distinction between those inside and those outside begs the question, "where does this distinction come from, does God prevent people from hearing so they will miss out on God's reign?"

This discourse centers on the same insider/outsider question we saw developed in chapter 3. Many on a shallow reading of verse 12 believe that God has separated people into two camps, those inside who understand the secrets and those outside who remain in darkness. Granted most translations lend themselves to this conclusion, but, is it accurate? In Isaiah 6, the prophet is charged with presenting Israel with God's message, a message which they are too hard-hearted to receive. This hard-heartedness is not an act of God; but rather, the result of the lifestyle which Israel has chosen for so long. We must assume that Mark is using the Isaiah passage in the same context. Essentially we should see some level of irony in the quote; the use of parables allows those who hear Jesus to say they had no idea what he was talking about. They can listen to him speak while turning a deaf ear. Parables, then, become a way to provide examples for the faithful so they can understand Divine secrets, while allowing those outside to remain ignorant.

We should, also, notice that "secrets" is meant to convey an idea similar to those held between friends. Secrets between friends are life events, not meant for public knowledge because the public lacks sufficient knowledge to properly understand them. Perhaps we should say the secrets of God's reign are like the secrets conveyed to students by a math teacher, open to all, at least all willing to understand them. This definition of secrets and the role of parables factor greatly in understanding the meaning of this parable as we will see below.

Vv 13-20: Jesus' words in verse 13 are somewhat troubling; after all, in verse 11 he proclaims that the disciples have been given the key, how is it they do not understand the parable? While the disciples have the key to understanding, understanding takes time and teaching. Like us they have the necessary tools to understand, but, they need some additional help from Jesus.

The next rhetorical question is even more telling, why is it that the disciples will not understand other parables if they do not understand this one? This is a clue to us, that no matter how we see the final interpretation of the parable it must shed some light on the need for parables (vv 10-12) and on how to interpret them (v 13). The interpretation given by Jesus must be seen as a starting point for understanding the parable; however, it would be improper to stop with what is made explicit. It seems likely that Jesus' interpretation is meant to put us on the right track, not to give us full knowledge.

Jesus begins by identifying the seed as "the word"; before we look into that, we should notice that Jesus does not identify the sower, meaning that his identity is unimportant for properly understanding the parable. What does Jesus mean by "the word"; the only time we have seen a reference to "the word" was in 2:2 where Jesus is teaching before being interrupted to heal the paralyzed man. There Jesus seems to be proclaiming the message of 1:14-15 that God is restoring the people and establishing the Divine reign. This kingdom proclamation seems to be what Jesus has in mind here; and if we cannot understand that we will never understand his other teachings, because they focus on this reign.

From here Jesus focuses on the soil types and qualities. The first soil is a packed down roadway, a hard heart, which gives the seed (word) zero chance for growth before the birds (Satan) removes it. Commentators like to debate whether or not the sower was being careless with the seed; but, if you have ever seen a large corn field you know there are always a couple of stalks growing off the edge of the field, it means nothing. What Jesus wants us to see is that this ground was not prepared for seed, in fact, years of use by people and animals had made it useless for seed; it might as well have been rock. Even if the birds had not gotten the seed it would simply have laid there, doing nothing. The next patch represents a place where the top soil has been loosened enough for the seeds to sprout; however, it has not been prepared and the underlying rock prevents the sprouts from developing roots and they die. The third soil allows the seed to grow, but, the plant uses so much energy trying to keep pace with the weeds around it that it cannot produce fruit. Worrying about those things competing with God's reign have meant that this person is unproductive. Here the soil seems well prepared, plants are growing, but, it has not been continually maintained and what should be growing is competing with things which should not be there. Here we notice the progression from completely unable to accept "the word" to an acceptance of "the word", though admittedly nothing comes of that acceptance. Proper preparation of the soil and routine maintenance of the soil are necessary if a plant is going to produce; the same is true of "the word".

As we look at the good soils something rather unexpected jumps off the page at us, Jesus does not interpret the fruit for us. While we can be sure that the fruit is in some way related to God's reign, we cannot know what the fruit is. Often, we are told that "fruit" is bringing souls into the kingdom (or something closely associated), but, if "soil" represents the condition of the heart that metaphor fails miserably. It is also tempting to bring in the fruit of the Spirit found in Galatians 5; and though that metaphor fits with the general theme of the passage we must

hesitate to make an exact parallel since Jesus left it open. Rather we must say the focus on the parable is not on the fruit, but, the soil, and we must focus on the relationship of the soils to “the word”. We see a progression in the good soils, just like the one in the unproductive soils, though, Jesus takes no time to explain these soils. Jesus simply admits that productive soils will produce fruit and it will be of varying amounts, a rather anticlimactic ending. Now we must ask ourselves how these pieces fit together.

Mark has been picking at the issue of “insider vs. outsider” since chapter 2 and it seems that here Jesus is dealing with that same issue, though in a somewhat roundabout way. Though we do not know what the fruit is, it is obvious the insiders produce it, while the outsiders die. There are two elements, though, which confuse this cut and dry reading of the text. First what do we do with the plant choked by weeds, it does not appear to die, but, it does not produce fruit either, are those represented here inside or not? Secondly, both unproductive and productive soils are listed in a progression, is Jesus implying that each of us grows more productive as we tend to the soil of our own life? These are questions not easily answered; but, it is relatively certain that the individual unwilling to think about and interpret the parables of Jesus, particularly as they relate to one’s own life, will remain on the outside.

Questions

1. Put yourself into the position of the crowds hearing this parable for the first time, without the interpretation, how do you think you would have responded, would you have sought more from Jesus or walked away, or perhaps, something in the middle?
2. How do you identify each of the soil types, what are the characteristics of the person typifying each of these?
3. Jesus indicates that there are differing levels of productivity within the Church, how should we react to this statement, especially considering we live in a culture emphasizing equality?
4. Where do you find yourself, on the continuum of production within the parable, are you producing fruit within your own life?
5. Jesus is very clear the word will produce fruit in soil that is prepared for it, how do you prepare yourself, as the soil, to hear the word in your everyday life?

Chapter 4: part 2

²¹He said to them, “Does anyone bring in a lamp, in order to place it under a basket, or, a bed? No! It is in order to put it on a lampstand. ²²Nothing is hidden, except to be revealed, nothing is in darkness that will not come into the light. ²³If anyone has an ear, listen!” ²⁴He continued, “Look and listen, the measure by which you measure will be used to measure you! ²⁵For to the one who has, more shall be given; but, to the one who does not have, even what this person has will be taken away.”

²⁶He continued, “God’s reign is just like, a person scattering seed on the ground; ²⁷then sleeps and rises day after day, meanwhile the seed sprouts and grows, and the sower does not know how. ²⁸The earth bears fruits by itself, first the stalk, then the head, and then the grain on the head. ²⁹But when the fruit is ripe; immediately, he sends out workers to bring in the harvest.”

³⁰Then he said, “What is God’s Reign like? What parable can describe it? ³¹Consider a mustard seed, when it is sown it is the smallest of all seeds. ³²But when it is planted, it grows, and becomes the largest of all herbs, producing branches large enough that the birds of the sky dwell in their shade.”

³³With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as many as they could hear. ³⁴He did not speak to them except in parables, then he explained everything to his own disciples.

³⁵That evening he said to them, “Let’s cross to the other shore.” ³⁶They released the crowd and took him into the boat as he was; also, there were other boats with them. ³⁷Then a strong wind blew up, and waves began to crash into the boat, so that the boat was taking on water. ³⁸But, he was in the stern sleeping on a pillow. They roused him saying, “Teacher! Don’t you care we are being destroyed.” ³⁹Then he stood up, rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Silence. Be calm.” Then the wind stopped and there was a great calm. ⁴⁰He said to them, “Why were you spineless? Where is your faith?” ⁴¹They trembled with fear, saying to one another, “Who is this, that even the wind sea obey him?”

Commentary

There are two distinct parts of this section, the conclusion of Jesus’ teaching begun in the previous section, and the report of Jesus crossing the sea, immediately following. Though the teaching and the crossing are not directly related, except in chronology, Mark has been developing a two-prong picture of Jesus, teacher and miracle worker. We saw in Chapters 1 and 2 Jesus’ miracles were explicitly connected to events involving teaching. Mark seems to be continuing that theme, placing a very dynamic and dramatic miracle immediately following an extended look at Jesus’ teaching.

vv 21-25: This paragraph is made up of four one line aphorisms, with a call to hear dividing the segment in half. The first of these one-liners focuses on the purpose of a lamp. A lamp is meant to illuminate the surrounding area, hence, it is put on a lampstand. Mark gives little direct indication of what Jesus is talking about, but, we can make a strong inference based on the preceding parable. In the parable of the soils, Jesus wanted to emphasize the possible

reactions to “the word”, and it is likely that the lamp here also refers to the word, or, the proclamation of God’s reign. God’s reign cannot be hidden away if it is to fulfill its purpose. It is tempting to bring in Matthew’s interpretation, “you are the light of the world” (Matt 5:14-16), but, Mark does not reference the Church’s role in spreading the light. Rather, in Mark, we simply see that God’s reign is announced and we are left to speculate what our role is in that announcement. Verse 22 continues the theme with a slightly different motif. Now, that Mark has established, the purpose of the lamp, to give light; he gives the power of the light. Light reveals everything, in the same way everything about God’s reign will be revealed through Jesus. This helps to explain verses 11, 12, & 23; Jesus wants everyone to hear and believe, and to that end, he will completely reveal God’s reign. This means that to comprehend we must pay close attention to what Jesus is saying about and through the parables, because they relate the message.

It is very interesting that Jesus connects seeing and listening to this saying about reciprocity. Combined with this is a saying about giving and taking in verse 25. It appears that Mark wants us to connect these three dots, coming away with one interpretation. Those who are willing to heed Jesus’ commands and hear what he says in the parables will be the ones who receive from God. In hearing a person gives a measure of attention to the parable, and that same measure of attention will be given back by God. This is not a strict one to one ratio, God does not seem to work like that, but, we understand that the more time one gives over to understanding God’s reign through the word, the more God will honor that individual and, in the words of the above parable, produce fruit within the person. Verse 25 elaborates on this theme, acknowledging that those who do not put time into understanding God’s reign will have that little bit of understanding taken away, while those who put time in will be rewarded with more than they had. Note that Jesus wants to reveal all things, without secrets so that everyone will see (v 22), here he acknowledges people will not hear and even what they have understood will be taken away. This contradiction is not the fault of God, rather, it is the stubbornness of humanity which does not listen to God. Jesus and God want to reveal, and will reveal, all of the secrets of God’s reign, however, we can still shut our eyes to the light and remain in darkness.

vv 26-29: This similitude has multiple possible interpretations, thanks, in part, to the number of pieces introduced in these four verses. The fact that “the earth bears fruit of itself”, can indicate that the seed of the word grows within the world without direct intervention. In other words, we do not have to worry about its growth, God will take care of that. While this interpretation does find some support within the parable, it does not seem to capture the true nature of the farmer, nor the harvesters. I think instead of focusing on the independence of the seed’s growth, we are better served to focus on the fact that seed can be growing below the surface without being observed by the farmer, and even after a plant bursts through the soil, it takes a significant amount of time before the fruit is ready. I think Mark wants us to focus on the fact that the fruits of God’s reign might not be readily apparent, but, with patience we will come to see a magnificent harvest. This interpretation would also help us understand why Mark spells out the steps in the growth of grain, from sprout to harvest. He is pointing out that

it takes time for the grain to reach maturity. It is also possible that in the harvest language, Jesus is deliberately echoing the prophecy of Joel 4 where the last days are compared to a grain harvest. If this is the case then we must understand Jesus to be saying that it may look like nothing is happening; but, God's reign is coming into its own and by the time God is ready to harvest, the harvest will be ready.

It is always tempting to try describe who the other characters are in the parable (is Jesus the farmer, are we?). I think in this situation such inquiries are truly red herrings and unimportant, because Jesus has set out to describe God's reign, no more no less. It is always possible to over interpret a parable, this happens when we start defining characters who are only meant to move the story along.

vv 30-32: Reaching a height of about 10 ft. the black mustard shrub, to which Jesus is referring, is a rather impressive garden plant. This massive shrub, is further impressive because it comes from an extremely tiny seed. This propensity for growth makes the mustard seed a common analogy in the ancient world. It is somewhat common for people to try to make the words "smallest" and "largest" very literal, but, clearly Jesus is using hyperbole to help distinguish the large end size of the plant from its humble beginnings. As in the saying above, Jesus wants to emphasize that God's reign has potential for tremendous growth, even though those sitting around him at the time might not see it. While it is important to remember that Jesus was talking to individuals about the growth potential of God's reign before it happened, even today in a culture that is increasingly post-Christian we can utilize these same messages about the growth potential within the Church today as we look to re-establish God's reign. The word planted in the world always has the potential to flourish in new and exciting ways and will bring about a plant disproportionate to its initial size.

vv 33-34: Mark completes the section of teaching by indicating that he is only giving us a snapshot of Jesus' teachings, and that there was far more we do not know about. The fact that Mark is being selective about what he gives us indicates that we are right to read these parables as relating to each other as we have. Mark is selecting parables that he feels belong together; and, we should at least read some common thread among them. Given the allusions to the word and God's reign we are therefore right in interpreting all of these parables through that lens. I think it is a wonderful message to us that Jesus took the time to explain the parables to his disciples. While we do not know if this reference is only to the twelve or if others were involved, it should give us confidence that Mark and others, who learned from the twelve, understood the parables the way Jesus meant them. This continuity means that we can be relatively confident we too understand what Jesus meant, because we like the disciples have been taught the secrets of God's reign.

vv 35-41: The use of the phrase "at evening" indicates that Mark is concluding the day which began verse 1. There is no need to believe that verses 10-34 were part of the day's teaching that began with the parable of the sower; rather, Mark substitute's representative teaching. Here, though, Mark resumes the narrative of the day with Jesus ending his teaching and

sending the crowds away. There is no hint as to why Jesus wants to cross the sea; could he be tired (physically, spiritually, or emotionally) from the teaching? Does he want to extend the geographic range of his ministry? Is he operating from a divine suggestion? We are not told, but, the first seems likely because the opposite shore of the sea was Gentile territory. In this region, Jesus stood a better chance of spending time away from crowds unrecognized and unnoticed by the population (and as we will see, immediately after performing a miracle he leaves, with hardly a word). Jesus' exhaustion may also be apparent in his taking refuge in the back of the boat to find sleep.

Open water can be a very dangerous place at night, especially in an open boat, as the disciples were, and without lights. The Sea of Galilee is prone to unpredictable weather, so a storm coming from nowhere is not uncommon. The disciples' boat was probably an open fishing boat with very low sides (to help make it easy to bring fish aboard), which means it would be in serious trouble in high seas. Verse 37 indicates that the boat had taken on a significant amount of water as the disciples began to wake Jesus. The disciples' reaction to the situation is very understandable; their terse comments to Jesus relate the gravity of the situation.

We must honestly ask, what did the disciples expect Jesus to do? Whatever they expected, it could not have been Jesus' rebuking of the storm as if it were a person. In fact, the language is the same as in 1:25 where Jesus rebukes the demon; we should not take this to mean that the storm was somehow controlled by a demon, though. Mark uses the language to show that the same power that allowed Jesus to easily rebuke the demons is now allowing him to speak to nature. We have come to expect this kind of power in Jesus, but, controlling nature is God's domain, people do not control nature they ask God to do so (Job 38:8-11, Psalm 107:23-32).

The demeanor's of Jesus and the disciples are polar opposites during this event, Jesus is calm and serene while the disciples are agitated and bordering on panic. Jesus even probes for the reason behind the disciples' fear. It is easy to view Jesus as divine in this passage, but, I think Mark wants us to see a man in complete control of himself, as he is when encountering demons. None of the chaotic things of life need shake us if we are centered in God's reign and working to see it universally realized. By contrast the disciples are a picture of us worried by the changes of life, unsure of what is happening. In the end their question becomes our question, "who is this man, and what kind of force can control nature?"

We cannot leave this section without mentioning the obvious connections between this story and Jonah 1:4-15. In both stories the main character is asleep on board a ship at sea when a storm arises, and both are woken by a frightened crew. Jonah is told to pray (an ironic command to a prophet); God calms the storm, but, only after the prophet is made even more vulnerable. Jesus is not directly asked to do anything (though the question seems to imply that he could help); but, on seeing the situation immediately calms the storm himself. Jonah is a character study in a person succeeding in spite of oneself; Jonah seems to do most everything wrong, and yet, saves Nineveh. Is Mark making an intentional comparison between Jonah and Jesus? Does Mark want us to see Jesus as the anti-Jonah, the one who is prepared to work

within God's plan completely and is thus empowered to succeed no matter the circumstances? It is hard to imagine a Jew could hear this this story (let alone retell it) without thinking about Jonah. Jonah is a narrative which highlights failures in listening to God, as well as God's ability to work despite human interference. It seems that Mark is making an intentional comparison so that we will be able to fully appreciate the disciples' question in verse 41. Does this mean (as some suggest) that this event never happened and that Christians invented it strictly for the moral? There is no reason to believe the event did not happen, nor, can anyone explain why Christians would feel the need to invent this story. Rather, what we see is an event retold in a way that enhances connections to other stories to help the reader identify themes.

Questions

1. Jesus claims that God's reign, or at least its message has been completely revealed, do you think we comprehend the whole message, or are some things still hidden from us?
2. We typically think about meditating on the word as synonymous with reading Scripture, but, do you think that the ideas of planting the word and listening to the word could have other meanings for us today?
3. Where is the growth potential for God's reign in society around you, both inside and outside the Church, and what can you do to help prepare the soil for this growth?
4. When the disciples' wake Jesus they seem to expect something, but, they do not expect Jesus to calm the storm, what do you think they expected, and what does that mean you should expect when you call on Jesus?
5. Consider the connections between verses 35-41 and Jonah 1, do you think Mark is trying to compare Jesus and Jonah, and if so how does that affect you answer to the question, "who is this man?"

Chapter 5: part 1

^{5:1}They went across the sea to the Gerasenes' country. ²Immediately on his disembarking the boat, a man with an evil spirit ran up to him from out of the tombs. ³He dwelt in the tombs, since no one was able to bind him even with chains. ⁴He had been shackled and chained many times, and each time he broke the shackles and smashed the chains, no one was strong enough to subdue him. ⁵He spent night and day among the tombs on the hillside, screaming and cutting himself with stones. ⁶Seeing Jesus at a distance, he ran and fell down in front of him. ⁷He screamed out saying, "What do you have to do with me, Jesus Son of God the Highest? Swear by God, not to torture me!" ⁸For he had said to him, "Evil spirit come out of this man." ⁹So he asked him, "What is your name?" And he responded, "My name is Legion, because we are many." ¹⁰He appealed to him again that he might not send them out of the region. ¹¹Now there was in the hills a large herd of pigs feeding, ¹²and they pleaded to him saying, "Send us to the pigs, so we can enter them." ¹³So he sent them, and the evil spirits left and entered the swine; then the herd stampeded down the slope into the sea, there were two thousand, and they drowned in the sea.

¹⁴The swineherds fled and spread the word, through the towns and country; and the people came to see what had happened. ¹⁵They came toward Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting, clothed and in his right mind, this one who had the Legion, and they were terrified. ¹⁶Those who had seen the demoniac related to the others about the pigs. ¹⁷They began to plead with him to leave their region.

¹⁸As he was climbing into the boat, the one who had had the demon pleaded with him that he be allowed to go with him. ¹⁹But he would not allow him, rather said to him, "Go to your own house, and your people and spread the word to them of what the Lord has done for you, and the Lord's mercy on you." ²⁰So he left and went to announce in the Ten Cities what Jesus had done for him, and everyone was amazed.

Commentary

After calming the storm, Jesus, along with the disciples, land o the opposite shore of the Sea of Galilee, which is dominated by Gentiles. This is the first time in the story that Jesus has ventured outside of Jewish territory, and follows on the heels of the disciples' question, "Who is this?" These are important points to remember as we explore this passage; also, unlike the other exorcism stories Jesus stumbles onto the demoniac, neither Jesus nor the demoniac set out to confront the other. This is a unique situation allows us new insights into the range of Jesus' power, and helps Mark establish a new sense of who Jesus is. It must be remembered that Jesus seems to have come to this shore to escape the crowds, not to demonstrate his power; Jesus is a person seeking fellowship with God and his disciples, not to put himself on display. At the end of this passage presents us with a different look at discipleship and the dimensions of Jesus' ministry. This encounter may not have been planned, but, Mark uses it to give us a clearer picture of who Jesus is.

Vv 1-13: There is no rest for the weary, no sooner does Jesus put his feet on dry ground that a man approaches him, and not just a man but a demoniac. Notice that Jesus disappears from

the story from verse 2-9 so that Mark can give us some background on the demoniac. This is important, Jesus does not simply disappear from Mark's story; if Mark is going to give this much background to another character, especially an unnamed one, we must pay attention. We can assume this man was a gentile, because Mark places the story within Gentile territory across the sea from Galilee. Next we see that the demon (at this point in the story we are led to believe there is only one) exerts great control over the man, as well as using the man to cause a great deal of chaos. The fact that people are trying to chain him up reflects the chaos he is causing and how society fears him, this man obviously cannot be trusted in society. In the Old Testament demons are the enemies of God because they cause chaos, which is opposed to God's order in creation and this demon shows strength by creating much fear and chaos.

Living among the tombs is probably a very natural thing for a person who cannot live within a village; the hillside caves, which are used as tombs would provide reasonably good shelter. We probably can make the assumption, the man was kicked out of his village and took up residence in the nearby cemetery as convenient shelter. Mark makes a big deal out of the tombs mentioning them three times in verses 1-5; Mark, therefore, wants us to see something beyond the simple historical detail of a man forced to live in an uncomfortable place. According to Numbers 19:16 any contact with a grave or the dead makes a person unclean. Mark is establishing a scene where everything around Jesus has the potential to make him unclean, he is outside of the promised land, among tombs, with a demoniac, and for good measure we are about to encounter pigs (unclean animals, Lev. 11:7). Contact with impurity makes one impure, and Mark is surrounding Jesus with the impure. Jesus makes the situation clean and holy, this represents a complete reversal of the normal order. Jesus' ability to make a situation holy is similar to the description of the altar in the Tabernacle in Exodus 29:37 "...and the altar shall be most holy; whatever touches the altar shall become holy" (NRSV). Jesus' presence acts like the altar taking away the impurity of life situations.

The encounter between Jesus and the demoniac begins with the man running to Jesus and confessing him to be the "Son of God the Highest". This behavior might lead some to think that the man is in control of his actions and is seeking healing; but, there is no reason that the demon might not be responsible for this. The title given to Jesus even a stronger epitaph than we saw in 3:11, indicating that it is the demons who responsible for the encounter. It appears that the demons, understanding who Jesus is, have decided to approach Jesus to ask for some level of protection. Much like the encounter in 1:22-28 the demon initiates the encounter then names Jesus, this time the demons even try to bind Jesus to an oath in an attempt to limit his authority over them. Just like in chapter 1 the demons are trying to exert authority over Jesus and limit his influence over them, and given the level of impurity surrounding the scene, if there ever was a time when the demons could exert authority over Jesus this is probably it. Does all of this have an impact on Jesus' ability to cast out the demon, after all it appears the demon resists his first command to come out. Some see verses 8-9 as Jesus resorting to a formula for exorcism, but, this does not seem to be the case. Yes Jesus does interact with these demons more than any others; but it appears the demons understand that they are not going to win the

fight. Notice that while giving Jesus their name they are also making an appeal for some degree of clemency from him.

Why is Jesus concerned with the demon's name, and what is the significance of the name legion? It seems as if Jesus asks the questions simply so that the reader can know the demon's name; Does Mark simply keep this element in the story to show that Jesus has power over demons no matter how many are united together? Is this in some way a veiled attack against Rome, saying that Jesus has power over the Roman armies? It seems unlikely that Mark is concerned at all with Rome, but he may want the reader to associate the destructive power of the Roman Legions with the potential for destruction with several demons working together.

It is also unclear why the demons do not want to leave the region, or, why Jesus would consent to allow them to stay. There is some suggestion that a demon's power was geographically limited and that expelling them from the region would take away their power. There is little evidence to back up this suggestion. It is also difficult to determine why Jesus would consent to allowing the demons to stay in the region; it seems that he did not consider them a threat to humanity once they were expelled from the man. While some exorcists of the time would use signs from the demon to prove it had been removed (e.g. tipping a bowl of water), Jesus never seems concerned with such signs, allowing the one healed to bear witness of the healing.

It is fitting that Jesus allows the demons to enter the swine, an unclean animal, upon leaving the man. It seems odd though that Jesus allows such a large herd to be drown, knowing the mindset of demons to cause chaos, why would Jesus consent to such a potentially destructive situation. On top of this, Mark is completely unconcerned with the deaths of two thousand hogs, not to mention the economic disaster to those raising the pigs. In fairness to Mark, he is focused on showing that Jesus is not polluted by situations that would make most unclean, but, that he purifies the situation. Because of this theme it would be hard for him to show much remorse for the death of unclean animals, even if this would impoverish those responsible for them. While we are right to think about loss of the animals and the repercussions of such a loss, we must remember Mark wants our focus on what kind of man can purify this situation.

vv 14-17: In a very natural reaction, the swineherds flee to the nearby village to relate their story. It is very unlikely that they would have seen (or heard) the exchange between Jesus and the demons, rather, their message would have been about a sudden stampede of pigs into the sea below. At most, they might have seen the demoniac relatively near the pigs and assumed he startled them causing a stampede. Yet their story still produces a crowd coming out to see exactly what happened.

We must notice the crowd's reaction to the situation they found at the seashore. First, the man is sitting at Jesus' feet "clothed and in his right mind"; this man who had been uncontrollable was calmly learning from Jesus. Despite this rather apparent change in the man's disposition, the crowds still regard him as "the demoniac", they still view him through the lens of his possession. This is a warning for us, because sometimes despite obvious changes in people we

tend to view them through a lens incorporating previous situations. The people fail to grasp, at least initially, the full measure of Jesus' work; they see the man healed of the legion, yet, the story they are concerned with is the pigs. This truly was a remarkable loss, but they must look past the healing by Jesus to focus on it. Instead of being grateful for Jesus healing the man and reacting in awe and wonder as the Jews did in 1:27, they react in fear; instead of running from the place to get others sick and possessed, they ask Jesus to leave. They care about the loss, not the purity and healing brought and thus, they do not want to be anywhere near Jesus, he is too dangerous. While we sometimes question the Jewish crowds and their motives, they, at least, run toward Jesus and try to prevent him from leaving.

vv 18-20: By contrast look at the man's reaction, he wants desperately to stay with Jesus, as a disciple. But, Jesus quickly thwarts this and assigns the man a unique job. It may have been that it would have been difficult for Jesus to minister with a gentile among his closest followers. It is also true that the Twelve had already been established, and Jesus may not have wanted to add to his entourage. Neither of these are given as reasons for rejecting the man's requests; rather, Jesus gives the rejection a positive framework. This man alone was in a position to tell his friends and family what had happened to him, and proclaim the Gospel among the Gentiles the way Jesus and his disciples were doing among the Jews. This is a different stance for Jesus, who up to this point has explicitly told people not to spread the word (see 1:44). Is it simply that this man was among the Gentiles who were not looking for a Messiah? Does Jesus see the fear (opposed to the Jewish excitement) and recognize the need for this man to defuse the fear. We are not told why Jesus gives this commandment, but, whatever the reason the man heartily accepts his new responsibility and takes *his* message to the people.

The man was to spread what God had done for him, not a generic Gospel, but, his encounter with the Lord's mercy. This is an important lesson for us, we are not spreading the message of Mark's Gospel; we are spreading the message of the Gospel as it has appeared to us in the person of Christ. Also note that Jesus tells the man to spread what "the Lord" has done and the man spreads what "Jesus had done". The man is naturally conflating what he saw in Jesus with the power of God, and Mark seems to want us to pick up on that theme, Jesus is the embodiment of God's love and power. When Mark was writing "the Lord" was a title for Jesus more than for God among Christians, but, he intentionally uses this title for God (Jesus would have also used the title for God) to help us identify the man's encounter with God was through the new Lord Jesus.

Questions

1. Jesus is looking for a chance to rest, yet he is prepared to help the man in need, how do you make sure you are prepared to help those around you even when you are not expecting to help someone, or when you are exhausted?
2. The dialogue between Jesus and the demon plays out even though the demon is already conquered, are there times when you feel like Jesus cannot quite overcome evil because of the

dialogue, how do you handle these situations, and how do you remind yourself that Jesus has defeated evil?

3. The people of the village saw a “demoniac” even after Jesus healed him, how do you handle the temptation to see people the way they were as opposed to the way they are, and how can you better recognize when a person has been truly changed by an encounter with Christ?

4. The people of the region are scared of Jesus and his power because they look at the destruction and not the healing; the same can happen to us, where we see the destruction to our desired way of life when God enters, how do we make sure we see the healing and not the destruction?

5. What does the phrase “your Gospel” mean to you and how are you spreading the Gospel given to you?

Chapter 5: part 2

²¹Jesus crossed back to the other side; and on the shore a large crowd gathered around him. ²²Then one of the synagogue leaders, named Jairus, approached, and seeing him fell at his feet. ²³Pleading with him he said, "My daughter is about to die! Please, come and lay hands on her that she may be restored and live." ²⁴He went with him, with the large crowd following after, mobbing him.

²⁵Now there was a woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years. ²⁶She had suffered considerably, under several doctors, even spending everything she had, to no avail, rather, she had grown worse. ²⁷Hearing about Jesus, she shadowed the crowd to touch his clothes. ²⁸-because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I can be restored!"- ²⁹Immediately, the bleeding stopped, and she knew in her body, that she was healed of her scourge. ³⁰Immediately, Jesus recognized that power had flowed from him, he stood still in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" ³¹His disciples responded, "Look around at this crowd mobbing you, and you ask, 'Who touched me'." ³²But he looked around to see who had done it. ³³Then the woman, terrified and trembling, knowing what had happened, came and knelt before him; and confessed the whole truth. ³⁴But he said to her, "Daughter, your confidence restored you. Go in peace, healed of your scourge."

³⁵While he was speaking with her, some people came from the synagogue leader's house with the message, "Your daughter has died. Why bother the teacher any longer?" ³⁶But Jesus overheard what was being said, he broke in to the synagogue leader, "Do not worry, simply have confidence." ³⁷Permitting no one to follow along, except Peter, James and James' brother John, ³⁸he came to the synagogue leader's house, and saw turmoil, with crying and loud bawling. ³⁹Entering he said to them, "Why the turmoil and crying? The child is not dead, she is sleeping." ⁴⁰Then they ridiculed him. So he threw them all out. Taking the child's father and mother and his disciples with him, he entered the room where the child was. ⁴¹Taking the child's hand and said to her, "Talitha kum!" -which translated is, "little girl, I say to you, rise!"- ⁴²Immediately the girl got up and walked around -now she was twelve years old- and they people were shocked. ⁴³He gave them strict orders that no one should know about this, then he told them, "Give her something to eat."

Commentary

This passage is a wonderful example of Mark's skill as a storyteller; he weaves two healing stories together using a technique dubbed by scholars the "Markan sandwich". Mark begins one story only to interrupt it with a second, which will help to highlight a theme. While in this case there are chronological reasons why Mark will do so (the woman literally interrupts Jesus' movement), we should not miss out on the theological reasons why Mark tells the story the way he does. Mark continues the theme of Jesus encountering impurity and transforming the circumstances, making them pure and holy. Two women suffering, two situations where impurity must be encountered, yet Jesus again shows his authority in these situations and we are left with another answer to the question, "Who is this man".

Vv 21-24: After being rejected by the gentiles, Jesus returns to the Western shore and the publicity and crowds we have come to expect. In the midst of this a father approaches Jesus to ask him to heal his daughter. There is nothing unusual about this, it is a very human impulse, especially considering the imminent danger the girl is in. What is significant about this story is who is making the request. To start with we are given the man's name, Jairus; Mark is not in the habit of giving out names, particularly when it comes to minor characters. Mark has not yet named anyone in the narrative other than Jesus, the twelve, and Legion. Does Jairus represent someone who became known in the Church after Jesus' resurrection? Perhaps, but that might make too much of the name; at the very least, Mark's use of his name shows that this is no ordinary healing, like those we have come to expect. We are also told he is one of the elders of the synagogue, a very prominent position within the local culture. Unlike the Jewish leadership we have encountered to this point, Jairus endorses Jesus' ministry; is this the action of a desperate father trying to find hope to cling to, or, does Jairus firmly believe in Jesus' power? Even though Jairus was only a local leader and desperate, we should recognize that Mark is establishing that not all of the Jewish leadership was against Jesus (though it often appears to be). Jairus is creating a situation where he is tacitly endorsing Jesus while the national leadership is skeptical; this would complicate many things in the area.

While we know that Jesus was back in Jewish country, we do not know exactly where, but, it is likely he was near Capernaum, where most of his ministry has been centered. If this is so, Jairus was possibly the leader at the synagogue where some of Jesus' other healings took place (1:21-27, 3:1-6?), and likely among the reasons he came to find Jesus. If so Jairus is not simply acting out of hearsay, but, is seeking someone he has seen in action before and can have some faith in.

Vv 25-34: We see in the preceding paragraph that Jesus goes with Jairus, but, is being swarmed by a mob of people as he does. We often see this kind of event on television where one person is being escorted through the mob of fans, usually with security holding people back. We can almost envision the disciples in the role of bodyguards, helping to ensure that Jesus can pass in relative ease. No doubt these crowds were excited to simply see Jesus, but, have been worked into a greater frenzy by the prospect of a great healing. As the scene begins to move toward Jairus' house, we are introduced to a character who completely contrasts him, except that she is just as desperate.

Contrasts between Jairus and the woman						
Jairus	Named	Man	Wealthy	Synagogue leader	Public appeal for help	Acute disease
Woman	Unnamed	Woman	Poor	unclean	Secretive approach	Prolonged disease

We are not told what this woman's exact problem is, though context leads us to believe that it was something related to her menstrual cycle. Whatever the illness was, it is likely that much of her suffering was due to psychological trauma as physical pain. This woman would have been shunned within society as unclean (Lev. 15:19-33). She would have been denied all physical contact; if someone even accidentally sat where she had sat that individual would be ceremonially unclean until evening. The social stigma probably would have been very isolating for this woman, who is already suffering physically. With all of this, she has grown poor consulting doctors about her situation, and they have not been able to help. After all of this, the poor woman has grown desperate and stalks the crowd, looking for a time when she can run in and touch Jesus, hoping that action will effect a cure.

Is Mark critiquing the medical system of his day by saying the doctors were ineffective? Probably not, rather, he is making the much more positive claim that healing comes through God's power and not through human genius. He is also highlighting that this woman has pursued the normal course of action, and it has failed; showing her to be a difficult case. With this background we are able to sympathize with a woman who is at least as desperate as the anxious father, Jairus.

Mark has alluded to the popular belief that a person could be healed by simply touching Jesus before (3:10), but, here we see the woman express the opinion openly. She seems to believe that touching Jesus has magical abilities; and her healing may be seen to suggest that her belief is confirmed. Jesus even comments that this is a type of faith, "Your confidence restored you". Jesus seems to look deeper into the situation than the woman does. She may well have expected a magical cure, but, Jesus saw the actions of someone who believed God could restore her. In a situation that has led this woman to desperation, Jesus recognizes the faith that can genuinely provide for healing.

Among the unusual events in this story is that Jesus, "recognized the power had flowed from him". Did Jesus feel this transfer of Divine power every time he healed someone, or, was this a special scenario to counter the woman's secretive plans? The woman had intended to hide her plans, to touch Jesus anonymously, then escape into the crowd. But, Jesus calls her out, much to the disciples' amazement, and she is forced to humbly admit what she did. Remember she was unclean, everyone she touched in the crowd was now unclean until they purified themselves (reading Leviticus, we see this is no small matter especially if someone went to the Temple before being purified). At the least, the woman is insensitive and rude, but, Jesus disregards this to engage her as an individual. He addresses her as "Daughter", a term of endearment and something that we do not see from Jesus (the closest we see is 2:5 where he calls the paralyzed man "Child"). This is a very tender way to address a woman who has lived in social ostracism for a dozen years. Jesus' dismissal is important to notice; he notes that she is healed, this is a complete healing not a temporary effect, and because of that she may, "Go in peace". The concept of peace is the Hebrew understanding of *Shalom* (see Jdgs. 18:6, 1 Sam

1:17) and a recognition of restored and whole relationship with God. Jesus has pronounced her both cured and ceremonially clean; he has reinstated her into society.

Vv 35-43: While Jesus is dismissing the woman a message comes to Jairus, his daughter has died while they were on the way. Jesus, who overheard the message, calls for faith; one can picture Jesus pushing between the messenger and Jairus as he continues on his way to the synagogue leader's house. This is a bold and confident act, which propels Jairus to at least continue the journey, probably on the hope that the report is false (or an extremely high level of faith in Jesus, no one else in the Gospels expects him to raise someone from the dead). From this point on Jesus will begin restricting those allowed to accompany him; dismissing the crowds and all but his three closest disciples, he continues to the house.

