

FIRST LESSONS FOR DISCIPLES

Mark 1:1

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I'm always concerned that the Word of God is more than just listened to or something that is far more than just on the outside of us, but which becomes a controlling influence in our lives by being within. Three opportunities a week are given each person here to really be involved with the Word of God: first, through personal study; second, through group sharing; and third, through the sermons on Sunday morning. I'll be speaking from the first verse of the Gospel of Mark today because our groups will be beginning this week, and they'll be studying together the whole first chapter. Rather than letting my sermon be the discussion point for the groups by being ahead of the groups, I'd rather that the groups be ahead of me so there's an opportunity for each of us to interact with the Word of God and find that which is fresh and meaningful individually.

I want what happened within the Early Church as described in several passages in the Book of Acts to happen within our Body. "They devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Notice the word "devoted"—not casually, not occasionally, but devoted. In Acts 6:7, "The word of God increased [and what happens when the Word of God increases?],...the number of disciples multiplied...greatly." How does the Word of God increase? It increases two ways. It increases by its impact on our life and, as that Word impacts our life, inevitably it spills out onto others as well. In Acts 12:24, "The word of God grew and multiplied." In Acts 13:49, "The word of the Lord spread through of the whole region." In Acts 19:20, in Ephesus, "So the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power."

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Today: Mark 1:1—the beginning of the Gospel, “The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (NIV).

As we are sharing together in our individual study and our group studies through the Gospel of Mark, there are six words that I hope you become very acquainted with in your personal study. They are the most important words of all education, for practically every question begins with one of these words: what, who, where, when, why and how. The sermon this morning from Mark 1:1 is really shaped around those six words, so by way of example I might share with you a Bible study pattern. It was Kipling who said, “I have six honest serving men. They taught me all I know. Their names are what and why and when and where and how and who.” Take these six words. Keep them in a notebook before you continually so you may exercise these questions as you read the Word of God. I would encourage you in your personal study to keep a notebook and write down with a pen or a pencil what you are hearing God say to you. I would even encourage you, if you like, to take notes on the sermons so there might be a lasting impact of the Word as we interact with it.

I. The first of these questions: What? What is the Gospel of Mark?

Mark really tries to tell us—doesn't he?—in that opening phrase, “The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ the Son of God.” To me, Mark is saying the gospel is two things. One thing that should always be kept in mind is that the gospel is the good news which is always just beginning. And another thing is that the gospel is “the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

A. The gospel is always just beginning. The good news. I think it is very probable that when Mark had finished writing his Gospel, he then wrote verse one. Verse one is really a capsule of what the whole Gospel contains. What Mark is simply saying in this Gospel is, “I'm going to tell

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you the earthly ministry: events of the earthly ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. But I want you to understand that all I have told you is simply the beginning of what He began to do.” Therefore, as he tells the beginning of Jesus, we will find him moving in his sermon by noting how Jesus began, but he doesn’t show how Jesus followed up. We see him in chapter 1 casting a demon out of a man in a Capernaum synagogue, but we never know what happened to the man after that. We see him at the end of chapter 1 healing a leper, but we’re never told what happened to the man after that. In chapter 2, we see the good news beginning in the healing of a paralytic, but we never know what happened to him after that. In Mark 5 we see Jesus healing a man who was on the mountainside, possessed by devils, but we never hear what happened to him after that. We see a daughter—Jairus’ daughter—who was raised from death, but the good news simply begins and no follow-up is given.

It is enough that the good news gets a start, because once it gets a start in our life it will go on and on being the good news. The Gospel of Mark in reality is simply the beginning of all that Jesus began to do and teach. If you read this Gospel audibly to yourself or to a group as the early Christians did, it takes about an hour and fifteen minutes to an hour and a half to read. It’s amazing that the story of Jesus can be told within that short period of time. It kind of puts me under conviction for my long sermons. That’s one of the things I’ve been getting from the Gospel of Mark—the ability to compact the essence of truth itself within that short time frame. This Gospel which moves along at a rapid clip is always impressing us with, “This is just the beginning.” It is particularly known by the aspect that it’s told as a story more to be heard than as something which is to be read. It is as if we are hearing Peter or Mark preach about the life of Jesus. Two out of three sentences in this book begin with the word “and.” Sixty-eight out of one hundred and sixteen paragraphs begin with the word “and,” which is a way of saying there is

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movement of action, there is rapidity and Jesus is always going on, on, there's much for Him to do. It's only the beginning.

