

# **Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of Mark**

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**Note: this is a draft copy that still needs editing**

# #1 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of Mark (Introduction)

The Gospel of Mark is the shortest, fastest-moving Gosport. The word “immediately” appears in it frequently. Its transitions are as quick and jarring as its introduction. Something important has happened, and Mark is eager to tell us about it.

The first verse outlines the entire book. It is structured around two confessions regarding the identity of Jesus. The first section runs from the first chapter up to Caesarea Philippi, where Peter confesses that Jesus is “the Christ.” Part two stretches from there to the end of the, where at the cross the centurion beholds Jesus and confesses: “Truly, this was the Son of God.” The Gospel is thus outlined by twin confessions regarding the identity of Jesus.

In the first part of the Gospel, we see the revelation of Jesus as the powerful, miracle-working king sent from God. In the second, we see the revelation of him as the suffering Savior. Both aspects are essential to our salvation.

As we see from the introduction, Jesus’s later sufferings are clearly previewed at the beginning. We will restrict the rest of our thoughts here to the prologue, including the rest of chapter 1 in our meditation on chapter 2.

The common theme of these introductory episodes appears in the phrase “in the wilderness.” Isaiah prophecies of a “voice crying in the wilderness.” When John appears, he does so “in the wilderness.” After Jesus is baptized with water (that which flowed through Eden), the Spirit leads him into the wilderness. What a stark contrast from the temptation of Adam and Eve. They were tempted in a garden paradise, while Jesus is tempted in the desert wilderness. They were tempted with luscious fruit all around them. Jesus is tempted in a dead desert. In the beginning, the Spirit hovered over the waters, which led to life and fulness. Now the Spirit leads Christ into a dead wilderness.

Christ came from heaven to the wilderness of this world, that he might lead us out of the wilderness into heaven itself. He has completed that trek, and his kingdom has come.

The time is fulfilled. Jesus's call to us is a simple one: repent and believe in the Gospel.

## #2 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of Mark - 1:1-2:15

The chapter divisions of the Bible do not always properly line up with the divisions of the book. This does not call into question the reliability of the Bible. The chapter divisions were added 1000 years after the NT was written!

Mark 1:1-15 contains the first section of the Gospel--a prologue. The theme was "in the wilderness."

The first major section of Mark stretches from 1:16 through 2:14. We will look at this section in today's devotional on Mark.

Mark likes to carefully order and arrange his narrative. All the Gospel writers do this to some degree, but Mark especially so. Scholars have referred to his favorite method of arrangement as a "Markan Sandwich." A sandwich has bread on the outsides and meat in the middle. The outer edges are parallel, but the focus is on the meat in the middle.

In 1:16-2:14 we have a big sandwich to look at. If we were to map it out visually as a big picture, it would look like this:

A - Jesus Calls Disciples: Follow Me! (1:16-20)

B - Jesus does miracles with authority: cast out demons (1:21-28)

C - Jesus heals with touch (1:29-34)

D - Jesus's Purpose: I came to preach! (1:35-39)

C' - Jesus heals with touch (1:40-45)

B - Jesus does miracles with authority: heals the lame man (2:1-12)

A' - Jesus Call Disciples: Follow Me! (2:13-14)

We have developed this detail in our sermon series and elsewhere on Mark several years ago. Here we just touch on the general point and purpose in a broad outline.

All these stories serve to underscore a fundamental point: Jesus is a king with authority who he brings the kingdom God. Jesus has authority over his disciples: he commands, and they obey. He says, "follow me" and immediately they follow him. Even the demons acknowledge this authority. They recognize the Son of God and his authority. They obey, but they do not adore. They are forced into submission, but their hearts are still rebellious.

This authority stretches beyond the devil itself to sin and its effects. Jesus uses the healing of the lame man to demonstrate that the "Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." It's hard to imagine a more compelling proof! He who can instantaneously remove the effect of sin can also remove the guilt of sin.

Jesus comes to take away sin and give us His righteousness. This is pictured in the healing miracles done through his "touch." He touches Peter's mother-in-law and she is made well. He takes her sickness and gives her his life. This is even more vividly seen in the healing of the leper. Leprosy made one ceremonially unclean. According to ritual law, a clean thing can be made unclean by touching an unclean thing. But you cannot make an unclean thing clean in the opposite direction. Contact with sin infects the "contactor," not the other way around. An unclean thing can defile a holy thing, but a holy thing does not purify that which is unholy.

Except with Jesus! His holy touch removes unholiness. How? He takes it upon himself and ultimately carries it to the cross.

But in the center, the emphasis is placed on the primary means Jesus will use to express his authority and bring in his kingdom: the preaching of the word. "Let us go on to the next towns that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out."

Christ's kingdom comes through his word. The word has the priority. Even the miracles are subordinate to it: they serve to ratify the word. For example, the healing of the lame man demonstrates the authority of his word of forgiveness. The demons are cast out by his authoritative word of rebuke.

If we wish to be in Jesus and have his power, we must find it in his word. In particular, we must find it in his preached word. That ministry has been entrusted to the church of Christ. After his resurrection he told his disciples: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching* them to observe all that I have commanded you.

And to this ministry he has added his rich blessing, and promised to be perpetually present in it: "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Let us then give ourselves faithfully to Christ's word and to its preaching, and in it find the power to save and brings us safely to the kingdom of God.

## #3 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of Mark - 2:16-3:12

So far we have noticed that Mark has carefully arranged his Gospel utilizing careful patterns. These patterns are not simply a fun "puzzle" we can find in the narrative using repeated words and themes. They serve an important purpose to help us better understand the key emphases of his teaching.

The second section runs from 2:16-3:12. It consists of a chain-linked series of narratives with an increasing degree of conflict between the Jews and Jesus.

This conflict was heightened by a series of antagonistic questions from the lips of the Jews.

1. In 2:16, the Scribes of the Pharisees ask: "How is it that he eats with tax collectors and sinners?"
2. In 2:18, the disciples of John and of the Pharisees ask: "Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?"
3. In 2:24, the Pharisees ask: "Behold, why do they do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?"

Interestingly, in the next section the Jews are silenced (3:4), and deliberate with the Herodians as to how they might kill Jesus (3:6). The conflict that gradually heightened has now reached a breaking point: the Jews are going to kill Jesus!

We saw in the prologue that the sufferings of Jesus at the end of the Gospel are previewed in the beginning. The conflict that will lead Jesus to death begins here!

If Jesus experienced conflict, we should expect nothing less! To be sure, there is a sinful conflict that flows from our evil hearts, destructive words, and cruel actions. But there is also an inevitable conflict that will come on account of Christ and the Gospel.

In the midst of this conflict and suffering, Jesus continues to do good and honor the Lord. In this, he reveals his work as our Savior. He is the great physician who comes to heal the sickness of sin (2:17). He is the bridegroom now come at the end of the ages to begin his wedding feast (2:19). He brings in the eternal Sabbath rest, which offers life and healing to his weary servants. He brings in God's kingdom, vanquishing Satan's

kingdom and all its minions.

When this conflict reaches its climax on the cross, Jesus will do the same: praying that God would forgive those who crucify him. He will minister life to others as his life is taken from him.

With Jesus, there will always be conflict with the world. But enmity with the world means friendship with God. With earthly friends, there are some blessings for this life. But with God, there is eternal life.



## #3B - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of Mark 3:14-6:13 (Structure)

Mark likes sandwiches. No, not literal sandwiches. I am speaking of structural sandwiches. Mark likes to arrange the material of his narrative in what we call a "reverse parallelism" that resembles a sandwich. Imagine a sandwich (from top to bottom) made like this: bread, butter, cheese, meat, cheese, butter, butter, bread. If you were to make it into a chart, it would look like this:

A - Bread

B - Butter

C- Cheese

D - Meat

C' - Cheese

B' - Butter

A' - Bread

The parts of the sandwich are arranged in a reverse parallel fashion. If it was a regular parallel, it would look like this:

A - Bread

B - Butter

C- Cheese

D - Meat

A' - Bread

B' - Butter

C'- Cheese

D' - Meat

The problem is that your sandwich would be really messy if you put it together this way. Instead, you put the firmer parts on the outside and the messier stuff on the inside

in a reverse parallel fashion.

This is what Mark does when he writes his Gospel. We saw a few days ago how Mark arranges parts of chapters 1-2 in "sandwich" pattern. He does the same thing in this section, which runs from 3:14-6:13. Without getting into all the specific details, the big picture looks like this

A - Call of the Twelve (3:14-19)

B - Questions Re: Jesus' Family and the Source of his Power (3:20-35)

C - 3 Parables: Sower, Growing Seed, the Mustard Seed (4:1-34)

Center: Jesus' Revelation of Divine Power on the Sea (4:35-41)

C' - 3 Miracles: Demoniac, Woman w/ Blood, Jairus' Daughter (5:1-43)

B' - Questions Re: Jesus' Family and the Source of his Power (6:1-6)

A' - Sending out of the Twelve (6:7-13)

Based on this "chart" you can see that the central focus of this section will be Jesus's revelation of his divine power on the sea. But it begins and ends with passages about Christ's delegating that power to human servants in the twelve.

