

# Mark Devotionals & Sermon Illustrations-1

## Devotionals & Sermon Illustrations TODAY IN THE WORD

### Index to this page

- [Mark 1](#)
- [Mark 2](#)
- [Mark 3](#)
- [Mark 4](#)
- [Mark 5](#)
- [Mark 6](#)
- [Mark 7](#)
- [Mark 8](#)
- [Mark 9](#)
- [Mark 10](#)
- [Mark 11](#)
- [Mark 12](#)
- [Mark 13](#)
- [Mark 14](#)
- [Mark 15](#)
- [Mark 16](#)

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- Our Daily Bread - offsite Our Daily Bread devotionals

## Today in the Word Devotionals & Sermon Illustrations **MARK 1**

Mark 1:1-13

I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. - Mark 1:8

### TODAY IN THE WORD

With its loud roar and impressive mane, the lion is a fascinating species. How much do you know about this 'king of beasts'?

In size, male lions can be as large as eight feet long, four feet high at the shoulder, and 550 pounds in weight. Lions live in family units called 'prides,' which may have 4-37 members. The females do most of the hunting, usually in the evenings. They pursue such animals as giraffes or zebras at speeds of about 35 miles per hour. And a lion's roar can be heard nearly six miles away!

It may seem strange to you that we've gone into this much detail about an animal. but it's important that we know about the lion because it is a traditional symbol of the Gospel of Mark, our focus for study this month. The lion represents the strength and power of the Lion of Judah (Revelation 5:5), who is Jesus Christ, and the arrival of His kingdom.

According to early church tradition, the author of Mark is John Mark, a cousin of Barnabas who accompanied him and Paul on part of their first missionary journey (see Acts 12:25). This Gospel is based on the preaching of Peter and was probably written in Rome during the last days of the apostle's life.

Since it was originally intended to be read by the suffering Roman church, Mark's themes include persecution, the cost of discipleship, and servanthood. As you study with us this month, you'll also find that a straightforward style, vivid narrative, and constant action characterize the Mark's Gospel.

As the book opens, John the Baptist is calling on Israel to repent from sin. The heart of his message is that a greater One will follow him (Mark 1:7-8).

In verse 9 we find that that person is Jesus of Nazareth. John baptizes Him, not because Jesus needed to repent of sin, but as a public affirmation of the Messiah. The entire Trinity is involved the Son is baptized, the Father speaks from heaven, and the Spirit descends like a dove. The gospel story has begun!

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The first verse of the book of Mark announces 'the beginning of the gospel.' Do you understand and believe the gospel message, the 'good news' of Jesus Christ? He loves you and died to save you from the penalty of sin death. If you believe this truth, you are a child of God!

If you are not sure or have not yet become a follower of Christ, don't delay! Accept Him as your Savior today. You might say a prayer similar to this: 'Dear God, I know I'm a sinner and deserve death. But I believe you love me and sent your Son to die in my place. I accept your gift of eternal life and ask Jesus to live in me as my Savior and Lord.'

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#### **Mark 1:1-12**

Jesus replied, Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness. - Matthew 3:15

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

In his best-selling book Rick Warren notes that the search for purpose in life has puzzled people for thousands of years. The reason, he explains, is because we usually begin at the wrong starting point. We begin with ourselves. The real secret to purpose is found in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Today we are beginning a month-long study of the life of Jesus as it is described in the Gospel of Mark. It is a lively account, full of action. In it we will see how all that Jesus did during His earthly ministry was influenced by His own sense of purpose. Our lives will lack purpose without a proper understanding of Christ.

Mark's gospel begins with a brief description of the ministry of John, the one who came baptizing in the desert and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Mark indicates that John's ministry of preaching and baptism fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3. John was sent to set the stage for the coming Messiah and announce His purpose. John's message promised that the one who came after him would indeed baptize with the Holy Spirit.

According to Matthew's Gospel, John objected when Jesus came to him to be baptized by him. Jesus convinced him by explaining that it was "proper to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15). This phrase might just as well have been Jesus' mission statement. The appropriateness of Jesus' actions were confirmed by God the Father's public testimony. When the Holy Spirit visibly descended in the form of a dove, it affirmed the Father's love for Jesus and marked Him as the one who would baptize in the Spirit. It is significant that the first action Jesus took once He began His public ministry was to respond to the prompting of the Holy Spirit (v. 12).

Jesus' actions exemplify the two most important dimensions of a life of purpose. He knew what God the Father had called Him to do, and He was responsive to the leading of the Holy Spirit in His life. We too have a purpose to fulfill and are led by the Spirit of God (Phil. 2:13; Rom. 8:14).

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

As we begin this study of the purpose of Christ as it is revealed in the Gospel of Mark, take a few minutes to think about your own life. Look over your calendar for the last month. In what have you been investing your time? Take a few minutes to review your finances. What do they say about your priorities? Now summarize your conclusions in a single purpose statement that accurately reflects what you have seen. Are you satisfied with it? If not, ask God to use our studies in the next few weeks to show you where changes need to be made.

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#### **Mark 1:12-13, Luke 4:1-12**

The Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. -

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

The legendary Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu wrote in *The Art of War*, "The highest form of generalship is to conquer the enemy by strategy." This also describes the tactic that our greatest enemy, Satan, uses in his spiritual warfare against humanity. Satan's strategy against Jesus in the desert—half-truths and cunning deception—is the same that he uses to this very day.

The first test concerns provision. Although Satan in some sense acknowledged Jesus' divine sonship, he tempted Jesus to take

matters into His own hands, rather than trust the Father to provide. Jesus refused to enter into any discussion and instead quoted from Deuteronomy 8:3. The rest of this verse says that, rather than bread, we're to live on God's Word, which is exactly what Jesus was doing during the temptation.

The second test concerns power. Somehow Satan was able to show Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and offered them to Him. After his boasting, Satan slipped in the fact that to receive these kingdoms, Jesus would have to worship him in the process. Breaking the first commandment was clearly not something that Jesus would do, as His quote from Deuteronomy 6:13 showed. Besides, the Father would give all the kingdoms of the world to His Son, so Satan was actually tempting Jesus to avoid the cross and His redemptive work.

The third test concerns protection. Satan took Jesus to the highest part of temple, probably the Royal Porch, which overlooked the Kidron Valley, some 450 feet below. To jump from there meant certain death. Here Satan upped the ante by quoting Scripture himself (Ps. 91:11-12), but twisting it horribly. Jesus replied with Deuteronomy 6:16, clearly understanding that testing God is not the way to prove His protection.

Jesus' complete faithfulness to the Father in this trial anticipated His faithfulness on the cross, the event that meant Satan's decisive defeat.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Satan tests us in the same area in which Jesus was tested—our faithfulness to God. Today's passage shows that responding in faithfulness depends upon knowing God's Word. As we learn His Word, the Spirit brings it to our attention at just the right moment. Are you growing in knowledge of the Word? If you aren't already in a Bible study or Sunday school class, consider joining one this month. In addition to your daily Bible study, you'll grow from studying the Word with other believers.

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#### Mark 1:14-20

I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. - Luke 5:32

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

Evangelist D. L. Moody was deeply affected by the observation of Henry Varley who said, "The world has yet to see what God can do with and for and through and in a man who is fully and wholly consecrated to Him." It is a challenging question. Yet it brings to mind an even more challenging one. What can God do with an ordinary person?

Few of us would say that we meet the criteria described by Varley. It's not that we are unconsecrated to God. It's just that we see ourselves as falling into the class of people that can best be described as "average." We are not the brightest or the boldest. We do not stand out in a crowd. We're just regular people.

According to today's passage, we are just the sort of people that Jesus Christ seeks to be His followers. The first disciples that Jesus called were fishermen casting their nets into the lake. He did not go to the religious elite to select those who would become His apostles; He went to common men as they went about their daily business. This is often the context for God's call. Moses and David were called to special service while guarding the flock (Ex. 3:1; 1 Sam. 16:11). Elisha was called while plowing his father's field (1 Kings 19:19).

When the call to special service finally came, it brought with it the expectation of an immediate response. Simon, Andrew, James, and John all answered Christ's call "without delay" (v. 20). They left their nets and their families behind in order to take up a new calling as "fishers of men" (v. 17). In each case obedience was costly. They abandoned their livelihood and may have faced family disapproval for taking up a more controversial and certainly less lucrative calling.

Later in his ministry Peter would remind Jesus of the sacrifices they had made and inquire about what they would gain in return. Jesus promised that anyone who has left goods or family behind for the sake of the kingdom of God will eventually receive a hundred times as much in addition to eternal life (Matt. 19:28-29; Mark 10:29-31).

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Are you longing to do something "great" for God? In most cases the greatest thing we can do for God is the thing He has put in front of us to do. It might be doing your best on the job or serving your family with an attitude of joy. Serving God is a matter of daily obedience that is worked out in the home and on the job.

Remind yourself of your responsibility to consecrate yourself to God by copying Henry Varley's quote and placing it where you will be able to see it as you go about your daily affairs..

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**Mark 1:14-45 'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will make you fishers of men. -**

In Brazil, more than 15 mothers in 600 local churches are praying their children to the mission field!

Founder Ana Maria Pereira believed that Brazilian moms would be eager to join together to pray for the salvation and future ministry of their children. She was right. Since 1995, the 'Wake Up Deborah' movement has grown rapidly. Participants promise to pray 15 minutes daily that their children will trust Christ and take the gospel to unreached people groups. Says Pereira: 'No one prays for a child like Mom!'

Christ's call to follow Him and become 'fishers of men' can come in many forms the prayers of these mothers are a beautiful example.

After His baptism, Jesus began a ministry of public preaching and called His first disciples Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John. Because these disciples were fishermen, Jesus used a familiar metaphor from their daily lives, inviting them to join Him in the work of 'fishing' for souls (v. 17). They obeyed immediately, leaving what they were doing to follow Him.

As Jesus preaches that the kingdom is near, His reputation spreads and grows. People can see for themselves that His words and actions have divine power He casts out demons and heals a leper and many others. Clearly, His authority comes from God, but at this time He does not allow the demons to speak (v. 25), nor the ex-leper (v. 44). Why? It is not yet time for Him to be fully revealed. God's plan would unfold in its own time.

In today's reading Jesus displays both His power, and His compassion (v. 41). Jesus was not a power-hungry rabbi or a calculating politician, but the incarnate Lord sent to love and heal suffering people.

**TODAY ALONG THE WAY** In the midst of a busy and powerful ministry, Jesus made it a point to withdraw for special times of prayer (v. 35). If our Lord needed to do so, how much more do we!

Take some time today to do a self-check on your prayer life. Are you spending regular, intimate time with God? Are you balancing praise, confession, and petition? Do you use a prayer list, a prayer journal, or another tool? Do you look forward to times of prayer, or dread them as a duty?

Ask the Holy Spirit to create a new hunger for prayer in your daily life.

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**Mark 1:16–20 An Intimate Friendship: A Fisherman Named Andrew**

The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah." John 1:41

Earlier this year Justin Wijaya posted a photo of his grandparents to a social media site with the caption, "70 years together." The photo showed a frail, elderly man in a hospital bed holding hands with an old woman. Wijaya explained that his grandmother has had various health problems for the past ten years, and now her husband has been diagnosed with advanced-stage leukemia at the age of 95. Yet they continue to care for one another. "My grandfather and old Chinese people are not very open about speaking their feelings about their loved one. For me action speaks much louder than words and throughout the years the unconditional love he has given to my grandmother, his children, and all his grandchildren are all the proof I need."

One disciple who was with Jesus from beginning to end of His time on earth was Andrew. He and his brother Simon Peter left their fishing nets to follow Jesus. In John's Gospel, Andrew told Simon about Jesus! And throughout Scripture, Andrew was characterized by bringing people to Jesus. When crowds were hungry after hearing Jesus teach, he found a boy with some fish and bread.

Along with the other disciples, Andrew had the privilege to spend private time with Jesus away from the other disciples. He was able to gain a perspective on the person of Jesus that few others had. He was among the very first to recognize Jesus as Messiah, and then was privileged to spend three years with Jesus. Not unlike a devoted spouse, who continues to discover new facets of his beloved over the years, no doubt Andrew was surprised again and again to discover just what type of Messiah Jesus was. And he didn't want to keep the good news to himself—Andrew wanted others to know Jesus too!

Apply the Word

It's impossible to keep deep love a secret. It will bubble up in our conversation, the way we care for our loved one, and in the way we plan our time. Is this true of us with Jesus? Do we talk about Him? Do we plan time to be with Him in prayer and in His Word? Does it change the way we live? We are able to love Him because He loved us first (1 John 4:19)..

**Mark 1:21-38** How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news. - Isaiah 52:7

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## TODAY IN THE WORD

Joseph Pulitzer, the nineteenth-century newspaper baron and founder of the Pulitzer prize, believed in the power of the press. Not only was Pulitzer convinced that a newspaper ought to be one of the most powerful institutions on earth, he believed that its influence ought to extend beyond the earth. Pulitzer once conceived of a scheme to erect a sign so large that it would be visible on the planet Mars. He planned to use it to advertise his newspaper.

Pulitzer was right about one thing: good news can have a global impact. That's especially true when the message being spread is the good news of the gospel. In the New Testament the term that is translated "gospel" literally means "good news." The verbal form is the word from which we get the term "evangelize." To evangelize is to proclaim the good news. Another term used in the New Testament to speak of the proclamation of the gospel is a word that meant to act as a herald.

Jesus came to announce the good news of God's grace and the offer of forgiveness. Although He performed many miracles, He did not see working miracles as His primary mission. When Jesus was being pursued by those who were chiefly interested in the healings He had performed, He did not stay behind and bask in their acclaim. Instead, He took His disciples to the next village and continued to proclaim the gospel without delay.

Miracles were an important part of Jesus' ministry but they served a particular function. Their purpose was to authenticate Jesus as God's chosen Messiah and to highlight His message. If we had needed only a miracle worker, God could have sent one of the prophets. We needed much more. What makes the gospel "good news" is its message that Jesus Christ came to give His life on behalf of sinners. Divine healing may provide health for a lifetime, but only Jesus can make us whole for all eternity.

Jesus' determination not to be a distraction from His primary mission of proclaiming the gospel helps us to put our own lives in perspective. The health of the body is indeed important. But the health of the soul is most important of all.

## TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Have you allowed other important responsibilities to distract you from the responsibility of sharing the good news about Jesus Christ with others? We're busy, and it's easy to get distracted by obligations and concerns that crowd their way into our world. Make a list of people you know that you have not yet had an opportunity to speak to about Jesus Christ. Now choose the name of the person on the list you are most likely to see in the next week. Pray daily for the Spirit to give you an opportunity to share what Jesus has done for you.

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### **Mark 1:21–28** Put Back into Community: A Man Who Was Unclean

The people were amazed at his teaching. Mark 1:22

At the close of 2002 and into 2003, the first dangerous communicable disease to emerge during the twenty-first century was Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, or SARS. Having originated in animal populations, SARS migrated to humans, crossed national borders and nearly became a pandemic. Symptoms included fever, headache, cough, and trouble breathing. One of the preventive measures used during the outbreak was quarantine. By containing those who had been exposed to the virus, its potential to spread was limited. But before the virus was recognizable, it was unknowingly transmitted between continents by passengers on transoceanic airline flights.

When a man touched by an impure spirit entered the temple on a Sabbath, his affliction was undetectable. Because those affected by disease, disability, and demonic possession were identified as "unclean" and often isolated from their communities, he would not have been granted access to the synagogue if his condition had been recognized. Though the man slipped in during a lucid moment, once Jesus began teaching, the demon possessing him shouted out in response to Jesus' authority. When Jesus rebuked the spirit, it shook the man violently and then leapt out of him with a shriek.

What Jesus did for the man was akin to declaring him healthy and disease-free. Once delivered, the man was free to engage again with his community. Not only delivered from demon possession, he was also delivered from isolation and loneliness. Jesus' healing touch in the life of this man, as it had been with so many others, was pervasive, transforming his mind, heart and even relationships. Not only was the man restored mentally and emotionally, he was also restored to his family, friends, and community as a member who was fully accepted and embraced.

### Apply the Word

Have you been taken out of relationships? Perhaps you have a health condition that has limited your availability, or maybe a broken relationship has kept you from others. Jesus doesn't just restore our relationship with God, but also our relationships with others. Seek reconciliation, or explore ways that you can connect through letters, email—and prayer!

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**Mark 1:21–28** A man possessed freed at Capernaum

Few modern experiences provide the same level of frustration as trying to call a customer-service number. You first have to navigate what's called a phone tree or menu: "Press 1 for accounts, press 2 for billing, press 3 for returns, press 4 for customer satisfaction ... " If you finally reach an actual person, he or she might not have the authority to actually resolve your issue.

The teachers of the law in Jesus' day appeared to be of little service to the people they taught. Though they claimed to be subject to the law, they often wielded it as their own weapon of oppression. Jesus was different. Mark first pointed out the authority of His teaching. The Pharisees may have been authoritative in their heavy-handed politics, but not in their teaching. But authoritative teaching wasn't the only difference—Jesus had spiritual authority as well.

Even the demonic spirit who possessed this man recognized who Jesus was, and the demon was clearly troubled. Scripture

doesn't clearly state why Jesus quieted the demon. It could have been to prevent publicizing His identity as the Son of God so early in His ministry. He may have just been acting out of compassion for the man. Jesus may have also taken particular offense at hearing an unclean entity speaking His holy name.

We don't know the definitive answer to "why," but the "how" is unmistakable. Jesus' authority extended to the spiritual world, and the demon obeyed Jesus and left the man. He also opened the eyes of the crowd. His authority was unique, and His teaching was new (v. 27).

The response of the teachers of the law demonstrated that the only alternative they could offer was to point out people's weaknesses, recite from the laws they had added to and manipulated, and urge the people to attain righteousness on their own. Jesus, though, could help. He taught with authority and ruled with power. And with this power, He offered hope.

#### Apply the Word

As is often the response to Jesus, news of this event traveled fast. People told about His wonderful works, and the reaction of these eyewitnesses that we can share as our own today is amazement. Be amazed at who Jesus is. He has authority over the evil we face. He reigns sovereign over the spirits that threaten us. And because of His power, we can trust Him to help us no matter what we face!

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**Mark 1:29–31** Restored to Serve: The Mother-in-Law of Simon

The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve. Matthew 20:28

When a sorceress disguised as an old hag begged at the castle door of a young prince, she encountered a rude, arrogant young man. She cast a curse upon him that transformed him into a hideous beast, and it would not be broken until he was able to love and be loved. In the classic fairy tale "Beauty and the Beast," the prince was ultimately freed by a beautiful bookworm named Belle, who did grow to love him despite his gruff exterior. The spell broken, the prince was restored to rule his kingdom. As a result of the curse and his redemption, he was now a different type of ruler: one who was just, kind, and compassionate. The prince's liberation affected not only him, but also others.

This fairytale echoes people's encounters with Jesus. Set free from sin, disease, and disability, each was delivered in order to be a testimony about Jesus. Early in His ministry, as Jesus called His disciples and began His healing work, the word about Him was spreading like wildfire. When He and His disciples arrived at the home of Simon and Andrew, Simon's mother-in-law was sick in bed with a fever. Going to her, perhaps in a private section of the home, Jesus took her hand and helped her up. Being healed in her rising, transformed by Jesus' touch, she immediately began to serve her guests.

What this woman experienced, in the touch of Jesus, was being set free to serve. Like a fairy-tale prince born to serve others with justice and compassion, she was delivered so that now she could serve others who also had physical and spiritual needs. As He did for so many with broken bodies and hearts, Jesus put her back into relationship with others.

#### Apply the Word

Being saved by Jesus is meant to affect not only the one saved, but also those around him or her. In what ways have you been called to serve those around you? What gifts has Jesus given you to offer to others? These acts of service are supposed to be a testimony to God's work in our lives, a way that we bear witness to His healing and restoration..

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**Mark 1:29-31**

The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news! - Mark 1:15

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

We have been studying accounts of some women in the Old Testament whose stories are less well known. Now we turn our attention to women who have “small roles” in the Gospels. The culture—political, religious, and legal—of the first century was patriarchal and male-centered. Women were typically viewed as having significantly less value than men, and the societal place for women was confined to domestic roles of wife and mother. In this context, the respect, dignity, and empowerment that Jesus gives women throughout His ministry are all the more remarkable. Jesus heals and restores women; He includes them as His followers; and women become heralds of His life and participants in His church. Today we encounter one of the first women Jesus healed, Simon Peter’s mother-in-law.

After teaching in the synagogue, Jesus and His disciples made their way to Simon Peter’s family estate. They arrived to find Simon’s mother-in-law in bed with a high fever. The brevity of verse 31 emphasizes the power of Jesus to restore this woman immediately. The authority of Jesus to heal is not some psychosomatic power of suggestion but a genuine miracle of divine intervention. Approximately thirty percent of Mark’s Gospel recounts the miracles and healings of Jesus, demonstrating the inauguration of God’s redemptive reign on earth (cf. Isaiah 61).

Simon Peter’s mother-in-law, cured from her ailment, jumped out of bed and began to serve Jesus and His disciples. Some modern readers criticize this scene from a so-called “feminist” perspective: the poor woman is bedridden from a dangerous fever one minute and the next minute is expected to return to her “duty” of waiting on the men. Such a critique is misguided in at least two ways. First, it is incorrect to impose a contemporary standard for gender roles that was completely nonexistent in the first century. Even more importantly, Mark’s emphasis is on Jesus’ deep care and immediate attention to this sick woman. Jesus completely restored her; He did not oppress her. Her service was her loving response to the Christ who healed her.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Simon’s mother-in-law exemplifies living in God’s grace. What is your response to Jesus’ love and ministry in your life? Is it grateful service in His kingdom or a guilt-ridden obligation to serve Him? Do you serve God in order to earn salvation or rather in response to it? Reflect today on your motives for serving God. Repent of ways you may have distorted the blessing of loving service to Him, ask God to help you live out of a grateful response to His love and grace.

## MARK 2

### Mark 2:1-22

It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. - Mark 2:17

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

The United States government is based on an intricate, three-way balance of power set up in our Constitution. Congress is responsible to make the laws, the President to enforce them, and the Supreme Court to interpret them.

Theoretically, each branch of government has its own set of powers, as well as a way to hold the other branches accountable. This is called a system of ‘checks and balances.’ While each part of the government has authority, no single part has absolute power.

God’s authority, on the other hand, is absolute. No one holds Him accountable, there is no need for ‘checks and balances,’ because He is perfect.

When Jesus appeared on earth wielding the authority of God, He amazed and offended those who thought of Him as merely human. In fact, we could say that the Gospel of Mark is the story of Jesus revealing His divine identity and authority bit by bit until the evidence is overwhelming.

We find an example of this in the case of the paralytic. When friends lowered the paralytic through the roof into the room where Jesus was speaking, everyone expected a physical healing. And Jesus did heal the man, but first He forgave the man’s sins. The teachers of the law understood that, in doing this, Jesus was claiming God’s authority after all, only God can forgive sins but they could say nothing in the face of Jesus’ self-evident power.

The religious leaders already opposed Jesus at this early time in His ministry. He was criticized for eating meals with sinners, a gesture of intimate fellowship to which no Pharisee would stoop. Jesus, on the other hand, had come to search out and save those

who were lost.

The Pharisees also complained that Jesus' disciples didn't fast. To this, Jesus responds that His coming is a reason for rejoicing, not grieving (v. 19), though even this early He is hinting that He will be taken away before too long (v. 20). The Divine Bridegroom had arrived, but the Pharisees refused to recognize His identity or authority.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Studying any of the four Gospels takes us back to the basics. How? As Christians we are to be 'little Christs' and what better source of information than a biography of Christ? In studying the life of our Lord we find a pattern for our own lives.

In this spirit, we'd like to suggest that you keep a running list of the attributes of Christ observed during this month's study. For example, from today's reading you might jot down 'healer,' 'authority from God,' or 'cares for spiritual needs,' among other possibilities. Add to your list with each day's reading.

By the end of the month, you'll have a list of qualities from Jesus' life that is sure to challenge you to more Christ-like living.

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Mark 2 How can the guests of the bridegroom fast?

The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath. Mark 2:28

The book *Olive Kitteridge* by Elizabeth Strout tells the story of the title character through thirteen interconnected stories. Even when a story doesn't seem to feature Olive, by the end of the book the reader realizes that each vignette has offered another perspective on the title character and provided a richer portrait of a complex human being.

At first glance, our passage today appears to be a random collection of stories from the life of Jesus. The Gospel of Mark is noted for its rapid-fire, bullet-point exposition, but when we slow down and read carefully we see that this chapter is presenting different angles to the same theme: Who is Jesus?

In verses 1 through 12, Jesus proclaims the forgiveness of sins for a paralyzed man. The religious leaders immediately recognize that Jesus has claimed the ability to perform the divine act of forgiveness. Jesus goes further: to prove that His declaration of forgiveness is not empty words, He also heals the man, performing a miraculous act in front of the skeptics. Jesus is the God who forgives and heals.

Next, the Pharisees grumble that Jesus eats with known sinners, accepting the offer of hospitality in their homes. The Pharisees also complain that Jesus' disciples didn't follow their practice of fasting and they picked and ate grain on the Sabbath. Each of these practices violated the Pharisees' understanding of what was required to have ritual purity before God.

They were missing the point. Trying to maintain religious purity through rigid rules was unnecessary when God Himself was standing before them. He was calling them not to religious perfection but to compassion for sinners. He was asking them not to fast but to follow Him. Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath, the true rest from our religious exertion.

#### Apply the Word

This passage is not calling us to abandon worship and service for God. It does ask us to evaluate why we are doing these. Are we trying to impress God and others with our piety and good deeds? Or are we responding out of faith, obedience, and gratitude like the healed paralytic? We must acknowledge we are the sick and the sinners, and that Jesus is the God who heals and forgives us..

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#### **Mark 2:1–12** The Paralytic And His Persistent Friends

November 22, 1963, is a date remembered by most people as the day John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Students of history will remember that two renowned authors passed away just about an hour before Kennedy and within minutes of each other: C. S. Lewis and Aldous Huxley. All three deaths were noteworthy, but one attracted far more publicity than the others.

In our reading today, we find three miraculous works by Jesus that happened at this house in Capernaum. Usually only one of these gets the most attention, so we will try to examine all three today and see how they are connected.

To modern audiences, the most familiar aspect of this story might be the act of the man's friends, lowering him down through an opening they made in the roof. Their act of faith precipitated an astounding miracle: Jesus telling the paralytic that his sins were forgiven—and then instructing him to take up his mat and walk (vv. 5, 9).

Jesus knew the thoughts of the teachers of the law who were in attendance, that they were silently appalled at His statement of forgiveness. So Jesus Himself asks the question, "Which is easier?" The question implies that anyone can walk around saying they



offer forgiveness of sins. Jesus went beyond pronouncement to proof: the paralyzed man now walked. The eyewitnesses to this event had a choice. They could be upset because Jesus had demonstrated that He had the power to forgive sins, or they could believe.

Jesus demonstrated that He could forgive sins, know the private thoughts of others, and heal the paralyzed man to full strength (v. 12). As the Son of God, Jesus didn't have to try any harder to know a man's thoughts than He did to heal paralysis. But knowing a thought is momentary. Healing a malady is temporary. The forgiveness of sins? That's eternal. Jesus offered the man—and all the eyewitnesses present—the opportunity to be forgiven through belief in Him.

