

SLIDE 1. Series: Who Is this Man?: A Study of the Gospel of Mark

Teaching: *Stories, Secrets, and Surprises*

Sunday March 9, 2025

READ: Mark 3:13 – 6:12

PRAY

TEACH

Jesus had emerged with his message of forgiveness and love - and He chose how to communicate it and how to demonstrate it – by preaching and healing.

But how would he make his message permanent - and how would he spread the word?

By choosing 12 apostles. A group – not like the Pharisees – who separated themselves from the people – but companions with whom Jesus would live and share his life. He sent them out to do the same as him – to preach and to heal.

But Jesus' family thought he was nuts!

And the Pharisees - worse – they thought the devil was in him.

But how could that be?! As Jesus said, "A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand." Evil doesn't drive out evil.

And accusing Jesus of evil is tantamount to blaspheming the Holy Spirit – which – Jesus says here – is unforgiveable.

To which – if we were reading the gospel on our own and making notes – we might stop here and ask, "What does *that* mean?!"

Well – it seems to mean this: that a man or woman who is incapable of distinguishing between good and evil (which is a work of the Holy Spirit) – because they have consistently denied or resisted the work of the Holy Spirit - will (inevitably) not be able to see the good that Jesus offers for the evil in his heart and mind and step.

In other words, this sin is unforgiveable because such a man doesn't see his need for forgiveness. It's not that Jesus can't or won't forgive him – it's that the man won't choose to be forgiven.

It is as an old parable of Lucifer goes: one day a priest noticed a handsome young man in his congregation. The young man stayed after the service for confession. He confessed so many and such terrible sins that the priest's hair stood on end. "You must have lived long to do all that," the priest said. "My name is Lucifer, and I fell from heaven at the beginning of time," said the young man. "Even so," said the priest, "say that you are sorry, say that you repent and even you can be forgiven." The young man looked at the priest for a moment and then turned and walked away. He would not and could not say it; and therefore he had to go on still desolate and still damned.

SLIDE 2. Can a Christian be in danger of committing the “unforgiveable” sin?

I don't think so – because – as we read and said last Sunday – nothing can snatch a believer out of the hands of Jesus – nothing can snatch a believer out of the hands of the Father (Jn. 10:28-29).

And yet – there are some who think we can “lose our salvation” – and this might be how – by a consistent denial or misattribution or flat out rejection of the work of the Holy Spirit.

Imagine saying NO to the Spirit of God. “NO – I don't sin. NO – that really isn't all that bad that it could be called 'sinful'. NO – I'm not going to say sorry – I've done nothing wrong. NO – I'm not going to serve others with the gifts you've given me. NO – I won't speak the truth in love. NO – I'm not interested in partnering with Father-God in the good things He has set out in advance for me to do.”

And saying such things long enough, and persistently - that you block out the possibility that you might not be right when you say such things – that you harden your heart - that you become impervious to the voice of the Holy Spirit.

I think it is then easy to imagine that if your salvation isn't in jeopardy – your friendship with God is in trouble. Analogously – you might be married, but only because you have a document and a ring to say so. God wants more for us than relationship status. He desires deep and meaningful friendship with us.

Let me say this before moving on: you are not at risk of committing the “unforgiveable sin” if at any time you wonder, “Have I committed the unforgiveable sin?” – because that alone is evidence of the Spirit of God in you – the Spirit that convicts us of sin and leads us into truth.

The Jesus' mother and His brothers came to see Him – which is to say – they came to take Him home – because He was embarrassing them.

SLIDE 3. So Jesus asked the crowd who had gathered, ***“Who are my mother and my brothers?”*** (Mk. 3:33).

In other words, “Who are my spiritual kin?”

Jesus answers His own question, “Whoever does the will of God” (Mk. 3:35).

I don't believe Jesus asked and answered His own question to dismiss or to negate his biological family.

Instead, I think He asked and answered His own question to expand the circle of family – to include anyone who would want to belong to a family – who would be connected to each other by the shared experience of forgiveness, the common interest of knowing and following Jesus, and the common goal of inviting others to do the same.

And so Jesus moved out of the synagogue and into the open – and taught in parables. A new context. A new method.

Which made me wonder...

SLIDE 4. How do we change how we talk about Jesus when we move from one context to another?

