

## The Gospel of Mark ~ Following The Servant King

Week 3: Mark 6:1 ~ 7:37

“Familiarity breeds contempt”, as the saying goes. Mark is continuing to show various reactions to Jesus, and we now see what His hometown folks thought of Him. Basically, they were incredulous. While Mark does mention that many people were “amazed”, that’s not the same as believing, or even liking, what they were seeing and hearing. It is easy to dismiss what you don’t understand...even more so when you think you already understand something. They already knew Jesus, surely there was nothing special about Him, right?

- *Have you ever felt limited, put in a box, pigeon-holed, by those who knew you back in the day? Please describe.*
- *How does your family view you compared to how others view you? (Whose perspective do you prefer?)*

Please remember that the overall purpose of Mark is to demonstrate that Jesus is...

1. The true King. He does this by highlighting the authority/power of Jesus.
2. A King of a very different character, nature, and style than the worldly pattern we are accustomed to.

With that in mind, it is important to understand that what Mark is doing between 6:6b-7:45 is demonstrating the juxtaposition between how a worldly king operates and uses power/authority and how Jesus, the world’s rightful King, operates and uses power/authority. Think of it as an extended and elaborate compare/contrast narrative.

To see this comparison clearly, we want to look at 6:6b-13 & 6:30-44 (Jesus sending out the 12 and then feeding the 5000) on one side and 6:14-29 (Herod killing John the Baptizer) on the other.

How does Jesus use His power and authority? He delegates it, He shares it with others. He empowers the Twelve to go forth with His power/authority to preach, heal, and drive out demons. Jesus’ power/authority brings life and healing.

How does Herod use His power and authority? He authorizes the arrest and killing of John. What prompted this? Pettiness...a bruised ego...pride. John had called Herod out for taking his brother’s wife as his own. Herod was content with simply arresting John, but his wife, Herodias, wanted him dead. Herod’s power/authority brings violence and death.

Before we go any further, perhaps it would be helpful to identify who this “King Herod” is, as there are six Herod’s mentioned in Scripture. This is Herod Antipas, who was technically a tetrarch, not a “king”, though he was afforded that title. He was a Roman-appointed governor. He was also one of the sons of Herod the Great, the Herod mentioned in the nativity story, who ordered the killing of boys aged two and under upon hearing from the Magi of the birth of the

King of the Jews. Upon the death of Herod the Great, his “kingdom” (again, loosely defined, as he too was a Roman vassal) was divided among his three sons: Archelaus, Philip, and Antipas. You can see their respective territories in the map below.



Obviously there was a lot of drama and scandal in this family, with one brother marrying the other brother’s wife, which is really just the tip of the iceberg for this family. By and large, the Jewish people were not fans of the Herodian dynasty, as they were not Jewish, and they were client rulers of the Romans.

Back to the passage at hand and the contrast Mark is drawing between Herod (Antipas) and Jesus...

Jesus embraces and encourages simplicity and trust, as seen in the instructions He gave the Twelve when He sent them out (6:8-11)...a simple reliance upon God to provide for needs. Additionally, Jesus sent them village to village, and had them pay particular attention to those in need.

Herod throws a grand party for himself, showing off his wealth and power, and invites influential and powerful people to attend, “...his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee.” (6:21)

Herod was clearly filled with fear and insecurity, along with a touch of superstition. The text specifically says that “*Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man.*”(6:20), even though his wife wanted John dead. But when he got bamboozled by his wife and step-daughter into making a foolish and impetuous oath, in front of a crowd of people, he did not have the strength of character to do the right thing. “*The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests...*” (6:26) Herod gave the order to have John killed. “Greatly distressed” means he was sorrowful, regretful. So then imagine when he starts to hear the news of a popular prophet who is going around preaching and doing miracles. He thought Jesus was John the Baptizer raised from the dead!

Herod’s party and Jesus feeding of the five thousand are meant to be a contrast of two different “banquets”. Herod’s, which represents worldly values, was open to the elite...just the important people...because the worldly value system is based on scarcity (there’s just not enough for everyone) and status/stratification (the upper class and the lower class; the haves and the have nots). Jesus’ “banquet”, on the other hand, was open to all who were present. This is because His Kingdom is one of love and abundance. When Jesus “...saw the large crowd, He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” (6:34) And with just five loaves of bread and a couple of fish, Jesus fed a multitude...and had leftovers! The text says there were five thousand men...so if we assume that women and children were also present, but not counted, we’re talking fifteen to twenty thousand people. Talk about abundance!

