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• EAST AFRICA •

# MARK—PART 1

by

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Many scholars consider Mark to be the first gospel written. Church father Papias attributed the book to Mark, and said his information came from Peter. This was not disputed in the early church, and various data render this plausible. The book is action-oriented. It is one of the “synoptic” gospels along with Matthew and Luke, because those three gospels contain many of the same stories, in similar sequence, and often with similar wording. Although it is the shortest of the gospels, it is often the most detailed, with many Jewish customs explained for gentile readers. Mark shows how Jesus fulfills the OT prophecies of the coming Messiah and is, as Mark states in the very first verse, “the Son of God.”

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## **I. Introduction**

### **A. The Author**

Mark, is otherwise known in the Bible as “John who was also called Mark” (**Acts 12:12, 25; 15:37**). He was the son of a prominent woman named Mary of Jerusalem (**Acts 12:12**), because many were gathered at her house when Peter was imprisoned in Jerusalem, and Peter went there when he was miraculously released from prison **Acts 12:1-19**). He was also the cousin of Barnabas (**Col 4:10**), who was himself a man of means (**Acts 4:36-37**). Mark accompanied Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey (**Acts 13:5, 13**) but then left, resulting in Paul’s refusing to take him on his second missionary journey, thus causing a rift between Paul and Barnabas (**Acts 15:36-40**). Paul and Mark eventually reconciled. Mark was with Paul during his first Roman imprisonment (**Phlm 24; Col 4:10**), and Paul specifically sent for Mark during his second Roman imprisonment (**2 Tim 4:11**).

In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius says this about the author of Mark’s gospel: “‘This also the presbyter said: Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not in order, whatsoever he remembered of the things said or done by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterward, as I said, he followed Peter, who adapted his teaching to the needs of his hearers, but with no intention of giving a connected account of the Lord’s discourses, so that Mark committed no error while he thus wrote some things as he remembered them. For he was careful of one thing, not to omit any of the things which he had heard, and not to state any of them falsely.’ These things are related by Papias concerning Mark.” (Eusebius 1890: 3.39.15) The “presbyter” is probably the apostle John, from whom Papias (the Bishop of Hierapolis) learned.

“That Mark wrote the second Gospel under the influence of Peter, or as a record of what he had heard from him, is the universal tradition of antiquity. . . . Justin Martyr refers to Mark’s Gospel under the name “Memoirs . . . of Peter” (*Dial. c. Tryph.* 106).” (Ibid.: 2.15n.390). Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and other church fathers all confirm Mark’s authorship of his gospel and his close association with Peter (Carson and Moo 2005: 173). Certain internal evidence within the gospel of Mark suggests this, including: the prominence of Peter in the book; the particularly critical light in which the disciples, and particularly Peter himself, are held (which suggests that only an apostle like Peter could have been so critical); the fact that Mark’s gospel follows a pattern similar to that found in Peter’s sermon in **Acts 10:36-41**; and the fact that in **1 Pet 5:13** Peter calls Mark “*my son*,” thus indicating the close association between them.

A rich church tradition indicates that, after the deaths of Peter and Paul in Rome, Mark went to Alexandria, Egypt, established a church there, brought many people to salvation in Christ, and was martyred there in AD 68 (McBirnie 1973: 254-57; Eusebius 1890: 2.16.1n.394)

### **B. Date**

Mark’s gospel has had dates in the AD 40s, 50s, 60s, and 70s proposed for it (see Carson and Moo 2005: 179-82). A Spanish Jesuit Catholic priest, papyrologist and biblical scholar, Jose O’Callaghan Martinez, claimed that three papyrus fragments found in Qumran among the Dead Sea scrolls were portions of the gospel of Mark. If so, this papyrus, “established by scientific methods as having been in a Palestinian library in 50 A.D., indicates that Mark’s gospel may well have been in circulation within about a dozen years at the time of Jesus’ death” (McBirnie 1973: 251). Most scholars dispute O’Callaghan’s claim (Carson and Moo 2005: 179-80; “Jose O’Callaghan Martinez” 2021: 7Q5). Consequently, most scholars date the book from the mid-50s to 60s.

## **II. Structure and Outline**

D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo point out the importance of Mark as a writer and this gospel: “Mark is the creator of the gospel in its literary form—an interweaving of biographical and kerygmatic [preaching of the gospel] themes that perfectly conveys the sense of meaning of that unique figure in human history, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. The newer approaches to Mark as literature have revealed the artistry and power of Mark’s narrative. . . . By reminding Christians that their salvation depends on the death and resurrection of Christ, Mark has inextricably tied Christian faith to the reality of historical events.” (Carson and Moo 2005: 192)

## A. Structure

As noted above, the organization of Mark parallels Peter's preaching in **Acts 10**:

<b>Acts 10</b>	<b>Mark</b>
"good news" (v. 36)	"the beginning of the good news" (1:1)
"God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit" (v. 38)	the coming of the Spirit on Jesus (1:10)
"beginning in Galilee" (v. 37)	the Galilean ministry (1:16–8:26)
"He went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil" (v. 38)	Jesus' ministry focuses on healings and exorcisms (1:16–8:26)
"We are witnesses of everything he did . . . in Jerusalem" (v. 39)	the ministry in Jerusalem (chs. 11-14)
"They killed him by hanging him, on a cross" (v. 39)	focus on the death of Christ (ch. 15)
"God raised him from the dead on the third day" (v. 40)	"He has risen! He is not here" (16:6)

The structure of the book itself can largely be divided into two main parts as follows:

<b>Prologue (1:1-13):</b> John the Baptist; Jesus' baptism; Jesus' temptations by Satan in the wilderness
<b>Public ministry in Galilee (1:14–8:26):</b> calling of the Twelve; teaching; miracles and healings; the focus is on the uniqueness of Jesus
<b>The road to Jerusalem and beyond (8:27–16:20):</b> predictions of his death, resurrection, and second coming; the Transfiguration; teaching and healings; ministry in Jerusalem; betrayal, arrest, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection

## B. Overview

The book of Mark can basically be divided into two halves: **1:1–8:26** and **8:27–16:20**. This first half of the book focuses on Jesus' ministry in Galilee, including his announcement of the kingdom, his calling of the twelve disciples, the ministry and death of John the Baptist, and Jesus' teaching and miracles, which bring about opposition of the religious leaders and disbelief among many, but all of which help to answer the question, "*Who then is this?*" (4:41).

## C. Outline

The book may be outlined in detail as follows:

### I. Prologue (1:1-13)

- A. Ministry of John the Baptist (1:1-8)
- B. Baptism of Jesus (1:9-11)
- C. Temptation by Satan (1:12-13)

### II. Jesus' Ministry in Galilee (1:14–8:26)

- A. Announcement of the Kingdom (1:14-15)
- B. Calling the first disciples (1:16-20)
- C. Healings and exorcisms (1:21-45)
  - 1. Jesus teaches in the synagogue and heals a man with an unclean spirit (1:21-28)
  - 2. Peter's mother-in-law (1:29-31)
  - 3. Many demon-possessed and sick people (1:32-34)
  - 4. Jesus preaches in Galilee (1:35-39)
  - 5. A leper (1:40-45)
- D. Opposition to Jesus begins and solidifies (2:1-3:6)
  - 1. Jesus heals a paralytic (2:1-12)
  - 2. The calling of Levi (Matthew) (2:13-17)
  - 3. Jesus and fasting: the significance of Christ (2:18-22)
  - 4. Jesus' and the Sabbath (2:23–3:6)
    - a. Eating grain on the Sabbath (2:23-28)
    - b. Jesus heals on the Sabbath (3:1-6)
- E. Jesus heals many with afflictions and unclean spirits (3:7-12)
- F. Choosing the Twelve (3:13-19)
- G. Disbelief, opposition, and Christ's true family (3:20-35)
  - 1. Jesus' earthly family think he is mad (3:20-21)
  - 2. The scribes accuse Jesus of being possessed by the devil (3:22-30)

3. Christ defines his true family (3:31-35)

**I. Jesus teaches in parables (4:1-34)**

1. Parable of the sower and the soils (4:1-20)

2. What is hidden will be revealed, and by your standard you will be judged (4:21-25)

3. Parable of the seed, growth, and harvest (4:26-29)

4. Parable of the mustard seed (4:30-34)

**J. Jesus calms the sea (4:35-41)**

**K. Exorcisms and healings (5:1-43)**

1. Gerasene demoniac (5:1-20)

2. Jairus's daughter and the woman with the discharge of blood (5:21-43)

**L. Jesus in Nazareth (6:1-6)**

**M. The Twelve are sent out and return (6:7-13, 30-32)**

**N. The fate of John the Baptist (6:14-29)**

**O. Miracles: feeding 5000; Jesus walks on water; and healings (6:33-56)**

1. Feeding 5000 (6:33-44)

2. Jesus walks on water (6:45-52)

3. Healings at Gennesaret (6:53-56)

**P. Traditions and what really defiles people (7:1-23)**

1. Jesus disputes the Pharisees concerning traditions (7:1-13)

2. Jesus says that defilement is from within (7:14-23)

**Q. Introducing ministry to Gentiles (7:24-8:10)**

1. Exorcising a Syrophenician woman's daughter in Tyre (7:24-30)

2. Healing a deaf man in Decapolis (7:31-37)

3. Feeding 4000 in Decapolis (8:1-10)

**R. Testing, lack of understanding, and healing (8:11-26)**

1. Pharisees ask for a sign (8:11-13)

2. The disciples do not understand (8:14-21)

3. Healing a blind man (8:22-26)

**III. Jesus' Identity and Destiny are revealed (8:27-9:13)**

**A. Jesus is the Messiah (the Christ) (8:27-30)**

**B. Jesus will be killed but will rise again (8:31-33)**

**C. The cost of discipleship (8:34-38)**

**D. The Transfiguration (9:1-13)**

**IV. The road to Jerusalem (9:14-14:9)**

**A. Miraculous healing of boy possessed by a demon (9:14-29)**

**B. Teaching on his death/resurrection, discipleship, and divorce (9:30-10:16)**

1. Jesus foretells his death and resurrection (9:30-32)

2. Who is the greatest in the Kingdom (9:33-37)

3. The nature of discipleship (9:38-50)

4. Jesus teaches on divorce (10:1-12)

4. Jesus blesses little children (10:13-16)

**C. The rich young ruler (10:17-31)**

**D. Teaching on his death/resurrection and discipleship (10:32-45)**

1. Jesus again foretells his death and resurrection (10:32-34)

2. James and John seek priority (10:35-40)

3. The nature of true discipleship and basis for priority (10:41-45)

**E. Entry into Jerusalem (10:46-11:11)**

1. Jesus heals blind Bartimaeus on the way to Jerusalem (10:46-52)

2. The triumphal entry into Jerusalem (11:1-11)

**V. Jesus' Ministry in Jerusalem (11:12-13:37)**

**A. Signs of Jesus' Messiahship (11:12-26)**

1. Cursing the fig tree (11:12-14, 20-26)

2. Driving money changers from the temple (11:15-19)

- B. Jesus' authority, parable, and teaching (11:27–12:44)**
  - 1. The source of Jesus' authority is questioned (11:27-33)
  - 2. The parable of the vine-growers (12:1-12)
  - 3. "Render to God the things that are God's" (12:13-17)
  - 4. The resurrection and marriage in the resurrection (12:18-27)
  - 5. The greatest commandment (12:28-34)
  - 6. Christ is the Lord (12:35-37)
  - 7. Warning against the hypocrisy of the scribes (12:38-40)
  - 8. The widow's mites (12:41-44)
- C. The Olivet Discourse (13:1-37)**

## **VI. Preparation for Death; Betrayal; Crucifixion; and Resurrection (14:1–16:20)**

- A. Jesus is anointed with costly perfume (14:1-9)**
- B. Judas' betrayal of Jesus (14:10-11)**
- C. The Last Supper (14:12-31)**
- D. In the Garden of Gethsemane (14:32-42)**
- E. Jesus' betrayal and arrest (14:43-52)**
- F. Jesus' trials before the Sanhedrin and Pontius Pilate (14:53–15:20)**
  - 1. The Sanhedrin (14:53-72)
  - 2. Pontius Pilate (15:1-15)
  - 3. Mocked by soldiers (15:16-20a)
- G. The crucifixion and burial (15:20b-47)**
- H. The resurrection (16:1-8)**
- I. Post-resurrection appearances (16:9-20)**

## **III. Commentary on Mark**

**1:1-8:** <sup>1</sup>*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.* <sup>2</sup>*As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, <sup>3</sup>the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" <sup>4</sup>John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup>Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. <sup>8</sup>I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

### **vv. 1-8—The beginning of the gospel and John the Baptist**

The gospel of Jesus Christ—who he is and what he came to do—had been prophesied hundreds of years before in the OT. In this section, Mark makes this clear and shows how those prophecies were being fulfilled.