Jesus' response on entering the house is rather brazen and abrupt; contrasting completely with the way he addressed the woman just a few verses earlier. When those mourning the young girl hear him they naturally react and reject his assumption; we must remember that Jesus is just entering the house and these people are intelligent enough to know death when they see it. Could Jesus be intentionally provoking the mourners so that he has an excuse to remove them from the scene, thus keeping the restoration more private? Or, is he making a theological statement that the people in the house are not prepared to hear? It appears that Jesus may be using sleep as a metaphor that this death is only temporary and she will awaken from it.¹⁴ Nonetheless, he removes the mourners from the scene keeping only those disciples he allowed to follow and the girl's parents.

Looking at the healing itself, there is little fuss involved, Jesus makes the situation look almost ordinary; as if, the girl had been simply sleeping and he woke her up. Much like he did with Simon Peter's mother-in-law (1:31), Jesus takes the girl by the hand and helps her to her feet. The speech is also unremarkable, though in the imperative, it seems the words were spoken with no more authority than one would expect to wake someone from a nap. *Talitha* is a common address to a child, literally "little (female) lamb" and *kum* is the imperative standup. Unlike Elijah and Elisha (1 Kgs. 17:17-24, 2 Kgs. 4:29-37), who both draw out the raising of children, Jesus makes the situation seem as easy and common as any other healing. Even the reaction of those in the room seems to be no greater than for any other miracle. Could Mark be intentionally underselling this miracle to help us think about it more; getting us to say, "wait he just raised her from the dead without batting an eye, how can you pass by so quickly, this isn't an everyday occurrence?"

While it is tempting to see the coincidental age of the girl and years of suffering of the woman as important, it is hard to link them in any real way. Though, it might be important that the girl

¹⁴ It should be noted that while sleep is used as a metaphor for death elsewhere in both the Old and New Testaments, it is always a different Greek word used; thus, by using this word which elsewhere always means natural sleep, Mark is creating a unique metaphor.

was just coming into womanhood and marriageable age. But, it seems that Mark simply gives her age to add a human element to the story.

Jesus gives the usual command for silence, accompanied, this time, by an injunction to feed the girl. The command to feed the girl seems to prove two things, one she is truly alive and healthy in every sense of the word; and two, that Jesus is concerned with physical want. Again, there is little we can make of this command theologically. As for his command to be silent on the issue, obviously that is impossible. Mourners were at the couple's house lamenting the loss of their daughter, they cannot simply pass that off as if nothing happened. Someone will notice the girl is not dead, and that will not take long. Rather, it seems that Mark is inserting the command to remind us that Jesus sought anonymity in such matters, not to expect us to believe that Jesus really thought they could keep this quiet.

Questions

1. Jairus and the woman could not be much more different in their circumstances and their approach to Jesus, yet he gives both their time, which one of these stories do you relate more with and why?
2. If you were the woman healed how would you react when Jesus stopped to question who had touched him? How about when he says, "Daughter... Go in peace, healed..."?
3. How would you feel if you were in Jairus' position as a desperate parent, whose daughter was on death's door, and Jesus stopped to question a poverty stricken woman about why she touched him? How about if you were in the crowd?
4. In one sense Mark makes Jesus' raising of the little girl a non-event; yet, it is important enough that only the three closest disciples witness it, how should we understand the nature of this miracle and its importance to understanding who Jesus is?
5. Confidence in Jesus is prominent in these two stories, in the first a woman acts recklessly in demonstrating her hope; in the second Jesus' personality seems to propel a family toward belief in him, when have you experienced either of these moments, faith leading to reckless abandon, and/or, faith only carried on through Jesus' own movement?

Chapter 6: part 1

^{6:1}He left there and entered his hometown; and, his disciples went with him. ²Since it was the Sabbath, he went to teach in the synagogue. Those who heard were bewildered saying, “Where did this come from? What is this wisdom given to him, and these powerful acts?” ³Isn’t this the builder, Mary’s son, and his brothers: James, Joseph, Jude, and Simon, and aren’t his sisters among us?” They were offended by him. ⁴Then Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not disrespected except in his hometown, and among his own people, and in his own house.” ⁵He was not able to perform powerful acts, except to put his hands on a few sick people and heal them. ⁶He wondered at their unbelief; and he traveled among the surrounding villages teaching.

⁷Then he called to himself the twelve, and he sent them out in pairs and gave them authority over unclean spirits. ⁸He commanded them to take nothing on their way except a staff, no bread, no bag, and no money in their belts, ⁹wear sandals, but not two garments. ¹⁰He said to them, “When you enter into a house, remain there until you leave the place; ¹¹but if the place does not welcome you or does not listen to you, as you leave there, and shake the dust from your feet as a witness against them.” ¹²Going out, they preached, so that people could be transformed. ¹³They threw out many demons, and they anointed with oil many who were sick, and healed them.

¹⁴King Herod also heard, because he had become famous. Some were saying John the Baptizer had been raised from the dead, and this is why the power was working in him. ¹⁵Others said, “He is Elijah.” Still others said, “A prophet as one of the Prophets.” ¹⁶But Herod said, “John, the one I beheaded, has been resurrected.”

¹⁷Now, Herod himself had sent out those who arrested John and threw him into prison, because of Herodias his Brother Phillip’s wife, whom he had married. ¹⁸For John had said to Herod, “It was not lawful for him to have your brother’s wife.” ¹⁹Now Herodias had it in for him and was going to kill him, but, was unable to do so. ²⁰Herod feared John, knowing him to be righteous and holy, so he protected him. When he listened to him he was greatly confused, yet he liked to listen to him.

²¹Yet her opportunity arrived, it was Herod’s birthday and he held a feast with the government officials, military officers, and leading people of Galilee. ²²During this Herodias’ daughter came and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; so the king said to the girl, “Make a request and it shall be granted.” ²³He swore to her, “Whatever you ask for, I will grant, up to half of my kingdom.” ²⁴She left and asked her mother what she should ask for; and she replied, “The head of John the Baptizer.” ²⁵She immediately hurried back in to the king to make her request saying, “I desire that, promptly, you give me the head of John the Baptizer on a platter!” ²⁶Though the king was deeply distraught, because of his oath and his guests, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷The king immediately sent the executioner with orders to bring her his head. So he left and beheaded him in the prison. ²⁸Then he took the head on a platter and gave it to the girl and the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹When his disciples heard, they came and took his body and buried it in a tomb.

Commentary

Jesus has subdued the forces of nature, an army of demons, and dire illnesses in the last three passages; but, his return home has proven that human nature can be even trickier to sway. Mark is continuing to ask “Who is this man” and in this section we are presented with new angles, Jesus’ hometown and Herod. We are also given the conclusion of John the Baptizer’s story, which also helps to shed light on Jesus. In the midst of this Jesus sends his disciples out on their first solo mission; they are sent to spread God’s victory proclamation in Jesus’ spirit, but, without Jesus’ presence. As Jesus becomes more famous and controversial, he begins to expand the scope of his ministry preparing for the time when he would be taken away and the disciples would have to carry on the tradition.

Vv 1-6: Jesus and his disciples return to his hometown, and though Mark does not name it here, he has already told us Jesus is from Nazareth (1:9). Mark does not care if Jesus has made the trip before, or if he ever goes back to Nazareth; rather, Mark makes this trip representative of Jesus’ relationship with his hometown. Jesus’ first recorded action after coming home is to go to the synagogue and teach. It is important to remember that one had to be invited to speak in a synagogue, similar to how one must be invited to preach in a church service today. This means that the people of Nazareth were at least somewhat receptive to Jesus and extended him an invitation. This scene resembles the previous two synagogue encounters (1:21, 3:1), Jesus’ teaching producing amazement in the audience; however, unlike the first two stories, in which the amazement has been seen positively, this community reacts negatively.

We are not told what Jesus has said to provoke the audience’s reaction, though presumably he proclaims the message of 1:15, “God’s plan has been fulfilled in him.” Mark is not very concerned about Jesus’ message because the message does not change and because in this case the messenger embodies the message. Rather, Mark is concerned with the reception Jesus receives for his teaching. The audience’s reaction is to identify Jesus’ occupation (pre-ministry) and family. Calling Jesus a “builder” is not necessarily an insult, the term reflects something close to “handyman” a person who was familiar with working with wood, stone, and even metals. In a small town like Nazareth this person would have been a respected member of society, because he would have done much of the construction and repair work people could not do for themselves. In larger cities these people might have been looked down on as “working class”, but, probably not in this instance. Rather, the people are reflecting on their “homey” impressions of Jesus. Jesus, for them, is not a prophetic figure with an awesome message of God inaugurating a new way of life and substantiating this with wonderful miracles. Jesus is the man you call when your door falls off the hinges or when you need a room added on to your house. The list of Jesus’ family members furthers this point; these people are average people living among us in a small town and God’s great miracles happen in great ways. The congregation expects wisdom and miraculous acts, they do not deny that God wants to work and is working in society, they simply do not expect great actions from such a common

individual in a common location. They expect greatness from others, wisdom from those trained for it, not from those trained to mend fences.

This is the second time Mark has talked about Jesus' family (3:31-35), and this time Mark gives us their names. There are some curiosities here that we should not pass over (although Mark only notes them in passing). First off, just like in 3:35 Jesus' sisters are important enough for Mark to mention separately. Though not named Jesus' sisters are presented as an element tying him to the community just as much as his parents and brothers, perhaps a subtle way for Mark to undermine some of the established society. Jesus' brothers are named, but, not much is said about them, perhaps the people want to imply that these are average men. Even if Jesus has been away for a while, his brothers have not, and they are only average so Jesus must be also. The most striking comment might be that they refer to Jesus as "Mary's son". Mary's husband, Joseph, is not mentioned at all in Mark. The omission of Joseph probably does mean he is dead at this point in Jesus' ministry, but, it is not certain. Does Mark's reference imply a virgin birth, a more scandalous birth narrative, or, simply she was the only living parent? Scholars debate this issue, but the truth is we cannot make much of Mark's comment other than it is unusual to identify a son by his mother.

Unlike Luke's portrayal (Luke 4:16-31), Mark does not show any signs of contempt for Jesus in Nazareth, nor does Jesus' comment refer to any. The people in the synagogue seem disinterested toward Jesus not necessarily vindictive and Jesus' comment implies that they were unwilling to listen to him, but, not necessarily opposed to him either. The response of the people is directly linked to verse 5 and Jesus' inability to perform the miraculous. While a few healings might sound miraculous to us, Mark means them as the exceptions that prove the rule. Did the people not give Jesus the opportunity to produce his normal works? More likely it is that not even Jesus has the authority over humans unconcerned with him. The verse could even be read to imply Jesus tried and failed to work miracles. The point being that the people of Nazareth would not allow God to break through into their world, unlike so many others who wanted or at least allowed (if skeptically) Jesus to work. This causes Jesus to react to the people of Nazareth in the way most react to him, shock and surprise. Verses 5-6 portray a very human Jesus capable of perplexity and being foiled by other people. The unbelief of the town only serves to hinder them, as Jesus continues his ministry and Nazareth gains no benefit.

Vv 7-13: Finally the disciples are given the opportunity to fulfill the purpose Jesus called them to in 3:14-19, to go out and be his proxies in the world. It is probably overly simplistic to assume this is the first and only time Jesus sent the disciples out by themselves. Rather, we should probably assume that this story represents one of many times Jesus sent his disciples out to proclaim his message to the world. It seems significant that Mark places this story between Jesus' rejection in Nazareth and Herod's killing of John, as if to show us that Jesus prepared his disciples for rejection and ultimately his death because the forces of the old guard

would reject them.¹⁵ Jesus sends his disciples out, without provision to proclaim the message; they are allowed only what would be considered everyday dress (including the staff) with nothing that would be necessary for a journey. The disciples are to expect and accept the hospitality they receive on their mission. The expectation of hospitality is not surprising, even today traveling evangelists can expect hospitality from the communities in which they are preaching. But Jesus goes further and wants the disciples to be prepared for communities which do not extend hospitality, something almost unthinkable in that society. Even Nazareth showed hospitality to Jesus (not much more than the minimum), even if he was not particularly warmly received. The disciples, though, must be prepared for communities which completely reject them and they must be willing to move on and keep going.

Taking Jesus' authority, the disciples go out and expand Jesus' ministry by healing the sick and casting out demons. It is worthy to note that the disciples' message in verse 12 sounds very similar to that of John in 1:9. It is likely Mark is trying to help us see the disciples' work as continuing that of John, preparing the way for Jesus, while taking on new authority from Jesus. This becomes specifically relevant placed immediately before the story of John's death. We should also note that, unlike Jesus, the disciples use oil in healing services. This might reflect the practice of the Church (and hence the Apostles) after the Resurrection and Mark simply adds it without any thought (since it was normal). It might also be that Mark is trying to point to a difference in authority between Jesus, who needs no mediators, and the disciples, who do; but, we cannot know for certain either way.

Vv 14-16: Mark introduces us to a new character in this paragraph, Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Galilee, son of Herod the Great, King of Judea. The introduction of the ruling class shows just how famous Jesus has become, even those who are farthest removed from his popular movement have heard of him. Mark also uses Herod to introduce the popular discussion about Jesus, "Who is he?" Mark is unclear about what a possible resurrection of John the Baptizer would mean, does the populace think Jesus is John or that Jesus works through John's power? Both are possible answers, Jesus and John are preaching similar messages and apparently have similar ministries. Was Jesus sent by John to continue his work as John, resurrected hides in secret? Is Jesus actually John raised from the dead, after all, how many people have seen John and Jesus? In an age before cameras, internet, and television, one can see how easy it is to spark debate and suspicion. On top of this some are saying that Jesus is Elijah the Old Testament prophet (1Kings) who is predicted to return prior to God's reign being established (Mal. 4:5-6, & Mat. 1:14 Jesus calls John Elijah). The mildest popular assumption is that Jesus is simply a prophet in the model of the Old Testament prophets, working with the power and strength of God. At the very least, Jesus was popularly understood to be one of God's messengers and perhaps one of great significance.

¹⁵ I feel it is inappropriate to talk of "the forces of this world" because this world is God's and we should recognize that the old regime is trying to hold onto something which does not belong to it, God's property. We are not made for another world we are made for another type of this world.

The paragraph serves as an introduction to the events between John the Baptizer and Herod (see below), but also gives us Herod's feelings on Jesus. It is hard to translate the emphasis of the original language in verse 16, in which Herod takes responsibility for John's death and implies that John has come back to torment him. Herod seems to see John as his personal tormenter and this resurrection (whether intended to or not) will continue to cause him problems. Mark wants us to imagine Herod as someone jealous of his power and who sees Jesus as threatening that power, in the way John did. There is definitely something of the neuroses of power in the character of Herod. The paragraph then provides us with a significant question, "If Herod sees Jesus as John and killed John, what then will be Herod's attitude toward Jesus going forward?" Mark wants us to ask this question, he wants us to ask how Jesus is going to relate to the political regimes that encounter him (see also 3:6).

Vv 17-20: Antipas (see above) arrests John the Baptizer; the wording of the sentence may hint that Antipas even felt some guilt at this. Mark remarks that John's condemnation of Herod Antipas' marriage of Herodias as the cause of his arrest, but, surely that was simply the straw that broke the camel's back. The Herod family is a very confusing family full of odd relationships caused by various marriages and made more confusing by the fact that Herod seems to be a personal name for some and a title for others. This means we are not exactly sure which of Herod Antipas' brothers (or half-brothers) was married to Herodias first, but, Mark is less concerned about that detail than presenting John as a heroic figure who stood up to the king for what is right (see Lev. 16:18, 20:21 for marriage guidelines). Herodias, under Roman law, had divorced her first husband (something not allowed by Jewish law) and married Herod Antipas. John spoke out against this action, probably with much public support. This, no doubt threatened Herod's already somewhat unstable power (he never got along with Rome and was never secure as ruler), necessitating him arresting John.

John's arrest sets up this odd relationship between himself and Herod; Herod hates John, wants to kill him, and because he is unable to, uses him as entertainment. We are given the picture that Herod brings John into his court, gives him latitude to speak, and listens enthusiastically, though he never really gets what John is trying to say. Mark's telling of this story is meant to bring to mind another awkward relationship between a prophet and Israelite monarchy. Elijah had a similar relationship with King Ahab (1 Kgs. 17-22) and Herodias seems to parallel the wicked Jezebel quite nicely. Like Ahab, Herod hates the prophet, yet respects him enough to fear him, but, the wife who is only technically behind the scenes, is plotting to kill the prophet at her first opportunity. Herod is thus caught in the middle respecting John enough to keep him alive, despite his wife's intentions, yet keeping him locked away and never truly hearing the message John was proclaiming.

Vv 21-29: The story of John continues, giving us the impression that Herodias has been plotting to kill John and was simply waiting for the next opportunity, which knew would come at Herod's next feast. Mark gives us no precise location for Herod's birthday feast, but, leads us to believe that it is in the same palace in which John is held prisoner. It may be Herod kept John

near him for entertainment, it may be that Herod happened to have his party at that location, and it may be that Herod had to send messengers to the prison where John was, we are simply not told.

Again the identity of the girl is impossible to verify, just as many of the familial elements of this story are. Though, it is clear that Mark wants us to see that Herodias is behind the girl's dancing and has deliberately sent her in to the feast as part of her plot to kill John. The young girl acts complicatedly with her mother, hence, her need to go to her mother to consult about the gift Herod wants to give her. It is likely the girl goes to tell her mother the plan has worked. The nature of her dance is not mentioned and there is no need to speculate on how tasteful it was, dance in any society may span from the artistic to the explicit. Herod's generosity is a grandiose display of wealth, though, the phrase "half my kingdom" is probably hyperbole. The plan works Herod is backed into a corner and consents to John's death, which is promptly carried out. And the scene closes with John's disciples showing respect for their fallen master, coming to bury his body.

Questions

1. The people of Nazareth rejected the Message of God because they saw him as common and mundane and not the means by which God works, how do you look at the things/people in your everyday life, do you expect God to do great things through them? (Specifically think of your church.)
2. Jesus was unable to overcome the unbelief of the town, do you think this concept is true, and do you think we have a problem with belief?
3. Why does Jesus perform miracles and what is their purpose, and should we expect any miracles in our modern culture? Why or why not? What kinds of miracles?
4. What do you make of the different ways in which Jesus is understood by the people, and what can we understand about the rejection and hatred of Jesus?
5. How does Mark's picture of John's interacts with Herod and Herodias strike you? What does John teach us about conviction and standing up for belief?

Chapter 6: part 2

³⁰Now, those who had been sent out returned to Jesus and proclaimed to him everything which they had done and seen. ³¹He said to them, “Come, off by yourselves to a deserted place and rest awhile.” Because there were many coming and going and they did not have time even to eat. ³²They got into a boat and went to a deserted place alone. ³³Many saw them leave and recognized them; many left from all cities and arrived ahead of them.

³⁴Upon arriving he saw the large crowd and had compassion on them for, “they were as sheep without a shepherd”; and he began to teach them much. ³⁵As the day waned, his disciples came to him saying, “This place is deserted, and the day is ending; ³⁶let them go, so they can go to the markets and villages and buy something to eat.” ³⁷He responded, “You provide them something to eat.” They replied, “Should we go away with eight months’ pay to buy bread enough to give everyone something to eat?” ³⁸Go, check how much bread you have!” Finding out they said, “Five loaves, with two fish.” ³⁹He directed them to have everyone sit in groups on the green grass. ⁴⁰they sat together in groups of hundreds and fifties. ⁴¹He took the five loaves and two fish and, looking up toward the heavens, he blessed them and broke the bread into pieces. He handed it to the disciples to pass out to them; and also, divided the two fish among them all. ⁴²Now everyone ate and they were filled. ⁴³They gathered the pieces of bread and the fish filling twelve baskets. ⁴⁴There were five thousand men who ate.

⁴⁵Now immediately his disciples climbed into the boat and went to the other side, to Bethsaida, as he dismissed the crowds. ⁴⁶After taking leave of them, he went into the mountains to pray. ⁴⁷At nightfall, the boat was in the middle of the sea and he was alone on the land. ⁴⁸Then he saw them struggling at the oars, because the wind was against them. Just before dawn, he approached them walking on the sea, intending to pass by them. ⁴⁹But they saw him walking on the sea and, thinking he was a ghost, cried out. ⁵⁰Seeing him, terrified them all. But he immediately spoke with them, saying, “Take courage! It’s me! Do not be afraid!” ⁵¹He came to them and go into the boat, and the wind was calmed. But, they were completely beside themselves, ⁵²because they did not understand from the bread, rather, they were stubborn.

⁵³Crossing over, they came to Gennesaret and anchored there. ⁵⁴then they got out of the boat, and immediately he was recognized. ⁵⁵They ran about the whole country and brought the sick on their mattresses to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶Wherever he went, whether a village, or city, or field, they would lay the sick in the square, and beg him to allow them to touch the fringe of his clothes. Many who touched him were restored.

Commentary

Following the digression about the death of John, Mark now resumes the narrative with the return of the disciples. Theologically, it is important to note that Jesus’ ministry continues to expand, even as we gain a clearer picture of the resistance he is facing. Mark has shown us that even though large crowds continue to follow Jesus, opinion is clearly divided about who he is and the value of his ministry. Despite this, the disciples return reporting great success, introducing a new level to the new movement, those brought in by the followers of Jesus. We

also see, that even though the political leadership has worries, or potentially hatred, about Jesus (whose ministry is clearly seen within the context of John's), he continues to act publically. Not only does Jesus not retreat from these new difficulties, he gives extremely public and grandiose displays of his authority.

Vv 30-33: The disciples return from what has been a very successful mission (v 7) and report to Jesus what they have encountered. There is some controversy about whether or not Mark uses the technical term "Apostles" or simply means, as above, "those who went sent" it is impossible to tell. The term Apostle seems to be a construction of the early Church and not a term used by Jesus, but, that does not mean Mark would not use it to help others understand who was on the mission. In any case the twelve come back to Jesus in joyous spirits. As in 4:35 Jesus does not get lost in the excitement of the situation; rather, he suggests that he and his disciples get away for some rest. This is a further reminder of the necessity not simply of sleep (though that is also important), but, of time of rest. Even after the heights of joy Jesus recommends reflection and quiet.

In the attempt to get away (similar to 4:35) Jesus and the disciples board the boat bound for a more remote location. The crowds, however, have other plans; they watch Jesus get into the boat and, anticipating where he is going, rush off, arriving at the location ahead of the boat. Just as before, Jesus' plans for relaxing retreat will have to wait, the people are waiting on him and he cannot disappoint. It is doubtful that the same crowd which saw the boat leave beat that boat to its destination; it would have had to have been an extremely dedicated crowd. This is what Mark wants to portray, though, it is probably more likely that the crowd arrived shortly after Jesus and his disciples, probably as they are just starting to relax. Mark uses dramatic language to help us see the stress the crowds are placing on Jesus and the disciples, after all, this trip is for their benefit not Jesus'.

Vv 34-44: Jesus sees the large crowds gathering and, for the first time, we see his compassion on the people. We are given the reason for Jesus' reaction, the people are leaderless and wandering "like sheep without a shepherd." This is a common Old Testament analogy (Num. 27:17, 1 Kgs. 22:17, Eze. 34:5-6) used in a variety of situations, from the death of Moses to military defeat, to showing God's concern for Israel. Jesus' reaction to this situation is to sit down and teach the people who have come. We should note that in this passage we have teaching and a miracle story, but, no healing stories. In other cases when a crowd has come to Jesus at least some have wanted healing, but here there is no hint of healing being a desire. Though we are not told why the crowd came, it appears they have a desire for Jesus, and not simply as a healer.

We are not given many physical details about this event, it just happens; Mark does not mention where this took place or how long Jesus taught. The story probably takes place on the east side of the Sea of Galilee since the crowds follow Jesus, and are presumably walking. It is also likely that Mark wants us to understand the event as taking the whole day. There is almost a hint of frustration in the disciples' comments; they came to an isolated place for a spiritual

retreat and have been forced into normal life. Obviously we can understand their frustration, they intended to have a time of stress relief and recharging and the stress followed them. Their comment to Jesus stresses the fact that the people need to buy their food; this betrays that the disciples do not want to be bothered by the people any longer. They know the only way the people will leave is if Jesus tells them to do so and thus their comment to Jesus.

Jesus' response is out of leftfield, telling the disciples that it is their obligation to find enough food for the people. Jesus' statement is an imperative suggesting that he is commanding the disciples, as their Rabbi, to do something. It would be fitting to add "seriously" to the disciples' response; they are exhausted and now Jesus wants them to cater the seminar. I think the disciples would have been asking themselves all day and especially at this moment, "Didn't he say something about getting away and recovering from OUR ministry, where's the rest?" Not only are the disciples questioning whether or not they should have to provide food for the crowd they also seem to question the logistics of such a feat. The response is not a literal comment about how much feeding the people would cost, but, represents the amount of effort involved. Does Jesus really expect twelve men, with no transportation, to walk to the nearest village plop down enough money to buy bread for five thousand and carry it back to the wilderness? Rather, the disciples' obvious and legitimate reaction to Jesus opens the situation up for a further teaching moment; this time teaching on the disciples' own question, "Who is this man". Jesus presses the issue further, showing he is serious about providing for the crowd. Five loaves and two fish was not even going to be enough food for Jesus and the disciples that night (one loaf feeds one person), let alone the crowd. Many want to ask the question, "How did this miracle happen", did the bread and fish miraculously reconstitute every time Jesus broke a piece off, or did people in the crowd have food and Jesus' actions prompt them to share. This is a misleading question, not simply because we cannot answer it, but, because it takes us away from the meaning Mark wants us to see. Jesus acts and food appears, when we are in need, Jesus acts and the need is alleviated, the how is not important.¹⁶

This is the only of Jesus' miracles to be recorded in all four Gospels, which should tell us two things, the historical event was very significant for the early Church and it has significant theological meaning. Frankly, such a powerful scene would probably have left more of a mark on those who witnessed it than any event until those surrounding Jesus' arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection. There are a number of theological possibilities in interpreting this scene and we should consider how each (all?) contribute to elevating the historical understanding.

One possible meaning Mark may have intended, though if so it is very much concealed, is that Jesus uses this miracle to redirect people's thoughts of God's reign away from military

¹⁶ I understand the more modern desire to find a natural explanation for the event, but, this perspective can have serious drawbacks. If we are quick to say that the crowd simply shared, we risk demeaning the message of Mark that God provided through Jesus, to Jesus was a charismatic leader who prompted people to share. Likewise, if we hold too tightly to the notion that the bread and fish reconstituted in Jesus' hands we may overlook the other ways in which God provides. In the end I think it is best to say, "We can't know, but Jesus provided."

conquest. The suggestion is made that five thousand men approaching Jesus represents a rebel force looking for a commander, which is also why they sat in groups of fifty and one hundred, military divisions. Though John 6 seems to imply that this is reason for the crowd, Mark does not; Jesus is constantly trying to redirect people's expectations of the "selected one", but, there is no need to see this here.

Other themes are far more likely, like comparing Jesus to Moses, who provided manna in the wilderness (Ex. 16:1-36), and Elisha, who provided for the prophets (2 Kgs. 4:42-44). God provided abundant food through both of these prophets, and now Jesus is shown in the same tradition. Mark clearly wants us to see that God favors Jesus' ministry because God is doing through Jesus the same thing which was done earlier, provide food.

Regardless of whether or not the crowd was a rebel military force looking for a leader, Mark definitely wants to show Jesus as redefining God's reign. This passage shows all four verbs traditionally associated with the Last Supper: "took", "looked up", "blessed", and "broke". In these actions was imitating the actions of the head of a household at every Jewish meal; but, these actions take on added significance in the post-Resurrection world of Mark and us. These actions point us toward God's eternal provision in Jesus and the Communion meal. We are then permitted to see that Jesus provided and will continue to provide. This is further highlighted by other language Mark uses which we do not readily see. The idea of "sheep without a shepherd" (v34) implies that Jesus will be their shepherd. They gather into dinner parties (one implication of the word translated groups) on the "green grass". After this the shepherd provides a banquet which satisfies their hunger. If this language sounds familiar it is because it is also found in Psalm 23. The provision the Psalmist describes is now available in Jesus. Thus, Jesus "the selected one" is not a military conqueror who will establish a just state and rule over a political regime; rather, he is the representative of God who gently protects and provides for the sheep, as the Psalms describe. This is truly a different picture from what many would have expected, but, it is now the framework in which many have come to see Jesus' purpose.

Mark ends the story by giving some statistics, the number of "men" fed and the amount leftover. Obviously, in telling us the amount leftover Mark wants us to understand this was no light snack it was a feast, and Jesus provided more than needed, unlike Moses and Elisha who provided just enough. Much is made over the fact that Mark envisions twelve large baskets, but, again this only reinforces that there were leftovers. The number twelve obviously is meant to symbolize the twelve disciples who questioned Jesus. The miracle provides so much that each of these sceptics collects the leftovers. The leftovers are meant as a comment to those who doubt God's ability to provide, even when those doubts are grounded in real circumstances. The fact that Mark explicitly tells us "five thousand men" leaves loose ends. We know he wants to emphasize the size of the crowd, but, because he uses a term which designates "men" we are left to ponder whether there were women and children present. If the military connection is legitimate then there probably were no women and children; but,

Mark may, like Matthew, be using a common phrase from Exodus to highlight the numbers (Mt. 14:21). What is most shocking, though, is what Mark does not say; unlike so many other miracles, we do not read anything of this crowd being amazed. Perhaps Jesus' greatest miracle and no one bats an eye! Rather, verse 45 tells us the gathering suddenly broke up. Perhaps John 6:15 is correct and Jesus saw the crowd misinterpreted the event and broke up the gathering, and, wishing to play that down at this point in the story, Mark glides past it without mention. We cannot be in any way certain, but, it is strange that such a miracle has such little impact on those who witnessed it.

Vv 45-52: We notice that this section bears a striking resemblance to chapter 4-5:20, Jesus teaches, there is an adventure on the sea, and they land in gentile territory where Jesus ministers. That is where the similarities end and the most interesting differences begin. Jesus separates from the disciples to dedicate time to prayer and rest (ironic considering the intentions at the start of the section were for the disciples to rest). Meanwhile the disciples are sent ahead, but, run into challenges on the sea.

The disciples are struggling with the wind, not uncommon for vessels, though not dangerous as was the storm in chapter 4, and Jesus decides to walk past them on the water. Mark states this in such a matter of fact way that it emphasizes the fear the disciples express at seeing him, but, try to imagine actually witnessing such a thing. Some scholars would like to dismiss Jesus' action by saying he walked on a sandbar, but, it is not likely experiences fishers would sail near a sandbar, nor it logical to expect a sandbar to run across the lake. We must accept the story as told, Jesus walked on the water.

In fact, to deny the supernatural element of this story undermines the message the Mark seems to be conveying. The supernatural is commonplace with Jesus, walking on water is the same as walking on land feeding five thousand on five loaves of bread is as common as an evening meal. In the man Jesus, the supernatural breaks through in new and fantastic ways, and we are left wondering how we are going to incorporate this into our lives. Notice, how commonplace Jesus' actions seem; Mark likes to build up Jesus' miracles, but here, they just happen and are a part of everyday life.

What we need to notice is the disciples' reactions, first fear and then disbelief. Honestly, the disciples have had a long and rough couple of days, their nerves are probably shot and now they see a person walking on the water (and moving faster than they are) fear is justifiable. Jesus, too, seems to think this is an appropriate reaction because he takes great pains to identify himself. He answers immediately with two commands to take heart, then identifies himself, he is concerned and compassionate toward the disciples' fears. The disciples' fears, like the wind, are quickly put to rest; but with that we see a completely new set of emotions, and a new side to the disciples. The disciples being "beside themselves" and "stubborn" is Mark's way of saying did not believe, or, they had hit a wall. These men who had just returned from spreading the message of Jesus now are in disbelief. They were telling people that Jesus was "the selected one" and was about to usher in God's reign and now they question who he is.

The reason Mark provides for the doubt is that the disciples failed to grasp the feeding miracle which happened the previous day. These men who were willing to spread out and proclaim that God's reign and God's anointed king are here, now have trouble with who Jesus is. From this point we are asked even more pointedly "who is this man, and what does that mean for me?" (This might lend credibility to the idea that the crowd in the previous story wanted to form an army around Jesus and make him king, and his rejection of that idea has made the disciples doubt who he is. Thus their doubts are because they failed to see the alternative reign he showed in the feeding miracle.)

Vv 53-56: This is somewhat clichéd language which we have come to expect in Mark's description of Jesus' ministry. Jesus returns to what has been successful and in an area he has been successful. Despite the disciples' inability to accept the new facets of Jesus they have seen he continues his ministry and continues with them. The crowds respond as before coming to him, trying to touch him in the hopes of being healed.

Questions

1. Twice in this passage we see Jesus emphasize the need for solitary rest and prayer, how do you make sure you take time for these activities, and how does Jesus' night alone impact what you do?
2. The disciples do not even have provisions enough for themselves and Jesus expects them to provide for the crowd, how does Jesus expect you to provide for others and how can you avoid imitating the disciples' objections to Jesus' ideas?
3. The crowd that followed Jesus may have been trying to remake Jesus into their picture of God's king, do you think we ever try to remake Jesus into our own pictures, and how can we move from this to being remade by him?
4. God's provision is on full display in this section, how has God provided in your life and how do you recognize that provision?
5. We tend to see Jesus' supernatural activities as matter-of-factly as Mark presents them, how can you develop a greater sense of awe for Jesus' actions (then and now), and how do you keep from reacting to Jesus in disbelief?

Chapter 7: part 1

^{7:1}Then, the Pharisees and some of the Scribes, who had come from Jerusalem, gathered around him. ²They saw some of his disciples eating food, with defiled hands, meaning not ritually washed. (³For the Pharisees, indeed all Jews, do not eat unless they have purified their hands, preserving the elder's traditions. ⁴Nor do they eat anything from the market without purifying it, there are many other received traditions, like purifying cups, pitchers, and bronze pots.) ⁵The Pharisees and scribes addressed him, "How is it your disciples do not walk according to the elder's traditions, but will eat with defiled hands?" ⁶He responded, "Isaiah well prophesied about you hypocrites, where it is written, 'This people shows me lip service, however, their hearts are very distant from me. ⁷Their worship is hollow because they teach doctrines of human laws.' ⁸You let go God's commands to uphold human traditions." ⁹He continued, "You are very good at rejecting God's commands to stand on your traditions. ¹⁰It was Moses who said, 'honor your father and your mother, and 'Anyone who dishonors father or mother must meet and end in death.' ¹¹But YOU say, 'If a person says to father or mother, everything you would get from me is corban (that is a gift to God), ¹²then you are free and no longer must provide for father or mother.' ¹³invalidating God's word in order to uphold your received traditions, and you do many similar things."

¹⁴He called out to the crowd again saying, "Hear me all of you and understand. ¹⁵Nothing which is outside a person can defile a person by entering them; rather, it is those things which come out of a person which defiles them." ¹⁷when he had left the crowd and entered the house his disciples asked him to explain the parable. ¹⁸He responded, "You don't understand either? Don't you know that nothing which enters into a person can defile the person? ¹⁹Because it will not enter the heart but goes into the belly, and then out through the latrine." (Thereby pronouncing all food clean.) ²⁰He continued, "It is what comes from the person which defiles the person. ²¹Because it is inside, from the person's heart, which evil thoughts come: sexual impurity, theft, murder, ²²adultery, greed evil actions, deceit, debauchery, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. ²³All of these things come from within and defile a person."

Commentary

Jesus is yet again confronted by the scribes, this time upset that his disciples do not appear to follow their purity traditions. In chapters 2-3 Jesus had been attacked for his miracles, with the claim that he worked through Beelzebub this time they attack his teaching. In reality, the discussion on washing is a rather petty debate and the scribes were probably not very hostile at this point. Jesus though uses the opportunity of being questioned to show a larger discontinuity in the theology of the scribes. He then enlarges the discussion to encompass the concept of purity laws and how they function within Jewish religious life. These comments also prepare us for Jesus' departure for gentile country in the next section.

Vv 1-13: The last time scribes came from Jerusalem (3:22) it was to confront Jesus about his healing ministry, this time it appears they want to discuss what he is teaching. If this is the case, it is not surprising that the scribes and Pharisees do not take exception with Jesus, but, his

disciples (cf. 2:18). After all, Jesus in watching his disciples and is not correcting their behavior, thus he is guilty of not holding them to a high standard. The issue revolves around ceremonial purity, rather than hygiene. It would have been proper etiquette to wash one's hands before eating because meals were shared out of a common dish.

As noted above (3:22) the Scribes were the legal experts they have come from Jerusalem to better understand Jesus' teaching. They want to know if Jesus aligns himself with the Pharisees' interpretations of Scripture and the inherited traditions. Just like in today's Church, there were multiple denominations within Judaism of Jesus' day. Each of these groups had their own understanding of Scripture and how it applied to life. Just like today there were often heated discussions about how to interpret and apply Scripture. The scribes are questioning why Jesus is not holding to the Pharisees' understanding of the purity code. Hand washing is not a requirement for purity in the Old Testament; the closest we find is in Exodus 30:18-21, 40:30-32 which require a priest offering sacrifice to wash. Leviticus talks of ritual purity (see esp. Lev. 11 & 17), and, it is likely that the Pharisees are basing their tradition on the fact that in some instances food might or the person eating it might be impure and need cleansing before eating. Since purity before God is such an important issue, one would want to make every effort to stay pure, even if that means being slightly overly cautious. This is especially true of revival movements, which typically call for adherence to a strict set of guidelines.