Put simply, Herod was self-focused; Jesus was others focused. And, again, Herod’s use of power/authority brought death and regret, while Jesus’ power/authority brought life and sustenance. Notice also that Jesus got the disciples involved, so they too participated in the blessing of others. Friends, that’s how Jesus works...He invites us to participate with Him in the blessing and provision of others. A worldly value system consolidates power, the Kingdom of God shares/disperses it.

- *What are some ways in which you see a contrast between how power/authority works in the world versus how power/authority works in the Kingdom of God?*
- *We (Christians/the Church) are the representatives of God’s Kingdom on earth. Does the way we use power/authority match the character of Jesus and His Kingdom? Explain*
- *The Herods mentioned in Scripture were not leaders of good character. Who is a political figure (past or present) that you admire for their character?*
- *Why do you think wealth and power are so corrupting? Why do you think people strive for it so much?*

Let's talk about walking on water. That sounds like fun. But before we do, let's put this story in its context. Recall that just prior to the feeding of the five thousand, the Twelve had just returned from their little mission trip and Jesus was trying to get away with them on a little retreat to get some rest, and likely to debrief with them (6:31-21). But to no avail, because the crowds just followed on land and got to the destination ahead of them. So after Jesus had fed the crowd and dismissed them, He hung back to have some time of solitude and prayer.

Why did Jesus not have the disciples stay with Him, since that seemed to be His original intent? I do not know. What I do know is that spiritual work takes a physical, emotional, and mental toll, which is why Jesus wanted to get away with them in the first place to rest. After spending time preaching, healing, and driving out demons, Jesus knew that they were more depleted than they realized. This is why rest is so important and needs to be prioritized.

Nevertheless, Jesus took some time for Himself to get away and pray. As mentioned before, if Jesus needed to do this, and He's the pattern we are to follow, then we need to have a regular practice/rhythm of it too.

Mark tells us that "*He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them.*" (6:48). We have already seen that Jesus has the power to calm a storm, so Jesus could have calmed the wind for the disciples from the shore. But Jesus wanted to be WITH them...not just ease their circumstances. This is very important. Often we want Jesus to fix our circumstances, but His priority is to be with us in the midst of our circumstances.

As was mentioned in the introduction of this study guide (week 1), Peter was likely Mark's source for much of his information. So it's interesting that Mark doesn't mention Peter getting out of the boat and walking (briefly, sort of) to Jesus. That's a detail only Matthew offers.

Understandably, the disciples were terrified when they saw a figure walking on the water. Jesus calmed their fears, "*Take courage. It is I. Don't be afraid.*" (6:50) Then Jesus got into the boat WITH them. Once again the power of God (walking on water) and the heart of God (desiring to be WITH them) is on display. Incidentally, "It is I" is more literally, "I am"...hmm, where have we heard that before?

I can't help but wonder if the reason the disciples were so afraid, amazed, lacking of understanding, and hard hearted (6:50-52) was due to how utterly exhausted they were. Whatever the case, chapter 6 ends with much of what we've already seen—crowds flocking to Jesus, and Him healing them.

- *How's your practice of solitude and prayer going? How's your rhythm of rest?*
- *What is more important to you: what Jesus does for you or that Jesus wants to be with you?*

- *If you're a long-time church goer, you're likely familiar with stories of Jesus...like feeding the multitudes, walking on water, healings, etc. How do you hear and receive these stories today? Or, what is your attitude toward such stories?*
  - *Do you believe them and are amazed by them?*
  - *Heard it all before...no big deal?*
  - *Great stories for kids, but you're a little sceptical about how factual they are?*
  - *Etc.*
  - *Why do you feel/think as you do?*
- *How important is it to believe in the miracles of Jesus in order to be an apprentice of Jesus?*
- *If you could be an eyewitness to one of the miracles of Jesus, which one would you want to see firsthand, and why that one? (We'll assume the resurrection is a given...choose another.)*

Of course, all this popularity and notoriety surrounding Jesus caught the attention of the religious leaders. As Mark has shown the great favor Jesus had with the crowds, he now shows that not everyone was a big fan of Jesus.