In this story of the beginning of Jesus' ministry and its impact on earth, which has gone on now for twenty centuries, Mark sometimes talks about Jesus as though He were continually physically present on earth. He's spiritually present. But Mark uses what is called in grammar the "historic present tense." Sometimes in the Gospel when he should be using the past tense to describe what Jesus did, he lapses to the present tense instead while talking about things. For example, in Mark 2:17 (and the translations don't always bring this out), "When Jesus heard it He says to them [not "He said to them" but "He says to them"] those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick." In Mark 11:1-2, "When they come [not "came" but "come"] near (to) Jerusalem at Bethany at the Mount of Olives, He sends two of His disciples and says to them." Mark lapses into those moments where it is as if Jesus is still speaking in the present. We must see Jesus continually in the present. I don't like to talk about Him in the past because He's not necessarily in the past. He is in the "now," "here," "in this moment."

So what is the gospel? The gospel is just beginning, always getting underway in our lives.

B. The gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Mark, in his introduction, uses three words to describe the one whom he is writing about. He uses the word "Jesus" which means "Jehovah saves" for that is the human name, the earthly name of Jesus given to Him upon the instructions of the angels, by his parents. Jesus, the man. And in Mark you see Jesus, the man.

You see glimpses of Him that are not picked up in some of the other Gospels. You see, for example, in Mark 1:41 when He sees the leper He is "moved with compassion." In chapter 3:5 He is in a synagogue. There is the opposition, the Pharisees and the Herodians daring Him to

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heal a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. So Mark says, “Jesus with anger looked around.” The implication is He eyeball to eyeballed everybody in the crowd. He looked around with anger—Jesus, the man.

He’s the man in Mark 5:38 who is asleep in the middle of a storm at sea. In Mark 10:21, a rich ruler comes asking Him what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus looks at the man and Mark is the only Gospel to tell us, “Having looked at him, He loved him.” This great one whom Mark is writing about in Mark 11:12 is also the man who can be hungry. So we see in Mark, the man.

We see also in Mark, Jesus not only as the man in the Gospel of Mark, but we also see Him as the “Christ,” the technical term meaning the “Messiah,” the anointed one. It is this question which the High Priest asked Jesus at His arraignment “Are You the Christ the Son of the blessed?” It is the question which Jesus asked His disciples in Mark 8 “‘Who do you say that I am?’ and Peter says, ‘Thou art the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed one of God.’” In the Old Testament, kings were anointed for their office, priests were anointed for their office and sometimes prophets were anointed as was Elisha. But in Jesus, the role of king, priest, and prophet, all come together and His anointing, the descent of the Spirit upon Him, shows that He is the one who has been given the mandate and the right by God to rule and be recognized as God’s special one, the anointed.

But He’s also the Son of God. Mark makes it very clear throughout his Gospel that the demons were the first to recognize His identity. Sometimes the disciples were in the dark and the crowds were in the dark and the opposition was in the dark. But evil always knew who He was. And the Gospel closes near the end with a statement by a Roman centurion as Jesus dies upon the cross, “Truly, Thou art the Son of God.”

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So Mark tells us the gospel's beginning and the gospel is about the human Jesus, who is also the Messiah who is also divine Son of God.

II. Who is the writer of this Gospel of Mark? is the second question to be asked.

You'll notice in the Gospel that he's not named. There is a title which says, "The Gospel according to Mark," but that is an insert put in at a later time after the Gospel was written. It certainly reflects perhaps the best of church tradition. But the first thing we should notice is the Gospel writer who tells the story is not named. Neither is the Gospel writer of Matthew. Neither is the Gospel writer of Luke. Neither is the Gospel writer of John. All of them, in the course of their story, take pains to keep their name out as the writer. There's something that comes across to me in that regard. They're in effect saying to us by example, "The story of Jesus is so great that no one person ought to take the credit for telling it. It belongs to so many other eyewitnesses. Who am I that my name should be lifted up by the side of His?" So there is anonymity in a very beautiful and powerful way. I think of that at times when I see the rush toward recognition, which can be practiced even within the Christian church, where names have to be put in letters three feet high. There is no such characteristic on the part of the Gospel writers. Humility, a recognition that, if they are writing the greatest story of all, one thing they could do to complement that story is to let Christ be lifted up and let themselves decrease.