#### **1. v. 1—The Gospel**

"*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*" implies that this is the account of the inauguration of the gospel, but the consummation is yet to come. Jesus speaks of the time of that consummation (the second coming of Christ) in **Mark 13** (often called the Olivet Discourse). Consequently, **v. 1** may be seen as referring to or the title of the entire book. On the other hand, R. A. Guelich points out that "the common Jewish formula for a scriptural citation, 'as has been written by,' . . . always links what has gone before to what follows" (Guelich 1992: 513). In other words, **v. 1** should not end with a period but a comma. Consequently, since Isaiah's promise underlies the coming of John the Baptist, "the beginning" can be viewed as "the preliminaries to the ministry" of Jesus, including the ministry of John the Baptist, Jesus' baptism, his temptation by Satan in the wilderness, and perhaps his initial proclamation in **1:14-15** (see Carson and Moo 2005: 169; Guelich 1992: 513). The rest of "*the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*" would thereby be the story about Jesus in the rest of the book.

The gospel is "*the gospel of Jesus Christ.*" He did not just proclaim the gospel but personifies the gospel: Jesus *is* the gospel. The word "gospel" itself is a Greek word (*euaggelion*) which means "good news" (Danker 2000: *euaggelion*, 402; Green and McKnight 1992: 282). "The Greek term 'gospel' (ev-angelion)

distinguished the Christian message from that of other religions. An ‘ev-angel’ was news of a great historical event, such as a victory in war or the ascension of a new king, that changed the listeners’ condition and required a response from the listener. So the gospel is news of what God has done to reach us. It is not advice about what we must do to reach God.” (Keller n.d.: “The Gospel,” 1) In other words, the gospel is all about who Jesus is and what Jesus has done.

Specifically, God is holy, just, righteous, and good (**Gen 18:25; Exod 34:6-7; Lev 11:44; Job 34:10-12; Ps 5:4; 136:1; 145:17; Hab 1:13; Rom 1:18; Jas 1:13**). Although the first human beings (Adam and Eve) were created without sin, they chose to follow Satan and disobey God and therefore became sinful (**Gen 3:1-19**). As a result, every human being since Adam and Eve has been born in a state of moral corruption known as indwelling sin; this indwelling sin is a “law” or power that is actively working inside every person (**Rom 7:5, 8-11, 14-24; Gal 5:17; Heb 3:12-13**). It leads to universal actualized sins as people go through lives (**Gen 8:21; Ps 51:5; 143:1-2; Jer 17:9; Mark 7:20-23; Rom 3:9-18, 23; 5:12-14; 7:14-24**). The Bible correctly tells us the result of this: “*the wages of sin is death*” (**Rom 6:23**; see also **Gen 2:17; Ezek 18:4, 20; Rom 5:12**). Because God is holy, he cannot tolerate sin (**Hab 1:13; Rom 1:18**). God also is just: “Due to his holy and perfect nature God cannot turn a blind eye to perverse human behaviour as if it does not matter. . . . If God is to be true to his own righteous nature, all wrongdoing must be punished.” (Alexander 2008: 130, 131)

If human beings are to be in right standing with God and enjoy eternal life, their sin has to be dealt with. This creates a tremendous problem. Because God himself is morally holy and perfect, that is the standard to which he holds us (**Matt 5:48**). The problem for human beings is that we can never achieve God’s standard of holiness and perfection on our own. First, “once a person sins, it is impossible to ever be perfect” (Sproul 2002: 94). Second, even our good deeds are tainted with sin. Indeed, if we are doing good deeds in order to escape God’s punishment and hell, that alone makes our good deeds *not* “good” because if our motive is to escape hell by doing “good deeds,” then those deeds are, by definition, selfish and self-centered, which itself is sin. Third, no amount of good deeds changes the sinful nature and sinful propensities of the heart. Thus, good deeds do not transform corrupt, sinful people into righteous, sinless people; at their core, they remain sinful people. However, God is loving and does not desire that anyone would perish (**Ezek 18:23; 33:11; 2 Pet 3:9; 1 John 4:8**).

The gospel is the good news that God has done for us what we never could do for ourselves. God became a man in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus lived the life we should have lived *as a man*; he perfectly obeyed God the Father in everything; he was “*tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin*” (**Heb 4:15**). That qualified him to be our representative, to take upon himself our sin and pay the penalty that otherwise we would have to pay but never could (**Rom 8:1-4; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13; Col 2:13-14; 1 Tim 2:5-6; 1 Pet 2:24**). At the same time, Jesus Christ was God. “God did not, then, inflict pain on someone else, but rather on the Cross absorbed the pain, violence, and evil of the world into himself. . . . This is a God who becomes human and offers his own lifeblood in order to honor moral justice and merciful love so that he can destroy all evil without destroying us. . . . Why did Jesus *have* to die in order to forgive us? There was a debt to be paid—God himself paid it. There was a penalty to be borne—God himself bore it. . . . On the cross neither justice nor mercy loses out—both are fulfilled at once. Jesus’s death was necessary if God was going to take justice seriously and still love us.” (Keller 2008: 192-93, 197) Jesus’ rising from the dead and ascending back to the Father validated who Jesus is and demonstrated that the Father accepted Christ’s sacrifice of himself on the cross for us. Consequently, who Jesus is and what he has done is the heart of the gospel. Mark makes this clear throughout his book.

Mark also begins by making clear that Jesus Christ is “*the Son of God*.” John Carter points out, “The central theological theme in the gospel of Mark centers around Jesus as the Son of God, affirmed by the Father (1:11, 9:7), by demons (3:11; 5:7), by a Roman centurion (15:9), and by Jesus Himself (13:32; 14:36, 61-62). The authoritative power of the Son of God is demonstrated in the authority of His teaching (1:22, 27), his power to heal disease and disability (1:30-31, 40-42; 2:3-12; 3:1-5; 5:25-34; 7:31-37; 8:22-26; 10:46-52), His absolute power over demonic forces (1:23-27; 5:1-20; 7:24-30; 9:17-27), His power over nature (4:37-39; 6:35-44, 47-52; 8:1-10), and ultimately, his power over death (5:21-24, 35-43). Mark used first hand testimony (believed by many to be Peter’s) to prove that by these powers the Kingdom of God had come to the people through Jesus Christ. The only reasonable response to such knowledge must be to come to Jesus in faith.” (Carter 2003: 7-8)

## 2. vv. 2-3—Quotations from Malachi and Isaiah

**Verse 2** quotes **Mal 3:1** and **v. 3** quotes **Isa 40:3**. Mark’s gospel is different from Matthew’s and Luke’s in that, unlike them, he does not begin with Jesus’ human genealogy. Unlike John’s gospel, he also does not include Jesus’ divine “genealogy.” Instead, Mark immediately begins with what one might call the “gospel genealogy,” i.e., he omits everything that is extraneous to his purpose but announces that “*this is the beginning*

of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” and then shows how the gospel of Jesus Christ was foretold in the OT. Mark is saying that both **Mal 3:1** and **Isa 40:3** find their fulfillment in John the Baptist. Similarly, **Matt 3:3; Luke 3:4** apply **Isa 40:3** to John the Baptist. John the Baptist himself recognized that he was the fulfillment of **Isa 40:3**, because in **John 1:23** he quoted that verse as applying to himself.

In **Matt 11:10; Luke 7:27** Jesus himself applied **Mal 3:1** to John the Baptist and compared him to Elijah who had been prophesied to come before “*the great and terrible day of the Lord*” (**Mal 4:5**; see **Matt 11:14; Mark 9:11-13**; see also **Luke 1:17**). John the Baptist’s clothing resembled Elijah’s (compare **Mark 1:6** and **2 Kgs 1:8**). As the fulfiller of **Mal 3:1** and **Isa 40:3** and as the promised Elijah, one might say that John the Baptist was the last of the OT prophets. However, as the fulfillment of OT prophecy and the one to announce that the Messiah had come, he was the transitional figure to the NT (see **Matt 11:9-13; Luke 16:16**).

John the Baptist’s ministry was in the wilderness, and the quotation from **Isa 40:3** refers to one crying “*in the wilderness.*” “For Isaiah, the wilderness is to become a place of new beginnings. Isaiah’s wilderness is the reverse of the wilderness of Sinai. The Sinai wilderness was a place of rebellion, failure, death for God’s son Israel. But in Is. 40 and later chapters, the wilderness is a place of rejoicing, abundance, life and blessing for the Israel of God. In Is. 40, the wilderness becomes the location of a new exodus for the people of God. . . . Now, in Mk. 1:2-4, John the Baptist appears to signal the inauguration of the new exodus projected by Isaiah. . . . Here, in Jesus, is the Israel of God who can enter the wilderness and bind the curse of sin. Here, in Jesus, is the Israel of God who can sojourn in the desert and spoil the strong man’s goods. In the wilderness, this Israel will not fail through unbelief; this Israel will not long for the meat of Egypt; this Israel will not serve any save the Lord God and him only.” (Dennison 1994: n.p.) Thus, despite the application of **Mal 3:1** and **Isa 40:3** to John the Baptist, the most important aspect of the beginning of the book of Mark is the identification of Jesus Christ (v. 1) with “*the Lord*” (v. 3), i.e., with God himself.

### 3. vv. 4-8—Ministry of John the Baptist

**Verse 4** says that “*John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*” The wilderness, repentance, and baptism are all significant terms that point to Jesus and the gospel.

- The wilderness was the prophesied place where God brings his people to inaugurate a new age (**Isa 35:1-10; Hos 2:14-23**).
- The Greek word for “repentance” is *metanoia*, which means a change of mind and direction from evil to good, from sin to God (Zodhiates 1992: *metanoia*, 970-72). Repentance is expected to manifest itself in a change of conduct (**Acts 26:20**). John himself made that clear when he told those who were coming to him to “*bear fruit in keeping with repentance*” (**Matt 3:8; Luke 3:8**) and gave specific examples of what that meant (**Luke 3:10-18**). Michael Spencer states that the repentance being preached by John the Baptist “is an act of total life reorientation to the great reality of the approaching Kingdom. Nothing about what God is asking of his people in the Kingdom is a minor change of direction or ‘turning over a new leaf.’ This is a radical life change that anchors everything in the approaching Kingdom and makes every decision from a Kingdom perspective. Modern Christianity needs to remember what John is preaching when we consider what Jesus asks of his followers.” (Spencer 2008: The Forerunner)
- Baptism signifies cleansing. **Ezek 36:25** says, “*I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.*” Baptism also signifies the death of the old life and the beginning of the new life (**Rom 6:3-4**). Baptism, unlike the Old Covenant ritual of circumcision, opens the way to cleansing and new life for all people—males and females alike—equally. Spencer points out, “Baptism was not something the Jews would have considered lightly. Converts to Judaism were baptized by other Jews. . . . What John was calling for was a step of real humility for these proud Jews: to be reduced to the same level as a convert. To come as an outsider, as one who was unclean and unwashed. The way into the Kingdom is a way of humility from the very beginning.” (Spencer 2008: The Forerunner) However, it is clear that “John sees this as a cleansing with water that precedes a cleansing/filling/washing by the most powerful agent of all- God’s Holy Spirit. Verse 8 shows that water baptism is never an end in itself, but a pointer, a picture of a greater, deeper spiritual reality.” (Ibid.)