In the next few days we will be working through these chapters in light of this arrangement. We begin today with 3:14 and what we find in the rest of chapter 3.

Jesus has already demonstrated that he has a unique authority yet to be seen in redemptive history. Other prophets did miracles here and there, but no one has done as many as Jesus. To top it off, he is also casting out demons, and declaring that he has authority to forgive sins. Most humans who possessed this kind of authority would want to keep it for themselves. Those who did not have it would do whatever they needed to get it.

But Jesus freely delegates that authority to others. The text tells us that Jesus appointed twelve whom he named "Apostles." The word "Apostle" also means "emissary" or "representative." An apostle is a delegate vested with the authority of the one who sends him, namely Jesus.

The Apostles were unique emissaries, part of the foundational age of the church. Some of their authority is unique and temporary for that age, while other parts are permanent and continue through other officers (pastors, elders, and deacons).

The special authority they are given is the ability to do miracles and exorcisms. Jesus never gave this authority to all. They also have special authority in their teaching in that they are the agents of new revelation that would become part of the Holy Scriptures. As with Jesus, the preaching/teaching of the Apostles is foundational and the most important. The miracles serve to ratify the word.

The apostles are long dead and gone. They can no longer work miracles. But they continue to speak (or better: Christ continues to speak!) through their words.

The apostles were weak, sinful, ordinary men. But Christ chose to show his power and authority through them. So today in his church he delegates his authority to pastors, elders, and deacons. They cannot lord it over the church as if it exists to serve them, their egos, or their status. Nor is the church given to their care to be an arena for them to test their own ideas and reshape it in their own image. They have authority to serve, to minister, and to sacrificial care for the people of God. The congregation, in turn, recognizes that despite their weakness and imperfection, Christ will bring his very words through them. They can often be wrong, to be sure (how often were the Apostles wrong?!). But God is pleased to bring his will to us through human servants.

As clearly as Jesus has demonstrated that his power has come from God, there continues to be a group that stands in conflict with him: the scribes and Pharisees. They absurdly claim that Jesus's power comes from Satan. Jesus points out the utterly contradictory character of their claims. Satan is evil, but he is not stupid. He is not going to destroy his own army. Instead, their claims expose their hardness of heart and constitute a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit that is unforgivable--indeed, it is an eternal sin.

What exactly does that mean? Essentially, Jesus's miracles were a manifestation ahead of time of what heaven will be like: no demons, no sickness, no blindness, no misery, no death. It was a preview of the final, visible work of the Holy Spirit to fully transform our bodies and our lives into what they will be in glory.

But the Pharisees saw the full manifestation of God's Spirit and claimed it was the work of the devil. They saw heaven but declared that it was hell.

What greater evidence could you be given to show that God is real and that his kingdom has come? If the sick are healed, lepers cleansed, the blind see, and the dead raised, what more do you need?

That's why their sin is "unforgivable." Not only had they seen more than sufficient evidence, but they had also been specially prepared by OT revelation for the coming of Jesus. As John says: he came to his own, but his own did not receive him.

By contrast, there is another group that does not reject him but receives him in faith. We often joke that when a leader's approval goes down in the polls that the only people that still like him are his close aids and immediate family. Jesus, however, radically changes this. He finds his closest confidants not in his immediate family, but a spiritual one: "Here are my mother, and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother" (34).

And what is God's will? It is that we would believe in the name of the Son of Man. That we would see his power and come to trust him. It is to see the greatness of the blessedness of the kingdom and the power at work through his word. It is to find in these things that which is more than sufficient for this world. It is to die to all other earthly needs, desires, and pursuits that God may be all in all in our hearts.

## #4 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of Mark 4

In our last devotional on Mark, we outlined how 3:14-6:7-13 are structured in the form of a Markan "sandwich." Here is that structure again for your reference.

A - Call of the Twelve (3:14-19)

B - Questions about Jesus' Family & the Source of his Power (3:20-35)

C - 3 Parables: the Sower, Growth, the Mustard Seed (4:1-34)

Center: Jesus' Divine Power on the Sea (4:35-41)

C' - 3 Miracles: Demoniac, Woman w/ Blood, Jairus' Daughter (5:1-43)

B' - Questions about Jesus' Family & the Source of his Power (6:1-6)

A' - Sending out of the Twelve (6:7-13)

This structure shows us that the central point (the one in the middle!) relates to Jesus's identity. He has the power of God and brings in his kingdom!

Today we take a closer look at Mark 4. This is the chapter that brings us down to the heart of this section of the narrative. It consists first of three parables related to seeds and growth. It is also a rather long section of teaching. This corresponds to the three miracles of chapter 5, which is also a fairly long section. This underscores the fundamental character of Jesus's ministry. It is both a word and deed ministry, with a priority going to the word. The deeds come after and flow out of the word and reinforce it. So in our lives, we first believe in the word, and then live (deeds!) out of it. Worship consists in speaking and hearing (i.e., a word), with sacraments (deeds/actions) that signify and seal it.

The first part of the chapter consists of three parables: the parables of the sower, the growing seed, and the mustard seed. Even as these parables are part of a bigger parallel structure stretching from chapters 3-6, the parable of the sower is arranged in its own mini-sandwich. Thankfully it is not hard to see:

A - The parable of the Sower Told

B - The Purpose of the Parables

B - The parable of the Sower Explained

The details are pretty obvious. Jesus essentially retells the whole parable to his disciples, giving them a clear explanation along the way.

Here are some points to highlight about the parable. First, there are really only two kinds of seed. Three of them are fruitless, and only one of them falls on good soil. There is great variation in the fruitless seed and many reasons they do not grow ((it can be stolen, fall away, choke). But there is consistency in the growing seed. Second, note the emphasis on the word of God. The seed is the word. We will grow in it! It is very easy to run after other good things (many of them not bad in themselves) thinking that they will cause us to grow. The word of God is the only thing that can make us grow to eternal life. Through it God feeds us, not man. Fourth, it is interesting how the parable previews what happens to some of the disciples. Judas is like the seed that Satan stole away after receiving the word with joy. Peter is like the seed that is on rocky ground, stumbling over the call to suffer persecution with Christ. The sons of Zebedee are consumed with power and status, and in this way manifest the principles of the seed choked out by the deceitfulness of riches and the desire for other things. That is not to say there is no difference between Judas (the son of perdition) and the others (chosen by God). It is to say that the principles manifested here affect us in our walk with the Lord.

The center of the parable reveals something surprising about the purpose of the parables. We often think that parables are primarily designed to be simple "sermon illustrations" to make his "theological" points more clear. The problem with this view is that the parables have a dual purpose. They serve to veil the kingdom of God to the blind, but make it more evident to those who can see. So the word of God has a dual effect. Sometimes it hardens those who hear it when they reject the word. The same message will also soften those upon whom God has placed his Holy Spirit.

Finally, this parable indicates that the kingdom of God is and must be a growing thing. The parable of the growing seed in verses 26-29 shows us that the power of this growth does not come from our own strength. It comes only from God. The farmers plant and tend, but only God's power makes it grow. So it is with the Gospel. We are called to be

active and engaged, but all the time knowing it is not our power at work, but God's. Thus we operate 100% out of faith (passively trusting God) but also 100% active and engaged (trusting that he will manifest his power through us).

The last section is the briefest of the chapter but by far the most important. In it Jesus reveals his Divine power on the sea. In it he demonstrates the power of the seed of his word just spoken of in the previous parables. It also exemplifies the passive trust and active engagement to which Jesus calls his disciples.

A great storm breaks out on the sea. The boat is filling with water. The disciples are about to drown and begin making a scene.

But Jesus is asleep on the stern of the boat. He knows that God's power is present. He also knows that the God who brings the storm knows how to preserve his servants in it without necessarily taking it away. The disciples mistake his passive trust in God as a lack of care for them.

So he gets up and with a single, brief phrase (two words in the Greek!) he rebukes the wind and the sea saying "Peace, be still!" Suddenly the wind ceases and there is a great calm.

Who is this, that the wind and seas obey him? It can be no other than God himself. In the beginning, he spoke and it came to be. He commanded, and the seas obeyed. The boundaries between land and water were set. He who in the Exodus parted the waters of the Red Sea to bring safety to his people speaks again to manifest his power. The power manifested at the beginning of the world appears again as the end draws near.

