



Weekly Study

Week 1: The Gospel of Mark: Preparation for Ministry

This lesson is about:

- 1) **Gospels** in general: We want you to understand the four gospels as each having different emphases and agendas, and that these agendas are part of the reason these gospels are considered sacred and are included in our Bible.
- 2) **Gospel of Mark**: We want you to learn to look for some of the basic themes of Mark's gospel.
- 3) **Preparation for Ministry**: This particular passage in Mark is Jesus' preparation for his ministry. We want you to see some of the components, and think about how you prepare yourself for ministry.

Gospels

We are starting today with the Gospel of Mark. And it begins this way.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The word gospel simply means good news. It is a translation of the word Evangelion (good news) or evangelize, which means to proclaim the good news.

I want you to think of a time that you received some good news. Maybe it was the report of a biopsy that the tumor is benign. Maybe it was that someone you loved had made it out of danger. Maybe it was you got the job you wanted. Why do you think we call the message and life of Jesus good news?

What is absolutely clear is that the early Christians thought of it, and the writers of these gospels, thought of it as great news. Despite the suffering it details about Jesus, despite the persecution it promises, despite the controversy he creates, this is a story of good news. What makes it so good? Do you think most people today think of our faith as good news? Or do they think of it as a list of should and should nots, things we are supposed to do to be good people, new rules we are supposed to follow? What makes this news good for you?

There are four gospels, and each one is a little bit different. (Otherwise, we would just have one!) When I gather with a family to plan a memorial service, it is always interesting to me the various remembrances and perspectives that each of the participants share. I might ask a simple question like “Where and when was your mom and dad’s first date?” The following conversation would ensue between the two children, with my head turning back and forth like watching a tennis match.

“It was the dance that they went to at the Methodist church, remember? Because dad had to sneak in there because he was Baptist?”

“No, that was their second date. Their first date was that football game.”

“That wasn’t a date. They ended up meeting at the football game. Mom came with Aunt Sally.”

“Well, mom considered it a date. They held hands while they were there, so it was a date.”

“Actually, you have it all backwards. The football game happened after the dance. That is why they could hold hands.”

“No. Because mom said that at first Aunt Sally was sitting between them. And then she introduced them to one another, and it took off from there.”

“At any rate, it was important that they both were Methodist. They really met and began to date at church.”

“But they loved football, and all through their lives they went to all the UT football games until Mom died. I wish Aunt Sally were here, because she was there then. She is the one that tells that story.”

The conversation above is an imperfect parallel to the wonderful depth of perspective in the gospels. The story of the first date was important for the narrative of Dad’s life, and was deeply true for each of those grown children. The issue isn’t whether they were true or not. Together, all of the brothers and sisters and friends and siblings of someone who has passed away can share a story about who Dad was and what he stood for. But each of those involved shape the story to fit his or her perspective, whether it was football or church that was the most important.

Imagine you were an historian of the Civil War, and you were trying to understand what happened at the battle of Gettysburg. If you found one letter home about the battle, it would be wonderful to have that original source. But what if you found four different letters, each telling the story a little different way. One might be trying to tell how bloody the battles were. Another might be trying to focus on the bravery of the soldiers, or the righteous cause for which they fought. Wouldn’t you realize that all of them were true and real accounts, but with different perspectives and agendas? And the real story of the battle could only be told if you had all of those letters somehow incorporated. That is the Bible.

So any time we read a gospel, we are not just trying to figure out what happened and what it meant, but why the way it happened might be important to that gospel writer, and why that particular perspective was important to the early church who gave it authority for us as followers of Jesus.

Here are five basic things anyone studying the Bible should know about the gospels:

- 1) Their purpose is to share the “good news” of who Jesus was, the pattern of life that he taught us, the reign of God that he initiates, the ultimate restoration and redemption of the world as it is supposed to be, the saving work of his death and resurrection to relieve us of the guilt, the penalty, and the power of sin in our lives. Every one of the gospels endeavors to do all of these things.
Most importantly, the purpose of the gospels is for us to know Jesus!
- 2) Scholars believe that they were all written between 70-90 AD, and most of them believe that Mark was written first, with the other gospel writers having access to Mark’s version when they wrote their gospels.
- 3) Each of the four gospels has a different perspective and agenda in the telling of the story of Jesus’ life. Sometimes, they are just differences in remembering of detail, but often, the different perspectives and versions say something about the theological agendas of their authors as the early church was learning and claiming its identity. Additionally, the fact that they were each included in the Bible says a great deal about what the church, guided by the Holy Spirit, found important about the life and teaching of Jesus.
- 4) We believe that the gospels were inspired by the Holy Spirit in their writing, and that the ancient Christian Church was inspired by the Holy Spirit when she adopted these four accounts of Jesus’ life into our canon. (The word “canon” literally means “measuring stick or tool.”) The Church determined that these four gospels, rather than the dozens that circulated through the Christian community, were the authentic representation of who Jesus was, and that the Bible is the measuring stick for how God works in the world, and what it means to be a Christian.
- 5) Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called “synoptic” gospels, and follow the same basic pattern for Jesus’ three years of ministry. Think of them as newsreels, intended to show a sequence of Jesus’ life. The Gospel of John, however, follows a very different pattern, and is often viewed as a portrait of Jesus, or perhaps a photo album of many different scenes over the course of his life.