This entire section of John the Baptist’s ministry shows him as focused on the one who was coming after him and the Kingdom that Jesus would be inaugurating. This is seen in the significance of the wilderness, repentance, and baptism, discussed above. Additionally, John himself said that “*After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie*” (**Mark 1:7**) and “*I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit*” (**Mark 1:8**). Elsewhere, he said, “*He [Christ] must increase, but I must decrease*” (**John 3:30**). In other words, John’s main purpose was “to begin



playing the melody that Jesus will pick up and write into his own song of life, death and resurrection.” (Ibid.)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The word “gospel” basically means “good news.” What is the “‘good news’ of Jesus Christ” that is being referred to here?
2. Jesus is referred to as the “Son of God.” How might this term be understood by an atheist or agnostic person? By a New Ager? By Jesus himself?
3. In light of the first several verses of chapter 1, why do you think that Mark includes no genealogy of Jesus, unlike the other two “synoptic” gospels of Matthew and Luke?
4. John the Baptist has been called by some “the last Old Testament man.” On the other hand, a case can be made that he is actually “the first New Testament man.” What do you really know about John the Baptist? Not only in the book of Mark, but throughout the Bible, there are many interesting similarities (as well as differences) between John the Baptist and Jesus – who they are, what they were like, what they said and taught. Make two lists: one of the similarities; one of the differences.
5. What is “repentance” (v. 4)?
6. “Baptism” as a rite or ritual was so unique and important in the ministry of John the Baptist that he, unlike anybody else in the Bible, is known and identified by that act (he is, after all, John “the Baptist”). The importance of baptism was carried on by Jesus who commissioned his disciples to “*make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*” (Matt 28:19). What is the importance and significance of baptism, and in what important ways does it differ from the already-established Jewish ritual of circumcision?
7. What do you think John the Baptist’s extremes in dress, food and lifestyle were meant to convey?
8. In what ways did John the Baptist exemplify the spirit and principles of the Gospel in what he said and how he lived?

**1:9-13:** <sup>9</sup> *In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.* <sup>10</sup> *And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.* <sup>11</sup> *And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”* <sup>12</sup> *The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.* <sup>13</sup> *And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.*

#### vv. 9-13—The baptism of Jesus and his temptation by Satan

Before Mark records any of Jesus’ words, he briefly recounts Jesus’ baptism and his temptation in the wilderness by Satan. Both of these events were symbolic. They show, among other things, that Jesus—Israel’s promised Messiah and the savior of the world—is recapitulating the history of Israel and of humanity, the difference being that Jesus succeeds where both Israel and Adam failed.

#### 1. vv. 9-11—The baptism of Jesus

Matthew reports that John felt that “*I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?*” But Jesus answered him, “*Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.*” (Matt 3:14-15) John was recognizing the sinlessness of Jesus, since baptism was a sign of repentance and commitment to God and his kingdom. By submitting to baptism, Jesus was publicly surrendering everything to God. Further, although he had no sin, by submitting to baptism “Jesus the sinless One is identifying Himself with the sinful position of His fellow Israelites by being baptized like them. His identification with them here anticipates His complete identification with sinners when He bears their sins on the cross.” (Poynthress 1991: 253) At that time he would supremely be “*numbered with the transgressors*” (Isa 53:12). Just as he established baptism as the outward sign that we are his followers, Jesus showed his willingness to submit to all divine institutions and did everything he requires of us.

John the Baptist indicates that he baptized Jesus to know the identity of the Messiah for certain (**John 1:31**, “*I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel*”). Jesus’ baptism served as a public dedication of his ministry, his identity as Messiah, and his identification with God. That is confirmed in **vv. 10-11** which say that “*when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.’*” That wording is significant. God had first called Israel his “son” at the time of the exodus (**Exod 4:22**—“*Israel is my son, my firstborn*”). **Matt 2:15** quotes **Hos 11:1**, “*Out of Egypt I called my son,*” and applies it to Jesus. This language is showing how OT Israel’s history is being re-enacted by Jesus. Jesus’ baptism also is a re-enactment of the crossing of the Red Sea and the Jordan River (which is where he was baptized), and entering the land (**Exod 14:13-22; Josh 3:14-17**; see **Matt 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:31-34**). Further, the identification of Jesus as God’s Son shows that he is the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant, the anointed Messiah, and the prophesied Servant of the Lord (see **2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7; Isa 42:1; 52:13-53:12; Acts 13:33**). The tearing of the heavens echoes the language of **Isa 64:1** (“*Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down*”). As was saw in **1:1-3**, “just as **Isa. 40** and **Mal. 3** anticipated the coming not of a messianic figure, but of God himself, so too **Isa. 64**. Jesus is identified not merely as Yahweh’s agent, but in some mysterious way with Yahweh’s very presence.” (Watts 2007: 122) Here God has come down in the person of Jesus, and both the Spirit and the Father bear witness to the Son. The same language of tearing is used again in connection with Christ’s crucifixion when “*the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom*” (**Mark 15:38**). The tearing of the heavens bracket the public ministry of Jesus.

**Isa 61:1** had said that the Spirit of the Lord would come upon the Messiah and anoint him for ministry. That anointing was publicly demonstrated by the Spirit’s descending on Jesus like a dove. Jesus confirmed that anointing in **Luke 4:18** (quoting **Isa 61:1**). In the voice from heaven, God brings together a number of OT passages to identify the Son: “**Psalm 2:7** speaks of the royal Son, **Isaiah 42:1** about the suffering servant who pleases God and **Genesis 22:2** about the beloved Son who is offered. All these Old Testament motifs surround Jesus at this point.” (Spencer 2008: The Baptism) Thus, Jesus’ baptism is symbolic and highly significant—it reveals his identity and points to his mission. “In Mark’s gospel, the incarnation of the Son of God is declared by the revelation at the baptism. Dramatically, abruptly—voice, dove, split-heavens—all announce that now the kingdom of God is at hand; now, from this moment at the Jordan, the kingdom of God has come; now, the beginning of new things—a new beginning in the history of redemption with the advent—the coming—of the Son of the Father. The exodus finds its fulfillment in Jesus; the sojourn in the wilderness finds its accomplishment in Jesus; the passage through the waters finds its fulfillment in Jesus. Indeed, the eschatological kingdom of God is near.” (Dennison 1994: n.p.)

One final aspect of Jesus’ baptism “*to fulfill all righteousness*” is that he had to fulfill the OT requirements for entering into the priesthood. He was a priest after the order of Melchizedek (**Ps 110:4; Heb 5:8-10; 6:20**). Priests offered sacrifices to God on behalf of the people; Jesus himself became a sacrifice for our sin (**2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pet 2:21**). In the OT, a priest had to be washed with water (**Exod 29:4; Lev 8:6**) and anointed with oil (**Exod 29:7; Lev 8:12**). His baptism in water and anointing by the Holy Spirit demonstrated that Jesus fulfilled these requirements but in a far deeper way than was true of the OT priests—the water of baptism ultimately was pointing forward to his death and resurrection (**Rom 6:3-5**), and the Holy Spirit is the reality that the anointing with oil signified. He also may have needed to be 30 years old (**Num 4:3**; see **Luke 3:23**; Price 2018: n.p.).

## 2. **vv. 12-13**—The temptation by Satan

*The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness*” (**v. 12**). “There is something of a pattern here for all Christians. First, there is the place of obedience. Then there is the blessing of assurance that I am God’s child. Then there is the driving out into the place of temptation and testing. This is as much God’s work as the blessing at baptism. Mark is clearly telling his readers that their testings and temptations are part of their experience as God’s children. Jesus went by that same road.” (Spencer 2008: The Temptation)

This connection between Jesus’ temptation and ours is deeper even than Spencer’s comment would indicate. Jesus is called the “last Adam” and the “second man” in **1 Cor 15:45, 47**. In his temptation, Jesus was recapitulating the temptation faced by the first Adam in the garden of Eden: Both Adam and Christ were tempted by Satan. Adam was tempted in a garden; Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. Adam was tempted with fruit, was putting God’s word to the test, and was enticed by the prospect of becoming like God (**Gen 3:1-6**); Jesus was tempted with bread, was tempted to put God to the test, and was tempted by the prospect of receiving the kingdoms of the world and their glory (**Matt 4:1-10; Luke 4:1-12**). In the garden, Adam was surrounded by

and ruled over the animals; in the wilderness, Jesus was surrounded by wild animals. Adam succumbed to Satan's temptation; Jesus overcame Satan's temptation. Because he succumbed, angels guarded the way to the tree of life so that Adam could not eat from it (**Gen 3:24**); because he overcame, angels ministered to Jesus (**Mark 1:13**).

The temptations of Adam and Christ are paradigms for us. The issue before Adam, Christ, and us is knowing God's word and choosing whether or not to follow it. The essence of Adam's (and our) sin is "the corruption of that which is good by using it for the human's own self-interests with creaturely disregard for the creator. The choice of listening to God's voice is traded for choices of personal gain" driven by personal autonomy and human desire. (Faro 2021: 116) By being tempted as the "last Adam" and the "second man," Jesus was showing us how to overcome temptation. The key is that, unlike Adam and us, Jesus never acted out of his own desire but always spoke and acted only in accord with the Father's will (compare **Gen 3:1-6; Matt 16:23; Mark 8:33** with **Matt 26:39; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42; John 5:19, 30; 6:38; 8:28; 12:49; 14:10**). In the wilderness, "he is weak and weary like we are, yet he has resisted and shown us how to resist. (Eph 6:10ff) His victory over every kind of temptation is a hope to every person who prays out of their own existential struggle." (Spencer 2008: The Temptation) Consequently, **Heb 2:18** says that "*because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.*" The fact that Jesus "*suffered when tempted*" suggests that his suffering in temptation was far greater than the suffering we may experience when we are tempted. The reason is that Jesus resisted temptation *all the way to the end, without giving in to the temptation*. We generally do not do that. When the temptation for us is very great, we tend to give in to it. Jesus never did. Consequently, he always experienced temptation to the fullest extent possible. His victory can be our victory when we remain close to him, know his word and will, draw on the power of the Spirit, and obey him in everything.

Jesus' temptation also was symbolically recapitulating the history of Israel. Jesus' forty days in the wilderness (**Matt 4:1-2**) are a miniature of the forty years which Israel spent in the wilderness. Just as God led Israel in the wilderness (**Exod 13:17-18, 21**), the Holy Spirit led Jesus in the wilderness (**Matt 4:1; Mark 1:12; Luke 4:1**). Although Mark does not record the specific temptations, Matthew and Luke do. The temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness (**Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13**) paralleled Israel's temptations in the wilderness. "In the first temptation and Jesus' response there are several interesting and significant parallels centering on the common theme of the sonship of both Jesus and the nation of Israel. Both are 'sons' (Deut. 8:5; cf. Matt. 4:3, 6); both are 'led' (Deut. 8:2; cf. Matt. 4:1); both are taken to the desert/wilderness (Deut. 8:2; cf. Matt. 4:1); and both hunger (Deut. 8:3; cf. Matt. 4:2)." (Burke 2006: 173-74n.55) Where Israel had been dissatisfied with God's provision of manna (**Num 11:1-6**), Jesus was tempted to turn stones into bread (**Matt 4:3; Luke 4:3**). Later, after feeding the 5000, Jesus specifically compared Himself to the manna which Israel had eaten in the wilderness by saying, "*I am the bread that came down out of heaven*" (**John 6:1-14, 41, 48-58**). Where Israel put God to the test at Massah and Meribah demanding proof of His presence and power (**Exod 17:1-7**), Jesus was tempted to jump from the Temple's pinnacle to force God to honor His promises (**Matt 4:5-6; Luke 4:9-11**). Where Israel turned from God to a molten calf (**Exod 32:1-6**), and later worshipped Baal (**Hos 2:1-13**), Jesus was tempted to fall down and worship Satan (**Matt 4:8-9; Luke 4:5-7**). Further, Jesus met the temptations by deliberately quoting from Moses' summary of Israel's history in the wilderness (**Deut 8:3; 6:13, 16**). "The selection of three texts from the same short section of the Old Testament indicates that he saw a theological parallel between Israel's experience and his own. Israel had been disciplined 'as a man disciplines his son' (Deuteronomy 8:5), but had not learned the lessons well. Now Jesus, newly declared 'Son of God' at the Jordan, has that sonship tested along similar lines. But where Israel failed, Jesus proves to be a true Son of God. In him Israel's promise is fulfilled." (France 1975: 67)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What were the purposes of Jesus' baptism and how was it a crucial experience in his life and important for inaugurating the Kingdom of God?
2. Without regard to the other Gospels, what sort of temptations would Jesus have been subject to, not only in the wilderness but throughout his life?
3. If Jesus defeated Satan at the cross and the resurrection, why do we still face temptations?
4. As you face temptations, does it help you to know that Jesus faced them too? Why or why not?

