

The Gospel of Mark ~ Following The Servant King

Week 2: Mark 3:13 ~ 5:43

Just as a reminder, there is far too much in Mark, and far too little time, for me to comment on everything there is worth commenting about. I apologize if I don't end up commenting on something you are interested in or have a question about. But just because I don't comment on it doesn't mean it's not worth conversation/discussion in your Table Group. Please don't limit your conversations/discussions to only what I mention. You are strongly encouraged to talk about whatever you feel the Lord is directing y'all to talk about.

With that said, I'm going to try a slightly different format for this discussion guide. (Please feel free to give me feedback about what you think about it.)

The Twelve (3:13-19)

All three Synoptic Gospels include a list of the 12 disciples/apostles. John does not include such a list. And Acts includes a list of the 11—Judas Iscariot was no more. (See Matthew 10:2-4, Mark 3:13-19, Luke 6:12-16, Acts 1:13). An interesting exercise to do is compare the lists with each other and notice the similarities and differences. (Ex. Simon Peter is always listed first; Judas Iscariot is always listed last. What other differences do you notice?)

If you're a regular reader of my notes then you're familiar with this simple understanding and pattern of discipleship...

- Be with Jesus
- Become like Jesus
- Do what Jesus did

This pattern is clearly seen in this passage in Mark. "*Jesus appointed twelve—designating them apostles—that they might **be with Him** and that He might **send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons.***" (3:14-15, emphasis added)

Another way we can describe it is Jesus is (then and now) looking for people and developing people that He can trust with His power and authority. This process continues today. Are we becoming the kind of people that Jesus can trust with His power and authority? We become such people by being WITH Him and trusting Him as we yield/surrender to the process of becoming like Him.

- *How is this process going for you?*
 - *How are you spending time with Jesus?*
 - *How are you becoming more like Him?*
 - *What are you doing because He did it and because you sense His desire for you to do it? Or, how are His ways becoming your ways?*

Jesus Redefines Family (3:21, 31-35)

How do you define “family”? What is your basis for this definition? If the One we call King/Lord, our Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer, our Teacher defines something a particular way, it stands to reason that His definition becomes our definition/understanding, yes?

Two things we can say about “family” is that they are a gift from God and, like any gift from God, we can make an idol out of them. Friends, if we take Jesus seriously, then we must understand that “family first” (when family is defined by biology/genetics or the nuclear family) is not a value Jesus supports. And, as this passage demonstrates, “family” is to be defined as “*Whoever does God’s will...*” (3:35)

Family is typically the first Us vs. Them we are introduced to. And while there is nothing inherently wrong with family, Us vs. Them thinking is inherently problematic. So please hear me clearly: I’m NOT saying that we should LESSEN the importance of family. Rather, I’m pointing out that Jesus wants us to EXPAND our understanding of family. As we’ve been saying since the beginning of the year, we want to see Church as Family...or to say it another way, expand our understanding of Family to encompass the Church.

It is important to understand how shocking and revolutionary Jesus’s words were, both then and now. Renowned scholar N.T. Wright states, “*Mark has already shown us that Jesus was quite capable of challenging the symbols that lay at the heart of the Jewish sense of identity. Family solidarity was up there with sabbath observance, the food laws, and other signs of Jewish identity. It meant one was being loyal to the ancestral heritage, and thereby to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob...[Jesus] slices through the whole traditional structure in one clean cut. He has a different vocation, a different mission, and it involves breaking hallowed family ties. God is doing the unthinkable: He is starting a new family, a new holy people, and is doing so without regard for ordinary human family bonds. Unless you read verses 34-35 as deeply shocking, you haven’t got the message.*”

- *Does your definition of family match Jesus’ definition of family? Why or why not?*
- *What would change if we defined family the same way Jesus does? Or, what are the implications of Jesus’ understanding of family?*
- *Why do you think there is such a temptation/tendency to prioritize blood relations? What is the potential harm in it?*
- *How do we know if our love for our families has crossed the line into idolatry?*