This is the power of Jesus's word. Yet we are so often filled with fear that it looks like we have no faith. We follow one who has authority over all, rebuking both storm and demon, and bringing peace with a single word in his good time. What is there to fear when such a one is with us in the storm? We only must take heart and wait upon him.

Let us then strive to replace fear with faith, trusting in his divine power to protect and preserve us.





## #5 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of Mark 5

In previous devotionals, we have outlined in detail how this section of Mark's Gospel is carefully arranged in what we call a "reverse parallelism." Many people have compared this to a "sandwich" which has bread on the outside, as well as cheese and meat in the middle.

Another way to think of it is like a palindrome. One of my favorite palindromes is "racecar." A palindrome is a word or set of words that is exactly the same whether you read the letters backwards or forwards. (One of the coolest I've ever heard is the phrase "Eva, can I stab bats in a cave?")

Let's stick with "racecar," since that's easier. If you were to map it out visually the palindrome parallel would look like this:

r  
a  
c  
e  
c  
a  
r  
a  
c  
e  
c  
a  
r

That's exactly what's happening here in Mark. If you put one finger at the beginning of the section, and another finger at the end of the section, and move them together until you get to the middle, you would find parallels the whole way.

At the end of Mark 4, we were actually pressed down to the center of the whole parallel: the revelation of Jesus's divine power on the sea. This Jesus is Lord of all. He is the one through whom God made the heavens and the earth.

In Mark 5, Jesus continues to demonstrate this divine identity. The chapter contains three miracle stories that stand in parallel to the three parables we heard just before. Jesus's ministry is both a word and deed a ministry. He accomplishes his redemption through his work, and he applies it through his word. His mighty words explain his mighty works.

But the details of the miracle stories also teach us a great deal about who Jesus is and what he does. The acts themselves speak even without the words!

We begin with Jesus's exorcism of Legion from the man in the country of the Gerasenes. This is unclean, Gentile territory. It's also underscored by the presence of pigs, into whom Jesus cast the demons. Lots of folks are quite puzzled over his choice of swine as the receptacle for the unclean spirits, but when you consider the context in various details, the theme of "uncleanness" is underscored. In the next stories, keep in mind that both death and a woman's flow of blood would make them unclean, ritually speaking, under OT law.

Furthermore, this man is a dramatic visible representation of what human misery looks like under the kingdom of darkness. Through the tyranny of the devil and the power of our flesh, we are like the living among the dead. Bound with spiritual shackles and chains to these ruthless overlords, there is no human power that can subdue us. We willingly give ourselves to the servitude even though it causes us to slowly destroy ourselves, even as this man continually cut himself with stones. It's amazing how the world today is so focused on giving freedom for the oppressed. In this, they have an element of truth, but it is redirected and applied in a way that misses humanity's true slavery and bondage. Insofar as there is an element of truth in it, they should pursue the lesser without neglecting the greater.

Into this oppressive bondage comes the word of Jesus: "come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" Through the power of his word Jesus frees him from the tyranny of the devil. This is he whom both the wind and the waves obey. He also has legions of demons under authority.

And what does Jesus require of him? His command is simple: "Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." And the man goes and does exactly what Jesus had said. Is this not at the heart of what Jesus calls us to when we follow him? We are to express our joy in faith that we are free

from the devil and have received the mercy of God. That is the source of all true Christian obedience. The Pharisees would formally follow the law, but they had no side of what they truly had. They obeyed but did not adore. Yet this unclean gentile with no revelational privileges receives Christ's mercy and does what he tells him.

The next two miracle stories are wonderfully woven together: The healing of the woman with the flow of blood and the resurrection of Jairus's daughter. They are, in fact, a mini Markan sandwich in the midst of a larger one. (Incidentally, that's one detail that reinforces the parallel between these three miracle stories and the three parables earlier. The parable of the sower was also a mini Markan sandwich.)

There are so many layers of detail here we simply do not have enough space to unpack at all. I'm already way too long for a devotional! If you are a member of Lynnwood OPC or are otherwise interested in hearing more, you can look up the sermon on this passage from several years ago on our sermon audio webpage.

Note one key parallel in both stories: the recipients of Jesus's healing power are both women. Earlier Jesus had healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law from a fever. Here now he heals two other women afflicted with different problems.

But note also the title each woman receives. They are both called "daughter" ([5:21](#), 34). The world speaks loudly today about the need for society to elevate the status of women, while at the same time diminishing the status of men. There is some truth in that claim, but the world is blind to a woman's true elevated status.

There is no greater privilege for a woman than to be made a daughter of God, just as there is no greater privilege for a man then to become a son of God. True equality does not consist in the equalization of earthly status, rules, wealth, or position. To be sure, when a society becomes so corrupt that it oppresses the weak and vulnerable, repentance and change is needed. God will bring his justice for the widow, the orphan, and the oppressed. But if we are blind to the spiritual source of true equality, we only have a recipe for perpetual conflict. Sometimes this is done by design. Too many Christian churches are proclaiming the Gospel of Marx rather than the Gospel of Mark.

But what great mercy Jesus shows to the miserable! The woman with the flow of blood, he allows his power to go forth. The result is not only the end of her physical suffering. A flow of blood made a woman unclean under Levitical ritual law. A cessation of her

flow of blood meant that she was now ceremonially clean and could fully engage in the worship of God in the temple. This daughter is no longer an outcast, but is welcomed back into God's family home.

And what greater misery is there than for a mother or father to lose a child? Jesus enters into the midst of this misery and brings the joy of resurrection life. He takes this little girl by the hand, touching her unclean death, and through his power raises her again to life.

That must be our focus. Jesus came to bring life to the dead, spiritual cleansing to the unclean and filthy, liberty from the tyranny of the devil. If we look to Jesus to provide any other thing however good at in itself, we are as blind as the Pharisees. If we come to him to provide solutions for our plates in this world, he will say to us as he says to the man in the Gospel of Luke 12:14: "who made me a ruler and arbitrator over you?" In this way he condemns a Marxist Gospel.

Jesus's divine power comes to save us unto eternal life. That will often mean the loss of many earthly things, but a gain of heavenly glory.

## #6 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of Mark 6

Mark 6 is a transitional chapter. In 6:1-13 we see the conclusion of the large parallelism that began in 3:13. What this means is that we find parallel themes at the beginning and the ending. Those themes are these:

The Appointing and Sending out of the Twelve Apostles (3:13-21, 7:7-13)

Questions about the source of Jesus's power related to family (3:31-35, 6:1-6)

In short, these themes deal with Jesus' power in its source and its delegation.

Mark 6 raises questions about the source of Jesus's power. On the one hand, the people cannot deny his mighty works and wisdom. On the other hand, those in his hometown are so familiar with him that they cannot believe that he could be from God. How can this Jesus, who grew up in earthly Nazareth have come down from the heavenly Jerusalem? How can he who worked as a carpenter also work divine miracles? A prophet is without honor except in his hometown. Clearly, there is no other possible source for Jesus's power than God himself.

That is why faith is emphasized in the passage. Jesus does no mighty works there except for a few healings. God's power only benefits us as we have true faith in him.

But Jesus's divine power does not remain within himself. It is also delegated to others. Thus, the twelve who were appointed in Mark 3 are not sent out with authority over the unclean spirits. They are to wield it by faith and to God's glory, taking nothing with them except a belt. The core of their message was repentance, for that is the only pathway to the kingdom of God. Although the apostles are all dead and gone, Christ still uses delegated authority in his church which he has entrusted to pastors, elders, and deacons. They are to teach, guide, and care for the church in Christ's name.

Interestingly, whereas Jesus could only heal a few in his hometown, the Apostles cast out many demons and healed many sick. This is an indication that Jesus's greatest works will occur through his servants after his death and resurrection. It is also a reminder that Jesus is still at work through his people in the world.

The rest of the chapter contains many important stories which we cannot develop fully in our devotionals.

In the story of the death of John the Baptist, we see a preview of the death of Jesus. Discipleship consists of union with Christ, picking up our crosses, and following him. John does this ahead of time at the end of his life.

Herod himself notes the similarities between Jesus and John, thinking that perhaps John had been raised from the dead (6:16). The details of the narrative contain many other previews of how Jesus would die. From the role of Herod as a reluctant executioner to the burying of his body by his disciples, the text is filled with similarities to Jesus's death. As with John, so it will be with Jesus.

The feeding of the five thousand clearly recalls the Exodus journeys of Israel. Just as God fed Israel with bread and meat in the wilderness, so now Jesus feeds them with loaves and fish. But Jesus does greater works than Moses. But his greatness is not seen merely in the fact that he feeds five thousand with only a few loaves, but that he himself is the true bread that comes down from heaven.

