

## The Gospel of Mark ~ Following The Servant King

Week 4: Mark 8:1 ~ 9:50

Have you ever experienced *deja vu*? The opening account in chapter 8 might feel like that. Didn't we just see a feeding of a multitude last week? Yep, sure did. Why two such similar accounts? The key is to notice the subtle differences between the two. The feeding of the five thousand in chapter 6 took place in Galilee. The feeding of the four thousand here in chapter 8 took place in the region of the Decapolis. What do these two different locations signify? It means that in the first feeding the multitude was largely Jewish. With the second, the crowd would have been largely Gentile. Meaning, Jesus' compassion and the abundance He offers extends to all people...which is something Mark's Roman audience/readership would have been interested in.

Another difference is that while both locations were "*remote*", this second location seems to be much more so. With the 5000, there were villages in the surrounding countryside in which they could have gone and purchased food (6:36). With the 4000, that doesn't seem to be the case. Additionally, the 4000 had been with Jesus for three days.

Now for some similarities: in both cases it was Jesus' compassion that motivated the feedings; in both cases the disciples were called upon to help in the distribution of food; and in both cases there were leftovers...just to add emphasis on how miraculous it all was. But as we're going to see momentarily, Mark is setting up the theme that we're going to see in this week's reading that the disciples simply weren't grasping Jesus and His teaching. They were a little slow on the uptake.

Up to now we have been observing how people variously respond to Jesus. Now we want to start paying attention to the reaction Jesus has to those around Him. First up, the Pharisees. They had come to "*question*" Jesus...or examine, argue, debate with Him. And they asked Him for a "*sign*", a miracle of some kind to confirm His authority and identity as being truly from God. Mark specifically states that they wanted to "*test*" Jesus. This is the second time Mark has used this word in his gospel. Do you know when the first time was? I'll give you a hint: the word "*test*" here in Greek is also the same word as "*tempt*". (see 1:13) The Pharisees were acting downright Satan-like...tempting Jesus to perform a miracle. And just like with Satan, Jesus would have nothing to do with it. But notice Jesus' reaction to this whole scene, "*He sighed deeply.*" (8:11-12)

- *What's something (or who is someone) that has caused you to sigh deeply recently? When you sign deeply, what are you typically expressing?*

Likely still aggravated by His interaction with the Pharisees, Jesus said to the disciples, "*Be careful...Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod.*" (8:15) Of course, the disciples didn't understand Him, and thought He was upset because they forgot to bring bread. (What did they do with the leftovers, the reader wonders?) So what exactly did Jesus mean by the "*yeast*" of the Pharisees and Herod? The metaphor of yeast (or leaven), at least in this instance, has to do with the influence, the vision and leadership style, of the religious pietists

(Pharisees) and of worldly political power (Herod). Neither one represents an accurate vision of the Kingdom. Or to say it another way, each represents a warped/twisted vision of the Kingdom.

This really is emblematic of human visions of the ideal society or world. Every human civilization posits its own view of what utopia would look like and how to achieve it. So far, all have fallen short. Jesus comes along and offers a completely different vision of reality and “the good life”, of how human communities should be ordered. Sadly, very few people are interested in Jesus’ vision (we call it the Kingdom of God) and His way of achieving it. That holds true even for people who fill congregations week in and week out.

- *What are some visions for an ideal society floating around out there? (By “vision” it might be helpful to think about political ideology/philosophy. In other words, what’s on offer as far as the best way to order society? Who/what do you think offers the best vision for human flourishing?)*
- *How have you seen (historically or presently) religious and political leaders try to bring about a utopian society? Why do you think their “yeast” has failed?*

It is understandable that Jesus would be frustrated with the disciples. Remember, they were handpicked to become leaders in His new movement. But they had to unlearn the vision and style of leadership seen in the religious leaders and the political leaders. That style will not work in the Kingdom, it is not in line with the values of the Kingdom. It is clear that the disciples were not thinking on the same wavelength as Jesus. (8:16-21).

(I’m going to skip over the healing of the blind man in 8:22-26 and save it for next week when we can compare/contrast it with the healing of another blind man in 10:46-52.)

We now hit a key transition/pivot point in the book of Mark. Jesus will begin ramping up their training as He unveils more clearly Who He is and How His plan/mission will unfold.