The Parable of the Sower/Soils (4:1-20)

This is a well known parable of Jesus found in all three Synoptic Gospels, so I’m not going to break it down. But I do want to point out a few interesting points. First, why did Jesus teach in parables? The answer is layered. On one level, parables use images and ideas from everyday life that the audience can connect with and relate to. They are easy to remember, even if not always easy to understand. On another level, though sometimes they are clarifying, oftentimes they are

mystifying and require explanation or at least quite a bit of reflection. And that was the point...you have to WANT to understand them; you have to be ready to accept/receive the truth that they contain. Jesus clearly understood that there would be various responses to Him and His message. “*Anyone with ears to hear, let them hear.*” (4:9) communicates you’ve got to desire to listen and understand, and also implies that some people won’t.

Second, while Matthew and Luke also include the Parable of the Sower/Soils, only Mark includes this somewhat chiding comment by Jesus when the disciples asked Him about it, “*Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?*” (4:13) The implication is that understanding this parable is somehow a key to understanding the rest. What is so important about this parable that we must understand?

This parable is about the Word [of God]. Well, what is that? (Or, more accurately, Who is that?) Let’s get theological here for a moment. The “Word of God” is, simultaneously...

- The written Word of God (Scripture)
- The spoken Word of God (verbally revealing and explaining the character and will of God)
- The incarnate Word of God (Jesus)

So when we hear the term “Word of God” (or shorthand as simply the Word) it can be referring to any one of these or all three of these. It takes a bit of discernment to determine which is being referred to in any given instance. But Jesus, as God’s fullest revelation of Himself, is the ultimate Word of God...the Word made flesh. (See also John 1:1-5, 10-14 and Hebrews 1:1-3)

What Jesus is communicating in this parable is that there will be various responses to Him and the news and teaching He is bringing. Our own experience backs this up, right? We all know people who have responded to Jesus differently.

Please allow me to share some of Dallas Willard’s thoughts, “*...we are not going to understand God or His Word by being clever, intelligent, and scholarly, or even by studying very hard because the interaction of God with us through his Word is a personal matter. It depends on the condition of our hearts, our minds, and our lives...The Parable of the Sower is one of the most important parables Jesus gave about the kingdom of God because it answered the question, ‘Why doesn’t the Word...have the effect on people we might hope for?’ It moves us to ask again why God doesn’t just change people...This is not a question about what God can do; but it is a question about what God will do. It is a question about the precise manner of how God chooses to interact with people to accomplish His purposes. It’s true that the God of all the earth can do anything He wants to do, but there are a lot of things He doesn’t want to do. If we’re going to work with God in the kingdom of God, we have to find the ways He has chosen to work, and then work with Him in those ways.*”

All that to say, our (or anyone’s) receptivity to God is based on our heart, our character, our inner disposition toward God, and God will not override our free will. He is absolutely committed to that.

(I'll spare you my comments of how I believe the Church in America is largely made up of "rocky places" and "thorny/weedy soil". I'm pretty sure I've written about that elsewhere.) But Dallas Willard offers a hopeful reminder, "*If someone's desire for God resembles any of the first three soils in the parable, that doesn't mean they'll stay there forever. Jesus didn't say the heart never changes. There is good reason to have hope for ourselves and others. What a person couldn't hear yesterday, they may be very open to hear today.*"

- *As you consider the Parable of the Sower/Soils, what questions does it raise for you?*
- *How did you receive the Word of God? Or, describe the process of your receiving/accepting the Word of God.*
- *We are not static creatures. At different times we could resemble different "soil". Presently, how would you describe the "soil" of your heart, your disposition toward God?*
- *Why is it so important that we understand that different people will have different reactions/responses to Jesus?*

More Thoughts On Seeds (4:26-34)

Most of the parables have something to do with the Kingdom of God. Many of them begin with, "*The Kingdom of God is like...*", as we see in 4:26 and 4:30. Now we need to remember that we started this week's reading with Jesus appointing 12 disciples/apostles, who were now in an apprentice/training "program", if you will. They were learning to become like Jesus and do what He did. Part of that process includes setting expectations correctly. We already saw with the Parable of the Sower/Soils that Jesus was preparing them for a variety of responses to the "sowing of the seed" ...i.e. spreading the Gospel. In these next two little parables He adds to that understanding.