#### Apply the Word

Jesus saw the faith of the man and his friends and said, "Son, your sins are forgiven" (v. 5). You may never have witnessed a paralytic lowered through a ceiling or healed with mere words, but if you have faith in Christ, you are an eyewitness to His greatest miracle: the redemption of a sinner. Whatever stress or worry you may face, find rest in that truth and praise Jesus for His power to heal, to know, and to save..

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### Mark 2:1-12

They were amazed at his teaching, because his message had authority. - Luke 4:32

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

President Harry Truman had a sign on his desk that read, "The buck stops here." This slogan served as a reminder to the president that being in authority meant that he must answer for the things done on his watch. Others might be able to "pass the buck" and avoid responsibility. He could not.

All human leaders possess authority, but it is derived authority—part of a stewardship that has been entrusted to them by those who have appointed or elected them and ultimately by God. Jesus exercised an even greater authority. His authority was innate rather than derived.

In Mark 2:1-3:19, Mark describes how Jesus demonstrated His authority through action. He proved that He had the authority to forgive the sins of a paralytic man by healing him. This miracle complemented Christ's declaration of forgiveness and was intended to show the skeptical religious leaders that "the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (v. 10).

Jesus also demonstrated His authority by ignoring the traditions of the religious leaders. He compared their traditions to old wineskins and old garments (vv. 21-22). Their old system of man-made rules was unsuitable for Christ's message of new life.

The Savior's authority was so great that it extended even to the Sabbath. The Pharisees objected to Jesus healing on the Sabbath. They believed that such a practice violated God's law. In reality, their restrictions actually distorted God's intent for the Sabbath. The law's command to rest on the seventh day was meant to be a blessing for God's people rather than a burden. As Jesus put it, "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (v. 27). Because He was God incarnate—both fully man and fully God—Jesus was both Lord of the Sabbath and its beneficiary. As our representative, sent by God to fulfill the Law in its entirety, He could not violate Sabbath. Jesus observed it according to its true intent. As the divine Son of God, Jesus had the authority to define what was a legitimate or an illegitimate way to keep the Sabbath.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The Pharisees tried to build a hedge around God's law by adding their own rules and regulations. Even worse, they usurped God's authority by trying to compel others to live by their code.

Can you think of at least one unwritten rule that you try to get others to live by? Has there been a time when you conformed to someone else's standard, simply because they expected you to do so? Ask God to help you evaluate whether these rules measure up to the standard of grace revealed in the gospel..

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### Mark 2:10 Luke 7:36-50

The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. - Mark 2:10

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

Ann Judson, the pioneer missionary who left behind a comfortable life in America to go to Burma with her husband Adoniram (see the February 4 study), once wrote to her sister, ""A little sacrifice for the cause of Christ is not worth naming, and I feel it a privilege,

of which I am entirely undeserving, to have had it in my power to sacrifice my all for Him who hesitated not to lay down His life for sinners.""

Any sacrifice we can make has to seem small compared to what Jesus Christ has done for us. No sinner who has come to Him in repentance and faith has ever been turned away. Jesus' compassion was always extended to those who sought forgiveness.

The story of the sinful woman and the self-righteous Pharisee is a perfect example of Jesus' infinite compassion for lost people. There are several amazing things about this incident.

The first is that this woman, despite her soiled reputation, felt safe in approaching Jesus to demonstrate repentance and sorrow for her sin. She was taking a huge risk of rejection and humiliation, should Jesus refuse to have anything to do with her, or hold her up to ridicule. It's obvious she would have received nothing but scorn from Simon, Jesus' host.

It's also amazing to see Jesus' complete composure as this woman wept on His feet, kissed them, and poured perfume on them. There isn't another man on earth who could have dealt with this potentially embarrassing and awkward situation the way Jesus did.

Simon the Pharisee's lack of passion for lost souls was mirrored in his treatment of Jesus. Simon's failure to provide the customary courtesies for his guest betrayed a low sense of value for Jesus and His mission of seeking and saving the lost. And it revealed Simon's pride of heart that made him feel superior to a ""sinner.""

What a moment it must have been when Jesus forgave this woman her many sins! It left the other dinner guests in amazement. The woman left free of her sin, declared righteous in God's sight--the act of God's grace that Paul would later call justification by faith.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Have you ever glanced at someone, perhaps on the street--and then stopped to really look at that person?

When you do that, you begin to see things you didn't notice at first glance. That's what we need to do with people on the spiritual level. Simon only saw a sinner; Jesus saw a sinner who was eager for salvation. Seeing people through Jesus' eyes can make all the difference. Ask God to help you do that with the people around you. But be careful: seeing people the way Jesus sees them will intensify your passion for souls!

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#### Mark 2:13–14 A Sordid Companion: A Tax Collector Named Levi

Through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. Romans 8:2

Bernie Madoff orchestrated the largest financial fraud in U.S. history through an elaborate web of fake investment opportunities known as a Ponzi scheme. Dozens of people, institutions, and even charities lost tens of billions of dollars through Madoff's lies and trickery. In 2009, he pleaded guilty to eleven charges, and he was sentenced to 150 years in prison. The judge in his case noted that no one—not even friends or family—had sent what are called mitigating letters attesting to good deeds or character for an accused person. Currently, Bernie Madoff lives in a federal prison in Butner, North Carolina.

Given the scope of Bernie Madoff's crimes and the people he hurt, perhaps it's not surprising that no one wanted to vouch for him. Tax collectors were viewed with similar disgust and disdain in the first century. Jesus was walking alongside a lake near Capernaum teaching when he spotted Levi sitting at a tax collector's booth. A first-century tax booth was less like a kiosk at the mall and more like a tollbooth where travelers were obligated to pay whatever was asked of them. When Jesus called out to Levi and asked him to become one of His followers, Levi must have been shocked by the invitation. Can you imagine the Messiah, the Savior, asking such a notorious thief to be part of His closest followers?

When Jesus called Levi, as when He met with Zacchaeus, He didn't leave him in the same situation. Zacchaeus made restitution. Levi left tax collecting and followed Jesus. An encounter with Jesus offers freedom from the bondage of sin and the opportunity for restoration. He extends this to all, even thieves, prostitutes, and tax collectors.

#### Apply the Word

Throughout the Gospels, those who encounter Jesus are set free mentally, physically, and spiritually. This freedom means leaving our sinful activities behind. From what has Jesus set you free? And, perhaps equally important, what might it be that Jesus is inviting you to leave? Levi left his tax booth behind, but he gained peace and fellowship with God.

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#### Mark 2:13–17 Hope of Eternal Life

It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. Mark 2:17

Sharing food is an important indication of welcome in virtually every culture. Extending and accepting an invitation to dine together usually conveys hospitality, generosity, and friendship. This helps us to understand why, in Jewish culture at the time of Christ, it was a scandal that Jesus would accept an invitation to dine in the home of a known sinner. To do so was to signal His friendship with these disreputable characters.

Levi, the host of the dinner party in today's passage, had been a tax collector, and the assembled guests were his friends and acquaintances. Tax collectors were among the most hated figures in Jewish society at the time of Christ. Working on behalf of the Roman government, tax collectors were notorious for embezzlement and extortion. Levi's friends were guilty by association with him, even if not they weren't publicans themselves.

This was exactly the sort of crowd that religious leaders like the Pharisees avoided in order to maintain their standards of cleanliness and ritual purity. The Pharisees focused on maintaining a relationship with God by following the details of the Law—but they were blind to the ways that their religious observance ostracized people that God loved.

Despite being an observant and faithful Jew, Jesus was not afraid to buck the conventions established by religious leaders. Spending time with sinners was exactly what Jesus came to earth to do. The fact that much of this time was spent around meals underscores the depth of Jesus' regard for the outcasts of society. To eat with other people is a deeply humanizing act in keeping with the spirit of the Incarnation itself. Jesus' decision to spend time with sinners both transcended the religious culture of His day and became a defining example for Christ-followers.

#### Apply the Word

In her book *Making Room*, theologian Christine Pohl says early Christian writers claimed sharing meals with people of different background demonstrated true Christian faith, a way to “portray a clear message of equality, transformed relations, and a common life.” Prayerfully consider whether God would have you extend friendship to someone by inviting them to a meal in your home.

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### Mark 2:18–22 Jesus on Fasting

When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting. Matthew 6:17–18

The Bible is full of references to God's people fasting. In the Old Testament the word fast is taken from the Hebrew word *sum*, meaning “to cover” the mouth; in the New Testament it comes from the Greek word *nesteuo*, meaning “to abstain.” In all cases, it meant to go without eating and drinking for spiritual reasons. Sometimes it was a form of lament, sometimes it was a physical way of pleading for God's help in times of turmoil, sometimes it was a way to commemorate God's actions on their behalf.

Today's passage underscores the overarching reason God's people fast: to draw near to God.

In verse 18 it's noted that both the Pharisees and John the Baptist's disciples were fasting, whereas Jesus' followers were not fasting. Jesus says, in essence, I am already here so my followers don't need to fast. In contrast, because they didn't recognize God the Son, the others were leaning toward God the Father, fasting in an attempt to bridge the distance.

Jesus seems to affirm the practice of fasting in order to draw near to God when He says that His followers will fast in the future once He is no longer with them. “But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast” (v. 20).

J. I. Packer likens fasting to clearing your schedule to spend time with a friend. He writes, “When friends need to be together, they will cancel all other activities in order to make that possible. There's nothing magical about fasting. It's just one way of telling God that your priority at that moment is to be alone with him, sorting out whatever is necessary, and you have cancelled the meal, party, concert, or whatever else you had planned to do in order to fulfill that priority.”

#### Apply the Word

Fasting has become a popular activity for those who recognize its health benefits even apart from any spiritual benefits. In this environment, it can be tempting to conflate dieting with intimacy with God. But Packer notes that we can fast from anything. “If we love music and decide to miss a concert in order to spend time with God, that is fasting.”!

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### Mark 2:19-20; Revelation 19:6-9

Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb! - Revelation 19:9

TODAY IN THE WORD

The church bells rang out and the organ played grandly. The moment we'd been waiting for throughout the entire movie had finally arrived: Maria was about to marry Baron von Trapp. Few scenes capture the majesty and stateliness of a wedding better than this one from "The Sound of Music." It's hard not to be moved by the celebration and ceremony of a wedding. Perhaps that's because weddings anticipate the wedding--the Wedding Supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9).

One of the first events recorded in John's gospel is the wedding at Cana, during which Jesus miraculously changed water into wine, thereby saving the bridegroom from great embarrassment (John 2:1-10). John specifically noted that this event was the occasion for Jesus' first public miracle; perhaps John was anticipating an even more miraculous wedding to come.

When some challenged Him because His disciples were not fasting as were the disciples of John and the Pharisees, Jesus responded, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast" (Mark 2:19-20). Since fasting and mourning were forbidden during wedding feasts, those who heard Jesus would have most likely assumed that Jesus was referring to Himself as the Bridegroom, as He clearly was.

In Ephesians 5, Paul not only referred to Jesus as the Bridegroom, but he also revealed the identity of His Bride--the church (Eph. 5:29-32)! It's no wonder that Paul called this truth a "profound mystery" (v. 32).

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Because the wedding is such a powerful metaphor of the Lord's return, here are two suggestions to make this imagery real in your own life.

## MARK 3

**Mark 2:23-3:12** The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath. - Mark 2:28

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

Does it ever seem as though computers are more trouble than they're worth?

That wasn't the original idea! Computers are supposed to make our jobs easier and faster, lead to a 'paperless office,' and make the 'information superhighway' available to all. Instead, we find ourselves waiting while the computer crashes and re-boots, examining software manuals for solutions to problems, and wondering why that word processor file we saved yesterday seems to have disappeared.

The personal computer, touted as the 'great time-saver' for the average person, has in some ways become the 'great time-waster.' What is meant to be a tool for our needs sometimes becomes a demanding, controlling force.

That's exactly what had happened to the Sabbath in Jesus' day. The Pharisees had made Sabbath regulations that ignored God's original purpose in ordaining a day of rest (see Exo. 20:8-11) and instead focused on nit-picky, external standards.

When the religious leaders criticized Jesus for allowing His disciples to 'work' on the Sabbath, He refuted the leaders by appealing to an episode from David's life (see 1 Sam. 21:1-6). The point is simple: the spirit rather than the letter of the law is what is important. When we become legalistic, we turn what was intended for our internal spiritual good into a meaningless external straitjacket.

And we should remember that God is the best and only interpreter of His own laws! That's part of what Jesus has in mind when he asserts His authority as Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28).

Jesus follows up His teaching with a Sabbath healing designed to prove the same points concerning legalism and His Lordship. Although His enemies are already plotting to kill Him (3:6), Jesus cares for them to the point of being distressed about their stubborn hearts (3:5).

Here is still more evidence that Jesus is God, for only divine love reaches out to enemies (see Luke 6:27-28). How tragic that the Pharisees could not see what even the demons knew (Mark 3:11)!

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

One month of devotions in Mark certainly can't exhaust all of the knowledge to be gleaned from this book!

Today, we encourage you to do additional Bible study on the topic of the Sabbath. A concordance is helpful in this type of study. Many study Bibles contain brief concordances, and you can try to find complete concordances in your church library or at any Christian bookstore.

While you study, here are some questions to ask yourself: What does the Bible teach about the Sabbath and rest? What is the Old Testament background for Jesus' teaching in today's reading? What meaning does the New Testament give the Sabbath? What principles can we apply to our lives today?

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### **Mark 3:13-35**

Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother. - Mark 3:35

#### **TODAY IN THE WORD**

Just north of Moody Bible Institute's main Chicago campus is one of the world's most prestigious private libraries, the Newberry Library. Behind its imposing brown stone walls lies an impressive collection of books, manuscripts, and memorabilia. Every year the library is visited by numerous scholars and students doing research.

But this library isn't just for academics. On a Saturday morning many ordinary people can be found doing personal research into their family histories. The Newberry Library is one of the best-known genealogical research centers in the country, and many people spend time there to trace their family trees as far back as possible.

Why? Because families are important to our sense of identity who we are, where we're going. In today's reading, Jesus uses His own family to teach an important lesson about discipleship.

He begins by choosing twelve disciples from among those following Him. He plans to train them in the principles of His kingdom and to send them out as representatives of His message, power, and authority.

In the wake of this choosing, or commissioning, Jesus' authority comes into question once again. The religious leaders accuse Him of using Satan's power, even implying that He might be possessed. Jesus argues that their accusation is a logical contradiction, not to mention blasphemous (v. 29). How can Satan's power be used against Satan? Only God's power can overcome Satan; so if Jesus casts out demons, His power can only come from one Source!

Jesus' family, on the other hand, believes He is merely crazy and comes to take charge of Him. He seizes this opportunity to teach the key principle of discipleship found in today's verse. This truth may be difficult, since it shows that allegiance to God must be above all others, even close family ties. But this truth is also encouraging: if we are obedient to God's will, He considers us to be members of His own family!

#### **TODAY ALONG THE WAY**

We hope that you are excited by these first five days of studying the life of Christ. We serve a great Savior! We know He understands everything about us, because He became human an amazing truth that should prompt a response of praise.

In fact, in your personal or family worship this week, why not plan a special time of music focused on praising Christ? You might sing hymns or choruses such as 'Jesus Is All The World to Me,' 'I Love You, Lord,' 'All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name,' and 'Isn't He?'. Or you might listen prayerfully to music that glorifies Him, such as Steve Green's 'Hymns: A Portrait of Christ.' Whatever you do, make it your purpose to exalt Christ and His love for you!

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### **Mark 3:20-30**

If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. - Mark 3:25

#### **TODAY IN THE WORD**

One of the most traumatic events of American history was the Civil War. The issues surrounding this tragedy are complex and much debated, including many of President Abraham Lincoln's decisions. What's not often discussed, however, is the impact of the Bible upon Lincoln's life.

Lincoln's few childhood books included the Bible, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (see Sept. 13), and a few historical volumes. Even without much education, he grew up reading Scripture and was significantly influenced by it.

With this early grounding in God's Word, it's not surprising that biblical themes would shape Lincoln's adult thinking. As the slavery

issue threatened to divide the Union, Lincoln wrote, "I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved; I do not expect the house to fall; but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other." Lincoln often used this allusion to Mark 3 in his political campaigns, including his 1860 campaign for the presidency.

In Mark 3, Jesus used the image of a divided house to describe what His coming meant for Satan and his demons. Jesus' enemies accused Him of casting out demons by the power of the Evil One, or Beelzebub (v. 22). But Jesus rightly showed that if Beelzebub cast out demons by his own power, then the end must be at hand (v. 26). Now the end was indeed at hand, but it was because One stronger than the Evil One had finally entered his "house" (the world) and had plundered his "spoils" (lost souls). Satan's end was assured because of the victory of Christ. Jesus went further to show that those who ascribed the works of the Holy Spirit to the Evil One were placing themselves in grave danger (v. 29).

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Lincoln wrote that the Civil War was key to his becoming a Christian: "When I left Springfield, I asked the people to pray for me; I was not a Christian ... But when I went to Gettysburg and saw the grave of thousands of our soldiers, I then and there consecrated myself to Christ." As we reflect upon historical events, we don't always see how God was working, both directly and through the impact of His Word. But we should be encouraged that biblical truths and themes do indeed influence our world in ways that aren't always obvious.

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#### Mark 3:20-34

Many of them said, "He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?" - John 10:20

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

A young man took a beginner's class in drawing while in high school. During the course he drew a portrait in pen and ink and excitedly showed it to his father, who had gone to art school and made his living by drawing. The father spent several minutes criticizing the portrait, pointing out its flaws. When the father was finished, his son put the portrait in a drawer along with his pen and ink. He never drew another portrait.

It is easier to criticize than to encourage. It is especially discouraging when the one giving the criticism is someone we care about. Some of the criticisms leveled against us are constructive, designed to help us overcome weakness or improve a skill. The comments of a coach or teacher may be hard to bear but are good for us. Yet there are many times when the criticism we face is unwarranted.

This was Jesus' experience during His ministry. His enemies called Him a glutton and a drunkard (Matt. 11:19). They accused Him of blasphemy and claimed that He cast out demons by the power of Satan (Matt. 9:3, 34). Some of the harshest criticism Jesus faced came from members of His own family.

When Jesus' relatives heard that a large crowd had come together in a house to listen to Jesus teach, His family members attempted to take Him into their custody. They explained Jesus' behavior by saying, "He is out of his mind" (v. 21). This shocking assessment of Jesus' ministry has raised questions about who actually spoke these words. It does not seem likely that Jesus' mother Mary uttered them. Joseph, if he was still alive at this time, also seems like an unlikely candidate. Perhaps they were the words of his brothers and sisters (Matt. 13:55-57). Or they may have been spoken by his uncles and aunts.

Whatever the source, Jesus shared the same experience that many who follow Him have also faced. He was disowned by members of His own family because of His obedience to God's call. Yet He did not let this dissuade Him from His mission.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Jesus told His disciples that His claim to their allegiance was higher than any other human relationship (Matt. 10:34-38). Are there any family members who have not yet heard about your personal commitment to Jesus Christ? Think of a way to share that allegiance with them today. You might write a letter, send an e-mail or make a phone call. If they live nearby invite them out for coffee and tell them face to face. They might think you are crazy, but you won't be the first to hear such an accusation..

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#### Mark 3:20-30

It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. - 1 John 5:6

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

In the 1520s, a man fled England fearing for his life because his translation of a certain book had outraged authorities. Prodded by corrupt and unbelieving church leaders, the King's agents rounded up copies of this book and publicly burned them. What was this dangerous, destabilizing book? The Bible! William Tyndale translated the New Testament from Latin into English, hoping that people would be able to read the Bible in their own language. Eventually he was captured, condemned as a heretic, and executed in 1536.

Blinded by their own dogma, these church leaders killed a true servant of the Lord. Mark 3 records a similar opposition to God's work in Jesus. Apparently word got back to Jesus' family about the great stir that He was creating. They concluded that He had gone crazy, so they came to take Him home.

Things got worse when religious scholars arrived. They concluded that Jesus cast out demons by the power of Satan, here called Beelzebub. Their reasoning, however, was illogical: if Jesus were aligned with Satan, His work of casting out demons would actually be like fighting against Himself. But much worse than poor logic was the fact that these leaders witnessed the power of the Holy Spirit of God at work in Jesus and chalked it up to satanic activity.

Why would Jesus call this an "eternal sin" (v. 29)? Because the Spirit alone bears witness to the truth of God in Christ. To behold God's work in Jesus and then to link it to Satan blinds a person from the very truth that saves. All other sins will be forgiven (v. 28) because they can be confessed before the Lord. But as long as someone denies the very Spirit who convicts people of sin and who makes forgiveness effective within a human heart, then forgiveness isn't possible. Jesus knew that ignorance wasn't the problem with these leaders, so He warned them that their hardened hearts could have eternal consequences. As long as they persisted in calling God's holy work evil, they would remain blind to salvation.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The teaching about blaspheming the Holy Spirit has caused many believers to wonder if they have committed this sin. The answer is no: if your heart is troubled by sin, then you are still responsive to the Spirit. As Billy Graham notes, "So long as the Spirit strives with a person he has not committed the unpardonable sin." Moreover, blasphemy of the Holy Spirit isn't temporary unbelief or doubt. The Gospels show that the religious leaders persisted in their hardened opposition despite increasing evidence that Jesus was truly God.

## MARK 4

### Mark 4:1-20

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit. - John 15:5

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

Best-selling Christian author, Philip Gulley, tells the story of a former neighbor, Doctor Gibbs. When not practicing medicine, the doctor planted trees. But he had some strange ideas.

For instance, Doctor Gibbs would smack his trees with a rolled-up newspaper every morning 'to get their attention,' he said. And he didn't water his trees, telling young Philip that that would spoil them. His trees, he claimed, would be stronger and have deeper roots if he let them fend for themselves.

Was he right? Apparently so. Twenty-five years later, Philip describes these trees as strong and healthy, while trees he himself planted and tended carefully appear weak and fragile. From these trees, he draws a lesson adversity can strengthen character.

Jesus also drew spiritual lessons from the natural world, especially in His parables. A parable is a story, illustration, or metaphor drawn from everyday life, used to teach spiritual or moral truths.

Why does Jesus use parables? One reason is shown in verse 12 (quoting Isaiah 6:9-10) parables simultaneously hide and reveal, so that only those who respond in faith will understand. This means that Jesus' parables function as a test of spiritual receptivity, exposing the inner heart condition of His listeners.

In today's reading Jesus employs the picture of a farmer sowing seed to illustrate God's Word in human hearts. Jesus describes four possible responses: (1) Satan may steal the Word out of a heart, just as birds eat some seeds. (2) Hardships may destroy the Word in other hearts, just as plants in rocky soil wither quickly. (3) Life's worries may suffocate the Word, just as thorns choke some plants' growth. (4) God's Word produces spiritual fruit in other lives, as when seeds fall into good soil.

Of course, this last response is the one God desires!

## TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Jesus often taught His disciples and the crowds in quite creative ways using an encounter with children as a teaching opportunity, making an object lesson out of a fig tree, or telling today's story about a farmer to illustrate responses to God's Word.

Following our Master, you too can be creative! Here are some helpful ideas related to today's devotional that you or your family might enjoy:

- (1) Write a song that tells the parable of the sower.
- (2) Draw or paint a picture of the sower in the fields.
- (3) Invent a simple board game based on the different responses to the Word in the parable.
- (4) Choreograph a mime that conveys the events and meanings of this parable.

Or, think of another activity in which your creativity can bring God glory!

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### **Mark 4:1-33**

God made it grow. - 1 Corinthians 3:6

## TODAY IN THE WORD

When Mike was a boy he dreamed of growing up to become a farmer like his father. As Mike grew older he realized that his dream would probably never come true. The rising cost of equipment combined with lower prices in the market made it increasingly difficult for other farmers in his community to make a living. When Mike graduated from high school he reluctantly decided to choose a different career path.

Despite its popular image, farming is not really a "simple life." It is a challenging vocation that requires a high degree of technical ability. To be successful, a farmer must know a little of everything, including chemistry, mechanics, and finances. Even then there is no guarantee that he will succeed. There are many variables outside his control that affect the outcome.

Although farmers in Jesus' day did not use high-tech equipment, they too had to cope with a variety of conditions and variables. Jesus drew on this to illustrate the impact of the gospel of the kingdom. Outwardly His effort in sowing the Word of God may not have appeared very successful. Like the farmer's seed in the parable of the four soils, most of it seemed to fall on unfruitful ground. This did not discourage Jesus. He was determined to sow the Word, even when there seemed to be little immediate result.

Jesus used other parables to emphasize the remarkable fruitfulness of His message. He compared the growth of gospel of the kingdom to the effort of a farmer who watches the planted seed sprout and grow "though he does not know how" (v. 27). In the parable of the four soils the result was determined by the nature of the soil.

In the parable of the farmer who watches the seed grow, the soil produces a crop mysteriously and automatically. Jesus continued to emphasize the theme of growth in His third parable about seeds. In this parable He compared the kingdom of God to the growth of the tiny mustard seed. Despite its small size, the mustard seed blossoms into a huge shrub with branches large enough to provide a shelter for the birds.

**TODAY ALONG THE WAY** One way to help you visualize the truth of this parable might be to plant some seeds of your own. Or if you are afraid that you don't have a "green thumb," purchase a small plant from the local nursery. Use it as a reminder of someone with whom you have shared the "seed" of the gospel. Pray for that person each time you water your plant, and ask God to cause the message that was sown to take root and produce spiritual fruit. It is our responsibility to scatter the seed, but only God can make it grow.!

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### **Mark 4:21-34**

What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? - Mark 4:30

## TODAY IN THE WORD

Researchers have recently concluded that artichokes help prevent skin cancer. Or, more exactly, silymarin, a compound found in artichokes, does so when rubbed on the skin like a body lotion or hand cream.



This is good news for the 600 Americans who develop skin cancer every year more than 10 die annually of the disease. Sun exposure is thought to be responsible for about 90 percent of all cases, and the problem is growing, especially among younger women. But now, 'artichoke lotion' may soon become the sunscreen of choice.

God's creation never ceases to amaze us! Who would have guessed that an ordinary artichoke would hold the secret to preventing skin cancer? Or that the tiny mustard seed grows into the largest of trees?

Jesus uses this illustration and others in today's reading as He continues sharing parables of the kingdom. The first picture is of a lamp the good news of God's kingdom is now revealed in Christ. We are to be good stewards of this knowledge (vv. 24-25). Matthew 5:16 further explains, 'Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.'

The second picture is of a growing plant. Who gets the credit? The farmer? No, nothing he does causes the seed to grow. Thanks to the way God created the natural world, it grows 'all by itself.' The principle is that God is sovereign (see also 1 Corinthians 3:6-8).

The third picture is of a mustard seed. This small seed grows into a large tree about 10-12 feet high. This also describes the growth of the kingdom it may start small, but one day it will dominate the earth. It is noteworthy that Jesus uses the same metaphor to describe faith (Matthew 17:20; Luke 17:6).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY Jesus often taught His disciples and the crowds in quite creative ways using an encounter with children as a teaching opportunity, making an object lesson out of a fig tree, or telling today's story about a farmer to illustrate responses to God's Word. Jesus used objects from everyday Jewish life to instruct His listeners in spiritual principles a lamp, a mustard seed, a farm. His audience could easily see such things in their homes or towns. Would you like to create your own object lesson? Why not take Jesus' hint about seeds and plant a tree or start a garden? (If spring hasn't yet come to your area, save this idea for a warmer future!) If you have young children, involve them in the project, showing them how God delights to take what is small and grow it into something big. For yourself, you might make your tree or garden into an emblem of your ministry a visible reminder that God is the one who brings fruit.