Church tradition tells us that this Gospel was written by John Mark and there's probably every reason to believe that he is the writer of the Gospel. A second century Christian by the name of Papias said, "Mark really wrote down what Jesus preached." And if you read Mark with the understanding that the influence of the apostle Peter is behind it, then it makes a lot of sense. There are a lot of eyewitness details in it. For example, it is only in the Gospel of Mark that in the storm at sea it is noted that Jesus was asleep on a pillow in the back of the boat. Only Mark

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has “the pillow” there, and maybe it is that Peter, in telling the story, had never forgotten that personal eyewitness glimpse of Jesus resting on a pillow in the back of the boat. It certainly moves with the idea that we would have of Peter, rapid action, moving right along.

John Mark was a person who came from a home prayer and Bible study group, something I hope we all want to have within our homes or within the atmosphere of this church in the next three and a half months. We first run across him in Acts 12, where his mother is the hostess at a prayer meeting in the Early Church in which they are asking for Peter’s release from prison. His mother evidently is quite well-off, for she has a hired maid; she has a courtyard kept by a gate, which is symbolic of a home which had plenty of room and which indicates some measure of wealth. And it was out of that small matrix, that small prayer and Bible study group, that John Mark first heard the stories of Jesus and had the chance to rub shoulder-to-shoulder with the friends of Jesus.

I think of the home Bible studies we are beginning, one of the greatest things we can do is to have our children also sitting on the floor listening to us—if they’re old enough to listen—as we struggle with the text of the Scripture and talk about it and relate to it and testify together and pray together. There is something about the Christian life that is more “caught” than “taught.” We ought to be concerned with the gospel being “caught” by our young people. They “catch” it by seeing how we relate to it.

John Mark caught the Gospel. Some theorize that it is John Mark’s house where the Last Supper was held; and it is John Mark, the young man, who is lying down in a room beneath the upper room and who hears a door slam and Judas walk out. Then an hour or two later, he hears Jesus and the disciples go out. And John Mark can’t get to sleep, so he gets up and wraps a sheet around him and disappears off into the night. And from the Garden of Gethsemane, he sees the

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soldiers coming to arrest Jesus. He almost lifts a hand of protest but then begins to run. A soldier grabs him, pulls the sheet away from him and the young man flees into the night, naked. A wild story but part of the two unique verses of the Gospel of Mark—14:51–52—that a young man had followed Him and run off into the night naked. Who else could this be but John Mark himself? Perhaps we could make that kind of connection.

We see John Mark springing from the home Bible study group, the young man who is attracted to the disciples of Jesus. But quickly, as we look through the Book of Acts, we see that John Mark becomes a disciple who fails the Lord very miserably. It is he who is taken by Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary tour and, as they approach the beginning of their experience in the Asia Minor hinterlands, it is John Mark who turns around and goes home and leaves Paul and Barnabas to continue their missionary journey. Paul is so ticked off at the quitter that later, when he begins his second missionary journey, he refuses to take John Mark with him. Maybe John Mark was afraid of the malaria-ridden fields that he would have to cross. Or maybe he was afraid of the robbers in the mountains. Or maybe he was just plain homesick for mama. But he went back and he failed. And when Barnabas, his cousin, wanted to take him on another missionary trip, Paul said, “Nothing doing! Get that guy out of here.” And they had sharp contention and separated. But I thank the Lord that there are people in the church that are like Barnabas who are willing to give others a second chance. They have a name like “Son of Encouragement.” That’s what Barnabas’ name meant. Because someone cared to help a person who had fallen down, Mark is a Gospel writer and we have his wonderful, compelling, story of Jesus. He’s a person who failed but made good, a kind of person we can all identify with.

