

***THE GOSPEL OF MARK***

***Mark 8:27—10:52***

***By***

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Our scene opens in this lesson in Caesarea Philippi. Jesus and His disciples had traveled north from Galilee to this area, which had been a center of pagan worship. Much of Jesus' public ministry in Galilee is finished at this point, and He will soon head toward Jerusalem. But what takes place here represents a crucial turning point in Mark's Gospel.

Up to this time Jesus had not openly declared Himself to be the Messiah. Instead, He had tried to "act it out" for His disciples. Now He seems to conclude that they are ready to reflect more deeply on who He is, so, He asks the all-important question, "***Whom do men say that I am?***" (8:27). Their general response identifies Him with John the Baptist or Elijah. Then with insight and directness Jesus asks, "***But whom say ye that I am?***" (8:28-29). Up to this point Peter had not shown any insight, but now he blurts out, "***Thou art the Christ.***" Peter's confession identifies Jesus in clear terms—He is not John the Baptist returned to life, nor Elijah, nor some other prophet. He is indeed the long-expected Messiah. In response, Jesus acknowledges who He is, but insists they tell no one else (8:30).

But identifying Jesus is only part of the encounter. Understanding the meaning of His Messiahship is very important. The popular view of the Messiah was violent and devoted. It held that Israel would see God's power in action, and her enemies would be broken and defeated. The Jewish population anticipated a Warrior Prince whose crusade would liberate their nation.

But now in verse 31 Jesus explains that He as the true Messiah, ***must suffer many things,*** and be rejected by the Jewish religious leaders, ***and be killed, and after three days rise again.*** His words carry undertones of Isaiah 53, a "Suffering Servant" passage, and provides a clue to the nature of His ministry. This is the first of three predictions of His coming death and resurrection. Jesus wants all who profess faith in Him to be aware of the cost of His Messiahship.

Peter could not handle Jesus' unbelievable words. That the Messiah should suffer went against the disciples' entire belief system, and Mark tells in verse 32 that Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked Him. But Jesus would not be patronized/used, and His counter rebuke of Peter reminds us of His earlier temptation experience in the wilder-

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ness, **“Get thee behind me, Satan!” (8:33)**. Jesus’ words sound harsh and blunt, because any hint of compromise had to be rejected. The stakes were high, and Jesus wanted no misunderstanding about His mission. Those who confess Christ must also accept His cross.

We may be more like Peter than we care to admit. We prefer power without pain, glory without humiliation. Peter was excited to protect Jesus, but Jesus called him, and us, to follow Him. No one could ever accuse Jesus of making others follow Him under false pretense. Jesus did not offer an easy way. In the short run, there was no future for the disciples in following Jesus, but in the long run their confidence could be firmly fixed in the complete will and power of God.

The phrase, “carry a cross,” meant more to Mark’s first-century readers than it does to us. These words have been weakened in our vocabulary by misuse, so they are now a weak comparison. We often speak of “cross bearing” as an inconvenience, such as a toothache or having to work with a grouchy boss. A nagging spouse, a person may say, is “the cross I have to bear.”

But that is not what Jesus or Mark meant. Anybody in first-century Palestine was aware of the cross. There were plenty of examples of slaves and social misfits nailed to crosses along the roadsides. For Jesus to declare that following Him meant taking up a cross (8:34) was scary thought. Justice for criminals or any who defied Rome’s power was swift, but the agonizing torture of the cross was slow.

The cross in Roman times was a symbol of suffering and execution. By using this imagery, Jesus implies that true discipleship involves a readiness to face hardships and challenges for the sake of following Him. It is an invitation to put aside personal ambitions and comforts, arranging commitment to Christ even when it leads to difficult circumstances.

Mark emphasizes this theme of discipleship and the cost associated with it, reflecting the early Christian community’s experiences of persecution and the need for persistent faith in the face of trials.