I, for instance, don't talk about Jesus the same way here (on Sunday mornings) as I do in other spaces with other people.

Other people in other spaces have different stories and ask different questions.

It's why, for instance, I will push us sometimes to think about things differently than we are accustomed to thinking about them – to make us ready for other spaces with other people.

It's why, for instance, I pushed us at our Seniors' Bible Study to explain (in non-religious terms) what we mean by the words – *confession* and *repentance* – as it relates to *salvation*.

And that push can sometimes catch us off guard.

As it did for my friend when she was visiting her BFF who noticed that she had a bible and a devotional unpacked and placed by her bedside.

Her friend asked her, "Why do you read that? What do you get out of it?"

My friend responded, "It helps me to know Jesus. Like any friendship, I'm trying to get to know Jesus better and better – and the Bible is one way I do that."

Not an answer loaded with religious language, but an answer that related to something relatable in context – friendship.

A parable is something thrown beside something else – a comparison – an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. It makes people listen. It was something familiar to Jesus' Jewish audience. A parable takes abstract ideas and makes them concrete. And, of course, parables make us think.

Are we ready to answer out-of-context questions about Jesus? Are we ready to tell stories that will relate, that will clarify, and invite curiosity about Him?

Jesus answered questions with questions (something to consider).
And Jesus taught in parables.

Such as the 3 that we read in Mark 4: the parable of the sower, the parable of the growing seed, and the parable of the mustard seed: all – kingdom parables – connecting here and now to there and then – our planetary life to a heavenly life – as if to say – it beings now! We can know and live the kingdom of God life – now.

It is like... a farmer who sows seed in 4 types of ground, a seed that sprouts and grows on its own, and a small seed with big impact.

But before Jesus explains the first and we briefly look at the other two – there is a troubling bit we need to look at in vv. 10-12 where it seems like Jesus is setting up his hearers to fail when he uses the parables.

But this can't be the case!

SLIDE 5. To the text: ***When he was in private, those who were around Him, along with the Twelve, asked Him about the parables. He answered, "The secret (the musterion – the mystery) of the kingdom of God has been granted to you, but to those outside, everything comes in parables so that..."***

SLIDE 6. Quoting Isaiah: ***They may look and look, yet not perceive; they may listen and listen, yet not understand; otherwise, they might turn back – and be forgiven*** (Mk. 4:10-12).

Again – if you're reading Mark 4 – and taking notes – this might be a Q. in the margin.

Jesus quoted Isaiah because Isaiah ran into the same problem Jesus anticipated – the spiritual dullness of some people.

Such that Jesus wasn't being predictive. He was empathizing with Isaiah – and more – Jesus lamented. Jesus was making an observation, not a judgment.

He said this (v. 12) out of frustrated love – the sorrow of a man who had an extraordinary gift to give – which some people were too blind to take.

It's as William Barclay observed: "If we read this, hearing not a tone of bitter exasperation, but a tone of regretful love, it will sound quite different..."

Reread v. 12 (above).

... It will tell us not of a God who deliberately blinded men and hid his truth, but of men who were so dully uncomprehending that it seemed no use - even for God - to try to penetrate the iron curtain of their lazy incomprehension" (**The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Mark**, William Barclay, p. 94).

Now to the parables themselves.

The parable of the sower talks about how the gospel (the root of the kingdom of God) is received by the world (and so how we might receive it, and how we might go into the world mindful of how it can be received) – on hard ground (with indifference), on rocky ground (without commitment), on thorny ground (with distraction), and on good ground (where it is heard – listened to, where it is received (where it is committed to mind and heart), and where it is acted upon (where it is productive).

Which makes it sound like there's only a 25% chance that the gospel will take at any given time. Which might sound despairing.

And yet – this is the parable to end despair – when Jesus was banished from the synagogue and regarded with suspicion – because – though part of the seed never grew – the fact remained that at the end of the day – there was a fantastic harvest!

The parable of the growing seed is to say that only God can make His kingdom grow – though we can certainly hinder or help its growth, that – like all natural growth – the growth of the kingdom of God is often imperceptible and yet it is also constant and inevitable – all of which – for us – is to say - that we need to be patient with the growth of the kingdom of God and yet hopeful because God is God – and His kingdom came, has come, and will come!