It’s later in Paul’s ministry that we see him reconciled to Mark. As Paul writes Colossians and Philemon, Mark is with him as he writes. Paul writes to Timothy—in 2 Timothy 4:11, “Get Mark

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and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry.” And Mark appears also to be the confidant of Peter, for in 1 Peter 5, Peter calls Mark “my son.” One writer has said, “In Mark’s Gospel we meet the man who failed and tried again, the man who by a friend’s help rebuilt a testimony and left that testimony in a deathless book.”

Who wrote it? Unnamed. But perhaps John Mark.

III. Where is this Gospel written? That’s the third question to be asked.

That’s the third question appropriate to all Bible study. The Gospel is probably written either in Rome or to the Roman Christians. It has that distinctive flavor which would appeal to a Roman audience. Matthew wrote to Jews. Therefore, he began with a genealogy showing that Jesus was related to David and therefore the heir to David’s throne. Luke wrote to all mankind, the universal man. He begins by showing the poverty of Jesus’ birth, the nativity events and how Jesus’ genealogy can be traced back to Adam. John wrote later, perhaps to give a philosophical overview of who Jesus was to the cultured mind. So he starts describing Jesus by the fact that He preexisted, He was always God, always with God.

But Mark is writing to a special kind of audience, the Roman audience. They were not concerned so much about the parentage of their leading generals and mighty conquerors. They were not concerned so much about who their mom and dad were. They were concerned with the fact, “Does this guy get the job done? Is he a man of action? Does he back up his word?” And, if a guy was good, he could make it. So Mark, writing to that Roman mind, doesn’t tell us about Jesus’ genealogy or preexistence. He simply starts out writing right smack-dab in the middle of Jesus’ ministry by noting how Jesus is introduced on the pages of human history with the baptism of John, and zap! We’re into the story.

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He's writing to the Roman mind, keen on action. And indeed as you go through the Gospel of Mark you notice time and time again the action of this Gospel. We see the Jesus who does something. The word "immediately" which is translated variously as "immediately", "henceforth" or "thenceforth", is used some forty times within the short compass of this Gospel. Not only that, but there is a minimum of what Jesus says in the Gospel. In the totality of Jesus' ministry as represented in all four Gospels, there are some thirty parables, which Jesus teaches—parables of enough length to be considered parables. Of these thirty parables, Mark only has four of the thirty, whereas Matthew has fifteen and Luke has nineteen. But when it comes to miracles, of which there are thirty-five in total in Christ's ministry, Mark has eighteen miracles. And Matthew and Luke—much longer Gospels—only relate twenty. He shows Jesus as the man of action. If there's anything we need to catch afresh from this Gospel, it's that same theme. Jesus is with us, Jesus is going on ahead, Jesus is doing, He went about doing good.

IV. The fourth question: When is it written?

The best estimates are that this Gospel of Mark is the first Gospel to have been written. And that it probably can safely be dated before 64 A.D. Two important things happened in 64 A.D. and 70 A.D. The important thing that happened in 64 A.D. is: official persecution by the emperor broke out against the Christians in Rome. And the thing that happened in 70 A.D.: the city of Jerusalem was destroyed. This Gospel was written before both of these events but nevertheless in a time when Christians had really been suffering for their faith, for their identification with Christ. Mark therefore shows Jesus as the heroic Christ, as the one who can face adversity and as the one who can face it triumphantly and calmly. It is on the Sea of Galilee that the disciples see the presence of Jesus of Nazareth. They were terrified but He is there, and the Christians of Rome can also see Jesus there in their terrifying moments. And in our energy crisis, we can also see Jesus there.

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The Gospel of Mark shows us the calm and serenity of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. As those moments are rapidly ticking on for His arrest and crucifixion, He calmly faced the headwind of the cross. What an inspiration! These early Christians to whom Mark is writing were meeting by and large in small home groups and, therefore, this Mark tells of Jesus who ministered not only to the masses but who took great time with the few and with the individual.

V. Why is this Gospel written? The fifth question.

There are many reasons. Perhaps it would be best just to single out two. Mark wants to show us in his Gospel that Jesus is both Lord and servant.