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**Mark 4:35-41** Without faith it is impossible to please God. - Hebrews 11:6

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

On September 2, 1935 a storm that was arguably one of the worst in known history struck the Florida Keys. One of only three category five storms to hit the United States, it was on par with Hurricane Camille in 1969 and Hurricane Andrew in 1992. Although it was never named, this storm's 200-mile-per-hour winds and 30-foot waves ensured that it would never be forgotten by those who suffered through it. The Labor Day hurricane of 1935 was later called "the storm of the century."

Today's reading describes the disciples' encounter with their own "storm of the century." Although it may not have been as fierce as the Labor Day hurricane of 1935, it was strong enough to cause these seasoned veterans of the waves to fear for their lives. In the biblical text Mark gives us a sense of how significant this storm was by using a term that was commonly used to speak of a whirlwind or a hurricane to describe it. He adds that it was as a "furious" or "great" storm (v. 37).

Storms were not unusual on the Sea of Galilee. This body of water is actually a heart-shaped lake approximately thirteen miles in length and located in a basin that is surrounded by mountains. It is well-known for sudden violent thunderstorms like the one described in today's passage. The danger to Christ's disciples was further magnified by the fact that this particular storm arose at night.

The disciples had embarked on their nighttime voyage at Jesus' request. Once they set sail, the Savior made His way to the stern of the ship and fell fast asleep. Perhaps that is the reason their plea for help included a note of recrimination. They seem to have wondered, "Why would Jesus lead us into a situation like this and then go to sleep on us?" Despite its accusing tone, there is also a note of implied confidence embedded in their cry. They appear to have believed that if Jesus were awake, He could somehow help them. They misread His slumber as a lack of awareness of their circumstances and ultimately as a lack of concern. It was this misinterpretation that prompted Him to chide them for their lack of faith (v. 40).

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The tranquility of our lives is often disturbed by the unexpected. During those times God's apparent silence can cause us to wrongly conclude that He is unmoved by our plight. He is still there, He is aware, and He still cares about you. One way you can celebrate this fact and remind yourself of His concern is to find a hymnal and sing or simply read the hymn entitled "Be Still, My Soul" by Katharina von Schlegel. It joyfully declares, "The wind and waves still know His voice who ruled them while He dwelt below."

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## **Mark 4:35–41** Disciples In The Storm Are Astounded

In early 2011, a Swiss company by the name of Meteo Systems claimed to have developed a successful method for making it rain in the desert. The company boasted that they had created fifty storms in the Abu Dhabi desert, but meteorological experts were highly pessimistic. The company would not release their data, and without the data from their research, people who understand weather best refused to believe anyone could control the rain to that degree.

No one in Jesus' day would have understood the weather better than fishermen, which is one reason why the disciples were so shocked by what transpired on their trip across the Sea of Galilee. It's possible that the disciples who reacted with the most fear were among the non-fishermen of the group, but the text makes it quite clear that the storm was extremely serious and the boat was in danger of being flooded (v. 37).

The wording in verse 36 can be confusing—what did Mark mean when writing "they took him along, just as he was, in the boat"? It could be referring to the fact that Jesus was sleeping (completely fearlessly), but it also may more accurately be read as "just as he was in the boat," which could indicate that Jesus climbed aboard before suggesting to the rest that they cross the water (likely in a few different boats).

What is perfectly clear is the stark contrast between Jesus' unshakable calm and the panic that struck His disciples. They were so scared that they mistook the Lord's peaceful demeanor for apathy toward their imminent doom.

But soon their fear of the storm turned to awestruck reverence at the power of Jesus. They had seen Him cast out demons and heal the lame. They had confessed Him as Messiah. But this miracle left them questioning just who could be so powerful. These eyewitnesses, who thought they knew more than anyone about the weather, were left almost speechless at the power of Jesus to control the wind and the waves.

### Apply the Word

So much of how Jesus relates to us leads to a sense of familiarity with Him, but make no mistake, His power is utterly awesome and beyond our comprehension. If you have the opportunity to enjoy the splendor of God's creation today, stop to marvel at the fact that this great big world answers to the word of Jesus Christ. Your Friend and Savior has the power over any storm, whether in nature or in your personal life. The Lord of your heart is the Lord of all creation!

## **MARK5**

### **Mark 4:35-5:20**

Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you. - Mark 5:19

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

Born in 1812 as a slave in Virginia, John Jasper spent his youth working on a tobacco farm. In 1831, he heard a sermon that put him under the conviction of the Holy Spirit regarding the sin in his life. After a twenty-five day struggle, John confessed his sins, joined a church, and began to lose the hatred he felt for those who enslaved him.

John Jasper became one of the most remarkable African-American preachers of the nineteenth century 24 years as a slave, 39 years as a free man. Yet for him it was spiritual bondage and freedom that was the real issue. Only God's love can set a person truly free, an emphasis in Jasper's preaching to which both blacks and whites responded.

In the same way, Jesus set the demoniac in today's reading dramatically free from Satanic oppression and bondage. His authority is powerfully displayed throughout today's reading.

First, Jesus shows His authority over the natural world by calming a storm. He and His disciples are crossing the Sea of Galilee when a storm arises. The disciples are frightened, and amazed when Jesus commandingly stops it. They don't yet fully comprehend His identity or His mission (4:41).

Second, Jesus shows His authority over the supernatural world by casting out demons. The destructive, degrading effect of demonic possession is seen both in the actions of the violent demoniac and in the senseless behavior of the pigs. Thankfully, God's power over the demonic realm is absolute the demons can only beg for mercy, there is no 'struggle' with omnipotence.

The Gentiles in this region responded with fear and incomprehension. They didn't understand the power they'd witnessed, and were

more worried about the financial loss of the pigs. Like the disciples, and perhaps like us, they were ignorant even when God worked right in front of them!

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The healed demoniac in today's reading sets a good example for us: He 'went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him' (5:20). Having experienced Jesus' mercy, the man immediately started to share the good news.

Is this your attitude to witnessing your faith? Are you able and eager to tell others how much Jesus has done for you? This week, we encourage you to look for at least one opportunity to tell an unbeliever something God has done for you, a way in which He has worked in your life. It might be your salvation testimony, or an answer to prayer. In any case, make it your purpose to glorify God and to attract others to Him through your words.

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#### **Mark 5:1-20**

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins. - Ephesians 2:1

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

In an article in Fortune magazine, David Whitford wrote of the shocking discovery prior to his father's death that his dad had amassed a six-figure debt on high-interest credit cards. There had been clues that his father was having financial problems, but when Whitford had tried to talk about it his father immediately changed the subject. "At one point," Whitford writes, "he put his hands over his ears and made a humming noise." Yet two days after his father's death, Whitford found these words scrawled on his father's desk: "Help me. I'm drowning."

Whitford's story illustrates a tragic reality. There is little we can do for those who refuse our help. Fortunately, God is able to help those whose problems are so great that they are beyond all human help. That was true of those whose plight is described in today's Scripture reading. It is likely that others had tried to help the demonized man. Eventually they decided that he needed to be restrained, probably for his own protection and the safety of others. When even that failed, they left him to wander among the hills alone. The caves he frequented were used by the mostly Gentile residents of that region as tombs. Terrorized by the demons that inhabited him, this poor man spent his days and nights crying out in agony and cutting himself with sharp stones.

He was not the only one with a problem. When the local residents saw this formerly demonized man dressed and in his right mind, they begged Jesus to leave the area. This was similar to the initial response of the man who had the legion of demons. In both cases those who spoke did not really understand the significance of what they were saying. The townspeople's request is the most ironic. Undoubtedly, they were convinced that they were the "sane" ones. They were not demon-possessed, but they were as spiritually bound as the man with the legion of demons. Jesus complied with the townspeople's request to depart from their shores, but He did not abandon them. He left behind the man who had been delivered from the legion of demons as a witness to His power.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY According to Ephesians 2:2, those who have not trusted in Jesus Christ follow "the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient." Apart from God's grace there would be no hope for recovery. The good news of the gospel is that God "made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions" (Eph. 2:5). We all know people who seem to be hopeless cases. If you can do nothing else for them, you can at least do this: tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how He has had mercy on you.

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#### **Mark 5:21–43 A Sick Woman: Who touched my clothes?**

Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering. Mark 5:34

Dr. Catherine Hamlin, now 90 years old, is an obstetrician from Australia who devoted her life to treating obstetric fistula patients in Ethiopia. She and her husband opened the first clinic dedicated to fistula treatment in Addis Ababa in 1959 and planned to stay for three years. They never left; decades later, their hospital has treated tens of thousands of women, and Dr. Hamlin still does clinical work once a week. An interviewer asked her why she would stay, given her privileged family background, and she replied: "It's because I am a Christian. I feel that God is behind this work. I know ... God is real and somebody who loves these women far more than I do."

Dr. Hamlin is right—God does love these women, for He is the same God who graciously healed an unclean woman and raised a dead girl to life in our passage for today. The passage opens with a desperate father pleading with Jesus to heal his dying daughter. Jesus agreed, and began to make His way to Jairus's house through a crushing crowd. As He traveled, a desperate woman sought healing from Jesus. She had been suffering from her hemorrhage for twelve years, she had spent all she had on doctors who were unable to help, and her constant bleeding meant that she was always ritually unclean and could not go to the temple.

She thought her act of touching His cloak would be so subtle and inconspicuous that she would escape detection. After all, Jesus was being jostled in a large crowd. But she learned that Jesus was not just a magic totem that offered healing—He was the God who transforms lives. He called her out and announced her healing and peace. Jesus then brought Jairus's daughter back to life.

Apply the Word - Dr. Hamlin has used her medical training to express God's love for hurting women in Ethiopia. How can we be part of God's transformation of lives, demonstrating His love for people? Ask the Lord to show you what you can do—perhaps visit lonely people in a nursing home, write letters to those who are incarcerated, or financially support medical missions teams..

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### **Mark 5:21-34**

Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering. - Mark 5:34

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

One of the greatest social problems facing the nation today is the challenge posed by rising health care costs. As health care costs increase, the number of people who are able to afford insurance coverage decreases. This combination of economic factors is a recipe for anxiety. Imagine, then, what it must have been like in Jesus' day when there was no insurance, and the practice of medicine was more superstition than science.

The woman in today's reading who interrupted Jesus' conversation with Jairus the synagogue ruler is a good example. Her plight was social as well as physical. The nature of her condition would have meant that anyone who came in contact with her became ceremonially unclean according to the Law of Moses. This woman was not only troubled by a physical affliction, she had suffered at the hands of the doctors to whom she turned for relief. In the process she watched her financial resources shrink as her condition grew worse.

The medical profession in Jesus' day did not enjoy a good reputation. It was listed as one of the "despised trades" in the collection of Jewish writings known as the Talmud. In fact, physicians are criticized for being more interested in profit than in the health of their patients. A popular saying declared that even the best doctor was destined for hell.

Disappointment and desperation prompted this woman to seek help from Jesus in secret. The measure of her faith is signaled by her certainty that she would be healed, if she could "just touch his clothes" (v. 28). Her attempt to steal away unnoticed through the crowd after being healed was thwarted when Jesus asked who had just touched Him. Although the request of Jairus was an urgent one, Jesus stopped the procession until she came forward and admitted what she had done.

The rabbis condemned the physicians of their day because they favored the rich and powerful. Jesus made Jairus, a man of influence, wait while He pronounced a blessing of peace upon this despised and insignificant woman. Not only did He provide her with the cure they could not, He showed her a compassion they lacked.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Do you know of someone who has been suffering from a long illness? Think of some concrete way you can show Christ's compassion to that person. It may be by visiting or writing a note saying that you have been praying for them. You might also think of doing something for the family, such as bringing a meal or offering to do housework. If you don't know anyone who is ill, your pastor may be able to point you to someone who is in need of compassion at this time..

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### **Mark 5:21-43**

Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering. - Mark 5:34

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

Jesus' miracles show His divine power and foreshadow His great victory over death, toward which Mark's narrative is moving. In *The Cross in the New Testament*, Leon Morris highlights Christ's liberating power and its effect on our lives:

'Whatever enemy Paul can think of he thinks of as beaten. Christ has conquered it; He has set men free from every spiritual foe... Paul sees deliverance in many aspects as one important part of the atonement. However many may be the tyrants that work to hold men in subjection, and whatever may be the means that they employ, Paul sees them as completely frustrated. Christ has delivered His people from them all.'

Those healed by Christ received a small taste of that world-changing power. Whether set free from illness, demons, or death itself, they should know that only God could have rescued them.

Today's reading focuses on two miracles, narrated in a 'sandwich structure.' That is, one story is started, 'interrupted' by another story, then finishes. The first story continues Mark's theme of gradually revealing Jesus' authority. We have seen His power over nature and demons, and over sickness and sin. Now He reverses death itself by raising Jairus's daughter to life!

Only the 'inner ring' of disciples Peter, James and John goes with Him. The people's reactions are ones we have already encountered—disbelief, then astonishment. And again Jesus orders those involved not to spread the news, because the Father's time for full revelation has not yet come (v. 43).

Although it also shows Jesus' power, the second story says more about the faith of the person healed. The woman believed that she would be cured, despite the failure of human medicine, if she could just touch Jesus. He stopped and singled her out in order to commend her faith publicly. When Jesus pronounced her 'healed' (v. 34), He used the same Greek word as 'saved' a coupling we have already seen in Mark, when Jesus healed the paralytic and forgave his sins (2:1-12). He is indeed the Great Physician!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY - To accompany your study of Christ's life this month, and to prepare your heart to celebrate Resurrection Sunday, we encourage you to seek out additional books or videos that tell the 'greatest story of all time.' Max Lucado (He Still Moves Stones) has written a number of best-selling volumes about Christ; they dramatically retell familiar stories and draw vivid lessons for believers today. Another recommendation is The Book of God by Walter Wangerin. The chapters on the life of Jesus imaginatively recreate key Gospel narratives, readers 'walk with Him' on the road to the Cross. You might also consider purchasing the 'Jesus' film, used around the world in effective evangelism. To accompany your study of Christ's life this month, and to prepare your heart to celebrate Resurrection Sunday, we encourage you to seek out additional books or videos that tell the 'greatest story of all time.'

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### **Mark 5:21-43**

Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering. - Mark 5:34

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

It is one of the most arresting photos ever on a magazine cover: a twelve-year-old Afghani girl, with piercing green eyes and a red shawl wrapped around her head, on the cover of the June 1985 National Geographic. Writer Martin Youssef asserts that her "courageous stare defies the poverty and desolate situation she has been thrown in." Her face appears desperate, long-suffering, and bold—all qualities shared with the bleeding woman in our passage today.

As we begin this narrative, Mark's Gospel describes a large crowd pressed around Jesus (vv. 21, 24, 31). He was on His way to heal the daughter of the synagogue ruler Jairus, when He was distracted by a powerful touch. Jesus sought to identify the recipient of His healing, despite the disciples' foolish assessment (vv. 30-32).

Mark distinguishes one woman from among the masses (vv. 25-26). She suffered from chronic hemorrhaging, leaving her unable to participate in religious observance; she was destitute, having spent all her money on doctors to no avail; and her health continued to decline. Jesus' reputation offered a glimmer of hope, so she reached for Him. Jesus' persistent questioning beckoned her out of secrecy; she humbly and fearfully made herself known.

This woman is unnamed, insignificant, unclean, and ostracized, which makes Jesus' care for her all the more remarkable. His words and actions offered complete restoration. He called her "daughter," and so re-established her in God's family, and He freed her from physical suffering.

Jairus received news of his daughter's death, but Jesus encouraged him not to forget the miracle just witnessed. The healing of the bleeding woman became an antidote for fear and inspiration for faith. The woman was hopeless and found hope in Jesus; she was sick and found healing. The bleeding woman's courage to come to Jesus defied her desolate situation. Her faith in the Great Physician healed her.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY -- The woman and Jairus both wrestle with fear and both exhibit remarkable faith in Jesus. The journey of following Jesus is mixed with faith and frailty. Jesus delights when we come to Him, full of faith or burdened with fear. Are you experiencing fear or doubts? Perhaps the prayer of a loving, desperate father will hearten you: "I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). Honestly share your thoughts and feelings with God; His Spirit will strengthen you to be faithful. Come to Jesus and be completely restored.

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### **Mark 5:24-34 Isaiah 6:4-8**

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. - Psalm 51:17

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

“Apart from Me—you are nothing.” Lord, I gladly accept the arrangement: I am nothing—You are all. My nothingness is my highest blessing, because You are the Vine, which gives and works all, so be it, Lord!—Andrew Murray, The True Vine

Humility and brokenness aren't very popular in our culture. Although some action heroes show sensitivity, the message of our society is that success demands toughness. But “having your act together” runs contrary to Scripture. Over and over, we see people driven to the Lord in their helpless need.

For the past few days, we've considered aspects of God's nature that need to be understood to foster prayer. For the next few days, we'll consider attitudes of our hearts that open us to prayer. Helplessness is one such attitude.

Consider the following insights from Ole Hallesby in his excellent book, *Prayer*: “Listen, my friend! Your helplessness is your best prayer. It calls from your heart to the heart of God with greater effect than all your uttered pleas. He hears it from the very moment that you are seized with helplessness, and He becomes actively engaged at once in hearing and answering the prayer of your helplessness.”

TODAY ALONG THE WAY -- Self-sufficiency can be a serious barrier to prayer. Many people take the adage “the Lord helps those who help themselves” to mean that they can never come to the Lord until they have exhausted their own resources. But passivity and helplessness are not the same. Isaiah's attitude was brokenness in the blinding light of God's holiness (v. 5). Yet Isaiah's eager response, “Here I am!” (v. 6) reveals how he was actively ready to respond to God. Or consider the woman in today's reading from Mark. Despite her best efforts to find help, her terrible condition worsened and she desperately sought Jesus (vv. 26–27). Both this woman and Isaiah show the close link between humility, coming helplessly before the Lord, and obedience. Do you ponder your true helplessness and vulnerability apart from Christ? Reflect back on Andrew Murray's prayer. Then ask the Lord to translate your sense of brokenness into an eager willingness to follow Him more fully. Christina Rossetti's prayer, from *Little Book of Prayers*, may spark further prayers for humble obedience.

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### **Mark 5:25-34 Leviticus 15:1-33**

[K]eep the Israelites separate from things that make them unclean, so they will not die in their uncleanness for defiling my dwelling place. - Leviticus 15:31

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

Until recently, the Colombian army encouraged Marxist rebels to surrender by distributing photos of glamorous women. Since the rebels are not allowed to date without permission from the commanders, the implication was that as soon as they gave up fighting they could have their pick of the beautiful women in the photos. The new defense minister, a woman, put an end to that policy!

We live in confused times. The world has no idea what to do with issues of sexual morality and behavior. By contrast, the Law provided clear guidelines for God's people. Today's reading focuses on standards for cleanness and uncleanness related to sexual hygiene.

What was at issue here? Verses 1–15 discuss abnormal male conditions, possibly the result of an illness or sexually transmitted disease. Verses 16-18 describe the appropriate procedures for male hygiene under normal circumstances. And verses 19-24 deal with a woman's menstrual period. Finally, verses 25-30 cover abnormal female symptoms in which a woman experiences a chronic hemorrhage (called “menostaxis”). The woman Jesus healed in Mark 5 suffered from this condition (see “Today Along the Way”).

The text here is pretty straightforward about the guidelines under normal circumstances, and only minimal times of purification were required. Disease-related complications, by contrast, were more serious. They contaminated all who came in contact with them, and required burnt and sin offerings to be made for purification. (Again, it may be better to think in terms of purification rather than atonement.) The bottom line is that these rules reflect a respect for blood (as symbolic of life) and reproductive organs (as generative of life).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY - As a supplementary Scripture passage today, we encourage you to read and reflect on Mark 5:25-34, the story of Jesus' miraculous healing of a woman with a chronic bleeding condition. According to the Law, how would she have suffered from her condition physically, socially, and spiritually? In light of this, consider not only the power but also the great love and compassion Jesus showed in healing her. How might the Jewish people in the crowd, who would have known the Law, have perceived and responded to this miracle?

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### **Mark 5:35-43**

Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord. - Psalm 27:14

## TODAY IN THE WORD

A medical center in Edmonton, Canada, recently launched a pilot program to recruit and train volunteers who will serve as greeters in the emergency waiting area. The greeters' mission is to provide comfort and to support patients and family members who must often wait hours before being seen by one of the medical staff. This initiative was prompted by a survey that showed that customer satisfaction was especially low by those people who had to use the medical center's emergency facilities.

Nobody likes to wait, even under the best of circumstances. Waiting with a loved one who needs medical treatment is even more stressful. Imagine what it must have been like for Jairus as he waited for Jesus to help his daughter. According to the biblical text, she was already at the point of death when this synagogue ruler came to Jesus and pleaded for His help.

Jairus was a person of authority in the synagogue, serving as chairman or president of its board of elders, and he was used to being treated with deference. One dimension of Jairus's role as president of the synagogue was to discipline its members. It must have been especially difficult for him to wait while Jesus dealt with a woman in the crowd whose condition would have made her an outcast in his assembly.

While Jesus spoke to the woman who had just been healed, messengers arrived to tell Jairus that his daughter had in fact died. They seem to convey their news with a bluntness that's hard to explain. Perhaps they were frustrated because they had warned Jairus against seeking help from Jesus. They assumed that Jairus was now needlessly troubling Him, since his daughter was already dead.

The mourners at the house show a similar callousness, moving from weeping to laughter in a matter of minutes. Their attitude could indicate that at least some of them were professional mourners, hired for the occasion by the family. Or possibly they understood Jesus' statement to mean that He would raise the girl from the dead—and they did not believe Him.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY - Jesus urged Jairus to take courage, saying, "Don't be afraid; just believe" (v. 36). Our Lord must have recognized that the delayed answer to Jairus's request was a breeding ground for doubt.

In the same way, we can be tempted to doubt when the answers to our prayers seem to be delayed. During the long wait it can bolster our faith to remember how God has answered our prayers in the past. If you keep a prayer journal, take the time to review God's answers to your requests.

## MARK 6

### Mark 6:1-13

I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. - John 13:16

## TODAY IN THE WORD

The wealthy Edward Studd found Christ at a D. L. Moody evangelistic campaign, then led his three sons to the Lord. Some years later, one son, C. T. Studd, also attended a Moody meeting and dedicated his life to serve God on the foreign mission field.

His decision stunned Cambridge University, where Studd was a student and a star cricket player. Six other college students joined him in vowing to go to China, they became known as the 'Cambridge Seven.' While many considered their venture rash, these seven young men made a decision to sacrifice all for the sake of the gospel. C. T. Studd eventually served in China, India, and Africa over the course of his life.

The 'Cambridge Seven' followed in the footsteps of the 'Galilee Twelve.' Jesus sent His twelve disciples out on a special regional preaching mission in today's reading; later He would send them into all the world, a command which we continue to obey today (Matthew 28:19-20).

But first Jesus arrived in His hometown of Nazareth to a cold reception. Since the people there believed they 'knew' Jesus, they were offended by His teaching and growing reputation. 'Familiarity breeds contempt,' it is said, and in their blindness they can't see any deeper than His blue-collar family roots. This time Jesus is the one who's amazed at their lack of faith!

When He sends out the twelve disciples, Jesus delegates His authority to them. This is a key part of their training (cf. 3:14-15), since they must travel by faith (no extra food, money, or clothing) and with an uncompromising message. Just as Jesus has been doing, they are to link repentance and faith with physical and spiritual healing.

And so they headed out to obey the words of their Teacher, relying on His wisdom and power just as we do today!

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Although your Gospel impressions might be dominated by large crowds and dramatic events, Jesus spent most of His time in smaller settings, teaching and training His disciples. The mission of the Twelve recorded in today's reading marks a milestone in their discipleship.

Discipleship is a key topic in our Christian lives. So we'd like to follow up yesterday's book recommendations with two more, this time on the subject of how you can be a more faithful and fruitful follower of Christ. The *Training of the Twelve* by A. B. Bruce studies and meditates on the methods by which Christ taught His disciples. The *Cost of Discipleship*, by the martyred Dietrich Bonhoeffer, has many excellent reflections on 'taking up our cross daily.' May the Holy Spirit use one of these or another volume to enrich your walk and ministry!

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#### **Mark 6:1–6** Proximity Does Not Save: A Resident of Nazareth

Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son? Mark 6:3

Born in Iowa in 1862 and raised in a home for orphans, Billy Sunday went on to play major league baseball. When he was converted to Christ in his twenties, Sunday left baseball to go into Christian ministry. In the early 1900s, he was America's most famous evangelist, holding large campaigns in America's biggest cities. Part of Sunday's appeal was his down-to-earth style. One of his most popular sayings was, "Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to a garage makes you an automobile."

Saving faith in Jesus Christ doesn't just ooze into our pores from the surrounding environment, and it can't be inherited from one generation to the next like a treasured heirloom. Just because our parents or grandparents were Christians doesn't confer salvation on us; we have to trust in Jesus for ourselves. This was true even of Jesus' family and friends in His hometown of Nazareth. After Jesus taught in His home synagogue, the crowd wondered among themselves how He could have gained such wisdom. Though they had heard the teaching and even seen a few miracles, their hearts were not softened to receive Him as anyone other than Joe and Mary's kid! Many in Nazareth could not comprehend that the carpenter they knew might be the One who could show them—and in fact be—the way to God. Rather than turning their hearts toward Him, as Jesus' brother James eventually did, and believing that He had been sent by God, most rejected Him.

To be saved by Jesus has nothing to do with hanging around church! Rather, to be saved is to trust in Him as Savior. It is to believe that a Nazareth carpenter of humble beginnings is the Redeemer sent by God.

Apply the Word - The good gift of being formed in the church doesn't negate the need to receive Jesus and trust Him for your salvation from sin, but it is a blessing to be introduced to Jesus at a young age by loved ones. If you have young people in your life, are you sharing this blessing with them? Only Jesus can save—but He can use you and the church to introduce them to faith.!

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#### **Mark 6:14-29**

A voice of one calling: 'In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. -

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

Alexander Men was born during the terrible Stalinist persecution of the Russian churches in the 1920s and 1930s. But his mother, Elena, was a secret Christian and taught her young son the truths of the faith. By age 12 he had decided to become a priest.

Over the years, Alexander became well-known as a pastor, apologist, and trainer and encourager of younger leaders. He suffered constant government harassment until the political atmosphere changed under Mikhail Gorbachev. In 1988, Alexander gave the first of hundreds of lectures on Christianity and began actively using his new religious freedoms to spread the gospel. He told a friend, 'I'm only an instrument that God is using for the moment.'

The 'moment' ended on September 9, 1990. Alexander Men was attacked and struck on the back of the head with an ax, killed on his way to church.

Like Alexander Men and countless other martyrs, John the Baptist died for what he believed. Today's reading is the conclusion of the story with which this Gospel opened the career of Jesus' forerunner.

Herod put John in prison for condemning his immorality in marrying his brother's wife, Herodias. Although Herod himself liked to hear John speak, his wife pressured her husband to place John in prison. In fact, although he was puzzled by John, Herod believed him to be 'a righteous and holy man'(v. 20). But Herodias's grudge and a foolish oath by her husband led to John's beheading.



