

Jesus Messiah: Seeing Christ In The Gospel Of Mark

*“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”
(Mark 1:15 ESV)*

*And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said,
“Truly this man was the Son of God!”
(Mark 15:38–39 ESV)*

Preaching And Pity
February 12th, 2017
Mark 1:29-45
Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning. I want to invite you to open your Bibles to Mark 1:29; that’s on page 836 in your pew Bibles. We are going to read verses 29-45 today – that’s a pretty big chunk but it appears to function as a unit in the text. I think I mentioned in one of the first messages in this series that Mark often employs a narrative device called “sandwich structure” – meaning he likes to tell stories in 3 parts with the outer parts functioning to frame or emphasize the inner part – that’s why they call it sandwich structure. In a sandwich the focus is on the MEAT but the bread is important too. The bread allows you to grab hold of the meat. In that sense, the bread SERVES the meat – so it is here. That sounds really complicated, but I think as we actually walk through it you will see exactly what I mean. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

And immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. 30 Now Simon’s mother-in-law lay ill with a fever, and immediately they told him about her. 31 And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them. 32 That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. 33 And the whole city was gathered together at the door. 34 And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. And he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. 35 And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. 36 And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, 37 and they found him and said to him, “Everyone is looking for you.” 38 And he said to them, “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.” 39 And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons. 40 And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, “If you will, you can make me clean.” 41 Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, “I will; be clean.” 42 And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. 43 And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once, 44 and

said to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them.” 45 But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter. (Mark 1:29–45 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Now, having read that unit as a whole I think that sandwich structure I mentioned should be pretty clear. The story begins with a healing that draws a crowd – that’s the first piece of bread. Then Jesus withdraws from the crowd in order to pray. Coming out of prayer he is freshly RESOLVED to focus on his primary mission which is to PREACH THE GOSPEL. So he leaves the crowd and continues preaching – that’s the meat in the middle. Then there is another story about a healing that again draws a crowd – that’s the second piece of bread! This healing generates so much enthusiasm that it actually threatens the primary mission of Jesus – look again at how the story ends:

Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once, 44 and said to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them.” 45 But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter. (Mark 1:29–45 ESV)

The people want Jesus to be a healer – but Jesus came to be a preacher. That is the point at the CENTRE of this narrative sandwich. The people want more bread! Even the disciples want more bread – they encourage Jesus to do more of this healing ministry that has so easily drawn a crowd but Jesus is determined to focus on the meat – Jesus is determined to be the Jesus that he was sent by God to be. He says to his disciples:

“Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.” (Mark 1:38 ESV)

Preaching at the centre, pity at the margins – that’s what this story is about. That’s how Jesus DID IT – that’s how the early church did it – and so obviously that is how we want to do it. But as you probably know that is FAR easier said than done. So the question I want to ask this morning is this:

How can we maintain the correct priority and shape of Christian ministry?

How do we “do like Jesus?” How do we “do like the early church?” How do we keep ourselves

from following the path of the COUNTLESS numbers of churches and denominations that have become little more than soup kitchens and social service providers? How do we protect ourselves from that slippery slope without becoming hard-hearted, love-less, compassionless, pity-less non-Christian people? We don't want to be in either of those ditches, so how do hold the middle road?

Let me suggest 4 insights from the text.

1. Insist upon a plurality of leaders

Now, you say, pastor, where do you see that in the text because all we see in this text is Jesus; the disciples are actually in the way in this story; and that is true, but that is also not terribly surprising. I think we would all be ok admitting that Jesus can do stuff that we cannot. Jesus walked on water – how you doing with that? Jesus could heal people with a word or with a touch – how you doing with that? Now – I know very well that Jesus said to his disciples that they would do greater things than he did through the power of the Holy Spirit – that's in John 14:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. (John 14:12 ESV)

Ok I believe that – but the church has always understood that in a collective sense. There is no individual in the church who can reproduce or even surpass the full range of Jesus' ministry. As a BODY we imitate Christ and that is obviously how the early church understood this. Turn in your Bibles to Acts 6.