Quick side note: In the introduction of this study (week 1) it was mentioned that Mark was writing to a Roman audience. The parenthetical statement that makes up 7:3-4 is one of the points of evidence, as Mark would not have needed to explain Jewish customs to a Jewish audience.

The heart of the matter is a matter of the heart...this would be a good way to describe 7:5-23. The religious leaders were running with the assumption that true piety and righteousness had to do with keeping religious rules and customs. Jesus very quickly and directly corrected that notion.

One of the reasons we (CUMC in 2025) have been focusing on shifting our culture and mindset from conceiving of Church as an institution/organization to that of a family is due to the tendency that religiosity (systems and rules of religion) can easily become the focus, which leads to institutionalism. Whereas within a family dynamic relationships take precedence. It is in relationships that we get a more accurate view of our own heart, as well as our heart for others. Sadly, it's just too easy to keep religious rules and still have a cold, dark heart. Additionally, as we see with the religious leaders in the text, institutional rules, systems, structures can be elevated even above God's will and commandments.

Jesus gets straight to the point, *“Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written, ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me. They worship Me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’”* (7:6-7) Jesus then went on to describe exactly how they were doing that. It was through a practice called Corban. Corban was a sacrifice/offering made to God. It was a freewill offering, it was not mandated. But it was expected that if you dedicated something as an offering to God, then you followed through. The

problem was that God had commanded that adult children take care of their aging parents (this is part of what it meant to “Honor your parents”--the Fifth Commandment).

Instead, and seemingly in order to look holy and righteous, the Pharisees were making showy offerings to God while neglecting their parents...thus missing the heart of God. Jesus wasn't saying there was anything wrong with making special sacrifices/offerings to God, so long as in doing so they weren't disobeying something God has clearly stated, and weren't doing it to draw attention to themselves.

But, again, the issue is the heart behind it all. What incited this whole discussion was that the disciples hadn't closely followed the purity laws and ceremonial washing rules. So Jesus had to correct the prevailing assumption, which was that purity, cleanness, holiness, righteousness, good or evil, had to do with outward behaviors and religious performance. Instead, according to Jesus, good/evil, clean/unclean, etc. stems from the condition of the heart. (Not the literal organ that pumps blood throughout our bodies, but one's inner self.) Good and evil comes from the inside out, not the other way around. The religious leaders cared more about looking good, holy, righteous, and being admired and respected rather than actually being good and virtuous. Or to say it another way, they put reputation over character.

- *How much do you care about your reputation (what others think of you)? What do you do to improve your reputation? Conversely, what are you doing to improve your character (who you really are; your inner self)?*
- *How would you describe the condition of your heart? Is there anything coming out of you that causes you concern or that you would like to change? How might you go about changing/improving the condition of your heart?*

Rules, customs, traditions, practices are part and parcel of religious life. Some are God-given, others are human-made. That doesn't necessarily make them bad or wrong. There was likely good intention and wisdom involved in their creation. But when they take precedence over what God has instructed/commanded, that's a problem. When they are done in order to be seen, respected, admired by others, that's a problem. When they are an act and not a reflection of the heart, that's a problem.

- *Which rules/traditions can you identify as human-made? What rules or traditions created by humans do you observe that might be problematic?*

It is tempting for many Christians, particularly those who have never faced any real oppression, to read Jesus' words in this passage and think that evil and sin is simply a personal/individual heart issue. (This fits nicely with our highly individualistic values and narratives.) But in context, this whole episode came about because Jesus (or the disciples) were not upholding the system's established expectations. Social pressure is a systemic issue. So let's not think of sin and evil being solely a personal/individual heart issue, as opposed to a systemic or societal issue. It's not either/or, but rather both/and, because what is a system or society but a collection of people

from whose hearts flow good or evil. The heart contributes to the system and the system influences the heart.

Before moving on, it would be wise to get our heads around something. How are Christians to make sense of the purity laws of the Old Testament, with their emphasis on what's clean and unclean? N.T. Wright offers this...