This story is narrated within the context of Jesus' growing reputation. As a result of the Twelve's preaching mission, word about Jesus quickly spread. The multitudes were still confused about His identity, but also recognized His special nature. Herod, feeling guilty, wondered if Jesus might be John the Baptist, raised from the dead (v. 16).

John died with his mission accomplished, willing to leave the scene (Mark 9:13; John 3:27-30). And he died standing for the truths he had lived (Matthew 11:10-12).

**TODAY ALONG THE WAY** - Today, we suggest that you take a meditative look back at the brief but remarkable career of John the Baptist. What lessons can we learn from his life?

Here are some questions that may help you as you reflect: What was the central priority of John's life? What was the core of his message? How and why did the crowds respond? the religious leaders? Herod and his family? Why was John persecuted and imprisoned? What was his attitude to Jesus? What did Jesus say about John?

If you wish, write out your thoughts on John the Baptist in your diary or spiritual journal.

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### **Mark 6:14-29**

Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. - Leviticus 19:17-18

#### **TODAY IN THE WORD**

The Herodian Dynasty lasted from 40 bc until ad 100. Herod Antipas in today's text was one of the sons of Herod the Great (see Matthew 2). Herod Antipas ruled as tetrarch of Galilee and Perea from 4 bc to ad 39. The ministries of Jesus and John the Baptist were concentrated in these regions, and both men were so popular among the people that King Herod knew of them (vv. 14, 20). The association between Herod and John the Baptist is the context of our text today.

An "acquaintance" formed between Herod and John when the Baptizer boldly criticized Herod regarding his incestuous marriage to Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. The Mosaic Law prohibited a man from marrying his brother's wife (Lev. 18:16; 20:21) unless the brother died (Deut. 25:5), which was not the case with Philip. Herodias despised John the Baptist for his rebuke. She cultivated her grudge into a vengeful monster, with the goal to have John destroyed. Herodias became overtaken with the desire to snuff out this annoyance.

The text presents Herod as curious about John (v. 20) and honorable to keep his promises (v. 26). His loyalty to his word transcended his interest in John, but Herod walked blindly into his wife's snare to behead the Baptizer. Like many prophets before him, John's audacity and commitment to the Lord's way cost him his life.

Our text today explains the death of John the Baptist, but it also points beyond this prophet. Notice the text begins and ends with Jesus. Herod reveals his misconceptions about Jesus' identity, which echo the disciples' confusion in Mark 8:27-29 (vv. 14-16). The story of John's execution also parallels the suffering and death of Christ. Like Herodias, the teachers of the law conspired to kill Jesus (vv. 19, 21). Like Herod, Pilate was conflicted about convicting Jesus to crucifixion, but in the end, satisfied the crowd (vv. 26-27). Unlike Jesus' disciples who abandon their Lord, though, John's disciples gave him a proper burial (v. 29).

**TODAY ALONG THE WAY** - Watering seeds of pain and resentment will grow roots of bitterness, bloom weeds of ill-will toward others, and produce thorns of destruction in our hearts and lives. If you are holding a grudge, God calls and empowers you to forgive (Matt. 6:12-15). We can forgive genuinely and love deeply, because we first have been forgiven and loved by God in Christ through His work on the cross. Today, pray for a spirit of forgiveness, release to God past and present offenses, and walk freely in the love of Jesus Christ.

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### **Mark 6:30-44**

I can do everything through him who gives me strength. - Philippians 4:13

#### **TODAY IN THE WORD**

Sir James Barrie, the British journalist and playwright, cherished his privacy and did not appreciate the intrusiveness of many reporters. A reporter once visited his home with the hope of obtaining an interview. When Barrie opened the door, the reporter smiled and said, "Sir James Barrie, I presume?" Barrie replied, "You do," and slammed the door in the reporter's face.

Like many public figures, Jesus' privacy diminished as His popularity grew. Although the people of Nazareth had demonstrated skepticism towards Jesus, the apostles' ministry of preaching, driving out demons, and healing expanded His fame among the

populace to such a degree that He found it necessary to find a quiet place to rest. The persistence of the crowd made this impossible. When they realized that Jesus and the Twelve planned to cross by boat to the northeast side of the lake, many in the crowd ran ahead on foot and actually arrived there before Jesus, rendering their solitary place no longer solitary.

Instead of resenting such an intrusion, Jesus responded with compassion. He did not view their presence as an imposition, viewing it instead as an opportunity to minister. The needy crowd seemed like sheep without a shepherd to the Savior. The patience of the disciples, on the other hand, eventually reached its limit when evening fell and the crowd showed no signs of diminishing. Noting the lateness of the hour and the need for food, the disciples urged Jesus to send the multitude away. Instead of complying with their request, Jesus told the disciples to solve the problem by providing food for the crowd themselves.

The disciples were understandably dismayed by this command. It was an unreasonable expectation, given the extremely limited resources at their disposal. There was nothing wrong with the disciples' calculation of the amount of food they had on hand, an amount so small that it would not even have been enough to feed the twelve of them. Their mistake was in not taking into account the power of Christ. Jesus' intent seems to have been to make them aware of their weakness and His power.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY - How do you feel about interruptions? Do you see them as intrusions that keep you from doing what you would like to do? Or do you consider them to be "divine appointments?" The next time there is an unexpected knock at the door or unanticipated phone call, try to look at it as God's way of breaking into the routine of your day. You may not feel prepared for the opportunity presented by your next interruption, but our God is always ready to show Himself strong on behalf of those who depend upon Him..

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### **Mark 6:30-56**

Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid. - Mark 6:50

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

Three preachers were out fishing bright and early one Saturday morning. After they'd found a good spot and cast their lines, one of them suddenly remembered he'd left his lunch on shore. Stepping out of the boat, he walked casually to shore, retrieved it, and returned to the boat.

Then the second preacher remembered he'd left his tackle box on shore. He repeated the first man's exploit.

The third preacher sat stunned by the 'walks on the water' he'd just witnessed. Not to be thought lacking in faith, he announced he'd left his hat on shore and stepped out of the boat. Splash!

The first preacher turned to the other and asked, 'Do you suppose we should have shown him the rocks to step on?'

Unlike the people in this scenario, Jesus' walk on the water was, of course, the real thing, again demonstrating His power over nature.

The day began with a miraculous feeding. The disciples had returned from their preaching tour, hoping for rest and privacy to review their experiences with Jesus. But the multitudes overwhelmed them, and Jesus responded with compassion. Although the disciples had recently been healing and casting out demons, they lacked the faith to believe that more than 5 people could be fed (v. 37). Again, Jesus demonstrates His power and not by halves, as there are plenty of leftovers!

That evening, while Jesus stayed behind to pray, the tired Twelve set out across Galilee in a fishing boat. Jesus saw them and walked to them across the water. The disciples were amazed and terrified, for they hadn't understood the lesson of that afternoon (v. 52) that with God, all things are possible. (Mark doesn't mention that Peter also tried to walk on the water perhaps Peter felt the story was already too well-known!)

The disciples had just returned from successful ministry, yet they were still lacking in faith twice in one day! There's a lesson here to always take God at His word.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Jesus met the physical needs of His listeners, miraculously feeding them with only five loaves and two fish. His motivation? Compassion the same motive that led Him to meet their spiritual needs (v. 34).

You, too, can be motivated by compassion to meet the physical needs of those around you. As an application for today's devotion, we suggest you look for a concrete way to serve those less fortunate. You might make a donation to a food pantry, for instance. Or volunteer to help serve a meal at a soup kitchen. If your church is having an Easter dinner drive, generously give food items or actively play a role in distributing the food to those in need.

Jesus cared for the whole person and so can we!

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## **Mark 6:45-56**

Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid. - Mark 6:50

### TODAY IN THE WORD

A little boy who was afraid of the water was playing in the sand along the shore when his father offered to give him a ride on his shoulders. The boy climbed up giggling with delight, but his laughter turned to tears when he felt his father stride into the waves. He watched the water rise around him and begged him to return to the shore, but his father held him tightly in place and spoke reassuring words. When the boy realized that he was secured by his father's strong arms, he relaxed and began to enjoy the ride. His fear of the water never did return.

Jesus taught His disciples a similar lesson when He sent them into the storm following the feeding of the five thousand. Immediately after the crowd had been fed, Jesus compelled his reluctant disciples to get into a boat and cross to the other side of the lake. The text does not say why He felt it necessary to "make" the disciples get into the boat (v. 45). One possibility is that they were reluctant to sail because of the lateness of the hour. They may also have seen signs in the weather that indicated that the passage across the lake would be difficult. Whatever the reason, Jesus refused to take no for an answer and instructed them to begin the journey while He went up on the mountainside to pray.

Before long the disciples' reluctance seemed justified, when they found themselves struggling against the wind and unable to make it to the other side of the lake. The storm that blew up as they made their journey seems to have been more of a frustration than a threat. They rowed against the wind for hours and were unable to make any headway, until Jesus came walking to them across the water.

Even though they had just witnessed an incredible miracle, they hadn't understood its true significance (v. 52). Jesus wanted to test the depths of their faith, to see if they had learned the lesson of faith in His power. Though they were fearful, He still exercised His authority over the weather to comfort them.

### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Our prayers often reflect a desire to avoid the storm and to complete our journey with ease. God, on the other hand, often seems to send us unto the wind and waves. His disciples had just seen Jesus feed the multitude, yet they still needed their faith strengthened through the experience of the storm.

As you reflect back over the past seven days, can you think of times when you experienced Christ's power in the midst of the unexpected storms of life? Thank Him now for showing up.

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## **Mark 6:45–56 Jesus Walks On Water**

One of the most popular videos on YouTube (currently at just under 3 million views) captures the reunion of a father and daughter. The father has been serving in Iraq; his 10-year-old daughter thinks she's having just another ordinary day at school. The camera zooms to her face as someone walks in the door of her classroom—and she realizes that it's her dad. What seemed like a regular day became an unforgettable experience.

Our passage today follows the account of Jesus feeding thousands from a paltry lunch. The disciples sailed away from the crowds that had just been fed, and Jesus withdrew to pray. As far as the disciples knew, nothing else tremendous was in store. They were back to their regular routine, with ordinary expectations. In yesterday's application, we discussed the risk of growing so familiar with Jesus that we fail to be awed by His power. The disciples fell victim to that very trap with hearts so hardened they missed the meaning of a miracle that happened right in front of them (v. 52).

While in the middle of the sea, the disciples struggled against the wind. They were not expecting to see Jesus. As readers of the Gospels, we come across the miracles of Jesus as though they happened in quick succession—and they often did. But over the course of following Christ, the Twelve had begun to witness Jesus as their teacher and leader without remembering that the next miraculous work could be right around the corner. It seems that they could not grasp that Jesus' power could be on display at any moment. In this case, it was just outside their boat. When Jesus appeared, they thought He was a ghost, failing to recognize Him because their hearts weren't prepared to see Him.

Christ identified Himself, boarded the boat, and immediately the wind relented. Then a new band of eyewitnesses reacted with the

expectations the disciples should have had all along. The people in Gennesaret recognized Jesus immediately and ran to Him! Their hearts were filled with expectation and faith that Jesus could heal them (v. 56).

Apply the Word

Do you call yourself a follower of Christ but expect nothing miraculous? Jesus can still amaze us. He still feeds us bountifully. He still shows up when we are desperate and in trouble. He is able to do infinitely more than we can imagine. One day, Jesus will again break into an ordinary day to call us to a beautiful, eternal reunion with Him. When we pray, "Come quickly, Lord Jesus!" we testify to His power and faithfulness.

## MARK 7

### Mark 7:1-37

Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer. - Deuteronomy 10:16

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

Haman enjoyed his power in the Persian court. He particularly enjoyed the fear and respect he received from others. So when Mordecai gave him neither, his ego felt bruised. He built gallows on which to hang Mordecai, then hurried to the king's palace to ask permission.

When he arrived, the king had a different question on his mind: 'What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?' Believing that man was himself, Haman answered that he should be dressed in the king's clothes and paraded through the city on the king's horse.

'Go at once,' said the king. 'Do just as you have suggested for Mordecai.'

Haman the hypocrite was caught in his own trap! No doubt his hatred burned inwardly as he honored his enemy outwardly. This two-faced character from the book of Esther parallels the Pharisees in today's reading.

They had accused the disciples of ceremonial uncleanness, but Jesus cuts straight to the real issue clean hearts, not clean hands. They have focused on outward forms at the expense of true inner righteousness. Jesus' words are strong and harsh the leaders are 'hypocrites' (v. 6), placing human traditions ahead of the commands of God (v. Cool).

Jesus doesn't stop there. He gives a supporting example of how the Pharisees excuse themselves from honoring their parents by using a hypocritical legal technicality. By the time Jesus adds 'And you do many things like that' (v. 13), the Pharisees are probably burning from the public humiliation.

Jesus then turns to the crowd to explain the principle involved. 'Cleanliness' is a heart issue, determined by what comes out, not by what goes in (vv. 15, 20-23). Sin is the only 'dirt' that makes us unclean.

Do we really think we can hide our hearts from God? Then we'd better act to please Him, not people!

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Let's try to apply today's reading to our personal or family entertainment choices, including any way in which we use our free time. This might include books, television, hobbies, sports, movies, games, sightseeing, Internet use, etc.

How often do we discuss such activities in light of their effect on our hearts? That is, since Jesus taught that what is 'unclean' comes from the heart, we should be focusing on the state of our hearts. Take a minute to do a self-examination. Do our entertainment choices grow the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) or are they more likely to feed our sinful nature (Mark 7:21-22)? Do they meet the criteria listed in Philippians 4:8?

Choose one of your favorite free-time activities and discuss with a friend or family member its effects on your heart.

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### Mark 7:1-23

You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? - Romans 2:23

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

Actor and comedian W. C. Fields was an avowed agnostic, so he surprised his friends when they discovered him reading a Bible while on his deathbed. When asked why, Fields replied, "I'm looking for a loophole."

The religious leaders of Jesus' day approached God's law with the same goal. They formulated an elaborate system of man-made regulations allegedly designed to protect God's commands but that instead provided loopholes for those who wanted to get around them. Although those who established these traditions probably introduced them with the good intent of helping God's people comply with the Law's requirements, these traditions had become an end in themselves.

Jesus commented on this tendency when the Pharisees and the teachers of the Mosaic Law criticized His disciples for eating with "unclean" hands (v. 2). This was not a complaint about the disciples' personal hygiene but their failure to comply with the practice of ceremonial washing prior to eating. After shopping in the marketplace, the Pharisees observed a ritual washing to "cleanse" themselves from any contact they may have had with Gentiles and non-practicing Jews.

Some viewed compliance with such rituals as synonymous with obedience to God's command. Preserving the traditions became more important than obeying the laws that they were meant to reflect. As an example, Jesus cited the practice of declaring property "Corban" (v. 11). This term is a transliteration of a Hebrew word that meant "offering" or "oblation." When something was declared Corban it still belonged to the owner but was no longer available for ordinary use. Apparently some used this as an excuse to shield their assets, even from their needy parents.

In other instances, focusing on such rules and traditions caused people to lose sight of the importance of the heart. They felt that the ritual alone was sufficient. Jesus compared the people of His generation with those condemned by the prophet Isaiah (vv. 6-7; cf. Isa. 29:3). Although meticulous in their religious practices, they did not truly honor God but offered only lip service.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Every church has traditions. Many of them are helpful and even necessary. Some, like baptism and the observance of the Lord's Supper, are commanded. The problem arises when our traditions become an end in themselves and keep us from fulfilling the true intent of God's commands. Make a list of five unwritten rules that shape the values and practice of the church you attend. How do they help the church in its worship and obedience? Do they ever get in the way?

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#### Mark 7:24-37

For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him. - Romans 10:12

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

Eddie's sixth-grade teacher wanted to motivate her students to work harder. She gave the class a test and arranged the desks according to the results. The student with the best score was assigned the first seat in the first row. The worst student was assigned the last seat in the last row. When Eddie learned that he had been assigned the lowest seat in class he put his head down on his desk and wept. He did not show up for class for the rest of the week. He felt like he had been branded by the teacher as "the dumbest kid in the class" and carried the sense of shame that came with that label for many years.

On the surface, it appears as if Jesus had labeled the woman in today's passage similarly. Mark underscores her Gentile status first by noting where this meeting took place. It occurred while Jesus was in the vicinity of Tyre, a Phoenician port and important center of commerce. He also points out that she was a Greek born in Syrian Phoenicia, marking her as a pagan who did not hold to Jewish beliefs or customs. The Jews of Jesus' day would have considered her unclean and believed that simply having contact with her defiled them.

Jesus emphasized the woman's status by comparing her to a dog. The Jews considered dogs unclean because they were scavengers that may have touched or eaten something that was unclean. They did not keep them as pets. It was a common Gentile practice to keep domesticated dogs as pets, and the Jews often called Gentiles "dogs" to signify these aspects of uncleanness.

Still, the woman pressed for the healing of her daughter after Jesus refused her initial request. His example emphasized the priority of the "children" but did not exclude those who were not (v. 27). This same principle was later echoed by the apostle Paul when he declared, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (Rom. 1:16). Jesus came to show compassion on Gentiles as well as Jews.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Jesus' contemporaries viewed this woman as an outcast unworthy of God's interest. Do you know anyone like her? Perhaps it is a neighbor whose social or ethnic background makes others in the community nervous. It may be a homeless person that you pass on

the way to work. Look for an opportunity to express an interest in such a person today. Greet him with a smile, or ask her how her day is going. God may use your friendliness to begin a relationship that will allow you to share the bread of life with someone starving for a morsel.

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### **Mark 7:24–30 Included in the Family: A Canaanite Woman**

Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed.

Genesis 22:18

Abeedah was a foreign exchange student at an American university, and one of her professors invited her to church. Though raised Muslim, she was curious about Christianity and accepted the invitation. When all the students cleared out of campus in the middle of December, Abeedah was left alone in her quiet dorm. But then her professor and his wife asked her to join their family for a Christmas celebration. When each of their children presented her with a gift, Abeedah was surprised and touched at being included in their family's celebration.

Though Jesus was trying to keep a low profile as He moved through Tyre, another "outsider" learned where He was staying (v. 24). The woman, a Greek, was born in Syrian Phoenicia. Her daughter had been possessed by an impure spirit, and this desperate mother threw herself at Jesus' feet, begging for His help. At this point in the text we might be surprised to see Jesus' answer. Perhaps provocatively, He articulated what His disciples were surely thinking: an "outsider" didn't deserve the same gifts as God's chosen people.

This woman showed spiritual and theological insight, and she protested on behalf of her daughter, "Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (v. 28). She demonstrated her faith in the Master's hand, and Jesus healed her daughter that moment.

Receiving God's gracious gifts—healing, salvation, inclusion into God's family—was never meant to be the exclusive right of the Jews. Rather, God had always intended to save other nations through the Jews. A desperate mother and her tortured daughter experienced God's goodness through Jesus, who shared God's gifts freely. The eternal plan of God to bless all nations is the same today as it was then!

Apply the Word

If there is a college or university nearby, you have a global mission field at your doorstep! Many international students long to build relationships with local families, and many are lonely while far away from home. Contact the student services department to see how you or your church could extend hospitality to these young people in the name of Jesus.

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### **Mark 7:24–30 Syrophenician Woman: Recognized the Lord**

Woman, you have great faith! Matthew 15:28

The classic hymn "Living By Faith" proclaims:

"I know that He safely will carry me thro', / No matter what evils betide. / Why should I then care, tho' the tempest may blow, / If Jesus walks close to my side? / Living by faith in Jesus above; / Trusting, confiding in His great love; / From all harm safe in His sheltering arm, / I'm living by faith and feel no alarm."

In just this way, the Syrophenician woman in today's passage acted on her faith in Jesus. He had withdrawn from the crowds into a Gentile region (near Tyre, in Phoenicia) in order to teach His disciples privately. He must have already known people there, for He visited a specific home. As soon as word got out that He had arrived, the woman showed up to plead for healing for her demon-possessed daughter (v. 26). She believed that Jesus had spiritual authority over demons and that He could grant her prayer (Matt. 15:28).

In their dialogue (vv. 27–29), the Syrophenician woman addressed Jesus as "Lord," the only time this happens in Mark, and "Son of David," a messianic title (see Matt. 15:21). Jesus responded with an image indicating that the good news of the kingdom was for the Jews first. They were "children" while Gentiles were "dogs." Was this a test of her faith? In part, yes, but it was also an encouragement to persist with her petition. The word Jesus used for "dogs" wasn't the insulting term ("wild dogs") but a more friendly one ("pet dogs").

The Syrophenician woman picked up on Jesus' tone and responded wittily. She didn't challenge the content of what He had said but rather put forward her request again, in another way, playfully using His image. He honored her faith and healed her daughter!

Apply the Word

The Syrophenician woman was praying earnestly for her child's deliverance. If we are parents or grandparents, we can imitate her faith-filled example by passionately and persistently praying for our own children—for them to trust in Jesus, return to Him, or grow in Him. We know that He loves little ones and delights to answer such prayers (Luke 18:16)..

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### **Mark 7:24-30**

The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. - Romans 16:20

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

The original recipients of Mark's Gospel were Gentiles (non-Jews) who were persecuted for their faith in Jesus Christ, a recently crucified Jewish carpenter and prophet whom they claimed had risen from the dead. In the face of suffering and ridicule, these early followers of Jesus were encouraged to remember that the good news of Jesus was not simply for Jews, who believed that He was the Messiah, but also for Gentiles. Recall how Peter explained the Gentile inclusion in Acts 15:7-11: God chose the Gentiles to hear the gospel and believe; He confirmed this by giving them the Holy Spirit; and all because "it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are" (Acts 15:11). Imagine reading today's passage from the perspective of an original Gentile recipient!

Our text takes place in the region of Tyre, which belonged to ancient Phoenicia. The most well-known Old Testament woman from Phoenicia is Jezebel, who turned King Ahab away from the God of Israel to worship Baal. A more positive representative of Phoenicia is the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:17-24). Today's text reflects the tensions that existed in this border area between Tyre and Galilee.

This woman from Phoenicia embodies bold faith. Though Jesus retreated in privacy, hoping to go unnoticed, this desperate woman sought Him out "as soon as she heard about him" (v. 25). She knew Jesus had the power to heal her demon-possessed daughter, for His reputation had spread. She humbly entreated Jesus, but received a shocking answer (vv. 26-27). Though the word "first" implies that a time will come for the salvation of Gentiles, Jesus' initial answer did not satisfy the woman. Curiously, she called Jesus "Lord." Some suggest this is simply a respectful form of address rather than a confession of His deity, but this seems inconsistent with the evaluation of her faith that Jesus pronounced. This woman had the gumption to rebut Jesus (v. 28), and in response to her "great faith" (Matt. 15:28), Jesus demonstrated that His saving power was not limited to Israel.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Jesus liberated the woman's daughter from demon-possession. Satan attempted to divert Jesus from His mission and destroy His creation, but Jesus' authority over Satan in healings, exorcism, and ultimately His resurrection, proves Jesus to be the Son of God. Our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers of this world and spiritual forces of evil in heavenly realms (Eph. 6:12). Prayerfully reflect on Ephesians 6:10-17, and pray for strength in Jesus and His power against the devil's schemes.

## **MARK 8**

### **Mark 8:1–21 Do you still not understand?**

I have compassion for these people. Mark 8:2

On October 8, 2008, John Ehrman pleaded guilty to making a false filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC); he was sentenced to six months in federal prison and ordered to pay a fine of more than \$700,000. Ehrman seems to have learned the wrong lesson from his conviction: In December 2014, he was indicted for 29 counts of wire fraud for a scheme that defrauded investors of more than \$2.3 million. If convicted, Ehrman faces the possibility of decades in prison and fines of several million dollars.

In our reading today, we might be forgiven for thinking that the disciples were also failing to learn the right lesson about Jesus. By this time, the disciples had seen Jesus heal people who had leprosy and were deaf, blind, or paralyzed. They had heard Him teach and pray and drive out evil spirits. They had witnessed Him challenge the Pharisees and calm a storm. They were there when He fed five thousand men with just five loaves and two fish (see Mark 6:30–44).

But the disciples still tended to hear with physical ears, not spiritual ones. Even after witnessing another miraculous provision of food for the crowd of four thousand, they thought Jesus was scolding them for forgetting bread, as if He could not provide enough bread to feed them all with just a word (v. 16)!

Notice the sequence of Jesus' questions in these verses—seven questions in all in just five verses. He uses these questions rhetorically to remind them of the evidence they have seen about who He is. Jesus didn't want them to be like the Pharisees, who insolently demanded a sign from heaven—after all the miracles Jesus had performed (vv. 11–13)! Jesus was pushing them to acknowledge that He was more than miracle-worker or teacher. He is God.

#### Apply the Word

A spiritual journal can be a good resource for remembering how Jesus has worked in our lives. You can record prayer requests and answered prayers, or use it to remember times of provision from God. You can also jot down insights and questions from your Bible study. This tool can ensure that our spiritual eyes see who God is and our spiritual ears hear how He is working..

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#### Mark 8:1-26

The bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. - John 6:33

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

Breadmakers are a handy modern gadget of recent days. Occupying a space slightly larger than a shoe box on the kitchen countertop, they make baking homemade bread an easy chore. Just measure in water, flour, yeast, and other ingredients, then push a button the machine does the rest! Purists prefer to bake bread the old-fashioned way, but many thousands of homemakers are using breadmakers, saving time, and pleasing their families with the tasty results.

Even a fleet of breadmakers, though, would not have been enough to feed the crowd in today's reading. Instead, we find here another God-sized 'catering' miracle! This time Jesus feeds a crowd of more than 4K people, and again there are many leftovers. Also again, sadly enough, the disciples are thinking from a human perspective rather than in terms of God's power (v. 4).

Jesus also uses a bread metaphor later in the day, warning His disciples against the 'yeast' of the Pharisees. Their corrupt influence and unbelieving hearts are distinctly shown in this chapter as well as the preceding one. Jesus has to explain the lesson to His confused disciples the spiritual reality of God's power, care, and provision can clearly be seen with the eyes of faith.

Strangely enough, we can be encouraged by how slow the disciples are to learn from Jesus. In today's reading, they seem to have 'forgotten' the feeding of the 5 and the many other miracles they've witnessed. Yet how many times have we done the same? We fail to count our blessings, to praise God for all He's done in our lives, instead whining and complaining to Him. But God patiently 're-teaches' us, even when our eyes are blind and our hearts are hard (vv. 17-18).

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today's reading contains two more examples of Jesus' compassion and concern for the people He met (cf. 9:41). In light of that, we'd like to suggest two ideas for connecting the physical and the spiritual in your prayer life this month.

Some of you might tell your children a Bible story of God providing food perhaps the feeding of the 4 in today's reading, or God sending manna for the Israelites in the wilderness at a meal. Then, thank God for the food at the end of the meal rather than the beginning after your story, this prayer will be more than a quick formality!

For others, consider fasting for one meal. Devote the time and money that would have been spent cooking and eating to the Lord for example, use the time for Bible study or prayer, or give the money to a compassion ministry in your community.

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#### Mark 8:14-9:1

Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced. - Isaiah 50:7

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

James Thurber went to a dinner party after he had lost his eye sight and speculated to a friend that one of the couples there was on the verge of breaking up. Thurber's friend objected, "That's not possible! I've never seen such friendliness and smiling." "Yes," Thurber replied. "You saw them. I heard them." A few months later the couple divorced.