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. 2 And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. 3 Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” (Acts 6:1–4 ESV)

What do you see there? What we see is that as the church grew the MARGINS threatened to overpower the mission. The Apostles were preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ! They were praying, they were studying, they were teaching – but of course they were also responding to human needs because they were saved! Obviously they were showing compassion – that's what saved people do! Saved people care about old people and hungry people and sick people and single moms and so all of the sudden the line at the soup kitchen was getting really long and the

Apostles were not getting home to their families and they were started to get pulled out of the study. So what did the church do? They invented a whole new layer of leadership. They appointed 7 new leaders – later called deacons – who would organize the compassionate ministries of the church – SO THAT – the apostles could focus on prayer and preaching.

This is absolutely critical! No one person is generally suited and gifted for effective ministry at both the centre and the margins of Christian mission. Jesus could do it – because Jesus was God in the flesh and uniquely filled with the Holy Spirit – but for us to do that, we are going to have to work together. We are going to have to recognize the variety of gifts that the Spirit gives and learn to lean on and to trust one another.

Let me put this very simply – very few good preachers are natural managers of the soup kitchen. Different gifts – different wiring. A preacher has to have a bit of a hard head to say hard things to God's people – I'm not making that up, that's in the Bible.

When God sent Ezekiel to preach to the people of God he said to him:

I have made your face as hard as their faces, and your forehead as hard as their foreheads. 9 Like emery harder than flint have I made your forehead. Fear them not, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house. (Ezekiel 3:8–9 ESV)

The harder your hearts, the firmer the preacher that God sends to you; read into that what you will. Isaiah said that God helped him to maintain a firm face when preaching to the people of Israel. He said:

the Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like a flint (Isaiah 50:7 ESV)

God gives a preacher one type of grace – the grace of determination, the grace of resolve, the grace of dogged ZEAL for the truth and purity of the Gospel – and he gives deacons another type of grace that is just as important to the life of the church – but it is necessarily and categorically different. In a good church you will have leaders who are blessed with both of those necessary graces.

Pity the church that has only one type of leader in their midst. Pity the church that has no zeal for truth for their lamp will soon go out and their reward will not survive the fire of judgment. Pity the church also that has no compassion for the broken, no mercy for the weak, no bread for the hungry and no help for the weary for how will they show themselves sheep on the last day? You need both graces to be operative in your church – in the leadership as in the body general - and you will almost never find both of those gifts well represented in a single, solitary figure. Therefore, as in the early church, you must insist upon a plurality of leaders.

Secondly, you must:

2. Prioritize prayer and preaching

The Bible does not simply say that good ministry includes both prayer and preaching on the one hand AND compassion and benevolence on the other – no it says that one has priority over the other. Jesus did not come to preach AND to heal in equal measure. There is no doubt that this is the primary message Mark is trying to communicate in the passage we have read. R.T. France says for example:

“Mark does not allow us to picture Jesus as a travelling ‘healer’ with a set technique, but as a man of *exousia* (authority) who responds as may be appropriate to different needs as he meets them.”¹

Do you see how this story builds on the story we looked at last week? Last week Pastor Levi spoke to us about how Jesus was uniquely ONE WITH AUTHORITY. Mark 1:22 says:

And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. (Mark 1:22 ESV)

Jesus had AN AUTHORITATIVE MESSAGE and his mission was to PROCLAIM THAT MESSAGE throughout Israel. That is why he came! That was his purpose! The healings happened IN RESPONSE to human needs that he met along the way.

Do you see that? Priority and pity – Jesus always kept those things in their proper balance and order.

¹ R.T. France, *The Gospel Of Mark*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 107.

You see the same thing in the early church. The disciples knew that it would be WRONG for them to neglect preaching the Word of God to serve tables – Acts 6:2. They would not allow the margin to overpower the mission. Preaching and prayer must have PRIORITY.

I have observed that if preaching and prayer are not in the driver's seat of a church then they will soon be kicked to the curb. If benevolence and mercy ministries get their hands on the wheel, they will soon occupy the entire vehicle. I could point you to a half a dozen churches in our town where that very thing has happened.