It begins with a little “pop quiz” Jesus had for the disciples. (8:27-30) He wasn’t particularly concerned with, “*Who do people say that I am?*” (8:27). That was more of a warm up question. The real test, what He really wanted to know, was “*Who do you say I am?*” (10:29, emphasis added) All three Synoptic Gospels record this account. Each of them have Peter speaking up, and passing the test, “*You are the Christ/Messiah.*” (8:30)

So Peter was on the right track...sort of. Yes, he had rightly identified Jesus as the Christ/Messiah. Unfortunately, as we’re about to see, he (and really all of them) had a different understanding of what it meant to be the Christ/Messiah, or how the long-awaited Christ/Messiah would bring about the Kingdom of God. (Implied in this is that their vision of the Kingdom was off as well.)

They, like most Jews of their time, believed that when the Messiah arrived, as a descendant of the royal line of David, He would reestablish the Kingdom of Israel, and Israel would be the reigning world power from then on. (Like I said, every society has their dream of an ideal world.)

Jesus then laid it on them, “*He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must **suffer** many things and **be rejected** by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that He must **be killed** and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this...*” (8:31-32a, emphasis added)

“*Wait!!! What???* No, no, no, that’s not how the story goes, Jesus. Get it right.” This is what I imagine Peter rebuking Jesus sounded like (8:32) Can you imagine that? Rebuking Jesus! That’s not going to go well. Jesus rebuked Peter in return, “*Get behind me, Satan!*” *You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.*” (8:33) Yikes! That seems harsh. But it was entirely accurate. One of the temptations that Satan offered to Jesus in the wilderness, we know from Matthew’s and Luke’s Gospels, was to have the Kingdom without the way of the Cross. Peter’s rebuke of Jesus was too reminiscent of Satan’s temptations, so Jesus called it out.

Jesus then goes on to describe what following Him truly entails. “*If anyone would come after Me, they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a person to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can a person give in exchange for their soul? If anyone is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when He comes in His Father’s glory with the holy angels...I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power.*” (8:34-91)

This, my friends, is what’s known as the cost of discipleship. (Make no mistake, the original hearers and readers understood any reference to a “cross” meant only one thing...crucifixion...torturous death.) You may ask, “*Who would ever want to pay such a cost?*” Just those who believe Jesus is worth it. The original hearers/readers may have asked, “*How does that advance the Kingdom?*” This is why it is important to understand that the Kingdom of God is different than anything we could ever imagine or would have ever cooked up ourselves.

- *How do you hear/receive the words “deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Me?” Is this what you understand the Christian life is all about? What do you think it might look like/be like if those who claim to follow Jesus actually lived that way?*
- *What does this have you considering about your own life and follow-ship of Jesus? (Is it aspirational? Unrealistic? Do you even want that? Etc. ) What might be a step in that direction for you?*

Let’s pause for a moment to reflect upon the past 2000 years and see how the presence of the Kingdom and the influence of the gospel has affected life today. We enjoy many values and standards of the Kingdom without realizing it. We take our inherited morals and ethics, particularly around justice, for granted...not recognizing that they are rooted in the Kingdom. For example, racism. We all know racism is bad and wrong. But WHY do we believe this? HOW did we come to believe this? The short answer is the reality of the Kingdom and the truth of the

gospel. You see, without the gospel, without Jesus and His Kingdom, we would not have any ideological foundation to make the claim that racism is wrong/bad.

Let me try to explain. The basic modus operandi of the world is “*might makes right*”. Human history is a long story of a struggle for power. And those with power dominate however and whomever they choose. We don’t like that...we believe that’s wrong. But the reason we react the way we do is because we are, in fact, more gospel-informed than we realize. Remember, the Kingdom is like a mustard seed (see 4:30-32)...it’s been growing and spreading for 2000 years, and we take for granted the impact it has had on the world around us. (Granted, there’s still much more work to be done, more aspects of the world that need to be touched and transformed by the gospel...which is why you and I are here.)

My point here is this: Many people want, and enjoy, the fruits of the Kingdom, without realizing it...but without really wanting the King (Jesus). Unfortunately, many Christians want the Kingdom and the King...but without the Cross. Yet it’s the Cross that confronts and counters the “*might makes right*” narrative.

- *What are some values and ideals that people hold to and enjoy without realizing that they are rooted in the Kingdom of God and are fruit of the Gospel?*
- *In your own words, how does the Cross confront and counter the “might makes right” narrative?*

An integral part of our discipleship unto Jesus is denying ourselves and taking up our cross. This is how the Kingdom advances. Sadly, history up to the present day demonstrates that far too many Christians strive for Kingdom ends through worldly means (i.e. using worldly power to accomplish Kingdom goals). Friends, it doesn’t work that way and only hurts the witness of the Church.