The next scene also recalls the Exodus story and emphasizes the superiority of Jesus to Moses. Moses parted the waters, but Jesus walked upon them. Moreover, Moses was a servant through whom the great "I AM" worked to deliver his people. As this text clearly indicates, Jesus is the great "I AM." Jesus explicitly takes that divine name to himself in 6:50: "Take heart; I am. Do not be afraid."

Jesus is fully God. He has a power greater than anything we could ask or imagine. That power is manifested in his word. But it only benefits us by faith. Without faith Christ's power is useless. With faith, there is nothing God cannot accomplish in us. Neither hunger nor thirst, storm or calm, or life or death can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.



## #7 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of Mark 7

Mark 6 saw the end of one section of the Gospel and the beginning of another. After the prologue, the next two large portions of Mark were structured in a few large "Markan Sandwiches." Clearly, he would order a "club sandwich" at the diner for lunch.

In 6:14 Mark begins a new section that stretches all the way to 8:21. Admittedly, it is more difficult to discern the macrostructure (i.e., the large arrangement) he provides for this section.

There are a few noteworthy parallels. First, it begins with the story of the death of John the Baptist (5:14-29), and it ends just before Jesus's first prediction of his crucifixion and death (9:31-33). If this is intentional, then the latter passage does double duty as the beginning of this section and the start of a new one. It also underscores that the powerful, miracle-working Jesus will also be a suffering savior.

Likewise, there is also the repetition of the feeding of the five thousand in 6:30-44, and the feeding of the four thousand in 8:1-10.

In between that, we have stories that echo some previous scenes. Jesus walking on the water echoes his calming of the storm. Jesus's mass healings through touch in 6:53-56 echo similar scenes in 3:10.

In the middle of this large section are several stories that focus on true cleanliness. First, there is a rejection of the Pharisee's formal view of "cleanness," but then also an illustration of true cleansing in the heart of the Syrophenician woman.

If this is the case, the section would place the focus on how Jesus's power and sufferings have as their ultimate goal the cleansing of his people's hearts through faith.

Illustrated visually, the whole section would look like this.

Death of Jesus Foreshadowed (6:14-29)



Feeding of the Five Thousand (6:30-44)

Jesus Walks on the Water and heals (6:45-56)

True Cleanness: Pharisees vs. Syrophoenician (7:1-30)

Jesus Heals a Deaf Man by the Sea (7:31-37)

Feeding of the Four Thousand (8:1-10)

Death of Jesus Foretold (8:31-33)

This obviously needs some more work and explanation. On the one hand, the beginning and ending line up nicely. But it is not obvious (at least at first) how the inner rings of Jesus walking on the water and healing the deaf man correspond.

It does, however, make a lot of sense that Mark would put the contrast between the Pharisees and the Syrophoenician woman at the center.

These two stand in dramatic contrast to one another. Externally speaking they could not be more different. The Pharisees have every claim to ritual purity and then some, having added extra regulation to ensure their “cleanness” before God. But inside they are rotten to the core. They wash the outside of the dish, but the inside is filled with rotten filth.

Jesus applies the words of Isaiah against them: “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” Pharisees lay claim to the ancient Jewish inheritance. Ironically, they are correct, but not in the way they think. They wash the tombs of the prophets and adorn them, but their words condemn them long ago.

What a contrast to the Syrophoenician woman. In every external respect she is completely unclean. She hails from an unclean city, has an unclean lineage, and her daughter has an unclean spirit. She has no inheritance rights to anything in Israel including their Savior. By the standards of the day, she is nothing less than a Gentile dog. The outside of her cup is covered with layers of manure.

But inside she demonstrates a heart cleansed by faith. A dog she may be but even dogs receive some love from their benevolent owners.

How easily the Pharisees are offended that Jesus would challenge their extra-biblical authority. Yet this woman takes no offense whatsoever at what today would be regarded as an unforgivable insult. She does this by faith, through which she also receives back her daughter, cleansed of the unclean demon.

Jesus comes to cleanse his people in so doing he will offend them. If he does not we are left like the Pharisees. We do not know how much cleaning to do unless we can see how filthy we are. If we are blind, our self-cleaning will always be a half job, like children that quickly stuff their mess in the closet and under the bed to appear clean by others.

## #8 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of Mark 8

Mark 8 contains a number of echos. Jesus feeds the four thousand just as he did the five thousand. Jesus heals a blind man even as he did a deaf man. Jesus foretells his death even as John the Baptist foreshadowed it.

Oddly enough, the blind man Jesus heals needs to miracle done in two phases. Thus the story contains a small echo in itself.

Why the need for all the repetition? The answer is clear: we are deaf and we are blind. In reality, it does not matter how often you repeat yourself to a deaf man, or how often you show something to a blind man. As long as they are unable to hear and to see, there is nothing you can do. You are powerless to help them.

This is the fundamental problem of human beings before God: they are deaf and blind. The Pharisees are absolutely blind. Their hearts are hard and they have no eyes to see.

The disciples are relatively blind. They see, but don't see clearly. They see the twelve leftover baskets from the feeding of the five thousand, but don't get that it signifies that Jesus is feeding a new twelve tribes of Israel. They see the seven baskets at the end of the feeding of the four thousand, but do not understand that it signifies the fullness of God's kingdom.

Seeing they do not see. Hearing they do not hear. They demand a sign but don't see the ones two inches in front of their nose.

We will look at how the themes of blindness provide a broad structure for the next section of the Gospel.

For now, we pause to consider a simple point the text is setting before us: we are blind.

Take that in for a minute. Do you really believe that about yourself? If we realize we are blind, our first order of business must be to regain our sight. Without sight, we can do nothing.

Jesus tells us that we must first take the log of our own eye before we can take the speck out of our brother's eye. Visualize that for a minute and you will quickly see the absurd humor.

If this is really our spiritual condition (and the Bible says that it clearly is) then how different our lives should be. We easily convince ourselves that we have mastered the basics of the Christian life. Yet when trouble and trial come, we respond as if our faith was nonexistent.

We see Jesus. We believe in him. But we do not see him clearly or fully. Thankfully we have a Christ who makes the deaf hear and gives sight to the blind!

## #9 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of Mark 9

In Mark 9 we transition to a new section of the Gospel. In our first Markan meditation we noted the entire book is outlined in the first verse, which ascribes two titles to Jesus. He is the "Christ" and the "Son of God." These two titles encapsulate the heart of Jesus's identity. They are also the content of the two major "confessions" that mark the end of Part 1 and Part 2 of the Gospel. In Mark 8:25 Peter confesses "You are the Christ." In Mark 15:39 the centurion also confesses Jesus as he breathes his last: "Truly this man was the Son of God."

Two parts to Mark's Gospel marked by two confessions regarding his identity.

We thus end part 1 and have begun part 2 as we turn to chapter 9.

The previous three sections were structured with different levels of consistency in what we call "Markan sandwiches." See the previous devotionals for the details.

How then is Mark 9-15 structured? It has two sections. The second part is easier to delimit as it contains the entirety of Jesus's passion (i.e. sufferings) and the events immediately preceding it.

Section one is what we begin to look at today. It runs from 8:27-10:52. What is the structure of this passage?

Interestingly, the section begins with a story only found in Mark. Mark is the shortest Gospel, and has the fewest sections that are unique to it (i.e. not also found in other Gospels). Anything we find only in Mark is going to have a special importance for the particular emphasis of his narrative.

It begins in 8:22-26 with the healing of a blind man. But notice the oddity of the miracle. In nearly all other miracles, Jesus only needs to say a mere word or offer a single touch and the person is healed. But with this healing of the blind man, the recovery of his sight comes in two phases: first he is only able to see shadowy forms (i.e. "men like

trees, walking"). It is only after Jesus lays hands on him again that he can see everything clearly.

The section begins with a blind man who only gradually recovers his sight.

Interestingly the section ends with the healing of another blind man: blind Bartimaeus in 10:46-52. He cries out for Christ's mercy asking only for one thing "Let me recover my sight" ([10:51](#)). Having once been blind, now he sees--and he follows Jesus towards the cross.

Do you see what Mark has done? He has begun and ended this section of the Gospel with the healing of blind men. In one the sight is only gradually restored. What is the point of this?

Mark is signaling to us that Jesus's disciples (including us!) have some lingering blindness. We see Jesus, believe in him, and want to follow him. But we do not always see him or the path we must walk to follow him clearly.

This theme of blindness is developed between these two healings of a blind man through three separate "passion predictions" that appear in this section. If we were to map it out visually, it would look like this:

Healing of a Blind Man (8:22-26)

Passion prediction #1 ([8:31](#))

Passion prediction #2 ([9:31](#))

Passion prediction #3 (10:33-34)

Healing of a Blind Man (10:46-52)

We have already seen this theme of blindness hinted at the previous chapter. The Pharisees are *absolutely* blind, refusing to accept that Jesus is the Christ. But the disciples, too, don't see things clearly. They are *relatively* blind. They see, but not yet clearly. They don't recognize the meaning of the feedings of five and four thousand.