Now practically speaking this means that you have to insist that your pastor dedicate the majority of his time to prayer, study, teaching and preaching. I said before that most effective preachers have a bit of hard head – but it is also true that no one goes into ministry unless they love people. And the truth is most preaching pastors struggle with visitation guilt. They don't go home obsessing over whether or not they studied enough – they go home worried they didn't visit enough. When I get out of my car in the driveway of my house at the end of a work week I am not feeling guilty about my study habits or my teaching times, I'm guilty about hospital visitation. "I forgot to visit so and so", "I didn't have time to write a card for so and so". "I forgot to call so and so". That's what I'm thinking as I walk from my car to my front door. That's where the vast majority of pastor guilt lives. And so if you don't insist that your pastor spend the majority of his time on teaching ministries – he won't. His pastor heart will lead him out of the study and into the coffee shop and down to the hospital and he will feel better but the pulpit will suffer and eventually, if that impulse goes unchecked, the witness of the church will die.

Now I would suggest that to keep a preacher on his knees and in his study so that you have power in the pulpit you need at least 3 things:

1. You need a pastoral care guy like Bill Fyvie. The reason my guilt doesn't get out of hand is because Bill has the visitation so well in hand. The truth is if you could choose between a visit from Bill or a visit from me – you would choose Bill – I would choose Bill – my mother would choose Bill – so our people are well cared for and that gives me peace as a preacher.

2. You need a supportive board of elders and I have that in spades. Just a week or two ago Clyde

Yorke pulled me aside and he said keep studying, keep teaching, keep doing those small groups, keep doing the podcast, keep preaching – stay at it no matter what. Every preacher needs to hear that from his board of elders every once in a while.

3. You need a congregation that takes collective responsibility for visitation and basic care. No one pastor – not even pastor Bill – can care for a church of this size. The elders will have to get involved – and ours do – and the members will have to get involved and ours do.

Everyone has to work together to keep the ministry of prayer and preaching at the centre of the ministry of the church.

Nevertheless, and this brings us to point 3; we must:

3. Respond to human needs

Why did Jesus heal people? There are a couple of answers to that question. There is a sense in which the healings were a part of his ministry of proclamation – that’s why John so often calls them “signs”. They were intended to point back to his preaching. Jesus preached a Gospel that was illustrated, as it were, by healings and acts of compassion. So John will say:

And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. (John 6:2 ESV)

What Mark calls a healing, John calls a sign. John wants us to understand that the healings had a communicative purpose. They were not to be separated from the preaching message of Jesus. They ADORNED the Gospel as it were; so I think its true to say that Jesus had a theological purpose in healing people. He healed people to say: “God is among you”, “salvation is among you”, “the kingdom of God has come”, “sin and death are defeated”, “behold I am making all things new” – there is a MESSAGE inside all of these miracles and that is PART of the reason that Jesus did them – of that there can be no doubt.

However, that isn’t what Mark emphasises. Mark doesn’t DENY that, but Mark does not emphasise that. Mark says:

Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him (Mark 1:41 ESV)

“I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. (Mark 8:2 ESV)

In Marks’ Gospel Jesus meets human needs in miraculous ways because he cares. And the crowds understood this side of Jesus so they began to say him:

have compassion on us and help us. (Mark 9:22 ESV)

And Jesus did. Jesus responded to human need and therefore, to be a follower of Jesus is to respond to human need.