We don't always see as clearly as we might think. That is especially true when it comes to spiritual insight. Although Jesus' disciples enjoyed the privilege of observing the Savior's miracles and sitting under His teaching, they often did not immediately grasp the significance of His ministry. When Jesus used metaphors to make a spiritual point, they often took Him too literally. At other times they understood Jesus, but only partially. In many respects they were like the blind man at Bethsaida who was healed in stages by Jesus. Spiritual insight came gradually to them.



Nowhere is this more evident than in Peter's confession of Christ. Unlike the multitude who merely considered Jesus to be a prophet, Peter recognized Him as the promised Messiah. Peter soon followed this remarkable insight with a misguided attempt to dissuade the Savior from going to the cross after Jesus had spoken frankly to the disciples about His approaching death and resurrection (v. 32). Peter may have grasped only half the message or was doubtful about the possibility of Christ's rising from the dead. The sharp rebuke he received in answer indicated Jesus' determination to complete His mission. To deviate from it would have played into the hands of Satan.

Peter's counsel was not only misguided, it was dangerously one-sided. It reflected a perspective that was too limited, taking into account the things of men rather than the things of God. Peter's self-centered mentality was inconsistent with Christ's mission and unworthy of a disciple of Christ. Jesus calls His followers to live with a similar sense of purpose, even to the point of death. As the hymn writer said, "Must Jesus bear the cross alone and all the world go free? No, there's a cross for everyone and there's a cross for me."

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Some people have found it helpful to write a personal mission statement. Try writing one that reflects the calling Jesus gives to His disciples in today's passage. Make it short—no more than a few sentences. It should be personal and should state the core values that inform your priorities. State what you believe to be most important and then what you plan to do about it. It will probably take you longer to think about the values that drive your mission statement than it will to write the statement itself.

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#### **Mark 8:22–26 Gradual Healing: A Twice-Touched Blind Man**

Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.

Mark 8:25

Cochlear implant surgery has changed many lives in recent years. In the revolutionary surgical procedure, doctors drill holes in the skull to insert a steel plate about the size of a quarter just above the ear. In a second procedure, surgeons replace the patient's own cochlear with a sophisticated hearing device. Following this implant, the patient is completely deaf for a month before the device is activated. To be successful, the process requires multiple steps. After following the required process for a cochlear implant, including a month of complete hearing loss, recipients call the first day they're able to hear "activation day."

In Bethsaida, when people begged Jesus to touch a blind man, He also used a multiple-step process. First, Jesus spit on the man's eyes. After his first attempt to see, the man reported that people looked like walking trees! But his healing process wasn't complete. After Jesus applied His hands to the man's eyes, his sight was completely restored. For reasons known then and now only to Jesus, He chose to heal this man in a way He didn't use with other people that He healed.

Like a skilled surgeon, Jesus used two different techniques to restore the man's vision. The text doesn't tell us how the man felt when he first opened his eyes and had only partial sight—was he hopeful or disappointed? When the man opened his eyes a second time, he was able, at last, to see clearly. At the moment of "activation," the man who had been blind knew Jesus to be a healer who was committed to his full restoration.

#### Apply the Word

Perhaps you've experienced God's healing in your life in some way. God has touched your heart or your mind or your body or your relationships. He has brought new life where there was death, light where there was darkness. Are there still areas that need His healing touch? Don't give up. Continue to trust Jesus for full restoration. He will be faithful..

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#### **Mark 8:27-30; 9:2-14**

"Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ." - Mark 8:29

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

When Boniface left England as a missionary for the lands now known as Germany, he found a mix of heretical Christianity (which denied the full deity of Christ), Gnosticism, and pagan worship. Forty years later, in 755, as he prepared to preach and baptize new converts along the Borne River, a group of pagan bandits attacked. When some in Boniface's party threatened violence, Boniface reportedly said, "Fear not those who kill the body but cannot kill the immortal soul ... Receive with constancy this momentary blow of death, that you may live and reign with Christ forever." Like other martyrs before him, and many who would follow, Boniface glimpsed Christ's eternal glory and was able to put the most horrifying circumstance in proper perspective.

Jesus may have also sensed that His closest disciples would need a glimpse of His future glory to endure the ordeals they were about to endure. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record the Transfiguration and confirm that it occurred just after Peter's bold confession of Jesus as the Christ. The Gospels also show that Jesus was slow to reveal His true identity because of the many misconceptions concerning the Messiah. Even when His disciples understood His true identity, He warned them to be quiet, rightly fearing that people would hail a political messiah, but shun a deliverer from sin.

The revelation of His true glory on the high mountain (probably Mount Hermon) was meant to keep them steadfast in the weeks to come, when all they believed about Jesus would be severely tested. Thus they needed to know the Son of Man, the Messiah, would not only have to suffer many things, including death on a cross, but that He would also have unspeakable glory. Although the disciples appeared to be beside themselves with this vision of Jesus' true glory, the words from the cloud confirmed Peter's confession, namely that Jesus is the Son of God, the true Christ.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

All believers need to focus on Jesus Christ to maintain proper perspective in the difficult trials of life. Even so, it's easy to get distracted and to lose focus. Perhaps you need a fresh glimpse of Jesus' glory. Take time this weekend to meditate on the vision of Jesus' resurrected glory in Revelation 1:9-20. Like the first disciples, we need a clear vision of Jesus' glory to keep our focus during trials and difficult times. This vision also previews the glory that awaits us, all because of Jesus.

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#### **Mark 8:27-9:1**

For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. - Mark 8:35

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

Reformation theologian John Calvin has some wise words about the cost of following Christ:

'Those whom the Lord has chosen and honored with His intercourse must prepare for a hard, laborious, troubled life... Having begun this course with Christ the first-born, He continues it towards all His children... Hence it affords us great consolation in hard and difficult circumstances, which men deem evil and adverse, to think that we are holding fellowship with the sufferings of Christ... How powerfully should it soften the bitterness of the cross, to think that the more we are afflicted with adversity, the surer we are made of our fellowship with Christ; by communion with whom our sufferings are not only blessed to us, but tend greatly to the furtherance of our salvation.'

As we see clearly in today's passage, that's what it means to be a disciple of Christ! Here the unfolding drama of Jesus' identity, authority, and mission reaches a climax first, through Peter's confession of Christ.

Jesus asks His disciples who everyone thinks He is. After the babble of answers John the Baptist, Elijah, a prophet He asks who they think He is. Peter responds with decisive clarity, 'You are the Christ' (8:29). That special moment of insight came from God (Matthew 16:17).

The second portion of the climax is Jesus' prediction of His death. He speaks plainly, telling the disciples for the first time that He must suffer, be rejected, and die, but also that He will rise from the dead.

Perhaps emboldened by his 'success' a moment before, Peter scolds Jesus for these words they contradict the disciples' expectations of a Messiah. But Jesus strongly rebukes him as an agent of Satan (Mark 8:33). Nothing can prevent the Son from obeying the Father's will!

And that's not all every disciple of Christ must follow in His footsteps. To follow Him means to take up our crosses daily, to give our lives wholly for the message of Life.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY Discipleship is often mentioned in the book of Mark, and today's passage reveals some important truths on that theme. So we recommend that you commit Mark 8:34-35 to memory. You might write these verses down somewhere and carry them with you throughout the day, reading and reviewing them as you are able.

Scripture memorization is an excellent spiritual discipline, necessary and beneficial to every disciple of Christ. As Joshua 1:8 says: 'Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.' As you memorize, consider ways in which you can obey Jesus' words.

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#### **Mark 8:31–38 What can anyone give in exchange for their soul?**

Whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. Mark 8:35

Jason Brown was the highest-paid center in the National Football League (NFL), earning \$25 million. But in 2012, at the age of 29 and with teams interested in signing him to another contract, he left the NFL—to grow sweet potatoes. “My agent, he told me, ‘You are making the biggest mistake of your life.’ And I looked right back at him and I said, ‘No I am not.’” Brown donates his harvest to food banks; in 2014, he gave away over 46,000 pounds of sweet potatoes and 10,000 pounds of cucumbers.

Our culture tells us that money has the highest value. Society says that self-fulfillment has the highest worth. But in our passage today, Jesus says that making more money and pursuing self-interest will be worthless pursuits if we neglect what is most important: following Him.

In fact, following Jesus requires a willingness to deny ourselves—to realign our ambitions and desires and impulses with His values and priorities (v. 34). In order to do this, we need to understand what has true value and worth. All the riches and power in the world are worthless if we have sacrificed our souls on the altar of self. Jesus poses the question to jolt us awake to the seriousness of what is at stake: “What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?” (v. 36).

Jesus does not pretend to call us to a life that will be easy or comfortable. He equates discipleship with carrying a cross, a badge of shame and implement of suffering. But He promises that faithful discipleship results in true, abundant, eternal life: “Whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it” (v. 35). When we understand God’s value system, we know that we have made the worthwhile choice to follow Jesus.

Apply the Word When ESPN described Jason Brown’s choice to leave football to become a farmer who donates his crops, they titled the story, “The Curious Case of Jason Brown.” When we make the choice to follow Jesus and change our priorities, people will find it curious, strange, even weird. But no life is more satisfying or fulfilling as the one lived in service to God!

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#### **Mark 8:34**

If you were looking for a missionary to take the gospel to India and Sri Lanka, you probably wouldn’t start by searching taverns of Paris! If you looked into one these raucous establishments in the 1530s, you might have seen a strikingly handsome young philosophy professor who liked to gamble and drink. Born in Spain, this brilliant young man eventually made his way to the University of Paris. His name was Francis Xavier, and the Word of God changed his life forever. The pursuit of pleasure and success eventually left Xavier empty. He sought the company of a good friend, who quoted Mark 8:36 to him. It completely redirected Xavier’s life—he left his teaching position and joined a small group of missionaries. Xavier began ministering in northern Italy, but later traveled between India and Japan, even ministering on South Seas islands. Even though he could not speak the language where he ministered, he would memorize entire sermons in that language so that he would not be hindered in sharing the gospel. This verse that impacted Xavier fits into a larger section in Mark about denying oneself for the gospel.

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#### **Mark 8:34 Mark 12:41-44**

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. - Mark 8:34

#### **TODAY IN THE WORD**

In November 1994, Rachel Saint died in Ecuador at the age of 80. She had lived with the Waodani people since 1959, sharing the gospel with those who had murdered her brother and four other missionaries three years earlier. Her life embodied the famous words of Mother Teresa: “In this life we cannot do great things. We can only do small things with great love.” The poor widow of today’s passage also embodies these words.

Recall descriptions of the temple in Jerusalem. A Jewish man or woman would enter the temple complex by passing through a large plaza to ascend a massive stairway. The double gate straight ahead led to the outer court or Court of the Gentiles, where the blind and lame visited Jesus and where He drove out merchants (Matt 21:12-16). Gentiles could not continue, but Jews could advance into the Court of Women. This was as far as Jewish women could proceed in the temple. Here Anna prayed (Luke 2:37), and this is where Jesus sat as today’s text begins (v. 41).

Jesus watched the crowd with particular attention to the worshippers on opposite ends of the socio-economic scale. He noticed a contrast between many rich people and one poor widow, between large monetary gifts and two small coins worth nearly nothing (v. 42).

Jesus drew the disciples’ attention not to the actual amounts of the offerings, but rather to the percentage of the gifts in proportion to each person’s resources (v. 43). Jesus commended the woman because she gave sacrificially and in great faith, trusting God to provide for her needs (v. 44).

Financially, legally, and culturally, the poor widow is insignificant, but spiritually she is a heroine. She demonstrated faithful discipleship through her stewardship of material possessions. She knew that all her resources were first of all God's resources and that He cared for her, so she could give a "small thing with great love" by trusting in God.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

"The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it" (Ps. 24:1). All things belong to God and come under His Lordship. How do you steward His resources—the money, time, talents, and creation He has given you? Do you make decisions based on your relationship with Christ and His kingdom? Whether you are rich, somewhere in the middle, or poor, do you give sacrificially and generously to glorify God and share in His kingdom work locally and globally? Take time to prayerfully evaluate your stewardship of God's resources.

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#### **Mark 8:36 Matthew 19:16-23**

What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? - Mark 8:36

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

It's tough to buy an apartment in the ritzy neighborhood of Knightsbridge in London, but one building owner made global headlines by offering a room for sale that was available for anyone who wanted it. The interested party, however, would have to use some imagination to make a home sweet home out of the tiny 77-square-foot former storage closet with no windows and no electricity. So what prevented these cramped quarters from being snatched off the market? The owner was asking \$335,000!

Some prices are too shocking even to consider, and that's exactly what the rich young man thought of Jesus' asking price. But this man wasn't looking for a mere apartment in a nice neighborhood; he wanted a way to earn eternal life.

Outwardly, the man appeared to be an outstanding example of godly living. Unlike the Pharisees and scribes, he didn't question Jesus in order to test Him. He earnestly valued Jesus' guidance, showing Him considerable respect and reverence (cf. Mark 10:17). And at least by his judgment, he thought he had upheld all the commandments that Jesus listed for him, even the command to love his neighbor. Everything pointed to the fact that this young man had all the qualifications to be an upstanding citizen in the kingdom of God.

But the man himself wasn't satisfied with his obedience, so he asked Jesus yet again to reveal what he was missing. To the man's dismay, Jesus did exactly that. He showed the man the condition of his heart with a simple test. He was given the choice between all the material possessions he had and the eternal life and reward that comes from abandoning everything to follow Jesus. He had the chance to trade his earthly possessions for heavenly wealth and in the process show abundant love by giving generously to the poor. The man, who had persistently asked Jesus for direction, lost heart the moment he heard Jesus' request. It's hard for a rich man to enter God's kingdom, especially when his love for his wealth exceeds his love for God and for others.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The command that Jesus gave to the rich young man was a specific directive to that man alone; He wasn't telling each of us to sell all of our possessions. But is there a possibility that you treasure material things more than the well-being of another person? Test your heart. Could you sell a prized possession and give the proceeds to a compassion ministry that aids the poor? Try it, and trust God to give you treasure in heaven that is far more valuable than anything on earth.

## MARK 9

#### **Mark 9:2-32**

This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him! - Mark 9:7

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

By outward appearance, Frodo Baggins, a hero in J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy, wore ordinary clothing. There seemed to be nothing especially beautiful or strong about his simple outfit.

But in one episode, an attack by goblins showed otherwise. Sure that Frodo has been killed in the battle, his friends pick up his body and make their escape. They are astounded when he says he's fine and asks to be put down. How, they wonder, did he survive? He takes off his shirt and reveals that he's been wearing a 'mithril' coat an especially strong and beautiful sort of silver. The armor had saved his life!

In a small way, Frodo's revelation of his hidden silver armor resembles the revelation of Christ's 'hidden glory' on the Mount of Transfiguration. This event is a key moment for Christ, preparing for Passion Week, and for His 'inner ring' of disciples, overwhelmed by the unveiled divinity of their Teacher.

Where one moment there had stood an ordinary-looking Jewish rabbi, suddenly there is one robed in dazzling white, talking with Moses and Elijah! The disciples are stunned and don't know how to respond (which doesn't prevent Peter from speaking!). Later, Peter, Mark's source, will cite this experience directly as evidence for his apostleship (2 Peter 1:16-18).

God's voice and approving words recall Jesus' baptism at the beginning of Mark (1:11) this is another testimony or validation by the Father of the Son's claims to spiritual authority. They also recall the cloud of His glory that guided the Israelites during the Exodus (see Exodus 13:21). The miracle following, of the demon-possessed boy at the bottom of the mountain, further proclaims Jesus' divine identity. Jesus is Lord!

Paradoxically, He chooses this time to make a second explicit prediction of His suffering, death, and resurrection (Mark 9:31). The disciples may not have understood, but all the pieces of God's puzzle are coming together.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The Mount of Transfiguration, here at the midpoint of our study of Mark, is a good place to stop and spend some extra time meditating on the person of Christ.

As you've been reading this month, what qualities or characteristics have you seen in Christ's life? What difference has this made in your daily walk with Him? In other words, who is Christ and how has He revealed Himself to you?

To answer these questions, you might write out in your diary or spiritual journal a personal prayer of thanksgiving for all that Jesus means to you. Back on March 3rd, we suggested you keep a running list of His attributes as you read through Mark if you've been doing that, you can use your list to help you write your prayer.

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#### Mark 9:2

One day an Austrian peasant spotted three men in hunting garb. Thinking they looked tired, he offered them a ride in his cart. The men accepted and struck up a conversation. "Who are you?" the driver asked one of the passengers.

"I'm the king of Saxony," was the reply. The peasant nodded and asked the next man the same question.

"The king of Bavaria," said the second passenger.

"And you," the peasant went on skeptically to the third passenger, "I suppose you're the emperor of Austria?" The amazing thing is that it was the emperor of Austria! The man was Francis Joseph I, emperor of Austria from 1848-1916. Would that peasant have acted differently if he had known that we was addressing his sovereign? Of course!

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#### Mark 9:2–13 Peter, James, And John See Him Transfigured

The popular song, "I Can Only Imagine," wonders what a person's reaction to entering the glory of the Lord in heaven would really be like. "Surrounded by your glory, what will my heart feel? Will I dance for you, Jesus, or in awe of you be still? Will I stand in your presence or to my knees will I fall? Will I sing hallelujah? Will I be able to speak at all?"

Based on Scripture, Peter would almost certainly be in the dancing, standing, hallelujah-singing camp. At the Transfiguration, Jesus' clothes shined supernaturally white. Elijah and Moses appeared next to Him. A voice, presumably of God the Father Himself, thundered down from the cloud above. The three disciples who had accompanied Jesus as eyewitnesses to this event were greatly frightened. Peter did not know what to say, but that didn't stop him from saying something anyway (vv. 5–6)!

Peter was looking for a way to properly respond to the momentous event taking place before his eyes, but there really was no action on his part required other than to witness it and worship. In fact, Jesus asked them to tell no one until after He rose from the dead, an expression that befuddled the disciples even more than what they had just seen.

The passage ends with a discussion about Elijah, but it probably does not allude to the appearance of Elijah at the Transfiguration so much as the symbolic fulfillment of his role by John the Baptist. Malachi had prophesied that Elijah would prepare the way for the coming of Messiah (Mal. 3:1; 4:5). Jesus affirmed that the work of Elijah had been accomplished (through John the Baptist, despite his humble claims to the contrary, John 1:21).

After seeing Elijah and Moses, the disciples wondered if the prophesied day of the Lord was at hand. The crucial moment of its

introduction was nearly upon them. They were eyewitnesses to a sneak peek of the unveiled glory of God enveloping His beloved Son.

#### Apply the Word

Have you ever had a moment with the Lord that left you speechless? There are aspects of God's glory that leave us grasping for words, because He is higher and more glorious than we can imagine. The Transfiguration was a taste of glory, a promise of the unspeakable joy awaiting us. In the meantime, follow the instruction of the voice of the Father: listen to Jesus! Obeying His commands is the perfect way to anticipate His return..

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#### Mark 9:1-13

We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. - Acts 14:22

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

When Christians talk about having a "mountain-top" experience, they are alluding to the incident described in today's passage. A mountain-top experience is one that is spiritually exhilarating but temporary. Although we might wish to prolong it, sooner or later we must leave the mountain and go down into the "valley."

The mountain-top experience of the Transfiguration as witnessed by Peter, James, and John was really more terrifying than exhilarating. It did not produce a spiritual high so much as a sense of fear and momentary confusion. According to Mark, the event took place six days after Jesus had predicted that the disciples would not taste death before seeing the kingdom of God come with power. Many scholars see the Transfiguration as a fulfillment of that promise.

Jesus' transfiguration did not mark the beginning of His exaltation, but served as a glorious prelude to His suffering. Luke's Gospel reveals that the purpose of the appearance of Elijah and Moses was to discuss the Savior's impending death (Luke 9:31). The priority of Jesus' suffering was further underscored by His command not to make the event public until after His death and resurrection had been accomplished.

Peter's suggestion that the disciples build three shelters seems rather ridiculous to us today, but it may refer to a practice that originated with the Feast of Tabernacles. During this yearly celebration God's people built booths or lived in tents to commemorate Israel's wilderness experience. Peter spoke rashly, unnerved by the presence of these heavenly visitors and the transformed Christ.

Peter's uncertainty about how the disciples should respond to such an experience was only momentary. His suggestion was soon corrected by words from God's own mouth that served as both a testimony and a divine command. The moment did not call for the construction of a new tabernacle but for faith and obedience. Jesus' disciples were given a vision of Christ's glory, but it was only a momentary glimpse. Their mission, like that of their Savior, was a path to glory by way of suffering.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The church will face many hardships before our Lord returns in glory. The hymn "For All the Saints" describes how a vision of the glory yet to come can help the church face this daily struggle: And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long, / steals on the ear the distant triumph song, / and hearts are brave again, and arms are strong. / Alleluia, Alleluia!

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#### Mark 9:14–29 Petition: Jesus Heals the Possessed Boy

Everything is possible for one who believes. Mark 9:23

The number of Americans who claim a religious affiliation has declined in the last several years, but the number of those who say they believe in miracles has increased at the same time. Four in five Americans now believe miracles definitely or probably occur. We don't have social surveys to tell us how many of the people in Jesus' place and time believed in miracles, but it's clear many had a keen sense of supernatural involvement in their lives. In today's Scripture we read an interesting story of human hope in supernatural power. This father took his possessed son to the disciples in order to have him exorcised.

When Jesus came upon the disciples and the assembled crowd, they were arguing. It seemed that the disciples had been unable to perform the miracle and the crowd had its doubts. Jesus rebuked the crowd saying, "Everything is possible for one who believes" (v. 23).

Jesus' words are actually a little ambiguous. Is Jesus heralding the importance of the faith of the one who prays, or asserting His own wonderworking power? Scholars argue that the logic of the passage confirms the second interpretation, but if so, the father misunderstood Jesus' words and responded: "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (v. 24).

At best, the father's faith was muddled. But this highlights a consistent lesson about petitionary prayer: Jesus is not limited by the faith of those who seek Him. He is free to exercise His power wherever and whenever He pleases, whether within or without the confines of another's convictions. Yes, He asks for the faith of those who come to Him with their requests; yes, He responds to faith. But the quality of our faith is not a prerequisite for His action. In other words, it's not about you. It's about Him.

Apply the Word

Jesus' miraculous healing of the possessed boy should comfort those who resonate with the father: "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" At times, Jesus is moved to action by even the most hesitant request born of the most marginal faith. Spend a few moments thanking God for His mercy toward those who wrestle with faith.

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### **Mark 9:30-50**

Whoever is not against us is for us. - Mark 9:40

#### **TODAY IN THE WORD**

How do you help someone you love face the inevitability of your own death? An aging parent or terminally ill spouse faces this difficult challenge. Jesus also faced it as He moved into the final stage of His ministry. In order to prepare the disciples for His impending death, Jesus passed through Galilee in secret. During the journey He warned His disciples that He would be betrayed, killed, and raised from the dead. This was the second time Jesus had publicly announced to the disciples that He would be crucified.

Although Jesus spoke plainly about His fate, the disciples were unable to understand His meaning. Perhaps they did not want to accept the possibility that the one they looked to as their Messiah would have to suffer. Although they could have asked Christ to clear up the confusion, they kept their reservations to themselves, choosing instead to debate with one another about which of them was the greatest disciple. Before the disciples would be prepared to face Christ's death, it was necessary that they recognize its significance.

Jesus' death on the cross was a sacrifice. It is the only payment that God accepts for sin. His death was also a model. Those who have accepted Christ as their Savior must take Him as their example. Those who see Christ only as a sacrifice may treat His death as if it were "fire insurance," enjoying its benefits without accepting the responsibility that comes with being a follower of Christ. Those who regard Christ only as an example truly fail to recognize their need for the grace of the cross and its power to transform the believer.

As Jesus prepared His followers for ministry after the cross, He focused on the importance of humility. Those who recognize Christ as Savior and take Him as their example will seek to serve rather than be served. The Christian life is not a beauty contest in which believers compete against one another for a crown. Those who are most prominent in the kingdom are those who are most interested in serving others.

#### **TODAY ALONG THE WAY**

It is sometimes hard to rejoice over someone else's success. This is just as true in the church as it is anywhere else. We are often like the disciples, striving for recognition and jealous of those who seem to enjoy more success than we do.

Apply the power of the cross to this tendency by praying for a church other than your own today. Ask God to help it grow and to strengthen its ministries. Pray that the gospel would be clearly proclaimed through its preaching and that the presence of God would be evident in its services.

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### **Mark 9:33-50**

Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other. - Mark 9:50

#### **TODAY IN THE WORD**

In the Moody Press book *Little Minds With Big Hearts*, editor Ramona Cramer Tucker collects amusing stories submitted by Christian moms to the 'Heart to Heart' page of *Today's Christian Woman* magazine.

One child asked his mother if he could stop at the library to borrow the Lamb's Book of Life. Another prayed, 'Dear God, thank you for giving us our sins.' Still another sang, 'Goats tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born!' And one little girl told a friend, 'Only God has crayons big enough to make rainbows.'

Refreshing and innocent, children often give us a new perspective on Christian truths we may have known for years. This spirit of

childlike humility is praised by Jesus in today's reading.

This attitude is contrasted with that of the disciples. Instead of learning from the humble obedience of their Master (as shown in His willingness to suffer and die, 9:31), they debate about who among them will be the greatest in God's kingdom. Jesus uses a child to illustrate that in His kingdom, the first must be last (v. 35), a total reversal of the world's principles.

True greatness is found in humility. What's at stake? Our very relationship with Christ (v. 37)!

True righteousness is also on Jesus' teaching agenda. It includes compassion (v. 41) and an acute consciousness of sin. We should neither sin nor cause others to sin. Jesus uses forceful hyperboles 'drowning by millstone,' cutting off body parts to illustrate the serious nature of sin, and how much God hates it. Again, our eternal destiny is at stake will we 'enter life' or 'go into hell'? The metaphor of salt, a spice and a preservative, also describes true righteousness (v. 50; cf. Matthew 5:13).

As we continue in Mark down the 'road to the Cross,' we can see true greatness and true righteousness most clearly in the person of Christ Himself.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

King David wrote: 'I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgression to the Lord' and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found' (Psalm 32:5-6).

Why not follow David's example today? Especially in light of Jesus' teaching regarding the seriousness of sin (Mark 9:42-47), we need to have regular times of confessing our sin to Him. He has promised to forgive us (1 John 1:9)!

You might end your prayer of confession with these words from another psalm: 'Turn to me and have mercy on me, as you always do to those who love your name. Direct my footsteps according to your word; let no sin rule over me' (Psalm 119:132-133).

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#### **Mark 9:33–50 How can you make it salty again?**

Be at peace with each other. Mark 9:50

Americans love ranking things—from the AP poll of college sports teams to U.S.News's college rankings to Yelp restaurant reviews to BuzzFeed lists, we love to see who's #1. But it is a problem when we try to apply rankings in the church. Who is the greatest preacher of all time? Who has the best church? Where can you find the greatest choir or the shortest sermons? Who has a top-ten children's ministry?

The disciples weren't immune to this mentality. In our text today, they argued among themselves about who was the greatest. Jesus responded that this way of thinking was deadly for discipleship.