The Jesus that Mark presents, for all His miracles, personifies/represents humanity. Jesus demonstrated a wide range of emotions—pity, anger, hunger, and weariness. The account of the Transfiguration, however, is different (9:2-13). It occurs just a few days after the Caesarea Philippi, on a mountain where Jesus is alone with Peter, James, and John. The inner circle and Mark’s readers are provided here with a glimpse into the future as they experience the Di-vine Presence: **“And his raiment**

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*became shining, exceeding white as snow; so as no fuller on earth can white them. And there appeared unto them Elias with Mo-ses: and they were talking with Jesus” (9:3-4).*

It was quite a remarkable experience. Impulsive Peter did not know what to say, but this did not keep him from talking. He suggested building three tabernacles to commemorate the event. For the second time in six days Peter was talking when he should have been listening. Mark apologizes for Peter’s foot-in-mouth issue in 9:6, *“For he wist not what to say: for they were sore afraid.”*

Mark tells us next that a cloud moved in and hid Jesus and Elijah and Moses, and out of that cloud a voice announced that Jesus was God’s *“beloved Son”*, and they should *“hear Him” (9:7)*. Then the cloud cleared away, and Moses and Elijah disappeared. Jesus was still there. The meaning of the event is clear. Jesus has not gone to heaven. They were now to leave the mountain and say nothing about what happened until after the resurrection (9:9).

Maybe the event was not clear to the disciples after all. Just six days earlier Jesus had referred to His death and resurrection (8:31), and now they were questioning one another as to what *“rising from the dead”* meant. So, they asked Jesus about the long-standing belief that Elijah had to come first before the Messiah would arrive (Mal. 4:5). Jesus’ answer to the disciples’ question put Him in opposition to the teaching of the scribes and created the eighth controversy recorded by Mark between Jesus and the religious authorities.

In response to their question, Jesus says in so many words, *“Correct. He has come, and gone, and now the Son of man is here.”* Verse 13 is probably a reference to John the Baptist as the new “Elijah” who was the predicted forerunner of Jesus the Messiah.

The scene shifts now as Jesus, Peter, James, and John join the other nine disciples at the foot of the mountain (9:14-29). A large crowd had gathered, and Mark tells us that the scribes were arguing with the disciples. The nine remaining disciples had failed to heal an epileptic boy. Their failure had made them look bad, and the scribes were pushing their advantage.

The description of the boy’s illness in verse 18 offers classic symptoms of epilepsy, and verse 21 indicates the condition had been lifelong. The boy’s father was desperate, willing to try anything and to seek help from anyone. The disciples had tried to

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cast out the “dumb spirit” and could not, and so the father turn to Jesus when He came on the scene.

Jesus was agitated: **“O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I suffer you? Bring him unto Me” (9:19)**. His frustration was justified. He had just come from a mountaintop experience, and His closest followers now prove to be powerless healers. It is almost as if Jesus were saying, *“Do I have to do it all?”*

Perhaps we have had a deeply moving religious experience in which we felt close to God. By the time we get home we find the same old problems and discover the same lack of ability to solve them as before. We need to come down to earth quickly as Jesus did. The transfiguration revealed Jesus to be the Savior of the world, but the immediate problem was the healing of one child. Like the disciples, we cannot save the entire world, but we can bring our resources to bear on bite-size event. The Christian religion provides mountaintop experiences, but it also calls us to work in the valley.

Jesus healed the boy in two stages. In the first stage He rebuked the spirit within the boy and ordered him out. The initial response was not encouraging: **“And the spirit cried, and rent him sore, and came out of him... many said, He is dead” (9:26)**. Then Jesus took the boy by the hand **“and lifted him up; and he arose” (9:27)**. The incident was a test of the father’s faith, and it was a lesson to Jesus’ disciples.

The silver lining of hope in the scene that Jesus found when He returned from the mountain was the father’s faith. His response to Jesus’ challenge, **“If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth” (9:23)**, was **“Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief” (9:24)**. His faith, even though limited, set-in motion a series of events that led to his son’s cure. He wanted help based on the outside bounds of his faith. He trusted as much as he possible could.

Later, in private, the disciples questioned Jesus as to why they were unable to heal the boy. Jesus’ answer is challenging, **“This kind can come forth by nothing but by prayer and fasting” (9:29)**. Prayer is not a means for us to get what we want. Instead, it is communing regularly with God so that we gradually increase spiritual power. *Prayerlessness* results in *powerlessness*. The disciples had been unable to help the boy because their spiritual lives were not nurtured to the degree necessary to do spiritual healing.