While Mark tells us that all Jews held to the standard laid out by the scribes, it is highly unlikely. When Mark was writing the Gospel such a statement may have had some truth in it because Judaism was slightly more uniform. However, at the time of Jesus there were many different parties with competing belief structures and this type of devotion was likely only required by a few of the more strict ones. Jesus' answer though is not simply an answer to the Pharisees, it shows a concern with the larger Jewish understanding and goes to the heart of how we ask and answer questions of theology.

We can almost see Jesus shaking his head as he quotes Isaiah 29:13, and perhaps muttering to himself, "They just don't get it". Jesus' reaction is aggressive rather than defensive and seems to show that he anticipated just such a confrontation at some point. The quote serves to get the people's attention; Jesus knows that if he begins with Scripture his opponents will pay attention if for no other reason than to ensure he does justice to the passage. Jesus then directs his audience's attention to how Jewish leaders have allowed worship of God to decline (v 8). By enforcing traditional commentaries on Scripture without enforcing the Scripture the Jews have set their commentaries above Scripture. Numbers (30:2) and Deuteronomy (23:21-23) both speak of the sanctity oaths and that oaths, before God especially, were to be kept. Jewish practice allowed someone to dedicate their possession to God (corban); such a gift had to be used for God. It is not known exactly how this process worked, but, by taking an oath a man could deny his parents (or any family member) any benefit from his possessions. By allowing such oaths the religious leaders are undermining God's commands (in this case the fifth).

The phrase “God’s word” here refers specifically to the Ten Commandments (known in Hebrew as the Ten Words); however, Jesus’ rebuke can be widened to the entirety of Scripture. The Pharisees/scribes failed to sufficiently question whether their traditions were in accordance with the wider teaching of Scripture. They want to They understand their traditions as a barrier preventing them from walking outside of Scripture. Jesus does not condemn the tradition (he actually never refers to their tradition as such); what he condemns is blind adherence to the tradition without taking Scripture into account. Even today we have traditions (and traditional interpretations) based on Scripture; Jesus’ warning is not to completely disregard such traditions, but to examine them frequently to ensure they agree with the whole of Scripture.

Vv 14-23: Jesus’ focus shifts away from the Pharisees and scribes toward the crowds in this paragraph. Rather than discussing various traditions, Jesus comes straight to the point and tells the people that purity is an internal not an external matter. What started out as a question over which tradition was necessary to follow is now morphing into a discussion on the nature of purity, and a debate over Leviticus 11 and the food laws.

Before we get into these questions one issue must be cleared up. Astute readers will notice that newer translations (including the above) omit verse 16 (which reads: “If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.”). This verse was in the manuscripts used by the King James Version, but, since 1611 other manuscripts have persuaded most scholars that this phrase was added in error to those used by the KJV translators. For this reason many translations will retain the phrase in a footnote or some other means of separation, indicating they are aware of its existence, but, they do not believe it is authentic. This is not a major issue, and the error because a scribe understood Jesus was teaching in a parable, and wrote out an appropriate ending for a parable.

Jesus’ comments that food does not defile are easily understood, food gives nutrition, but, does not touch who we are as individuals, the heart. That is, food does not magically impart impurity into our bodies because the food does not reach the places where our impurity lies. The question is, what this statement means in light of Leviticus 11 and Mark’s own editorial comment in verse 19. Mark’s own comment is that Jesus in essence nullified the food laws of Leviticus in his declaration and certainly this line of thought was behind the decision in Acts 15 not to require Gentile Christians to hold to Jewish food laws. But it is also important to remember that Jesus is not necessarily undermining the law. He is pointing out that the law is not imposed simply because certain foods have magical powers to make one impure; there are still other reasons to hold to the law (i.e. a sign that one tries to remain pure).

None of this, though, is Jesus’ true focus, rather, he is concerned that people realize that evil is something that comes from within. Jesus wants us to be concerned with our thoughts and attitudes, reigning them in before they have a negative impact on our lives. Scholars can debate why Jesus used such a list, but, it is meant to be representative of anything which is evil. Jesus wants us to be clear that everything evil we do is because of the evil intentions we indulge in our own hearts. Before we carried away with thinking there is nothing positive in humanity, we need to notice what Jesus said. He did not say, “Everything that comes from the heart is

evil”, but, “All of these things come from within and defile a person.” Jesus is not saying that everything about the human heart is necessarily evil, but, the evil which humanity participates in certainly comes from the heart.

Questions

1. Jesus tells the Pharisees to reevaluate their traditions in the light of Scripture, how do we continue to reevaluate our own traditions today?
2. Jesus seems to undermine some of the Jewish law, how do we ensure that we follow God’s desires?
3. Comments like Mark’s in verse 19 can lead Christians to be dismissive of Jewish law, do you think Christians should make more of an effort to understand Jewish law?
4. Do you think there are ways that we can show our purity outwardly by what we do or avoid doing?
5. A natural conclusion of this section is to ask ourselves, what evil do I tolerate within myself?

Chapter 7: part 2

²⁴Then he left and went to the region of Tyre, he did not want anyone to know he entered a house, yet could not escape notice. ²⁵However, immediately a woman, whose daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit, came and knelt before him. ²⁶The woman was Greek, a Syrophenician by birth, she entreated him to cast the spirit from her daughter. ²⁷He responded to her, "The children must first eat their fill, it is not good to give the children's bread to the dogs." ²⁸She entreated him, "Lord, even the dogs under the table eat from the children's scraps." ²⁹He answered, "Saying that, you can go, the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰She left, and entering her house she saw the child laying on the bed and the demon was gone.

³¹Then Jesus left the region Tyre, went through Sidon, to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Ten Cities. ³²There some brought to him one who was deaf and stuttered, and they begged him to lay his hands on him. ³³Taking him away from the crowd, Jesus placed his fingers in his ears then spit and touched his tongue. ³⁴Looking up to the sky, he groaned and said to him, "Ephphatha!" -which means "Open!"- ³⁵Immediately, his ears were opened and he heard, while the bonds on his tongue fell away, and he spoke clearly. ³⁶He sternly warned them to tell no one about this, but the more he warned them, the more liberally they spoke of it. ³⁷They were utterly astonished and said, "He does everything well! He makes the deaf hear and the mute speak!"

^{8:1}At that time there was another large crowd with nothing to eat. So he called his disciples and said to them, ²"I feel compassion for the crowd because they have been with me for three days and have nothing to eat. ³If I send them away to their houses hungry they might faint on the path, some have come a long distance." ⁴His disciples responded to him, "How could anyone get enough food to eat here, it is a wilderness?" ⁵He asked them, "How much food do you have?" They answered, "Seven loaves." ⁶He commanded the crowd to sit on the ground and he took the seven loaves, gave thank, broke the bread, and gave it to his disciples to pass out; and they passed it out to the crowd. ⁷There were also a few small fish. He blessed these and had them passed out. ⁸They ate and were satisfied; and they collected seven baskets from the leftovers. ⁹There were four thousand people. Then Jesus sent them away. ¹⁰Immediately he got into a boat with his disciples and went across to the region of Dalmanutha.

Commentary

The previous section was a treatment of purity laws and Jewish tradition, and immediately after this discussion Jesus leaves for a rest among the gentiles. This is more than a coincidence in the story. Mark is using Jesus' desire to get away from the crowds as a way to introduce a gentile mission. Mark has set us up by showing Jesus as someone willing to rethink tradition and purity laws, elements of Jewish culture which separated them from gentiles. Now, Jesus is going into gentile territory and extending healing to them. For mark Jesus ministering among the gentiles is a large step and needs to be highlighted. Even today we are still talking about how various cultures come together in the Church and how we relate to those cultures to which we are trying to minister.

Vv 24-30: The passage starts with Jesus leaving Galilee and heading north to the area around the city of Tyre. As in 5:1 Jesus goes to gentile territory hoping to avoid recognition and perhaps finding some rest from the crowds. Just as before, Jesus is immediately recognized and asked to help exorcize a demon. Mark makes a point to identify the woman who approaches Jesus; even though we can assume she is a gentile from her location. Mark's identification of her as Greek and Syrophenician are meant to highlight her as a gentile, rather, than show any concern for her lineage. Much like John's use of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-42), Mark wants us to see Jesus interacting with a person (specifically a woman) who by cultural norms he should probably have avoided. The woman's desperation echoes the desperation of Jarius and the woman in (5:21-43), but, Jesus' response is drastically different.

Many are unsure how to deal with Jesus' initial response to the woman, because it sounds so harsh. We are used to Jesus willingly extending healing to all who need it and for him to turn his back on someone seems out of character. I should also be noted that in this case "dog" is a slur, rather than the cuddly house pet. Jesus is implying that healing this woman's daughter would be to take one's children's dinner plate and throw it out the window to the strays while the child is still eating. The woman's response to this shows humility and betrays that she might understand, to some degree, Jesus' ministry. Her use of the title "Lord" is unique in Mark's Gospel, and though it does not imply Jesus' divinity, it is a sign of deep respect and shows the woman's nature (especially after being insulted). She accepts her place within Jesus' comment, Jesus has called her a dog and she uses that label. But, in a show of tremendous wit and skill she points out that the dogs who sit at the children's feet eat what falls to the floor. This does not mean the dogs have the importance of children, but, they still get fed. In other words, by healing her daughter, Jesus is not taking himself away from the Jews, but, showing mercy to a desperate gentile woman. Jesus then consents and heals the girl.

While it is obvious Mark wants us to see the inclusion of the gentiles in Jesus' actions, the question still remains how willing was Jesus to heal the girl. Unlike any other time, Jesus simply sends the woman away promising healing, rather than going with her to her house. This combined with his harsh comments has led some to ask whether Jesus did not want to heal the girl, but, truly was forced to when the woman bested his argument. As difficult as it might be for some to consider, we must ask if this woman truly bested Jesus in a demonstration of wit and won the healing. This seems unlikely, rather, it seems that Jesus intentionally engaged in a dialogue, and like a master teacher willingly lost the argument. This idea fits perfectly into Mark's theme of breaking down traditional lines within Judaism. Jesus has taken the hard line of Jewish opinion about gentiles so that this woman could undermine it. Jesus has allowed this woman, who would get little respect from most Jews, to show the fatal flaw in Jewish ideals by besting a Rabbi. As for not going to her house, it obviously was not necessary for Jesus to go to the girl and it would have been highly inappropriate for him to go back to the woman's house (according to any culture at the time).

Vv31-37: Jesus moves from Tyre to the Ten Cities, a region on the east shore of the Sea of Galilee where he healed a demoniac (5:1-20). Here he encounters a man who is a deaf mute, the first within the story. We are not told explicitly that the message of the former demoniac has had an impact on the reaction to Jesus; but, this crowd is markedly different from the one in the first story. This could mean that others have spread the message of Jesus or even that this story takes place in a different of the Ten Cities. Mark is giving us a glimpse of Jesus' growing popularity by revealing that crowds now follow Jesus in gentile regions.

It is noticeable that the crowds bring the man to Jesus for healing; it is a community action not simply left to his loved ones. Usually Jesus heals the person in public view; but, this man he takes away from the people. Also his manner of healing is different, usually Jesus simply touches the patient, while here he uses saliva. Jesus' practice might sound odd, but, at the time it was an accepted medicine to touch someone with saliva. It could be that Jesus is conforming to medical tradition. The record of Jesus speaking, as with Jairus' daughter, adds a human element and perhaps shows that Mark's source was present at the healing. It also shows that while Jesus conformed to accepted medical practice, Mark wants us to be sure it was the words and power of Jesus which worked the cure, not the medicine.

This is a relatively straightforward healing story, albeit a new disease, which should make us question why Mark would insert it here. We are used to Jesus' healing and even a healing among the Gentiles is not shocking, especially how straightforward it appears. At the very least, Mark is calling to mind Isaiah 35:6 and connecting this man's healing to the day of the LORD. God is breaking into this world in a new way and this man's healing is proof. Mark may also be intending a further meaning; this man is representative of a specific group now being able to properly hear Jesus' words. Jesus' anointing of the man symbolizes that a group of individuals is now able to hear and understand his words. Though whether the group which now hears is, the disciples finally beginning to hear and understand Jesus, or, the gentiles finally being given the message of Jesus is unclear. It might be that Mark wants us to see that the disciples are beginning to hear what Jesus has been saying to them and are starting to put the pieces in place. It might also be said that the man represents the whole of the gentile community which now has the ability to hear the message which until this time has been proclaimed exclusively to the Jews.

8:1-10: This story is very similar to the feeding of the five thousand (6:34-44), the major differences are the differences in numbers and the location in gentile territory. In fact, as incredible as it might seem the disciples are asking the same question they did the first time. One would naturally presume that the disciples would have learned from the first feeding story that Jesus was able to provide the food. This has led some to question to authenticity of this story. Simply because the disciples act ignorant in the story does not mean the event did not happen. Rather the fact that every number in the story is different and the location is so radically different point to the event happening, and being a separate event from the one recorded in 6:34-44.

Why are the disciples so ignorant, because they are the foils in the story, they ask the questions for us. Mark wants us to ask Jesus, "Are you going to do the same thing for the gentiles that you did for the Jews?" He gets us to ask this question by making the disciples seem incompetent and repeating their objection that food in the area was scarce. The disciples have seen Jesus perform this miracle, they know it is possible; Mark is setting us up to ask if Jesus will do here what he did before, and the answer is yes.

The other key difference between the two stories is the numbers involved, here Jesus provides for fewer with slightly more and has slightly less leftover. We must ask whether or not Mark wants us to see a reference to the table scraps mentioned by the woman above. Does the slightly smaller scale of the miracle indicate that Jesus sees the gentiles as somehow less than the Jews? Even if we think Jesus did show preference we must look at it from the perspective of Jesus' understanding of his ministry. Matthew in retelling the story of the Syrophenician woman (whom he calls Canaanite Matthew 15:21-28), makes it clear Jesus saw his ministry within Israel (Matthew 15:21). Mark has been implicitly revealing this same opinion, but, throughout chapter 7 has been showing how Jesus opened the door to the gentiles for his followers. Even if we see Jesus' earthly ministry to the gentiles as secondary, we must recognize that in this he is giving permission for his followers to elaborate on that work.

Another question in the numbers mentioned deals with the repetition of the number seven, is such a repetition significant. The number seven is often used to signify something is complete or whole. What makes this an interesting possibility is that in the previous feeding story there were twelve baskets leftover (6:43). If in that instance Mark wanted us to see the whole of Israel (the Twelve Tribes), then it is likely that here he wants us to view the inclusion of the gentiles as completing the people of God.

Questions

1. Jesus has not tested anyone prior to healing before, why do you think he does so with this woman?
2. We are not used to Jesus insulting people, what would you think if you were the woman who had come to Jesus for help and he insulted you?
3. Why do you suppose we are told the details of how Jesus healed the deaf man, and is his healing symbolic of another group, if so who?
4. Is there any significance to the different numbers we find in this feeding story or do they simply indicate it was a different story?
5. Do we have groups of outsiders today who we can place in the role of the gentiles in these passages, if so, what can the Church and you do to incorporate them into the community?

Chapter 8: part 1

^{8:11}Now the Pharisees came and began to dispute with Jesus and to test him by seeking a sign from heaven. ¹²Jesus sighed deeply and said, “This generation searches for a sign; to you I say this generation will absolutely not be given a sign.” ¹³Then he forsook them and again went to the other side.

¹⁴But they had forgotten to take bread and except for one loaf had none with them on the boat. ¹⁵Then he charged them, “Watch out! Guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod!” ¹⁶Yet, they were discussing with one another that they had no bread. ¹⁷Understanding this he said, “Why are you discussing having no bread? Don’t you comprehend? Don’t you understand? Have you been hardening your hearts? ¹⁸You have eyes, can’t you see? You have ears can’t you hear? Don’t you remember? ¹⁹When I divided the five loaves among the five thousand, how many full baskets of leftovers did you collect?” They replied, “Twelve.” ²⁰“What about the seven loaves for the four thousand how many full baskets of leftovers did you collect?” They replied, “Seven.” ²¹He responded to them, “Do you not yet understand?”

²²Now coming into Bethsaida, some people brought a blind man to him and begged Jesus to touch him. ²³Raising him up by the hand he led him outside the village, then Jesus spit into his eyes and laid his hands on him, then he asked, “What do you see?” ²⁴The man looked up and said, “I see people, however I see them walking though as trees.” ²⁵Jesus again laid his hands on the man’s eyes, then he stared, and he was restored, seeing everything clearly. ²⁶Jesus sent him home saying, “Don’t go into the village.”

²⁷Jesus and his disciples went out into the villages around Caesarea of Philippi. Along the way he questioned his disciples saying, “Who do people say I am?” ²⁸They responded, “John the Baptizer, others Elijah, still others one of the Prophets.” ²⁹He then asked, “But you, who do you say I am?” Peter responded, “You are the Selected One.” ³⁰He warned them that they should tell no one about him.

Commentary

Jesus and the Twelve have returned from gentile territory and immediately drawn into a discussion with the Jewish authorities concerning Jesus’ identity. The question of identity becomes a central theme in this section. Jesus’ identity is still clearly not understood, either by enemies (Pharisees) or allies (the disciples). While the Pharisees are left behind in the dark, Jesus will begin the process of “healing” the disciples’ blindness. This section serves as a transition point in Mark: Jesus will start to move with a purpose and begin explaining that purpose to his own. In 4:41 the disciples asked, “Who is this?” now we will begin to see the answer revealed. Jesus draws clear lines between himself and the Jewish authorities asking his disciples, and us, which side we are on.

Vv 11-13: Jesus returns to Galilee after his journey through gentile regions and is confronted by the Pharisees, who have come to embody formal opposition to Jesus. The Pharisees’ purpose is clear from the context, they want to discredit Jesus by forcing him to provide proof of his legitimacy. It is not clear what kind of sign the Pharisees would have considered proof of Jesus’

authority. In fact, Mark seems to imply that no sign could have been enough and in testing Jesus the Pharisees are simply trying to undermine his credibility.

Jesus' exasperation with the Pharisees is left unexplained, though, it is easy enough for us to see that he has done many signs and their demand for a sign represents willful blindness. Jesus has already been teaching for a length of time (Mark gives no idea how long) and has performed numerous miracles, one more is not suddenly going to change the Pharisees' minds. Jesus knows this and provides a very strong reaction to the Pharisees. While most translations have Jesus simply telling the Pharisees he will not perform and sign, his response reflects a Hebrew way of saying, "May God curse (or kill) me if I do this for you." This is a very harsh response. Coupled with his response Jesus does not simply walk away from the Pharisees; he releases them as he does the crowds. Within the context this release implies that Jesus has nothing more to do with the Pharisees.

Vv 14-21: Opening the scene with a lack of bread is odd, but, it provides an opening for Jesus' parable. Jesus plays on the bread with his warning about yeast, but, what does he mean by yeast? Matthew reports that Jesus is talking about the teachings of the Pharisees (Matt. 16:12), and for Luke it is their hypocrisy. The two are not unrelated, hypocrisy stems from living contrary to one's teaching. Though understanding yeast as teaching might make the best sense since the two words sound similar in Aramaic (the language Jesus spoke). Yeast in this sense could also simply mean "wickedness" or "unbelief" considering Jesus has in mind the previous encounter. The Pharisees are not presented as teachers or hypocrites above, rather they are unbelievers. Likewise, Herod is not a teacher, he is simply an unbeliever who has stood against John the Baptizer and presumably now regards Jesus with suspicion. Jesus' use of Herod and the Pharisees indicates that he wants his disciples to be wary of those in political power who do not trust Jesus' message and are seeking to curtail his influence.

The disciples' reaction is to completely disregard Jesus' statement, focusing on the lack of material provision. The wording suggests the disciples had begun this discussion prior to Jesus' comment and are now resuming it, completely disregarding what Jesus has said. While Matthew (Matt. 16:7-8) implies the disciples misunderstood Jesus' words, here we see the disciples as less concerned about Jesus' teaching than their material needs. Jesus' rebuke reaffirms this idea, confronting the disciples with metaphors taken straight from the prophets. Jesus' rhetorical questions reflect words used by Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel (Is. 6:9, Jer. 5:21, Ez. 15:2) to condemn the people for not listening to God. Jesus' reminder of the two feeding stories further illustrates this point. The disciples are concerned that they do not have enough to eat and Jesus reminds them of how he has miraculously fed crowds. The message is clear, Jesus can take care of the material need, focus on what he wants to teach. The disciples have seen the signs that Jesus has performed and yet have failed to truly see them. Like the Pharisees they have had the evidence for Jesus' identity presented to them, yet, they have failed to acknowledge that identity. Jesus has twice proven he can provide for physical needs and the disciples are still more concerned with this perceived problem than with the real issue

that powerful people are out to undermine them. Jesus is warning the disciples there is danger and they must be prepared for it, but, they are so disconnected they even miss the warning. What is exceptional is that the disciples are supposed to be the group with insight and to whom the things of God are known (4:11). There is both comfort and warning in this passage; it is comforting that Jesus continues to work with the disciples who are struggling to understand him and his role, and warning that one can be among Jesus' closest circle and still not understand him. Jesus' closing remark is a word of assurance, by saying "not yet" he implies that he is going to continue to work with the disciples, unlike the Pharisees, until they understand what he is about.

Vv 22-26: Jesus has just pointed out the disciples' blindness in spiritual matters and his desire to continue to reveal himself to them, now he is confronted with a man who is blind and in need of Jesus to heal him. It is not coincidental that Mark places this story here, he is pointing us toward Jesus the healer of all kinds of blindness. This is the first occurrence of Jesus healing the blind in Mark, and like the deaf man (7:31-37) there is a reference to Isaiah (Is. 29:18). In fact, other than the disease involved (blindness rather than deaf mute) this story shares many details with the one in 7:31-37: residents bring the man to Jesus, Jesus taking the man aside, use of saliva, command for silence.

The most interesting part of this interchange occurs when Jesus asks the man what he sees. We would expect that Jesus' healing would be instantaneous as is usual, but, after Jesus touches the man he still only has partial sight. When Jesus asks if his sight is restored the man (in a rather confusing sentence) responds he can distinguish people from trees only because they move. This improvement on the man's sight is magnificent and could be hailed as a miracle in its own right. Jesus, though, wants perfect vision for the man. The second time Jesus lays hands on the man his sight is completely restored. Mark uses redundant words to get across to us that the man's vision was perfect. He went from no vision to perfectly clear sight; a feat that Jesus hopes to accomplish in the spiritual eyes of the disciples. We should not read into the fact that Jesus had to touch the man twice to heal him, rather, we are to understand that vision can be something that takes time to clarify.

vv 27-30: This paragraph thematically begins Jesus' journey toward Jerusalem. He is beginning on his "Path" to Jerusalem and teaching the disciples about the "Path." Caesarea of Philippi was over one hundred miles north of Jerusalem affording Jesus ample opportunity to teach along the way. This trip to a countryside outside of a predominantly gentile city (though within Jewish territory) indicates another retreat for Jesus and the disciples.¹⁷ We saw in 6:14-16 Mark was concerned with who people thought Jesus to be, now, Jesus expresses the same concern. He leads in asking what others, particularly outsiders, are saying about his identity.

The answer is virtually the same as in 6:15; but, the disciples' answer is very terse perhaps reflecting an almost apologetic mood. It is almost as if they are sorry that others do not have

¹⁷ So far we have seen attempts at retreat in 1:35, 3:13, 5:1, 6:31, 7:24, & 8:27.

the same view of Jesus they do. All three answers fall into one category, great prophet; by using the definite article “the” Mark intends us to understand an Old Testament prophet. As we said above the variation reflects how people interpret Jesus’ role, as a major prophet or as the prophet to introduce God’s eschatological action (see commentary on 6:14-16). Does Mark mean that people thought Jesus was a literal reincarnation of one of these individuals? Probably not, it is more likely that people were comparing him to these figures as people today compare him to Buddha and Mohammed. The prophets (particularly Elijah) and John the Baptizer were major religious figures who had important messages to give people, it is no light matter to be compared with them. The question of identity is an important one, the answer shows what people think of Jesus’ message compared with other messages in the world. Even today we are asked, “Is Jesus’ message different from that of other great religious figures?” answering this question determines how one thinks of religion in general, and specific religious messages; including how one structures one’s life within these messages.

Jesus then moves from the comfortably objective third party to the intimate subjective second person, asking the disciples what they believed about his identity. This question has been in the forefront of Mark’s drama ever since the beginning and particularly since the disciples asked about Jesus’ identity in 4:41. The way Jesus frames the question may mean he is leading the disciples toward a deeper answer. Peter responds with what 1:1 has told us is the correct answer, Jesus is the “Selected One” the Messiah. Peter is, here and elsewhere, the spokesman for the disciples; we must understand him to be speaking for the group not on his own. Mark wants us to see that the entire group is in agreement with Peter even if he is the only one to speak his opinion. We see in this passage as well as in the next paragraph, Peter talks to Jesus, but, Jesus addresses all of the disciples as if they are all in accord. We can almost see the rest of the disciples standing behind Peter nodding in agreement as he looks back over his shoulder for reassurance as he responds to Jesus’ very probing question. We are so used to identifying Jesus as Peter does (in fact, some act like Christ is Jesus’ last name) that we often forget that this confession is a big deal, and by saying this the disciples are making a very provocative, bold, and dangerous statement that could (and did) cost them everything. Identifying Jesus as the “Selected One” could not have been easy for them, it was a very courageous move.

In the first half of Mark we were asked who Jesus is, now we know his identity and Jesus will begin to explain what his identity means for his disciples and us. Now there is a true separation between the insiders, those who understand Jesus’ identity, and the outsiders, those who do not, and Jesus wants to maintain this distinction. We are familiar with Jesus’ commands to silence by now, but, this by far is the most powerful because this is the biggest secret. While Jesus has asked people to keep healing a secret, presumably to help reduce popular demand for healing, here Jesus is asking his disciples to keep secret the hope of God’s coming to alleviate the sufferings of the people. Keeping his identity secret must have been terribly difficult for the disciples, but, it was entirely necessary because even though they knew Jesus’ identity, they did not understand what that identity meant. Just as the Gospel opened by

identifying Jesus so here we see Jesus identified, and now, Jesus will begin to show exactly what that identity means, and it will be different from the powerful healer/exorcist/teacher.

Questions

1. The Pharisees wanted Jesus to prove himself to them, have you ever asked Jesus to prove himself, how? Is it proper for us to ask for a sign?
2. The disciples failed to listen to Jesus because they were concerned about the trivial, how does this happen in your life and our churches, and how do we prevent it from happening?
3. The blind man is presented as a physical demonstration of the disciples spirituality, when have you been blinded to Jesus and how has he restored your sight?
4. The disciples were forced to keep secret the hope and salvation their culture had looked forward to for generations, how would you react to such an obligation?
5. What is Jesus' identity to you and in the world today, and how does that impact your life?

Chapter 8: part 2

³¹Then Jesus began to teach them that it was necessary for the Son of Adam to suffer much, to be rejected by the Elders, Chief-priests, and Scribes, to be killed, and to rise after three days. ³²He said this openly, but Peter took him aside and began to warn him. ³³Jesus turned and looking at his disciples warned Peter, “Get behind me, Satan. For you are not thinking God’s thoughts; these are humanity’s.” ³⁴Then calling together the crowd and his disciples he said, “If anyone desires to follow after me, these must reject themselves, take up their cross and follow me! ³⁵For all who desire to save their lives will perish, yet all who perish for my sake and the sake of the victory proclamation, these will be saved. ³⁶What do people profit by gaining the whole world, while, forfeiting their lives?” ³⁷For what can people give in exchange for their lives? ³⁸For those who are ashamed of me and my words in this sinful and adulterous generation, the Son of Adam will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with his holy angels.” ^{9:1}He continued, “Truly, I say to you some of these standing here will not taste death until they see God’s reign having come in power.”

²Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John away up a high mountain so they could be alone, and there he was transformed before them. ³Then his clothes became radiantly white, whiter than any launderer on earth could bleach. ⁴Elijah and Moses appeared to them and began talking with Jesus. ⁵Peter responded by saying to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good we are here, now let us build three shelters one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁶Since he did not know how to respond, for they were terrified. ⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my son the Beloved, listen to him.” ⁸Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. ⁹As they were descending the mountain, he commanded them not to reveal what they had seen until the time when the Son of Adam had been raised from the dead. ¹⁰So they kept it to themselves question, “What does raised from the dead mean?”

¹¹Then they asked Jesus, “Why do the scribes say Elijah must come first?” ¹²He answered them, “Elijah does indeed come first to restore everything. Why was it written that the Son of Adam would suffer many things and be despised? ¹³I tell you Elijah did come, but they treated him as they liked, just as it is written.”

Commentary

The previous section ended with Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Selected One for which Israel was waiting. Like so many times before Jesus commands that the information be suppressed. In this section we seem to get a glimpse at why Jesus is suppressing information about himself. Here we see Jesus begin to explain himself and his mission to the disciples; and, even this group who has walked by his side since the beginning struggle with the message. This section repeatedly engages the disciples’ expectations for Jesus and forces them to consider and reconsider what they believe about him. Just as Mark introduced us to the character of Jesus at the beginning of the Gospel; now, at the midpoint, we are shown new and different qualities in Jesus which will help us rediscover him.

8:31-9:1: This section is a direct continuation from the previous section and in order to understand this material properly we must remember that Peter has just confessed Jesus is the Selected One. Jesus ordered his disciples to keep his identity secret, and,, now we begin to get a glimpse at the reason for the secrecy. Jesus begins to teach the disciples a new doctrine, a suffering savior. This might not strike some Christians as a radical concept because we are used to equating the suffering servant passage of Isaiah 53 (and other passages) with Jesus; but, this was an extremely radical statement by Jesus.

We must notice that Jesus substitutes “Son of Adam”, a picture taken from Daniel 7, for Peter’s “Selected One”; this is subtle, but, Jesus is redefining the disciples’ expectations beginning with their language. So far Jesus has only used this title one other time (2:10) and that was in conjunction with a healing. There Jesus wanted to establish an identity in front of the Jewish leaders of someone with power, and more power than they understood. Here, Jesus seems to use Son of Adam to undermine the disciples’ expectations so that he can help them understand his mission. It is exceptional that Jesus would use Son of Adam, the title of a heroic savior, to introduce his role as sufferer, but, Jesus is very good at keeping people off-balance. Rather than a hero come to liberate the Jewish people from occupation and establish God’s kingdom on earth, Jesus presents a savior rejected by the Jewish leadership. Jesus was not simply projecting his rejection, but also, his death. The disciples were doubtlessly thinking Jesus would establish a new kingdom of Israel as David had done, which makes the idea of death difficult to swallow. We see Jesus’ statement, with the help of hindsight, as a literal statement; but, the disciples might have had a different perspective.

It is often asked how the disciples could not have understood Jesus’ statement about rising again. What we often fail to grasp is that the disciples could have been thinking metaphorically. Jesus’ use of “after three days” could be an idiom for “the day after tomorrow” and it could also be a reference to Hosea 6:2. In Hosea the phrase has a metaphoric meaning and refers to the reestablishment of the Jewish community in “the last day”. In other words, the disciples might have been hearing Jesus saying, “I’m going to die, but, don’t worry because on God’s judgment day I’ll rise again.” In Jewish theology at the time, like Christians today, the belief was in a general resurrection of the righteous not in an individual being raised from the dead. This means the disciples probably would not have been prepared to hear that Jesus as an individual was going to be raised.

This teaching triggers a reaction in the disciples whose expectations have been shattered, and Peter, their spokesman, confronts Jesus about it. We do not know what Peter said, but presumably, it was something about being too important to die or that the savior cannot die. Jesus understands that Peter is representing the group and issues his counter-rebuke to the entire group not simply Peter. Even though the warning is directed toward Peter it is meant for the entire group to take in. Jesus’ use of Satan seems to point toward the origin of a thought so far removed from Jesus’ vision. He is not necessarily saying Satan put the idea into the disciples’ heads, but, lashing out that such a thought completely contradicts God’s will. Notice

immediately after he tells the disciples they are thinking as humans not as God does. Jesus is not backtracking; he is pointing out that thinking in human terms has allowed the disciples to misalign themselves with evil. In not seeking divine guidance in their ideas of the Selected One, the disciples have unwittingly opened the door to evil plans for Jesus.

From here Jesus introduces the crowds to the discussion and explains to them what it means to think like God as opposed to thinking like this world. By including the crowd Jesus has included us, showing that this teaching is for anyone who wants to follow him not simply the disciples. Jesus' call to reject one's self means to take away control for one's life and give it to God. This kind of rejection of self is not easy or popular, but, speaks to the level of commitment Jesus calls for. While Jesus was literally crucified, he uses the concept here as a grizzly and gruesome example of the worst death possible. The cross was an exclusively Roman punishment at the time, one used on only the most extreme criminals who defied Roman authority. Jesus' comment is not about simply being prepared to suffer; rather, Jesus demands disciples willing to submit to the most gruesome deaths imaginable and willing to stand up for his message against the wealthy and powerful. Notice the connections between verse 30 and 34, rejection by political elites, and death that is where the vision of God is leading Jesus and his disciples. The idea of saving and losing one's life is an obvious play on words; anyone who wants to preserve earthly life by not standing up for Jesus and the victory proclamation will end up suffering eternal death and the person willing to sacrifice this world will gain eternal life. Jesus goes further explaining that even the entirety of creation (should a person be able to own it) is not enough to buy eternal life. Jesus then reframes the point making it clear that what matters is that a person is honored by Jesus in front of God's throne. This honoring can only come about if a person stays loyal to Jesus on earth (among "this generation"). Those loyal to this generation will be rejected (shamed) by Jesus, when they stand before God.

9:1 poses an interesting problem, what does Jesus mean that some will see God's reign coming? Some have proposed that since Jesus has not returned and did not return in the first century AD this represents a failed prophecy. But, that fails to hear what Jesus is saying and what Mark is implying. Mark places this phrase here as a transition to the story of the transfiguration below, which is a vision of Jesus in glory and though only a glimpse some disciples saw Jesus' glory. Though Mark does not record it, Matthew 24 and Acts 1 show the ascension of Jesus as a vision of Jesus entering glory, and Acts 2 shows Pentecost as the coming of God's reign in power. Mark is writing a time when God's reign (in the Church) is coming into its own and there are still a few eye-witnesses to Jesus left, in other words a time when this prophecy was being fulfilled.

Vv 2-10: Mark ties the transfiguration to the preceding events by very specific language, telling us this happened six days later. Mark is usually very vague about the chronology of events and the specific time frame tells us he wants to connect this story with Jesus' teaching in 8:31-9:1. As in 5:37 only Peter, James and John are permitted to witness the events that happen. Jesus is setting these three off as his inner most disciples (and probably the leaders of the disciples).

This mountaintop experience parallels Moses' trip up Sinai in Exodus 24 and Elijah's meeting God on the mountain in 1 Kings 19. In fact, Mark may well be trying to help us see that Jesus' encounter is like yet distinct and greater than these two accounts. While we are not told how Jesus is transformed, we are told that his clothes are made supernaturally white. The implication is that Jesus appears as the angels in the resurrection story (see 16:5, Mt. 28:3, Jn. 20:12). The important thing for Mark is that Jesus is glorified and that the disciples witness it. The entire event is recorded from the disciples point-of-view and represents their encounter with the transformed Jesus, rather, than simply Jesus' transformation.

As Jesus is transformed Elijah and Moses appear and hold conversation with him. This is very significant since they represent an eschatological hope for Israel. As we see in verses 11-13, the Jewish expectation was that Elijah would return to usher in the Selected One. This was based on Malachi 4:5, which discusses the coming of Elijah before the Day of the LORD. Moses seems to represent a passing of a mantle and fulfilling Deuteronomy 18:15-19 and the promise of another prophet like Moses. This event symbolizes God's reign entering the world in the person of Jesus.

Mark wants us to see Peter's response to the situation (again he is speaking for the disciples) as absurd. The use of "Rabbi" is obviously inadequate in the situation, because Jesus is clearly more than a teacher. Peter's response is to comment where no comment is possible, and to speak when he should listen. His idea is to provide temporary shelter for the three immanent men while they talk (a not unreasonable idea). The disciples were caught off guard by the event and did not know how to respond, a feeling which can often occur when people have an overwhelming encounter with God.

The cloud encompassing the mountain is a further allusion to Exodus 24 and as the Israelites were to listen to Moses because he heard directly from God, now we are to listen to Jesus because God calls him son. This is a monumental moment, Jesus now eclipses the two men standing next to him in importance, not only does God speak to him, God speaks for him. We are also taken back to chapter 1 and Mark's labeling of Jesus as God's son and the voice speaking at his baptism. Now we have witnesses to what Mark has been telling us all along, Jesus is united to God by a special and distinct relationship.