The disciples wanted to be the greatest; Jesus said that welcoming a little child was more important than seeking status (vv. 35–37). They wanted to claim the credit for impressive miracles, but Jesus said that even offering a cup of water to someone in His name was an act of service (vv. 38–41). They sought status for their religious credentials, but Jesus said that it was better to be blind or crippled and be faithful to God (vv. 42–48).

Jesus' question at the end of this passage is a rhetorical device intended to make readers attentive to His point. "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again?" (v. 50). Without its saltiness, salt is worthless.

What is this spiritual saltiness that Jesus is referring to? He continues, "Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other." Competition about who was the greatest was counterproductive to a "salty," grace-filled witness to a watching world about the joy of following Jesus. Discipleship means renouncing claims of status and recognition in order to follow the example of Christ to serve "one of these little ones" with even a cup of cold water.

#### Apply the Word

Over forty Bible verses mention salt! Jesus describes His followers as the salt of the earth (Matt. 5:13), and the apostle Paul encourages believers to "Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone" (Col. 4:6). Put one of these verses on a notecard by your saltshaker to remind you to be a "salty" witness for Jesus.

## MARK 10

### Mark 10:1-12



What God has joined together, let man not separate. - Mark 10:9

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

'I have dreamed of this day many times,' wrote Alice Si on July 11, 1998, the day of her marriage to Johann Malmberg. 'I have cried with joy at my friends' weddings. It touches me so much when I witness the wonderful union God has brought between a man and a woman, it's hard to believe that it's now my turn.'

In her wedding program, Alice shared her testimony and spoke of how God had brought her and Johann together: 'God drew us closer as we worshipped Him together. It was His love that connected our hearts and united us together and on Him we build our marriage.'

As they joined their lives, Alice and Johann clearly understood that God must be the foundation for their relationship. After all, He designed marriage!

Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce in today's reading is prompted by another 'test question' from the Pharisees. Perhaps the Pharisees are hoping to trap Jesus on the same issue that had gotten John the Baptist into trouble with Herod.

Historically, Moses had permitted divorce, but Jesus authoritatively says this was only due to the Israelites' hard hearts. Quoting Genesis 1:27 and 2:24, Jesus demonstrates that God's plan is one man-one woman for life. There is a mystical union of two bodies and two souls into 'one flesh' that should not be broken.

The marriage covenant is sacred before God, which is why today's verse is often quoted in Christian wedding ceremonies. Ecclesiastes 4:12 is often cited as well: 'A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.' Because He designed marriage, God is the necessary 'third partner' for every husband and wife.

To His disciples, Jesus makes explicit the implications of this teaching divorce and remarriage are nothing short of adultery (Mark 10:11-12). This is a hard teaching, quite different from the attitudes of modern Western societies, but God takes His commands concerning marriage seriously. So should we!

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

That God has an ideal and a plan for marriage is abundantly clear in this passage. Here are several ideas for following up on today's devotional:

- (1) Plan a special time with your spouse in the near future. Pick a setting where the two of you can have privacy (not a ballgame, in other words). Get a baby-sitter for the kids. Don't be stingy with time or money. Enjoy God's gift of marriage!
- (2) Do additional Bible study on marriage and family relationships. Start where Jesus did with the creation narrative (Genesis 1-2). And don't neglect Paul's teachings, for example, Ephesians 5:22-6:4. How do you see yourself applying what you learn?
- (3) If you are single, consider talking with older believers about their marriage. What wisdom or life-experience do they have to share?

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#### **Mark 10:1-16**

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. - Genesis 2:24

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

In his book *Every Second Counts*, six-time Tour de France winner Lance Armstrong laments that he did not work as hard on his marriage as he did on his racing career: "All I knew was that in trying to do everything, we'd forgotten to do the most important thing," he writes. "We forgot to be married. People warn you that marriage is hard work, but you don't listen. You talk about the pretty bridesmaids' dresses, but you don't talk about what happens next; about how difficult it will be to stay or to rebuild."

LArmstrong is not alone in his sad discovery. Recent surveys indicate that nearly half of all marriages today will end in divorce. In addition to the obvious toll such a trend takes on the partners in the relationship, there is a tremendous cost to the children of couples who seek divorce.

While many Christians are concerned today that recent efforts to legalize gay marriages undermine the family, not enough is said about the threat to the institution of marriage posed by the prevalence of divorce among heterosexuals. Jesus recognized the danger and came to restore marriage and the family to God's original intent through His teaching.

Some of the rabbis of Jesus' day taught that a husband could divorce his wife for any reason. Others believed that immorality was the only ground for divorce. A woman who was sent away by her husband could not challenge the divorce and was often reduced to poverty. According to Jesus, God's intent is that marriage last for a lifetime. A divorce, while valid in the civil court, may not necessarily be valid in the eyes of God.

Jesus showed a similar concern for children. Although Scripture taught that children were a blessing from the Lord, they did not enjoy much status in Jesus' day. It was not uncommon for unwanted children to be abandoned. Christ's disciples showed little interest in the children being brought to Jesus for blessing and even seemed to regard them as something of a nuisance. Jesus indicated that children were welcome in the kingdom. He was as eager to bless them as their parents were to have them blessed.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If recent statistics are accurate, it is likely that you either have been touched by divorce or know someone who has. You may be a child of divorced parents or have been divorced yourself. It is even possible that as you examine Jesus' teaching about the family, you realize that you have broken God's pattern. If so, remember that Christ offers forgiveness. Confess your sin and commit yourself to following His principles without reservation. He will not turn you away.

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#### **Mark 10:13-31**

I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. - Mark 10:15

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

What would it take for a kid from the slums to go to college and become a success? Consider the non-material side of this question.

A sociology professor sent his students to gather case histories of 200 young boys from the Baltimore slums. Twenty-five years later, another professor had his students follow up on the earlier study. Amazingly, they found that 176 of the 200 had achieved successful careers as lawyers, doctors, and businessmen. How? Each explained, 'There was a teacher.'

So the professor sought out the teacher and asked, 'What was your secret?'

She replied, 'It's really very simple. I loved those boys.'

For that teacher, reward was not found in a monthly paycheck, but in seeing her students learn and grow. The world judges success by material standards, but she lived by different rules.

This is the same lesson Jesus teaches in today's reading. A child may enter the kingdom, but a rich young ruler cannot. God's rules are different!

Once again, Jesus holds up a child as an example (see 9:35-37). This is a specific rebuke to His disciples, who had been 'protecting' their Teacher's valuable time. Jesus rearranges their idea of 'valuable' with the startling assertion found in today's verse.

This principle is quickly seen in a rich young ruler with a question about eternal life. His question is sincere, as is his claim to have followed the Ten Commandments throughout his life.

Lovingly, Jesus looks into this man's heart and cuts straight to the real issue. He finds that there is something more precious to this man than eternal life his material possessions. So Jesus tells him to go and sell everything and give the money to the poor. The man goes away sad, for his heart's treasure is on earth (cf. Matthew 6:19-21).

On the other hand, those whose hearts are centered on heaven will be amply rewarded for their sacrifices here on earth (Mark 10:29-31).

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

As we are seeing, Jesus often seized 'chance meetings' with people and turned them into 'teachable moments.' His 'people encounters' became lessons in the disciples' training program.

Openness and teachability are key qualities for followers of Christ today, as well. So we urge you this week to look for and seize a teachable moment in your child's life, a friend's life, or your own life. That is, in at least one 'people encounter' this week, consciously teach or learn a spiritual lesson from what is said or done. Be sure to base the lesson upon Scripture!

This is one way to 'spur one another on toward love and good deeds' (Hebrews 10:24).

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## **Mark 10:17–22** Keeping by Letting Go: A Rich Man

He went away sad, because he had great wealth. Mark 10:22

In an Indian village, one naughty monkey would regularly plunder food from the home of a family. Entering through windows and other necessary openings, he would help himself to choice morsels. Though they tried to capture him, the family had been unsuccessful. One day—after attempting to sneak a sweet treat herself!—the youngest daughter got an idea. Finding a heavy glass jar with a narrow neck, she placed several peanuts inside before her family left for the day. When they returned that evening, they found a frustrated monkey, grasping three peanuts, unable to extricate his clenched paw from the jar. Had he released the nuts, he could have scampered off to freedom. Holding them tightly, he remained bound.

The wealthy man who fell on his knees before Jesus was searching for redemption. He wanted to inherit eternal life. When he asserted that he had kept the commandments since he was a boy, Jesus identified the one thing that the man lacked. “Go,” Jesus instructed, “sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (v. 21). Jesus knew that for the man to be truly free, he had to unclench his deathgrip on all that he owned. Sadly, the immediate lure of possessions appealed more than the promise of eternal life. Sharing the monkey’s dilemma, he chose peanuts over true freedom.

To be clear, Jesus had no intention of trapping the man! His heart for the people He encountered was for them to release their grip on anything that would keep them bound and keep them from Him. Jesus knew what each person needed—whether to pick up their mat, make restitution, relinquish possessions, or stay in a hometown as a witness to His salvation.

### Apply the Word

Peanuts and possessions are not inherently evil—unless they are keeping us away from following Christ. For some, it will mean letting go of material wealth; for others, relinquishing the dream of a family that looks a certain way or having a certain level of safety and security. Is there anything to which you’re holding more tightly than to Jesus?.

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## **Mark 10:17-31**

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith. - Ephesians 2:8

### TODAY IN THE WORD

In his book *Holiness by Grace*, Bryan Chapell recounts the old tale of a man who died and met the angel Gabriel at the gates of heaven. Gabriel tells the man that each of the good things he has done will be assigned a certain number of points and that he needs a hundred points to enter heaven.

The man had been faithfully married to the same woman for fifty years, but that was worth only three points. When he said he had attended church all his life, Gabriel told him that it was worth one point. His work with the homeless was worth two points. When the man’s points were tallied, he became desperate. “At this rate the only way I will get to heaven is by the grace of God,” he cried. “Come on in,” said Gabriel.

The man in today’s Scripture passage was troubled by the same dilemma. As he described his own track record of personal goodness, Jesus informed him that he still fell short of mark. The man was correct to think that righteousness was a prerequisite to obtaining eternal life—but he was wrong to believe that his own good works would make him righteous.

According to Luke’s account of this event, the man was a “ruler” (Luke 18:18). The Greek term is broad and may mean that he was an official in the local synagogue or a member of the Sanhedrin. According to Matthew 19:22, he was a “young man.” He was also wealthy. Many of the Jews of Jesus’ day would have considered the possession of this kind of wealth and prestige at such a young age to be an indicator of personal righteousness. They believed that God rewards good people with material blessing and honor. In fact, Jesus’ own disciples seem to have held this view (v. 24).

Although we cannot earn eternal life, there is a cost to following Jesus. Christ calls His disciples to radical trust and complete devotion. Those who have left all to follow Him will find that they have lost nothing.

### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If eternal life is to be gained on the basis of human effort, the very best of us would fall short. What are you relying on as the basis for your hope of eternal life? Church attendance, good morals, generosity, and kindness are all important aspects of living the Christian life—but none of these is sufficient to gain entrance to heaven. If you have never placed your faith in Jesus Christ as the one who provides eternal life as a free gift, do so today.

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## **Mark 10:32-45 Daniel 7:13-14;**

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. - Mark 10:45

### TODAY IN THE WORD

In 1855, J. Hudson Taylor did a radical thing--he adopted traditional Chinese dress as he ministered through China. Few had taken such a bold step prior to this time. But Taylor knew that if he were to be successful in reaching souls in the isolated, inland parts of China, he must speak the language, dress in traditional clothing, and make every attempt possible to adopt local customs. In short, Taylor knew that he had to become as much like those to whom he ministered as possible. His thinking was clearly inspired: the work of the China Inland Mission was enormously effective in reaching China with the love of Christ.

In God's infinite love and mercy, He also knew that to redeem His people, He had to become like them. Perhaps this is why Jesus' preferred title for Himself was "the Son of Man." In Semitic languages, this term was used idiomatically for humanity in general or for a particular individual. Think back to our study in Philippians 2 (see December 9). Jesus was "found in appearance as a man" (v. Cool. In Daniel's vision, he said that "one like a son of man" appeared before him (Dan. 7:13). Both verses affirm the fully-human nature of our Lord.

It is significant, however, that Jesus always referred to Himself as the Son of Man, not a Son of Man. Jesus is not merely a human being--He is the human being--the perfect representation of God's plan for humanity. Only in Jesus Christ do we behold humanity fully restored from the fall.

It's not surprising that this perfect human being should be given "authority, glory, and sovereign power" and receive the worship of all peoples and nations (Dan. 7:14).

### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

What would it be like if our Savior had not been able to speak our language?.

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## **Mark 10:32-52**

Even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. - Mark 10:45

### TODAY IN THE WORD

In his classic devotional *My Utmost for His Highest*, Oswald Chambers remarks about servanthood:

'If we are devoted to the cause of humanity, we shall soon be crushed and broken-hearted, for we shall often meet with more ingratitude from men than we would from a dog; but if our motive is to love God, no ingratitude can hinder us from serving our fellow men... [N]o matter how men may treat me, they will never treat me with the spite and hatred with which I treated Jesus Christ. When we realize that Jesus Christ has served us to the end of our meanness, our selfishness, and sin, nothing that we meet with from others can exhaust our determination to serve men for His sake.'

Christ exemplifies perfectly the ideal of servanthood, an ideal His disciples obviously hadn't grasped yet. On this topic, today's reading centers around an attitude contrast between Jesus and His disciples.

Jesus, for the third time in Mark, speaks directly of His suffering, death and resurrection (vv. 33-34). To Him, this is a natural follow-up to yesterday's teaching on sacrifice and servanthood (vv. 29-31). Those remarks had stirred astonishment and fear, reactions we've seen all too often in this Gospel, and no doubt His listeners responded similarly to His Passion prediction.

At any rate, James and John certainly didn't get the point! They approach Jesus privately to request seats of honor in His kingdom (cf. 9:33-37). Using images of baptism and a cup, He responds that they will suffer for His Name (Mark 10:39) rather different from what they wanted to hear!

Jesus tries to explain His meaning to all the disciples. The world says that power is for ruling, for lording it over others. But in God's economy, power is for serving (vv. 42-44). If we want 'seats of honor' in His kingdom, in this as in all things we must imitate Christ!

### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We have reached a crucial moment in the Gospel of Mark. Passion Week is about to begin. Jesus will enter Jerusalem in triumph... and be hanging on a cross by the end of the week. As we approach the events at the core of salvation and of our faith, it's time to take a deep spiritual breath.

Take this time of respite to thumb back through 'Today Along the Way' sections from earlier this month. Is there one you intended to

do but haven't yet? Is the Holy Spirit leading you to do one that you'd skipped?

It will certainly help your spiritual walk!

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### **Mark 10:32-45**

If we endure, we will also reign with him. - 2 Timothy 2:12

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

When Alexander the Great captured the Indian king Porus, he asked the defeated monarch how he would like to be treated. Porus replied, "Like a king." Alexander asked the ruler if he had any additional requests. Porus replied that he did not, "for everything is comprehended in the word 'king.'" Alexander was so impressed with this reply that he restored Porus's lands to him.

James and John shared a similar desire to be treated like kings. But instead of waiting to be asked, they took their request to Christ. Actually, according to Matthew's Gospel, it was the mother of the two sons of Zebedee who made the initial request that the two brothers be granted a seat on Jesus' right and left hands (Matt. 20:20). It was considered an honor to be seated at someone's right hand. To sit on the right and the left suggests an even greater honor. Perhaps the two envisioned a kind of co-regency with Christ. Furthermore, their naïve response to Jesus' probing question suggests that they believed they were prepared for the task.

Although they were warned that the cross must come before the crown, the two sons of Zebedee glibly overestimated their ability to face the storm that was about to engulf the Savior and His disciples. The places at Jesus' right and left hands were not to be their destiny, but they would eventually reign with Christ.

This is true of every believer. In Romans 8:17 the apostle Paul promises: "Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory." There is glory promised to those who follow Jesus, but it is a glory that can only be attained by humility. Those who would share in the glory of Christ must first embrace Him as Lord and Savior and then take up the cross and follow after Him.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

James and John were not the only ones who struggled with self-centered ambition. The reaction of the other ten disciples indicates that the desire for pre-eminence is a universal temptation.

One way to fight against it is to practice the spiritual discipline of secrecy. Find ways to serve others without drawing attention to yourself. Write an anonymous note of encouragement or quietly perform a task in the church that often goes undone. Pray, give, or serve in secret, trusting that the One who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

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### **Mark 10:35-45**

The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. - Mark 10:45

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

According to author Lyle Dorsett in *A Passion for Souls*, one of the remarkable facets of Dwight Moody's ministry was his association with numerous men and women whose education, refinement, and qualifications for ministry far outdistanced his own. Moody was poorly educated, rough around the edges, and the product of a life of grinding poverty. But instead of being intimidated by his educated friends, or feeling the need to elevate himself, Moody was at ease around them and often humbly recognized their superior training and gifts. Moody did not let pride interfere with his passion for souls.

The original disciples of Jesus were still learning the lesson of humility when the events of today's reading took place. Because we are human too, we can understand the request that James and John made for places of glory and honor in God's kingdom. As many Bible teachers have pointed out, the other ten disciples were probably mad because they hadn't thought of it first.

The two brothers did not know what they were asking for. Jesus indicated that identifying with Him involved the "cup" of suffering like the cup He would drink in the Garden of Geth-semane (Mark 14:36), and a "baptism" in the fires of suffering and adversity. Although James and John quickly agreed that they were up to the test, Jesus set their request aside.

Then He turned to the real issue—the new kind of leadership that should mark His people. We call it servant leadership, an appropriate title for the kind of leadership in which the leader voluntarily becomes the "slave of all" (v. 44).

At this point, Jesus made another defining statement about His life and ministry (today's verse). The reason servant leadership is the

path to greatness in His kingdom is that He is the Supreme Leader and Lord who came not to flaunt His authority and lord it over people, but to die as a sacrifice for sinners.

We know enough about human styles of leadership to know that someone who is on an ego-driven "power trip" is not likely to notice or care about the needs of others, much less sacrifice that power to meet those needs. But things are supposed to be different for Jesus' disciples.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The application of today's study to our lives pretty well suggests itself. Are we busy grabbing power and authority, or are we humbly serving others?

One way to measure your "servant quotient" is to ask yourself how you relate to people who could be intimidating to you from a human perspective. Do you feel the need to elevate yourself at their expense, or are you content to serve alongside them--or even serve them--if that's where God places you?.

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#### **Mark 10:45 Luke 9:51-56**

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

Mark Wellman knows the importance of determination. Paralyzed from the waist down in a mountain-climbing accident, the young Wellman felt like giving up on life. But then he began working out and discovered that he was especially good at pull-ups. Wellman's upper body gained tremendous strength—so much so that six years after his accident, he was ready for a new challenge. Using special equipment that allowed him to pull himself up a fixed rope, Wellman climbed the 3,000-foot peak of "El Capitan" mountain in Yosemite National Park.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Mark indicates that Jesus' followers were "astonished" by His determination as He headed for Jerusalem (Mark 10:32). Accomplishing the Father's will is what energized the Savior, leading Him forward. We can seek to follow Jesus' example by our determination to know and do God's will, both this month and in the new year ahead.

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#### **Mark 10:45 Daniel 7:13-14;**

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. - Mark 10:45

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

In 1855, J. Hudson Taylor did a radical thing--he adopted traditional Chinese dress as he ministered through China. Few had taken such a bold step prior to this time. But Taylor knew that if he were to be successful in reaching souls in the isolated, inland parts of China, he must speak the language, dress in traditional clothing, and make every attempt possible to adopt local customs. In short, Taylor knew that he had to become as much like those to whom he ministered as possible. His thinking was clearly inspired: the work of the China Inland Mission was enormously effective in reaching China with the love of Christ.

In God's infinite love and mercy, He also knew that to redeem His people, He had to become like them. Perhaps this is why Jesus' preferred title for Himself was "the Son of Man." In Semitic languages, this term was used idiomatically for humanity in general or for a particular individual. Think back to our study in Philippians 2 (see December 9). Jesus was "found in appearance as a man" (v. 6). In Daniel's vision, he said that "one like a son of man" appeared before him (Dan. 7:13). Both verses affirm the fully-human nature of our Lord.

It is significant, however, that Jesus always referred to Himself as the Son of Man, not a Son of Man. Jesus is not merely a human being--He is the human being--the perfect representation of God's plan for humanity. Only in Jesus Christ do we behold humanity fully restored from the fall.

It's not surprising that this perfect human being should be given "authority, glory, and sovereign power" and receive the worship of all peoples and nations (Dan. 7:14).

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

What would it be like if our Savior had not been able to speak our language?

## MARK 11

### Mark 11:1-19

Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! - Mark 11:9

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

In the classic holiday film, 'It's A Wonderful Life,' George Bailey is in trouble. A banker, he's misplaced a large sum of money actually, it has been nabbed by his rival, Mr. Potter. Because of his generosity to others, George doesn't have enough money to cover the loss and is in danger of going to jail.

An 'angel' named Clarence shows George all the good he's done and convinces him not to kill himself, but the problem of the money remains. Suddenly the door of the house bangs open in stream the people of the town. Remembering his kindness, they've gathered their money to help George in his time of need. Their dramatic entrance concludes the story in a spirit of joy!

Jesus' dramatic entrance in today's reading also brings joy to many, but a different emotion to the 'businessmen' in the temple. Far from helping others, the vendors and moneylenders were cheating the worshipers.

With the 'triumphal entry' into Jerusalem, Passion Week now begins. Fulfilling the words of Zechariah 9:9, Jesus enters the city riding the colt of a donkey, indicating humility. That it had never been ridden before may signify its dedication to special religious use.

The people, looking for the immediate establishment of Messiah's kingdom, treat Jesus as royalty. They pave his way with cloaks and leafy branches, shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!' (Mark 11:9; cf. Psalm 118:26).

Jesus' first act in Jerusalem is a forceful one He drives commerce out of the temple. Why? The 'businessmen' have turned God's house into a mere marketplace (v. 17; cf. Isaiah 56:7). They exploit the worshipers for profit. The verse mentions 'all nations' because they've set up shop in the court of the Gentiles, the part of the temple open to non-Jews.

What a start to the week! The King has come, and He's making His presence felt!

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem, the crowd shouted words of praise from Psalm 118, which is particularly associated with Passover week. It may have been the hymn sung at the close of the Last Supper (Mark 14:26).

Why not spend some extra time today reflecting on this key psalm? Read through it slowly. 'Chew over' important verses. Meditate on the power of God and the spirit of thanksgiving shown here. Pray some of the words. Ask God what He wants to teach you. Personalize the psalm by praising God for His work in your own life, family, church, and community.

You'll draw closer to God as you imitate Psalm 143:5: 'I remember the days of long ago; I meditate on all your works and consider what your hands have done.'

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### Mark 11:1-26

See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. - Matthew 21:5

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

In his poem about the Triumphal Entry, G. K. Chesterton writes from the point of view of the donkey that carried Christ into Jerusalem. The donkey begins by lamenting his unattractive features—his “monstrous head and sickening cry and ears like errant wings.” The donkey characterizes himself as “the devil's walking parody on all four footed things.” Of all God's creatures he is treated like “the tattered outlaw of the earth,” starved, beaten and ridiculed. But the poem ends on a triumphant note, as the donkey declares: Fools! I also had my hour; / One far fierce hour and sweet; / There was a shout about my ears, / And Palms about my feet!

Chesterton's poem captures the ironic beauty of Christ's entry into Jerusalem. After attempting to keep a low profile, the Triumphal Entry marked Jesus' public declaration to Israel that He had come as their Messiah.

Zechariah 9:9, a prophecy viewed as messianic by Jesus' contemporaries, predicted that Israel's future king would come “righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” The action of the crowd in spreading garments and palm branches in the road before Christ reflected the kind of homage usually paid to royalty (cf. 2 Kings 9:13). As the multitude

cheered, they quoted Psalm 118:26, one of the Hallel Psalms usually sung during the Feast of Tabernacles and at Passover. The same crowd that hailed Jesus as king on this Sunday would call for His crucifixion a few days later.

Commentator C. E. B. Cranfield notes that Jesus intended to fulfill Zechariah's prophecy, "but to do so in circumstances so paradoxical as to make the meaning of his action hidden. It was a veiled assertion of his Messiahship." Our Lord did not enter Jerusalem like a conquering king but as a lowly servant. He did not ride on a war horse but on a borrowed donkey. His royal procession was not made up of lords and nobles but of fishermen, publicans, and sinners. He did not come to claim a crown of gold and a royal throne but a crown of thorns and a cross.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The hymn "All Glory, Laud and Honor" by Theodulph of Orleans and translated by John Neal celebrates Christ's Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem and is usually sung only on Palm Sunday. It describes Jesus as the redeemer king who is worthy of our praise. Sing or read the words to this great hymn of worship as a way of acknowledging Christ's kingship over your life. How can you acknowledge the authority of Christ in the home and at work today?

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#### **Mark 11:1–11** The Crowd At Jerusalem Magnifies Him

The ministry of Christ was filled with controversy. For every moment of praise and thankfulness there was a repercussion of anger and rejection. At no time was the controversy more pronounced than in the week of His Passion, culminating in His crucifixion. The Triumphant Entry stands out as one of those rare moments when all the details recorded in a single story are absolutely perfect and positive and trouble-free. It didn't last long, but this was just right.

It started with Jesus approaching Jerusalem. He gave two disciples a mission, and they followed it without incident. They found the colt that would be used to fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9: "See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

What a prophecy to fulfill! Fittingly, the crowds who spontaneously celebrated His entrance into Jerusalem shouted, "Hosanna!" which means "Save!" The King was celebrated just as He deserved as He made His way into the temple. His path was paved with their cloaks and with branches. All of this love, all of this honor, all of this joyous celebration for Messiah ... and it would all change soon.

For one moment before the popular opinion reversed, Jesus was worshiped as King. The eyewitnesses, had their experience in those days ended on that high note, would have the happiest of stories to share. But the road mapped out for Jesus didn't end at the Triumphant Entry. First, it would have to lead Him to the cross.

Jesus could have decided that His mission on earth was over after the Triumphant Entry. He could have announced to His Father that the climactic moment had occurred—the people hailed Him as Messiah! Surely His work on earth was done! But Jesus was obedient and trusted God to deliver and sustain Him through the dark days that would follow this bright path of palm branches and praise.

#### Apply the Word

As we approach this weekend, think about how you can dedicate these next few days to the worship of Jesus, unencumbered by any entanglements or distractions. Even though we're still over a week away from Palm Sunday, prepare your heart for worship now. Commit your thoughts throughout the weekend to celebrating Jesus as the King of kings and praise Him for His power to save!

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#### **Mark 11:12-25**

He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. - John 1:11

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

Odysseus has been away for twenty years. When he finally returns home to Ithaca, dressed as a beggar, no one but his dog recognizes him. Worse, he finds his house in disarray, a band of men competing for his wife, and the loyalties of some servants wandering. Little do they know that a day of judgment has arrived.

In today's reading, the Creator of trees, the Lord of the Temple, comes to His own creatures and finds them straying. The tree is without fruit; the Temple is without reverence.

Note Jesus' two different responses to His creatures' unreadiness. When hungry Jesus finds the fig tree fruitless, He curses it (v. 14). It doesn't get a second chance to bear fruit, but withers from the roots. The money changers and worshipers in the Temple, however, do get a second chance. Jesus rebukes them by throwing over their tables, but He also teaches them from the Scriptures



(v. 17). His actions prune. He cuts away weeds that choke out true worship and gives those with ears to hear a second chance to bear good fruit.