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Continuing their way toward Jerusalem (9:30-50), Jesus and His disciples traveled incognito: ***“And he would not that any man should know it” (9:30)***. The implication here is that Jesus wanted to avoid the crowds so He could be alone with His disciples.

Key to His teaching is the second prediction of the passion, ***“The Son of man is delivered into the hands of men, and they shall kill Him; and after that He is killed, He shall rise the third day” (9:31)***. The words ***“into the hands of men”*** is way of saying Jesus must suffer as a victim of all humankind, not just certain just certain religious rivals or Roman officials. Mark is showing that the death of Jesus has universal meaning.

As usual, the disciples did not understand, but they were afraid to ask for an explanation (9:32). Instead, they whispered among themselves along the way until Jesus pressed them to share their thoughts aloud. The disciples were reluctant to do so, probably out of embarrassment, because they had been discussing their positions of status within the group: ***“...for by the way they had dispute among themselves, who should be the greatest” (9:34)***.

But Jesus was patient with them, for next we read that He ***“sat down”*** and taught them the meaning of true greatness. “Sitting down” was a way of conveying that a message was important. A rabbi always sat down to teach, and in our slang it would be like saying, “Now listen up, fellows this is important.”

To get His point across, Jesus used visual aid. He took a child on lap and said that receiving a child was an example of identifying with anyone who needs help. His hug of a child was an act of identifying with the lowliest of all.

But the next scene indicates that the disciples continued to be slow learners. John reported to Jesus that a man was casting out demons in Jesus’ name but was not one of their designated followers (9:38). Jesus’ response is a warning against a narrow and exclusive spirit. Healing and helping are not limited to an in-group but are common to all who follow Jesus. The disciples are exposed as being jealous not only of each other, but also of outsiders.

There is an important lesson for us in this exchange. The gospel of Jesus Christ is an inclusive fellowship. It loses its power if we try to limit it to only our way. The words of Jesus have a strong present-day application when He rebuked the disciples for trying to restrain the man who was not a member of their group, ***“Forbid him not; for***

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*there is no man which shall do a miracle in my name, that can lightly speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is on our part” (9:39-40).*

Jesus uses tough talk in 9:42-50 as He elaborates on this point. He minces no words as He pounds home the danger of leading other people astray. Casting millstones around the necks of people and throwing them into the sea was one form of Roman cruelty. Jesus uses it as an analogy to make His point: causing others to suffer because of your bad example is reason for severe punishment. The demands of discipleship require single-mindedness, and Jesus’ language about cutting off hands and feet and plucking out eyes is meant to shake His disciples out of their self-centeredness.

The picture-language of Mark 9:43 is vivid. The Greek word for “hell” refers to “Gehenna,” which was in a valley south of Jerusalem, which was the city’s trash dump. Garbage was burned there, and so the place was identical with destruction by fire. Notice that Jesus’ strongest language is directed toward two groups: the scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders of the Jews; and, as here, His own professed disciples. Whenever leaders placed obstacles in the path of ordinary folk who were seeking the Kingdom of God, they earned a tongue-lashing from Jesus.

It was as if Jesus were saying, *“Stop this squabbling among yourselves. Following Me is going to require a commitment that demands sacrifice.”* And then He called His followers to be like **“salt” (vs. 49-50)**. Those disciples whose lives are not characterized by lowly service, openness to others, care for children, and self-discipline are flavorless. They have lost the sharpness that sets them apart from the world and makes them useful. The message to His disciples and to us is clear, ***“Be salty as Christ was salty.”***

Jesus and His disciples move on. The usual crowd tags along and within it are the familiar faces of Pharisees, people with children, and those wanting something from Him. The Pharisees test Him again as Mark recounts the ninth controversy between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, this time with a problem that was a burning issue among the Jews: the question of divorce (10:2-12). Behind this issue was an argument between two rival rabbinic schools about divorce.

The school of Hillel said that a man could get a divorce for the most trivial of reasons—if his wife burned his food, for example. The stricter school of Shammai insisted that unchastity was the only just cause for divorce. Both their interpretations were based on Deuteronomy 24:1-6. In this confrontation with Jesus, the Pharisees were attempting to trap Him into taking one of the sides.