Some interesting things about the Gospel of Mark:

- 1) We don’t know exactly who wrote Mark, as no author’s name is mentioned in any of the Gospels. All we know comes from other early sources about the Gospels, or from internal clues. It is traditionally said to be written by John Mark, who was a traveling companion of Paul’s, cousin of Barnabas. Some believe he was the “young man” in Mark 14:51-52, who ran away naked after Jesus was arrested. Most all believe it was a Gentile Christian.

Mark is in some ways the most straightforward of the gospels. I tell anyone who is deciding they want to start reading the Bible to start with Mark. It is short and to the point. It was written in very rough common grammatically poor Greek. Mark has become one of the more popular of the Synoptics for scholars of the twentieth century because it is thought to provide the earliest and most reliable source for those seeking to uncover the historical Jesus. It has been tied more

closely than the other gospels to the original oral tradition of the story of Jesus based on its literary style resembling that of a spoken narrative, with words such as “and” or “immediately.”

- 2) Most scholars believe it was the first gospel written, and that it was written in a time of upheaval and persecution, making reference to the Jewish wars of 66-70 AD in what is called the “little apocalypse” in Mark 13.
- 3) It has the following theological and literary themes:
 - a. Disciples are to remain faithful during persecution.
 - b. Miracles are a sign of the advent of the kingdom of God.
 - c. Things happen very quickly. It is short and to the point. The words “immediately” and “just then” and “at once” are common.
 - d. There is a focus on suffering, and the struggle against evil powers.
 - e. There will come a day in which Jesus returns again in power.
 - f. More so than the other Synoptic gospels (remember, Matthew, Mark, Luke are called synoptics) the disciples seem to have a hard time understanding who Jesus really is and what the messiah is here to do. In this sense the reader is identifying with the disciples as we focus on the question of “Who is Jesus?”
 - g. The “messianic secret” occurs in Mark, where Jesus tells his disciples not to tell anyone he is the messiah. In addition, Mark emphasizes that those who did not have faith did not understand the parables.
 - h. The earliest manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark end at Mark 16:8 with the women visiting Jesus’ tomb and seeing a young man dressed in a white robe saying that Christ had risen. “And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” Later manuscripts have Jesus’ appearances added on with a full conclusion in Jesus’ ascension. Even though scholars debate the original conclusion, the longer ending of Mark remains part of our canonical text.

Scripture: Read Mark 1:1-28

Preparation for Ministry

Before Jesus began his ministry, he prepared. Or, maybe God prepared him. The first event of his ministry was teaching in a synagogue, where he encountered a man with an unclean spirit, asking if Jesus had “come to destroy them.” Already, he was in a conflict with the darkness, which would manifest itself in the remainder of his life. But before he faced that unclean spirit and began a life of pushing back that darkness, he got himself ready. He 1) was baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit. (A similar indwelling will come on the Mount of Transfiguration before Jesus goes to the cross.) 2) he was tested in the wilderness, and 3) he began to gather his team.

- 1) He was baptized. When we baptize someone, I ask “what name is given this child,” or “what is your name?” This is the equivalent of asking “Who are you? What is your core identity?” We believe that identity is given to us by God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When Jesus was

baptized, the heavens opened and he was given his core identity – you are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased! He was reminded of who he was. Before we do any work for God, we must remember who and whose we are. We are God’s beloved children, in whom he is well pleased. Nothing can take that away from us. Our challenge is to live out of and up to that identity.

- 2) He was tested, tempted, tempered in the wilderness. Before a soldier goes into battle, she or he is tested and tempered at “boot camp.” It is a sort of training, but a sort of tempering by fire, so that when the real battle comes, the soldier can pass. They learn to rely on their most core strength when other things are taken from them. When we fast during Lent, remembering Jesus’ time of fasting in the wilderness, it is a sort of training for us to learn, so that when the real challenge comes we are ready. Sometimes, I can look back at my life, and see that each part was, in some way, a preparation for the next part.
- 3) He called his team. Even Jesus recognized that he needed some people around him to help him accomplish his calling. He called them to follow him. He shared the mission, and how they would be part of it. “I will make you fish for people.” He didn’t call the best and the brightest. He didn’t call the greatest scholars. No those people would believe they could accomplish all they needed to accomplish by their own power. He chose people who would have difficulty understanding without faith opening the eyes of their hearts. He chose people who would not ordinarily believe they could together be a sign, instrument, and foretaste of God’s kingdom. But they did. You cannot do what God calls you to do alone. The very act of inviting others to support you and join you in ministry hones and clarifies your calling.