Jesus' actions elicit several responses: the religious leaders, who are afraid, plot His death; the crowds stand amazed (v. 18). The disciples, on the other hand, accept Jesus' authority over the Temple, but they show surprise at Jesus' authority over nature. They think He should be surprised, too: "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!" (v. 21).

The fig tree had a different response altogether. Unlike humans, it wasn't surprised at Jesus' authority; it recognized Him as its Maker. Its roots heard His voice saying, "I came and you weren't ready for me: bear no more fruit." Its withering reflects not only punishment (since its purpose, as well as ours, is to bear fruit), but also unwavering obedience to its great Creator.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

This passage gives us these lessons in prayer: have faith in God; believe, do not doubt, that God will act; forgive others. This last command also appears in the Lord's Prayer. Jesus stressed the importance of forgiveness for effective prayer. As a sign of obedience, forgiveness fosters humility before God and belief in God's authority to judge and to forgive us. As you pray today, ask God to reveal what you "hold against anyone" (v. 25) and release it to Him, forgiving the other person. Make a point to pray for the well-being of that person this week.

## MARK 12

### Mark 11:20-12:12

The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone. - Mark 12:10

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

When pioneer missionary Hudson Taylor started the China Inland Mission (CIM), he decided not to make any public appeals for funds. Among other reasons, he believed this policy would be an example that God provides for those who obey Him. Hudson's faith was stretched many times in this area, yet he stood by his conviction and God always supplied.

At one point, donations had decreased due to political controversy between China and England. Just prior to this, God had spurred George Muller, founder of orphanages, to increase his support for the work in China. He sent a letter and eleven checks one for each of the CIM missionaries whom he didn't already support. This encouraging letter arrived in China at precisely the moment when money was most desperately needed!

Hudson Taylor knew a truth found in today's reading: the prayer of faith is always granted. That's the lesson of the fig tree, an episode actually started in yesterday's reading (vv. 12-14, 20-25). When we pray, we must come open to God. That's faith, which includes total submission to the will of God (cf. 14:36). We must also come open to people. That's forgiveness, a desire to treat others as God treats us (cf. Matt. 5:23-24).

On this day, Jesus is challenged by the religious leaders. Their traps and tests, their fear and hatred, all come to a head in the question, 'By what authority are you doing these things?' (Mark 11:28). God's time for a direct answer has not yet come, so Jesus counters with a question about John the Baptist. Afraid to answer, the Pharisees let the issue drop.

In the parable of the tenants, Jesus reveals the leaders' attitudes (12:12). They don't want to acknowledge their rightful ruler, God; instead they are selfish and rebellious. The parable may also be interpreted as the history of Israel (cf. Isa. 5:1-2) the nation persecuted the prophets, and soon it will kill the Son of God Himself. But there's good news death will not be able to defeat Him (Mark 12:10-11)!

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

What Bible study tools do you currently use or own? If you don't already have one, we recommend you obtain a 'harmony' of the Gospels. This book takes all four Gospels and places the life of Christ in chronological order, with parallel passages side by side. In other words, you can read the whole story straight through!

A study Bible is likely to have a 'harmony' with outline and references only; a full 'harmony' has complete passages. As we continue to progress through Passion Week in Mark, you may be interested in tracking the other Gospels' narratives of the same week. As you familiarize yourself with this valuable tool, our prayer is that you become a skilled handler of God's Word (2 Tim. 2:15).

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. - Mark 12:30

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

Exams are an unavoidable part of students' lives. There are the SAT and ACT for college entrance, the GRE and others for graduate school, and the TOEFL for foreign students, besides typical weeks of final exams at the ends of semesters. Ideally, such exams serve as objective criteria for admissions or grading, or as measures of achievement or progress in a particular field of study.

Students and teachers know, though, that this is not always the case. Some students 'test well,' higher than their true knowledge or ability, while some teachers have trouble creating and grading exams in ways that accomplish those ideal purposes.

In today's reading Jesus is given an aggressive 'final exam' by a group out to see him fail, the Pharisees, but He passes with flying colors! In His final teachings, Jesus addresses several different subjects.

First, should the Jews pay taxes to the Romans? This is a politically loaded question, particularly for a possible 'Messiah.' Of course, Jesus sees the trap in the question, and His wise answer amazes everyone (v. 17).

Second, what about marriage in the afterlife? The Sadducees, who don't even believe in resurrection, pose this question as a ridiculous 'brain teaser.' Jesus responds that marriage doesn't exist in heaven, then challenges their disbelief. God is the God of the living (v. 27)!

Third, what is the greatest commandment? This question seems motivated by sincere admiration for how well Jesus has answered the other challenges. He sums up the entire Mosaic law in the principles of loving and worshipping God, and loving our neighbors (vv. 29-31).

The 'test' is over no one dares ask any more questions. Now Jesus takes the offensive, proving the eternity of the Christ (from Ps. 110:1) and condemning the leaders for hypocrisy, injustice, and selfishness. By contrast, the widow who gives her last pennies to God (Mark 12:41-44) lives by total faith!

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Throughout Mark, we have seen the pride and hypocrisy of the Jewish religious leaders in response to Jesus, and in today's reading He condemns them in very strong language. The Pharisees demonstrate the opposite of the 'servant principle' that Christ teaches His disciples (Mark 9:35).

This week, we encourage you to act like a disciple, not a Pharisee. How? Search out and do a concrete act of service for another person. Give a gift of your time, money, or energy to someone as a special expression of God's love through you. Don't seek human credit for your action keep it between you and the Lord. He sees everything, knows your heart, and will reward you for your obedience!

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#### **Mark 12:28-44**

Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. - John 17:17

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

According to public opinion polls, car salesmen, television and radio personalities, and politicians all rank in the top ten least trusted professions. Certainly not everyone in these professions is dishonest—but the nature of the job means that it is very tempting not to tell the truth. In fact, being honest might cost you a sale, a sponsor, a viewer, or a vote.

Those who tell the truth in any profession or area of life may face negative consequences. That was especially true in Jesus' life and ministry. The religious leaders of Christ's day frequently did not appreciate what He had to say about their attitudes and practices.

Mark 11:27-12:44 describes a series of confrontations between Jesus and the religious authorities of His day. The chief priests, the teachers of the law, elders, Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians are all mentioned. In other words, Jesus found Himself in conflict with every major religious group of His day. Many of these groups—like the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians—exercised political as well as religious influence. This did not deter Jesus from speaking out against them. He was determined to speak the truth no matter what the consequences.

The Pharisees were religious legalists who emphasized scrupulous adherence to the traditions of the rabbis and were widely admired by the populace. The Sadducees who were smaller in number and did not enjoy such popular support, but they had more political influence than the Pharisees. The Sadducees differed theologically from the Pharisees and rejected both the doctrine of the resurrection from the dead and the oral tradition of the rabbis. They only accepted the Law of Moses as Scripture. The Herodians

supported the kingly dynasty of Herod. Although neither a religious group nor a political party, they were keenly interested in the political implications of Jesus' teaching.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It can be hard to take a stand for the truth when dealing with people of influence. We may be tempted to remain silent because we will be stereotyped by speaking out or will be regarded as unpopular by others. We may be nervous about the repercussions, especially if the truth we state contradicts the views of those who exercise authority over us. Don't let the fear of rejection keep you from speaking the truth in love. No matter what the consequences, it is worth it to follow the example of Christ.

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#### **Mark 12:41-44**

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. - Mark 8:34

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

In November 1994, Rachel Saint died in Ecuador at the age of 80. She had lived with the Waodani people since 1959, sharing the gospel with those who had murdered her brother and four other missionaries three years earlier. Her life embodied the famous words of Mother Teresa: "In this life we cannot do great things. We can only do small things with great love." The poor widow of today's passage also embodies these words.

Recall descriptions of the temple in Jerusalem. A Jewish man or woman would enter the temple complex by passing through a large plaza to ascend a massive stairway. The double gate straight ahead led to the outer court or Court of the Gentiles, where the blind and lame visited Jesus and where He drove out merchants (Matt 21:12-16). Gentiles could not continue, but Jews could advance into the Court of Women. This was as far as Jewish women could proceed in the temple. Here Anna prayed (Luke 2:37), and this is where Jesus sat as today's text begins (v. 41).

Jesus watched the crowd with particular attention to the worshippers on opposite ends of the socio-economic scale. He noticed a contrast between many rich people and one poor widow, between large monetary gifts and two small coins worth nearly nothing (v. 42).

Jesus drew the disciples' attention not to the actual amounts of the offerings, but rather to the percentage of the gifts in proportion to each person's resources (v. 43). Jesus commended the woman because she gave sacrificially and in great faith, trusting God to provide for her needs (v. 44).

Financially, legally, and culturally, the poor widow is insignificant, but spiritually she is a heroine. She demonstrated faithful discipleship through her stewardship of material possessions. She knew that all her resources were first of all God's resources and that He cared for her, so she could give a "small thing with great love" by trusting in God.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

"The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it" (Ps. 24:1). All things belong to God and come under His Lordship. How do you steward His resources—the money, time, talents, and creation He has given you? Do you make decisions based on your relationship with Christ and His kingdom? Whether you are rich, somewhere in the middle, or poor, do you give sacrificially and generously to glorify God and share in His kingdom work locally and globally? Take time to prayerfully evaluate your stewardship of God's resources.

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#### **Mark 12:41-44**

The LORD is a God who knows, and by him deeds are weighed. - 1 Samuel 2:3

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

With his usual clarity, A.W. Tozer once said concerning the ministry of giving, In Gods sight, my giving is measured not by how much I give, but by how much I have left after I make my gift. Not by its size is my gift judged, but by how much of me there is in it. No one gives at all until he has given all! No one gives anything acceptable to God until he has first given himself in love and sacrifice.caught Jesus attention. Her sacrificial generosity made a lasting difference because her gift gave Jesus the occasion to state a timeless principle of biblical giving: God weighs the heart of the person making the gift, not the amount being given.s sacrifice takes on even more meaning when set against Jesusteaching, found in the immediately preceding verses. In Mark 12:38-40, He warned the people about the proud and self-important religious leaders of Jerusalem who devour[ed] widows houses (v. 40). treasury and poured in large amounts of money. But Jesus was not impressed, because their giving was little more than a of their total wealth and it was given with a proud heart (vv. 41-42).and influence who made it a habit to take everything they could. But then came a poor widow,

totally powerless and unnoticed by society, to give all she could. No wonder Jesus praised her act of love for God's another piece of context we need to note here. This incident happened early in Holy Week, meaning that Jesus was just a few days away from making the ultimate sacrificial gift by dying on the Cross. He had the right to question the motive of superficial givers because He too, like the widow, was prepared to give everything He had. His act of generosity became a lasting testimony of genuine love for the Lord. It is encouraging to know that the giving of just one person, for example, can make such a difference to the kingdom of God? note spiritually. In addition to the widow in today's text, we can take a cue from the poverty-stricken believers of Macedonia, who gave liberally but first gave themselves to the Lord (2 Corinthians 8:1-14). Following their example today will give us a head start on a great year of giving.

## MARK 13

### Mark 13:1-23

All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. - Mark 13:13

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

The Christian film 'Thief in the Night,' shown in thousands of churches over the years, warns us to be prepared for Christ's return.

In one sequence an alarm clock awakes a husband and wife. The husband goes into the bathroom to shower and shave. Suddenly the wife can't hear the familiar noises as he moves around, only the whine of his electric razor. She goes into the bathroom, but there's no one there. Her husband, a believer, has been 'raptured' and gone to be with Christ. The background music whispers to the wife, 'You've been left behind.'

The producers based this and similar scenes on Matthew 24:40-41 and Luke 17:34-35. One day Christ will return with shocking suddenness are we ready?

Jesus concludes His Passion Week teaching with a long discourse on eschatology, often called the 'end times.' This seems to be addressed privately to His disciples. They admire the temple (v. 1), but Jesus wants them to see what truly matters. The temple will be destroyed one day, but God's kingdom lasts forever.

What signs will us see? 1168 B.C., Antiochus Epiphanes had erected an altar to Zeus in the Jerusalem temple, partly fulfilling Daniel's prophecy. But Jesus indicates that this prophecy will also apply in the future. The Antichrist, also called the 'Man of Lawlessness' (2 Thess. 2), by accepting worship will repeat this idolatrous pattern.

How are we to live in light of all this? As Jesus often repeats, we are to be on our guard, prepared and watchful for His return.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today and tomorrow, through Christ's teaching on the end times, we look beyond Passion Week to His glorious Second Coming.

So here's a hypothetical question: If you could somehow know that Christ would return tomorrow, how would spend your last day on earth? Are you being faithful to the tasks God has given you? What would most please Christ to find you doing when He returns? Now compare this to what you were planning to do tomorrow. Is there a radical difference between how you answered the first and second questions? If yes, you may need to check your priorities.

Our prayer is that upon His return, Christ will greet each of us with the words, 'Well done, good and faithful servant!' (Matt. 25:21).

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### Mark 13:1-35

He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus." - Revelation 22:20

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

Evangelist Billy Sunday once told the story of an assistant who had been sent by D. L. Moody into a dangerous part of the city of Chicago to try to preach the gospel to a group of social anarchists. It was an unlikely audience. "Do the best you can," Moody advised the man, "and some night I'll come down and help you." The man later told Billy Sunday that Moody's promise had been an incentive to do his very best. "He didn't know when Mr. Moody would come," Sunday recounted, "so he looked for him every night, and the harder time he had, the harder he hoped and looked."

This is the same incentive given to Christ's followers as they approach the end of the age. Jesus warned His disciples that as the

end of the age draws near, the difficulties facing the church will increase. False teaching, natural disasters, and wars will all mark what Jesus refers to as "the beginning of birth pains." This metaphor implies that such troubles will only increase as the day of Christ's return draws near.

According to Jesus, all of this was to be foreshadowed by the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. This was fulfilled in 70 A.D. when the Roman general Titus attacked Jerusalem in an effort to subdue a revolt. During the campaign against Jerusalem soldiers set fire to the temple chambers and the sanctuary. The entire temple area was soon ablaze. This tragedy prefigured even greater destruction to come shortly before Christ's return. At that time the "abomination that causes desolation," an event predicted in the book of Daniel, will appear on the scene and mark the beginning of the end (v. 14; see Dan. 9:27; 11:1; 12:11).

Although there has been much disagreement among believers about the exact timing of the events described in today's passage, Jesus' ultimate message is very clear. Since no one knows the exact day and time when He will return, those of us who belong to Christ should live with a sense of daily expectation. We must not be discouraged by the trials we face but should make every effort to proclaim the gospel while there is still time.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Make a list of all the events that Jesus mentions in today's passage. Do you see any of them taking place today? While Jesus' teaching about the things that will take place at the end of the age was never intended to incite idle speculation about the end times, a study of biblical prophecy can strengthen your faith and give you a greater sense of confidence in God's word.

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#### **Mark 13:24-37**

At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. - Mark 13:26

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

In exile on the island of Patmos off the coast of present-day Turkey, the Apostle John recounts a stunning vision.

A voice like a trumpet spoke to him. He turned around and saw a man wearing a long robe with a golden sash. His eyes were blazing, His hair pure white. His feet glowed, His voice roared like a waterfall. In one hand He held seven stars; out of His mouth came a double-edged sword. His face shone like the sun.

John fell on his face before his risen Lord. Jesus assured him: 'Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!' (see Rev. 1:9-18).

John saw a sight which all believers long for and will rejoice to see our Savior, living and glorified! One day He will come to claim His people and consummate history. This exciting truth is also found here in Mark 13, as Jesus concludes His teaching on the end times.

After the signs and events we listed yesterday, what will happen? Christ will return! He will come in power to gather His people (vv. 26-27). A 'rapture' of believers will precede His Second Coming, the marker for the start of the Millennial Kingdom.

We must be busy preparing ourselves for this exciting event. As Jesus succinctly said, 'Watch!' (Mark 13:37). Just as people can read the signs of nature about weather or plants, we should be able to read the 'signs of the times' (vv. 28-29).

Again, there is a dual prophetic perspective. Some of the prophecy will be fulfilled in 'this generation' (v. 30) when the temple is destroyed in 70 A.D. But Jesus also has in mind events still future to us today. When will these things happen? Only the Father knows (v. 32).

Until that day, we desire to be spiritually awake, actively obeying and following our Lord!

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Numerous times in this chapter, Jesus cautions and exhorts His disciples to be ready and watchful. How about you? Are you ready for the Lord's return? Are you obeying and following Christ to the utmost?

Today we suggest that you review and evaluate your involvement in your local church. Are you regularly participating in worship, fellowship, etc.? Are you using your spiritual gifts by ministering to others? We're not asking how busy you are with church activities instead, we're asking you to reflect and pray over the nature and quality of those activities.

As with yesterday's hypothetical question, you may find that some adjustments are necessary. Be obedient to what God shows you!

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## **Mark 13:26–37 No One Knows the Day or the Hour**

About that day or hour no one knows. Mark 13:32

One of the most unusual end times hoaxes in history is known as the “Prophet Hen of Leeds.” In the town of Leeds in England in 1806, a chicken was laying eggs with the phrase “Christ is coming” written on them. Many believed judgment day was at hand. Investigators, however, found that someone had written on each egg, then forced it back up into the hen so it could be “miraculously laid” a bit later. It turned out that the hen was not a prophet, and judgment day did not arrive!

In fact, no such claim should be believed, for according to Scripture no one but God the Father knows the day or hour of Christ’s return, not even the angels or Christ Himself (v. 32; Acts 1:7). Before the Second Coming (v. 26), there will be signs and foreshadowings (vv. 28–29), but even so it will come as a surprise, though more to unbelievers than to believers (see tomorrow’s devotional).

The statement that “this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened” (v. 30) carries a double meaning. In one sense of “generation,” Jesus was referring to the destruction of Jerusalem in a.d. 70. In a more general sense, He was indicating an undefined span of time.

The proper response, then, is watchfulness: “Be on guard! Be alert!” (v. 33; Rev. 3:3). Jesus illustrated this with a parable in which the owner of a house leaves and puts his servants in charge until he returns (vv. 34–37). The time of his return is unknown; it could be at any time and without any warning. When he returns, the servants need to be found faithfully doing what they should be doing.

The same is true for us. When Christ returns, we do not want to be found spiritually sleeping or pursuing only trivial earthly priorities.

Apply the Word

One of the reasons for discussing the end times in Scripture is to shape our choices today. When theologians say that Christ’s return is imminent, they mean that He could return at any time! How can we live each day in watchful and joyful expectation of this? What if our first thought upon rising each morning was, “Today could be the day!” How would that change your plans?

## **MARK 14**

### **Mark 14:1-26**

This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. - Mark 14:24

TODAY IN THE WORD

The Passover meal may be one of the oldest ongoing ceremonies in human history.

Just prior to the Exodus from Egypt (ca. 1446 B.C.), God told Moses to instruct the Israelites to sacrifice perfect lambs for a special meal (see Exo. 12). They put blood from these lambs on the doorframes of their houses so that the Lord would spare the firstborn son from the death that awaited the firstborn sons of the Egyptians. The lamb itself was to be roasted and served with bitter herbs and yeastless bread.

Since that day, according to God’s command, the Jewish people have celebrated Passover to commemorate their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. In our Bible reading, Jesus eats the Passover with His disciples and gives it a continuing, deeper meaning for the church today to commemorate our deliverance from the slavery of sin.

First, there is the episode of His anointing. A woman (Mary, see John 12:3) anoints Jesus’ head with perfume worth a year’s wages a gift fit for a King! Some rebuke her for wastefulness, but Jesus commends her beautiful act of devotion to Him.

Jesus’ death is a once-in-history event (Mark 14:7). Mary has anointed Him for burial, and her story will be told throughout the world (v. 9). (The Gospel of Mark itself fulfills these words!)

Now we come to the ‘Last Supper’ of Jesus and His disciples, their celebration of the Jewish Passover feast. Here Jesus establishes a symbol for the future church the bread represents His body, the wine His blood (vv. 22-24). As He has predicted, soon His body will be broken and His blood shed to redeem the sins of the world.

As Jesus said: ‘I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world’ (John 6:51).

## TODAY ALONG THE WAY

As we know, the 'Last Supper' shared by Jesus and His disciples is also a lasting ordinance for the church. We celebrate communion to remember Christ's body and blood, sacrificed for us.

In light of today's reading, we urge you to prepare your heart for your church's next communion service. Read one or more of these additional passages: Matthew 26:26-30; Luke 22:14-20; or 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. Copy down at least three verses that capture the significance of communion. Carry these verses with you and read them over daily.

The next time you participate in communion, these verses will be easily recalled to your mind, helping you focus on Christ's redemptive love and prompting a response of thankfulness and worship.

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### **Mark 14:1-52**

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. - 1 Peter 2:21

## TODAY IN THE WORD

George MacDonald, Scottish clergyman and author of the children's classic *At the Back of the North Wind*, wrote, "The Son of God suffered unto death, not that men might not suffer, but that their sufferings might be like his." MacDonald's statement suggests that Christ's suffering gives meaning to the suffering of the believer. But this also raises a related question. What gave meaning to Christ's suffering? How was He able to approach the pain of the cross and all that surrounded it with such calm assurance?

The answer is found in Jesus' knowledge of the Father's plan. Even though His disciples had difficulty grasping the inevitability and significance of Christ's suffering, our Lord did not shrink back from the pain that was soon to come. He understood that it was part of His destiny. His acceptance was not the result of fatalism. Rather, it came from His knowledge and faith that His Heavenly Father would use that suffering to purchase our redemption.

Jesus did not enjoy suffering. He looked forward to all that His suffering would accomplish but not to the actual suffering itself. On the night of His betrayal and arrest our Lord agonized in the Garden of Gethsemane to such an extent that He was "overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (v. 34). When the Greek text describes Jesus' state of mind, it uses terms that speak of alarm and great distress. At that time He looked for comfort from His disciples and through prayer. He even prayed and asked that, if at all possible, He be spared suffering. The secret to His calm acceptance of His fate is found in the qualifying phrase of Christ's prayer: "Not what I will, but what you will" (v. 36).

The Savior's deference to the Father's will reflected more than a submissive attitude. It was grounded in the confidence that His suffering was part of a divine plan. It was not suffering merely for the sake of suffering. Nor was it suffering in vain. Christ suffered for a purpose: "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Peter 3:18).

## TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Christ's suffering was both an offering and an example. Unlike Him, our suffering does not purge sin. But like Christ's, our suffering does have purpose. Those who suffer for the sake of Christ do so as part of God's larger plan. Like Him, we are to entrust ourselves to the one who judges justly (cf. 1 Peter 2:23).

Like Him too, we can look for comfort in prayer and the companionship of others who love God. Think of someone you know who is currently going through a time of suffering. Perhaps a brief note, phone call, or visit would be a source of encouragement today.

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### **Mark 14:12-26; Hebrews 10:1-18**

Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world! - John 1:29

## TODAY IN THE WORD

When the German poet, Heinrich Heine, was on his deathbed, a priest told him that God would forgive his sins. Heine rather flippantly responded, "Of course God will forgive me; that's His job." Later the psychiatrist Sigmund Freud, commenting on Heine's words, said: "What it means to say is nothing else than ... that's what he [God] is there for, and that's the only reason I've taken him on (as one engages one's doctor or one's lawyer)."

Thinking of God's forgiveness as simply part of His job description is pretty arrogant, to say the least! The Bible makes it clear that God isn't in our employ, waiting around to say "That's OK!" whenever we decide that maybe we've done something wrong. Instead, the Bible shows that our sin cost God dearly. In fact, forgiveness for sin is only possible because of the willing death of Jesus Christ,

the Son of God.

The necessity of Jesus' sacrifice is difficult for many people to understand. The same was true for the disciples. It's no coincidence that Jesus' crucifixion occurred during the Jewish Passover celebration. As the disciples would find out, the customary slaughtering of a spotless lamb for the Passover meal was a picture of Jesus' own sacrifice.

As Jesus sent His disciples before Him to make the necessary preparations for the Passover meal, they were no doubt anticipating an enjoyable evening with their Lord. But a somber note was sounded when Jesus predicted that He would be betrayed. An equally grave moment occurred when Jesus linked the breaking of bread with His own body, and the drinking of wine with His own blood, predicting His own death.

The author of Hebrews also shows that repeated animal sacrifices could never take away sin. Instead, only the willing sacrifice of Jesus' body could make people holy (v. 10). Because Jesus' death truly effected full forgiveness of sins, no other sacrifice is needed or could ever be effective (v. 18).

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Unfortunately many people have ideas about God's pardon that are similar to Heinrich Heine. But when we understand the depth of Christ's willing sacrifice, it's hard to be flippant. Advent season is a good time to reflect on the purpose of Jesus' incarnation, namely, to take away the sins of the world. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you thoughts or deeds for which you need to be forgiven. Then confess your sins and prepare your heart to celebrate Jesus' perfect sacrifice as you join with God's people tomorrow in worship..

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#### **Mark 14:53-71**

Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. - Matthew 10:32

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

When Jack's friends learned that he was scheduled to go to court for a minor traffic accident, they urged him to plead "not guilty" before the judge. "The driver of the other car probably won't show up," they told him. "Why pay a fine when you don't have to?" Jack explained that his conscience wouldn't let him do as they suggested. "I'm guilty," he said. "The accident was my fault. I can't tell a lie and say otherwise."

Jesus faced an even greater consequence for telling the truth—a death sentence. Jesus was brought before a hastily convened session of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council in Jerusalem. Although they possessed the authority to have Jesus whipped, the Roman government did not grant the Sanhedrin the right to exercise capital punishment on their own. One purpose for this late-night trial was to gather the kind of evidence that could be presented to the Roman governor to make a case for sentencing Jesus to death.

At first their efforts appeared to be unfruitful when those who were brought forward to testify against Jesus failed to agree. The Law of Moses required the agreement of at least two witnesses before a man could be put to death (see Deut. 17:6). Jesus remained silent during their testimony until the High Priest asked Him directly whether He was the Christ. Jesus not only said yes, He did so in a way that underscored His claim to be equal with God the Father (v. 62). The result was swift. In a dramatic public display of disapproval, the High Priest announced that no further evidence was necessary. Jesus was condemned simply because He told the truth about Himself.

Peter's behavior during Christ's trial stands in sharp contrast. Facing the same threat, he caved to the pressure and emphatically claimed that he did not know Jesus. He had been called by Christ to be a disciple and a witness. Instead of owning up to this calling, Peter's fear of the possible consequences led him to disown His Savior.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Can you think of a time when you were tempted to hide your allegiance to Jesus Christ from someone? Thankfully, He forgives us when we acknowledge our failures in these areas, and the Holy Spirit can give us boldness and enthusiasm for sharing our Savior.

Think about some specific ways that you can stake your identity with Christ. It may be through words you say, or kind actions, or the things that surround your office and home. With what Christ has done for us, let's proudly claim His name!.

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#### **Mark 14:27-65**

Not what I will, but what you will. - Mark 14:36

#### TODAY IN THE WORD



The 'Judas kiss' has become a well-known symbol of betrayal.