The disciples see Jesus, but only a vague, shadowy form. They see Jesus, but only as one sees men like trees walking.

This is evident in the immediately aftermath of Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ. That bold confession becomes the "rock" upon which the church is built. But Peter was blind to its true significance. He saw the glory and power of Christ, but did not see the need for his sufferings. In fact, when Jesus plainly tells him that he will suffer and die, Peter rebukes Jesus.

Let that sink in for a minute: what level of blindness does someone need to have to rebuke Jesus? As boldly as Peter confesses Jesus to be the Christ so he seeks to rebuke him.

Jesus's counter-rebuke cuts through Peter's blindness and exposes the heart of his objection: "Get thee behind me Satan!" Satan had tempted him at the beginning of his ministry in the wilderness. Having been defeated he left "until an opportune time." That time has apparently come!

The blindness is only further exposed in the Transfiguration. Here Jesus's exalted glory is visibly revealed. They even have the testimony of the two greatest figures of the Old Testament to ratify it: Moses and Elijah. If that were not enough, they have the verbal testimony of God the Father himself who says: "This is my beloved Son; listen to him!"

Yet they are still blind. Peter's words are utterly absurd. He sees the three figures and thinks its time for a spiritual campout and retreat! And when Jesus again reveals his impending sufferings and death, the disciples remain baffled and without understanding ([9:32](#)).

The theme continues in the next story, where the disciples are unable to cast out a demon. Only Jesus is able to do it. This should underscore a clear point: despite his impending sufferings and weakness, Jesus is the greatest! Interestingly, Jesus makes clear that his great power is manifested in humility and weakness, as this demon could only be driven out by "prayer" ([9:29](#)).

The last thing that should be in the disciple's mind at this point is any thought of their own equality to Jesus. They are nothing, and Jesus is everything!

Yet how great is their blindness! Right after they behold Jesus in his transfigured glory, hearing the voice of God himself ratify his identity as his beloved son, what are the disciples preoccupied with?

They are arguing about who will be the greatest! Human blindness knows no end! We are so filled with self-importance we can't see past our own egos even when face to face with the glory of God.

Indeed, to enter the kingdom we must die to self that we might live to God. If we wish to be great we must become less. If we wish to be first we must become last of all and servant of all.

Mark's message to us is clear: we are blind. Even Christians who have received their sight through the Holy Spirit do not always see clearly.

Do you see yourself in these blind men? As you go through your day in your thoughts and interactions with others, start with this question: what am I blind to? If you find yourself in the midst of conflict with others, you must first ask yourself: what am I not seeing about myself and my shortcomings. Humans have a tendency to clearly see what is "great" about them while being totally blind to what is not so great.

In this section God has given us a mirror in which we can see our own blindness. He does so not to condemn us, but to help us see our need for more light. To those who humble themselves and ask for a clearer vision of the kingdom, he will continually come to wipe the mud from our eyes.



# #10 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of Mark 10

Mark 8-10 is all about blindness. The disciples see Jesus cannot see them clearly.

To underscore this point, Mark begins and ends this section with the healing of a blind man. In between he gives an expose of his disciples' blindness arranged around three predictions of his sufferings, crucifixion, death, and resurrection. Mapped out visually the structure would look like this:

Healing of a Blind Man (8:22-26)

Passion prediction #1 ([8:31](#))

Passion prediction #2 ([9:31](#))

Passion prediction #3 (10:33-34)

Healing of a Blind Man (10:46-52)

The section is surrounded by blind men, even as Jesus is surrounded by blind men.

But the text is not just a window into their blindness, it is a mirror in which we can see our own blindness--if we have eyes to see.

We have made it to chapter 10 which is right in the middle of this expose of blindness. The section contains a few passages that by themselves contain elements of his teaching that do not at first seem directly connected to this theme. For example, Jesus teaches about the ethics of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. He makes it clear that from the beginning marriage was intended by God to be a life-long union between one man and one woman. Divorce is only on account of sin. Nothing but adultery (or certain cases of willful desertion, as Paul indicates in 1 Cor. 7) can be just grounds for dissolving a marriage. In other words, there is only a very narrow set of circumstances in which divorce and remarriage are allowed. To violate those provisions is to commit adultery.

Adultery is pretty clear-cut. It involves sexual contact with another person outside of marriage. It does not require divorce, but grants the innocent party the right for one if they so desire (getting counsel and help along the way). Willful desertion is more complicated and requires that the persons involved submit themselves to the guidance of the church and not be left to make the decision totally on their own as if they were left to their own discretion. It often requires years of hard work to bring reconciliation and restoration. Only after every effort to salvage the marriage fails, the offended party can ask for a divorce on the grounds of wilful desertion. Such cases do not only involve the literal abandonment of one's spouse and family (i.e. moving to another continent). It might also involve the abandonment of one's basic marital obligations. To chronically and unrepentantly fail in these things in egregious ways is to deny the Christian faith and make one worse than an unbeliever (1 Tim. 5:8).

If you are having these kinds of problems in your marriage, the time has definitely come to seek out help (if you have not already).

However, the broader section is not really about divorce and remarriage. How does it tie into the bigger picture? Experience teaches us that there is no area where blindness is more evident than in marriage relationships. Our sin very often deceives us, making us blind to our own sins and shortcomings and allowing us to only see the problems in our spouses. When our faults are pointed out, we demand grace for ourselves but want to give none to others. The devil thus gains a foothold in our hearts and destroys Christian relationships from within. How blind we are!

Jesus's teaching on divorce is followed by his famous saying, "Let the little children come to me." The lesson here is that we must become like little children to enter the kingdom. The blind disciples rebuke the people's request to bring their little ones to Jesus. They do not understand that everyone who comes to Christ to receive the kingdom must come in the same way.

What is the point of this point being made with children? Children can't do much on their own, and they know it. Last night my daughter was trying to learn to play the recorder for the first time and was getting quite frustrated. What did she do? Without blinking an eye, she came right to me as her parent and asked for help. It is basic to a child's life to know that they need the help of their father and mother, and they gladly seek it out.

Things are a little different when we are adults. We are often not so quick to ask for help. The reasons might be different, but the cause is the same. For example, a man often won't ask for help because it wounds his ego and his pride. He desires to be and to be known as competent and self-sufficient. Asking for help bruises that ego. Sometimes the motive is different. The person does not ask for help because they do not wish to be a burden on others. Or the person does not ask because they want to avoid the shame of others knowing about their problems.

These are the same things that can become obstacles for us coming to Christ and receiving the grace of his kingdom. In order to embrace Christ and his kingdom, we have to become like little children.

I think it is interesting that this passage follows right after his teaching on marriage and divorce. When problems arise in our relationships we really have to be willing to become like little children and be taught the "ABCs" of how to love another person. But no one wants to humble themselves and go to kindergarten all over again. No one wants to suffer the humiliation of being tested as to how well we sing the alphabet song. We would rather go to adult "court" to defend ourselves. Unfortunately, when we desire "justice" from the court of God, that is exactly what he will give us. The problem is that we will all end up condemned, for we are all sinners!

A similar point is made in the story of the rich young man (or "ruler" as he is described in the other Gospels). The passage is often a stumbling block for people a few different ways.

First, some are confused by Jesus's answer to the man, thinking that he is teaching salvation by works. Nothing could be further from the truth. True obedience only flows from faith. The man's problem is that he does not understand what true obedience is, and therefore lacks true faith. Jesus seeks to expose it in his answer. He starts with the fruit to get to the root, not to confuse the two.

Secondly, this is also seen in his call to the man to sell everything he has and give to the poor. Again, people get tripped up here thinking that this is a blanket mandate for every believer to sell all their possessions and join monasteries. That is not Jesus's point.

Instead, he is trying to show this man that the kingdom of God is something infinitely more valuable than all the possessions of the earth put together. His problem was that he loved his wealth so much he made it his God. To him and to anyone else whose wealth has become a stumbling block to receiving the kingdom of God, the only way to overcome it is to remove it and put away the false idols from among you.

In other words, Jesus's call to sell everything was specifically tailored to this man's spiritual needs. It was a matter of entering God's kingdom or being cast away from it.

But he was blind to the infinite value of the kingdom of heaven. He went away sad at the thought of losing his money. But who would be sad to buy something for 1/10th of the market value, even if it cost everything they had? You could turn around and sell it and have a tenfold profit. He is blind to the spiritual realities of the kingdom of God.