One of the reasons we come to church on Sundays is to 1) experience the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit; 2) challenge ourselves to grow and learn, and try to test ourselves to move forward; 3) gather a team, a herd, around us. The world does not want to see us huddle all the time. At some point, we have to break the huddle and go out there and play the game, facing the obstacles and darkness that God calls us to push back. It sometimes bothers me that people think of the church as a “filling station,” in which they receive something rather than give their love and worship to God. But the truth is we all need to be filled and refilled with the Holy Spirit, and find encouragement from the team we have chosen.

I believe God is preparing you for something, just as he did Jesus. Let’s make sure not to miss the training.

Questions for learning and reflection:

- 1) What actually happened in these verses? List the events in order below. This is a good way to remember some of the real basics of Jesus’ ministry.
- 2) List (or highlight) all the words that point to immediacy and speed.

- 3) Where do you see in this passage a sense of struggle against evil forces?
- 4) What, according to this passage, was the important role of John the Baptist? In what way was the message of Jesus like the message of John described in this passage.
- 5) Where do you see in this passage statements and demonstrations of who Jesus is and what his life was all about.
- 6) Three basic geographical areas are listed in these passages. What are they?
- 7) How do you think our own agendas and perspectives color the way we describe what has happened in history and what is happening in the world around us now? Give some examples.
- 8) What do you think might be the relationship between verses 9-11 and verses 12-13?
- 9) Have you ever had a time of temptation or struggle, and found that God prepared you for it? Describe.
- 10) Why do you think the disciples followed Jesus so quickly, without discussion about where he was leading them?
- 11) Do you ever see your Christian life as a struggle? How have you been prepared, tested, and called for the journey?



Daily Readings

Week 1: The Gospel of Mark: Preparation for Ministry

Week 1, Day 1: Mark 1:1-13

The wilderness location helps establish John as a prophetic outsider who challenges the status quo of urban political centers. His nontraditional clothing and eating style reinforces his connection to the prophet Elijah. In addition to preaching repentance, John's signature act in the gospels was to pronounce Jesus as the one who be greater than him and to baptize him. Jesus is then declared to be God's beloved son from heaven, validating the prophet's testimony of Him.

The beginning and ending of this passage talks about being in the wilderness, has there ever been a time in your life where you felt as though you were going through a spiritual wilderness? What did you learn or are learning about your time there?

Week 1, Day 2: Mark 1:14-20

John's imprisonment is another reminder to the reader of the political ramifications of Jesus's mission. The first real activity that Jesus does in Mark was to seek out his followers. Rabbis rarely selected their own students and Jesus, in a radical reorientation of societal norms, encourages simple fishermen to leave their family businesses and follow him.

In this passage Jesus reorients the fishermen's vocation into a personal calling for them to be his followers. How might Jesus be calling you to further transform your life into a personal calling of discipleship?

Week 1, Day 3: Mark 1:32-39

Jesus' teaching and healings gain notoriety among the people to the point of practical inconvenience for Jesus and the disciples. Jesus models healthy self-care by making time to move away from the hectic crowds and spend time in solitude and prayer. Jesus not allowing the demons who know who he really is to speak is an example of the Messianic Secret that is prevalent throughout the gospel of Mark.

When the disciples told Jesus that everyone was looking for him his response was to head off to another town. Are you able to say no to some of the demands on your life when you need to? What are some ways you could practice better self-care like Jesus did when he went off to pray?

Week 1, Day 4: Mark 6:1-13

The people's description of Jesus as "the carpenter," "the son of Mary," ignores any mention of a father figure. This would have been a direct insult on Jesus' character in the first-century possibly hinting at Jesus being conceived illegitimately. Jesus is amazed and apparently inhibited by the people's disbelief in his hometown prompting him to move on from there after just a few teachings and healings. Jesus sends out the disciples in pairs giving them authority to anoint with oil, heal the sick and cast out demons. Jesus prepares his followers for future rejection in his name, similar to the way he was rejected in his hometown.

What jumps out to you about the way Jesus sent and instructed his disciples for ministry? What relevance does it have for us today?

Week 1, Day 5: Mark 8:22-26

Many have interpreted this healing story as a symbol of the ignorance of the disciples, who do not yet see clearly who Jesus really is. If read in this way it provides one particular way to understand the disciples "hardness of heart." Only God can remove such hardness/blindness of who Jesus really is. This scripture is unique in that it provides an example of a progressive healing. Not all healings are instantaneous.

When was a time when you felt like the Holy Spirit allowed you to see or understand something more clearly?