- Does it make a difference to your answer when you consider the temptations that you have given in to (including those that you have *knowingly* and *intentionally* given in to even though you knew in advance that what you were about to do was wrong, was specifically condemned by Scripture, and grieved and/or angered God)?

5. The Bible makes it clear that Jesus never, in fact, sinned—but *could* he have sinned when faced with various temptations? Does **Heb 2:18**, which indicates that Jesus *suffered* in his temptations, bear upon this? If so, how? If you think not, why not and, in that case, what does **Heb 2:18** mean?

6. Read the three specific temptations that are recorded in **Matt 4:1-10**, and then consider the following: What is the *premise* or *basis* for each temptation?

- How does each temptation relate to the kingdom of God and Jesus' mission?
- What would have been a potential result (for Jesus, his mission, the kingdom) had Jesus succumbed to each temptation?

**1:14-15:** <sup>14</sup> *Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, <sup>15</sup> and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”*

#### vv. 14-15—Announcement of the Kingdom

John's gospel reveals that Jesus had engaged in ministry primarily in Judea and by the Jordan river before John the Baptist was arrested. This was while Jesus was “increasing” and John was “decreasing” (**John 3:30**). “The apostles were not evidently with him during most of this time except on a part-time basis” (Cheney 1969: 37). In **v. 14**, however, Mark is showing us that John the Baptist completed his God-appointed job as the forerunner. John was imprisoned by Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, because John had condemned Herod's marrying Herodias, who had been his half-brother Philip's wife (**Matt 14:3; Mark 6:17-18; Luke 3:19-20**). Ironically, this event caused Jesus to go to Galilee (Herod's territory). In Galilee Jesus chose the twelve apostles, his ministry with the Twelve became full-time, and his message intensified.

**Verse 15** summarizes Jesus' message. God's plan was that “*when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons*” (**Gal 4:4-5**). Consequently, in **v. 15** Jesus announces, “*The time is fulfilled.*” He confirmed this in **Luke 4:21** when he read from **Isa 61:1-2a** concerning the coming of the Messiah and then said, “*Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*” Consequently, **2 Cor 1:20** says that all of the promises of God are fulfilled in Jesus.

This has profound implications for us. As Paul puts it in **2 Cor 6:2**, “*Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.*” This gets us back to Jesus' announcement in **Mark 1:15** that “*the kingdom of God is at hand.*” When Jesus cast out demons, he told the Pharisees, “*The kingdom of God has come upon you*” (**Luke 11:20**). In **Luke 17:20-21** he added, “*The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.*” How can this be, since we still experience sin and evil, and much of the world is opposed to Christ and his rule? This seeming paradox is explained by the “already/not yet” nature of the kingdom of God, i.e., although the kingdom of God and reign of Christ have been inaugurated and realized in principle (the “already” of the kingdom), they have not yet been fully manifested but await a future consummation in all their glory (the “not yet” of the kingdom).<sup>1</sup>

The primary meaning for both the OT Hebrew and NT Greek words translated as God's “kingdom” is “His reign, His rule, His sovereignty . . . not a realm or a people” (Ladd 1959: 19-21; see **Ps 103:19; 145:11, 13; Matt 6:33; Mark 10:15; Luke 19:11-12**). In one sense, God's kingdom is eternal. God always has been, is now, and always will be sovereign and reigning over everything (**Gen 1:1; Job 12:9-10; Ps 103:19; Isa 44:24-28; 66:1-2; Dan 4:34-37; 6:26-27; Matt 5:34-35; Acts 4:27-28; 7:49-50; Eph 1:11**).

However, in another sense the kingdom of God is a spiritual reality that is present and may be entered

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<sup>1</sup> The “already/not yet” schema has been discussed by many commentators. See, e.g., Hoekema 1979: 13-22; Venema 2000: 12-32; Vos 1979: 38 (helpful diagram). It is reflected in the Beatitudes of **Matt 5:2-10**: **vv. 2, 10** are in the present; all other rewards are future. “This distinction is significant, for it underscores that although the kingdom of God (the reign of Christ) is a present reality, the consummated kingdom awaits his return in glory” (Alexander 2008: 95).

now. The very nature of the kingdom is different from the expectations of the Jews and even of Jesus' own disciples (at first). Jesus specified that the kingdom of God is spiritual (**John 3:5-8**) and can only be entered by means of the new birth (**John 3:3**). That is why Jesus said, "*Repent and believe in the gospel*" (**Mark 1:15**). We have already discussed repentance above in connection with John the Baptist. To "*believe in the gospel*" is the other side of the coin of repentance. One might say that there are three components of true, saving faith or belief: (1) there a cognitive aspect—one must believe in who Jesus is and what he did (see **Acts 2:22-24, 32, 36; Rom 1: 1-4; 10:9; 1 Cor 15:1-8**); (2) there is a behavioral aspect—our behavior, our works, our lives are the evidence or whether or not the faith we profess is real (see **Matt 28:18-20; John 14:23-24; Eph 2:8-10; Jas 2:14-20**); and (3) there is a devotional aspect—love and devotion to Christ are central to true, saving faith (see **John 15:4-15; 17:3; 21:15-17**). Michael Spencer describes the true nature of saving "belief" as follows: "New Testament belief has more in common with the sort of belief we associate with life commitment. Marriage is the best example. The persons giving their lives to one another "believe in" the other person with a totality of their being, their future and their possessions. . . . Belief in Jesus that does not continue is not true belief. Perseverance is one of the characteristics of true faith. Faith may be a long and winding journey with many peaks, valleys and seasons of more and less fruitfulness, but genuine faith continues to believe in Jesus and to seek to follow him. The Bible offers no comfort to the person who once believed but does so no longer. . . . Repentance and belief must go hand in hand. So, when someone asks me what they must do to go to heaven, I give an honest answer: Admit your sin, repent and surrender all you know of yourself to all you know of Jesus." (Spencer 2020: The Response)

Proclaiming the kingdom was the primary focus of Jesus' teaching (**Matt 4:17, 23; 9:35; Luke 4:43**) and his parables (**Matt 13:1-50; 21:28-22:14; 25:1-13**). He commissioned His disciples to proclaim the kingdom of God (**Luke 9:1-6; 10:1-12**). Both before and after Christ's death, "the kingdom of God" was equated with "*preaching the gospel*" (**Luke 9:2, 6**) and "*the gospel of the grace of God*" (**Acts 20:24-25**). **Acts 28:23-31** equates the "*kingdom of God*" with the "*salvation of God*." Jesus ordained his church to be the visible representation of the kingdom on earth (**Matt 16:18-19**). As such, we are "to keep firmly in our minds that the whole of Christian existence is the application of the gospel to every part of our lives. We start with Christ as the new creation for us, and we move toward the goal, which is to be made like him in the universal new creation." (Goldsworthy 1991: 233) This is the "already" of the kingdom.

In another sense the kingdom of God is eschatological. Some passages speak of God's kingdom as a future realm which will come only with the return of Christ (**Matt 7:21; Mark 9:47; 10:23; 14:25**). In other words, the kingdom of God is the eschatological goal of all history, when all of God's enemies are defeated, all evil vanquished, and God reigns with His people in perfect righteousness, happiness, and goodness (**Dan 2:44; Zech 14:9; Matt 6:9-10; 1 Cor 15:20-28; Rev 21:1-22:5**). In this sense, the kingdom of God is future (**Matt 7:21; Mark 9:47; 10:23; 14:25; Luke 21:27-31; 22:15-16; Eph 5:5; 2 Tim 4:18; 2 Pet 1:11**). It is "an inheritance which God will bestow upon His people when Christ comes in glory [**Matt 25:34; 1 Cor 15:50; Eph 1:14, 18; Col 3:24**]" (Ladd 1959: 17). That is the "not yet" of the kingdom. The "already" and the "not yet" of the kingdom are related: "The blessings of the present age are the pledge and guarantee of greater blessings to come" (Hoekema 1979: 22).

**1:16-20:** <sup>16</sup> *Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen.* <sup>17</sup> *And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men."* <sup>18</sup> *And immediately they left their nets and followed him.* <sup>19</sup> *And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets.* <sup>20</sup> *And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.*

#### **vv. 16-20—Calling the first disciples**

In Jesus' day, people wishing to become a disciple of a teacher or rabbi would typically approach the teacher and request to become a follower (see **Matt 8:19**). However, in Jesus' case, Jesus himself took the initiative in establishing the discipleship relationship (see **Matt 4:18-19; Mark 1:16-17; 2:14; Luke 5:9-11, 27; John 1:42-43**). The event recorded by Mark is not the first time Jesus had encountered Peter, James, and John. **John 1:35-51** indicates that Simon (Peter), Andrew, Philip, and Nathanael had met Jesus, probably near the Jordan river, sometime after Jesus' baptism. That may explain why Peter, Andrew, James, and John all immediately left their boats when Jesus called them to "*Follow me*."

The calling of these early disciples shows us something important about discipleship. First, there is no separation between conversion and discipleship (**Matt 28:18-20**). In multiple passages, Jesus called on people to

follow him as his disciples and discussed the nature of being a disciple (see **Matt 4:18-22; 5:3-16; 10:24-25; 12:46-50; Mark 3:31-35; Luke 6:40; 8:19-21; 9:23-24, 57-62; 14:25-33; John 8:31-32; 13:34-35; 15:1-8, 18-20**). The Greek word for “disciple” is *mathētēs*. “*Mathētēs* means more in the NT than a mere pupil or learner. It is an adherent who accepts the instruction given to him and makes it his rule of conduct.” (Zodhiates 1993: *mathētēs*, 936) Second, discipleship is transformational. The response of Peter, Andrew, James, and John—they “left . . . and followed”—corresponds to Jesus’ call to “repent and believe.” Those early disciples left their businesses and their families—and hence their income and their security—to follow Jesus. Later, Peter said, “We have left everything and followed you” (**Mark 10:28**). There is a direct relationship to Jesus’ call to “repent and believe in the gospel” (**Mark 1:15**) and becoming a disciple. In fact, the basis for discipleship is a deep understanding and appreciation of the gospel and its implications: “The gospel is for disciples, not just for ‘sinners;’ it saves and transforms people in relationship, not merely individuals who go it alone. . . . Discipleship is about trusting Jesus, believing his gospel. While this may sound simple enough, the problem is that we all struggle to understand what trusting Jesus or believing the gospel really looks like. . . . [The Great Commission] focuses on proclaiming the gospel to not-yet disciples and teaching the gospel to already disciples. Jesus puts the gospel first, which leads to making and maturing disciples. He does not call people to evangelize first, making discipleship an optional second. Both evangelism and discipleship are gospel motivated. . . . Jesus proclaimed the same gospel to the crowds that he taught to the disciples. He did not have the twelve on a special, gospel-plus track to study advanced subject matter. The gospel is for undergraduates and graduates because nobody ever graduates from the gospel. Jesus taught the same gospel of the kingdom to sinners and saints. Why? Because his agenda of grace is the only solution to our common predicament of sin, Christian or non-Christian. Both desperately need the forgiving, reconciling, and restoring power of the gospel to know and enjoy God, not just once but for a lifetime.” (Dodson 2012: 17, 19, 36, 38)

Michael Spencer observes that our response to Jesus’ call, like that of the early disciples, must be “a laying down of our current lives and the taking up of a new one. As we read these names [of the early disciples], we realize that these are men with families and obligations and bills just like us, yet they were so changed by Jesus that they left all and followed him. Jesus was aware of what this meant. He told his disciples to count the cost (Luke 14:28ff) and to not follow him with a divided loyalty. (Matthew 8:18-22)” (Spencer 2009: The Calling) A true disciple puts love of and commitment to Jesus over everything and everyone, even his or her own life (**Luke 14:26**). He adds, “Today it is popular to speak of “accepting Christ” and “asking Jesus into your heart.” These phrases are not found in the Bible and they define the Christian life in terms that are deficient. Christ calls us to follow him. Learn from him. Imitate him. Accompany him. We can never exhaust the possibilities of what it means to follow Jesus.” (Ibid.)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the “kingdom of God?”
2. *How* is the kingdom present now (especially in light of the manifest evil in the world)?
3. Jesus said to “*believe in the gospel.*” What does this mean?
  - In this regard, how do most people today look at the word “believe?”
  - What do you think Jesus meant by that word?
4. Jesus said to “*follow me.*” What does it mean to follow Jesus?
5. “Accepting Jesus” or “asking Jesus into your heart” are *not* found in the Bible. How are these *deficient* terms for defining what it means to be a Christian?
  - In this regard, what do you think of the idea that you can “accept Jesus” as *savior* but not as *lord*?
6. Has Jesus in fact called you? If so, have you ever wondered *why* he called you?