Blink and it's gone, this event is over almost as quickly as it began. The disciples look up and Jesus is standing by himself as if nothing had happened. Many scholars want to ask, was this an event which could have been recorded or was it some type of group vision? But this question draws an unnatural distinction between the two. A vision is an event where God opens up one's eyes to a reality not seen without God's help. If we accept that such an event is possible, then so too is an event to which God has closed people's eyes. In other words, an event can truly happen even if one cannot videotape it. We are so accustomed to talking of visions being purely the result of psychological dysfunction that we often forget about God's ability to communicate with us in various means. Even if we use the word "vision" to describe this event we are only using it to describe a unique event where the disciples present were granted

special insight into world. Using a word like “vision” in this instance implies the full meaning of the word, the ability to see what others cannot. In this instance, even if we believe that one might not have seen the transfiguration (or videotaped it), that is because of an inability to see what is there, not because the disciples were hallucinating.

Vv 11:13: The first thing we notice is that Jesus does not allow the three disciples to speak of this event until after he is raised. Again, we must think that Jesus is trying to prevent misinterpretation of his mission, not just by the three who saw the transformation, but also by those who heard their story. After the resurrection this event could be placed into its proper context; however, at the time of its happening it is hard to imagine anything other than mass hysteria or disbelief resulting from such a story.

The disciples’ question is based on the scribes teaching that Elijah would return at the day of the LORD. This teaching was based on Malachi 4:5-6 and Sirach 48:10. Mark does not go into great detail about this teaching, but, presumably the disciples are asking because they just saw Elijah. They are questioning whether or not this appearance constitutes Elijah’s return. The disciples seem to be expecting that if this was Elijah’s return then the day of the LORD was beginning (something difficult to reconcile with Jesus’ prediction of his death). These disciples, so privileged to see Jesus transformed and the return of Elijah and Moses, now are suffering from information overload and do not know how to process everything they have seen and been taught.

Jesus’ answer is somewhat cryptic (especially compared to Matthew 17:10-13), but, it is still effective. Jesus tells the disciples that Elijah comes first in the sense that, like Elijah (1 Kgs. 17-19), the political leadership would reject God’s work among the people. The question we need to ask is, was Jesus referring to himself, the Son of Adam, or John the Baptizer (Matt. 17:10-13). There is no easy answer both fit the bill, a great prophet who works miraculously, but, is rejected and hunted. Here, we see a perfect example of a common mistake made by people trying to understand the Bible, particularly in prophecy, reading a passage at a surface level. Malachi “predicts” the return of Elijah and so Jews anticipated the physical return of the prophet. Jesus reinterprets this passage to show that Malachi referred to the prophet as a figure who would be emulated. Unfortunately, we still see individuals looking at the surface of the Biblical text trying to discern when various “prophecies” will be fulfilled and Jesus will return; instead of, reading deep into the passage trying to see how God is working in the world. The disciples wondered how this new revelation fit into the way they understood their Scriptures; Jesus opened up to them a thought they had never considered. Jesus wanted the disciples to understand that God was working then to restore all things, however, one dimensional thinking was holding the Jewish community back from participating with God. In this sense both Jesus and John can be said to have fulfilled the words of Malachi and many have failed to recognize that fact.

Questions

1. Has Jesus ever dashed your expectations (like Peter) and how did you respond to it?
2. Understanding that “three days” could be metaphorical implying the last days, how do think you would have responded to Jesus’ teaching of his death and resurrection?
3. What do you think about the disciples’ “vision”, do you think anyone could have recorded the event, and what does a religious vision mean to you? (Do you expect to have one?)
4. Jesus implies that people would not be able to handle the story of his transformation because they had wrong expectations of the coming of the Selected One, how does this relate to people’s expectations of Jesus’ second coming?
5. Have you ever been overwhelmed trying to understand God, Jesus, and the Church, how did you overcome or resolve the difficulties?

Chapter 9: part 1

¹⁴As they came upon the disciples, they saw a large crowd surrounding them, and scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵Immediately, the whole crowd saw him and overwhelmed with excitement ran up to him and greeted him. ¹⁶Jesus asked them, "What are you arguing about?" ¹⁷Someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I have brought my son to you, because he has an unclean spirit. ¹⁸Whenever it seizes him it throws him down, and he foams at the mouth clenches his teeth and stiffens. I spoke to your disciples about throwing it out, but, they were not strong enough." ¹⁹Jesus responded, "This unbelieving generation, how long will I be with you? How long can I put up with you? Bring him to me!" ²⁰They brought the boy to him, on seeing him the spirit immediately convulsed him and falling upon the ground he rolled around foaming. ²¹He asked the father, "How long has this been going on?" His father answered, "Since childhood. ²²It often throws him into the fire or water trying to kill him. But if you are able, help us! Show us compassion!" ²³Jesus retorted, "If you are able? Everything is possible for the one who believes!" ²⁴Immediately the boy's father said, "I believe! Help my unbelief!" ²⁵Jesus, seeing a crowd was forming, rebuked the unclean spirit saying to him, "Deaf and mute spirit: I command you- Leave him! And never enter him again!" ²⁶Then screaming and convulsing it left, and he appeared to be dead, and many said he had died. ²⁷But Jesus took his hand and lifted him up, and he got up.

²⁸Then Jesus entered a house, and his disciples asked him privately, "Why weren't we able to throw it out?" ²⁹He said to them, "This kind cannot be thrown out except through prayer."

³⁰Then they left and went through Galilee, but, he did not want anyone to know; ³¹because he was teaching his disciples, "The Son of Adam is handed over into human hands, and they will kill him, then three days after being killed he will rise." ³²They did not understand the message, but, they were afraid to ask about it.

³³Then they came to Capernaum; and entering a house, he asked them, "What were you discussing on the path?" ³⁴But they were silent, because on the path they had been discussing with one another who is the most important. ³⁵Sitting down he called the Twelve and said to them, "Anyone who wants to be first will be the last of all and the servant of all." ³⁶Then taking a child he set him in their midst, and hugging him said to them, ³⁷"Whoever so welcomes one of these children in my name welcomes me, and the one who welcomes me does not welcome me, rather, the one who sent me."

Commentary

Jesus exorcising demons is nothing new, but, this event is more about what Jesus can teach than about Jesus' power. As he did in 7:31-37 and 8:8:22-26, Mark is using this story of Jesus' power as an avenue to discuss a larger theme. In this case, the exorcism provides a segue into Jesus' teaching. Jesus' actions in this section are motivated by the disciples' needs; he heals because the disciples cannot and teaches because they cannot understand. Mark's narrative has shifted and will only provide glimpses of Jesus' power and only when necessary to further the story.

Vv 14-27: Jesus, Peter, James, and John return from the mountain where Jesus was transformed to chaos. The group comes off the mountain to find the rest of the disciples in a heated confrontation with some scribes while a crowd looks on. Mark's story gives the impression that the crowd saw Jesus before those arguing, and realizing that he could intervene in the situation, ran to him for help, with those arguing close behind. One can almost picture children arguing as a parent walking into the room; the children break the fight only to go to the parent and accuse each other. The scribes and the crowd probably somewhat delighted to call out Jesus because the people he invested with power had failed to deliver. The disciples perhaps sheepishly walking over to Jesus embarrassed at disappointing him. The scribes and crowd, though, are only incidental to the story and only highlight the public nature of the disciples' failure.

In 6:7, Jesus gave the twelve authority and power to throw out unclean spirits, making this story somewhat confusing because of the disciples' inability to do so. What has happened between 6:13, where they exorcised many demons and now? This question is left in the background while Jesus deals with the father. Rather, Jesus reveals his frustration with the situation. Jesus desires for the power of God to break into the world in such a way that such demon possession will be easily overcome. Instead, he sees contention and argument while a boy remains un-helped and un-healed. The "generation" implies those people who fail to see God's reign coming into the world, and is not limited to a specific time or people group.

Jesus' initial question is directed to the scribes and disciples, but, it is the father who answers Jesus; which probably shows the level of his desperation. The father is so concerned about his son (and probably frustrated with the disciples) that he breaks in on the conversation. Mark describes the boy's symptoms in such a way that many modern commentators believe he is describing epilepsy. Associating demon possession with a known medical condition can lead us astray in two different ways; either, into the assumption that demons do not exist and that all such stories are medical conditions misdiagnosed, or, that demons are responsible for medical conditions. The first of these assumptions is based on the notion that all maladies are of natural origin and discredits any potential for supernatural involvement. The second, gives too much credit to malicious supernatural forces and does not allow for natural causes of disease. Rather, we should think of this story as an instance where the symptoms of demon possession looked similar to a disease and leave it at that. From this point Jesus deals with the father and his follow-up question (how long...) seems to suggest that a longer duration of possession indicates a stronger possession. However, there is no explicit connection drawn between the length of the possession and the strength of the demon, and it may be that Jesus is engaging the father as a display of empathy.

The exchange between Jesus and the father quickly becomes a focal point of the passage for many. The dialogue on faith and the father's desperate reaction to Jesus reveals a depth of love and emotion reaches to the quick. It is very easy to hear a note of desperation in the father's voice when addressing Jesus, and it almost seems natural for him to say "if" after the

disciples have failed. Jesus, though, does not appear to appreciate the qualifier, because his response is rather terse. Jesus almost laughs at the idea of placing a conditional “if” on his power; highlighting what the reader already knows, of course Jesus can heal the boy. The interesting part of Jesus’ remark is that faith is the defining characteristic of people who work in God’s power. Mark leads us to think that Jesus is talking explicitly to the father because he is the one who responds in a cry for help. The question is, was Jesus addressing the father or someone else? This passage is reminiscent of 6:1-7 where Jesus returns home, however, the unbelief of his hometown made it difficult for him to work. It is possible that Jesus is addressing the crowds, the scribes, and even the disciples as well. The comment reinforcing the notion that the disciples failed because those around them failed to believe God’s power worked through them. The father’s reaction is one we all should aspire toward, recognition of our own guilt and incompetence while maintaining a sincere desire to grow into a complete relationship with God. Even more difficult are Jesus’ words, “Anything is possible”; how are we to understand this concept literally, metaphorically, hyperbolically. However we decide to interpret these words, we must understand they are tempered by the necessary condition of faith. Faith here means to completely trust God and to order one’s life accordingly, rather than, simple mental assent. The implication is that the person believing understands at a very deep level that they are doing exactly what God wants done. With this as the backdrop Jesus heals the boy; though, the reaction of the demon to Jesus’ command betrays its power over the boy. The boy appears to be dead after the encounter, implying the demon was deep within and had significant control over the boy. However in the end the boy is restored to health and leaves, with his father, in peace.

Vv 28-29: The disciples wait until they are alone to question Jesus further about why they were unsuccessful in throwing out the demon. Their question is even more relevant when we reflect on the condition for healing Jesus mentioned was faith, a quality the disciples obviously possessed. It must have been very embarrassing for the disciples not to be able to throw out the demon, something in which they had had prior success. They also were aware they had faith, so there must be some other reason why they failed.

Jesus responds that they lacked “prayer”, but it is not entirely clear what he means or how prayer and faith are related in this passage. Does Jesus mean the disciples failed to pray as they were attempting to throw out the demon, or, perhaps the disciples failed to establish a lifestyle of prayer sufficient enough to combat this demon? It is also necessary to consider does Jesus mean to establish a hierarchy, implying that certain demons are stronger than others and require the exorcist to be stronger as well? While it is entirely possible that Jesus does establish a hierarchy and is commenting that the disciples have not developed far enough to handle stronger demons it seems less likely. This line of thought implies that the exorcist is responsible for throwing out the demon and that each exorcist must gain in rank to battle stronger demons. While this is the usual Hollywood model, it appears Jesus is thinking differently. Jesus appears to be scolding the disciples for not depending on God enough, rather, they trusted in their own abilities. God is the one who defeats the demons, the exorcist

is merely the conduit for the power. Here, Jesus relates faith and prayer by acknowledging that faith is dependence on God and prayer is acknowledging that dependence. The disciples failed because they did not put the work into God's care; refusing to step into the realm of faith. The lesson is that even if Jesus grants us power to work, we are still dependent on God for the power and need to remember to stand squarely in that dependence to exercise the power.

Vv 30-31: Mark uses this paragraph to remind us that Jesus is not simply healing or teaching as he heads toward Jerusalem, he is preparing his disciples for what lies ahead. His teaching about his death and resurrection go beyond simply the bare facts, Jesus is teaching his disciples how to live without him. Part of this teaching, no doubt, is the importance of prayer and faith, and includes the teachings below. Mark tells us again in 10:32-34 that Jesus taught on his death and resurrection; and there he provides some different information, but, Mark wants us to notice that all the teaching between 8:22-10:42 is connected to how the disciples are to understand Jesus and how their lives interact with his. This means that all of this teaching is to be considered within the context of Jesus' death and resurrection.

We should not pass by this paragraph without noticing the irony that the Son of Adam, a divine figure, should be powerless to resist being betrayed into the control of humans. The language here is very similar to that found in 8:31, though the use of humans instead of the specific titles makes the disparity between them and Jesus seem even greater. The language helps reveal Jesus' humility in this situation. It is also noteworthy, but not unexpected, that the disciples still are failing to grasp what they are being told about coming events.

Vv 32-37: The discussion of the Twelve on the path makes it clear they do not understand what Jesus is going to go through. Just as when Jesus warned them about the yeast of the Pharisees (8: 14-21), the disciples are completely tuned out to what he is talking about and worried about their own circumstances. The discussion about importance is a natural one, everyone wants to feel they are important and their contributions are recognized. The problem is that in God's reign these kind of concerns are turned upside down. God is concerned that we place ourselves in the service of others, rather than, that we are lauded for our accomplishments. It is hard to miss the fact that Jesus uses a child as a teaching aid here; it must have been discouraging for the disciples for Jesus to say forget your accomplishments and act as if you have the social position of this child. We want to be on top of the world, identifiable and respected, but, Jesus wants us to be serving and humbly serving, not looking for praise. The idea of service is expressly detailed in "welcoming" children. The idea of welcoming is showing hospitality as one would for friends and family. The idea of providing hospitality for children is to provide for even those who can never return that hospitality, like children who have no money or position to offer anyone. Not only does one honor Jesus by doing so, but, showing hospitality to the lowest members of the social structure is showing love and respect for God.

Questions

1. It must have been extremely embarrassing for the disciples to have their failure pointed out so publicly, how do you respond when your failures are pointed out, and how do you call out the failures of others?
2. How do you understand Jesus' call to faith in your life, how can you echo the father's response "help my unbelief", and what do faith and disbelief look like in your life?
3. How do you understand "Anything is possible" and have you ever experienced a situation where you felt this rang true?
4. How do you develop your prayer life, especially as it relates to the power and authority that God has given you through the Holy Spirit? How does the disciples' failure in prayer relate to your own life?
5. What does it mean for you to be last and to serve, and what does it mean for you to "welcome" people?

Chapter 9: part 2

³⁸John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone throwing out demons in your name, but, we forbade him because he does not follow us.” ³⁹Jesus responded, “Do not forbid him because no one is able to do such in my name and then quickly revile me. ⁴⁰For the one who is not against us is for us. ⁴¹For anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink because in the name of the Selected One, truly this person will be rewarded.”

⁴²“For those who might cause one of these little ones who believe to desert; it would be better if they were collared with a millstone and they were thrown into the sea. ⁴³Should your hand cause you to desert, cut it off! It is better for you to enter life crippled than have two hands and depart to Gehenna, into the unquenchable fire! ⁴⁵Should your foot cause you to desert, cut it off! It is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and be thrown into Gehenna!” ⁴⁷Should your eye cause you to desert, throw it out! It is better for you to enter God’s reign with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into Gehenna!” ⁴⁸Where their worm does not die and the fire is unquenchable!”

⁴⁹“For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰Salt is good, but, if the salt becomes un-salty, how will it become salty again? Have salt among yourselves and be at peace with one another.”

^{10:1}He left there and came to the region of Judea across the Jordan; there crowds gathered around him, and as usual, he taught them. ²Then Pharisees came to test him asking if it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife. ³He replied, “What does Moses command you?” ⁴They said, “Moses permits him to write a certificate of divorce and to be divorced.” ⁵Jesus responded, “He wrote this command because of your hard hearts. ⁶But at the beginning of creation, ‘God made male and female.’ ⁷Consequently, a man leaves his father and mother and is bonded to his wife. ⁸So the two become one body, they are no longer two but one body. ⁹Therefore, those who God had joined together, humanity must never separate.” ¹⁰When they were again in the house, the disciples asked him about this. ¹¹He replied, “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery with her. ¹²Also, if a woman divorces her husband and marries another she commits adultery.

Commentary

As Jesus continues on his journey to Jerusalem he continues to take every opportunity to teach his disciples. While these might at first appear to be a series of unrelated teachings, they are, in fact, instructions on how to continue as Jesus’ disciple. Jesus began the discussion in the last section by showing the need for humility and prayer and will conclude teaching in the next section again discussing humility and service. What makes someone a disciple and what does continued discipleship mean; these are questions Jesus needs to deal with.

Vv 38-41: To properly understand this story we must read it with the last section firmly in mind. In the previous section the disciples have failed to throw out a demon and were arguing about their status within the group. Now we come to a story where John, one of Jesus’ closest disciples, has rebuked a man for throwing out demons because he was not part of the group (presumably the Twelve). It is unclear from the wording whether or not the disciples were

successful at dissuading the man from practicing exorcism. It may be that John is bragging about upholding Jesus' reputation, or, it might be he is complaining to Jesus, expecting that he will personally address the situation. However, John's remark is going to allow Jesus the chance to teach his disciples what it means to be one of the group.

There is no indication that Jesus or the disciples know the man in question, or, that he follows Jesus as part of the larger crowds; he is on his own but is using Jesus' authority. The word "name" appears three times in this paragraph as a euphemism for "authority". It would appear from John's words that the man is having success expelling demons and is possibly even earning a living doing so, but, we are not told.

John is expecting to be praised by Jesus for bringing such a serious matter to his attention, instead Jesus reverses the issue. The disciples have been working on the assumption of "Anyone not with us is against us" and Jesus wants them to think, "Anyone not against us is for us." John and the other disciples understand Jesus' name to possess magical power and anyone can use it to accomplish amazing results. This is the thinking that led them to ask Jesus why they could not throw out the demon (9:28). What Jesus understands is that his name is not an incantation to ward off evil. He knows that merely saying his name will have no effect without faith; we see this in the disciples' failure 9:14-27, as well as Acts 19:13-16. The fact that this man is having success means that he also has some level of faith in Jesus.

The disciples' must have been upset hearing Jesus' response, they were sacrificing to follow Jesus, trying to soak in as much as possible and committed to helping him establish God's reign. By contrast, this man was probably a lone wolf, who may have been helping people but was less interested in learning what Jesus was about. Also, the disciples had been chosen as The Twelve, they were Jesus' representatives; what did their position mean if they were not the ones carrying on and expanding Jesus' ministry? Jesus is opening up ministry to a wider range of people, a ministry the disciples were specially commissioned for had now been opened up to a wider range of people.

Organizations tend toward clearly defined boundaries (particularly religious groups), they want to define who is in and who is out. The disciples, likewise, want to define who is in and out on a very strict measure, those Jesus has called to follow him, or at least, those who regularly follow him and are known to him. Jesus opens up the boundaries and makes his circle inclusive, even of those who do no more and offer a drink of water. In the hot arid landscape of the Middle East, giving a cup of water to a thirsty individual is considered the most basic and expected form of hospitality. Handing out water is an expectation, definitely not an action worthy of a reward; yet, Jesus says that even this action is worthy of eternal reward. Jesus does attach a condition to the action; one may be rewarded for the most basic action, but, only if done on account of Jesus. Basic human compassion does not lead to Divine rewards, one must act because of the name of Christ. Specifically, Jesus says the person's actions must be directed toward a disciple because the person wants to do something for Jesus. While Jesus will

elsewhere talk of ministry to a wider circle of people, here he makes the express point of compassion for the sake of his name (or appropriately the title Christ/Selected One).

Vv 42-48: Jesus paints a graphic picture of the fate of those who harm the faith of “these little ones.” At a basic level it is easy enough to see that Jesus desires his disciples build up rather than harm faith; however, there are a couple of questions which need to be resolved. First, it must be resolved what Jesus means by cause to stumble. Some translations render the phrase “cause to sin”, but, this probably does not reflect Jesus’ actual meaning. Rather, Jesus has been talking about insiders and outsiders and the nature of faith. So it seems we must conclude that Jesus means here, “cause one to lose faith in me.” Secondly, we must ask who are the “little ones”? It is easy to go back to 9:33-37 and see the child Jesus uses as an illustration and assume he meant children. However, we have noticed Jesus has been talking of faith, and has just pointed to the inclusion of individuals with very meager credentials. The Greek word translated “little” usually denotes size and leads to confusion since Jesus has previously used someone of small stature as an illustration. But, here it seems Jesus wants us to see anyone whose faith has not sufficiently developed even if their body has.

The illustration is rather vivid, the millstone involved was one turned by a donkey and would have been extremely heavy. The idea is that the immediate drowning when such a stone was wrapped around a person’s neck before being dumped into a lake, was better than what awaits the individual. This is a horrific thought, and should serve as a tremendous warning about how we treat individuals who are small in faith. We had better act with humility or the punishment which awaits us is far worse than we want to experience. Though here he leaves the punishment to the imagination.

Not only is there danger in harming someone else’s faith there is danger in harming one’s own. Jesus goes on to explain that a disciple might be better off to expelled very important parts of oneself, rather than face Gehenna. There is debate over how literal Jesus meant us to understand this passage, but, it seems to be highly metaphoric language.¹⁸ The three body parts listed are very important to most people, particularly if right-handed (at the time everyone was assumed to be right-handed). These body parts represent significant aspects of one’s person. One cannot let anything in one’s life become a hazard to discipleship and if it is one would be far better off to excise it than to risk the judgment to come.

The reference to Gehenna comes from Isaiah 66:24 and originally represented the Valley of Hinnon where the trash from Jerusalem was burned. Later it became synonymous with the judgment of God and punishment, which is how Jesus is using it. It is unclear whether Jesus meant that the individual would live in eternal fire (the classic Christian definition of Hell) or if the person would be destroyed in the eternal fire. But, this point should not matter, the

¹⁸ Tradition tells us that, following this command Origen of Alexandria castrated himself rather than risk eternal punishment for falling to the temptation of women, but, few others in Church history have taken Jesus’ words so literally.

punishment envisioned should be sufficient either way to get us to realize the importance of discipleship. Discipleship is avoiding the things of life that move us away from faith in Jesus and helping others to avoid them also. In doing so we enter fully into God's reign which is life.

Vv 49-50: It is not entirely clear what Jesus means in this parable and there is some room for interpretation. It does appear that Mark has joined together two sayings which both contain the word "salt" but may have little else in common. However, as it is written verse 49 seems to help to transition from the discussion of punishment in eternal fire to the use of salt as a metaphor for our lives. Jesus may have had Gehenna in mind and saying that everyone is going to have trial by fire circumstances in their lives. He could also be picking up on the idea that salt was used to cleanse and purify objects, implying that everyone will go through fire to cleanse themselves. The second half of the saying then equates salt with peace and living in peace with one another. Salt was used in covenant ceremonies and Jesus may be thinking of that language and that if one loses salt that one also loses the ability to live in harmony with others. This is a slightly different take on the parable than we find in Matthew or Luke (Mt. 5:13, Lk. 14:34) where the disciples are presented as salt to the world. Here we see the need for the disciples to maintain salt among themselves.

10:1-12: Jesus has continued on his journey and is posed a question about divorce. This seems perhaps a little strange because divorce seems to have been a fairly settled issue for Jews of the time. While, specific grounds needed for a man to divorce his wife were debated, there was no debate about what the law allowed. Perhaps Mark is recording a trap sprung by the Pharisees because they had already heard something of Jesus' views on the issue. Perhaps the Pharisees wanted to make Jesus look like a religious extremist who does not listen to modern culture (or conventional religious views) in order to dissuade public opinion about him. The Pharisees do not have to disprove Jesus to be right, they simply have to make his views sound extreme to the average person. The Pharisees may well have thought they won this contest because they forced Jesus to make an unpopular comment, something sure to lose him followers.

As to the actual question and answer, Mark records a very abrupt conversation; a simple question and a straightforward and brutally honest answer. Jewish culture, at the time, universally allowed that a man could divorce his wife (though not a wife her husband). What constituted valid grounds was debated, from the conservative, only adultery, to a more liberal "found someone better". The majority opinion was in the middle allowing for divorce when a man could site something akin to "irreconcilable differences". Jesus has none of this and flat refuses to justify any divorce.

Jesus' stand on divorce is obviously important, but, more important is how he comes to his understanding. Jewish Law (Deuteronomy 24:1-4) explicitly allows for a man to divorce his wife, though, the circumstances necessary for divorce are not plainly spelled out. Jesus does not care about the Law, but, cuts to the heart of Scripture, humanity's relationship(s) with God. Jesus understands that marriage represents a Divine reality which should not be taken lightly. O end this relationship also has implications for all human relationships. In essence, the

Pharisees have said that because the Law gives guidelines about divorce, it is permissible. Jesus has said that because God intended marriage as a theological reality divorce should not be entered into lightly. Jesus asked them about Moses' command¹⁹ and they replied with a permission. Jesus then counters with the first command about marriage in the Scriptures, implying the Pharisees were debating the circumstances of divorce without ever questioning the true purpose of marriage.

Jesus directs us back to God's activity in creating marriage as contrasted with a human's desire to end it. Humanity does not have the right to divide the new creation which God has made in marriage, for no other reason than God has made it. It is important for us to consider that Jesus looks at God's intent when considering the question and not what is simply allowed or not allowed for us. Jesus wants us to understand that we are look after God's creation, our purpose in creation and Eden, and we need to look with an eye toward how our actions impact that responsibility. In an age asking about permissibility in the Church (particularly within sexual ethics) this is sage advice, begin to order your life around what God has created humanity to be. When asked about this in private, Jesus expands the teaching to reveal that because "the two are one flesh", ever trying to dissolve their union simply results in adultery and infidelity. The union is greater than the two involved and transcends their wishes. Another truly remarkable part of Jesus' teaching is that he places women on an equal plain with men. Notice the woman is every bit the equal both in committing sin and being wounded by it, this was revolutionary at the time. Jews at the time referred to a couple in adultery by saying the woman committed adultery against her husband and the man as committing adultery against the woman's husband; Jesus' statement made both equal in marriage.

Questions

1. We sometimes have difficulty accepting people into our world as "Christians", how do we be accepting while still maintaining our identity?
2. How do you purge yourself of stumbling blocks, and avoid either causing another to stumble or yourself to end in Gehenna?
3. How do think Jesus expects his disciples to maintain peace and harmony in their relationships?
4. How do you feel about Jesus' description of marriage, divorce and the role of marriage?
5. Jesus goes beyond what was allowed to understand what we were created for, how do you look past the do's and don'ts of the Bible to understand the created order and God's Divine purpose?

¹⁹ Moses was traditionally considered the author of the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, & Deuteronomy) and here his name is shorthand for those books, and does not imply that the person was responsible for the command.

Chapter 10: part 1

¹³Some brought little children for him to lay hands on, but the disciples scolded them. ¹⁴Jesus seeing this, became angry and said, “Allow the children to come to me, do not bar them, for God’s reign is theirs. ¹⁵Truly I tell you whoever does not welcome God’s reign like a child will never enter it.” ¹⁶Then he hugged them and laid his hands on them and blessed them.

¹⁷As he continued on the path a man ran up to him and knelt before him and asked, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁸Jesus answered, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except one, God. ¹⁹You know the commandments do not murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, or cheat. Honor your father and mother.” ²⁰He responded, “Teacher, all these I have kept from childhood.” ²¹Jesus looked at him and loved him and said, “You have one need, go, sell all you have and give it to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me.” ²²But the man was aghast by the message and left grieving, because he had many possessions.

²³Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How difficult is it for the wealthy to enter God’s reign. ²⁴Now the disciples were astonished at this message, but Jesus again answered, “Children. How difficult is it to enter God’s reign. ²⁵It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the wealthy to enter God’s reign.” ²⁶They were even more shocked and said among themselves, “Who is able to be saved?” ²⁷Jesus looked at them and said, “Through humanity it is impossible, but not through God. Through God all is possible.”

²⁸Peter started to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” ²⁹Jesus said, “Truly, I tell you no one has left a house, brothers, sisters, father, mother, children, or fields for my sake, and the sake of the Victory Proclamation, ³⁰who will not receive now, in these days, hundred times over houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and fields with persecution, in these times, and eternal life. ³¹And many of the first will be last and the last, first.”

Commentary

Jesus continues to define the “discipleship” in this section as he nears the end of his journey to Jerusalem. As in the previous section, the disciples’ poor judgment leads to the first opportunity to teach. Jesus is then presented with a question common to all religious leaders, and though his initial answer underscores common beliefs, he then presents a challenge to discipleship that should cause every potential follower to pause. Jesus is never about simple straightforward answers, he wants us to be conscience about our move toward God. These stringent demands, though, are not without benefit.

Vv 13-16: Perhaps nowhere else in the Gospel are we presented with a more lovable portrait of Jesus than in this paragraph. Parents have brought their children to Jesus and the disciples have stopped them from approaching, and curiously we are not told why either did what they did. It is tempting to think that these parents were extremely religious and wanted their children to get a blessing from Jesus, the text does not tell us. It could be that these parents simply wanted their children to be able to say they met Jesus as we do with celebrities today. The parents might also be thinking that Jesus was a healer, and his touch (remember touch was

important to healing) would provide protection for the children from illness. Could it be these parents wanted a celebrity moment with Jesus while he was in the midst of doing something very important, like teaching or healing or eating? Perhaps the disciples were protecting Jesus' quiet time? The only person whose feelings are known is Jesus; and his anger heightens our sense of his compassion. Jesus' frustration with the disciples is understandable; especially since it appears the disciples have already forgotten the lessons of 9:36-37.

The focus of the passage is usually on the disciples' hindrance of the children, and unfortunately this leaves the parents out of the interpretation. As in 9:36-37, Jesus is using the idea of children as a metaphor for those who have little faith (this would naturally include children). The disciples are not hindering the children from approaching, rather, they are hindering the parents from bringing the children. The parents perhaps are a little simplistic in their approach to Jesus (maybe "childlike" might be more suitable); but, they are trying to reach Jesus and the disciples have hindered (caused to stumble) rather than helped their approach. The disciples expect spiritual sophistication from parents and children; but, as in "Jesus Loves Me", "Little ones to him belong." Jesus is showing the disciples that people respond differently to Jesus and at different levels and their job is not to guard the door, rather, be a greeter showing people where to go. This is what Jesus does, he fulfills the parents request and blesses the children.

Jesus' message is very explicit, we must be like children to enter God's Reign, presumably, he means simple and trusting. We are not told explicitly what "like a child means", but, given the context it has to do with being accepting of others' motives and willing to trust and help them as they come to Jesus. It should also be noted that here Jesus likely uses "God's reign" to refer to both this world and the next. We will never establish God's reign on earth if we do not trust one another, nor, will we enter God's reign after death if we are unwilling to think like and trust God. Instead of this simple compassion, the disciples want to gauge people's understanding and fit-ness to enter God's reign and thus cause Jesus' scorn and frustration.

Vv 17-22: Jesus' dealing with the rich and his subsequent teaching on wealth is among the most difficult parts of the Gospel. Jesus is continuing his journey toward Jerusalem and is interrupted on the path. Mark is being subtle here, the man is questioning Jesus as to the way to eternal life as Jesus is on "the Way". Ultimately Mark wants us to see Jesus' invitation to the man at the end of the conversation in terms of Jesus' own road of self-denial that led to the cross. Jesus' continuing on the path becomes a contrast to the man who goes away.

From the beginning this encounter is strange; an unidentified man comes up to Jesus and uses an unusual greeting "good". Jesus even seems skeptical of the stranger who has used such language; though, there is no real reason why Jesus would reply the way he did. It is possible that Jesus believed the man was simply trying to flatter him and was using this response to deflect the flattery and test the man's sincerity. But, since the matter of God's goodness is promptly dropped it is difficult to pursue the matter.

The question of how to gain eternal life is a universal question and it is likely that this was not the first time Jesus was asked about it. Jesus' response is classic Jewish theology, obey the Ten Commandments. It is important to note that neither Jewish theology, nor Jesus believes this to represent "works righteousness". Faith asks "what must I do" because in faith we know God wants to have a relationship with us, which will have certain requirements for us. The actions do not lead to eternal life in themselves, but are necessary for us to continue in a relationship with God, this is the message of the Epistle of James. The fact that Jesus only brings up the second half of the Commandments does not imply that he holds the ones focused on God to be less important. It seems likely that Jesus would have assumed the man already knew to follow the Commandments about God if he is asking about eternal life.

We see Jesus in so many battles of wits that it is easy to think that Jesus is trying to trap the man and that verses 20-21, in particular, represent a hostile exchange. However, the man seems entirely sincere in his desire and in his statement of maintaining the Law. Likewise, Jesus gives the man a searching look and loves him, implying that he wanted (and intended?) the man to follow him. Jesus wanted the man to join his band and so gives him one more challenge, leave everything behind, be dependent on others, and follow.

The man's reaction to Jesus shows just how difficult Jesus' teaching is to accept; he is not simply disheartened, he feels insulted. The man is not simply walking away pouting that he would have to give up his toys, but, is angered that Jesus would suggest that he has to live an ascetic lifestyle. The question is often asked whether or not this is a universal command from Jesus meant for everyone to follow or if it was a specific command meant for that man. Unfortunately, this question actually misses the point of Jesus' teaching. As Robert Gundry says, "That Jesus did not command all his followers to sell all their possessions gives comfort only to the kind of people to whom he *would* issue that command."ⁱⁱⁱ People who are looking for a loophole in this command are the wealthy to whom Jesus was talking. Jesus wanted the man to use his wealth for God's purposes and be purely dependent on God for his support. This is the universal command Jesus places on our lives, however, does Jesus literally expect every believer to sell everything, probably not. We see that Jesus and the disciples were supported by the generosity of others, and the disciples seem to have kept possessions (i.e. boats, houses), which were used on occasions. Our goal is not to be tied to our possessions, to separate from them so as to be dependent on God for our lives.

Vv 23-27: Jesus' commentary on the exchange provides further difficulty and frustration for the disciples and us. Jesus' initial comment about it being "difficult" for the wealthy to enter God's reign is harsh, but, then he goes a step further and says it is impossible. The camel is the largest animal in the region so it provides a natural contrast to the eye of a sewing needle; in modern North America we might use a moose or bear (or bigfoot). Some preachers like to imagine that "the eye of a needle" refers to a door in the wall of a city meant for people, but, there is absolutely no evidence to support this idea. The claim is that if a camel wanted to enter the city by this gate it must be stripped of all baggage and crawl through the gate. Beside the

lack of evidence it is bad theology and misses the point of the parable; saying that a rich person can get into heaven if like a camel they strip off their baggage and crawl is “works righteousness”. The person stripping off the baggage to get into Heaven puts the task squarely on the person and denies God.

What Jesus goes on to say is that despite the impossibility for humans to enter God’s reign, God can and does work miracles and God can bring anyone into Paradise, even the wealthy. This is shocking for two reasons, first, many of the time (and our time) thought wealth was a sign of God’s blessing on an individual’s life. Jesus was combating this idea saying that wealth was a hindrance to God, rather, than a blessing. Jesus wanted people to see that wealth was not a reward for loving God, but, at best a means to help others (v 21 “go, sell all you have and give it to the poor”) and at worst the thing that keeps us from God. Second, Jesus’ words are shocking because they seem to level the playing-field again. He has just elaborated on how wealth is a hindrance to God and keeps people from God, yet, for God salvation of the wealthy seems to be the same as salvation of the poor. In other words, it is no easier for the poor to gain heaven than the wealthy and no less possible for the wealthy, because both enter through the grace of God. At the end of this we are left almost where we started asking, “How do I gain eternal life”. The only answer we have is exactly where we started, continue on the path following Jesus. Everything Jesus has said is food for thought, helping us to reflect on God as we go down the path; helping us to focus so we are certain to follow Jesus and not stumble.

Vv 28-31: Peter turns the tables, pointing out that the disciples have, in fact, done exactly what Jesus has commanded. Jesus then makes a very comforting statement that anyone who has given up something to become a disciple will be rewarded. The list of rewards should probably be thought of as somewhat rhetorical, since the list of possessions gained would soon become unmanageable. Jesus also promises hardships, but, these seem to be outweighed by the rewards. It is also interesting that “fathers” is left off the list of rewards, perhaps as a subtle reminder that there is only one Father for disciples. It may also be significant that Jesus does not list “spouse” among the things given up; considering his view on divorce this may be a subtle reminder that it is impossible to give up a spouse. The reward list, though rhetorical, seems to indicate the ideal Church, each acting as family to the others, each give use of house and family to others, all united together. After all, though Peter kept close to his family and presumably still owned his house and boat, these were no means private property; rather, they seemed to be very public places used by all who wanted to connect with Jesus. Jesus ends the comment with a familiar line for many Christians about the role reversal in God’s reign. The question is who is this line directed at, the rich man, or Peter, or both? The rich man thought highly of himself because his wealth, Peter thinks highly of himself because of what he has given up; it is likely that Jesus is commenting about thinking highly about oneself, not simply of being in a certain physical position. It is equally haughty to think, “God has made me wealthy” and, “I have suffered most for God”.