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In response to their question, *“Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife?”* (10:2), Jesus asked them to quote the Mosaic law on divorce. When they responded, *“Moses suffered to write a bill of divorcement, and to put her away”* (10:4), Jesus explained that this provision was made *“for the hardness of your heart.”* And then He went on to argue that lasting marriage was an intention of creation, and in verse 6-8 He quotes Genesis 1:27.

Rather than focus attention on the loopholes that allow divorce, Jesus shifted the issue to the sacredness of marriage. Jesus declared that although Moses’ permission to divorce was a compromise to human sin, God intended for a husband and wife to be intimately one.

Jesus reminds us of the ideal, of God’s intentions, but recognizes that in the first century, and in twenty first century society, as well, people fall short of the ideal. In Jewish law, women were property. They had no legal rights but were at the complete disposal of the male head of the family. The Hillel school of thought usually prevailed, and divorce for trivial reasons was common. By His insistence on fidelity in marriage, Jesus reinforced the status of women by restoring a “high” view of the marital vows. Marriage in which “two become one” argues for mutual responsibility, not action based on personal dissatisfaction.

This part of our Scriptures lesson is a hard one to apply to the complex problems of divorce in the modern world. Some say that Jesus prohibited divorce. Others argue that Jesus was not a legalist, and what we have here is the reminder that God wills marriage to be permanent union. It represents the norm, but divorce is sometimes necessary because of human failure. Even then, there is the sense that God’s intention is being violated. Jesus calls us to take the high view of marriage, but His own willingness to forgive sinners makes room in the Kingdom for those who fall short. And all of us can be grateful for that.

Jesus was on His way to the cross. He knew it, and He had explained it to His disciples on two occasions, even though His words did not sink into their understanding. Yet, in the next scene we see Him taking time for children who, as we have seen, were people without status in that society (10:13-16).

According to custom, mothers often brought their children after their first birthday to be touched and blessed by a rabbi. This may have accounted for the scene here, and probably the children were infants. But the disciples maintained their unblemished record for inappropriate behavior by rebuking the parents who had brought

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their children to Jesus. To them, teaching, preaching, and doing miracles of healing were more important than messing around with a bunch of children.

But Jesus does both. He teaches and He embraces the children at the same time. His point seems to be that the Kingdom belongs to the childlike. What makes children so apt an illustration is not their innocence but their simplicity and ability to trust. Children are helpless and dependent. One way of interpreting verse 15 is ***“The Kingdom belongs to such as these, the children; and if you do not receive God’s gift as a child receives gifts from earthly parents, you shall not enter.”***

The difference between Jesus’ words about childlikeness and His encounter with the rich young man (10:17-22) is quite interesting. The broken and the needy—if they know it—are far closer to the Kingdom of God than those who are adequate and successful. Mark’s placing the story of Jesus and the children back-to-back with that of the rich young man was probably no accident.

Not that the young man was so bad. Matter of fact, he had much to commend him. But he got off on the wrong foot with Jesus by attempting to “snow” him with ingratiating phrase, ***“Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?”*** (10:17). Jesus responded by saying, in effect, “Don’t use flattery by calling me good. Save that for God.” Then He recites several commandments, as a kind of checklist: do not commit adultery, do not kill, do not steal, do not bear false witness, defraud not, honor thy father and mother (10:19).

The rich young man is confident he has passed the test, ***“Master, all these have I observed from my youth.”*** It is interesting that Jesus did not dispute the young man’s reply, but then He presented him with the acid test: sell all of your possessions and follow me. If you look closely, verse 21 contains a five-fold command that grabbed his attention: *go, sell, give, come, follow*. For this young man, getting rid of his wealth was a requirement for discipleship. But he failed the test. It was too much for him, and he responded by becoming the only man in Mark’s Gospel who was called by Jesus but who chose not to follow.