**1:21-45:** <sup>21</sup> *And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching.* <sup>22</sup> *And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.* <sup>23</sup> *And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out,* <sup>24</sup> *“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.”* <sup>25</sup> *But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!”* <sup>26</sup> *And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him.* <sup>27</sup> *And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, “What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”* <sup>28</sup> *And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.*

<sup>29</sup> *And immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John.* <sup>30</sup> *Now Simon’s mother-in-law lay ill with a fever, and immediately they told him about her.* <sup>31</sup> *And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them.*

<sup>32</sup> *That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons.* <sup>33</sup> *And the whole city was gathered together at the door.* <sup>34</sup> *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.*

<sup>35</sup> *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.* <sup>36</sup> *And Simon and those who were with him searched for him,* <sup>37</sup> *and they found him and said to him, “Everyone is looking for you.”* <sup>38</sup> *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.”* <sup>39</sup> *And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.*

<sup>40</sup> *And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, “If you will, you can make me clean.”* <sup>41</sup> *Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, “I will; be clean.”*

<sup>42</sup> *And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.* <sup>43</sup> *And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once,* <sup>44</sup> *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.”* <sup>45</sup> *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.*

#### vv. 21-45—Healings and exorcisms

Jesus began his public ministry in Galilee, where he was from. Galilee was in the northern part of Israel, near the Sea of Galilee. His ministry was characterized by healings, casting out demons, and teaching. It was in Galilee that he called his twelve disciples.

#### 1. vv. 21-28—Jesus teaches in a synagogue and heals a man with an unclean spirit

**Matt 4:13** reports that when Jesus went to Galilee following John the Baptist’s arrest, he settled and lived in Capernaum. “Capernaum was a large and important city in Galilee, a headquarters of government and commerce and an international crossroads. . . . Being invited to teach in a large synagogue in a prominent city was not something done without thought or significance. This is a clue that Jesus had already achieved considerable notoriety as a teacher and perhaps as a miracle worker.” (Spencer 2020: “Reconsider Jesus – The Teacher”)

The “scribes” were not simply people who copied the law but were “the scholars of the day, professionally trained in the interpretation and application of the law” (Wessel 1984: 627). The scribes would teach and interpret the Scripture, like most scholars today do, by quoting other interpretations and authorities. Jesus was different. He taught as one having the intrinsic authority in himself to declare the meaning of the Scripture. His style of teaching is captured in the Sermon on the Mount when he repeatedly said, “*You have heard it said [i.e., in the Scripture] . . . but I say to you*” (**Matt 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44**). Further, when he taught in the synagogue in Nazareth, after quoting **Isa 61:1-2a**, he then declared, “*Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing*” (**Luke 4:21**). We do not find this amazing, because we understand who Jesus was. But Michael Spencer points out how radical Jesus’ teaching was: “The only way we can imagine the impact of this sort of teaching is if we picture what the reaction of Christians would be to someone who said: ‘Well, I know the Bible says such and such, but I say. . . .’” (Spencer 2020: “Reconsider Jesus – The Teacher”) It is no wonder that the people “*were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes*” (v. 22).

Additionally, Jesus’ actions demonstrated that he had the authority to teach as he did (v. 27). Although many people in the congregation may not have known who Jesus was, the demons did. They knew he was “*the Holy One of God*” (v. 24). They knew that the coming of the Holy One of God would result in their judgment

and destruction, hence their question, “*Have you come to destroy us?*” (v. 24; see also **Matt 8:29; Mark 5:7; Luke 8:28-31**) However, the demons apparently were not aware of the “already, but not yet” nature of the kingdom and the fact that Christ was coming twice: the first time in lowliness, the second time in triumph and judgment.<sup>2</sup> By casting out the unclean spirit, Jesus was demonstrating that he had power over the “authorities, cosmic powers, this present darkness, and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (**Eph 6:12**; see **Matt 12:22-29; Mark 3:22-27; Luke 11:14-22**). In short, “When you and I come face to face with Jesus Christ in our lives we need to understand something that the people of his time understood: This is no mere man. This is someone utterly and completely unique. This is someone who teaches with authority, like God himself. This is someone who confronts evil and it obeys him like God himself.” (Spencer 2020: “Reconsider Jesus – The Teacher”)

Finally, when the demon identified Jesus as “*the Holy One of God*” (v. 24), Jesus rebuked him, saying “*Be silent!*” (v. 25) Jesus commands this to demons and others on a number of occasions in the gospels (see, e.g., **Matt 8:4; 9:30; 16:20; 17:9; Mark 1:25, 34, 44; 3:12; 5:43; 7:36; 8:30; 9:9; Luke 4:41; 9:21**). Why would he do this? There may be a number of reasons for this. First, he may not have wanted his identity to be proclaimed by demons. Second, he may not have wanted to become so famous so soon as to lose control of his mission, to be seen as nothing but a healer and exorcist. Third, after Jesus fed the 5000, John reports that the people “*were about to come and take him by force to make him king*” (**John 6:15**). In other words, Jesus was surrounded by people who came to look at him as one who met their physical needs (see **John 6:26-27**), a political, or even a military ruler. That was not his mission. Instead, Jesus knew that his identity and mission were intimately related to the cross. That was why he had come to earth, and that was something that could not be taught or explained. As one writer explains, “Since it was through His vicarious death that Jesus would save His people, that death was necessary before his true identity was to be made known. If his identity were to be made public prior to his death, much conflict would have arisen from the Jews’ basic misunderstanding of who the Messiah was to be.” (Carter 2003: 9) Even his disciples did not understand the necessity for his crucifixion. It only became clear to them after his resurrection.

## 2. **vv. 29-34**—Jesus heals many

These healings reveal the extraordinary power of Jesus. The use of “all” and “many” (**vv. 32, 34**) show that the healing of the demon-possessed man in **vv. 21-28** was not an isolated event and that Jesus had power over natural diseases as well as over demons. Jesus’ healings were immediate, total, and visible. There was no question that he was unique in his power and authority. In Jesus, the power of the age to come “broke into” this age; his power over demons and physical diseases demonstrated that “*the kingdom of God is at hand*” (**Mark 1:15**). “The healing miracles in Mark exist as part of a message: the Kingdom of God has arrived in Jesus. Disease and physical deterioration were part of the consequences of sin that we read about in Genesis 3. In contrast, the miracles of Jesus demonstrate the power of the Kingdom of God to reverse these consequences and destroy the works of the devil.” (Spencer 2020: “Reconsider Jesus – The Healer”)

Jesus’ initial fame as a healer had certain practical implications. First, since humans are body-soul unities, bodily illness tends to turn a person’s focus “inward,” i.e., everything else pales in comparison to the bodily illness. “These healing miracles show that Jesus brings something to the whole person. The Kingdom of God is good news for all aspects of our life.” (Spencer 2020: “Reconsider Jesus – The Healer”) Jesus’ healing of the sick not only demonstrated his authority and power but also enabled them to quit focusing on their physical condition in order to respond to Jesus’ message concerning their spiritual condition.<sup>3</sup> Second, the response of Peter’s mother-in-law to her healing (“*he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them,*” v. 31) demonstrates the response of all true disciples: when Jesus touches our life, we serve him, and we do that by serving others.<sup>4</sup>

## 3. **vv. 35-39**—Jesus preaches in Galilee

**Verses 35-39** show “the other side of the coin” of the relationship between the physical and the spiritual. Although healing a person’s body can open him or her up to listen to the gospel, since we are physical creatures living in a physical world, the physical can overwhelm the spiritual. As Michael Spencer points out,

<sup>2</sup> This misunderstanding is similar to the misunderstanding of the disciples themselves who evidently thought that the destruction of the temple, Jesus’ coming, and the end of the age was a single complex of events (see **Matt 24:3; Mark 13:4; Luke 21:7**) The “already, but not yet” nature of the kingdom is discussed at Menn 2021: 23-25.

<sup>3</sup> The intimate connection between the physical and the spiritual must not be forgotten by the church in its mission to the world. This connection is discussed in some detail in Menn 2016 and Menn 20017.

<sup>4</sup> Not only was Peter married, but so were the rest of the Twelve (**1 Cor 9:5**).



“The reader of the Gospels comes away with the impression that Jesus was almost humanly overwhelmed with those who came to experience healing” (Spencer 2020: “Reconsider Jesus – The Healer”).

Jesus was sensitive to this danger. Consequently, immediately after healing and exorcising many, “*he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed*” (v. 35). He did the same thing immediately after feeding the 5000 (Mark 6:46). Walter Wessel observes that the crisis Jesus faced after his multiple healings, exorcisms, and feeding the 5000 was “the shallow and superficial response of the people to Jesus. They are only interested in what he can do to heal their physical afflictions. So Jesus seeks the strength that only communion and fellowship with the father can provide. The disciples . . . think Jesus will be pleased to know that everyone was looking for him (v.37). They do not understand that this popular and shallow reception of him was the very reason he withdrew to pray.” (Wessel 1984: 629)

Verses 38-39 reveal that, however important his caring for the physical needs of the people was, Jesus knew that his mission was far more important than that. The crowds wanted Jesus to go back or stay where he was. Had he done that, more people would have been temporarily, physically healed—but we never would have had a savior. Therefore, he told his disciples, “*Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out*” (v. 38). The church must not forget this lesson. It must care for the physical needs of people. However, it must do so in the context of demonstrating the transformative truth and reality of the gospel.

#### 4. vv. 40-45—Jesus cleanses a leper

The healing of the leper in this passage (see also Matt 8:2-4) reveals yet another aspect of the physical-spiritual, body-soul interrelationship. Rebecca Pippert explains: “Jesus was perceptive. He had an extraordinary ability to see beneath the myriad of layers of people and know what they longed for, or really believed, but were afraid of revealing. . . . To the leper in Mark 1:40-45 he could have shouted, ‘Be healed . . . but don’t get too close. I just hate the sight of lepers.’ He did not. Jesus reached over and touched him. Jesus’ touch was not necessary for his physical healing. It was critical for his emotional healing. Can you imagine what it meant to that man to be touched? A leper was an outcast, quite accustomed to walking down a street and seeing people scatter, shrieking at him, ‘Unclean—unclean!’ Jesus knew that this man not only had a diseased body but an equally diseased self-concept. He needed to be touched to be fully cured. And so Jesus responded as he always did, with total healing for the whole person.” (Pippert 1979: 37-38)

Jesus cited the cleansing of lepers as a sign that he was the true Messiah of Israel, Israel itself was being restored, and the kingdom of God was being inaugurated. “The prophecies of return from exile, and of the return of YHWH to Zion, saw these events as being marked by the dramatic restoration of creation, focused on the healing of the sick [e.g., Isa 35:1-10: “*Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. Then the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute will shout for joy.*”]: . . . We can say with confidence that Jesus intended his ‘mighty works’ of healing to be understood symbolically as a fulfillment of this expectation.” (Wright 1996: 428-29) When John the Baptist was puzzled by what Jesus was doing and questioned whether Jesus truly was the Expected One, Jesus replied by pointing to the symbolic nature of his works: “*Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.*” (Matt 11:4-6; Luke 7:22-23)