Questions

1. How do we allow the little ones to approach Jesus while still teaching them to do so in a proper manner which allows for growth?
2. How do you use your wealth for God's reign, and how easy would it be to walk away from your possession to live off of the generosity of others?
3. How do you feel about Jesus' perspective on wealth and how it relates to salvation?
4. When all is said and done the only "real" advice Jesus gives for entering eternal life is to trust God and follow Jesus, how do you feel about this ambiguous advice, and how do you follow it?
5. Do you find the Church on earth to be a reward for following God, and if not how do you think you can begin to see it as a privilege and reward?

Chapter 10: part 2

³²They were on the path going up to Jerusalem; Jesus was leading and the disciples were amazed, while those following were scared. He, again, took the twelve aside and told them what must happen to him. ³³“Look, we are going up to Jerusalem, then the Son of Adam will be handed over to the Chief-priests and Scribes. They will condemn him to death and hand him over to the Gentiles. ³⁴They will ridicule him, spit on him, brutalize him, and kill him. Yet after three days he will rise!”

³⁵James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him and said, “Teacher, we would like you to grant our request.” ³⁶He responded, “What do you want me to do for you?” ³⁷They said to him, “Grant that, in your glory one of us will sit on your right and one on your left.” ³⁸Jesus answered them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup which I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism in which I am baptized?” ³⁹They responded, “We are able.” Jesus then responded, “The cup I drink you will drink, and the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, ⁴⁰however, to sit on my right and left I cannot grant, that is for those to whom it has been prepared.”

⁴¹The ten heard this and became cross with James and John. ⁴²Calling them together Jesus said, “You know those seen as powerful among the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high-ranking claim superiority over them. ⁴³But it is not so among you, rather, anyone who desires to be great among you will be your servant. ⁴⁴Anyone who desires to be first among you, will be a slave of all. ⁴⁵Because the Son of Adam did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life to ransom many.”

⁴⁶Then they came into Jericho, and as Jesus was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a considerable crowd, Bartimaeus, Timaeus' son, a blind beggar was sitting by the path. ⁴⁷He heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, and he yelled out, “Son of David! Jesus have mercy on me!” ⁴⁸Many warned him to be silent, but, he yelled even louder, “Son of David! Have mercy on me!” ⁴⁹Jesus stopped and said, “Call him!” They called the blind man saying, “take heart, get up, he is calling for you.” ⁵⁰So he threw off his cloak, jumped up and went to Jesus. ⁵¹Jesus asked him, “What do you want me to do?” The blind man answered, “My Rabbi, if I could see.” ⁵²Jesus said, “Go! Your confidence has saved you.” Immediately he could see and he followed him on the path.

Commentary

At the beginning, in the middle, and now at the end of the journey, Jesus has taken time to address his disciples and explain what is going to happen to him. Unfortunately, it appears the disciples are still incapable of understanding what Jesus is saying. Jesus promises pain and suffering, while the disciples still expect glory and honor. Jesus has told them, yet again, about his impending death, but, they still focus on being leaders in a coming political regime. The story ends just outside the destination with Jesus healing the blind man. We then ask will there be enough time for Jesus to put the disciples' spiritual vision right before his time runs out.

Vv 32-34: The scene opens with Jesus and his disciples continuing on the pathway to Jerusalem; and Mark uses the geography to reveal a theological truth. It is not in fashion today, but, Jerusalem is traditionally a metaphor for completing the journey with Jesus and entering glory. Jesus is leading the company toward the goal, the disciples close behind marvel at Jesus, while

the crowd brings up the rear scared of the trip. This is a picture of our journey with Jesus, we can either be close behind him marveling in him and the journey, or, we keep our distance trembling at what is going on and because of who we are following. Either way discipleship is dependent on following Jesus on the path, walking in his footsteps. Why are the disciples' in awe and the crowds afraid? Because Jesus is boldly headed toward Jerusalem, the seat of opposition, he is walking straight into the lion's den and is completely unconcerned. The disciples seem astonished Jesus will instigate so openly walk into such a dangerous situation, here we remember Scribes have twice come from Jerusalem to investigate him (3:22, 7:1). Are the crowds also aware of this fact and scared of being associated with this band who are walking into potential conflict and arrest?

At this point we are used to Jesus taking the disciples aside for special teaching, so his doing so here is nothing unusual. In this third prediction of his death, Jesus become much more descriptive about what will happen than he has before (8:31, 9:31). The previous predictions made Jesus' death a distant event, verse 33 reveals that the time has come and the party is heading toward the predicted collision. Not only does Jesus reveal they are headed toward the final conflict, he also spells out, in dramatic detail, what is about to happen. The first part expands on 8:31 detailing the reaction of the Jewish leadership, particularly the political leadership who cooperated with Roman rule. It is important to remember to distinguish between the political leaders and the average Jew; it is the leadership who want Jesus out of the way not necessarily the average Jew, many of whom were probably sympathetic to Jesus. This leadership is going to betray not simply Jesus, but, the entire people by handing their savior and destined leader over to the current rulers. They will sell-out their own people to keep their power, by handing over the person God has destined to rule the earth. From here the Gentiles, those outside of God's people, will mock torture and ultimately kill Jesus. Those who have been entrusted with governing God's people will reject God's plan to preserve the status quo. We cannot reasonably expect the Gentiles to act any differently toward Jesus than what he predicts, after all, they care about power and dominance not God. This paragraph expresses a historical truth, Jesus was handed over to the Roman authorities by the Jewish leadership and was crucified; but, there is also a theological truth: that we must not be complicit with the rulers of this world in handing Jesus over to them, because this is what they will do. We cannot sell Jesus out, rather we must continue to follow him to Jerusalem. Beginning here and continuing in chapter 15 we see language which ties Jesus directly to the "Suffering Servant" of Isaiah 53, and as such, Jesus is fulfilling the will of God. The servant suffers because the Gentiles have power and this servant is trying to change that, the nations rule the earth but the servant is trying to institute God's Reign. This clash will end in the suffering and death of the servant, but, also in his final victory because he will rise. This last part is not elaborated on; as in 8:31 and 9:31, this is simply a matter-of-fact statement. We are not told what Jesus' rising will look like or what it means simply that though the world kills him, he will live.

Vv 35-40: Every time Jesus issues a prediction of his death the disciples do something to prove they do not understand, and this time is no exception. How James and John could have made such a statement immediately after Jesus' comments on his death is hard to understand, and, it is probably best to think that Mark has omitted at least part of Jesus' teaching. If we allow that part of the conversation has been omitted, then we see that Mark is highlighting the fact that the disciples (specifically Jesus' innermost circle) still fail to grasp his mission and teaching. James and John are seeking honor and glory within Jesus' earthly kingdom; in fact, they are seeking the two highest places of honor. Jesus does not deny their request outright, rather, he redirects the focus toward the brothers and their desire to follow him. At this point it almost sounds like Jesus is willing to acknowledge their request if they are willing to follow him to the ends of the earth. Cup and baptism surely refer to Jesus' own path of suffering and death at the hands of the ruling elite, and the pair willingly agree to the terms. James and John may very well have understood Jesus to imply death as a condition and were then understanding a kingdom in the resurrection, or, they still might have been clueless to what Jesus was about to go through. Either way, the suffering was worth the eternal glory of being Jesus' second in command. It is at this point that Jesus pulls the rug out from their feet. They will indeed suffer with Jesus, and walk where he walks, but, they are still not guaranteed their request. God has specific people for these seats and only these people will get them there is nothing anyone can do to earn them. God's reign is not based on ambition or even hard work, it is based on God and while we should work hard, it is still God who grants places in the Reign.

Vv 41-45: As we might expect, James and John's request has upset the rest of the disciples, presumably because they are all thinking like James and John and want to be first with Jesus. The desire for power, prestige, and celebrity is a common one within humanity and now the disciples have found themselves (however unwittingly) near to it. They started following a smalltime backwoods teacher and found themselves in on the ground-floor of the most anticipated movement in history. All of the disciples are worried about their place in the structure of the coming regime and none wants to miss out on potential honors.

Jesus understands this and takes the opportunity to underline exactly what the new regime will mean for those who enter it and those who want power with it. Jesus uses the existing social hierarchy as a contrast to the way things will be when God rules. Now those who are in positions of power dominate everyone else. We see this today in the celebrity treatment of the rich and famous. The culture of celebrity oppresses many to pamper the few, their opinions are more important, their desires come first, and they transcend the laws everyone else are governed by. This is a natural human tendency and unless we are on the very bottom rung of the ladder we do not feel the oppression quite as hard. In fact, like the disciples, we are more likely to grumble about the social structure only because we are not in position to take advantage of it. We find fault with the specific people in the positions of authority not the system, because we all strive to one day displace (or at least sit next to) those currently on top.

Jesus' command presents us with an oxymoron, one cannot seek a position of power and truly be a servant and slave. Truly serving requires one to give up all hope of power and influence (contrary to what some politicians might say). If I am serving people I am putting aside my own desires to grant the requests of someone else. Jesus is not saying that we put aside our ambition to serve God; we are to reject ambition and power to serve the needs of the Church. Jesus wants us to see that our ambition must realize itself in working for others not ourselves, otherwise we are undermining the kingdom.

A major question in Jesus' comment is how do we understand his life being "a ransom for many"? The easiest, and most common, understanding is that this comment simply means Jesus understood that in his death he would atone for (pay the price for) the sins of the world.²⁰ This substitutionary atonement is a legitimate theory; yet, it is possible that Jesus had other ideas, and we should consider them and it may well be that there are multiple angles to this answer. Another possibility is that continuing the theme of Isaiah 53 Jesus meant his entire life was the ransom, and that the way he lived was going to free others. Jesus' willingness to live as God's servant provided the path to God for others to follow. It is also possible that Jesus, himself, understood only that by following his life others could find God; but, that his death opened a door to God which he was unaware of at the time. Thus, Jesus spoke with emphasis in one direction, while our post-Easter reflection allows us to see a second meaning. The theories of how Jesus liberates us (liberates as synonym for pays ransom or redeem), are numerous and varied (as are the New Testament metaphors) and it is probably best not to get locked in to one specific understanding. Considering this verse falls near the end of Mark's long discourse on discipleship that theme should be part of our understanding of Jesus' "life as a ransom for many".

Vv 46- 52: This story takes place at the end of the journey; Jericho is the last stop before Jerusalem and we are to understand Jesus is almost to his destination. The healing of blind men has framed this section of Jesus' teaching, teaching primarily focused on discipleship. Unlike everyone else healed in the Gospel, Mark tells us Bartimaeus' name and his heritage as Timaeus' son.²¹ This probably means that Bartimaeus became a known figure in the early Church and that thirty years after the event Mark's readers would still recall him. This otherwise blind anonymous beggar was given purpose and reputation after encountering Jesus.

The encounter begins as Jesus and his disciples are leaving Jericho with a sizable group of religious pilgrims headed to Jerusalem for Passover (crowds no longer refers to a group coming to see Jesus). A beggar has stationed himself near the road hoping to collect from those passing by. Obviously there were many Jesus' at the time and place and so Mark uses the identifier "of Nazareth" which is how people of the time knew Jesus. The term "Son of David" is

²⁰ Or in some theological circles, he would atone for only those whom God has destined to save. These theologians put a great deal of stress on the word "many" as opposed to "all". But this is over-reading the text, by forcing the phrase to have only one potential meaning.

²¹ In Aramaic, Israel's language at the time, Bartimaeus means son of Timaeus and would be spelled bar-Timaeus.

equivalent to “Selected One” and “Christ” showing the man understood that Jesus was the promised descendant of David who would restore and reign over Israel. This is the first use of this title in Mark and the first glimpse of Jesus’ true nature since Peter’s confession in 8:29. The blind man has some peculiar insight to be able to see Jesus’ true identity when no one else seems able to see it. The crowd is interesting jeering at him in the beginning and then cheering him when Jesus stops and sends for him. Is this Jesus’ power that when he stops to show compassion others are changed? The exchange between Jesus and Bartimaeus is very simple, and almost gives the feel of a formality, as if the two men can read each other without words. Jesus is straight forward and so is Bartimaeus, and unlike so many healings before, when Jesus says that Bartimaeus is free to go, Bartimaeus stays. Unlike the rich man who could not leave behind everything he had, Bartimaeus easily leaves behind everything he has and follows after Jesus. It is fitting that right before Jesus’ journey ends he makes sure eyes are open and clear and that people are able to “Follow him on the path”. This healing is the call to discipleship in a picture Jesus gives vision and the former blind beggar follows him. While Bartimaeus becomes the perfect metaphor for discipleship we should be quick to also remember that his story is historical as well as metaphorical and it is because his story is so fitting that it became the metaphor.

Questions

1. Are there ways in which you personally and the local church are complicate with the rulers of this world and are in danger of handing Jesus over to the?
2. James and John want to be given honor and power, probably as a reward for hard work and service, have you ever felt your work needed to be honored and how do you combat this kind of pride and ambition?
3. Where are areas where you can work on being a servant to the church and work to put aside your own pride and ambition?
4. How do you understand Jesus’ life as a “Ransom for many” and how does tha relate to your understanding of your role in the Church?
5. In what ways were you the blind beggar and how have you encountered Jesus on his journey?

Chapter 11: part 1

^{11:1}When they came near Jerusalem, Bethpage, and Bethany, to the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent out two of his disciples, ²saying to them, “Go into the village over there. Immediately, on entering you will find a colt, which no one has ridden, tied up outside and bring him. ³If anyone asks, ‘What are you doing?’ Respond, ‘The Lord needs him and he will send him back immediately.’” ⁴They went and found a colt tied to a door, outside on the street, they untied him ⁵Some bystanders asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” ⁶But they answered how Jesus had told them, and they dropped it. ⁷They brought the colt to Jesus and laid their coats on him and he sat on him. ⁸Many laid their coats upon the path, and others cut branches from the field. ⁹They were going before and after him shouting:

“Hosanna! Blessings on the one coming in the Lord’s name! ¹⁰Blessings on the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the Highest!”

¹¹He came into Jerusalem and entered the Temple, then surveyed everything; but, it was already evening so he went back to Bethany with the twelve.

¹²The next day they were leaving Bethany and Jesus was hungry. ¹³Seeing a fig tree in the distance in leaf, he went to find figs on it. Coming to it, he found only leaves- because it was not the time for figs. ¹⁴So he cursed it, “May no one ever again eat fruit from you!” His disciples heard this.

¹⁵They entered Jerusalem, and he went into the Temple and began to throw out those buying and selling in the Temple; he overturned the tables of the currency-exchangers, and the seats of those selling the doves. ¹⁶Then he did not allow anyone to carry things through the Temple. ¹⁷He began to teach, saying to them, “Isn’t it written, ‘*My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.*’ But you have made it a stronghold for thieves. ¹⁸The Chief-priests and Scribes heard this and sought a way to destroy him, but they feared him because the crowds marveled at his teaching. ¹⁹When it grew late they left the city.

²⁰When morning came they saw the fig tree had withered from the roots.

²¹Remembering, Peter said to him, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!” ²²Jesus responded, “Have faith in God. ²³Truly, I say to you anyone might say to this mountain ‘Be taken away and thrown into the sea!’ And does not doubt in their heart, but believes what was said, it will happen just as they said. ²⁴Therefore, I tell you about everything you pray and ask for, believe that you will receive and it will be done for you. ²⁵When you stand to pray, forgive anything you have against anyone, so that, your father who is in heaven will forgive your trespasses.”

Commentary

The long journey is over, the small band has reached Jerusalem on the Sunday before Passover. At this point Mark’s narrative slows down and he begins to focus on time, something he has not done previously. Mark will now begin to take us day-by-day through Jesus’ last week before the Crucifixion. This is appropriate because we have arrived in Jerusalem, Israel’s capital and most sacred city. In the previous section, Bartimaeus identified Jesus as David’s son, the rightful ruler over Jerusalem and now we see how he is treated by those who should be his

subjects. Jesus is no longer the healer who teaches his disciples in private; he now engages in very public demonstrations of his authority and engages the current authorities in Jerusalem. Now the question becomes, “How will this city, which should accept Jesus asking, react to his presence?”

Vv 1-11: After his long journey, Jesus has finally reached Jerusalem and it is time that he announces himself to the world. Until now, he has been isolated in a relative backwater and though he has become popular there, he has not stepped onto the big stage. Jesus’ opening salvo in Jerusalem is carefully staged and designed to gain some attention within the city. Jesus was known to the religious leaders of Jerusalem (3:22 & 7:1 indicate they sent people to assess his ministry), but, this demonstration was designed to push him into the spotlight and force a confrontation with those officials. Pilgrims entering Jerusalem for Passover were expected to walk into the city; Jesus’ decision to stop and mount a ride reflects a conscience effort to make a scene. Unlike Matthew, Mark does not explicitly quote Zechariah 9:9-10; but, we still understand that Jesus is operating with these verses in mind. Zechariah prophesied that Israel’s new king (the Selected One) would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey, Jesus is claiming this role for himself. Bartimaeus has already identified Jesus as the Son of David and coming king, now, we see Jesus acting on those words and implicating claiming the title for himself.

Bethany is approximately 2 miles from Jerusalem, and it is around here that Jesus sends two disciples on a special errand. Jesus’ provides his disciples with very explicit commands for finding his chosen ride, and some have suggested that this shows Jesus’ Divine insight. However, this is not necessary because the other Gospels (particularly John) tell us Jesus had friends in the area and probably borrowed the donkey from one of them. Mark’s omission of this detail seems to help us understand (at least implicitly) that Jesus is claiming royal authority as the Son of David, and that his subjects recognize his authority and consent to his request. The use of “Lord” probably infers God’s need of the donkey, or that Jesus is intending to use it for God’s purpose, but, the term could also refer to Jesus if understood as a reference to Psalm 110:1, though it is unlikely Jesus would have used this type of self-identification. The fact that the donkey had never been ridden confirms that it was saved for the divine/royal purpose. Animals meant to be used by either God or the king was to be set aside specially for and only used for that purpose.

The disciples complete the mission bringing the donkey back to Jesus who uses their coats as a saddle as he rides toward Jerusalem. The disciples and the crowd also use coats and brush to construct a path for the donkey. This is something like rose petals being thrown down or a red carpet. The crowd is recognizing the significance of the man riding a donkey into Jerusalem. The crowd is probably the same group who left Jericho with Jesus and the disciples and are probably people from Galilee and well acquainted with Jesus’ ministry. The crowds seem to be shouting (or singing) Psalm 118, a Hallel, one of the Psalms sung by pilgrims on the approach to Jerusalem for a festival. In the original context the Psalm was sung as pilgrims entered Jerusalem and these were the ones identified as coming in the Lord’s name. Mark has

reorganized the Psalm to apply specifically to Jesus and give a stronger messianic understanding. This would have been an impressive sight, hundreds, or potentially a few thousand, people dancing and singing around Jesus as he rides into the Holy City. We must remember there were as many as 500,000 pilgrims in Jerusalem and while this procession would have been noticed, it would not have been an overwhelming mass. Jesus is sending a message that God's reign has entered Jerusalem and the existing authorities must decide whether they will recognize this new authority or fight back. Jesus concludes the day going into the Temple scouting it out. Jesus is obviously planning something, but, because of the late hour he decides to leave and wait for Monday.

Vv 12-14: Mark weaves together Jesus' visits to the Temple with this story of the fig tree, alternating between a visit to the Temple and this story. Ultimately, Mark will put both the fig tree and the Temple stories into context in Jesus' teaching in chapter 13 about what will happen to the Temple and Believers in times to come. It had to have been Jesus' intention to use the fig tree for a lesson, otherwise this story makes little sense and it would make even less sense for someone to record it, making it a type of parable. Jesus approaches a healthy tree full of leaves, looking for fruit; though, as Mark tells us, he had no reason to expect to find any fruit. Jesus' curse of the tree on not finding fruit seems like an unreasonably angry outburst, unless of course, we see it as a parable designed to teach us something. At this point Mark again becomes the brilliant storyteller, allowing us to chew on Jesus' words and actions as we follow him back into Jerusalem.

Vv 15-19: Like his entrance into the city, Jesus' demonstration in the Temple was a deliberate action meant to call out the Jewish leaders and get the public attention. It is important to remember the Temple was a massive complex of buildings and courtyards; there is no way Jesus drove all of the merchants out of the Temple. Rather, we should think of Jesus picking a visible location and throwing the merchants out of that area, even chasing after them as they ran out. Jesus' actions were meant to focus public attention on him as he spoke, as well as, ensuring the leadership would hear about it. A much larger display would have meant sure arrest by the Roman authorities who were patrolling the city looking to squash rebellion. That being said, it was a noteworthy display, which the authorities will notice (this action probably triggers the debates in chapter 12).

Jewish worship dictated that a special tax be paid annually for the support of the Temple (see, Ex. 30:11-16) and this tax was to be paid in a special coin. Roman imperial coins were considered to have idolatrous carvings (a picture of the goddess Roma) and had to be exchanged for coins fit for Jewish worship. In the same vein, it was impractical for pilgrims to bring animals with them for sacrifice, so it was necessary to maintain large numbers of animals so pilgrims would be able to have an appropriate sacrifice. Jesus is not reacting against these practices as such, here we must note he only goes after the sellers.

Jesus' actions achieve their goals, the leadership is determined to destroy him, while the public is enthralled by his teaching. Now we must ask, what Jesus was trying to teach in this protest.

Some commentators think that Jesus was engaging in a primarily political protest, recognizing that the Temple authorities were in bed with Rome against the common people or that these authorities were price gouging and getting rich through exploiting the Temple. Jesus' ministry has been entirely about God's reign, which includes approach government in a new way. This would mean there is inherently a social justice dimension to everything Jesus does, including this demonstration. Jesus is making a comment about exploiting the Temple for wealth; but, it is a secondary comment. Notice the two Old Testament quotes, Isaiah 56:7 talks of the necessity of God's house being dedicated to prayer, and Jeremiah 7:11 shows what humanity is doing to the Temple. In order to make money, those profiting from the Temple set up shop in the Temple, making it a market rather than a house of prayer. Jesus is calling us to remember our first responsibility is toward God, if that means going out of our way to make God's house and worship more sacred, so be it. This passage is about God's reign, with the emphasis on God not the simple the new kingdom. Jesus has now thrown down the gauntlet, he intends to initiate a new focus on God and this will run contrary to the existing forms, how are those in Jerusalem (and you) going to react?

Vv 20-25: Jesus has expected to see fruit in the Temple, but, he was disappointed just as he was with the tree. Now the tree has withered from the roots, it is completely destroyed, will the Temple follow. The tree clearly is meant to help us understand the Temple, like the trees leaves, it has all the trappings of spiritual fruit, and exactly as much fruit. Jesus has cursed the tree and there is nothing left. What does God make of the Temple, is it cursed, will he kill it also? Mark started the story immediately before the Temple and concluded it immediately after so we would ask these questions.

The rather abrupt transition to a discourse on prayer somewhat obscures the message of the fig tree, but does reveal Jesus' mindset. The death of the fig tree is not impressive for the one who believes and prays; even impossible actions like a mountain being picked up and hurled into the sea is possible in prayer. Jesus is commenting on the fact that creation is God's and in connecting to God in a true relationship (through prayer) leads to the accomplishing feats otherwise impossible in nature. We should be quick to remember here that prayer is far more than petitioning God to give us something, it involves a two-way communication with God growing toward a deep unhindered relationship. We can connect this to the Temple protest immediately prior, where Jesus called for the Temple to be a house of prayer. Jesus certainly seems to be implying that while Israel is looking for salvation through political measures, true salvation and restoration comes through prayer. Jesus also connects prayer to love in verse 25 indicating that prayer must include a genuine concern for our position in society, working to heal other relationships not simply attempting to improve our relationship with God. To curse something was to remove it from God's blessing, Jesus has cursed the fig tree and it died, what will happen if the Temple (and our lives) are likewise removed from God's sustaining blessing; there is only one way to prevent this, improving our relationship with God through prayer.

Questions

1. Jesus' demonstrations in his entry and the Temple were impressive but easily overlooked, do you think you would have noticed them or missed them?
2. Those walking with Jesus erupted in song what song would you sing in that procession, why?
3. When you think about Jesus' demonstration in the Temple do you see it as a social change toward equality or a restoration of spiritual space?
4. How do you maintain God's worship space and time as sacred, are there ways you can make it more sacred?
5. What does your prayer life look like and How can it grow and produce fruit, and not wither from the roots and come under curse?

Chapter 11: part 2

²⁷They again came to Jerusalem and while walking around in the Temple, the Chief-priests, Scribes, and Elders approached him. ²⁸They said to him, "By what authority do you act? Who gave you the authority to do these things?" ²⁹Jesus responded to them, "I will ask you one question, answer me and I will tell you by what authority I act. ³⁰John's baptism, was it from heaven or humanity, answer me!" ³¹They discussed together, "If we say from heaven, he will ask, 'why don't you believe me?' ³²But can we say, 'From humanity?'" –fearing the crowds because all believed John was a prophet.- ³³So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." Jesus replied, "I will not tell you on what authority I act."

^{12:1}Jesus began to speak to them in a parable, "A man planted a vineyard; he built a fence, dug a winepress, and built a tower. Then he leased it to farmers and went abroad. ²At the appropriate time, he sent a servant to the farmers to collect his portion of the fruit of the vineyard. ³But they beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ⁴Then he sent them another slave; but they hit him in the head and treated him with contempt. ⁵He sent another, whom they killed, and many others, some of whom they beat, and others they killed. ⁶Yet he had one beloved son, and he sent him to them last, saying, "They will honor my son." ⁷The farmers said to one another, "This is the heir. Come on, we will kill him. Then the inheritance will be ours." ⁸They grabbed him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. ⁹What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy those farmers and give the vineyard to others. ¹⁰Have you not read in the Scriptures:

"The stone rejected by the builders has become the keystone. ¹¹The Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes."

¹²Now they sought to seize him, though they feared the crowds, because they knew he spoke the parable against them. But, they left and went away.

¹³Then they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to snare him in his words. ¹⁴They came up and said to him, "Teacher, we know you are genuine and not concerned about people's ideas and do not show favoritism to anyone. Rather, you teach God's true path. Is it legal to pay Caesar's taxes or not? Do we shell out or not?" ¹⁵Recognizing their hypocrisy Jesus said, "Why do you test me? Get me a denarius so I can see it." ¹⁶They gave him one, and he said to them. "Whose picture is on this and whose inscription?" They responded, "Caesar's." ¹⁷Jesus said to them, "Give Caesar's things to Caesar and those things which are God's give to God." They were amazed by him.

Commentary

This section begins the lengthy exchange between Jesus and the religious leaders of the Temple. Just as there are many Christian denominations today, there were many branches of Judaism in Jesus' time, and in chapter 12 Mark shows Jesus' debates with some of these groups. As Jesus encounters each of these groups we see how his theology differs from each of the groups. Mark presents these discussions as challenges showing Jesus' superiority in understanding the Jewish scriptures and theology and rhetorical ability.

Vv 27-33: It is now Tuesday, and again Jesus returns to Jerusalem and the Temple, but, this time to teach. As Jesus is teaching a group representing the various leaders within Judaism approach Jesus to question him. We said in the previous section that Jesus was acting, at least in part, to call attention to himself and draw the authorities into confrontation. It appears that Jesus' plan has worked, the phrase "these things" in verse 28 seems to relate back at least to the display in the Temple the day before and maybe to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Jesus' accusers are not simply asking Jesus about his credentials, they are also implying that they did not give Jesus authority to act. The group which has approached Jesus is responding to Jesus' gauntlet by saying they are in control of the Temple area (and perhaps Jerusalem) and that any religious activity within this space must meet with their blessing. The question implies that the only legitimate authority within the Temple is those currently operating it, and since they did not give Jesus permission to act he had no legitimate authority to do so. It is also important that this group does not approach Jesus in private; Jesus is in the Temple courtyard, the authorities want this confrontation to be very public. The authorities are trying to maintain power over Jewish religious life and to do so they want to remind the crowd around Jesus that they control the Temple, he does not. Even if Jesus says his authority comes from God, these authorities will ask him to prove it, while reminding the crowd that God has put them in charge of the Temple. In their minds, at best Jesus loses credibility and potentially he does something to incriminate himself allowing them to imprison him. The question becomes a very well-conceived trap.

Masterful barely describes Jesus' response; not simply because John the Baptizer would provide him with the ability to claim God's authority, but, because invoking this name wins back the crowd. It was a common move for Jewish teachers to answer a question with a question, presumably the counter-question would be somewhat leading and however it was answered would help provide context for the answer to the first question.²² It is not unreasonable for the authorities to consent to answer Jesus' question (though in retrospect it is a momentous misstep). The mention of John takes us back to chapter 1 where Mark explicitly reveals John's role in the coming of God's reign. From our perspective Jesus is identifying himself at least on par with the prophet who was to come before and prepare the way for God's Selected One. Given John's message that God was about to send someone greater than himself, we can here see Jesus taking up that mantle. Though we see this implication in the text, there is no way anyone around Jesus that day could have been aware of this implication. Mark has provided us with far more resources for understanding this message than anyone in the Temple that day would have had.

It is obvious from the context that the authorities did not believe in John's baptism (or at least had serious questions about it); but, they were not about to betray this attitude to the crowd. They are forced into a non-answer, providing Jesus with a way out of their question. It is

²² For instance someone asks, "Are you a liberal or conservative?" I respond, "Well, is X a conservative or liberal?" How the person responds to my question will give me an insight on how best to respond to the initial question.

probable that Jesus would not have wanted to reveal himself as the Selected One except on his own terms, and was looking for a way out of such a public confrontation about his authority and identity. Jesus now maintains some level of anonymity with the crowd and delays the final clash with the Temple authorities. As an added perk, by not conceding that John's power came from God, the Temple authorities have driven a wedge between themselves and the crowd, while pushing them closer to Jesus who identified with John and his message.

12:1-12: This parable is apparently directly addressed to the group who came to interrogate Jesus and possibly followed close on the heels of the previous dialogue. While the parable is unique to Jesus, it does follow themes developed in Isaiah 5. In that passage, Israel is God's vineyard, but, because it does not produce fruit God will come to destroy the vineyard. Religious leaders familiar with that passage would be very quick to make the connection when Jesus began to tell his parable. Remember Isaiah predicts destruction for an unproductive people, Jesus' authority has just been called into question and he has aligned himself with John the baptizer in prophetic ministry. For the authorities standing around Jesus this parable would suddenly be seen as his attempt at a prophetic oracle.

The scene of the parable would have been common to those listening, a wealthy man buys land develops it and leases it to tenets (this system of tenet farming was abundant in 1st century Judea). Grape vines take several years to produce, so naturally the landlord would have to wait a long time for a share of the harvest (the rent due him). During this time the tenets seem to have grown comfortable and adopted the belief that they were entitled to own the land and manage it how they saw fit. When the owner sends for the rent these tenets have no difficulty beating the slave sent to collect. In our culture we have such a hatred for slavery that we tend to believe that slaves were always mistreated and considered inferior. However, a slave of a wealthy man (especially one sent on such an important mission) would have had serious clout. It would have been a major offense to beat the man sent to collect the money and a serious insult to the landowner. While we might understand the landowner sending one (or two?) more slave after the first one is mistreated, it is unrealistic to expect him to continue to send slaves as he does. It is particularly difficult to imagine him sending more after the tenets murder one (verse 5). This rather unrealistic detail will add to the punch at the end of the story because it depicts a landowner who is taking unreasonable steps to appeal to the tenets, they earned their destruction long before it comes.

The landlord's decision to send his son is completely irresponsible based on the pattern of evidence, except if we take into account his desire to show mercy toward and help the tenets who have behaved so badly. As careful readers of Mark we automatically see the words "beloved son" and reflect back to 1:11 and 9:7 where the phrase is used of Jesus. We understand that Jesus is inserting himself into the story at this point and describing what will happen to him in the near future. However, for those who were standing around Jesus (with the possible exception of the disciples) this allusion would have been far less clear, since they would not have been at either event where Jesus was called God's son. The leaders Jesus was

addressing would have understood that Jesus was placing himself in the story as one sent to collect from the tenants, and, they may have guessed that he was calling himself the “son”; but, he just as well could be represented by one of the slaves.

The death of the son is brutal and ignoble, the tenants do not even show a basic level of human decency, rather, their greed has completely corrupted them. It is not clear how these tenants expected to gain control of the vineyard in killing the son (nor does it need to be); their motive is to gain something for themselves and any means is sufficient to do so. It may not have been Jesus’ intent, but, the lack of a definite plan does seem to make the tenants seem desperate and hopelessly ignorant; they are desperate for power which makes them shortsighted. The tenants have forgotten about the landlord and his return will signal not their deaths, but, their utter destruction. The use of “destruction” rather than death helps us to understand the parable as an allegory with God’s final judgment in mind, because this judgment will not end in physical death, but, in eternal destruction. This language should really hit home and allow us to see the picture Jesus has painted.

Jesus ends the parable quoting from Psalm 118:22-23, which does not precisely fit the context, though, the message is clear enough. There is no real reversal of fortunes in the parable as in the quote, those who are rejected are not vindicated. However, the quote goes beyond the parable filling in what happens after the story. The term used in the quote is literally “headstone” a stone of prominence in a building. The one rejected by those in charge of picking out stones will become the greatest of all the stones in the building. Those who the leadership have rejected will be vindicated by God and set in the most prominent position. These verses have become a common Christian expression for Jesus as the one whose rejection was the greatest and whose vindication the most far reaching. In this context, though, it is hard to imagine Jesus talking exclusively of himself. Rather, it seems that Jesus is talking about all those who have been God’s messengers to Israel (with the son taking a prominent position as in the parable). It is easy to see the leadership’s disgust with Jesus at this point, Jesus has accused them of gross misconduct as those invested with management of the vineyard. At this point the Jewish leaders look for a chance to destroy Jesus, but, because he has ingratiated himself with the crowds this might be a difficult feat.

Vv 13-17: After their first failure to turn the crowds against Jesus, we see a group of Pharisees come to challenge Jesus’ teaching. The question may sound simple but if Jesus answers that taxes are not necessary then he will be executed for political treason and if he answers that taxes should be paid he will lose support in the crowd. Even though the crowd remains in the background it is very important to the story, it is important that Jesus retain the public support he has gained. Jesus’ escape from the trap is amazing, not only does he maintain his own standing he makes the Pharisees who question him look bad. As we said above the Roman coinage, bearing the face of the emperor (or the goddess Roma) and the title “son of the divine Augustus” was considered idolatry by many Jews, and here are some Pharisees with these coins in the Temple. Jesus does not have Roman coins but his accusers do, this is a PR win for Jesus

who can maintain the loyalty of the crowd. As for his answer, that is ambiguous. What is Caesar's and what is God's? Jesus gives no real answer, other than the obvious give Caesar his coins. Some scholars argue that Jesus is adopting a policy of appeasement toward Rome, allowing them political control while maintaining love toward God. Others see this as merely lip-service to Rome, because Jesus understood that everything was God's therefore nothing was Caesar's. Jesus calls for people to return or give back what is due to them, the question becomes what do your loyalties to God require from you and then what belongs to Caesar? As so often happens Jesus leaves us with an open-ended question, we are meant to think about how we support earthly rulers and regimes. We are meant to consider how far we support the culture around us, and at what point we are giving what is God's to Caesar. One thing that is important here is that this is not the most exhaustive answer to the question, Mark wants us to see that Jesus was continually escaping from traps designed to incriminate him. This response is Jesus cunningly avoiding a dangerous situation, and thwarting those who sought to kill him. Thus proving himself to be loyal to God while his enemies were only after political gain.

Questions

1. Jesus hides behind John the Baptizer when his authority is questioned, why do you think he did not give the authorities a straight answer?
2. Jesus' response to the authorities puts them in a politically sensitive position, how should we handle cases where our convictions lead us against prevailing attitudes?
3. Jesus' parable calls out the Jewish leadership for greed and ambition, do we ever fall into this trap in the Church, if so how, and how can we prevent it from happening?
4. How do make sure Jesus remains the keystone in your life and not the stone rejected?
5. What does giving back to God and Caesar mean for your own life, how do you balance these, and how do you ensure your loyalty to God?

Chapter 12

¹⁸Then the Sadducees came up to him, these are the ones who believe there will be no resurrection, and they asked, ¹⁹“Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man should die leaving a wife with no children, then his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. ²⁰There were seven brothers, and the first was married, but, died without leaving children. ²¹The second married her, and also died without raising offspring, and the third likewise. ²²in fact, none of the seven had children, last of all the woman died. ²³In the resurrection whose wife will she be? Because all seven married her.” ²⁴Jesus responded, “Are you not lead astray because you do not know the Scriptures or the God’s power? ²⁵For when the dead rise they will not married or consent to marriage, but, will be like angels in heaven. As for the rising of the dead, have you not read in the scroll of Moses, the part where God said to him, “I am the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” ²⁷God is not God of the dead, but, the God of the living, this is why you are lead astray.”