In 4:26-29 Jesus describes the mysterious process/interaction between the seed and the soil that occurs outside of the control of the sower. Notice, "*...he does not know how.*" (4:27) and "*All by itself...*" (4:28) This is an important reminder for all Christians, as we do our part to share the Gospel, that beyond "sowing the seed" the process of someone coming to faith in Jesus is really outside of our control.

As someone who has been teaching the Gospel for over thirty years, I can attest that it is a mystery...this interplay between the truth of the Gospel, the relatively feeble effort of the sharer/sower/teacher, the hearts/minds of the listener, and the work of the Holy Spirit. Yet, somehow, fruit is cultivated and a harvest is gleaned.

The metaphor of the Word of God as a seed is fitting and powerful. Picture one little apple seed in the palm of your hand. Now picture a huge apple orchard. Everything needed to create that entire orchard, when given the right conditions, sits in the palm of your hand. All the DNA and

genetic energy in that little seed, when mixed with the right amount of nutrients from the soil, water, and sunlight...and through the power of reproduction...has the potential to produce an entire orchard. That's amazing!

That's basically the point of the parable of the mustard seed. The power of the Kingdom of God works differently than the power of the world...it's like the creative power locked up in a seed...not the destructive power of violence and military might. The Kingdom of God is of a very different character than the Kingdom of the world...it reflects the character of the King.

Please allow me to share a little bit more from Dallas Willard, *"The seed is a power to organize reality. Please think about that for a moment. When you put that little seed down in the earth, it's already packed with potent substances. The power contained within it cracks the shell of the seed and puts out a little root. That little root starts eating dirt, eventually putting out a little leaf, then more leaves, and then fruit. That seed has organized reality in a specific and defined way to make a watermelon out of dirt, water, and sunlight. That's why the [Word] is aptly portrayed as a seed—it is a spiritual power to organize reality."*

(Incidentally, you'll notice I'm quoting Dallas Willard a lot this week. All these quotes are from his book, *The Scandal Of The Kingdom: How the Parables of Jesus Revolutionize Life with God*...just in case any of y'all wanted to check it out.)

- *As we think of how the Kingdom of God advances, what role does God play? What role do we play? What role do the people who hear about the Kingdom (the Gospel) play?*
- *What is the seed planted in you producing? How has the Gospel organized the reality of your life?*

Various Reactions To Jesus (4:35-5:43)

Through the Parable of the Sower/Soils Jesus taught that different people will have different reactions/responses to Him. Now Mark is going to show that to be the case.

Notice the reaction of the disciples when Jesus calmed the storm, *"They were terrified and asked each other, 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey Him.'" (4:41)* To fully appreciate the significance of Jesus calming the storm, we need to understand how ancient Near East people viewed the sea. For them, the sea represented chaos and disorder; the powerful, uncontrollable, evil forces of the world. This harkens back to the creation narrative in Genesis 1:2, *"Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters."* The creation story is about how God formed and ordered the chaos of the primordial world. So for Jesus to tame the sea with a word, *"Quiet! Be still!" (4:39)* would naturally raise the question of *"Who is this guy?"* Up to this point the disciples had accepted Jesus as a rabbi, perhaps even a special and unique rabbi, but calming the storm is on a God-like level.

What we want to pay attention to is that though they were “*terrified*”, they nevertheless stuck with Jesus. It appears that they wanted to stick around in order to figure out the answer, “*Who is this?*” So that’s one reaction/response to Jesus, and generally positive.

Next we see the various reactions of the people from the region of the Gerasenes (5:1-20). Ironically, the most positive response to Jesus is by a guy full of demons and by the demons themselves.