After this Jesus foretells his death a third time, after which we see the disciples once again. And what are they discussing? You'd think they might be talking about their Savior, the greatness of his work, or even marveling at the wisdom and power he is revealing before their waking eyes.

But what are they discussing? They are arguing about who will sit at Jesus's right and left hands. (Incidentally, Matthew 20 indicates that the mother of the sons of Zebedee makes this request with them, which adds a whole other layer to this blindness!).

They are blind to the greatness of the one standing before them. And in what does his greatness consist? Not in his regal glory, but in his humble service: "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:43-44).

The disciples are blinded by their own egos. They worship self rather than God. We are no different.

Thankfully there is mercy for those who see their own blindness. The section opened with the healing of a blind man, and now it ends with the healing of a blind man.

Blind Bartimaeus has one desire: "Let me recover my sight!" By faith his request is granted. And how does he respond? He "follows [Jesus] on the way" (10:52).

Jesus was on the way to the cross, and Bartimaeus picked up his cross and followed him. He saw more than the physical world around him, he now sees the spiritual world to which Jesus is going. Bartimaeus is ready to leave his blindness and everything else that he might have Christ in his eternal kingdom.

This is the issue for us as Jesus's disciples: our eyes have been opened. We do not see Jesus clearly. The first question we need to ask when we face conflict, trouble, or strife is: "How am *I* blind in this situation?" Especially in our interpersonal troubles, Jesus calls us to take the log out of our own eye before we take the speck out of our brother's. No one would go to an eye doctor whose vision is blocked by tree trunks in his eye cavities. A wise doctor who saw his own blindness would probably call in sick for the day.

# #11 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of Mark 11

Mark 11 is the start of Jesus's passion week, and also the beginning of a new section of the Gospel. On the earthly level, it marks the beginning of Jesus's defeat at the hands of his enemies.

Ironically, the story of Jesus's defeat begins with a note of triumph. Mark 11:1-11 is known to the church as Jesus's "Triumphal Entry." It gets its name because of its central theme: the regal authority of Jesus as the king.

Every part of the story shouts out that Jesus is the king. He arrives at Jerusalem, the city of the great king. He comes to the Mount of Olives, a location associated with King David in the Old Testament and future prophecies (Zechariah 14:4). He commandeers a colt for his royal use. Note that the text says "the Lord [King!] has need of it." The people spread out their cloaks and leafy branches on the road. These are acts associated with acknowledging a monarch. Just in case we miss the visual point the people tell us plainly that this is the blessed king who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hidden in Mark's telling of the story is the fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9: "Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a colt, the foal of a donkey." This is explicitly referenced in Matthew 21, but is not spelled out in Mark. Based on what we have seen in Mark 8-10, this might be because Mark is emphasizing the blindness of the disciples to Christ's need to suffer. Hidden within his triumphal entry is a sign of his defeat and humiliation. After all, a donkey is not typically the choice of a royal coronation. The humble king will have victory only after his defeat.

Following this is another Markan sandwich. It's easiest to see when we map it out visually:

The cursing of the Fig Tree (11:12-14)

Overturning the Tables of the Moneychangers (11:20-25)

## The Withered Fig Tree (11:20-25)

The cursing of the fig tree is symbolic of the rejection of the nation of Israel for their unbelief. That is underscored by Jesus's words to Peter emphasizing the need for faith, expressed in simple acts of religious devotion such as prayer, repentance, and forgiveness. This stands in contrast to the externalism of Judaism, which was corrupted to the point that it became a for-profit business by the Jewish leaders. That is also why their emphasis on sacrifice is set in contrast to the true purpose of the Temple—that it would be a house of prayer. A cursed and corrupt approach to God, indeed!

We must take to heart Mark's emphasis in this text. The problem with Judaism was not just a Jewish problem—it was a human problem. We will constantly be tempted to measure our spirituality by acts of external service and activity. The next step is to then begin condemning others because they do not "do" as many things as we do, and become filled with pride in our own accomplishments. When we do that are pursuing "works righteousness." Ironically, even prayer itself which is inherently a cessation of nearly all activity with the making of simple supplications to God can be corrupted into a work of self-righteousness. We must be on guard against the prideful spirit of unbelief at all times.

The chapter began with a scene that emphasized Jesus's regal authority with the Triumphal entry. We end the chapter on the same note, only this time by way of answer to an objection from the chief priests, scribes, and elders: "But what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority?" All they know is power. They obey God, but they do not adore him. Jesus's answer exposes their hypocrisy. It is obvious that there is only one possible source for his authority: God himself! They know this about John, and they know this about Jesus. But their corrupt, hard hearts betray their minds.

It is easy to condemn the Pharisees, scribes, and chief priests. We might be tempted to scoff and laugh at the absurdity of their unbelief. But we must remember that the disciples, too, fail to follow Jesus faithfully.

If we are to follow him, we must not only acknowledge his authority but follow what he says. We cannot have Jesus as Savior if we do not also have him as our Lord. We must pray even as Jesus did: "Not my will, but Thine be done!"





## #12 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of Mark 12

Mark 12 begins with the Parable of the Tenants. It develops and encapsulates many of the themes of chapter 11. There Mark emphasized the authority of Jesus as the coming king sent from God. He also outlined the corruption of God's people, symbolized the cursed and withered fig tree, and illustrated in the cleansing of the temple. God wanted fruit. He sent his son with authority to collect it but found none. They were fruitless and ruthlessly killed the beloved son who came to save them from themselves.

The parable contains the cryptic application of Psalm 118 to Jesus. Having rejected this "stone," he will become the cornerstone. It may at first seem odd to switch so abruptly from a garden-agricultural image to a building-architectural one. But throughout the Bible God combines garden images with that of buildings, especially when describing his dwelling place among his people. God is a farmer of fields, but also a framer of fortresses. He builds and plants. So Eden is a garden but has imagery that previews the Temple (a building). The temple structure has garden imagery all around it. Even the church itself is described by Paul in Ephesians with this kind of mixed metaphor when he describes the church as "grow[ing] into a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph. 2:21). Heaven itself is the new Jerusalem (a city with buildings) but is filled with garden imagery.

Judaism was no Garden of Eden, and although the building looked great and pure on the outside, it was rotten on the inside. It had no true fruit. The kingdom was thus taken from them and given to others (i.e. the Gentiles).

The next section contains some of Jesus's most important teachings on several subjections, including submission to government, the resurrection, and the greatest commandment. The common theme to all of them is Jesus's power, authority, and wisdom over the scribes and the Pharisees. Although he will be handed over to them to be crucified, he clearly could have overpowered them if he so desired.

We don't have space here to unpack the details of every passage. So I will focus on the first.

Jesus's famous statement that we should give "to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" is often misinterpreted. Most wish Jesus had gone into more detail about specific policy provisions. But had Jesus done that he would have been putting the focus in the wrong place. Remember, when people come to Jesus on their earthly terms wanting him to address their earthly problems, his response will surprise them. In Luke 12:13 a man asks Jesus to settle a dispute with his brother over their inheritance. Jesus replies by saying: "Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?" Jesus came to bring a heavenly kingdom. He is not interested in telling us the details of how to work out human political life on earth.

That is not to say that Jesus says nothing. His simple aphorism about "Caesar and God" actually says quite a bit. It can be boiled down to two things for the ruling and the subject: limitation of power (for the ruler) and submission (for the subject).

Many folks today have a false view of Christian submission to the civil government. COVID has filled many with fear, so we all need to be respectful and sensitive to our brothers, not reading into their motives or chastising them when we should be comforting them. Even where we emphasize individual freedom, we must also recognize that responsibility goes hand in hand with it.

However some have articulated a view of civil government that approaches a theological justification for totalitarianism. That is exactly what Jesus is rejecting. Jesus puts clear limits on Caesar's authority. In Jesus's time, it was clearly recognized that there were things that belonged to "Caesar." The idea that there was a sacred sphere that belonged to God alone put clear limits on the scope of his power. This distinction is the foundation of the principle of limited government and the idea of certain rights/freedoms guaranteed to the people. Without "religious" liberty there is no other civil liberty. Caesar seeks to envelop everything under his comprehensive rule. Without a foundational limitation to his power, he will eventually envelop everything. Jesus's statement points us in a different direction. There are things that are Caesar's, but then there are also things that don't belong to him. Instead, they belong to God. God has given civil leaders a task in the civil realm: promote what is good, punish what is evil. They do not have justification to be tyrants, nor are Christians always in every instance to unthinkingly obey them when they act tyrannically. To be sure, the normal rule is obedience and submission. We cannot refuse to obey simply because we don't agree with them. But the commandment to love our neighbor and defend the oppressed lays upon us an additional obligation. When the government acts so tyrannically as to violate its fundamental calling, appropriate measures of protest and

resistance become justified.