²⁸Then one of the Scribes came and heard them disputing, and seeing he answered well, he asked, “What is the most important commandment of all?” ²⁹Jesus responded, “the most important is, *‘Listen Israel, the Lord our God is Lord alone.* ³⁰*You must love the Lord God with all your heart, with all your life, with all your mind, and with all your strength.*’ ³¹The second is, *‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”* ³²The Scribe replied, “Good teacher, you have spoken the truth, there is only one and no other beside God. ³³To love God with all your heart, with all your understanding, and to love your neighbor as yourself is better than all burnt-offerings and sacrifices.” ³⁴Jesus, seeing he answered wisely, said to him, “You are not far away from the God’s reign.” No one dared to question him again.

³⁵Jesus responded saying to those teaching in the Temple, “Why is it, the Scribes call the Selected One David’s son? ³⁶David himself said, through the Holy Spirit, *‘The Lord said to my lord sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.’* ³⁷David himself calls him “Lord” how can he then be his son?” A large crowd heard gladly listened.

³⁸While teaching he said, “Beware, the desires of the Scribes who walk around in their best robes, and are greeted in the markets. ³⁹They take the place of honor in the synagogues and at dinners. ⁴⁰They devour widows’ houses, and use long prayers for appearance. They will receive the harshest judgment.” ⁴¹Then he sat opposite the treasury watching how the crowds gave money to the treasury, and many of the wealthy gave much. ⁴²One poor widow came and gave two small copper coins, worth a penny. ⁴³Calling his disciples he said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has given much more than all those giving to the treasury. ⁴⁴For all of them gave from their abundance, but, she gave in her poverty all she had to live on.”

Commentary

This section continues the dispute between Jesus and the Temple leadership, as new groups approach Jesus trying to stump him. Mark seems to be emphasizing that Jesus was not accepted by any party within Judaism; rather, each party tried, unsuccessfully, to undermine him. These encounters help us to understand that Jesus’ teachings were radical and made all of the parties within Judaism nervous. Jesus’ continued ability to win the argument and the crowd

reveals that his is the true teaching. The section ends when Jesus reverses the roles and puts a question to the authorities they cannot answer. Which is brilliantly coupled with another lesson for the disciples on humility.

Vv 18-27: The Sadducees were a conservative Jewish party that only accepted the authority of the Pentateuch. They came to be associated with the Jewish elites and the Temple authorities and it is probable the chief-priests Mark refers to were Sadducees. Resurrection had become a major point of separation for the Sadducees, who believed a person only lived on through children and reputation.²³ As above, the goal of the Sadducees question is to make Jesus look bad in front of the crowds. The story builds from the teaching in Deuteronomy 25:5-6, where a brother is commanded to help his brother's name (reputation) live on by providing children to his name. The Sadducees are pointing out that their concept of eternal life is found in the Law. The story and question presented to Jesus reflect a clever attempt to sidestep the real issue. The Sadducees want to establish that there is no resurrection of the dead because the opponent cannot determine how life after death will look. Restated the question looks like this, "Because in a previous life all seven brothers were legally married to this woman if you cannot deduce who is her right husband then there can be no resurrection." Presented in this way the Sadducees' position looks rather foolish, and betrays that they are simply constructing an artificial difficulty to diminish Jesus in the eyes of the crowd. That being said, the question of resurrection is still important and thought the Sadducees have stacked the deck with their question, Jesus must provide a suitable answer because of the crowd. The public nature of the confrontation means Jesus must answer both the question which was asked (whose wife will she be) and the implied question (prove the doctrine of resurrection).

Jesus' answer is twofold, first addressing the question of marriage, then citing his foundation for belief in the resurrection. Jesus points out the blatant assumption in the Sadducees question, that we will have the same relationships after the resurrection as we did prior. "Whose wife" assumes marriage exists; Jesus points out the angels are not married and humanity will have no need of marriage either. Does Jesus' answer imply that there are no genders in the resurrection, or, that marriage is primarily about reproduction and without reproduction marriage is unnecessary? No and No. Jesus is simply stating (albeit in a somewhat cloaked way) that in the resurrection human relationships will not be the same as they are now. If love among everyone is perfected, do not all our relationships look different not only marriage. Those married for years might have special difficult with this verse, but, Jesus is not saying that your relationship with your spouse will be lessened he is saying it will be strengthened. Your love for and relationship with your spouse will grow, though it may look different from how it looks here in this life. The Sadducees said, "Our world does not work in that world so that world must not exist." Jesus has responded, "If you believe in God's power you can understand that the next world works on its own terms."

²³ It is possible the Sadducees believed in Sheol, the region of the dead in the Old Testament. This was a place of vague existence and though it sounds like an afterlife, it is far from a belief in resurrection and full life after death.

Now that Jesus has appropriately dispensed with the false question, he can answer the real question about the resurrection. Jesus goes to an unexpected source for his defense of the resurrection Exodus 3. The brilliant part of this answer is that everyone is aware that the Sadducees consider Exodus authoritative, undermining their authority as scholars. The difficulty is that it is not immediately apparent how this passage proves resurrection. Exodus 3:6, 15, 16 where the phrase “I am the God...” is used, God is revealing the Divine name to Moses. God’s name we are told is related to “I AM” and thus being and life. What Jesus is inferring is that those who live in God constantly have being or life because that is an essential characteristic of God, which is passed on to humanity. Why didn’t Jesus spell out this point more fully so it would be easy to understand? He may have, while Mark condensed the point for the readers, or, perhaps Jesus wanted those who heard the saying to truly think through what it means to serve the Living God.

Vv 28-34: Mark seems to establish a slightly different scenario for this question. The previous questions had groups of people coming to Jesus posing questions designed to trap him in his own words; here we have a lone Scribe, who presumably has been listening in the crowd, asking Jesus a genuine question of faith. The Question the Scribe asks Jesus is a very important one, whatever one considers to be the greatest commandment will be the starting point for theology. Thus the Scribe is asking Jesus what is the best place to begin understanding God.

There is scholarly debate as to how much of Jesus’ answer was unique and how much was understood by other Rabbis of the time. Many other Rabbis said things similar to Jesus’ response to the question, but, none seem to have landed exactly where Jesus landed. Part of what makes Jesus’ answer unique is that he takes it straight from the Old Testament, directly quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18. This specific combination is unique, but, what it represents is not. When we look at the Ten Commandments we find two tables, the first representing our relationship with (or love of) God, and the second our love of others (neighbor). In essence Jesus has spotted the Ten Commandments in two passages and merged them into one saying. There is one slight difference between Jesus’ quotation and Deuteronomy, Jesus adds “all your mind”. This expansion of the original is not a big deal; both Deuteronomy and Jesus’ quotation are breaking down human life into parts and saying each part must be given to God, Jesus simply breaks the categories down differently. As we see in the Scribe’s reply to Jesus the wording is not important so long as one understands that the entirety of one’s self must be subjected to God.

We see in the Scribes response to Jesus that Jesus does have supporters among the Temple authorities, however few and far between. The Scribe also shows that those who are willing to listen to Jesus will understand that he has spoken well and rightly answered the questions put to him, both the traps and the honest ones. If all of the Temple authorities were like this Scribe, asking Jesus legitimate questions, then they all would be near God’s reign. Instead, they attempt to trap Jesus and harm his reputation with the crowds. This proves that these authorities do not care about finding God, they are only concerned with maintaining their

authority and preserving their way of thinking. The Scribe was interested in knowing God, and when Jesus responded that loving God was the priority the Scribe found a kindred spirit and was able to take Jesus' comments one step further in saying that loving God was more important than the physical signs of worship. This story leaves us wanting more, wondering what became of this Scribe and how he fit into the trial and execution of Jesus. Does he go on to play a role in the developing Church, or, does he refrain from joining Jesus' followers? We are not told, but, it is the kind of questioning that he purposes that will ultimately lead a person to find Jesus and God.

Vv 35-37: Jesus turns the tables in this paragraph by asking the difficult and leading question. Quoting from Psalm 110:1, Jesus restructures the debate surrounding the Selected One, by asking, "Who is he". The fact that the question is left without answer has two effects. Within the immediate context it shows Jesus as superior to the other religious leaders because he could answer their questions, while they were unable to answer his. Mark is also asking his readers to consider Jesus' question in light of Bartimaeus calling Jesus "Son of David" in 10:47, and the crowd's reaction to Jesus' triumphal entry. Jesus' opponents are silent, but, they probably are aware that Jesus is saying the Selected One is not simply the new David coming to restore Israel's political autonomy, but, greater than David, coming to initiate God's reign on earth. Jesus' question asks us to consider what God's purpose is for the Selected One and how we might have to adjust our own beliefs and attitudes in light of calling him lord. In the immediate context, Jews were expecting a second David who would restore Israel's monarchy, this is the original meaning of "Son of David"; Jesus is asking them to consider what it means that the Selected One is greater than David.

It is also probable that Jesus is attempting to force the leadership to at least consider his actions in light of this verse. It is likely that Jesus wants the leadership to remember the demonstrations which lead to this dialogue, particularly his entry into the city. He wants them to consider whether or not he is claiming to be the Selected One. It is also worth noting that modern scholarship recognizes that David probably did not write Psalm 110, as verse 36 claims. This is a moot point, though, because Jesus' hearers believe David wrote the Psalm and that it spoke of the Selected One. Jesus' argument is in no way hampered by the authorship of the Psalm (let alone scholarly interpretation of it) because it was directed to a specific group based on their understanding.

Vv 38-44: These verse may seem somewhat disconnected from the above, but, in reality they play well off of the discussions we have seen. Jesus is asking the people what kind of leadership they want to follow, by saying the current leadership is interested in self-importance. The current leadership is worried about looking good, rather than giving like the widow. The current leadership wants to maintain power, in the proper seats at the table, rather than, giving to the work of God as the widow. The widow despite her poverty, gave to God's work when she could easily have saved for herself. The others gave what was left over after saving for themselves, at least this was Jesus' point. The leaders worry first about themselves and how

they appear, the widow trusts God to provide for her. Where the leadership wants to devour the widow's house, she hands it over to God. The leadership should be looking out for God and the widow, but, they are only looking out for themselves. This was evident in the power-plays they tried to make in trapping Jesus. They were interested in maintaining power by making Jesus look bad, not in truly listening to God. They do their job for the respect it garners not because of a desire to work with God. The woman becomes the example of giving everything, something the leadership should be emulating, and the disciples and the reader are asked to ponder who they will emulate.

Questions

1. Take some time and reflect about the idea of being united to the Living God and what life and death mean when united to such a God?
2. What does "Love God and love neighbor" mean in your life, how do you live out this commandment?
3. In chapters 11 & 12 we see three types of question, those from the leadership are meant to ensnare and win an argument, that from the Scribe is meant to learn and grow, and that from Jesus is meant to convict and grow, how do you approach a theological debate, what do your questions say about you?
4. How do you avoid being like the Scribes and using your place in the Church as a boon to your self-worth, how do you maintain proper perspective?
5. How do you ensure that you respond to God not simply in your abundance and wealth, but, also in your poverty and scarcity?

Chapter 13: part 1

^{13:1}As they were leaving the Temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Teacher, look, what impressive stones, what marvelous buildings!” ²Jesus responded, “You see these wondrous buildings? Not one stone will be left on another, it will be completely destroyed.”

³When they were seated at the Mount of Olives across facing the Temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him, ⁴“Tell us, when will this happen? What will be the sign that all these things are about to happen?” ⁵Jesus answered them, “Watch, that no one deceives you. ⁶Many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am him’ and lead many astray. ⁷When you should hear about wars, and reports of wars, do not be frightened. This will happen, but it is not yet the end. ⁸Because nation will be raised against nation and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be earthquakes in many places and famines, but these are the beginnings of the labor pains. ⁹Watch yourselves, some will hand you over to the councils, and you will be beaten in the synagogues, and you will stand before governors and rulers and on my account, you will testify before them. ¹⁰First, the Victory Proclamation must be proclaimed to all the nations. ¹¹When they lead you in and hand you over, do not be anxious about what you will say; rather, say those things which are given to you in that time, for you are not speaking, but the Holy Spirit. ¹²Brother will hand brother over to death, and father, children! Children shall rise against parents and have them killed. ¹³You will be hated by all because of my name; but the one who endures to the end will be saved.

¹⁴But, when you see the appalling sacrilege standing where it should not be, -reader understand- then those in Judea must run to the mountains. ¹⁵The one on the rooftop should not even go down into the house to get anything. ¹⁶The one in the field should not even go back to get a cloak. ¹⁷Alas, for those who are in labor or nursing when this happens. ¹⁸Pray that it is not winter! ¹⁹Because at that time there will be greater suffering than has been from the beginning of creation until now, or will ever be seen after. ²⁰Unless the Lord should cut short that time there would be no one left; yet, for the sake of those chosen, whom God chose the time will be shortened. ²¹If someone should say to you, ‘Look here is the Selected One’ or ‘over there’ do not believe it. ²²For false Messiahs and false prophets shall arise, and with signs and wonders shall mislead many, including, if possible, those chosen. ²³Be alert! I have told you everything beforehand.

Commentary

After a long day disputing with various groups of the Temple leadership, Jesus and his disciples leave the Temple complex as Jesus continues teaching. This chapter is very difficult for many people because it reads like apocalyptic literature.²⁴ The dark and dire nature of the material combined with the metaphorical language and frequent allusions, make this chapter

²⁴ Apocalypse- means “to reveal” and is generally associated with Revelation in the New Testament and Daniel in the Old Testament. However, there are many Jewish and Christian books which fall into this genre. As we will see below, many moderns have difficulty with this type of literature because they do not understand what the author is trying to do within the work, and thus, miss the message. This is especially apparent in the wild theories about the book of Revelation. While Mark 13 is not an Apocalypse it does have some similar features.

difficult to understand. As we go through the next two sections the reader must try to focus on the details of Mark. This means both fighting the urge to bring in unrelated (and later texts) such as Revelation. The nature of apocalyptic literature feeds our desire for secrets and conspiracies, we must suppress such desires to understand what Jesus is saying, while paradoxically being content when we cannot understand.

Vv 1-2: While at first glance this seems like a routine change of scenery, which Mark uses to introduce a new section, on consideration we find it is so much more. Jesus has been engaged with the Temple and religious authorities since he arrived in Jerusalem, now he is leaving. Jesus is withdrawing from the Temple after being harassed and rejected by the leadership and he will not return. The disciple observes the magnificent edifice of the Temple, but, Jesus has left and he knows that without him this edifice will crumble. Ezekiel 10 & 11 paint a similar picture; God abandoning the Temple and residing on the mountain east of the city. Jesus entered the Temple to point out the need for reform and was met with traps and accusations from the ruling elite. Now Jesus has left and though the Temple still looks magnificent without Jesus it is like a hollowed out oak tree that will topple in the next wind storm.

Though the Temple was literally destroyed by the Roman Tenth Legion in ad 70, we do not need to read Jesus' words so literally. He is talking of the breakdown of Temple worship when its center is rejected. No matter how impressive the structure is without the proper focus the structure will be destroyed. If this is true, then there is definitely no reason to believe that Mark put these words into Jesus' mouth as he was writing this book watching Jerusalem and the Temple be destroyed.

Vv 3-13: The disciples' question while sitting on the Mount of Olives refers back to Jesus' words about the destruction of the Temple; they are asking, "When will the Temple be destroyed". This means the rest of the chapter is in some way an answer to this question and any interpretation which fails to answer this question is invalid. The two sets of brothers are concerned about tradition Jewish Temple worship and its end and it is this to which Jesus responds. Given this question and Jesus' attempt to address this question, unless it is clearly stated by Mark or at least strongly presupposed in the text, we are interpreting the passage irresponsibly if we understand it to be referring to the end of the world. After all, the Temple was destroyed in ad 70 and thus Jesus' response is directed at that event. This, however, does not mean Jesus' message does not have a more universal scope particularly the message of "hope in troubled times", but, it does mean that it is not set against the backdrop of the earth's final days. Notice the use of "these things" in verse 4 which refers back specifically to Jesus' comments in verse 2. Jesus has publically pronounced destruction for the Temple, now, as has been his practice, he will describe this pronouncement in greater detail for his disciples in private, though, only four of them.

The beginning of Jesus' answer, verse 5, is specifically enlightening; normally we would associate war and natural disaster with the chaos of destruction. Jesus, though, tells his disciples to remain calm through such events because they are not a sign of the end. The

cataclysmic events that most people will associate with the approaching “end” (destruction of the Temple) are not and should not cause the disciples extra grief. Rather, the disciples must be vigilant not to be deceived by the false claims during these times, claims of the coming end. Many will look at Jesus’ use of birth language to say the end is starting, however, this language means that a birth will happen, not that the baby is moving. Think Braxton-Hicks or false-labor, more than the early stages of labor. The emphasis of the statement is on “beginning” not on “labor pains”; Jesus is noting these events are signs a new birth will happen not that it has begun. Likewise there are going to be false messiahs (those coming “in my name”), but, this is the normal world we live in. There is always suffering and death caused by the natural world and human sin, there are also those claiming authority which does not belong to them, even Jesus’ name, “Selected One.”

In verse 9 we see a change, notice the repetition of “Watch”, this is exactly like verse 5 only here Jesus is warning the disciples’ directly, where verse 5 is a general warning. Jesus is now dictating a warning specifically for his disciples, he is saying, “While everyone is watching these calamities, here is what is going to happen to you.” Notice how Jesus does not advance in time between verse 5 and verse 9, this combined with the “watch” means these are simultaneous events. While the false labor of natural disasters and warfare is happening, the disciples shall be criminalized, and persecuted the same way Jesus has been. In other words, as the world waits for the destruction of the Temple, it will be business as usual for the disciples, they will be hated and persecuted. During this whole time the Victory Proclamation of Jesus will be proclaimed to the whole world. This proclamation is part of the persecution, the persecution provides means for the proclamation. This will be a tough time for believers, even natural familial bonds will be broken; the disciples’ most intimate relatives might betray them into the hands of those persecuting them. This kind of treatment must be expected and must be endured, there is no avoiding it; rather, it will continue until the world changes. This is a daunting task, but, Jesus does remind us that the Holy Spirit will be present at the most difficult times. This is said not only to give the disciples comfort, but also, to keep them humble. In the toughest times it will be the Holy Spirit that guides your thoughts and actions. The Holy Spirit is with you, so you must place your hope and confidence in the Holy Spirit.

It has sometimes been understood that Jesus meant that both he could return, his message had to reach every country on earth. We have seen this bragged about and lamented among mission agencies, either trumpeting their impact or trying to raise support. These mission agencies do good work, but, that is an inappropriate reading of verse 10. Jesus is referring back to 11:17, and God being worshiped by all nations. Before the Temple will be destroyed all nations must be prepared to worship God, thus, they must hear God’s message. But since we cannot identify what Jesus means by “nation” or what it means to “proclaim” the message we have to understand this phrase more metaphorically. Rather, it speaks to the disciples continuing Jesus’ mission despite the persecution they will face. As they are put into difficult situations, and because they are in these situations, the world will hear their message and be prepared to worship God in a new way.

Vv 14-23: After telling the disciples what not to look for and what they ought to be focused on, Jesus finally gives an answer to the disciples' question. The disciples are to look for the appalling sacrilege, and when they see it, they will know that the Temple will soon collapse. Unfortunately, this answer seems to produce far more questions than answers, because Jesus is rather vague and provides few if any details. However, the few details given in direct answer to the disciples is a benefit to us because we are free to focus on Jesus' instructions for the intervening period immediately before.

The biggest question in the paragraph is, what is the appalling sacrilege? The phrase "appalling sacrilege" comes from Daniel (Dn. 11:31, 12:11) referring to the abolition of the sacrifice by gentiles and the establishing of an idol in the Temple. Such an event occurred in 167 b.c. when Antiochus erected an altar to Zeus in the Temple (1 Macc. 1:54-59, 2 Macc. 6:2) and stopped burnt offerings.²⁵ Jesus is using the idea of Daniel and probably the memory of Antiochus to point to future events. Did Jesus have a specific event in mind when he said this, or, did he understand the Temple could not exist on its present course and one day would be desecrated? It is impossible to know. Mark's addition of "reader understand" may even betray he does not know what Jesus meant, or, it may be that there was a common understanding about Jesus' words and he does not need to elaborate more. Many scholars believe that Mark is looking back on, or forward to, the destruction of the Temple by Rome in ad 70, and that Jesus' words indicate the standards of the Roman legion, which were considered idolatrous and not allowed in Jerusalem. In this theory Mark has just heard of the events surrounding the Temple's destruction, or, he knows of the siege of Jerusalem and can see what is about to take place. This theory means that Mark includes the warnings of verses 14-23 to give context to Jesus' words not as real warnings. If Mark had written with this siege in mind it would have been far too late for these warnings of Jesus to have been useful to anyone in Judea.

The fact that Roman legions inside or surrounding Jerusalem's walls would have been little use as a warning for people to run has lead others to conclude that Jesus (and Mark) was not referring to the siege as the appalling sacrilege, after all, the purpose of a siege is to prevent people from running away. These scholars point to an event which happened prior to the Roman legions going to war with Judea. A group of Zealots (a political/religious group in Judea) took control of the Temple in ad 67 and were eventually killed within the Temple complex. Such bloodshed was naturally seen as defiling the Temple, and was among the reasons Rome marched on Judea. This event could have been in Mark's mind as he wrote (and Jesus' mind?), providing an event where if someone knew Jesus' words it would afford them time to leave before the destruction of the Temple. Such a view allows for Jesus' warnings to be valuable to anyone who knew his words through oral tradition, because they could flee before the Roman

²⁵ It is impossible to cover here, but, most scholars believe that these verses in Daniel refer specifically to this event in 167 b.c., and possibly were written close to the time it happened. The history of the composition of Daniel is a very complex subject and anyone interested should read a commentary on Daniel, particularly Temper Longman III, *Daniel* in the New International Version Application Commentary (NIVAC) series.

legions came and Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed.²⁶ No matter which (if either) of these events Mark (and Jesus) has in mind, the point is that the Temple has rejected God's Selected One and was destroyed. The Temple ceased to function as the Temple because it was no longer the space that God inhabited. This is the message of Ezekiel 10-11 that the Temple was not serving its purpose so God left and the Temple became simply a building; Now history is repeating itself and the Temple will again be destroyed.

The idea of flight in such a situation is natural, Jesus wants people to understand that as in 167 b.c., this coming event will be bad people will want to flee. Notice that those fleeing are "they" and not "you" this warning is for those throughout Judea not specifically the disciples; the disciples are warned but the warning is for everyone. Does this mean they are to spread the warning as part of their proclaiming? Notice also, the call to prayer in verse 18 is directed at the disciples and not a general call to prayer. The disciples are meant to pray, pray for the safety of those very people who are rejecting Jesus and bringing the destruction of their beloved Temple and city. Jesus is not necessarily including the disciples in any of these trials related to the destruction of the Temple, however, they are called to pray for those going through them. The suffering of verse 19 should not be read literally (we can never compare the suffering of one group against another), but, is a reference to Daniel 12:1 and means intense suffering for those going through the situation. Despite the intensity of this suffering, Jesus provides some comfort, the suffering will be short-lived. The "chosen" reminds us that Israel is God's chosen people. For Mark and the other New Testament authors, Israel meant people of God, not political Israel or even cultural Judaism, and thus included Gentile Christians. Because God has chosen this people the suffering will not be prolonged. This all is reminiscent of Genesis 18 and God's protection of Lot and his family at the destruction of Sodom. The people has rejected God and will suffer because of that; however, God will provide for the chosen during the suffering.

Jesus then turns again to false-prophets and false teachings. He has reminded the disciples that God is with them through the suffering and will even ease the suffering on their accounts, now they must focus on remaining faithful. The disciples want to know what will happen, Jesus wants them concerned with remaining faithful. Faithfulness will be rewarded in salvation, and it is the most important thing. The disciples cannot get caught up in what is going on around them, or in the messages they hear; rather, they must stay true to Jesus' words and his message, because it is through this message they will be saved. Jesus has revealed everything they need to know, now they because take his comments to heart and stay vigilant.

Questions

1. Like the disciple, we can get caught up looking at the magnificent stones of the Temple, have you ever gotten caught up in the magnificence of something that has rejected Jesus?

²⁶ It is questionable whether or not Mark's Gospel would have been of use since it was written outside of Judea and would have taken time to circulate to the area.

2. So often we hear preachers claiming this or that natural disaster or war is the sign of “the End”, in light of Jesus’ words here what do you make of such claims?
3. How do you feel about the Holy Spirit giving you words to say when you need them, in what ways is this a comforting promise, and how might this be somewhat frightening?
4. Jesus does not provide a specific date, time, or event for the Temple’s destruction, is this at all disheartening when you consider the disciples’ asked him a sincere question, and were looking for hope in the answer?
5. Jesus has reminded the disciples several times to be aware of being led astray, how do you take care not to be led astray, even when “chicken littles” are running around saying the sky is falling?

Chapter 13: part 2

²⁴But, in those days, after the trials, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not provide its light. ²⁵Then the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. ²⁶Then they will see the Son of Adam coming in the clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷He shall send angels to gather the chosen from the four winds, from the ends of the earth, even the edge of the sky.

²⁸Now from the fig tree learn this parable, when the branches are tender and put out leaves, you know summer is near. ²⁹In the same way, when you see this happening, you know it is near, at the door. ³⁰Truly, I tell you, this generation will not pass away until this has taken place. ³¹The earth and sky may pass away, but, my words will never pass away.

³²But, as for the day and the hour, no one knows, not the angels in heaven, not the Son, only the Father. ³³Watch! Keep Alert! Because you do not know what time it is. ³⁴As a person going on a journey leaves a household, and gave responsibility to the servants, each one with a specific job, and tells the gatekeeper, 'Keep watch!' ³⁵Therefore, keep watch! Because you do not know when the master of the house will return, late evening, or the middle of the night, or at dawn, or early morning; ³⁶or coming suddenly he finds you asleep. ³⁷What I say to you I say to all, keep watch!

Commentary

In the last section Jesus began to answer a question put to him by the inner circle of the disciples, about when the Temple would be destroyed. This section is the conclusion of the answer. But notice that in this section there is no reference to the Temple, rather, here we see a discussion of the events that will take place after the destruction of the Temple. Jesus seems to be somewhat unconcerned with the loss of the center of Jewish worship. Rather, Jesus wants the disciples to redirect their focus on him. In this light the destruction of the Temple is only peripheral, a necessary event, but not the true focus. True disciples will see the Temple's destruction but will understand their focus needs to be elsewhere. Jesus' discussion points back to God's plan and that while the Temple will pass away God's plan is eternal and will take the disciples in a new direction.

Vv 24-27: This paragraph is one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament. Two elements help make this passage difficult for interpreters, its brevity and its use of Old Testament symbols. It is very common to see in this text a reference to Jesus' physical return to earth and the end of the world. In fact, some scholars/pastors use this passage in combination with other passages to "predict" the imminent return of Jesus and the beginning of the "end of days" usually warning "The Great Tribulation" is about to begin. Conversely, scholars on the other end of the spectrum, reading the passage the same way, point to this as Christianity's most embarrassing passage, because in the next paragraph Jesus guarantees the events will happen within the disciples' lifetime. This leaves the average Christian doing a lot of head-scratching wondering what Jesus means.

It is important to realize that both of these readings are the same reading of the text with one difference, how one reads “this generation”. The first of these “traditional opinions” understands that Jesus was interpreting the end times for the disciples, and so when he says “this generation” he means the generation that is living when the events surrounding the end begin. The latter opinion recognizes that “this generation” should be read as the disciples and their generation. They then say that Mark²⁷ misunderstood the destruction of the Temple as the signal Jesus would return and writing immediately before the event was expecting Jesus’ return and the end of the world. Other than this difference both of these readings understand that Jesus is implying that when all of the events pointed to in verses 5-23 have taken place there will be some kind of cataclysmic event which will usher in Jesus’ return.

Both of these readings are highly dependent on other New Testament texts for interpreting Mark 13. As we said at the beginning of the study it is necessary to Mark on Mark’s terms, bringing in as few New Testament references as possible. Mark’s theology is not dependent on Matthew, Paul, or John, as such we should hesitate to use these authors to help us interpret Mark. The “traditional” understandings depend heavily on 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11, where Paul discusses Jesus’ return to provide hope and comfort for the Thessalonian Christians. However, it is often missed that Paul is not addressing the same question Jesus is addressing and is thus providing a different answer. In Thessalonians, Paul is telling the Thessalonians not to worry about dying, because when Jesus returns, he will raise the dead and bring them back to earth with him. Paul is preaching the resurrection of the dead and the ultimate return of Jesus. Mark does not talk at all about the resurrection, rather, he is still discussing the destruction of the Temple and its significance. In fact, if we look closely at Thessalonians, Paul is reminding his readers that Jesus’ return is going to be a spectacular event, not something hidden; moreover, other things are happening and going to happen. For these reasons, the Thessalonians should not worry about when Jesus is returning and anyway it will be “like a thief in the night”, that is unpredictable.

So if Jesus is not talking of his return, what is he talking about? First, we must notice that verse 24 begins, “in those days” meaning at the same time or immediately following the preceding paragraph. That is these events coincide with the destruction of the Temple and are a continuation of the answer to the disciples’ question in verse 3. Some might object here saying, that there was not even a solar eclipse at the time of the Temple’s destruction let alone all of the heavenly lights going out. But that is to read Jesus’ words far too literally, and fail to see the Old Testament reference. Why many fail to make the connection is that Jesus is not quoting one passage, but, aligning his own prophecy with the Old Testament prophets. The darkening of the sun, moon, and/or stars is a standard illustration in the prophets, most notably Isaiah 34:4 (before Babylon is destroyed), Joel 2:10 (in the LORD’s Day before Judah is returned),

²⁷ Some scholars believe Mark used this phrasing to encourage the belief Jesus predicted his return at the destruction of the Temple; other scholars believe Jesus did use these words to predict his return and was thus wrong about his return coinciding with the Temple’s destruction.

Amos 8:9 (before the LORD tramples the oppressors in Israel). All of these were fulfilled long before Jesus' prophecy so we must assume that such language is metaphorical not literal. In fact Peter will quote from Joel 2 in Acts 2:17, saying that in the morning of Pentecost Joel 2 was being fulfilled. In other words, Jesus is not looking forward to literal events, rather, looking backward to the prophets; he understands that what will happen to the Temple will be as decisive and recognizable as God's work as the overthrow of ancient powers and the restoration of God's people to their land. The Old Testament prophets used such imagery to highlight God's coming to power and a new political order, and Jesus is doing the same thing. The disciples need to be aware that when the Temple is destroyed God will do something completely different.

What often trips up many is the allusion to Daniel found in verses 26-27, and this peculiar language about the Son of Adam. We have seen since 8:28 Jesus has taken this title on himself particularly in reference to his death and resurrection. Why use it here? And why is it "they will see" not "you will see" or "all will see"? Jesus is directly referencing Daniel 7:13-14 where, in a vision, Daniel sees the Son of Adam receive power and authority from God, instituting a new kingdom on earth. This kingdom was not to be run as all other kingdoms were run, rather, it was to be God's kingdom, ruled by this Son of Adam under God's authority and decree. What we see in Mark is Jesus pointing to the destruction of the Temple as the signal that he has inherited the world. Notice the use of "they will see"; when Paul and other New Testament authors speak of Jesus' return they talk in terms of "we" or "all" including believers. Jesus' language excludes believers, the disciples will not see because they have already seen by the time these events happen. Believers see Jesus inherit power in his resurrection, or in Pentecost. Rather God will show those outside that Jesus reigns by allowing the Temple to be destroyed while the people of God march on and thrive. Jerusalem has rejected God by rejecting Jesus God is now going to destroy physical Jerusalem and continue working in Jesus. The picture of Daniel is not the Son of Adam coming to earth, but, to God's throne, so we must assume that this is the picture Jesus has. If this is the case, the angels gathering the chosen, refers, not to an eschatological harvest before judgment, but, Jesus opening the doors of the Church to everyone. Thus, bringing all peoples into the folds of God's people. We are quick to give human missionaries credit for conversions, here, though it is the angels, who do the work, even if unseen.²⁸

This paragraph can be summed up in the idea that when the sacrificial system is destroyed, those outside the Church will be able to recognize Jesus' power because through him people all over the world will still be able to connect with God. Jews and Gentiles would still see God worshiped and more to the point God encountered in Jesus. Since God was to be worshiped and encountered in the Temple, the very existence of the Church would show that God was doing a new thing in Jesus and that God had truly crowned him and given him rule over all

²⁸ The word translated "angel" normally means "messenger" and may here, thus, Jesus sends human messengers to the world; but, given the visionary nature of the verses "angels" seems the better translation.

nations, just as Daniel 7 promised. What everyone will see is God's people growing even after the destruction of the Holy City. However, for Christians they have already seen Christ enthroned and this will not mean much to them, other than that Jesus predicted it would happen.

Vv 28-31: Those living in this region expect to eat ripe figs in the early summer, not long after the tree sprouts leaves. In the same way, as the disciples begin to see the world unfold before them and recognize the signs Jesus has laid out, they should realize the destruction of the Temple is close. While the fig tree is used completely differently here, it is hard not to think back to 11:12-14 where Jesus curses the fig tree for not producing fruit, as a sign that the Temple was not producing fruit. The symbol of the fig tree then provides an *inclusio*²⁹ for Jesus' dealings with the Temple.

We have already seen that some want to read the "this generation" of verse 30 as the generation going through the "last days". However, there is really no way to read the sentence other than to understand Jesus is talking to the disciples about their generation. If we accept that Jesus is not in any way talking about the "last days" then there is no reason to be concerned because he is discussing the events of ad70 well within the lifetime of some in that generation.

Jesus closes the paragraph with a very strong declaration of his reliability. We understand scientifically that eventually all of creation will break down due to the law of entropy; however, from our perspective on earth creation looks permanent. Jesus' words are even more permanent and reliable than the earth. In this Jesus echoes Isaiah 40:8, where God's word is said to be permanent; allowing us to see a strong connection between Jesus and God. Jesus' words are God's words and neither will pass away. This had to have been a comforting and awe-inspiring moment for the disciples. Comforting because Jesus had given them supreme confidence in the truth of his words and the hope they had. Awe-inspiring because they would have at least been familiar with the passage in Isaiah and recognized Jesus put his reliability alongside God's.

Vv 32-36: We have said throughout chapter 13 that Jesus is referring to the destruction of the Temple and not his return, this is the one place where there may be some doubt, but, such doubt is confined to this paragraph. The use of "but" in verse 32 does show a strong break from the preceding paragraph. This break could indicate a new subject "Jesus' return" or it could indicate change in perspective, "Despite all of this do not get comfortable". Further, some scholars believe that the phrase "the day and the hour" is a standard way of talking of Jesus' return. This is a debatable issue and does not really impact the meaning of the text significantly; the phrase simply commands the faithful to stay vigilant until there is no reason to be vigilant. Essentially regardless of whether Jesus is addressing his return or not, the

²⁹ An *inclusio* is a literary device where a section is opened and closed with the same word, phrase, or idea so the reader can easily identify the author meant that section to be a distinct unit.

command is for Christians to remain on guard until they die or Jesus returns. The command becomes a general command. In light of Jesus' warnings of false-prophets leading people astray, we must assume that vigilance is always needed because there remains a constant threat of false-prophets. Just as the good servant (or slave or employee) goes about his or her work even when no one else is around, so the good Christian is constantly aware and perpetually working at what God has entrusted to her or him.

Questions

1. If Jesus is the enthroned Son of Adam mentioned in Daniel 7 and God has given him reign over all the earth, why is that not everyone recognizes this fact, and how can you help make Jesus' reign more apparent?
2. How do you help Jesus to bring people from every nation into the fold known as God's people, the Church universal?
3. It is sometimes easy for us to equate Jesus with God because we are so used to it, but, imagine the disciples' reaction to Jesus' words in verse 31?
4. What are the specific ways you maintain vigilance against falling astray, and how do you stay at the work assigned to you?
5. Like the disciples' we want answers about the end, in light of Jesus' answer to their question what do you think Jesus' reaction to our fascination with the end would be?

Chapter 14: part 1

^{14:1}It was two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and the chief-priests and Scribes were searching for a cunning way to seize and kill Jesus. ²Yet they reasoned, it cannot be during the festival, perchance, the people would riot.

³Now Jesus was in Bethany, at the house of Simon the Leper, when a woman entered with an alabaster bottle of expensive perfume made of genuine nard; she broke the bottle and poured it on his head. ⁴Some were angered and said among themselves, “Why would she waste that perfume? ⁵She could have sold the perfume for a year’s wages and given that to the poor.” So they sternly scolded her. ⁶But Jesus responded, “Leave her alone, why do you give her grief? She has performed a good service to me. ⁷You will always have the poor with you and you can do good things for them whenever you wish, but, you will not always have me. ⁸She did what she could, she anointed my body beforehand for its burial. ⁹Amen, I tell you, wherever the Victory Proclamation might be proclaimed, throughout the whole world what she has done will be spoken of as a witness to her.”

¹⁰But Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, went to the chief-priests to hand Jesus over to them. ¹¹On hearing this they rejoiced, promising to give him money; and he began to look for the best time to hand him over.

¹²On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb was sacrificed, Jesus’ disciples asked him, “Where do you want us to begin preparing so you may eat the Passover?” ¹³He sent two disciples saying to them, “Go into the city, there a man carrying a jar of water will meet you, follow him. ¹⁴Wherever he enters say to the house’s owner, the Teacher asks, ‘Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’ ¹⁵Then he will show you a large guest room which has already been furnished, that is where to make preparations.” ¹⁶The disciples left for the city, and they found everything as he had told them. Then they prepared for the Passover.