Immediately after Jesus sets foot in this area, a demon-possessed man comes running and falls at Jesus’ feet exclaiming, “*What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?*” How utterly unexpected! Mark demonstrates that this guy was the very first person to recognize who Jesus was. It’s almost as if Mark is using this guy to answer the disciple’s question at the end of chapter 4. The least likely person is the first to acknowledge Jesus’ rank and authority.

There are some interesting points to this whole scene. First, this guy didn’t have just one demon in him; he had a “Legion”. That’s bad...that’s very bad. Second, why did Jesus acquiesce to the begging request of the demons to be sent into a herd of pigs? I have no answer to that question. It is also interesting to note that the demons were concerned that Jesus would “torture” them (5:7). Third, uh, pigs? This should alert the reader that this is not Jewish land. Pigs were “unclean” animals, and no self-respecting Jew would tend pigs. Remember that the original audience of Mark’s Gospel were Romans. And while Jesus was Jewish, and most of His ministry was in Jewish territory, He did occasionally travel to places outside Israel. Mark is subtly communicating that Jesus is not only the King of the Jews, but King of the world.

Notice the reaction of the townspeople when they went to see what had happened. They saw the local crazy man now in his right mind; they heard about the pig stampede and drowning, “*...and they were afraid.*” (5:15) and “*...the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.*” (5:17) They could have celebrated the newfound wellness of the formerly possessed man. They could have shown Jesus and His friends hospitality. But fear causes people to have a skewed perspective. Perhaps they were focused on the financial impact of losing two thousand pigs. Maybe there was some racial/ethnic tension since Jesus and the disciples were Jewish. Whatever the case, it is clear that Jesus makes an impact and leaves an impression wherever He goes...and some people clearly aren’t warm and welcoming to that.

It is interesting that while this story is in all three Synoptic Gospels, none of the writers bother to give us the name of this formerly possessed guy. His reaction to Jesus is what we’d expect...he wants to go with Jesus and the disciples. And why wouldn’t he? Jesus healed/freed him. It’s Jesus’ response to him that is somewhat surprising/unexpected. Jesus said no, but still had a plan/opportunity for him, “*Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how He has had mercy on you.*” (5:19) And the man went and did just that...which prompted more reaction: “*So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.*” (5:20, emphasis added.)

(If you’re a Bible nerd like me, you may want to check out Matthew 8 and Luke 8 and their respective accounts of the same story, comparing the similarities and differences in accounts.)

Both the disciples (4:41) and the townspeople (5:15) were fearful of Jesus. On one level that's understandable...we tend to fear what we don't understand and what we can't control. In the case of the disciples, their fear caused them to move toward Jesus...or at least to stay with Him. But the townspeople didn't want anything to do with Him. Their fear caused them to reject Jesus.

- *Do you tend to be fascinated/intrigued by what you don't understand and can't control or to shy away from what you don't understand and can't control? Explain and/or offer examples.*
- *The man who was delivered from demons couldn't offer up a doctrinal dissertation about Jesus. But he could share his story. He could tell people about the difference Jesus made in his life. What difference has Jesus made in your life? Who might you share that with? (Your story doesn't have to be dramatic to be worth telling. The focus isn't on dramatic effect, but simply on Jesus...His goodness, love, care, mercy.)*

Have you noticed how many times Mark has mentioned a "crowd" around Jesus? In this week's reading alone—3:20, 3:32, 4:1, 4:36, 5:21, 5:24, 5:27, 5:30-31. Mark is definitely emphasizing the growing popularity of Jesus. It's safe to assume that there were mixed motivations amongst the crowd as to why they were wanted to see and be around Jesus. Some were wanting to see something spectacular, a miracle, healing, or deliverance. Some were likely skeptical of this rather unorthodox rabbi. Others were probably sincerely curious, and others were likely just following the crowd (crowds tend to draw crowds).

In the midst of these crowds Mark highlights two individuals in desperate situations: a synagogue ruler named Jairus whose daughter was dying and an unnamed woman with a long-standing flow of blood (hemorrhages). It is noteworthy that both of these people and situations were interruptions. They did not have appointments with Jesus. Notice how accommodating Jesus was to their respective plights. Whatever Jesus had planned for the day, He was flexible and obliged their requests.