Jesus’ touching the leper has an important implication concerning Jesus’ divinity. According to the law, to touch a leper or other “unclean” person would make the person who did the touching ritually unclean (Lev 5:3; see also Lev 13:45-46; Num 5:1-4; 19:22). However, “When Jesus touched the leper, the leprosy and impurity did not spread to Jesus. Jesus is the Holy One and Healer. The power to heal and cleanse, flows from Jesus to the leper to conquer the disease. Leprosy is unable to affect Jesus. . . . Jesus proves to have special power and authority. As Emmanuel, he is the Holy One. Purity flows from him to heal the infected person and he has the authority to declare the purity of the cleansed person. Jesus did not see any need to undergo any purification action for himself. The Gospels do not record that Jesus ever personally underwent any form of ritual purification. As the Holy One, he could not be defiled by touching the leper. . . . Whilst Jesus does not become impure when touching the leper, purity flows from him towards the leper. The purity laws find their fulfillment in him.” (Viljoen 2014: 6)<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> “The story concludes with Jesus instructing the man to take his sacrifice and to show himself to the priests. It should be noted that the first and the second phases of the purification rituals, as prescribed in Leviticus 14:2-9, are left out. Jesus has already removed the impurity from the man (first phase of cleansing), and has already declared the man clean (second phase). What remains is the sacrifice of the third phase, so that the priest would allow him to be readmitted to the full communal and spiritual life.” (Viljoen 2014: 6) The healed leper’s going to the priest would, of course, be dramatic

This, in turn, has implications for presenting the gospel to Muslims and others who are particularly concerned about the issues of cleanliness and defilement. Bruce Sidebotham discusses this: “In Indonesia a friend asked me why Christians insist that Jesus is God and that he was crucified. Instead of trying to convince my friend that all have sinned and that all sin must be punished by death, I noted what he already knew, that all flesh is defiled and from before birth contains the very substances from which we need to be cleansed. I expressed my opinion on the futility of ceremonial rituals for making us clean enough for heaven, because dirt cannot make itself clean any better than darkness can make itself light. I said that just as a candle drives darkness from a room by entering it, God drives defilement from human flesh by becoming it. In other words, the very thing that Muslims object to most in Christianity,—the identification of God with his creation, is the solution to man’s most basic problem as perceived by most Muslims.” (Sidebotham 2002: 4) Although Muslims object to the idea that that Jesus is God incarnate, “The nature of Jesus’ miracles – healing blindness with his spit and leprosy with his touch – proves that he had to be God. No mere prophet could touch a leper without being contaminated, and while a prophet’s grave might be holy his spit remains foul like everyone else’s.” (Ibid.). Yet Jesus (and his spit) remained pure and holy—which means he cannot be a mere man.

The issue of Jesus commanding people to be silent (v. 44) was discussed above in connection with vv. 21-28. Here, the cured leper acted consistent with human nature and proclaimed the news of his healing despite being admonished by Jesus not to do so. This had the effect of restricting Jesus’ public ministry. Nevertheless, his reputation was such that, despite staying in desolate places, “*people were coming to him from every quarter*” (v. 45).

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If “all sin is sin,” why did Jesus often have harsher words for the scribes, Pharisees, and teachers of the law than for “ordinary” sinners?
2. Why did Jesus often tell demons and people to be silent after he had performed miracles?
3. Discuss the physical-spiritual/body-soul interrelationships.
4. Why were healings an important part of Jesus’ ministry. How did his healings adversely affect his ministry?
5. What was the symbolic significance of Jesus’ healings and miracles?
6. How could Jesus touch a leper and not be defiled himself?
7. When Jesus touches us—either by healing or otherwise—how should we respond?

**2:1-12:** <sup>1</sup>*And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home.* <sup>2</sup>*And many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door. And he was preaching the word to them.* <sup>3</sup>*And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men.* <sup>4</sup>*And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and when they had made an opening, they let down the bed on which the paralytic lay.* <sup>5</sup>*And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”* <sup>6</sup>*Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts,* <sup>7</sup>*“Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”* <sup>8</sup>*And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, “Why do you question these things in your hearts? <sup>9</sup>Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk?’ <sup>10</sup>But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic— <sup>11</sup>“I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.” <sup>12</sup>And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We never saw anything like this!”*

#### vv. 1-12—Jesus heals a paralytic

This event begins the opposition to Jesus and his ministry which will culminate in his death. Indeed, this

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evidence of Jesus’ ability to heal even the most loathsome of diseases and should have alerted the priesthood to Jesus’ unique identity, power, and authority.

and the next few events in Jesus' ministry serve to unite the scribes, Pharisees, and Herodians (who formerly had been opposed to each other) against Jesus *"to destroy him"* (**Mark 3:6**).

There are at least six aspects of Jesus' healing the paralytic that we should consider. First, recall that in **Mark 1:38** Jesus said, *"Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out."* Now he has returned to Capernaum—which evidently was his base of operations in Galilee (see **Matt 4:12-17**)—and *"he was preaching the word to them"* (**Mark 2:2**).

Second, the paralyzed man was brought to Jesus by four of his friends. Jesus took note of this. Michael Spencer comments, "It is not only the paralyzed man's faith, but the faith of his friends that is commended. Much of Western Christianity is hyper-individualized and resists the idea of a 'community of faith.' But I think it is biblically impossible to speak of faith outside of a community of faith that believes before we do, nurtures us as we learn to believe, supports us as we believe and believes when we stumble in belief. God's covenant with his 'people' is a community covenant that does not downplay individual faith, but places God's covenant with the community at the center of his dealings with human beings. All this underlines why it is vitally important for every Christian to be part of a believing community." (Spencer 2020: "Reconsider Jesus – The Forgiver of Sins")

Third, the key point of this event is found in **v. 5** which says, *"And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'"* Since the man obviously had come to be physically healed of his paralysis, he undoubtedly was expecting Jesus to say something like, *"Son, your faith has made you whole—be healed!"* In fact, the paralyzed man may even have been disappointed when Jesus said, *"Son, your sins are forgiven."* (He may have thought, "That's nice, but Jesus, I obviously have come to be healed of my paralysis.") Jesus knew that. But he also knew that the thing we want the most may not be the thing we need the most. That man's—and our—fundamental problem was not his physical condition, but his spiritual condition. Jesus was not saying that the man's physical condition did not matter. (After all, Jesus will physically heal him.) However, everything concerning our life in this body, including paralysis, hunger or plenty, illness or health, poverty or riches, and even life itself, pale in comparison to our need for salvation and the forgiveness of our sin. Consequently, "The crux of this story is the extension of Jesus' Kingdom authority to that final and most profound area of human life – the forgiveness of sins. Sin is the basic human problem, the problem that occupies Genesis 1-11 and leads to the plan of God beginning with Abraham and continuing through the entire Bible. The Kingdom of God is an invasion of territory claimed by Satan but held by the power of sin. Salvation is the victory of God over sin and this victory is manifested first and foremost in forgiveness. The most basic of human needs is for the guilt we have before a holy God to be removed. Such an event is impossible in human power alone. We cannot forgive ourselves or do enough good to persuade God to forgive us. God forgives out of mercy and grace, prompted by the work of his Son in the incarnation, cross and resurrection. God may now forgive sinners because their penalty has been paid and his justice satisfied. The entire Old Testament pointed in this direction and Jesus now proclaims forgiveness as a free gift. This is the most important good news of the Gospel." (Spencer 2020: "Reconsider Jesus – The Forgiver of Sins")

This leads to the fourth important aspect of this account, namely, the response of the scribes: the beginning of the opposition of the religious leaders to Jesus and his ministry. What Jesus said to the paralyzed man (and what he was about to do) went directly to the issue of *who Jesus is*. If Jesus is only a man, then the scribes were exactly correct when they said in **v. 7**, *"Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"* They correctly recognized that, according to the law, only proper sacrifice and acts of repentance held out any hope for forgiveness, but to grant forgiveness simply by a word is the prerogative of God alone. Indeed, by saying to the man (whom he had never met before) *"your sins are forgiven,"* Jesus was, in effect, asserting that the man had sinned against *Jesus himself*.

All sin ultimately is against God because God's law comes from him and is a reflection of his holy nature; therefore, to sin by transgressing his law is to offend him personally. Further, to sin against other people is to sin against God because people are made in the image of God (**Gen 1:26-27; 9:6; Jas 3:9-10**); sin amounts to dishonoring and defiling God's image and thereby reveals what the sinner really thinks about God himself. The situation is similar to when a person commits a crime against another person; the criminal violates not only the person but primarily violates the law of the state. Hence, it is the government which prosecutes the lawbreaker, not the wronged individual. By claiming to forgive the paralyzed man's sins, Jesus was thereby asserting that he was God come to earth as a man. C. S. Lewis noted the significance of Jesus' claim to forgive sins—any sins: "We can all understand how a man forgives offenses against himself. You tread on my toe and I forgive you, you steal my money and I forgive you. But what should we make of a man, himself unrobbed and untrodden on, who announced that he forgave you for treading on other men's toes and stealing other men's money? . . . Yet this is what Jesus did. He told people that their sins were forgiven, and never waited to consult

all the other people whom their sins had undoubtedly injured. He unhesitatingly behaved as if He was the party chiefly concerned, the person chiefly offended in all offences. This makes sense only if He really was the God whose laws are broken and whose love is wounded in every sin. In the mouth of any speaker who is not God, these words would imply what I can only regard as silliness and conceit unrivalled by any other character in history.” (Lewis 1996: 55)

Fifth, Jesus’ response to the scribes demonstrates that he is, in fact, God come to earth as a man. In **v. 8**, Jesus revealed that he knew the secrets and reasoning of people’s hearts and minds. “This is not just reading moods or body language, but a manifestation of knowledge that only a divine person could have; the sort of searching knowledge of human thoughts and motives that allows God to know us as we are and to judge us with absolute integrity.” (Spencer 2020: “Reconsider Jesus – The Forgiver of Sins”) In **vv. 9-12**, Jesus offered definitive proof that he did have the authority to forgive the man, and thereby demonstrated that he was God: <sup>9</sup> *“Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk’?* <sup>10</sup> *But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’—he said to the paralytic—* <sup>11</sup> *‘I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.’* <sup>12</sup> *And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We never saw anything like this!’”*

Anyone could say the words “*your sins are forgiven.*” But how could one know if his sins really were forgiven, since forgiveness is unseen and spiritual? That is why Jesus demonstrated his authority to forgive (and thereby demonstrated who he really was) by doing something that was impossible for anyone except God to do: immediately and totally healing the paralyzed man by his mere word alone. Even here, there is more going on than meets the eye. While the people were amazed and glorified God when they saw the man healed, they did not realize the depths of why only Jesus could have uttered the words “*your sins are forgiven*” and why “*you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.*” The reason is the cross. It is the fact that Jesus knew that he would be going to the cross to pay for the paralyzed man’s sins that enabled him to say “*your sins are forgiven.*” The authority to forgive sins implies the authority to deal with the consequences of sins. Only Jesus could do that because only he bore those consequences on the cross. Since ultimately disease, sickness, paralysis, and death are the consequences of sin (see, e.g., **Gen 2:17; Ezek 18:20; Rom 5:12-14**), Jesus was demonstrating his authority over sin and its consequences in the physical world, so that all would see and know that “for Jesus, there is no limitation on his authority in any area of life. He can speak to sin, to disease, to demonic oppression, to guilt, to self-hatred – to anything that holds us in bondage – and set us free and make us whole” (Spencer 2020: “Reconsider Jesus – The Forgiver of Sins”). This is even indicated in **v. 11** when Jesus told the man, “*I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.*” The word “rise” is the Greek word *egeirō*, which elsewhere in Mark and the NT is a common word for “resurrection.” Jesus’ rising from the dead and ascending back to the Father validated who Jesus is and demonstrated that the Father accepted Christ’s sacrifice of himself on the cross for us. Because Jesus is the “firstfruits” of the resurrection, he guarantees that, at his coming, all those who belong to him (including the formerly paralyzed man) will also experience resurrection (see **1 Cor 15:23**).