A. Jesus is Lord. My little boy has picked up a question that he has asked me a couple of times. He's four years old. He says, "Daddy, who's boss around this house?" Then he says, "Daddy, you're boss!"

Mark is really answering the question who's boss in the universe. Caesar? No, behind Caesar there's a God far superior to Caesar. Jesus is Lord. So, throughout this Gospel, we see Jesus acting with authority, teaching with authority, dying with authority, being raised from the dead with authority.

B. But He is more than Lord. He is servant, slave. The Roman mind would have had a difficult time understanding this. Men who were great were served. They were not to serve or be a slave themselves. But with Jesus, it was different. One of the key verses in the Gospel of Mark is Mark 10:44–45, where Jesus says, "Whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 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." Jesus the servant.

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It is in the Gospel of Mark alone that Jesus is called “the carpenter”. Were it not for Mark, we wouldn’t know that He served as a carpenter until He began His ministry. Matthew says He was the Son of a carpenter, but it’s up to Mark to tell us He was a carpenter, a servant.

I was shopping at Christmas time and ran across this beautiful little painting of Jesus at the carpenter bench, fashioning a little boat for a boy. Somehow that said so much to me about Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth—how in the small and menial things He served the children and cared enough to make a boat for a boy. We got it and it’s hanging over our little boy’s bed. I hope he’ll get the idea of Jesus through this reminder which is before him. Jesus is the carpenter. Jesus is the servant of us all. He has paved the way by showing that true greatness lies in service. How may I apply this Gospel to my life?

That is always the final question. “How do I take all of this and reduce it to my experience?” is a question we should always be asking. As we go through this Gospel of Mark, I think you will see with me that there are at least five groups of people around Jesus in the Gospel.

The first group of people I see around Jesus is the opposition—those against Him—which consists of religious leadership, political leadership, hometown feeling and sometimes even opposed family.

A second group around Jesus is indifferent to Jesus. Like the soldiers, for example, who don’t really know what they’re doing to the Son of God. There are many others who never turn out for His healings or see them, or never really listen to His teachings. Indifferent, they let life go by without apprehending Him.

Then there are those in the Gospel of Mark—a third group—who are amazed. And Mark likes to use that word, “amazed.” They were all amazed at what He said or they were all amazed at what He did. These were the individuals who could perhaps be typified by what’s in Herod’s song in

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“Jesus Christ, Superstar”: “Walk across my swimming pool. Turn my water into wine.” They were there to see the miracles. They were amazed. But that’s the end of it.

A fourth group was the needy gathered around Christ. Those who needed healing, like a leper, like a blind man, like a paralytic. Those who needed help like a demonic or like Jairus’ daughter who was dead. The needy were clustered around Jesus.

There is also a fifth group clustered around Jesus in the Gospel of Mark: the followers. Those who are walking along because they have become convinced that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. And they wanted to give everything to Him.

As you look at your life and as I look at mine with respect to these groupings of people... Where would you place yourself?

The crowds have a spectator religion, a once a week involvement in the Christian faith. A casual nodding acquaintance with the Word of God. A kind of casualness in prayer. God wants to draw every one of us in this room out of a spectator faith into an active faith of sharing and study and prayer.

Then there’s the faith of the needy that worship Jesus and serve Him out of what they can receive from Him. But that is eclipsed by a far more mature faith, which asks not “What can Christ give to me?” but, “What can I offer Him? How can I serve Him? What can I give to someone else on His behalf? The Gospel of Mark is meant to be read and studied and prayed over and understood from the perspective that true discipleship is to emerge.

What? Who? Where? When? Why? How? These are questions to ask continually as we look at this Gospel.

Closing Prayer

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Our Lord, we give thanks that You have appeared in life and that we have this Gospel, the good news. We're thankful that it is good news—good news for any year, good news for any person, good news at any age. You have come into life. And Lord, I pray that as we enter now into a moment of commitment and dedication to study, that Your Spirit would be very much at work creating new levels of commitment and discipleship in our midst. That Your Word might grow and increase mightily and prevail. Through Jesus our Lord we pray. Amen.