*“The scriptures spoke of purity, and set up codes as signposts to it; Jesus was offering the reality. When you arrive at the destination you don't need the signposts any more, not because they were worthless but precisely because they were correct. Learning to read the Old Testament this way wasn't easy in the early church, and it isn't easy today. The starting point is to realize that the Jewish scriptures aren't to be seen as a timeless code of behavior, but as the story that leads to Jesus. This doesn't mean we can casually set aside bits we don't like or understand. When things are set aside, as the purity laws are here, it's not because they're irrelevant but because the deeper truth to which they pointed has now arrived. Everything the scriptures were getting at reached a peak in Jesus Christ; from now on everything is different. Figuring out that difference, and still remaining loyal to scripture, is one of the key arts of being a Christian, then and now.”* (emphasis added)

We now come to one of the more difficult stories in the Gospels (found also in Matthew 15). In His interaction with the Syrophoenician woman (read: Gentile, not Jewish), Jesus doesn't sound, well, very Jesusy. His exchange with her seems harsh and uncaring, even cold...kind of insulting. What's going on here?

Before attempting to answer that question, please take note that Jesus and the disciples were outside Israel. They had traveled north to the area to Tyre, and even that far from home they still drew a crowd. Jesus' popularity had spread quite far. So Jesus was now in an area that Jews considered “unclean”. Mark has just presented an account of Jesus clarifying what is clean vs unclean. The sheer fact that Jesus immediately goes into a Gentile region clues us in that He's up to something. On top of that, the woman came to Jesus because her daughter had an “unclean spirit”. Also keep in mind that the disciples were with Jesus on this occasion.

So with all that said, it seems that Jesus was, in fact, acting quite Jesusy...He was confronting the prevailing assumptions of the day, assumptions that regulated how people of different cultures related to each other, and He was doing so in a creative way. Remember, actions speak louder than words. What did Jesus do? He healed the daughter. This demonstrates that the Kingdom of God is open and available to all. The disciples needed to see this. They needed their prejudices confronted and corrected. Think of this as an object lesson for the disciples...that God's love and mercy extends past the boundaries they had been brought up with. Jesus' initial words to the woman mirror the thought/attitudes of the disciples, and most Jews, of the day. But Jesus' actions correct that wrong belief.

As has already been stated, Mark likes to utilize a method of compare and contrast to make his points. Notice, then, the difference between how Jesus healed the woman's daughter and how He healed the deaf/mute in the next section.

The demon-possessed daughter was not even present. Apparently, Jesus just willed it to be done, and the demon was driven out. That's some serious power/authority. Then Mark goes into rather graphic detail about how Jesus healed the deaf/mute, involving sticking His fingers in the man's ears, spitting, and touching his tongue. That is quite a contrast in healings.

A common feature in both of the healings was that Jesus refused to put on a show or make a spectacle of it all. With the healing/deliverance of the daughter, there literally was nothing to see. And with the deaf/mute, the text reads "...*He took him aside, away from the crowd...*" (7:33) To say all this another way, Jesus wasn't a show off. Plus, He knew that people were more interested in spectacle than they were about heart transformation; more interested in their own agendas rather than the agenda of the Kingdom.

- *How might your prevailing assumptions and prejudices be holding you back from loving others well? Who do you struggle to love or desire good for?*
- *The Syrophenician woman/mother was desperate. If you are willing, describe a time in your life when you were desperate.*

### Soul Training Exercise ~ Embracing Interruptions

How do you handle interruptions and people demanding your attention? So far in Mark we've seen that Jesus is constantly surrounded by people and crowds, who oftentimes have their own agendas and needs that they're hoping Jesus can help with.

We've seen Jesus be gracious and compassionate with people. Would that be how people would describe us when we're interrupted or when people are seeking our attention? Whatever Jesus had going on, He seemed to be able to make room in His schedule, and in His heart, for people. Perhaps that was because, at the end of the day, people are what matter most.

The invitation this week is to turn every interruption, every disruption of our plans, every call for our attention, as an opportunity...maybe even a divine appointment. Now, I'm NOT saying that we need to try and meet every demand upon us. But let's take every interruption as an invitation to pause and consider if God is up to something in that moment, in the lives of those interrupting us, or maybe even in our own heart.

May we grow into the type of people who deal with others, and the interruptions they bring and the demands they have, with grace and peace, knowing there is something much bigger going on around us.