God has given civil government authority in human life. But each individual is made in God's image. They have their own distinctive identity before God. This truth is the foundation for the idea of human rights.

In the USA (and in my state of Washington) a foundational axiom is that one of the fundamental purposes of government is to protect individual rights. The first article of the WA state constitution actually spells this out explicitly (borrowing language from the Declaration of Independence).

I am not arguing that the USA or (much less) the State of Washington in its current condition should be regarded as a "Christian nation." In order to be useful, that term needs careful thought and explanation. I am saying that the idea of limitations on government power is clearly expressed by Jesus.

Some things don't belong to Caesar. He cannot be a totalitarian dictator without coming under the judgment of God. This is a relatively new concept in world history at this point. The trajectory of human history has been to switch between totalitarian empires: Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans. There is a scale of tyranny in each. Some are more brutal and oppressive, while others less so. But they were all essentially totalitarian. The state encompassed all, including religious worship. Caesar himself became God.

Not so for Jesus. There is a clear sphere that Caesar cannot touch. That is foundationally religious, but it should not be limited to what strictly belongs to "worship" proper. Biblically speaking, "religion" is our entire service to God in all areas of life. When a person's life and activity touches their religious principles government needs to take special care not to violate or interfere with their sincerely held beliefs.

Religious freedom is thus the foundation for other forms of individual freedom.

In addition to this limitation on Caesar as a check on his tyranny, Jesus's statement also calls us to humble submission. Where Caesar transgresses his bounds, there is the right to resist in the proper, God-honoring channels. But where Caesar is ruling on the right track, we are called to submit and obey. That includes honestly paying all taxes owed.

Jesus's statement thus marvelously balances the unavoidable political character of much of our life on this earth, while at the same time keeping our focus where it needs to be: the kingdom of God. Thus even the most oppressed by civil or ecclesiastical totalitarianism still give what is owed. And so the chapter concludes with the humble widow giving all that she has into the offering box, showing the devotion of her heart to the true God and king of all.

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# 13 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of Mark 13

Mark 13 contains Jesus's "Olivet Discourse." This section of Jesus's teachings gets its name from its location: the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem.

The great dilemma in interpreting this passage is determining what specific events are in view. From Jesus's perspective, all the events were still future. From our perspective (2000 years later) the question becomes: is this already fulfilled, or still awaiting fulfillment? In other words, has Jesus's predictions already come to pass, or are we still waiting for them?

The right answer is simple: both! Some of what Jesus says has already happened, but much of it hasn't happened yet. We err to the right or to the left in going too far in either direction. A group called "Preterists" take the position that it is mostly or all already fulfilled. Another group called "dispensationalists" see this happening in the future with a rebuilt temple and a restored Jewish nation connected to an earthly millennial age. Both are wrong.

The fact is that part of what Jesus says here is fulfilled in 70 AD when the Romans desecrated and destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. In context, Jesus has already prepared the way for this prophecy symbolically in the cursing of the fig tree and the Parable of the Tenants. These teachings outlined the rejection of national Israel and God's impending judgment against them.

Some parts are fairly obvious in their connection to the events of 70 AD. But some do not fit such a temporal fulfillment at all.

The problem is that Jesus seems to move seamlessly between an almost literal description of 70 AD to a discussion of the literal end of the world. Still further, some of the things that happened at 70 AD also find an analogue (i.e. an analogy) at the end of the world. This makes interpreting the passage quite difficult.

I think the right interpretation recognizes that Jesus is following a pattern of prophecy that has its roots in the Old Testament. OT prophecy tended to look into the future through the lens of the present. They looked beyond their present situation and into

the future. Thus God's bringing temporal judgment on a nation was spoken of in terms that were reminiscent of the final n of all nations. The immediate judgment became a "lens" through which the final judgment was previewed.

Something similar will happen at the crucifixion two chapters later. Events that will take place at the end of the world are previewed on the cross. The sun is darkened. The bodies of the saints are raised from the dead. That is because Jesus's crucifixion is a preview of final judgment.

We just don't have the space in a devotional to unpack all the details (but see the sermons on Mark 15 from several years back if you want to dive in).

The theological point is clear: God will judge the world through Christ. There are two choices. We will be ready and prepared for him, eagerly going about the master's service. Or we will be asleep at the wheel pursuing the things of the world, and the day will come upon us like a thief in the night.

We must therefore always be watchful, ready, and on guard. He will not forget his saints who long for his appearing.

# #14 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of Mark 14

Mark 14 is a densely packed chapter. There is a lot that happens. Jesus is anointed for his burial, he institutes the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, prays in Gethsemane, put on trial before the High Priest, and foretells Peter's denial and Judas' betrayal.

Since we simply do not have the space to dive into everything adequately, we will focus on the significance of this last point. Although all the disciples abandon Jesus in different ways--even one fleeing naked in shame--Mark highlights and coordinates the actions of Judas and Peter.

Different terms are used to describe their actions. Judas is said to "betray" Jesus, while Peter is said to "deny" him. At their core, both share a common element. Both Peter and Judas reject Jesus. But they do so in different ways and with different motives.

Judas betrays Jesus in a high-handed and purposeful way. Before the Lord's Supper, he goes to the chief priests to betray Jesus and plot how he might hand him over to them. His motive? We see an indication of it in the "waste" of ointment symbolically placed upon Jesus for his burial. Other Gospels tell us that Judas cared nothing for the poor, but was a thief who used to help himself to what was given to the apostolic money bag (John 12:6).

Money is what Judas loves, and money is what he received. When he agrees to hand Jesus over to the Jewish leaders, they promise to give him money ([14:11](#)). For a mere thirty pieces of silver, he betrays the Son of God whose precious blood is of infinite value to pay for sin and purchase eternal life!

Judas's treachery is deep. Sin's evil truly knows no limit. The fact that the same principle of sin should cause of to shudder in horror. We are just as capable of doing what Judas did if God's gracious, restraining had were not upon us.

Indeed, Peter is just as capable of rejecting Jesus. In fact, that is exactly what he does, albeit in a different way. Judas's rejection was a for-profit betrayal. Peter's rejection

was a moment of weakness and denial. The same sin brings forth a parallel fruit, but with a different purpose from God.

Peter's problem is that he has stumbled over Jesus's cross. He sees Christ's glory and that he will ultimately be victorious. He has faith, but it is a "blind faith" (and not in the good sense of that phrase!). He is like the blind man in chapter 8: he sees Jesus but sees only a vague outline of whom he is. He sees Jesus as if he were a man like a tree walking (cf. Mark 8:24). He confesses that Jesus is the Christ, but rebukes him when he predicts his sufferings. He even emphatically denies that he would ever deny his Lord, while Jesus ominously foretells his future betrayal.

Peter's rejection of Jesus was not a high-handed, treacherous betrayal. It was due to his blindness and weakness. At the same time, the story makes clear that in themselves there is little difference between the sin in Judas and the sin in Peter.

What then makes the difference between them? Why is Judas rejected and Peter restored?

It is only the grace of God that makes the difference. Satan wanted each one. Satan entered into Judas, and Satan asked for Peter. The difference is that Jesus prayed for Peter, but he did not pray for Judas.

In John 17 our Lord makes clear that his prayer is for his chosen people, and not indiscriminately for every individual in the world (John 17:9). Jesus came to redeem his chosen people, not those whom he had rejected ahead of time. Thus, Jesus does not pray for Judas, the "son of destruction" (John 17:12). Judas fell because Jesus withheld his grace from him.

Why then was Peter restored while Judas finally rejected? It only lies in God's grace. Jesus did not pray for Judas, but he did pray for Peter:

"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." (Luke 22:31–32)

The only difference between Judas and Peter is the gracious prayer of Jesus.



And the only thing that keeps us on the path to the kingdom is the same grace and prayers of Christ.

He prayed for us on the cross, asking God's forgiveness when he was condemned. He was raised to live and now stands in heaven, always living to make intercession for us.

His sovereign choice of us means that our salvation can be certain. We will have moments of failure and weakness, but God remains faithful and strong. Satan desires us, but we are safe in the care of Christ. Not even the devil can snatch us out of his hand.

## #15 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of Mark 15

The Gospel of Mark is all about discipleship. That word is thrown around a lot in Christian circles today, but usually with a very wrong meaning. Discipleship is usually discussed from a purely human perspective. Typically discipleship is thought of primarily as a personal relationship between human beings. It is thought to consist in having lots of social interactions with other people, typically of a more directly spiritual nature.

But this is not biblical discipleship. It's not that having a Christian mentor is a bad thing, nor is it true that the Bible does not commend to us this dynamic interpersonal dynamic with others. On the contrary, the Christian life is lived in the context of the church and the communion of saints. Older men mentor younger men, and older women help teach younger women how to deal with the various phases of life in faith and hope. My point is not that this is a bad thing. It is, in fact, a necessary thing.