In other words, for Jesus to forgive the man meant that Jesus himself would have to die in the man’s place and pay the price for his sins. Gleason Archer states, “God as God could not forgive us for our sins unless our sins were fully paid for; otherwise He could have been a condoner and protector of the violation of His own holy law. It was only as a man that God in Christ could furnish a satisfaction sufficient to atone for the sins of mankind; for only a man, a true human being, could properly represent the human race. But our Redeemer also had to be God, for only God could furnish a sacrifice of infinite value, to compensate for the penalty of eternal hell that our sin demands, according to the righteous claims of divine justice.” (Archer 1982: 323)

Anselm of Canterbury puts it like this: Because man *cannot* satisfy his debt to God, “none but God *can* make this satisfaction. But none but a man *ought* to do this, other wise man does not make the satisfaction. If it be necessary, therefore, as it appears, that the heavenly kingdom be made up of men, and this cannot be effected unless the aforesaid satisfaction be made, which none but God can make and none but man ought to make, it is necessary for the God-man to make it. . . . Therefore, in order that the God-man may perform this, it is necessary that the same being should be perfect God and perfect man, in order to make this atonement. . . . Since, then, it is necessary that the God-man preserve the completeness of each nature, it is no less necessary that these two natures be united entire in one person, just as a body and a reasonable soul exist together in every human being; for otherwise it is impossible that the same being should be very God and very man.” (Anselm 1903: II:6-7) Only Jesus Christ meets the qualifications.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Christ as fully man and as the divine Son of God is described in detail above in Menn 2020, section **2.VI. Responses to the Islamic View of Jesus: Jesus is the “Son of God”**.

It is only this mysterious union of God and man in the person of Christ that enabled God both to inflict and endure the punishment of the cross. Jesus lived the life we should have lived *as a man*: he perfectly obeyed God the Father in everything; he was “*tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin*” (**Heb 4:15**). That qualified him to be our representative, to take upon himself our sin and pay the penalty that otherwise we would have to pay but never could (**Rom 8:1-4; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13; Col 2:13-14; 1 Tim 2:5-6; 1 Pet 2:24**). As Timothy Keller states, “God did not, then, inflict pain on someone else, but rather on the Cross absorbed the pain, violence, and evil of the world into himself. Therefore the God of the Bible is not like the primitive deities who demanded our blood for their wrath to be appeased. Rather, this is a God who becomes human and offers his own lifeblood in order to honor moral justice and merciful love so that he can destroy all evil without destroying us. . . . Why did Jesus *have* to die in order to forgive us? There was a debt to be paid—God himself paid it. There was a penalty to be borne—God himself bore it. . . . On the cross neither justice nor mercy loses out—both are fulfilled at once. Jesus’s death was necessary if God was going to take justice seriously and still love us.” (Keller 2008: 192-93, 197) John Stott summarizes, “The essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives which belong to God alone; God accepts penalties which belong to man alone.” (Stott 1986: 160)

Finally, in **v. 10**, Jesus’ statement, “*But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,*” is more significant than most people then or now may realize. Jesus is called the “Son of Man” approximately 80 times in the Gospels; it is his most frequent description of himself. The phrase “*Son of Man*” alludes to **Dan 7:13-14** (“*I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed.*”). In **Rev 1:13-14** John received a revelation from Jesus, who is described as “*one like a son of man . . . [whose] head and His hair were white like wool, like snow.*” Those images are taken from Daniel’s vision in **Dan 7:9, 13**. However, in Daniel’s vision (**Dan 7:9**) it was “*the Ancient of Days*” whose “*vesture was like white snow and the hair of His head like pure wool.*” Given this context, “The Son of Man is God, infinite in wisdom and holiness.” (Johnson 2001: 59) Thus, whenever Jesus used the term “*Son of Man*” he was making an assertion that he was, in fact, God come to earth *as a man*.

In fact, Jesus’ use of the phrase “Son of Man” to describe himself pours new meaning into that phrase and reveals the far greater depth of the true identity of Jesus and of God than most people then and now realize. “According to Daniel 7:9-22 the Son of man was a heavenly figure who would participate in the judgment on the last day; however, Jesus pours new content into the title by claiming that the Son of man must also suffer. Thus, Jesus links together the Son of man and the Suffering Servant (Isa. 52:13-53:12 [see **Matt 17:12; 20:25-28; Mark 10:42-45; Luke 22:25-27; John 3:14**]).” (Schreiner 1989: 818) “The death and the exaltation of the Servant of the Lord are the way in which God reveals his glory and demonstrates his deity to the world. . . . The Servant, in both his humiliation and his exaltation, is therefore not merely a human figure distinguished from God, but, in both his humiliation and his exaltation, belongs to the identity of the unique God” (Bauckham 1998: 49, 51). Thus, the term “Son of Man” reveals (along with many of Jesus’ other statements and actions) the true nature of who God is. As Richard Bauckham puts it, “Jesus reveals the divine identity—who God truly is—in humiliation as well as exaltation, and in the connexion of the two. God’s own identity is revealed in Jesus, his life and his cross, just as truly as in his exaltation, in a way that is fully continuous and consistent with the Old Testament and Jewish understanding of God, but is also novel and surprising.” (Ibid.: viii)

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What role do you think a community of faith should play in the lives of Christians?
  - How has your life been affected by a community of faith?
2. Jesus knows our every thought (**v. 8**). What difference does this (or should this) make to you?
3. How does this event with the paralyzed man demonstrate Jesus’ divinity?
4. Why does only Jesus have the authority to forgive sins?

5. How does Jesus reveal the true nature of what God is like?

6. What does the phrase “Son of Man” refer to and mean?

**2:13-17:** <sup>13</sup> *He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them.* <sup>14</sup> *And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he rose and followed him.* <sup>15</sup> *And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.* <sup>16</sup> *And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”* <sup>17</sup> *And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”*

#### vv. 13-17—The calling of Levi

This scene again begins with Jesus teaching (see also **Mark 1:14, 38; 2:2**). He may have been teaching from a boat near the shore as in **Mark 4:1** or teaching as he was walking (**Mark 2:14**; see **Luke 24:13-15, 25-28**). **Verse 13** indicates that, although the religious leaders were beginning to oppose Jesus, the crowds were still coming to him. **Verses 14-17** concentrate on the calling of Levi, a tax collector, to become one of Jesus’ disciples.<sup>7</sup> As with the healing of the paralyzed man in **vv. 1-12**, this episode is important and reveals much about four important areas: the nature of Jesus, the kingdom, and the gospel; our need for God’s grace and forgiveness; the profound nature of truly being born again (as epitomized by Levi); and the nature of Jesus’ opponents. Because there is a logical flow to that order, this is the order in which we will discuss this passage.

#### 1. The nature of Jesus, the kingdom, and the gospel.

Whereas **vv. 1-12** speak directly to the issue of who Jesus is, **vv. 14-17** tell us about the nature of the gospel, the kingdom, Jesus’ values, and his relationship with people. As Michael Spencer puts it, “If Christianity is correct in its confession that Jesus is the incarnation of the eternal, Creator God, then Jesus’ treatment of individuals is perhaps the most important part of the gospel message. Why? Because this indicates how God feels about me! It is the most personal aspect of what the Gospels have to say to any of us.” (Spencer 2020: “Reconsider Jesus – Calling the Tax Collector”)

Jesus’ calling of Levi is particularly significant in that “in first century Palestine, tax collectors were especially despised. This was due to a number of reasons: The Romans sold tax collecting franchises to the highest bidder. Once the collector paid his quota to the Romans, he could keep everything else. For this reason, tax collectors were notoriously dishonest and sometimes collected double (or more) of what was owed. Also, tax collectors were seen as being in collaboration with the occupying force. The ordinary Jew may not have been a zealot, but he was certainly patriotic and found it easy to hate someone who turned their back on his own people, all to work for the Romans. Being in contact with the Romans also meant that the tax collector was ritually unclean, being numbered with the “non-religious” outcasts of society. So, it is no surprise this particular group was associated with prostitutes and ‘sinners.’ Their social circle was limited to other religious and social outcasts.” (Spencer 2020: “Reconsider Jesus – Calling the Tax Collector”)

This passage demonstrates that Jesus does not “play favorites.” God’s grace is not limited to the rich, the powerful, the wealthy, or the educated (although some of those, such as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, were recipients of that grace). Instead, God’s grace extends equally to people of all kinds, without distinction: women and men; the young and the old; the poor and the rich; the weak and the strong; the uneducated and the educated; the sick and the well; the ugly and the good looking; the unlovable and the lovable; even to “*tax collectors and sinners*” (**vv. 16-17**). That Jesus does not “play favorites” is graphically shown in that he “*reclined at table in his [Levi’s] house*” (**v. 15**). That is more significant than we may realize in at least two ways:

- First, “Sharing a meal was the deepest sign of hospitality and acceptance. It was an invitation into friendship and fellowship, going far beyond simply sharing food. Many of the current scholars reinterpreting Jesus believe that this action, on the part of Jesus, was more than just something observed about him; they believe it was an intentional action, done in a public way, to proclaim a radically different message about the Kingdom of God and the God of the Kingdom.” (Spencer 2020: “Reconsider Jesus – Calling the Tax

<sup>7</sup> Levi is the same as Matthew (see **Matt 9:9; 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 5:27-28; 6:15; Acts 11:13**). Walter Wessel states, “Levi was probably his given name and Matthew (‘gift of God’) his apostolic name” (Wessel 1984: 634).

Collector”) Jesus was not just extending superficial grace to “tax collectors and sinners” but then keeping his distance from them. Instead, he was demonstrating real friendship, deep relationship, and true acceptance of people who were shunned by the “respectable” people of society.<sup>8</sup>

This tells us much about the nature of the kingdom and the gospel. It is a lesson we all must learn. Peter had to learn that lesson in **Galatians 2**. **Gal 2:11-14** says, “<sup>11</sup> But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. <sup>12</sup> For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. <sup>13</sup> The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. <sup>14</sup> But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, ‘If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?’” These verses show us that the gospel affects every area of our lives, including even who we eat with. Paul saw that, regardless of their motives, the actions and results of what Peter and the others were doing stabbed at the heart of the gospel itself.

In **Acts 10** Peter had been shown that God does not show partiality between Jews and Gentiles. He even testified about this in **Acts 11** to Jews who had opposed his eating with uncircumcised Gentiles. When Peter met with Paul in Jerusalem, he agreed with Paul’s doctrine (**Gal 2:1-10**). Now, however, Peter was denying the very gospel he had preached by the way he was living. Peter’s external, objective actions did not correspond to his internal, subjective beliefs. Consequently, Paul rightly called him a “hypocrite.” Since this was not just a private matter between Peter and certain individual Gentiles but the entire church was being affected and the nature of the gospel itself was at issue, Paul did not go to Peter privately (as per **Matt 18:15-16**) but rightly confronted him *publicly* (see **Eph 5:11; 1 Tim 5:20**). Peter was acting in an exclusivistic, ethnocentric way which is contrary to the gospel. That is why Paul did not attack Peter on the grounds that Peter was acting in a tribalistic, or racist, or hateful, or hurtful way, although he was acting in all those ways. Instead, Paul’s attack went to the heart of the matter, namely, that Peter was not being “*straightforward about the truth of the gospel*” (v. 14). The NIV translates this as being “*in line with the truth of the gospel*.” Peter denied the gospel by excluding Gentiles from full participation and equality in the life of the church. He was also denying Gentiles complete acceptance *in his private life* (i.e., in who he ate with) because of the fact that they were Gentiles. In effect, although he knew better, Peter was making the gospel for “Jews only.” This is a complete reversal of the entire movement of salvation history and amounts to overturning the New Covenant and reinstating the Old Covenant.

**Mark 2:14-17** and **Gal 2:11-14** are profoundly important for the church today. The issue for us may not be who we eat with. The same type of issue occurs any time a church or individual Christians deny people membership, positions of leadership, fellowship, or full equality because of tribal, ethnic, socio-economic, or other similar reasons. This was a big problem not only in Galatia but also in the early church in Jerusalem (see **Acts 6:1; Jas 2:1-13**); it continues to be a big problem for the church around the world today. This is reflected in the lack of fellowship that some denominations have with other denominations. Of course, we all think our own theology is correct and those who disagree with us are wrong. Even if we are correct in our theology, however, we may be correct in the same way that Peter was correct: his internal beliefs about the oneness of Jews and Gentiles in Christ were correct, but since he did not translate those internal beliefs into concrete, positive action to insure that Gentiles were treated as equals, Peter was a hypocrite who was “*not straightforward about the truth of the gospel*.” He had, in effect, turned his Jewish heritage and traditions into an idol. This is serious. The gospel is *truth*, and truth necessarily affects how we live as well as what we believe. If churches (and individuals) do not resolutely examine themselves and change their practices to bring them in line with the implications of the gospel, God’s verdict on the day of judgment may be that we were not faithful believers or churches at all but really were nothing but hypocrites and idolaters.