The parable of the mustard seed is to say that we should not be discouraged by our small starts because our tiny efforts can sometimes bring massive results – such as the tiny seed to the size of a tree-like plant – which we could understand as the whole of the church – to include peoples of all nations with all kinds of opinions and theologies.

In summary – these 3 parables about the kingdom of God say this to us:

SLIDE 7. The Kingdom of God...

Will not be deterred.

Will grow constantly and inevitably.

Will include every tribe and tongue and nation.

So, be encouraged!

We – are part of that kingdom – because God is God.

The God who wind and wave obey (Mk. 4:35-41). The God who drove out of a man - a legion of demons (Mk. 5:1-20). The God who restored a woman's health and community and brought back to life from death the daughter of one of the synagogue leaders (Mk. 5:21-43).

Who is this man?

The demons sure knew.

Speaking for that possessed man - who cried out in a loud voice, "What do you have to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Mosty High God?" (Mk. 5:7).

The demons begged Jesus not to send them out of the region. And so he sent them into a herd of pigs who then plunged themselves into the sea and drowned.

The man was left dressed and in his right mind.

The town and countryside people asked Jesus to leave.

Why?!

Because their pigs had been destroyed. Now, I like bacon and pork chops and ribs as much as the next guy – but not *more* than the next guy.

You'd think the people would have celebrated the man's healing, but they were terrified of the healer. You'd think the people would have urged Jesus to stay and do more, but they wanted him out of their district as quickly as possible.

Why?!

We can only guess, but here's what we know: Jesus disrupted the status quo of the community. He upended their routine. He disturbed their comfort.

So, he had to go.

Whereas the man who was healed wanted Jesus to stay – and for him to stay with Jesus. But Jesus had another plan: a plan for that man to be a witness to the 10 Greek cities of the Decapolis – beautiful cities – with their Greek gods, their Greek temples, their Greek amphitheaters – their Greek way of life.

This was the first small sign of Christianity breaking the bonds of Judaism and going out into all the world. This healed man was the first seed that would – in time – become a mighty harvest. Because God is God.

And yet Jesus was rejected in his hometown!

Even though they were astonished by His teaching – he was an offense to them because he was just Mary's boy - who worked with his hands. Who was Jesus to teach them?! Never mind heal them.

SLIDE 8. *So He was not able to do any miracles there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. And he was amazed at their unbelief* (Mk. 6:5-6).

Amazed. How is that possible and what did it take?

It was possible because Jesus – though fully divine - is also fully human. And so, in his humanity – he was surprised by the *unbelief* of his hometown community.

Jesus was amazed at their *unbelief*.

There's one other instance (recorded in the gospels) when Jesus was amazed.

It was at the *belief* of a Roman soldier who said to Jesus, "Just say the word, and my servant will be healed (Lk. 7:7).

So, there seems to be 2 things that make Jesus step back and say – WOW: those who believe when it might not be expected, and those who don't believe when they have every reason to do so.

SLIDE 9. Do we AMAZE Jesus?

I imagine we do – in both directions.

When we trust Him in our suffering and with His silence. When we come to Him in humility out of tough back stories. When He sees us give up comfort and security for the sake of the kingdom.

When we read our bibles to get to know Him and forget Him and His ways. When He answers our prayers, but we stop praying. When He makes himself known to us through a circumstance or experience and wonder where He is.

May we amaze Jesus more and more by our belief in Him – as opposed to our disbelief!

Now – to end this section – as we started it.

Having chosen the 12 – Jesus commissions them – to be minimalist missionaries.

Blessing those who welcomed them, and letting the rejection of others return to them. They preached and they cast out demons and they healed the sick.

Jesus commissioned them to his message and his method.

And off they went.

Maybe – to Jesus' amazement.

SLIDE 10. Application Questions

1. How can you cultivate a habit of saying YES to the Holy Spirit?

2. What gives you hope during this time of turbulence? That the Kingdom of God will not be deterred, will grow constantly and inevitably, will include every tribe and tongue and nation?

SLIDE 11. Homework

Read Mark 6:14 – 8:21: the execution of John the Baptist, Jesus' feeding 5000, Jesus' crossings of the Sea of Galilee, travels to Tyre and Sidon, Jesus feeding 4000.