You may have heard stories about the 'Judas kiss' being used among old-style 'Mafia' crime families. If one of them was suspected of being a police informer, his loyalty would be tested. If he passed, he would be welcomed back. But if he failed, he would be confronted and condemned. The spokesman would kiss the betrayer on both cheeks, signifying that the 'Mafia' family had turned against him. It became known as the 'kiss of death.'

To take what should convey affection and turn it into an act of betrayal is indeed twisted. Yet in today's reading this is how Judas identifies his Master to hand Him over to His enemies. His betrayal had already been set in motion (14:10-11, 17-21) this is the final step.

Knowing death is near, Jesus seeks out the garden of Gethsemane for prayer. His soul is overwhelmed with what is about to happen (v. 34). He will drink the cup of suffering in obedience to His Father (v. 36). How much He loves us!

Next, Jesus' enemies arrive, and Judas's kiss is the first wound given to our Savior. One of the chosen Twelve has betrayed his Teacher; the rest flee in fear and confusion (cf. Zech. 13:7). (Mark also appears to have been present he is likely the 'young man' in verses 51-52.)

In the dead of night, Jesus is put on trial before the Sanhedrin, the council of Jewish leaders. They can't get their lying witnesses in order, so the proceedings are disorderly. At last the high priest asks Jesus for His true identity. In God's plan the moment of full revelation has arrived Jesus unmistakably asserts His deity (v. 62).

On grounds of blasphemy (cf. Lev. 24:16), the Sanhedrin condemns Jesus to death, then mocks and tortures Him. Jesus remains silent the Lamb led to the slaughter (cf. Isa. 53:7).

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Make Jesus' agonized prayer 'Not what I will, but what you will' your own in a special prayer focus. For three days, or another length of time you choose, set aside your normal prayer methods. Instead, pray: (1) that God reveal His will for you in your life at this time; and (2) that He make you wholly submissive and obedient to that will.

This may not be as simple as it sounds. We often get on our knees with a 'shopping list' of prayer requests, problems, intercessory needs, etc. Or, we are accustomed to various aids or techniques for disciplining our prayer lives. While these may be helpful, we suggest that you leave them behind for this activity.

Then approach this special prayer time with an eager expectation that God will speak to you in a real and personal way!

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### **Mark 14:32–50 Could you not keep watch for one hour?**

Matthew 28:16–20

Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. Mark 14:38

The Gospels record over three hundred questions that Jesus asked—we've only covered about 10 percent of them this month! We've studied questions that reveal Jesus' identity as the Messiah, the Son of God. We've seen His questions transform lives. Jesus asked rhetorical questions, and posed questions that demanded an answer to reveal something about the hearts of His listeners. And today we'll study our final question this month that challenges us to embrace the call to discipleship.

In some ways this is a difficult passage to read. Our Savior took Peter, James, and John with Him into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. He was "deeply distressed and troubled ... overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (Mark 14:33–34). But surely His closest friends will be there for Him at a time like this, right? Of course we know the answer. The disciples repeatedly fall asleep.

Then it gets worse. The religious leaders arrive with an armed crowd to arrest Jesus. All the disciples, from converted tax collector to rough fishermen to political activist, all abandon Him. "Then everyone deserted Him and fled" (Mark 14:50).

As readers, we should identify with the disciples. We know our own failures and imperfections. We know all the times that we have wilted in the face of opposition instead of standing firm for Jesus. We know that so often we cannot keep watch for one hour.

Thankfully, this is not the end of the story. Jesus restores His terrified followers to fellowship. He promises the presence of the Holy Spirit. And He charges them with the Great Commission, the call to extend the offer of discipleship to all people around the world (Matt. 28:19–20). Will we share this good news?

Apply the Word

Have you felt like a spiritual failure? Your story is not over! God can transform a life that looks like a disappointment into a powerful testimony. Jesus calls you to follow Him and declare the good news of forgiveness through His work of salvation. Commit today to "watch and pray" so that you will be empowered to choose Jesus over the temptations offered by this world.!

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### **Mark 14:66-15:20**

'Crucify him!' they shouted. - Mark 15:13

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

When Carrie Blackaby, age 16, was diagnosed with cancer, her father Henry didn't understand. What was God doing? Why? But the Blackabys didn't question God's love. Henry writes in *Experiencing God*:

'At times I went before the Heavenly Father, and I saw behind my daughter the Cross of Jesus Christ. I said, 'Father, don't ever let me look at circumstances and question your love for me. Your love for me was settled on the Cross. That has never changed and will never change for me.' Our love relationship with the Heavenly Father sustained us through a very difficult time.'

God was pleased to heal Carrie and restore her to her family. But even if God had not done so, Henry Blackaby would have taken his stand on God's perfect love shown through His Son Jesus.

In today's reading, Jesus continues down the road to the Cross. While He is on trial before the Sanhedrin, Peter is outside in the courtyard. As Jesus had predicted (14:29-31), out of fear Peter three times denies knowing his Lord. When he realizes what he's done (v. 72), Peter weeps over his faithlessness. We know that his repentance will bring Jesus' forgiveness (John 21:15-19).

Meanwhile Jesus is taken to another trial, before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. Blasphemy doesn't qualify as a capital crime here, so the Sanhedrin charges Jesus as a political rebel who is setting up his own kingdom (cf. John 18:36-37). Sensing that envy, not justice, motivates them, Pilate tries to duck responsibility by offering to release a prisoner. When the crowd calls for Barabbas's freedom and Jesus' death, he gives in to please them.

Infected by the general atmosphere, the Roman soldiers taunt and strike Jesus. They even set a crown of thorns on His head little did they know that their badge of mockery would become to the church a symbol of love!

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

In his fear and weakness, Peter denied knowing or following Jesus. How about you? Do you own Christ publicly? Do your words and actions boldly proclaim your Savior? Do you know how to answer someone who asks you about your faith?

To motivate you for witnessing, we suggest you memorize one of the following: Mark 8:38 or, if you're feeling more ambitious, 1 John 2:20-25. These verses impress upon us the seriousness of our responsibility to share the gospel. If we are ashamed of Christ, He will be ashamed of us. If we claim to know God, our actions should show it. And if we know that Jesus is the Christ, this truth should remain in us.

Tomorrow we'll follow up on this and suggest a specific way you can witness to those around you.

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### **Mark 14:53-65; 15:21-41**

They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull)... And they crucified him. - Mark 15:22, 24

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

Today is that holy day which has come to be known as Good Friday, the day on which our Lord was betrayed, arrested, tried in both Roman and Jewish courts, condemned, and nailed to the cross.

The good of Good Friday refers to the benefits that flow to us from Jesus Christ's death on Calvary. We were reminded yesterday that Jesus died as God's Passover lamb, sacrificed to make atonement for the sins of His people.

This is reminiscent of the night God ordered the Jews in Egypt to sacrifice a lamb and put the blood on the doorposts of their houses to deliver themselves from His death angel. This ceremony became a type, or symbol, pointing forward to a reality that was realized on Good Friday. Jesus came to die as ""the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"" (John 1:29).

The details of Jesus' arrest, trials, beatings, and crucifixion are painful to read about again when we remember that ""He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities"" (Isa. 53:5, see tomorrow's study).

Jesus offered no defense to His accusers. But when the high priest asked Him directly, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?", Jesus replied, "I am" (vv. 61-62). Here is more evidence of the Jewish roots of our faith, because our Savior is also the Messiah, the promised Redeemer of Israel who was anticipated and prophesied throughout the Old Testament.

Mark's description of the scene at Calvary is grim, from a human standpoint. We know that the crowd shouted insults and taunts at Jesus as He hung on the cross. And apparently, the two thieves began the ordeal by reviling Him. Later, however, one of the men turned to the Lord in faith (Luke 23:39-43).

The tearing of the temple curtain when Jesus died (Mark 15:38) has tremendous meaning for our faith in relation to its Old Testament roots. The curtain separated the holy place from the holy of holies, the inner sanctuary into which Israel's high priest came once a year with a blood sacrifice on the Day of Atonement (see the April 14 study). Jesus' death fulfilled the purpose of the sacrificial system, and provided us with a way into God's presence.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

There is so much more to the story of Good Friday than we can include in this study. We encourage you to read more in each of the four Gospels.

As you read, take special note of Jesus' cry in John 19:30: "It is finished." This was an announcement that the debt of our sins had been paid in full. The "bill" we owed to God for violating His law, which we could not pay, was paid by Jesus Christ with His precious blood. Meditate on the wonder of this truth, and then express your thanksgiving to the Lord.

## MARK 15

### Mark 15:1-15

Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. - Acts 13:28

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate provided another opportunity for Him to talk His way out of trouble. Pilate was a mid-level Roman official who had been appointed prefect of Judea. He had been picked for this responsibility by Tiberius the Roman Emperor. His religious insensitivity and ruthless behavior toward the Jews were well-known.

According to the Jewish historian Josephus, Pilate had offended the Jews when he allowed his troops to carry a Roman standard emblazoned with an idolatrous image. He had also hung golden shields inscribed with the names of pagan deities in the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus mentioned an instance when Pilate murdered several Galileans while they offered sacrifices (Luke 13:1).

In view of this, it seems likely that Pilate's efforts to set Jesus free were motivated more by his dislike for the Sanhedrin than by any desire for genuine justice. Although Pilate had been granted nearly absolute power, the current climate of instability and his own troubled history with the Jews made him reluctant to act in Jesus' case without popular support.

Jesus' response to Pilate's questioning did not make it any easier. Since Pilate would not have considered blasphemy sufficient grounds for capital punishment, the religious leaders had accused Jesus of claiming to be "king of the Jews," an allegation that the Roman government considered treasonous (v. 2). When Pilate asked directly whether this claim was true, Jesus gave an answer that might have been interpreted either way. The more recent translations eliminate the ambiguity implied in the original language. According to the Greek text, Jesus declared, "You have said."

Why didn't Jesus simply say "yes?" The fact that He did not deny the claim was itself a form of assent. Pilate had given Him an opportunity to renounce their accusation and go free, but Jesus refused to compromise the truth in order to save Himself from suffering. Christ's answer seems designed to force Pilate to draw his own conclusions about Jesus. Instead, the Roman prelate proved to be more interested in satisfying the crowd than in discovering and acting upon the truth.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Although Jesus had been brought to him as a prisoner, it was really Pilate who was on trial. He knew that Jesus was innocent of any crime and that the religious leaders were motivated by envy. He may even have sensed that Jesus was the Son of God. In the end, Pilate asked the right question: "What shall I do with Jesus?" Unfortunately, he asked it of the wrong people. He should have answered it for himself, rather than letting the will of the crowd dictate his response.

So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. John 8:36

The story is told about two men who were identical twins. They shared DNA, and they were both raised by their father who was a violent alcoholic. After each of the young men left home, their lives took dramatically different paths. One chose to stay away from alcohol, attended college, got married, landed a good job and started a family. His brother, however, was also an alcoholic like their father. He was kicked out of college for failing grades and poor behavior. Unable to hold a job, this second brother continued to suffer physically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually. When asked about the choices he had made in life, both twins gave the same response: "Given what I grew up with, how could I choose anything else?"

When Pontius Pilate released a prisoner named Barabbas, this man found himself suddenly spared from a death sentence. Pilate, who recognized that Jesus was innocent and that the chief priests were motivated by their own self-interest, had authorized the release of one prisoner to the crowds. In accordance with the custom, Pilate suggested releasing Jesus. The crowd, however, now bloodthirsty for Jesus, demanded another man for release: a violent prisoner named Barabbas, who was part of a murderous group of insurrectionists.

What, then, became of Barabbas? The Gospels don't tell us the rest of his story, so we don't know how he responded to his second chance at life. Did he continue a cycle of violence? Or did he see that Jesus provided him with an opportunity at not just physical life but also spiritual life? In this way, the story of Barabbas challenges us to consider how we respond to the offer of new life through Jesus Christ.

Apply the Word

Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we have been offered eternal life in fellowship with God. Have you accepted this gracious gift by trusting in the Person and work of Jesus to forgive your sins? You can talk to a pastor, trusted Christian friend, or call 1-888-NEED-HIM. They will introduce you to the Savior who forgives sins and transforms lives.

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### **Mark 15:16–39 Roman Centurion: The Power of the Cross**

Surely this man was the Son of God! Mark 15:39

Philip Ryken wrote in *The Heart of the Cross*: "[The cross of Christ] seems weak to those who look for strength. It appears foolish to those who look for wisdom. But this is only when the cross is viewed in human terms. From God's perspective, the cross is neither impotent nor ignorant. It is full of power and wisdom... The power of the cross is the power of love. When Jesus was crucified, he showed the full extent of God's love."

The cross, to the Roman centurion in today's passage, was simply a gruesome tool to get the job done. By the end of the day, however, his perspective had been radically transformed. We are given no indication that before this day he had been in any way interested in the Jewish faith (in contrast with the centurion we studied on December 21).

The centurion's testimony in today's verse was inspired by his eyewitness experience of the crucifixion. If he was in charge of the soldiers who mocked Jesus, his involvement started at verse 16. He and his squad escorted to Golgotha the three criminals scheduled to be executed. They nailed Jesus to the cross and attached a sign reading "King of the Jews." As was their custom, they gambled for His clothing. They would also have seen and heard the religious leaders and assorted passersby insulting Jesus, as well as His dialogues with the other condemned men (see Luke 23:39–43).

The Roman centurion was on duty during the three hours of darkness. He heard Jesus' last words (v. 34). Though a veteran of such affairs, he had never seen anything like this! Stunned by all he had witnessed and how Jesus had died, the centurion proclaimed that Jesus was the Son of God and a righteous or innocent man (v. 39; cf. Luke 23:47).

Apply the Word

Reading the Christmas narrative might be a personal or family tradition. This Christmas Eve, why not read the larger story? The reason He came was to die for our sins and to triumph over death in His resurrection. In addition to Luke 2, also read Luke 23–24. Thank God for the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the gift of eternal life with Him!.

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### **Mark 15:16-47**

And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. - Hebrews 13:12

TODAY IN THE WORD

The popularity of Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* astounded the film industry. Many believed that there would be little

interest in a movie where the characters spoke only Latin and Aramaic with English subtitles. Some predicted that the project would ruin Gibson's career. Once the film was finally released, the movie's graphic violence became the focus of even more controversy. Some claimed that the film's brutality provided a necessary antidote to the sanitized image most believers have of Christ's suffering. Many who saw *The Passion of the Christ* said that the film helped them to finally appreciate the full extent of all that Jesus experienced while on the cross.

Yet even Gibson's graphic portrayal could not do justice to the full extent of suffering that Christ experienced on the cross. Certainly, He faced the brutality of Roman crucifixion. This practice was as much a means of torture as it was a form of execution. The Romans reserved crucifixion for slaves and those who were considered to be the lowest criminals. Its victims were suspended by their hands on a cross beam that had been fastened to a stake that was driven into the ground. In most cases the stake was about the height of a man.

The worst suffering that Christ endured was not the physical torment of the cross but the pain of separation from His Heavenly Father. While hanging on the cross, Jesus endured the wrath of God on behalf of sinners. As the apostle Paul explains, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21).

In other words, during the crucifixion Jesus had to endure a double indignity. Not only did He experience the pain of separation from His Heavenly Father, He also endured the shame of bearing our sins. The religious leaders believed that Jesus was a heretic. The Romans executed Him as though He were a rebel. God the Father knew that He was none of these. Jesus was a sacrifice for sin.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Although it is not as common in our evangelical context, Christians have long had a tradition of meditating on the suffering of Christ. This is not intended to promote a morbid fascination with the physical details of Christ's death, but to help us appreciate the significance of the cross.

One way to do this is through music. Try using the classic hymn by Isaac Watts, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." Those who prefer contemporary worship music may wish to use Chris Tomlin's updated version, "The Wonderful Cross."

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#### **Mark 15:21-47**

The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. - 1 Corinthians 1:18

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

On February 14, 1998, Danny Valentine promised his wife the ultimate Valentine's Day gift one of his own kidneys. Columnist Barbara Carmen tells the story of how Danny's wife, Kathy, needed a replacement for a previously transplanted kidney. She faced a seven-year wait, but doctors said she could survive on dialysis for only three years.

So in love, Danny volunteered to give Kathy one of his kidneys, and the operation took place last summer. Kathy says gratefully: 'First a life-mate, now the gift of life.'

As beautiful as Danny's gift of life was, Christ's gift of life, through His sacrifice on the cross, is even more beautiful and valuable.

Condemned by the Jewish council and the Roman government, Jesus is executed as a criminal. His hands and feet are nailed to a cross, which is lifted up so that all can see His punishment. Jesus bore this pain for the sins of the world, choosing not even to take a sedative (v. 23).

Several astonishing events accompany His crucifixion. Darkness descends for three hours nature itself is grieving. The curtain in the temple that blocks off the holiest place (cf. Exodus 26:31-33) is torn in two, signifying that any human being can now be a 'priest' with direct access to God (cf. Heb. 10:19-20; 1 Pet. 2:5, 9). And a Roman centurion, trained to order and discipline, decides that this condemned rebel is the Son of God and responds in faith (Mark 15:39)!

After Jesus has died, Joseph of Arimathea requests His body for burial. This is also rather remarkable a member of the Sanhedrin wanting to bury a dead convict! Joseph is apparently a secret believer (v. 43), like Nicodemus (John 3:1-21), and puts Jesus' body in a special tomb.

The faithful women who witnessed Jesus' crucifixion also mark where He is buried. They don't suspect what is about to happen!

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Through His death and resurrection, Christ opened the way of eternal life to those who believe in Him (John 3:16). He 'tore the

curtain' that separated humanity from God. Do your friends know this good news? What about your neighbors?

Here's a witnessing idea you might try in the near future. Make a list of perhaps 6-8 people in your life who are not believers. Invite them over for a showing and discussion of the Jesus video. (Copies may be easily bought or rented at many Christian bookstores.) Perhaps they will react like the centurion: 'Surely this man was the Son of God!' (Mark 15:39). Or, they may be interested in further studying the Bible with you.

Whatever the response, pray that the truth of Christ will be clearly communicated.

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### **Mark 15:34 Psalm 22**

Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" - Mark 15:34

#### **TODAY IN THE WORD**

Remember from our study of Psalm 2 that God made a covenant with David and his descendants, and although persecutors mock the king, God always vindicates His anointed one. The Hebrew word for anointed one is messiah. As we end our month's study looking at three Messianic Psalms, we will see the pattern from Psalm 2 emerge, as well as the way these psalms are connected with Jesus and the New Testament.

Psalm 22 is attributed to King David. The first section of Psalm 22 is David's prayer for help (vv. 1-21). From the darkest place of suffering, David cries out to God. David's fundamental lament is not the threat of death, but rather the anguish of feeling abandoned by God.

David articulates three contrasts: first, the experience of his ancestors compared to his (vv. 3-8); second, his intimacy with God from birth compared to presently feeling forsaken by Him (vv. 9-11). The third contrast is that his enemies "surround" and "encircle" him, yet God is "far off" (vv. 7-8, 12-19). David prays for God to come near and deliver him.

The second section is David's praise (vv. 22-31). The theme of David's praise is deliverance, and he invites the congregation to "praise God with me" (v. 23). David's predicament is completely reversed: God is near and He reigns. The king is rescued from his enemies. David broadens the perspective of his deliverance from his individual circumstance to "all the ends of the earth" (v. 27). David declares, this is who God is; this is how He acts; we can trust Him.

The Gospel writers used Psalm 22 to portray and interpret the end of Jesus' life (cf. Matt. 27:11-56; Mark 15:1-39). Jesus Himself prays David's lament: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:33). He takes upon Himself human suffering and lament. Jesus Christ is the King described in Psalms 2 and 22. He experiences persecution from the chief priests and elders; He entrusts Himself to God His Father; and He is vindicated in resurrection.

#### **APPLY THE WORD**

Christians might be tempted to ignore or hide suffering by communicating, "I am happy and well!" all the time. This is neither healthy nor biblical. Psalm 22 combines lament and praise, suffering and celebration. Jesus demonstrates that authentic faith includes crying out to God in anguish (cf. Heb. 5:7). He gives His followers an example and encouragement to pray to God for help. Genuine faith exercises hopeful lament in times of suffering and grief.

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### **Mark 15:42-47 Joseph Buries Him**

The various compilations of eyewitness accounts in the four Gospels offer a full complement of perspectives. The person of Joseph of Arimathea is described with two very different labels—both entirely true. Today's reading informs us that Joseph was a prominent member of the Council, the Sanhedrin. But today's key verse gives him a seemingly contradictory title: a disciple of Jesus.

Up to that point, Joseph's allegiance to Jesus may have been kept quiet, but now he boldly marched up to Pilate and requested the body of Jesus (v. 43). This was a privilege generally reserved for family members by Roman law, and it was not exactly the best way to keep His faith in Christ a secret from the Jewish Council. Burial in his own tomb would have been considered the equivalent of including Jesus in his family. Everything about this act was both bold and loving.

Perhaps the most obvious aspect of Joseph's eyewitness account of Jesus in this particular instance was that Joseph could verify that Jesus was really deceased. It wasn't only him, but the centurion as well. Jesus had died, and Joseph treated the body for burial. The Christ, the Son of the Living God, was laid to rest in a tomb and a stone sealed the entrance. The apparent finality must have been crushing.

Joseph wasn't the only follower to witness Jesus' body so closely after His death. Mary Magdalene and Jesus' mother saw the place

of burial, and John 19 informs us that Nicodemus assisted Joseph in preparing His body for burial (19:39–40). This was evidence not only of loyalty and love, but also of faith. These two men who had hidden their belief while Jesus was alive took the exact opposite approach after His death at the time when it would have been most convenient to hide that they loved and followed Him. They chose to embrace and attest to His identity as the Son of God. Even after the cross, they believed.

#### Apply the Word

Think back to the times when life has been most disappointing, those times when your hopes were at their furthest from your circumstances. Have those not been the times when Jesus has proved to mean the most to you? If now is one of those times, take heart in the promise that no defeat, not even death, is beyond the redeeming power of Christ. And if this is not a time when you're suffering, extend the comfort of Jesus to someone who is...

## MARK 16

### Mark 16:1-8

[Jesus] was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead. - Romans 1:4

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

C. S. Lewis's allegorical fantasy *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is based on the Christian gospel. Four children journey through the doors of a wardrobe into a mythical country called Narnia.

Toward the end of the story, the lion Aslan, a Christ-figure, offers to give his life in exchange for that of one of the children, Edmund. By turning traitor, Edmund has forfeited his life to the White Witch. Delighted at the chance to eliminate their arch-enemy Aslan, the witch and her cohorts agree to the bargain. The great lion is ritually killed on top of a stone table. Has evil won?

Not at all. As dawn breaks, a great roar is heard and the stone table cracks in two. The children can hardly believe their eyes Aslan is alive again!

Similar amazement and rejoicing is found at the original Resurrection, which author Lewis has in mind that of our Lord Jesus Christ, who conquered death and is Himself the life (John 11:25; 14:6; Rom. 6:9).

Early Sunday morning, some of the women who had been with Jesus went to His tomb. With the Sabbath over, they wanted to show their love by anointing His body. They had no expectation of His resurrection instead, they worried over who would roll away the large stone at the entrance to the tomb.

There, they find the stone already moved, and an angel waiting for them. His message? 'You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen!' (v. 6). He instructs them to bring this fantastic news to the disciples and Peter.

Mark ends here, whereas the other Gospels add more details to the narrative. 'He has risen!' What more needs to be said? In the words of the hymn, 'Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia!

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### Mark 16:1-19

He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. - Matthew 28:6

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

Mark's Gospel concludes with a textual difficulty. Most scholars believe that verses 9 through 19 were not penned by Mark because they do not appear in some of the oldest Greek manuscripts. Various explanations have been given for their addition. Some have suggested that they were compiled by someone else after Mark's death prohibited him from finishing the Gospel. They believe these verses were added by those who thought it unlikely that Mark would end his Gospel by saying that the women were afraid. Others believe verses 9 through 19 reflect an independent tradition, perhaps used for catechetical purposes, that someone else later attached to Mark's Gospel.

The events described in the last eighteen verses are consistent with material found elsewhere in Scripture. Christ's appearance to Mary Magdalene is described by John. Jesus' appearance to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus is recounted by Luke. Matthew records the Great Commission, and in the book of Acts Luke recounts instances of speaking in tongues, handling snakes, laying on of hands, and Christ's ascension. While these verses may not have been originally penned by Mark, there is nothing

unorthodox about what they include.

Even without the last eighteen verses, Mark's Gospel ends on a note of victory and promise. Whatever Mark's original ending may have been, it is clear that the end of verse eight is not the end of the story. After Jesus' suffering and death was vindicated by resurrection, Jesus sent word to His disciples by way of an angel who appeared to Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James.

The angel announced that Jesus' body was no longer in the tomb because He had risen from the grave. They were commanded to bring this good news to the other disciples and to tell them that Jesus had already gone before them into Galilee. "There you will see him," the angel promised, "just as he told you" (v. 7). Jesus had fulfilled His purpose on earth, God had raised Him from the dead, and now He provides our lives with purpose and meaning.

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We usually think of the resurrection only at Easter. Yet it is the foundation for the new life that we experience in Christ. The hope of every believer is that those who have been united with Christ in His death have also been united with Him in resurrection. It is this resurrection power that enables us to have victory over sin.

As you continue in your journey with Christ, remember that He has won the victory over death and sin for us. And rejoice that we can become more like Him through the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

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#### Mark 16:9-20

Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations... You are witnesses of these things. - Luke 24:47-48

#### TODAY IN THE WORD

'Before believing in Jesus my life was miserable, full of sadness,' an Algerian believer wrote recently to a Christian radio station. 'One day Christ came, without my even calling Him, and He knocked at the door with His broad smile. He came into the house and He changed my thoughts from despair to happiness. Now despite the misery and poverty, I am happy in my heart and in my head. Now I have a goal in my life, to please God and to grow in my life with Christ... Christ's love for us makes us the richest people on earth.'

After Christ comes through the door of your heart, your life is never the same! The incredible difference He makes cannot be counted or measured. Doesn't that truth make you want to run out and share the good news?!

It should be noted that these final verses of Mark are not found in the earliest reliable manuscripts of Scripture. Additionally, there are some stylistic differences that suggest they were added later. Under the circumstances, it seems best to mentally 'bracket' these verses as possibly not belonging to Mark's Gospel.

The other three Gospels have more detailed and authoritative accounts of Jesus' post-Resurrection appearances. The report of the women, the conversation on the Emmaus road, and the encounters of the risen Christ with His disciples all seem to be alluded to in Mark's extra verses, but the stories are better told elsewhere.

The list of 'signs' involving snakes and poison is highly suspect (vv. 17-18). Why? This teaching is not found in any form in the other Gospels, nor anywhere else. Nor are these practices found in the history of the early church in Acts. Perhaps these 'signs' should be interpreted as figures of speech about God's power.

Despite this somewhat ragged ending to Mark, we can focus on one exciting, certain truth: It is our duty, joy, and honor to take the good news of Jesus Christ to the world (v. 15)!

#### TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Our prayer at Today in the Word is that this month's study of Mark has caused you to fall in love with Christ in a new way and to pursue Christ-likeness with a fresh passion.

We recommend that you testify to a friend, your study group, or your church congregation of what you've learned from Mark about Christ and what it means to be His disciple. This assignment may lead you to reflect on this month's study in order to reach some general conclusions. Or you might use your list of Christ's attributes (see 'Today Along the Way' for March 3rd) as the basis for what you say.

Don't keep your insights to yourself spread the Word!