My point is that this is not biblical "discipleship."

To be a "disciple" means that you are a student. To be a student means that you need to learn something. That was clearly the case of the 12 disciples in the Gospel of Mark. Their problem was that they were blind and deaf. Blind and deaf people cannot learn unless you can break through their inability to see and to hear. Thankfully we have more educational tools today that will assist us in overcoming those barriers.

It's not so simple in the spiritual realm of our lives. Discipleship comes through the word of God as it is taught to us by Christ. That's why Jesus tells us that we are to make disciples of all the nations by baptizing them in the name of the Triune God and teaching them to observe all that Christ has commanded (Matthew 28). The primary means of discipleship is not through interpersonal, human relations. It is this through the public proclamation of the ministry of the word.

In fact, sometimes Christ calls us to embrace that word even that is all we have. The "solas" of the Reformation are rightly declared triumphantly by Protestants. The

theological side of faith alone, Christ alone, and God alone are easy to articulate. But we too quickly forget that embracing these truths means that many times we will find ourselves all alone ("sola") without any human helper.

The hard reality is that too often Christian discipleship does not accompany with it close, friendly relationships of support and encouragement. More often than not we find ourselves in conflict and in a great struggle to be at peace even with our brothers. The morning readings in the story of Joseph are a sober reminder of that.

If we think that discipleship always must entail close personal relationships of support and encouragement, we can easily find ourselves discouraged, dejected, bitter, and even angry.

Again, I am not denying that Christians should strive for this with one another, nor that the presence of such things is a sign of health in a church. What I am saying is that all too often Jesus calls us to suffer alone and be content only with him.

This brings us to Mark 15. The hour of Christ's sufferings have come, and there is no one there to comfort him. Judas has betrayed him. Peter has abandoned him. Even Mark himself, as the tradition of the church tells us, fled naked in the night. All his disciples have left him and fled. Jesus suffers alone.

The two nearest him are criminals: the innocent suffering the same fate as the guilty. They bring no comfort but also hurl insults. The present would be better if they were absent. There is no Elijah to come and rescue him. All he has is loneliness, darkness, and death. From a distance, his mother and a few women watch helplessly. It is only in death that he finally has a companion as Joseph of Arimathea lays his body in the tomb.

But it is not only his human friends who abandon him. On the cross as he suffers the wrath of God vicariously, he cries out "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It seems that even God himself has forsaken him!

In this way Christ suffered, and in the same way he calls us to follow him. Did you note the brief verse right in the middle of this chapter regarding Simon of Cyrene? The text tells us that "...they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, to carry his cross" (Mark 15:21).

Apparently, he was known to the church as he is specifically identified as "the father of Alexander and Rufus." The lonely Christ has only one lonely stranger who himself follows under compulsion.

Simon of Cyrene comes right behind Jesus, carrying his cross.

In Simon we see a picture of true discipleship. Not shirking away from suffering, shame, ridicule, and even death, Simon follows the Savior carrying the cross. If we are to follow Jesus must often be content simply to know that we are with Jesus and Jesus is with us. That is the practical side of confessing salvation in "Christ alone."

Jesus tells us that if anyone would come after him, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow him. That is true discipleship. It is to lose the world that you might gain eternal life. The presence of this eternal life begins now in this life. And that presence will not remain partial or piecemeal. Even as Christ suffered but also was raised, so also we shall be raised. To have Christ's presence is to have eternal life. Although our father and mother forsake us, the Lord never will!

This is the real school of Christ. This is true discipleship. If our focus is anywhere else, we are blind and in need of Christ's healing grace to open our eyes to see his glory.

## #16 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of Mark 16

The Gospel of Mark has a very strange ending. The other Gospels end with several resurrection appearances, confirming the reality of Christ's resurrection. This is crucial to our faith in the Gospel as resurrection is foundational to our Christianity. But the Gospel of Mark ends without including these appearances. We simply have the declaration of the angel that Christ has been raised from the dead.

Early in church history someone sensed that a new Christian might have some questions about what happened after this scene. To address them, they attached an appendix to the end of this Gospel. Most of what is in it is just a summary of information from other Gospels. But it is most likely not originally from Mark's hand. It is not unlikely that this appendix was not originally intended to be taken as the word of God, but over the years confusion developed and it began to be included with the text of Scripture itself. Think of it like notes in a study Bible, only without the clear demarcation between the notes and the Scripture itself.

The appendix was not included in the earliest manuscripts of Mark. My theory is that it was at first attached to the end of Mark in order to clear up any potential confusion. Imagine if you were sharing the Gospel with a friend and their first exposure to the life of Jesus was from the Gospel of Mark. There is clearly some more information you would want them to know about! However, later in church history, the line between inspired Scripture and this appendix became blurred. Some began regarding the appendix as inspired scripture.

The original, inspired ending of the Gospel runs from Mark 16:1-8. In this telling of the "resurrection" story, we only read of the two Marys and Salome bringing spices to Jesus's tomb to anoint him. This was clearly an act motivated by love, but not one that could be practically implemented. By the time they get there, they ask a question that reminds them and us of the obvious obstacle to their purpose. There is a very large stone covering the entrance to the tomb and there is no way they could roll it back.

Indeed, they love the Lord Jesus! But they are still seeking to express that love as if they were still alive. They cared for the body of Jesus before his death by clothing and

feeding it. But they do not realize that the body of Jesus no longer needs that kind of physical care. They seek the living among the dead.

But the stone has already been rolled back! They have come to see the dead, but have found that he is living. They see someone in a white robe sitting on the right side of the tomb. They are alarmed and afraid. This “angel” messenger is there only to share a word: the report of Jesus's resurrection. They are alarmed, but he declares: “do not be alarmed.” Jesus who was crucified has now risen. He also gives them a command: “...go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.”

Strangely, the Gospel ends with a report that the women left astonished, trembling, and filled with fear. Although they were commanded by the messenger to bring the report to the disciples, “they said nothing to anyone.”

They know from the rest of the Gospels that there is more to the story. Eventually they overcame this fear and astonishment by God’s grace and gave the report to the disciples. Jesus then later appeared to all of them, confirming his promise not only regarding his crucifixion, but also his resurrection.

So why does the Gospel of Mark end in this way? Why does he not tell the rest of the story? Why does he leave us with these three women trembling, astonished, and afraid? Why does he end the story where they have not yet said anything to anyone?

I think the answer lies in what Mark has been telling us about discipleship. In the previous chapter, we saw that one key thing about Jesus's sufferings is that he did it all alone. He had no human helper, comforter, or encourager. No human agent came to him with God’s word to comfort or instruct him.

Likewise, the Christian must be prepared to trust in the Lord and suffer with him even if that means doing it all alone.

Although man may forsake us, the Lord Jesus will never forsake us. Even when we have no human helper we are still not alone. Christ is with us.

The disciples would eventually receive eyewitness evidence to confirm Jesus's words. They will see and then believe. But more blessed are those who do not see and believe.

The vast majority of Christians who lived after the coming of Christ have not been the beneficiaries of personally witnessing the evidence of his resurrection. They have not been able to see him with their own eyes, put their hand into the wounds on his hand and sides, or see him eat food.

Instead, we are called to believe a report and trust a word of resurrection. That is not to say the evidence should not be weighed carefully. Nor is it saying that we blindly trust any word that comes to us without “testing the spirits.” It is to say that the evidence we have for Christ resurrection and the truth of the gospel comes to a second hand through the word-report of others. This testimony is admissible even in earthly courts provided it comes from a credible witness and does not conflict with itself or the testimony of others.

This is all the disciples had at first when they followed the Lord Jesus during his earthly life. Three times Jesus predicted his death and resurrection. He gave them a word or a report of what will happen. But they did not believe him.

Christ is present to us through his word. He calls us to have faith in that word. This is our link in this life to the risen Christ. If we want to have his presence with us, we must turn to his word. We will find ourselves trembling and afraid, often overcome with our unbelief. We are people of little faith. But faith will overcome fear and doubt will be overcome by trust.

Then we will be enabled to speak the word to others—no matter what obstacle or suffering is placed in our path.

Being a disciple of Christ means being content to know that Christ has risen from the dead. The report of that is not fairytale. It is true and real. The evidence has been weighed in balance and has been found sufficient.

For now we only have a word of resurrection to encourage our hearts along the way. One day we will (like the disciples) behold him in his exalted glory. For now Christ only speaks, but in the future his word come to be. We will see the wound marks in his

hands and in his side, eternal reminders of his love for us when he died on the cross. In that day, faith will become sight, and fear will be vanquished. The tomb will be fully and finally conquered, and death will be no more.