Let's take a moment to pause and remember what Mark is ultimately trying to do with his Gospel: To demonstrate the power/authority AND the character of Jesus (the King).

It should be noted that Jairus and this woman were at different places on the social spectrum. Yet Jesus didn't show deference to the one higher on the social scale (Jairus). If anything, He was more accommodating to the one who was more vulnerable and marginalized. This is not what we typically see of people in power, is it?

Notice the similar reactions to Jesus that both Jairus and the woman had. Both of them "*fell at His feet*" (5:22; 5:33) This is a proper response to Jesus.

Consider how effortlessly Jesus healed both the woman and Jairus' daughter. With the woman, Jesus didn't even try, He didn't initiate it, it wasn't even a conscious decision on His part. Power just flowed out of Him. And with Jairus' daughter, Jesus raised the dead with a word.

As we wrap up this week, I think it is important to understand that Jesus doesn't want people to live in fear. He understands the powerful, and debilitating, role fear can play in our lives. So He confronts fear, as with the disciples on the boat in the storm, "*Why are you so afraid?*" (4:40), and He calms fear, as with Jairus upon hearing the news that his daughter had died, "*Don't be afraid; just believe.*" (5:36) A raging storm and a deadly illness are scary and dangerous things. Jesus was not denying that. Nor was He saying that such things can't/won't do real harm and damage to people. But Jesus wanted them to focus on the fact that He was with them and for them. He wants us to understand that, and focus on that, as well. No matter what we face, and no matter the outcome, Jesus is with us. Things may not always work out the way we hope; the result may not be what we want; we may experience pain and loss; the healing may not happen and tragedy may still strike. But that doesn't change the ultimate reality that Jesus is King and He loves us.

- *We've seen a lot of various reactions to Jesus this week. Which resonates most with you, or which can you relate most to? Which strikes you as strange/odd? Which most clearly demonstrates Jesus' authority to you?*
- *What are various reactions you've observed in people regarding Jesus? How can you tell if they're reacting/responding to Jesus, or to Christians (or people who are representing Jesus), or to religion/religious institutions?*
- *What would it take for you to fall at someone's feet?*
- *If you are willing to share, what is the scariest and/or most painful experience you have faced? How did Jesus see you through it...how was He with you in the midst of it? (Even if the outcome wasn't what you hoped it would be.)*
- *What role is fear playing in your life presently? What are you currently afraid of? How are you turning that fear over to Jesus, or how are you turning to Jesus in the midst of it?*

Soul Training Exercise

Pop Quiz: (You know I like to spring pop quizzes on you...I'm ornery like that 😊) What was the very first Soul Training Exercise I ever introduced to CUMC?...I'll give you a hint, it was from the first chapter of the first book by James Bryan Smith that we read together (*The Good And Beautiful God*). We're going to do that one again...

Where was Jesus in the midst of the storm? In the back of the boat...sleeping...not a care in the world.

Friends, we were meant to sleep about a third of our lives. We need rest if we are to function properly—physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually. How well do you sleep? Do you have good sleep habits/patterns?

This week, let's work hard at resting/sleeping. Here are some practical tips from James Bryan Smith...

- Go to sleep at a consistent time each night.
- Try not to engage in activities that create stress prior to bedtime. (Is your phone/device a source of stress?)
- Avoid stimulants, such as caffeine, in the evening.
- Try relaxation techniques—breathing, meditation, soft music, or reading to prepare you to fall asleep.

As James Bryan Smith says, "*Sleep is an act of surrender. It is a declaration of trust.*" Jesus sleeping peacefully through the storm was a way of trusting His Heavenly Father. Sleep is also a way of respecting the way God designed us by honoring the limitations He has placed on us. Let's build our trust in God...by sleeping.

So this week, rest well, my friends. And may this become a habit that goes beyond this week.