¹⁷At evening Jesus came with the Twelve. ¹⁸As they were reclining and eating, Jesus said, “Truly, I tell you, one of you will hand me over, one eating with me.” ¹⁹Growing distressed they asked him one after another, “Not I!?” ²⁰He answered, “It is one of the twelve, dipping bread into this bowl with me. ²¹Indeed, the Son of Adam is going along as it was written about him. But, alas for the one who hands the Son of Adam over, it would have been better for him not to have been born.”

²²Then, as they were eating, he picked up bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them. Then he said, “Take this! It is my body.” ²³Taking a cup he gave thanks and gave it to them, and they all drank from it. ²⁴He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, poured out for many. ²⁵Truly, I tell you I will not drink the fruit of the vine again until that day when I will drink new wine in God’s reign.” ²⁶After singing praises, they went to the Mount of Olives.

Commentary

Chapter 14 is very long and details several events, beginning on the Wednesday of Holy Week and ending early Friday morning. This section draws clear lines between service to Jesus and those who want to destroy him. The disciples are presented with a portrait of true

devotion to Jesus, and Jesus' way of uniting his followers. The section ends with Jesus' institution of Communion, revealing both how important communion was for the early Church and how intertwined it was with Jesus' final Passover.

Vv 1-2: All opposition to Jesus left the scene at the end of chapter 12 so that Mark could explain the transition of God's residence from the Temple to Jesus. No he returns to the Jewish authorities; and as Jesus has rejected the Temple, they have rejected Jesus and his authority. They are done dealing with Jesus and will now actively pursue the end of Jesus' ministry. However as verse 2 shows, in their minds, they would have to wait to seek his destruction because it was the Passover and tensions in the city were high with 500,000 pilgrims there. If they would have arrested Jesus in a public place people would have cried out that a prophet was being arrested, which could easily begin a riot. Since the authorities had no idea where Jesus would be outside the Temple complex, it would have been impossible for them to act until after the pilgrims had left after the Passover.

There are several issues when one tries to date these events. The significance of the narrative is in the fact that Jesus did suffer and die not in finding the exact day and time. That being said, Mark does report chronological details so we should try to interpret them. First, the Passover was a one day celebration followed by the feast of Unleavened Bread. It was this entire eight day period which the authorities are referring to in verse 2. Two days before these events is traditionally Wednesday, however, because the Jewish day begins at evening we have some confusion. Was the Thursday evening meal the Passover meal, and thus Jesus was arrested and crucified after Passover before Unleavened Bread? Was Friday the day of preparation for the Passover, meaning the Passover was celebrated at sundown Friday? Does the "two days" refer to Wednesday afternoon or evening? (We will continue this discussion in verses 12-16.)

Vv 3-9: Jesus and his disciples have been invited to a meal at the house of Simon, an otherwise unknown individual who was evidently a follower of Jesus. The identifier "leper" does not mean he has leprosy. He might have been healed of leprosy or even had another connection to the disease without actually contracting it. Other than Simon, Jesus is the only other named individual named in this paragraph, both the woman and her accusers are anonymous.³⁰

What was the woman doing when she poured out the perfume on Jesus? It is unlikely that she meant to anoint him for burial as Jesus says in verse 7. She may easily have been anointing Jesus as the Selected One, using a valuable perfume instead of the olive oil usually used to anoint kings and priests (Ex. 29:21; 1 Sam. 10:1, 16:13; Ps 23:5, 133:2). However, it seems more likely that this is an act of love and devotion more than a ceremony of anointing. Her love and devotion for Jesus leads her an act of supreme generosity. Some would argue that there is no symbolic value to her destroying the bottle, but, she intentionally brought the bottle, intended

³⁰ John 12:3 identifies this woman as Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus, however, John likes to name characters in his stories and locates this event in their house. This means that we should be very slow to identify this woman as Mary, particularly in Mark's story.

to use the whole bottle on Jesus, and the bottle would have had a stopper so it did not have to be broken. Rather, it seems breaking the bottle was a way of saying that the contents were only for Jesus and the bottle was not fit for anyone else after it was used for Jesus. Mark wants us to see that like God, once something is dedicated to Jesus it can only be used for Jesus.

Despite this woman's act of love and devotion to Jesus, some in the crowd that day condemn her actions as not sufficiently in tune with social justice. One would think they have a point that this woman has committed an extravagant waste, and the perfume could have done a great deal to help the poor. After all Jesus did say in 10:21 sell everything for the sake of the poor. We are so used to agreeing with Jesus' assessments of a situation, we sometimes can forget that others make valid points. Those who spoke out against this woman had a valid concern, and Jesus acknowledges this, only pointing out the time and place required different thinking. The woman's detractors are governed by a very high ethic, concern for the poor, but, what Jesus points out is that the woman is governed by love of God. All ethics, no matter how good, must be governed in the love of God if they are to be pure. Today, many Christians talk of social justice and ethics in general, but, these are only truly Christian if they are done within a love for God. Jesus points out that love for God in that situation meant anointing him for his burial (even if she did not recognize that is what she did) even if that meant taking resources away from helping the poor. It is also worth noting that many believe that Jesus' words in verse 7 are a prophecy that poverty will always exist. However, we cannot assume this for fear that we accept that poverty is inevitable and stop working to eliminate it. Rather, we must understand Jesus as saying to those individuals they need to be sensitive to the moment. Jesus' death is fast approaching and true disciples, like this woman, must be sensitive to that fact, and regular activities like taking care of the poor can be temporarily suspended. This unknown woman, lives eternally through this loving action which (whether or not she realized it) was attuned to the gravity of the moment.

Vv 10-11: We are not told what Judas' motives were, but, his actions are clearly meant to contrast the love and devotion of the unnamed woman. Where that woman implicitly understood Jesus, Judas, one of the inner circle since the beginning (3:19) now betrays Jesus. While the authorities pledge to give Judas money to hand Jesus over to them, we are not told that is Judas' motive.³¹ Possibly Judas finally understood Jesus' teachings about himself in the encounter with the woman, and this made him rethink his allegiances. Did he want to force the issue with the Jewish authorities, was he disillusioned with Jesus, or was he greedy, we simply are not told.³² Whatever the reason Judas goes to the chief-priests and Scribes, they are more than happy to see him. The authorities could not arrest Jesus because of the crowds, but, with Judas' help they could find Jesus in private and arrest him during the festival.

³¹ John says that Judas was greedy, routinely stole from the Jesus and the disciples and betrayed Jesus for the money, but, since Mark does not provide us with this detail we must leave Judas' motives out.

³² The so called "Gospel of Judas" written around ad400 goes so far as to say Jesus told Judas to betray him so that he could die and God's plan would be fulfilled.

Vv 12-16: As with the donkey in 11:1-7, Jesus seems to have the Passover meal planned out ahead of time. He sends two disciples to the house he has already arranged to eat at. A house prepared for the meal. The disciples then go into Jerusalem and look for the place Jesus has arranged. One tradition even tells us the house belonged to Mark's parents and they prepared Jesus' Last Supper; this may be legend, but, it does add to Mark's narrative if he witnessed this firsthand.

Now we deal with the question of dating the Last Supper. We said above there are questions about when this supper happened and whether or not it was the Passover meal. In all likelihood this was the Thursday evening meal that Jesus and his disciples were eating. It is completely possible that the "two days before" in verse 1 was on Wednesday afternoon, making this the formal Passover meal, two days later (remember Jewish days start at sundown). However it seems far more likely that Jesus intentionally reserved the room one day early and that this was the evening prior to the lambs being sacrificed, and the Passover was on Friday evening.³³ The question then becomes, was Jesus intending this to be his Passover meal? It seems that a strong case can be made that Jesus did intend this meal to be seen as the Passover. We will see below that Jesus added symbolism to the meal, so it seems likely that he intentionally ate a Passover meal with his disciples one day early. Why celebrate it a day early? We cannot be sure, did he fear for his life and want to ensure he celebrated the Passover, maybe he and his disciples used a different calendar from the Temple authorities, or perhaps this was when they could get the room.

Vv 17-21: We do not know how many attended this dinner, artists usually depict thirteen, Jesus and the twelve, but, some have estimated numbers closer to thirty. The meal was to begin at evening, around the time Jesus arrives, and end before midnight. This was a solemn and somewhat somber meal, centered on remembering Israel's salvation and liberation from Egypt. Yet, in the middle of the meal Jesus provides what must have been a shock to the group gathered around him. They knew Jesus had predicted he would be handed over to the authorities and sentenced to death (9:31, 10:33), but, to find out it would be one of them who did so. Judas is never named in this paragraph, though we know he is the betrayer. The whole group of disciples is thrown into confusion each asking if he will be responsible. Each of the innocent disciples must have been thinking that he would do something inadvertently to lead the authorities to Jesus, a frightening idea. Because they all surely knew they were not going to conspire with the authorities against Jesus. Second, we must ask what Judas, who was presumably still at the meal, was thinking at this point. Did he wonder how Jesus knew what he had done (even if Jesus did not know it was Judas that thought had to have crossed Judas' mind)? It is possible that Jesus was identifying himself with the righteous sufferer in Psalm 41:9. If so was he teaching on the psalm saying that like the sufferer he would be betrayed by an intimate friend? Is this the comment that set the room abuzz? Did Jesus know who the betrayer was, or, did he simply understand the passage to mean he would be betrayed by one

³³ In both ad30 and 33 Passover began on a Friday evening, France *Mark*, 560.

in his inner circle of twelve? Jesus quickly moves beyond this thought to speak about the fate of his betrayer. While we never question God's grace, certainly human history has been very unkind to Judas; and though Mark does not record it, Matthew and Luke present him meeting a pitiful end (Matt. 27:3-5, Acts 1:18-19).

Vv 22-26: After Jesus' earth-shattering revelation we might think the disciples have had enough for one night, but, Jesus gives them another. We are so accustomed to the Eucharistic (or Communion) meal that we fail to remember this was a startling redefinition for the disciples. As we said above, Jesus is eating a Passover meal with the disciples, a meal meant to remember Israel's salvation from Egypt. Jesus very traditionally blesses the bread and cup, but in his words he provides them with new meaning. They are now symbols of his own life and death, and will provide new meaning to the disciples for the formerly Passover meal.³⁴ Much ink has been spilt trying to figure out which of the four traditional cups Jesus used to institute his ritual, but, Mark (and the other Gospel writers) leave this detail out precisely because Jesus gave new meaning to and changed the meal. It was no longer four cups, it was one used in the celebration; the historical detail was unimportant to Mark, rather, he wanted to present the Theological reality that Jesus instituted Eucharist so the disciples could stay connected to him and each other. Here Jesus must be alluding to Jeremiah 31:31-33 where God institutes a new covenant with Israel, and since all covenants were sealed in blood (or sacrifice, see Exodus 24) Jesus is showing the disciples they are now participating in the new covenant. This is probably combined with allusions to Isaiah 53:12, the suffering servant. Jesus is saying to the disciples that as Passover reminded Israel of its covenant with God and their salvation, now he is giving the new Israel the same type of ceremony, where many more can participate in God's salvation. Some hold tightly to Jesus' use of "many" in verse 24 to highlight a view of a limited atonement. While this is certainly a possibility, we should by no means consider it a certainty, after all in the context "many" only refers to those who will accept Jesus' new covenant in the Eucharistic meal. Also, it is worth noting that among those included in the "many" is Judas, who though not mentioned is likely still in the meal. This is an important point to reflect on.

Jesus closes the ceremony with a somewhat cryptic reference (v 25), he will not drink wine until God's reign is established. He has always said that he was establishing God's reign, thus, we must assume that he meant completely established here. The question then is, what does the completion of God's reign look like. Does this mean that we are supposed to be completing Jesus' mission establishing God's reign, and when we are finished Jesus will return to drink new wine with us? Is this a vague allusion to God's triumphant breaking into human history and ending life as we know it? Whatever the case, Jesus is obviously looking beyond his death to a time of resurrection when he would enjoy the full reign of God and is establishing a ceremony to help keep us focused on God's reign.

³⁴ It would be extremely unwise to build a theology of Christ's presence in our Eucharist from this one passage, so for now we see it as symbolic, which can have a whole host of meanings.

It is also very important that this meal closes with a hymn of praise. While this is a common close to a Passover celebration, we should note that Jesus has changed the Passover's meaning at this point. Despite the somber and even morbid mood of the dinner the group leaves singing praise to God. This is an important theological consideration, no matter what is happening in our lives, it is appropriate to praise God.

Questions

1. The anonymous woman sacrifices an extremely luxurious item simply to show love and devotion to Jesus, have you ever made such a sacrifice and how can you begin to make smaller sacrifices to Jesus?
2. How do you make sure that your ethics are grounded in love for God not simply in a concern for justice?
3. What does it say to you that Jesus invited his betrayer into the Eucharistic meal?
4. How would you have reacted if you were one of the disciples whom Jesus identified as a possible betrayer?
5. How important is the Eucharistic meal for you, and how do you think about it?

Gethsemane

²⁷Jesus said to them, “You will become deserters. It is written, *I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will scatter*. ²⁸But, after I am raised I will go before you to Galilee. ²⁹Peter responded, “Even if all others desert, I will not!” ³⁰Jesus replied, “Truly, I tell you, this night, by the time the rooster has crowed twice you will have denied me three times.” ³¹Peter insisted, “Even if I must die with you, I will never deny you!” The others said the same.

³²Coming to the place called Gethsemane, Jesus said to his disciples, “sit here while I pray.” ³³He took Peter, James and John with him. He grew anxious and very distressed. ³⁴He said to them, “I’m grieved to my core, to the point of death. Wait here and keep watch.” ³⁵He went a little further and collapsed on the ground and prayed that if possible the suffering might be taken away. ³⁶He said, “Abba, Father, you can do anything. Take this cup from me. But not as I desire but yours.” ³⁷Then returning he found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, “Simon are you sleeping? Do you not even have strength enough to watch for one hour? ³⁸Watch and pray, that you might not come into temptation. The spirit may be willing but the body is weak.” ³⁹Again he left and prayed the same prayer as before. ⁴⁰Yet again he came and found them sleeping because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him. ⁴¹He came a third time, and said to them, “You are still asleep and getting refreshed? Enough! The time has come. Look the one handing over the Son of Adam to the custody of sinners. ⁴²Get up! We are going! Look, the one handing me over is here.”

⁴³Immediately, while Jesus was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived with a crowd from the chief-priests, Scribes, and elders, carrying clubs and swords. ⁴⁴His betrayer had given them a signal, “The one I kiss is him, seize him, and take him away under guard.” ⁴⁵Approaching, immediately, he said, “Rabbi!” And kissed him. ⁴⁶They took hold of Jesus and arrested him. ⁴⁷But one of those present drew a sword and struck the servant of the High Priest; cutting off his ear. ⁴⁸Jesus responded, “Have you come to take me like a bandit, with clubs and swords? ⁴⁹Day after day, I was with you, teaching in the Temple, yet, you did not arrest me, now let the Scripture be fulfilled.” ⁵⁰Then the disciples left him and fled. ⁵¹One young man had accompanied him clothed only in a linen robe; they seized him. ⁵²He left the robe and fled away naked.

Commentary

After concluding the meal, Jesus and the disciples have arrived at a familiar spot, the Mount of Olives. We are not told why Jesus left the house where he was staying, only that he did. It would have been against Jewish law to go back to Bethany, where they were probably staying, until the morning because it was outside of Jerusalem. So Jesus takes the twelve to the outer edge of Jerusalem, the near slope of the mount. It is likely that Jesus was following a customary practice to get away from civilization to pray (see, 1:35). Judas takes advantage of this alone time to lead the authorities to this secluded spot where they can quietly arrest a (in their minds) subversive rabbi whose popularity is quickly growing. The scene presents a startling contrast, Jesus alone in the garden seeking God’s will in prayer, and the Temple authorities sending armed guards to interrupt this action so they can maintain control.

Vv 27-31: This paragraph begins a sequence of events in which the disciples are portrayed negatively. From 11:1 until now the disciples have been true friends and colleagues to Jesus. If they have appeared somewhat ignorant (i.e. 13:1) that is completely understandable; someone has to ask questions if we are to learn. In fact, the devotion to Jesus from the other disciples is part of what makes Judas stand out so sharply. Here though, Jesus informs the disciples that they are all about to desert him. The verb behind “desert” in this paragraph has appeared two other places 4:17 and four times in 9:42-48. In the previous instances the verb meant a permanent desertion of Jesus and the path of discipleship. This is a very serious charge. In this passage Jesus is comparing the disciples to the rocky soil of chapter 4 which could not handle the difficulties of life. Is it any wonder Peter and the others take offense at such an accusation? They have been with Jesus through thick and thin so far, how are they going to desert now? This is especially troubling considering the disciples’ last few hours. At a very solemn and sacred event they were told that one of them was going to hand Jesus over to the authorities who wanted him dead. Unsure of who this individual might be, they celebrated the feast, at the end of which Jesus reinterpreted the meaning of the feast. Now after all of that, Jesus explains that they will all desert him. Those must have been a wrenching few hours for the disciples, and their night was just getting started.

The quotation Jesus uses is from Zechariah 13:7-9, where it discusses God’s leader being struck down.³⁵ In Zechariah, this event leads to some of the people being refined by the event and now worthy of God’s reign. However, it is questionable if Jesus (let alone the disciples) was thinking of the end of the prophecy. It is also worthwhile to point out that Jesus is using Scripture to understand his fate. His knowledge seems to come from a unique depth of understanding Scripture, rather than, a divine intuition. Jesus seems to have undergone careful and detailed study of Scripture mingled with an active prayer life, which allows him unique insight into God’s mind.³⁶ Mark has been using Jesus’ physical journey to underscore the message, discipleship means following Jesus on the journey. Now we see Jesus combining study of Scripture with a time of prayer, certainly we are meant to take notice. Jesus does not leave the subject without hope, he will rise and after doing so will be found in Galilee. Galilee is significant as the place of beginning, of power, and home. The disciples will be offered the opportunity to regather with Jesus back where the journey started. Even those who desert are offered the chance to rejoin Jesus.

Peter’s rebuke is in some sense laudable and what we should all strive for, a heart which remains true to Jesus through anything. As usual, Peter is only expressing what the other disciples are thinking (v 31); but, we should understand that Peter was the strongest in his

³⁵ In Zechariah God strikes down the servant, calling on the sword to strike him down. However, there is no need to take this as if God was killing Jesus; Hebrew often uses such language to speak about God using events for a positive outcome. Thus giving God total credit because God created a positive outcome. This is a nice way to show the futility of opposing God.

³⁶ We may not be able to duplicate the results Jesus achieved, after all we do accept his unique relationship to the Father; however, his practice certainly must be emulated.

affirmation of his willingness to die with Jesus. As so often happens to Peter when he makes bold statements, Jesus counters with a dire prediction. Not only will Peter desert Jesus he will specifically and deliberately renounce any connection with Jesus. There have been frequent attempts to add meaning to Jesus' prediction by associating Peter's denial with divorce procedures or by identifying a specific time as the "second cockcrow". However, these are red herrings Jesus' meaning is at the surface here, Peter will renounce Jesus three times before the dawn arrives. The fact that Mark is the only Gospel to record the rooster crowing twice might best be explained by the fact that he is retelling Peter's story, and this is surely an event which would have burned itself into Peter's memory.

Vv 32-42: This paragraph begins in much the same way the story of the Transfiguration does (9:2-10), Jesus takes his inner circle to a mountain to pray, leaving the others along the way. We do not know what purpose Jesus had in bringing these three along, he may have wanted others nearby to help carry his burden, or, he may simply have wanted to put them in a better position to witness what was to transpire. Mark's description of Jesus' state of mind at this point should be somewhat shocking. Jesus is obviously burdened by the stress of the moment, this burden seeming brings Jesus up to the breaking point. We can contrast the stress of verse 34 with the calm in control Jesus of verse 48 to gauge the effectiveness of this multi-hour prayer session. Jesus may have entered the garden on the point of collapse, but, he left in full control of himself and the situation.

If we take Mark seriously that Jesus was only a short distance from the three disciples, then it is safe to assume that these three saw some of Jesus' prayer (even if they do eventually fall asleep). While it is common for many today to follow Jesus' example and pray lying face down on the ground, in the Bible and for Jews of the time, it was not a common position for prayer. One would prostrate oneself in God's physical presence as in some modes of worship (Mat. 17:6; 1 Cor. 14:5; Rev. 7:11, 11:16). Does this mean Jesus was having a vision of God, while the Peter, James, and John looked on? We cannot be sure, but, it is intriguing to think about the possibility that as Jesus was in most dire need God was the most apparent (and a-parent) to him. The prayer recorded in verse 36 may well be part of the prayer Jesus used that night, overheard by the three and preserved, but, at the very least it records the theme of the prayer that night and should be understood that way. People often struggle with "unanswered prayers" wondering why a good God would not listen to the requests of people God loves. Jesus' prayer in the garden reveals that such thinking is backward. Jesus words express his desire not to suffer, but, then Jesus requests that God align Jesus' will with the Divine will. Prayer for Jesus is not about requesting things from God, prayer is about recognizing where one's desires are and how they match up with God's desires. Prayer even supplications such as Jesus' is about harmonizing with God. A focus on "unanswered prayer" is asking why God did not align to my needs and wishes. We should not view the Gethsemane prayer as, "Jesus asked, God said no, and Jesus was content with God's answer". The Gethsemane prayer reveals Jesus in touch with himself and his driving influences and passions sincerely asking God what the Divine will was in this instance and once he understood the Divine will, he aligned himself

to it. It is an incredible amount of maturity that allows Jesus to align himself with God so quickly (a few hours), and speaks to this being a well-practiced discipline.

While Jesus is praying the disciples are sleeping, this group who pledged loyalty to Jesus twice this evening and once in the garden is now sleeping when he wants/needs them to watch and pray. On a physical level we can understand drowsiness, they had a good meal, plenty of wine, stressful situation, and a late night all rolled into one. But Jesus is still rightly upset at finding them asleep when he has asked them to pray with him. One must ask how they intend to stay loyal to death if they will not even follow into prayer. It seems that Mark wants us to ask this question of both the disciples that night and ourselves considering Jesus' warning in 13:35 to "Keep watch!" It is often taken that Jesus recognizes the willing spirit in the disciples, but, their physical bodies are letting them down. This is a somewhat dualistic approach to verse 38. Jesus seems to be saying that while the disciples have high ideals, v 31, they are easily overcome by physical concerns. Jesus is condemning their inability to stay awake, we cannot simply see this statement as mere human weakness because of physical nature. Could this situation have been different had the disciples been attentive to Jesus' command for prayer? Perhaps, maybe they would have been more confident in Jesus' resurrection, maybe one or two would have died with him, maybe the Pentecost event would have happened while Jesus was on the cross. While there are no answers to such a question it can be helpful to reflect on if it leads us to greater responsibility in prayer.

The scene is repeated three times, but, the repetition seems only to mean that it was a consistent pattern. Mark wants us to understand that they disciples were not prepared to pray while Jesus was prepared. In the end Jesus betrays some frustration with the disciples sleeping while he wishes them to pray, but, the time for prayer is over the encounter is about to come. Jesus will be handed over to sinners and there is no more the disciples can do. In this case sinners seems to mean those who would reject God's Selected One; we should not read this in the sense of "we are all sinners", rather, as those who are distant from God's purpose at that time. The authorities have pushed themselves away from God in arresting Jesus so now they have become sinners.

An often mentioned aspect of Jesus' prayer is the use of the word "Abba", an Aramaic word for father. The fact that Mark records the Aramaic shows its significance for the Christ community, indeed we still hear it used today. It was a radical identification for God to be called Abba and Jesus probably was the first to institute the use. It was probably also common for Jesus to refer to God as Abba. It is common today (especially for preachers) to equate Abba with the American "Daddy". However this is a poor equation, Abba was a term of intimacy, but, intimacy within a patriarchal culture. The intimacy in the term was balanced by and filtered through respect. Therefore it is probably closer to "Dad" an informal way of addressing one's father, but, without any infantile or juvenile associations. I can call my father "Dad" but those outside cannot because they do not share such an intimate relationship, at the same time it reflects a maturity in myself that has left juvenile language behind me.

Vv 43-52: Though we are not told when, at some point between the meal and verse 41 Judas has left the group to find the posse meant to arrest Jesus. It may be that Judas left after the meal, knowing where Jesus intended to go; or, it may be that he went along and seeing where Jesus left them, he snuck off knowing Jesus would be a long time in prayer. This is a somewhat unimportant detail, it should be understood that it would have been relatively easy for Judas to leave and return with the chief-priests men. Now he has arrived with the mob and kisses Jesus. The men with Judas may or may not have seen Jesus before and no doubt would have had difficulty distinguishing him in the dark. Judas therefore gives them a signal so they will be sure to arrest the right man (rather than one of the disciples willing to take the fall for Jesus, allowing him to continue his ministry). A kiss was a normal friendly greeting and combined with Judas' identification as one of the twelve helps to underscore the seriousness of the betrayal.

The arrest is straightforward, yet, Jesus seems to be in control of the whole scene, as if to undermine every power-play the authorities are making. While there is chaos all around, Jesus stands in the middle poised and confident. Judas disappears as soon as Mark can dispose of him. Mark seemed to care nothing for Judas using as much as was necessary to be faithful to the story, but, removing as soon as he can. Jesus' comments about his arrest also help undermine his opponents, pointing out their cowardice in sending an armed guard to arrest him at night when he has been in public all week. Where Jesus stands upright in God's strength, the authorities shrink away only acting by force and in secret. Though outlaw culture is popular today (one might reasonably question the sanity in that) Jesus reasonably asks why he is associated with outlaws. From this point through his death Jesus will be associated with outlaws, not simply petty robbers or revolutionaries, but, those who willingly want to undermine civilization. And now the Scriptures can be fulfilled, all of them, not simply the desertion of the disciples quoted above, but, all the ones related to Jesus' death and resurrection.

Two small stories contribute to the sense of chaos in this scene, the cutting off of the servant's ear and the youth running away naked. It is strange that neither of these individuals is one of the disciples, simply as people present. All the other Gospels identify the one with the sword as a disciple (John says Peter) and they all leave out the story of the youth. On a literal level it was probably a disciple with the sword since it was unlikely that many others (if any) would have been there. While the youth has frequently been linked to Mark himself, a veiled way of showing that he witnessed some of the events he is writing about. There may also be a symbolic level to these accounts. By listing the man with the sword so generically Mark completely disassociates Jesus with violent resistance movements. Others may resort to swords to save themselves and others, but, not Jesus. We may not be comfortable with pacifist ideals, but, we need to question the role of violence in society, even when saving the innocent. The youth is woefully underdressed for the occasion wearing only a loose-fitting linen garment. This is similar to clothing worn in baptismal ceremonies and may represent a complete rejection of Jesus even by the baptized. Such a statement implies that not only the disciples left Jesus alone, but, all who had connection to him. It is not improper to see such metaphorical

undercurrents in the text, however, one must be extremely careful in pushing them too far, because they can be like rip tides carrying the reader out to sea. Mark's choice of language here does invite some of these questions, after all, why would he not use "disciple" when he is so found of using them for negative examples, and why would a youth be so remarkably underdressed?

Questions

1. How do you make sure to emulate Jesus' devotional practice of serious Scripture study combined with prayer? Where can you improve?
2. We often harass the disciples, particularly Peter, for their actions that night, but, how do you think you would have handled such a long and stressful evening? (Think of some definite steps you can take to make sure you would handle such events differently)
3. What do you think about the purpose of prayer, how do you deal with "unanswered prayers", and what steps can you take to keep vigilant in times of trial?
4. What is your reaction to Jesus' separation from violence and force, both in his words "Am I a bandit" and Mark's disassociation of the man with the sword from Jesus' disciples?
5. Why do you think Mark added the story of the Youth, is there symbolic meaning there, and if so how does it reflect in the Church's relationship with Jesus today?

Jesus' Trials

⁵³They lead Jesus to the High Priest and all the chief-priests, elders, and Scribes came together. ⁵⁴Peter followed far behind until they entered the High Priest's courtyard, where he sat with the guards warming himself by the fire. ⁵⁵The chief-priests and the whole council sought testimony against Jesus in order to put him to death, however, they did not find any. ⁵⁶Many gave false-testimony against him, but, they could not agree with each other. ⁵⁷Some stood to give false-testimony saying, ⁵⁸"We heard him saying, 'I will destroy this sanctuary made by humans; and in three days I will build another not made by humans.'" ⁵⁹But, even on this their testimony did not agree. ⁶⁰Then the High Priest rose in their midst and asked Jesus, "Are you not going to answer those who testify against you?" ⁶¹However Jesus did not respond. Then the High Priest asked Jesus, "Are you the Selected One, The Son of the Blessed One?" ⁶²Jesus answered, "I am! And you will see the Son of Adam sitting on the right hand of the Power, coming in the clouds of heaven." ⁶³The High Priest then tore his clothes saying, "Why do we need any more testimony? ⁶⁴You heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?" They all condemned him deserving of death. ⁶⁵Some began to spit on him, and covered his face and hit him, saying, "Prophecy!" then the servants took him away and beat him.

⁶⁶Meanwhile, Peter was below in the courtyard, when one of the High Priest's servant girls came near. ⁶⁷Seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, "You were also with Jesus of Nazareth?" ⁶⁸He denied it, though, saying, "I do not know about this, I do not understand what you are talking about." Then he left for the porch. Then the rooster crowed. ⁶⁹The servant girl saw him and began again, saying to those gathered around, "He is one of them." ⁷⁰He denied it again. A short time later one of those standing around said to Peter, "Surely, you are one of them, you are from Galilee." ⁷¹But he put himself under oath, swearing, "I do not know this man you are talking about!" ⁷²Immediately, the rooster crowed again and Peter recalled the words Jesus said to him, "By the time the rooster has crowed twice you will have denied me three times." And he collapsed in tears.

^{15:1}When dawn came the chief-priests consulted with the elders, Scribes and whole Sanhedrin; they bound Jesus and leading him away, handed him over to Pilate. ²Pilate asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus replied, "You say so." ³The chief-priests were accusing him of many things. ⁴Pilate again asked him, "Are you not going to respond? Look at all the accusations!" ⁵However, Jesus did not respond; and Pilate was surprised.

⁶During the festival. Pilate released a prisoner whom, they chose. ⁷A certain man named Barabbas was being held with the rebels for committing murder during a revolt. ⁸The crowd began to gather to ask him to do just this. ⁹Pilate asked them, "Do you want me to release the king of the Jews?" ⁹Because he knew the chief-priest had handed him over from jealousy. ¹¹But the chief-priests stirred the crowd to have Barabbas released to them, instead. ¹²Pilate again asked them, "What do you want me to do with the one you call king of the Jews?" ¹³They barked, "Crucify him!" ¹⁴Pilate asked, "What evil deed has he done?" But they shouted louder, "Crucify him!" ¹⁵But Pilate, wanting to satisfy the crowd's desire, released Barabbas, and handed Jesus over to be flogged and then crucified.

Commentary

This section opens with “They lead Jesus” and from this point Jesus becomes passive; while he retains a certain measure of control (particularly over himself) he is not in control of the movement of the story. This passivity is a switch from the Jesus who barged into Jerusalem in chapter 11 pressing for a confrontation with the Jewish leadership. The final confrontation is happening and Jesus is not going to be very active in it. In this section everything revolves around Jesus, and the other characters are seen against him. The Jewish leadership, Peter, and Pilate all are set against him, revealing various reactions to Jesus which ultimately ended in his death. Notice with this section the speed of the Gospel slows to a crawl, Mark wants us to spend a great deal of time reflecting on the twelve hours or so which lead up to Jesus’ death. We are to consider everything about the events that led to Jesus’ crucifixion and how they impact Jesus’ story and our own.

Vv 53-65: The scene is set at the High Priest’s house, where Jesus is led by the guards and where the Jewish authorities are gathering. Presumably, the moment Judas arrived messengers were sent to all the leaders instructing them to gather for a special meeting. It is often remarked that this trial broke all of the Jewish laws concerning a murder trial. Preachers make such remarks to undermine the authorities’ legitimacy, making them seem petty and cowardly. However, there is little evidence for how Jewish trials were conducted at the time, and, because they were under a Roman governor, the Jewish leaders would have not been allowed to hold a murder trial.³⁷ Rather, we should view this as a fact-finding inquiry, where the Jewish council questioned Jesus in order to determine whether or not to bring charges against him in a Roman court. It is likely that a sizable portion of the council was against Jesus from the start, but, there may well have been a portion that truly was undecided and the proceedings were necessary for them to reach a decision. There seems to have been several initial charges against Jesus, including the charge of plotting the destruction of the Temple (a plan to overthrow the government?). Mark notes that on all of these charges the testimony did not agree meaning (at least) according to Deuteronomy 19:15 there was no grounds to charge Jesus. It is often assumed that this was a kangaroo court simply searching for a pretext to kill Jesus, however, it is entirely possible that many inside the room that night may well have agreed with Mark’s assessment at this point and had no reason to bring charges against Jesus. The High Priest may be railroading Jesus, but, proper procedure seems to have been followed.

The second charge of destruction of the Temple (v 58) deserves special consideration, because it is the only one Mark lists specifically. Until this point, Mark has consistently spoken of the “Temple” now he uses “sanctuary”, such a switch is significant. John 2:19 records a very similar statement by Jesus after his demonstration in the Temple (Jn. 2:11-22). Early Christians seem to have gravitated to the idea of Jesus (or the Church) as the new Temple (see. 1 Cor. 3:16-17; Heb. 9:11; 1 Pe. 2:4-5). Mark is embedding this doctrine into the charges against Jesus,

³⁷ The source for Jewish murder trials quoted to support the accusation that procedure was not followed is the *Mishnah* written almost two hundred years after this incident.

highlighting the fact that Jesus' opponents misunderstood his words/life. Jesus is the replacement for the Temple, but, the authorities think he might destroy and rebuild the Temple. Considering Mark is writing around the time of the Temple's destruction, this must have been uniquely comforting and important to Christians of the time, reminding them of Jesus' role in God's plan.

While Mark notes (v 59) that even the charge of the destruction of the Temple does not seem to stick, it does provide an opening for the High Priest's line of questioning. Jews did not expect Herod's Temple (the one of Jesus' time) to be the last Temple; the belief was that God would eventually come and build a new Temple (this is the belief behind the "New Jerusalem" of Rev. 21-22). Some Jews believed the Selected One would have a hand in building this Temple; and though the charge of plotting against the Temple did not stick, the High Priest now sees an avenue to question Jesus as to his identity. This question ultimately leads to the council condemning Jesus and bringing him before Pilate to answer charges. The High Priest allows Jesus the opportunity to respond to the charges, but, as Mark has told us, there is nothing to respond to because there is no credible testimony. Jesus' silence forces the High priest to directly ask the question which is on everyone's mind (including the reader).

Some scholars have tried to suggest that Jesus' response to the High Priest was "Am I" as opposed to "I am" on the basis that Mark has not come out and declared Jesus as the Selected One.³⁸ They go on to say that Jesus' prediction of his "coming" was added by Mark who expected such an event to coincide with the Temple's destruction.³⁹ However, there is little in Mark (or elsewhere) to support such a theory. Jesus' response is as straightforward as the High Priest's question and it hard to imagine how such a questioning response could lead to Jesus' death. Not to mention when questioned about political aims by Pilate Jesus denies them. The second half of the theory is based on understanding Jesus words "see" and "coming" literally. Thus Mark added this language believing Jesus was about to return. But, as we saw in 13:24-27, these are metaphorical words meant to illustrate a point. Jesus' response combines Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 13:7, both present God's Selected One being honored and vindicated by God. Jesus is making a rhetorical point that God will vindicate him and the authorities will "see" this happen. Presumably, Jesus means the authorities will see the influence of the Temple wane and the Church grow, which is consistent with chapter 13 and verse 58 above. Jesus' "they will see" (13:26) has become "you will see" implying that the Church will have already acknowledged this vindication which the authorities will only come to recognize.

We are not told explicitly which part of Jesus' response was considered blasphemous by the council, though none of the response would have pleased them. Even the blatant affirmation

³⁸ In Greek "I am" and "Am I" look identical and can only be differentiated by context.

³⁹ This viewpoint has the advantage that it makes Jesus simply a great religious figure who never claimed any special significance. Rather, it was his followers who mistakenly thought him divine and (also mistakenly) wove additional meaning into his death, while inventing stories of his return. Thus Jesus is a moral figure who should be taken seriously, but, who makes no special claim to authority.

to be God's Selected One was not in itself a blasphemous statement. It is presumable that Jesus presenting himself "sitting at the right hand of [God]" was seen as Jesus usurping God's authority. Jesus is ascribing for himself God's power, and divine responsibility leading to the High Priest's reaction.⁴⁰ There is some degree of legitimacy to the claim of blasphemy on such grounds, even if the High Priest is trying to establish a kangaroo court. Jesus' own testimony will seal his fate and the meeting adjourns with the council's decision to recommend a death sentence to Pilate. It is not surprising that the council would want to disassociate themselves from a blasphemer by insulting and beating him; he disrespected their God and they will turn their backs on him. The irony comes in their mocking "prophecy" reminds us that in 10:54 Jesus did prophecy exactly this treatment (see also Isa. 50:6 on the suffering servant)).