Last week I was at a pastors’ conference in Minnesota. Don’t ask me why they hold Pastors’ Conferences in February in Minnesota – I don’t know, it strikes me as cruel and mean – but there it is – and at this conference one of the sessions was taught by a retired missionary who now teaches missiology at the largest Evangelical seminary in North America. He said this, and this is a direct quote:

“In my experience, Christians who go overseas to make disciples usually end up doing all sorts of things that help to alleviate poverty and human suffering as the natural overflow of the disciple making process. On the other hand, the Christians who go overseas to do something else primarily, never actually get around to making disciples.” Zane Pratt

Are you hearing that? He is saying that if you keep the focus on preaching the Gospel and making disciples you will naturally OVERFLOW in deeds of mercy that alleviate poverty and human suffering – BECAUSE THAT IS WHAT SAVED PEOPLE DO! That is INVARIABLY what saved people do. People who receive the mercy of God in Jesus Christ INVARIABLY show mercy to other people – Jesus SAID that – long before Zane Pratt said that, Jesus said that. Do you remember the parable of the unmerciful servant? Do you remember how that parable ends? The master – who has been merciful to the servant – berates the servant for failing to show mercy in response to his fellow servants. He says:

‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ (Matthew 18:32–33 ESV)

Jesus consistently taught that saved people respond to God’s mercy with mercy towards other

people. If they don't respond that way then they have not received God's mercy. So, God's people **MUST ALWAYS** be on the lookout for ways to respond to God's mercy in acts of mercy towards other people. That's not a program – that's a way of life.

Do you remember the parable of the Good Samaritan? What is the point of that parable? Real believers love their neighbours by responding to human need. The Good Samaritan did not start a ministry for beat up travellers – he just saw a human being in his path with an obvious need that he was positioned to meet – and so he did. And so we do! Now, we have a clear mission – make disciples of all nations by preaching the Gospel, baptizing folks and teaching them to obey all that Jesus said – but as we go – we overflow. We overflow in **NATURAL, INSTINCTIVE, RESPONSIVE** compassion and mercy to those we meet along the way.

And yet – and here is the thing - we **CONTINUE ON OUR WAY**. We have to know where to draw the line and when to get back to our mission.

4. Know where to draw the line

Just like Jesus did in our story. The disciples come looking for him and they tell him about all the people who have **LINED UP** for physical healing and Jesus says to them:

“Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.” (Mark 1:38 ESV)

At some point everybody has to decide are we going to be a church or a social service provider? Are we going to be a hospital for souls or a hospital for the sick? Are we going to prioritize physical suffering or eternal suffering? What are we going to care about **MOST**? Because you can't care about everything **EQUALLY**.

You can't! For the simple reason that there is no **END TO HUMAN SUFFERING IN A FALLEN WORLD**. David Wells said that; he said:

"Needs, in a therapeutic society, multiply faster than fruit flies. No sooner is one need met than two take its place."

If I could fix that, I would just say “needs in a fallen world multiply faster than fruit flies! No

sooner is one need met than two take its place” that’s why Jesus said, ‘the poor you will always have with you’ (Mark 14:7). Trying to rid the world of needs is like trying to dip the ocean dry with a teacup. It simply cannot be done. You cannot spend your whole life addressing the FRUIT of human suffering – you must go for the ROOT of human suffering which is human SIN and for that JOB YOU NEED THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST!

That is why preaching the Gospel is the MOST MERCIFUL THING YOU CAN DO. Mark makes that point in chapter 6 of his Gospel. He says that when Jesus:

went ashore he saw a great crowd, and **he had compassion on them**, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. **And he began to teach them many things.** (Mark 6:34 ESV)

Jesus cared about all suffering – especially eternal suffering. Therefore he knew when it was time to STOP healing and to STOP meeting physical needs in order to address eternal needs.

You are not following Jesus if you are not prepared to do the same.

O Father God, will you help us to do these difficult things? Will you keep us on the centre road! Will you help us to PREACH and to PRAY in a desperate battle for human souls in the city of Orillia? Lord God there are 30,000 people heading towards a Christ-less eternity within 10 km of this place – would you put a burden in our hearts for those souls? Would you make us discontent with any friendship that is not currently being salted with Gospel conversation? Would you make us prayerful? O God, every week we put names in this register – would you make us faithful to PRAY for those names and then to PREACH TO THOSE NAMES? And Lord would you keep our eyes open to the needs of the people you place in our path? Help us to see them as you see them and to respond to them with kindness and compassion. Make us merciful and keep us purposeful – O God, we ask, in Jesus’ name, amen.

Amen. Jody, would you come and lead us?