Jesus next move from the specifics of His encounter with the rich young man to a generalization about the problems wealth brings (10:23-27). His view of riches as a hindrance is another popular Jewish belief that Jesus turned upside down. Traditionally, wealth was a sign of blessing by God. Here, Jesus presented it as a major obstacle to a right relationship with God. The following translation of verses 23-27 captures the essence of Jesus’ attitude, ***“How hard, indeed, is it for anyone to enter the Kingdom, but for rich people it is quite impossible. In fact, humanly speaking, it***



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*is impossible for anyone to be saved, rich or not; but with God all things are possible.”*

The disciples were **“astonished” (10:24)** at Jesus’ words, but He then pile on their shock by using an analogy to illustrate what He meant by **“impossible.”** He says that a camel could go through the eye of a needle more easily than a rich man could enter the Kingdom. Jesus uses the imagery of a camel going through the eye of a needle emphasizing the near impossibility of the task. The “eye of the needle” probably refers to the actual tiny opening of a sewing needle, although some suggest it could be a narrow gate in the city walls. The point Jesus makes is that wealth can be an obstacle to spiritual humility and dependence on God, as it often leads to self-reliance and attachment to material possessions.

Jesus concludes the teaching by reassuring His disciples that while it is impossible for humans to achieve salvation on their own, **“with God all things are possible” (10:27)**, emphasizing that God’s grace makes what seems impossible possible. What we own often ends up owning us, but material possessions are very low priorities in the Kingdom of God.

Good old Peter congratulates himself and his fellow disciples by saying to Jesus, **“We have left all, and have follow thee” (10:28)**. His implication is clear: “What about us?” In response, Jesus declared that there were compensations/rewards for discipleship, both in this world and the next, which far outweigh the suffering and persecution that are part of the discipleship experience (10:29-31).

Mark’s earliest readers might have understood Jesus’ words better than the disciples did. Those persecuted early believers became members of an intimate and warm fellowship. They experienced a depth of caring for one another far richer than their natural families provided. The reward for becoming a believer was not just other-worldly. Mark reminded his readers that they had experienced a fellowship and loyalty so deep, it was payment worth **“a hundredfold”** for what they had sacrificed. In the Kingdom of a new family is given, and in the final accounting **“many that are first shall be last; and the last first” (10:31)**.

The picture of Jesus walking ahead of His disciples as He headed toward His fate must have been an unforgettable experience for those who were following Him (10:32-50). The emotions of the group increased as they approached Jerusalem. Mark says that the disciples were both **“amazed”** and **“afraid” (10:32)**. Jesus explains one more time what was going to happen to Him. This was the third, final, and most detailed prediction of His coming suffering and death. Two new dimen-

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sions were introduced: His transfer to a Roman court, and the ridicule, contempt, and beating He would experience.

James and John responds (10:35-37). In spite of what Jesus had just told them, they still expected a festival when they reached Jerusalem, and they wanted ringside seats—favored positions in the Kingdom of God.

In responding, Jesus teaches them and us two important lessons (10:38). One is that, whatever rewards come from following Jesus, they belong only to those who share the journey. In so many words Jesus asks, *“Can you go through the terror that I will go through?”*

The other lesson is about servanthood. The goal of the believer is not to be chief, but to be servant. The life of Jesus had been a model of serving, not being served. His death was like a ransom, and it provided a finishing touch to what His life had demonstrated. Jesus’ life had been lived for others, and His death was for the sake of others. Both are models *par excellence* for us to follow.

By the time they reached Jericho, they were only fifteen miles from Jerusalem. Out of the crowd blind Bartimaeus called out, ***“Jesus, thou son of David, have mercy upon me!” (10:46).*** People tried to quiet him, but Bartimaeus would have none of it, and he kept crying out to Jesus, ***“Thou son of David, have mercy on me.”*** Jesus heard him, and Bartimaeus came forward when Jesus singled him out, ***“What wilt thou that I should do unto thee?”*** In response Bartimaeus said, ***“Lord, that I may receive my sight.”*** And in verse 52 Jesus said, ***“Go thy way; thy faith hath made thee whole.”*** Jesus restored his sight, performing the last recorded healing miracle in Mark’s Gospel.

Verse 52 tells us that healed Bartimaeus ***“followed Jesus in the way.”*** His spiritual vision matched his restored physical sight. Bartimaeus, also, saw in two new ways. His physical vision was the gift Jesus gave him, but also acquired new spiritual eyes, which enabled him to know who his healer was.

Blind Bartimaeus discovered that believing is seeing. Jesus’ disciples saw with blur-vision, and so do we. Mark’s Gospel helps us see Jesus more clearly in the hope that we also might believe. And follow.