- *What are some ways we see Kingdom ends/goals strived for through worldly means? Or, how do we see people expecting Kingdom fruit from a worldly seed?*

As you can imagine, the disciples just didn’t get it. (Let’s face it, it’s a hard pill to swallow. Spoiler alert: it will take the resurrection to convince them.) Now what about that cryptic part at the end about some not tasting death before seeing the Kingdom come with power? What’s up with that? That leads us to the very next section.

This next scene (9:2-13) is theologically dense and loaded. Let’s unpack a bit of it. To fully grasp the significance of the Transfiguration we need to recall two other significant times when God met with significant figures in Israel’s history on a mountain and revealed His glory. Moses met with God on a mountain (see Exodus 24 & 33) and experienced the glory of the Lord. And Elijah met with God on a mountain (see I Kings 19) where he, too, experienced the Presence of the Lord. So, lo and behold, who joins Jesus on the mountain but none other than Moses and Elijah. Moses and Elijah, both prophets in their own right, represent the Law/Torah (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah)...so basically Israel’s scriptural heritage. The Law/Torah was instructions from

God on how to be and live as His faithful covenant partners. The Prophets were people who constantly called God's people back to covenant faithfulness.

Let's keep in mind that this whole incident occurred immediately after Jesus saying that some would not taste death before they see the Kingdom of God come with power. The Transfiguration is the fulfillment of that statement. The Kingdom of God is all around us all the time, but it is usually veiled. Biblical cosmology understands that the physical/material world and the spiritual/unseen world are overlapping and interlocked. And every now and again that veil is removed, or the spiritual/unseen world breaks forth in the physical/material world. That is what's happening on the Mount of Transfiguration. The disciples were catching a glimpse of the fullness of reality...and Jesus was/is the focal point.

- *What do you think/feel about the idea that the physical and spiritual world, the seen and the unseen reality, are overlapping and interlocking? How can/should that affect our everyday lives? What questions does it raise for you?*

Interestingly, both Moses and Elijah were expected (foretold) to "return" in some way, shape, or form, before the end. In Deuteronomy 18:15 Moses said, "*The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.*" In Malachi 4:5 we read, "*See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes.*"

Peter (of course it's Peter; it's always Peter, isn't it?) wanted to prolong the experience by building tents/shelters/tabernacles for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. But God didn't want Peter (or the disciples, or anyone else) to mistakenly equate Moses and Elijah as being on the same level as Jesus. "*Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: 'This is My Son, whom I love. **Listen to Him!**'*" (9:7, emphasis added) An enveloping cloud is reminiscent of Moses on Mt. Sinai. What the Voice said is a call back to Jesus' baptism. There was/is no mistaking the emphasis—One greater than Moses and Elijah is here; One who fulfills and supersedes the Law and the Prophets. That is quite a statement.

It is popular to put all great religious figures on the same plane, as if they all amount to basically the same. Friends, we can't do that with Jesus. Jesus was not a religious/spiritual figure pointing people to God. HE IS GOD! Let us not be ashamed or embarrassed to make such a claim about Jesus...it's that claim that our faith rests on.

As momentous an occasion as this was, Jesus told Peter, James, and John to keep it to themselves "*...until the Son of Man had risen from the dead*" (9:9). Once again we see that they couldn't grasp that their rabbi, the Messiah, the One they had just seen glorified, could possibly suffer and die. But they did have a clarifying question regarding Elijah (9:11). What is important for us to understand is that Jesus was the fulfillment of Moses' prophecy that a prophet like himself would arise (Notice that what Moses told the early Israelites is the same thing the Voice told the disciples."*Listen to Him*"). And John the Baptizer was the fulfillment of a future "Elijah" that was foretold. As we're told about John the Baptizer in Luke 1:17, "*And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah.*" And as we're told in Matthew 11:13-15, "*For all the*

*Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.”*

Moving on to 9:14-32, whatever euphoria or “spiritual high” Jesus, Peter, James, and John might have been experiencing from their recent experience quickly comes to an end. It’s unclear exactly who was arguing with whom. Were the disciples arguing with the teachers of the law or with the crowd? Or was the crowd arguing with the teachers of the law. And what were they arguing about? It seems the catalyst for the argument had to do something with the disciples not being able to drive out an evil spirit from a boy. (9:18) It’s all a bit confusing...and I think that’s the point. In the midst of it all there was a desperate father who just wanted to see his son well/delivered.

Jesus’ response seems to carry a tone of frustration/exasperation (9:19). But it’s challenging to figure out if He was frustrated with the crowd, or the teachers of the law, or the disciples, or all of the above. Though I think it’s safe to say that Jesus was not frustrated with the father who simply wanted his son healed and made whole.