Vv 66-72: Beginning in verse 54, Mark has been weaving Peter's story into Jesus'. Peter has followed secretly, keeping his distance; and now is trying to remain unnoticed in the High Priest's courtyard. It would have been very bold of Peter to even go so far as the courtyard when Jesus was being interrogated inside. But Peter's courage fails him as soon as one of the servant girls appears. We are not told how this girl recognizes Peter, perhaps she has seen him before, but her question indicates she knows who he is. This is a somewhat private question and Peter meets it with an appropriate response. Neither is being harsh to the other, though, Peter's answer is very deliberate. The move away from the fire shows Peter is now afraid of being recognized, but, wants to remain loyal to Jesus when everyone else has abandoned him. The girl's second accusation is to a group standing nearby, which Peter seems to overhear. The second denial is more severe than the first, probably hoping to squash such language. The third accusation comes from the bystanders, probably in response to Peter's denial. A Galilean accent in the High Priest's courtyard at that specific time probably would have been a dead giveaway; why else would someone from Galilee be there at that time? Peter, though, tries to extricate himself from the situation with an oath that he does not know Jesus.

Peter's story is set as a foil to Jesus, where Jesus remains true to his calling to the end, despite harsh questioning from the highest Jewish authorities, Peter breaks down in front of a lowly servant girl. Jesus boldly identifies himself, while Peter boldly curses any association with Jesus. We are not told how Peter extricated himself from the courtyard, but, it is likely his curse had its desired effect. Likely after such harsh words no one pushed him further. The second appearance of the rooster fulfills Jesus' words in 14:30 and reminds Peter of the entire evening. Peter's remorse is obvious, but, for now the damage is done, it will not be until chapter 16 when we find out Peter is restored to Jesus. Could Peter have then felt he was permanently abandoning Jesus?

15:1-5: In verse 1 Mark's account begins to slow to a crawl, we are told that at dawn the Jewish authorities take Jesus to the Roman governor Pilate for trial. The next time stamp is at verse 25 when we are told it is nine in the morning, meaning the entire trial phase lasts under three

⁴⁰ Some want to see Jesus' identification "I am" as usurping the Divine name of Exodus 3, however, there is no clear connection between the two. While John does develop this theme, Mark never does.

hours. The Jewish leadership is wasting no time, immediately after their decision to bring charges to Pilate they are off, arriving at his residence as soon as he is awake (perhaps before). Arriving so early betrays the seriousness the authorities attached to Jesus' case, they wanted to make sure he was taken care of before the duties of the Passover began around noon.

While Pilate asked Jesus many questions, only one is recorded, probably because it is the only one Jesus answered. Pilate asks Jesus if he is the "King of the Jews" this means that the charges brought against Jesus involve him making such a claim. While the council condemned Jesus on charges of blasphemy, such a charge would not mean much in a Roman court and certainly would not carry the death penalty. It appears the council understood this and reframed the charges based on Jesus' affirmation that he was the Selected One. The Selected One was seen as the rightful heir to David's throne and others who had claimed the title tried to seize the throne. The authorities played up the political angle of Selected One when handing Jesus over to Pilate, knowing he would be favorable toward executing any political rival to Rome. Jesus' answer could be taken to mean he denied the charge outright, "that is your opinion, not mine"; however, it can also mean something like, "that's not the title I would use". It is not clear which way Jesus meant this, but, based on Pilate's reaction it seems likely that he took Jesus to mean that even if the title was appropriate the definition Pilate was using was wrong. From then on Jesus remains silent, which seems to have impressed Pilate. Was Jesus reluctantly submitting to the inevitable death for treason, or was he innocent and not going to speak to blatantly false accusations?

Vv 6-15: It is unclear what Pilate's custom was for pardoning prisoners, though other places in the empire routinely granted pardons at festival times. Such pardons are an easy way to promote good will toward the occupying empire. The crowd seems to show up intentionally for this event, though, they are a rather ambiguous group simply representing the people. The crowd was a small group, perhaps they were even gathered by the council to help influence Pilate's decision and motivate him to execute Jesus. The other new character is Barabbas, imprisoned with rebels and murders, and presumably one himself. Barabbas becomes the direct foil to Jesus (Matt. 27:16 even calls him Jesus Barabbas). Barabbas means "father's son" a title used of Jesus in 1:11 and 9:7 by the true Father. Barabbas is associated with rebels and murders yet he will go free, Jesus promotes love, peace, and forgiveness yet will be condemned.

It is hard to think that Pilate, who despised the Jews, felt much compassion for Jesus, so we must ask what his motives might have been for pushing Jesus' release. Did he realize Jesus was less of a threat to him, was he trying to undermine the Jewish leaders, perhaps he felt uncomfortable releasing Barabbas? Pilate may ask what Jesus has done, but, claiming to be king is enough to warrant crucifixion, and thus, his words help underscore to the reader that the true king was wrongly executed. Pilate works the political system getting a Jewish crowd to condemn one of their own to death, siding with Rome against their own people and completely fulfilling Jesus' words in 10:33. With the council antagonizing the crowd Pilate consents to their

wishes and sentences Jesus to death. To what extent Pilate is conceding to the crowd and to what extent he is playing politics is debatable. One think Mark wants the reader to see is that God' people handed Jesus over; that is, God's people rejected God's plan. While Jews have taken the brunt of criticism for Jesus' death, this is unfair. Mark thought of the Church as the continuation of Israel, meaning the Church is both responsible for and grows out of Jesus' death. As we approach this passage we must consider Mark's view of the relationship of the Church to Israel.

Questions

1. Jesus willingly allows others control of his life, how does that speak to you in a world always striving to be in control?
2. Here, again, we see Jesus use language of "coming" to reveal that the world will know God has glorified him, how does this alter your views of Jesus' return, if any, and, how have you seen Jesus glorified?
3. Jesus remains silent through much of the inquiry answering questions of identity but refusing to defend himself against charges, how would you respond to accusations made against you?
4. Have you ever felt like Peter that you have denied Jesus and beyond forgiveness, how did you recognize his grace and forgiveness, and how can you use such stories to help others?
5. We often place blame for Jesus' death on various parties how would you handle this situation if you were Pilate, in the crowd, or even a member of the council and the High Priest and other officials were telling you this man deserved death?

Crucifixion and Death

¹⁶The soldiers lead Jesus into the courtyard of the Governor's headquarters, and they called together a whole contingent of soldiers. ¹⁷They dressed him in purple and wove a crown out of thorns and put it on him. ¹⁸Then they saluted him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" ¹⁹Then they beat him with a stick and spit on him, while doing homage to him. ²⁰After mocking him, they stripped off the purple robes, and put his own clothes on him. Then they lead him away to crucify him.

²¹They conscripted Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus, who was coming from the countryside, to carry the cross. ²²They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha—which translated is the place of the Skull. ²³They gave him wine mixed with myrrh, however he did not take it. ²⁴Then they crucified him. They divided his clothes drawing lots to decide who got what.

²⁵It was nine in the morning when they crucified him. ²⁶The placard with the accusation was inscribed, "The King of the Jews". ²⁷With him they crucified two rebels, one on his right and one on his left. ²⁹Those walking by ridiculed him, shaking their heads and saying, "Ha, the one who would destroy the sanctuary and rebuild it in three days! ³⁰Save yourself! Come down from the cross!" ³¹Likewise, the chief-priest and Scribes mocked him among themselves, "He saved others yet is not able to save himself! ³²Let the Selected One, the King of Israel now come down from the cross, so we can see and believe!" Even the two crucified with him ridiculed him.

³³From noon until three in the afternoon the whole earth was in darkness. ³⁴At three o'clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani!"—which translated is "My God, my God why have you abandoned me!" ³⁵Some of those standing around heard this and said, "Look he is calling for Elijah." ³⁶Then someone ran to fill a sponge with sour wine and put it on a stick to him a drink saying, "Wait, we should see if Elijah takes him down." ³⁷But Jesus gave out a loud cry and expired. ³⁸Then the curtain of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom. ³⁹The centurion, standing facing him, saw him expire and said, "Truly this man was a son of God."

Commentary

This section depicts the complete (?) abandonment on Jesus and his utter humiliation as he approaches and suffers a horrific death. Jesus has already been rejected by his disciples and his people; now, in the hands of the nations (symbolized in the Roman guard) his rejection is complete. Throughout this section we will see allusions to Scripture, particularly Psalm 22, as Mark tries to develop a complete theological picture of what is happening. These Scripture references help Mark paint a picture without digressing from the narrative at hand. We will also see Jesus' true identity repeatedly used. While the characters mean to sarcastically mock Jesus, Mark uses these words ironically to underscore Jesus' true identity. This section is incredibly somber, but, through it all there is an ever present hope, resting in the knowledge that God is in control. We should notice that Mark says as little about the brutality of Jesus' physical suffering and death as possible, presumably because he was familiar with it. He spends

more time on theology and the mounting verbal abuse and spiritual strain Jesus endured, as if to say these were the vilest parts of the ordeal.

Scripture References in the Crucifixion Account		
Passage in Mark	Type of Reference	OT source
15:19	Allusion	Isaiah 50:6
15:20	Allusion	Isaiah 53:3-4
15:24	Quote	Psalms 22:18
15:29	Quote	Psalms 22:7
15:34	Quote	Psalms 22:1
15:36	Allusion	Psalms 69:21

Vv 16-20: This paragraph depicts the soldiers of Pilate’s guard holding a mock coronation service for Jesus. We are not told if this happens before or after the flogging which was to be part of his sentence. The guards in the privacy of a courtyard likely only accessible to the soldiers, they mock the one condemned as king. We have witnessed this type of behavior from soldiers against enemy prisoners in our own times. The soldiers are upset that someone would dare challenge Rome’s authority to rule and mock such behavior. Just as the Jewish council beat and mocked a prophet who would dare to claim special authority from God, so now the soldiers do the same to one who is condemned for claiming an authority they feel is reserved for the Emperor. The robes used to dress up Jesus probably were not literally purple (much too expensive for soldiers, and too fine to risk staining with blood). It is likely that Mark here means a sarcastic “royal robes” just as the crown is sarcastic. It is hard to translate, but, the word for crown here does not betray one worn by a ruler, rather, one similar to the olive leaf crown worn by a conquering hero, or, athletic champion. These actions complete the prophecy of 10:34 preparing us for the death of Jesus which follows. When the guards are done with Jesus they give him back his clothes, though, it is questionable whether or not they removed the crown. Presumably, it would have been upsetting to the Jewish sensibilities to see a prisoner walking through the streets of Jerusalem naked, though, Jesus will again be stripped prior to being put on the cross.

Vv 21-24: The account of verse 20 might indicate that the soldiers attempted to force Jesus to carry the cross, but, that it proved too much for him. At any rate Simon walks by the procession on his way to Jerusalem and is conscripted to carry the cross. This would have been a beam to which Jesus was affixed by the hands the beam would then have been hoisted up and set on a vertical pole permanently set in the ground. Simon is a minor character and may or may not have been a believer, though, his sons apparently were disciples. The inclusion of the note of Alexander and Rufus, shows that Mark and his readers knew them, and probably they provided this detail. It is not known for certain where Golgotha was, though, it was probably located near Jerusalem (a few hundred yards). Mark translates the Aramaic so the readers will gain a

more vivid picture of the place Jesus is taken.⁴¹ Though an historical detail, the picture of Simon carrying the cross of Jesus also gives a profound metaphor for discipleship. Simon literally walks into Jesus' path and takes up Christ's cross, carrying it to the end. It should be noted that John 19:17 says Jesus carried his own cross, here, tradition is probably right that Jesus started out carrying it and was replaced by Simon when he could go no further. We are not sure why John includes that detail and excludes Simon. It may well be that some had already begun to say Simon was crucified in Jesus' place and John was attempting to help readers understand it was actually Jesus who was crucified.⁴²

Upon arriving at the place of execution, Jesus is offered wine and myrrh, but, there is some confusion as to who offered this to him and why he refused it. It appears that this wine mixture was meant to be a narcotic to dull the senses during crucifixion, meaning it was unlikely the soldiers would give it to him, since they would desire to inflict as much pain as possible. However, no one else is explicitly mentioned. There may have been a group present (probably women) who wanted to ease the suffering of condemned prisoners, but, this is unclear. It is also unclear why Jesus refused, was it a desire for a clear head during the execution, a desire to keep his promise of his next taste of wine (see 14:25)?

Vv 25-32: Notice the time, everything which has occurred since Jesus was taken to Pilate happened in less than three hours, this was a very efficient event. As time slows down we must think that this is exactly how Jesus' followers would have experienced these circumstances. His life must have seemed a whirlwind of activity, while his death dragged on. Mark will now begin detailing three hour intervals allowing us to maintain a consistent time frame.

The charges against Jesus were meant to be a continued public mockery, outlining what he has done to deserve death. The fact that Jesus was in the middle of the rebels indicates that the soldiers saw him as the most serious charges. Further, Mark wants us to see that Jesus was surrounded by those deserving death, giving us a deeper appreciation for his love. One further reference may have been in Mark's mind, James' and John's request and boast in 10:37-40. Despite their assurances, when the time came for Jesus to enter his glory they were not present, two unnamed rebels take the honor.⁴³

Everyone around Jesus is ridiculing him, mocking his position; no one recognizes his true nature. We should not try too hard to reconcile Mark's description of the rebels with Luke's (Lk. 23:29-33), Mark wants to highlight that everyone turned on Jesus, Luke shows a theme of salvation. Looking too hard for the historical fact behind the account can lead to missing both points. The cries of the crowd echo 14:58 and the charges brought against Jesus, evidently this

⁴¹ The popular understanding that Golgotha looked like a skull has little merit, it was a theory created in the 19th century. Rather the place may have received the name because of the executions which happened there or even because it was the site of a polling station (skull as in heads counted).

⁴² This obviously was not a concern for Mark writing some 25 years earlier, in fact, it may have been a misreading of Mark which led to such a belief. This belief is still taught today in some Muslim circles.

⁴³ Some Old Latin manuscripts name them Zoathan and Chammatha but it is not likely these were accurate.

was a well-known comment. The Scribes and chief-priests, extend the mockery perhaps throwing Jesus' own words at him. If he wants them to see him come in glory, now is the time, the true King of Israel, the Selected One would be able to save himself and come down from the cross. Mark's inclusion of these sarcastic barbs is more than a record of the harassment lumped on Jesus. Ironically Jesus is doing exactly what these groups are demanding, though, not in saving himself, but, in sacrificing himself (see 8:35). This shows how far off people can be about God's plan that they ask for God to do what he is already doing, but, fail to recognize it happening.

Vv 33-39: At noon, after three hours of mocking, the scene shifts and the whole earth is shrouded in darkness. We must ask if Mark is being literal/scientific, metaphorical/theological, or some combination of both when he makes the comments about darkness (and many other elements of this paragraph). While some mistakenly try to explain the darkness by a solar eclipse this is impossible; eclipses cannot last three hours, nor can they happen during a full moon (the full moon is the marker to begin Passover). At most, Mark must be referring to something rather mundane like localized cloud cover (It is hard to imagine true supernatural darkness lasting three hours not being recorded anywhere else in history). This means we must look for metaphorical/theological meaning behind Mark's statement. Darkness is often associated with God's displeasure (See, Ex. 10:21-23; Deu. 28:29; Jer. 15:9; Am. 8:9). We should also remember passages such as Joel 2 and Mark 13:24 where the sun's darkening is a precursor for God beginning the "Day of Judgment" and establishing a new regime. Does Mark mean to say that in this darkness God has begun to fulfill the words of the prophets?

After the appearance of the darkness we are presented with Jesus' last words, the only words he speaks from the cross in Mark.⁴⁴ Mark has preserved the Aramaic words of Jesus four times in the Gospel (5:41, 7:34, 14:36, & 15:34) the first two in healing stories the second two in prayers. Is Mark trying to show that Jesus' words are about healing and communion with God, and doing so in balance? This is the only instance where Jesus is quoting another source, Psalm 22:1. The question then must be raised, why did he quote this verse? Two options are open to us (and they are not necessarily mutually exclusive). Jesus may well have felt abandoned by God at that instance and cried out in the words of the Psalmist to express that fact. Also Jesus may have cried out this phrase so those standing around would reflect on the Psalm (which Mark has woven throughout the passage) and remember that though God's servant seems afflicted in the end he is vindicated. It is an overstatement for us to say that Jesus *really* was abandoned by God in this moment.⁴⁵ Mark wants us to see in Jesus ourselves and the feeling of loneliness and abandonment we feel; Jesus also, despite his closeness to God,, felt the same. The language Mark uses to present Jesus' cry is similar to 1:11 and may indicate that he meant

⁴⁴ The so-called "seven last words" are a combination of the words recorded in all four gospels, and while they can be theologically powerful together overemphasis on the historical use of them can blur the scene each writer is trying to present.

⁴⁵ Not because it is impossible for us to think Jesus was abandoned by God (though one surely can question if the two persons of the Trinity can ever truly be separated), but, because Mark does not spell it out.

it to be heard and interpreted by those present. If this is the case it may well indicate that Jesus knew any feelings of abandonment he felt then would soon be swallowed up in God's vindication of him. We should also not forget, that as Jesus entered his darkest hour of life the words on his lips were a prayer of lament and hope and one taken from Scripture, surely this is meant to be a pattern to follow.

Jesus' words are not even heard correctly by those standing around, rather, they hear a cry for help directed toward Elijah. One onlooker wants to prolong the torture Jesus is experiencing by giving him some wine so he will not expire so soon. The soldiers would not have interfered with this so long as Jesus died they did not care how long it took. Jesus then gives another cry, though we are not told if it is articulate or simply a groan. Mark's description of Jesus' death is soft and somber, matter-of-fact yet polite, how one describes the death of a loved one, and thoroughly consistent with Mark's description of the entire day.

Jesus' death occurs somewhere around three in the afternoon and is immediately followed by the tearing of the curtain in the Temple. What exactly is meant in this statement is subject to question. On a theological level it is popular to say the curtain between God and humanity has been destroyed. However, it is at least as likely that Mark meant to underscore that God left the Temple, similar to the events described by the prophet Ezekiel. It may also be that since one of the curtains of the Temple was decorated with earth, sky, and sea that the tearing was a prefiguring of God's shaking up of the entire cosmos. Part of the problem in identifying Mark's intent is that there were two curtains in the Temple and Mark does not tell us which one was torn, the one between the two outer sections or the one between the holiest section and the next. Any or perhaps all of these theological meanings could be wrapped up in Mark's words. However, there is no historical evidence for such an event, though, there are some other historical curiosities. Jewish and Roman historians alike, do recount Temple doors opening on their own prior to the Temple's destruction. The Accounts vary and are somewhat suspect, but, they are interesting especially as the Roman historian Tacitus attributes the effect to "The gods are departing."^{iv} Again it must be stressed that the presence or absence of historical data does not impact Mark's narrative. Mark wants us to see a new theological reality begins in Jesus' death and we must work to understand what that means, not what happened to the physical Temple.

The quote by the centurion, is typically seen as a response to the events of the day delivered by a believing Gentile, as an ironic twist on the fact the Jews do not understand who Jesus is. That is, though Jesus' people cannot discern his identity while he lives with them, this Gentile sees Jesus for one day and understands him. In the centurion's words we see echoed statements of Jesus' nature from the beginning of the Gospel (1:1). This, though, does not mean the centurion was authentic in his statement. Mark obviously wants us to see the truth behind the centurion's comment, but, he very well may have been ironical in saying this. There is no need whatsoever to read any belief into the centurion, the point is that, like Mark, the reader sees the true statement even when the rest of the world might not. In fact, based on Mark's account

we would be hard pressed to find any reason for such a man to think that Jesus (who died after only a few hours on the cross) would be fit to where the title “God’s son”.⁴⁶

Questions

1. What do you think was going through Simon’s mind as he carried the cross of a condemned rebel, do you think he ever became a believer, and how does he provide an example for your life?
2. How do you interpret the statement of the centurion, is he a legitimate believer or are his comments the capstone of the ironic comments surrounding Jesus when he died, and the inability of the world to understand him?
3. When you think about the darkness covering the world and the tearing of the curtain, what do you think Mark is trying to tell you, are these simply literal events do they only have symbolic meaning, a combination of both? And what are the Theological realities he is trying to express?
4. When you see all of the Scripture references Mark uses in this passage, how do you think we should interpret them, particularly the quote of Psalm 22:1 in verse 34?
5. Put yourself in the Women’s shoes, what do you think they were thinking/feeling, particularly if they were not present at the last supper and Gethsemane?

⁴⁶ Notice “son” has not been capitalized, because even if the centurion is authentic in his statement there is no reason to believe he is a convert, rather, he could have been a pagan and made such a statement. If this were the case then son depicts a favored position open to many contrary to the Christian sense of a unique position held by Jesus.

Burial and Resurrection

⁴⁰But some women did look on from far off, including Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and Joses, and Salome. ⁴¹While Jesus was in Galilee they followed him, they also supported him and with many others came with him to Jerusalem.

⁴²It was already late in the afternoon on Friday, that is the day before the Sabbath. ⁴³Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the council, and one who earnestly anticipated God's reign, dared to approach Pilate and request Jesus' body. ⁴⁴Pilate was shocked Jesus was already dead, and called for the centurion and asked him if Jesus had already died. ⁴⁵After being confirmed by the centurion, he granted the corpse to Joseph; ⁴⁶who bought a linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the cloth and laid it in a tomb, which had been hewn from the rock, then rolled a stone in front of the tomb's entrance. ⁴⁷But Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses observed the place where the body was laid.

^{16:1}After the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices in order that they could go and anoint the body. ²Early in the morning on the first day of the week, they went to the tomb just after sunrise. ³They were discussing among themselves, "Who will roll the stone from the tomb's entrance for us?" ⁴Looking up, they saw stone had been rolled away though it was very large. ⁵Entering the tomb, they saw a young man, clothed in a white robe and seated on the right side, and they were terrified. ⁶Then he said to them, "Do not fear. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He is risen. He is not here. Look, here is where they laid him. ⁷Now go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He goes ahead of you into Galilee, and you will see him there just as he told you.'" ⁸They left, fleeing from the tomb, trembling with amazement. But, they said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.

Commentary

Jesus died alone none of his family and friends were nearby. But his burial does reveal that his friends were still around and still cared for him; though not the disciples we would expect. The disciples who are mentioned in this part of the story are disciples whom we have not seen before, named here for the first time. This unit features the women who had accompanied Jesus through his ministry, and otherwise are unknown in Mark, though their names are known in Church history. These less obvious disciples take care of Jesus' body after his death, providing some last dignity to one who died in shame.

Vv 40-41: The section opens by revealing that among Jesus' followers were many women, who helped to provide the group with food and clothing. Until now, we could easily presume that all of Jesus' followers were men; but, Mark has revealed that though the Twelve were all men (the only ones called "disciples" in Mark) discipleship extended to women. It is unclear how many women were a part of the group, but, Mark leads us to believe it was significantly more than the three mentioned. Many, and perhaps all, of these women had male relatives among Jesus' followers; given the norms of the society it is hard to imagine a woman accompanying the group without a male relative (except perhaps an older widow). Three women are mentioned by name; however, as with so many other small characters Mark gives little

information about their identity, probably assuming his readers would know who they were. It is a testament to early Christianity that so many women were so easily recognizable by their reputation. Mary Magdalene is known to us through Luke where Jesus removes demons from her (Lk. 8:2). She is also the only person universally attested at the empty tomb (John says she was alone see, Jn. 20). Salome is otherwise unknown, she may have been the mother of James and John (sons of Zebedee) since Matthew uses this language when recording the event (Mt. 27:56). The other Mary is more problematic to identify. Many believe that she is the mother of Jesus, since he had brothers named James and Joses (6:3). However, it is unclear why Mark would call James “the younger” (he was known as “James the Just”), unless perhaps he meant “Jesus’ younger brother”, but, since he applies the title only to James it seems odd. Others suggest that she is the mother of James the son of Alphaeus (3:19), who in Christian tradition is known as “James the Less” or “the younger”. For us two thousand years removed from the scene identifying these women is far less important than it was for Mark’s first readers. Mark is saying to his audience “here is the story of the women you know”, because we do not know them it is less important to identify them, rather, we here we say we can trust that members of the Church knew them and we can trust the Church. These women are at a distance, but, unlike all the male disciples, they witness Jesus’ death. These women could testify to the fact Jesus died.

Vv 42-47: Like Simon, and the women, Joseph of Arimathea was probably a known figure in Mark’s community. Also like Simon (and unlike the women) he is not described as a follower of Jesus; rather, Mark uses the ambiguous “anticipated God’s reign”. Mark has always associated “God’s reign” with following Jesus, yet, Jesus is now and Joseph is “anticipating”. Was Joseph simply a member of the council who realized Jesus had been unjustly condemned and wanted to do what he could for the wronged prophet, or was he a true follower who wanted to honor Jesus? It may be Joseph simply felt that Jesus was wronged and wanted to make up for it and Mark is rewarding that action by giving him an honored title; though, it is hard to imagine someone going to such lengths simply to apologize for an injustice. Mark may well be intentionally using an ambiguous phrase to distance Joseph from Jesus and his followers. Joseph is a wealthy member of the Jerusalem ruling class, the enemies of Jesus in the story. Mark may well want us to believe that the council was unanimously opposed to Jesus, and Joseph as a true follower undermines that position. It may also be that Mark wants to highlight the women and their testimony so he downplays Joseph.

Joseph obviously was not just any member of the council, he had some considerable pull, since he was able to petition Pilate for a favor. Roman policy was that crucifixion victims were not buried, rather, scavengers disposed of the bodies. In Judea it seems some exception was made, and the victims were ultimately buried in a mass grave, not necessarily out of respect for the dead, but, simply to remove the bodies from sight. Joseph would have needed some considerable pull to gain permission to take the body. Even though Pilate seemed well disposed to Jesus (15:9-15) it would have been no easy matter to request Jesus’ body. This was a matter of Roman justice, and Pilate would not have wanted to appear soft (plus he hated the

Jews). It may be that he owed Joseph (or wanted Joseph to owe him) and since it was almost Sabbath (and Passover) he banked on few people seeing Jesus buried, and thus, compromising his reputation. At any length it was very courageous for Joseph to make the request and he could not have banked on Pilate's generosity. The burial is somewhat hasty since everything had to be completed before sundown and the start of the Sabbath (see, Deut. 21:23). But Joseph, who is evidently very wealthy, has a tomb prepared near the city.

Pilate's shock at Jesus' death is sometimes read to mean that Jesus died so soon as to be suspicious, and thus, on his own terms. However, since the flogging Jesus endured could often be fatal, there is no need to see anything suspicious in Jesus' death (though Mark does imply in 15:33-38 that there was some sense of Jesus controlling his time of death). Rather, Pilate's surprise is a pretext for calling in the centurion in charge of the crucifixion to confirm Jesus' death. Mark has already told us Christian women witnessed and confirmed Jesus' death, now he shows us a Roman soldier, charged with executing Jesus, confirms his death to a Roman official. Neither of these characters are likely to lie about Jesus being dead, because they have their jobs/lives at stake if Jesus is not executed, especially the centurion who commented about his death (15:39).

In what must have been a very hurried process, the whole of verse 42-47 taking less than three hours, Joseph buries Jesus' body. While Joseph is said to have buried Jesus, it is unlikely that he would defile himself the day before the Passover (Nu. 19:11). It is most likely that it was Joseph's (Gentile?) servants who did all the work, after all removing a body from a cross and burying it in a different location was certainly not a one-man job. Again, the same women who witnessed Jesus' death witnessed his burial.⁴⁷ These same women who ministered to Jesus in life will minister to him in death and those who witnessed his death will witness his burial.

16:1-8: Everything about 15:46-47 prepares the way for the events of 16:1-2. Jesus was buried in a hurry, presumably without some of the rites considered essential for an honorable burial. Saturday evening, immediately after the Sabbath ended, the women mentioned above buy spices to complete Jesus' burial. Since, it was evening, it was impossible for the women to go to a dark tomb to anoint a body, they waited for dawn so they could work in the light. We are not told but if the grave faced east, it is even more essential to wait for morning when the sun could illuminate the tomb.

The women who witnessed Jesus' burial are returning to the site to perform these tasks and provide their teacher with a proper burial. The same women who saw him die and buried are now the ones who approach the tomb. Mark has established a consistent witness; these women have seen every event surrounding Jesus from Friday on. They saw Jesus die, they saw him buried, and there can be no question about their consistent testimony concerning what

⁴⁷ It is impossible to know why Salome is omitted in 15:47 and 16:1, nor is there a good guess, she simply leaves the story. As for the second Mary, obviously Mark did not want to rewrite her full title three times, so he abbreviates it using James once and Joses once, showing it is the same woman.

follows. However, in that society the testimony of a woman was decidedly inferior to that of men (if it was accepted at all). This makes one question why Mark would rely so heavily on these women's testimony, when the other Gospel's report Jesus' male disciples also saw the empty tomb (Lk. 23:12; Jn. 20:3). Is Mark opposed to bringing the disciples back into the story after deserting Jesus, maybe he wants to establish that Christianity is based on the testimony of women, maybe he omits their testimony because it was not consistent through the entirety of Jesus' death and burial, or maybe he did include it in a now lost ending (see below). These questions of credibility are central to accepting this story, Christianity is ultimately dependent to some degree on believing these witnesses. Having said that we must also remember Thomas Aquinas' saying, "To one who has faith, no explanation is necessary. To one without faith, no explanation is possible."

The women approach the tomb worried about how they are going to move the heavy stone which sealed it. This rather earthy discussion is interrupted, by the recognition the stone had been moved already. Mark's language describing what the women saw is vivid, in 15:40 they are bystanders taking in the scene, in 15:47 they seem to be diligent in observing the details (so to get the right tomb on their return), and here, the sight seems to wake them up to reality. One can almost see the conversation interrupted by the panicked recognition that Jesus' tomb stood open.

The young man and his message are strange, allowing us to easily understand why the women are frightened by him and his message. Matthew tells us that it was an angel at the tomb and Luke's description of the men's appearance leaves little doubt (Mt. 28:5; Lk.24:4). Mark does not give us that luxury, though one can certainly say Mark implies an angel. The youth's message is even more startling, Jesus is not in the grave. The comment to look at the place that Jesus was laid is meant to imply "take note of", rather than to imply the women did not know where Jesus was laid. The young man's message proves Jesus' predictions were correct, not only did he rise, but he rose bodily. We have said before that "three days" meant a short time and, indeed, we are not told if Jesus rose on Friday, Saturday, or Sunday, nor is it important. Jesus rose after a brief time, far briefer than the women were expecting, and his resurrection proves all of his other claims. Now the women must go, they must spread the news to Jesus' disciples, and Peter specifically. Jesus has forgiven their betrayal and is now going to meet them just as he said in Galilee.

Galilee represents the beginning for Mark, a time of powerful work and Jesus' presence, so while this is a historical remark (see Mt. 28) it also has theological significance. Jesus is offering restoration to a time of joy and power, now the disciples must return to claim it. Was this message open to Judas, we are never told, but, it is possible he was included in "disciples" and meant to return with them.

Almost all scholars agree that Mark's writing ends with "because they were afraid" and everything following this was later attempts to find a conclusion for the Gospel (note the square brackets in most translations). The question for scholars is whether or not Mark meant

to end the Gospel with such an awkward phrase (and in Greek it is even more awkward). There are three major theories: Mark never finished the Gospel, the original ending was lost, or, Mark intended to end the Gospel on a cliffhanger. We are too far removed to know for certain which of these possibilities is true, we can only speculate. Mark is writing for Christians some thirty years after the resurrection, one must ask whether he would fail to include stories of Jesus' appearance to the disciples, especially since everyone would know these stories. It seems more likely that if Mark wanted a climax that did not involve appearance stories, he would have left off with the young man's speech in verse 7. Some have argued that Mark's Gospel was meant to be a stage play and the awkward ending was meant so the actor reciting it would then take on the role of the women and tell his personal story of encountering Jesus. While such theories are pure speculation, the premise is true, lacking an ending, Mark's Gospel invites the reader to reflect on how he or she encountered Jesus and whether or not she or he is going to carry out the young man's commission where the women seem to have failed.

Questions

1. Consider Joseph of Arimathea's situation, how difficult do you think it must have been to request Jesus' body and to bury it in public view?
2. We are not told, but how do you think the disciples (including the women) spent that Saturday, remember it was both Sabbath and Passover?
3. What do you think it says about early Christianity that many of its claims seem to rest on the testimony of women, especially since the larger society did not value a woman's testimony?
4. What do you think of the ending of Mark's Gospel, did it originally have a resurrection account, what does an incomplete ending say to you?
5. How has your picture of Jesus and the Gospel of Mark changed as you have read it and how can you share these changes with others?

Added Endings

^{8b} However, they briefly stated everything they had been commanded to those with Peter. After this Jesus himself sent them out from east to west and through them the holy and eternal proclamation of salvation through the Ages. Amen.

⁹After rising early on the first day of the week, Jesus first appeared to Mary Magdalene, from whom he threw out seven demons. ¹⁰She then went told those who had been with him, who were mourning and weeping. ¹¹ However, they did not believe her report that he was living and she had seen him. ¹²After this he appeared in a different form to two of them who were going into the countryside. ¹³These two then returned and told the rest, but, they did not believe them. ¹⁴Finally, he appeared to the eleven as they were eating, and scolded them for their unbelief and hardheartedness, because they did not believe those who had seen him after he was raised. ¹⁵Then he said to them, “Go into the whole world, and preach the Victory Proclaim to the whole of creation. ¹⁶Those who believe and are baptized will be saved, but those who do not believe will be condemned. ¹⁷These signs will accompany believers, they will throw out demons in my name, they will speak new languages, ¹⁸if they should pick up snakes, or drink something poisonous, it will not harm them, if they lay hands on the sick they shall be made well.” ¹⁹After the Lord Jesus told them this he was taken up into the sky and seated at the right hand of God. ²⁰Then they left and preached everywhere, the Lord worked with them, confirming the message through these signs accompanying them.

Commentary

Whether or not Mark intended to end his Gospel at verse 8, the ending seemed incomplete to some early readers. Sometime prior to AD 400 two different endings were created to help provide some clarity for Mark’s readers. While some Church Fathers knew of these endings they did not think they were authentic. As sometimes happens the endings were eventually incorporated into the text of Mark through a written game of “telephone”. At first the endings were left off to the side clearly separated from the text, as if to say, this is someone’s attempt to end the Gospel. As time went one scribes eventually left out the clear break and these endings were written as part of the Gospel. Because of their inclusion in the King James Version it is very difficult to remove them from modern translations. Now most translations will set these verses off in square brackets (a feature glossed over by many readers), but, they remain in some regard part of the text.

V 8b: This “Short Ending” resembles a liturgical benediction one might encounter in a High Church service. There is a brief recap of the women’s message, but, the main focus is the commissioning Jesus gives to the disciples. The commission is meant for the reader to engage in and take seriously. Notice the wonderfully poetic description of the commission.

Vv 9-20: The “Longer Ending” attempts to provide a conclusion to the Gospel in a way the Shorter Ending does not; providing us with a historical account of Jesus’ resurrection. One notices that this ending bears no resemblance to verses 1-8. Rather, it seems that the author of the ending combines Luke 24 and John 20 to provide a sketch of the events after verse 8.

Notice how suddenly, though the women have all run away from fear, Mary Magdalene is alone with Jesus in the garden (Jn. 20). This scene is followed by a brief account of the travelers on the Road to Emmaus (Lk. 24). These scenes do not work well with the story Mark has told and are an obvious attempt [though not a bad one] to complete the Gospel. There are also references to the Church's growth taken from Acts and one curious statement in verse 18. It is Mark 16:18 which has provided scriptural authority for some Appalachian churches to practice snake handling. There is no clear evidence where this reference comes from, and it does not easily fall into line with the Gospels or Acts. It appears the author may have had Paul's encounter with a snake mentioned in Acts 28:3-5 in mind when writing. It is also possible he knew of a tradition that Justus (mentioned in Acts 1:23) was unharmed after drinking poison (see Eusebius *History* 3.39.9-10). What we then see in verses 17-18 is the experiences of the apostles normalized for the Christian life; thus, all Christians are expected to show the evidences of the Holy Spirit which the apostles showed. This, I believe, goes way beyond picking up a copperhead. This whole section reflects the author's conviction that Christians cannot be content unless they are emulating the earliest apostles, not so much in duplicating their feats as in living in the same Spirit.

Questions

1. What do you think, how do you feel about the message of/about Jesus being described as "holy and eternal", how do you show the same level of reverence?
2. How do you understand the commission to preach to the whole of creation?
3. Jesus scolds and commissions the disciples in the same breath, what does that say about God's love and forgiveness?
4. The signs meant to accompany the believers are often difficult to believe, what do you make of them, and how do/can they apply to you?
5. What authority do these verses have over your life, even if you do not think they are part of Mark's original Gospel?

ⁱ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39.15.

ⁱⁱ Tacitus *Annals* 15.44.

ⁱⁱⁱ R. H. Gundry, *Matthew* 388.

^{iv} Tacitus *History* 5.13 in France 657-658.