As we’ve seen in earlier passages (1:24; 5:7) “*When the [evil] spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion.*” Demons/evil spirits react to the presence of Jesus. The challenge with reading words (as opposed to hearing them) is that it’s difficult to pick up on tone. For example, in Jesus’ response to the father asking, “*...if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.*” (9:22), was Jesus offended? Was He chiding the father? Or was He almost being playful when He questions, “*If you can?...Everything is possible for those who believe.*” (9:23)

The father’s response is perhaps one of the most honest statements we see a person make in Scripture. “*I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief.*” (9:24) I don’t know about you, but I can relate to that statement. It is common to think that faith and doubt are somehow opposed to one another. But the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty, control, and/or indifference. Or to say it another way, faith, like love, is a capacity...it can grow or shrink. The most important thing, and this father demonstrates it, is coming to Jesus.

- *What do you have no problem believing and what do you struggle to believe? (The beautiful thing is that we can come to Jesus with our unbelief.)*

The disciples were obviously curious as to why they couldn’t drive out the evil spirit (9:28). You’ll recall they had successfully driven out demons in earlier instances when they were sent out by Jesus to do just that (6:12-13). Evidently, some demons are more powerful than others. As Jesus said, “*This kind can come out only by prayer.*” (9:29...and some manuscripts add *and fasting*). Mark is turning a corner in his gospel account. Or perhaps a better way of saying it, Jesus is turning a corner in His ministry. Things are going to get more challenging, and the disciples need to be ready for it. This explains why Jesus wanted to get away for some more intense teaching time with the disciples (9:30)

Up to this point, Mark has been making the case that Jesus is the Messiah, and he's been doing so by highlighting Jesus' authority, particularly as seen in miracles and healings. But as we're seeing in this week's reading, Mark is transitioning to highlighting the kind of Messiah Jesus will be...one who suffers and dies. We saw it earlier in 8:31; we see it again here, "*The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill Him, and after three days He will rise.*" (9:31) He is trying to teach and prepare the disciples for what is to come. But the pattern continues...they don't get it.

The rest of chapter 9 seems to have all occurred one evening in a house in Capernaum (9:33). Let's keep Jesus' earlier words in mind, "*Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod.*" (8:15). He is trying to teach the disciples a different way of leadership.

"Greatness" is measured very differently in the Kingdom, "*If anyone wants to be first, they must be the very last, and the servant of all.*" (9:35) This is a stark difference from how the Pharisees and Herod operate.

Also, the work of the Kingdom is not some private little exclusive club for special people, "*...for whoever is not against us is for us.*" (9:40) Many people participate in Kingdom work without knowing it. Jesus doesn't want His followers wasting time trying to figure out who's on "Team Jesus". If they are not actively opposing you, and if they're doing good work, don't inhibit them. This seems to be what Jesus is saying in 9:38-41. The religious and political leaders were concerned with excluding those who didn't fit their mold. Jesus doesn't want His followers following that pattern.

Notice that Jesus mentions "*little children*" (9:37) and "*little ones*" (9:42) throughout this conversation. Little kids had very little status and significance...by worldly standards. But Jesus Kingdom operates on a different value system. So whereas worldly leaders overlook those deemed insignificant, Jesus wants His followers, and especially leaders in His movement, to give special attention to the easily overlooked.

Lastly, whereas worldly-style leadership is often contentious (one big struggle for power...if you need an example look no further than the legislative and executive branches of the federal government), Jesus admonishes those who would follow Him to, "*...be at peace with each other.*" (9:50)

The different culture of the Kingdom, and the different leadership style of the Kingdom, will naturally put those of us trying to live the way of the Kingdom at odds with those around us. Jesus wants His disciples, then and now, to be prepared for a tough road ahead...but well worth the struggle and challenges.

- *Who is the most Christlike leader you know? What makes them so? How are they different than the worldly mold?*

## Soul Training Exercise ~ Prayer to the Crucified Christ

In this week's reading we see things turn a corner. Jesus "*began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that He must be killed and after three days rise again.*" (8:31) Additionally, He "*gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.*" (9:9). Yet again, "*He said to them, 'The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill Him, and after three days He will rise.'*" (9:31).

Jesus' suffering and death is central to His ministry to save the world and advance the Kingdom. Accepting the way of the Cross is also crucial to our discipleship to Jesus. We are called to a cruciform way of life, as our Lord exemplified.

With that in mind, let's make this prayer a regular prayer we pray. Try to pray it each day, perhaps multiple times per day. Maybe even memorize it so as to internalize it.

*Lord Jesus, You stretched out your arms of love upon the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace; so clothe us in Your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know You to the knowledge and love of You; for the honor of Your name. Amen.*