- Second, just as Jesus’ forgiving the paralyzed man in **vv. 1-12** pointed to the fact that Jesus himself

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<sup>8</sup> This is more important than we may realize. While the “tax collectors and sinners” with whom Jesus ate in **vv. 15-16** had clearly been irreligious nonbelievers at the time they encountered Jesus, Jesus’ eating with people extends beyond the “tax collectors and sinners.” In **Rev 3:20**, for example, Jesus says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.” We should remember that Jesus said these words in connection with speaking to the church in Laodicea. In other words, what he is saying is that even in the church itself, although there are people who attend regularly, give regularly, and have all the outward appearance of being Christians, nevertheless they are *not* Christians, they are *not* truly born again, they are *not* saved, they are *not* in an intimate, loving relationship with Jesus himself. We will discuss this further below in connection with the “older brother” of Jesus’ parable in **Luke 15**.

would bear the man's sins on the cross, so the banquet or meal Jesus had with Levi and his friends pointed to the "messianic banquet" and "wedding supper of the Lamb" in **Rev 19:6-9**. This had been prophesied in **Isa 25:6** ("*On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples, a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined*"). The banquet is for "all peoples" without distinction. This is also reflected in Revelation, which says that "*by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth*" (**Rev 5:9-10**; see also **7:9**). However, in **Matt 8:11-12** Jesus makes explicit the warning that was only implicit in what he told the scribes and Pharisees in **Mark 2:17**. In Matthew Jesus said, "*I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*" (See also **Matt 21:28-32**; **22:1-14**; **Luke 13:22-30**; **14:7-24**) In other words, while God's grace extends to people of all kinds, only those who are connected to Jesus Christ by faith will be at the "messianic banquet" and "wedding supper of the Lamb." Those who reject Christ will be in the place where there will be "*weeping and gnashing of teeth.*"

## 2. Our need for God's grace and forgiveness.

Jesus' statements to the scribes and Pharisees in **v. 17** ("*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners*") reflects another important aspect of the gospel and the kingdom. Whereas **vv. 1-12** demonstrated who Jesus is and that he alone has the ability and authority to forgive people, **v. 17** reveals our *need* for his forgiveness. God is holy, just, righteous, and good (**Gen 18:25**; **Exod 34:6-7**; **Lev 11:44**; **Job 34:10-12**; **Ps 5:4**; **136:1**; **145:17**; **Hab 1:13**; **Rom 1:18**; **Jas 1:13**). Because God himself is morally holy and perfect, that is the standard to which he holds us (**Matt 5:48**). Jesus' distinctions between the "well" and the "sick," the "righteous" and the "sinners" point to the fact that we are *all* "sick"; we are *all* "sinners."<sup>9</sup>

Although the first human beings (Adam and Eve) were created without sin, they chose to follow Satan and disobey God and therefore became sinful (**Gen 3:1-19**). As a result, every human being since Adam and Eve has been born in a state of moral corruption known as indwelling sin; this indwelling sin is a "law" or power that is actively working inside every person (e.g., **Gen 6:5**; **Ps 51:5**; **Jer 17:9**; **Rom 3:9-18, 23**; **Rom 7:5, 8-11, 14-24**; **Gal 3:21-22**; **5:17**; **Heb 3:12-13**). It leads to universal actualized sins as people go through their lives (**Gen 8:21**; **Ps 51:5**; **143:1-2**; **Jer 17:9**; **Mark 7:20-23**; **Rom 3:9-18, 23**; **5:12-14**; **7:14-24**). As Paul observes in **Rom 3:10-12**, "*None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.*" The "sickness" of our sin is not merely some minor ailment that will go away on its own; it is fatal (see **Eph 2:1**, "*you were dead in the trespasses and sins*" and **Rom 6:23**, "*the wages of sin is death*"; see also **Gen 2:17**; **Ezek 18:4, 20**; **Rom 5:12**).

In short, our problem is inside of us, in our hearts (i.e., the core of our being), and we cannot change our hearts on our own (**Matt 15:16-20**; **Mark 7:14-23**). The problem for human beings is that we can never achieve God's standard of holiness and perfection on our own, for "once a person sins, it is impossible to ever be perfect" (Sproul 2002: 94). Indeed, even our good deeds are tainted with sin. If we are doing good deeds, even in part to earn God's favor or to escape God's punishment and hell, that alone makes our good deeds *not* "good," because our motive is selfish and self-centered, which itself is sin. Further, no amount of good deeds changes the sinful nature and sinful propensities of the heart. Thus, good deeds do not transform corrupt, sinful people into righteous, sinless people; at their core, they remain sinful people. Since no amount of desire, willing, rituals, sacrifices, or other actions can change the fundamental problem of our inner corruption and the sinfulness of our heart, no rituals, sacrifices, "good deeds," or other actions can *ever* "establish our own righteousness" or "earn" our way to heaven, salvation, or acceptance with God (**Gal 2:16**).

That is why Jesus first has to "call" us (**v. 17**); we cannot achieve right standing with God and enter the kingdom on our own. The gospel is the good news that, in Christ, God has done for us what we never could do for ourselves. Because Jesus lived the life we should have lived and was "*tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin*" (**Heb 4:15**), he and he alone was qualified to be our representative, to take upon himself our sin and pay the penalty that otherwise we would have to pay but never could (**Rom 8:1-4**; **2 Cor 5:21**; **Gal 3:13**; **Col 2:13-14**; **1 Tim 2:5-6**; **1 Pet 2:24**). Jesus' rising from the dead and ascending back to the Father validated who he is and demonstrated that the Father accepted Christ's sacrifice of himself on the cross for us. Thus, salvation

<sup>9</sup> In his distinctions between the "well" and the "sick," the "righteous" and the "sinners," Jesus was *not* implying that the Pharisees were "well" and "righteous" and in no need of the salvation he brings. That is clearly seen in his dealings with them throughout the NT. For example, in **John 8** Jesus said that they were slaves to sin (**John 8:34**), were not Abraham's children (**John 8:39**), and were children of the devil (**John 8:44**).



is—and only can be—*given* by God to people as a *gift* of his *grace*. Salvation is—and can only be—*received* by people solely by *faith* in Christ. As **Eph 2:8-9** says, “*For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.*” To be saved means to repent of our sins, accept by faith what Christ has done for us, and turn to Christ as the Lord of our life (**Matt 11:28; Mark 1:14-15; John 1:12; 3:16; 17:3; Acts 26:20; 1 John 1:8-9**). In Christ, we are as free from the guilt and penalty of sin as if we had paid the full price for our sin ourselves (**Rom 6:3-7; Gal 2:20**). In fact, when we turn to Christ in faith, he not only takes our sin onto himself and pays the price for our sin that we should have paid, but he also imputes to us his righteousness so that we can stand before God (**Isa 53:5-6, 10-11; Rom 10:4; 2 Cor 5:21; Heb 2:17-18; 1 Pet 2:4; 3:18**).

### 3. The profound nature of truly being born again

**Verse 14** says, “*And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he rose and followed him.*” Note that Jesus is the one who sought Levi and called him; Levi had not been seeking Jesus. This is an illustration of the order of salvation: God is primary—he must first regenerate our hearts; we then respond by faith and obedience. Timothy Keller states, “Religion [i.e., any religion except Christianity] operates on the principle ‘I obey—therefore I am accepted by God.’ But the operating principle of the gospel is ‘I am accepted by God through what Christ has done—therefore I obey.’” (Keller 2008: 179-80)

The calling of Levi represents, perhaps better than most other cases, the profound nature of what being born again means. There are at least two reasons for this. Walter Wessel points out, “There was much at stake for Levi in accepting Jesus’ challenge. Fishermen could easily go back to fishing (as some of the disciples did after Jesus’ crucifixion [see **John 21:3**]), but for Levi there would be little possibility of his returning to his occupation. Tax collector jobs were greatly sought after as a sure way to get rich quickly.” (Wessel 1984: 634) Additionally, as was discussed above, tax collectors were despised and, essentially, considered by other Jews to be traitors to Israel. By following Jesus, Levi would be leaving his government associates and social relationships and would be attaching himself to a group of people who probably would have despised him. He would be adopting a new life completely foreign to everything he had ever known or done. That is a tremendous step! Yet Levi took that step.

It is interesting that the NT has other examples of “tax collectors and sinners” who clearly recognized the profound nature of salvation and the implications for their lives. Zacchaeus—another tax collector—illustrates this. Again, Jesus sought him out and called him and “*received him joyfully*” (**Luke 19:6**). As in **Mark 2:16**, the people who saw Jesus with Zacchaeus “grumbled” and said, “*He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner*” (**Luke 19:7**). However, it is Zacchaeus’ response that reveals how deeply he understood the life-transforming nature of salvation. **Luke 19:8** says, “*And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, ‘Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.’*” The law required that a person tithe, i.e., give 10% (see **Lev 27:30-33; Deut 12:18; Num 18:21-24**). As a tax collector, Zacchaeus was undoubtedly a rich man. He realized that 10% was essentially nothing to him. He also realized that, by following Christ, he was now under the “law of Christ.” Consequently, he voluntarily committed to give half of his possessions to the poor. Additionally, the OT law only required that a person repay 120%, not 400%, in the case of theft or defrauding someone (see **Lev 6:2-5; Num 5:7**). Yet Zacchaeus voluntarily decided to give back four times the amount of which he had defrauded anyone. His giving back so much more was a clear outward sign of a changed heart. And consider his motive: Zacchaeus’ motive for his generous giving was to please the Lord. Zacchaeus’ statement, “*Behold, Lord!*” (or, “*Look, Lord!*”) is like a little child saying “Look, Mommy!” or “Look, Daddy! See what I’m doing!” Zacchaeus was doing what he thought would please his new Lord. That should be our attitude also.

A similar example is found in **Luke 7:36-50**. There, “*a woman of the city, who was a sinner*” (v. 37) brought an alabaster flask of ointment and “*standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment*” (v. 38). Simon the Pharisee at whose house Jesus was eating only said to himself that “*she is a sinner*” (v. 39). Jesus then told the Pharisee a parable and concluded by saying, “*I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little*” (v. 47). As was true with Zacchaeus, that woman knew the profound and life-changing nature of salvation, and she demonstrated this by her actions. She went to a Pharisee’s house knowing how he felt about her, humbled and embarrassed herself by kissing Jesus’ feet and wiping them with her hair, and gave up a costly alabaster flask of ointment,<sup>10</sup> all for her

<sup>10</sup> If the alabaster flask of ointment was like the perfume in **Matt 26:6-13** and **John 12:1-8** it could have been worth 300

love of and gratitude to Jesus.

It is likely that “tax collectors and sinners” demonstrate their faith so extravagantly because they understand the depth of the change that new life in Christ means. The reason is the clear contrast between the lives they had been living and what Christ now calls and empowers them to do. We see this in **Luke 18** in Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector who went to the temple to pray. While the Pharisee essentially exalted himself, “the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’” (**Luke 18:13**) Michael Spencer concludes by saying, “The implications of all of this are truly stunning. Christianity is not a religion that allows us to make ourselves acceptable to God. If we believe we have become acceptable to him, we have missed him. Instead, Christianity is a relationship with a God whose heart is drawn towards the sinful, the broken, the outcast and the excluded. God sides with sinners and eats with them, warning those of us who are religious that, by declaring ourselves well, we stand in danger of not hearing the voice of our Creator calling us to himself. Such a perspective does not dissolve the need of Christianity to articulate God’s holiness and judgement on sin, this also being basic to the Bible. But if we say that we see God as he has revealed himself in Jesus, then we are claiming that we see a God whose mercy seeks out the very sinners who have offended his holiness, while he also bore the price of their rescue. This is what the cross is all about, and this is why Paul says that the cross is foolishness to the world but powerful to those who are being saved.” (Spencer 2020: “Reconsider Jesus – Calling the Tax Collector”)

#### 4. The nature of Jesus’ opponents

**Verse 16** tells us that “*the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, ‘Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?’*” While Jesus’ calling Levi and eating with him and other “sinners” revealed Jesus’ values and priorities, this response of the scribes and Pharisees revealed their attitude and priorities. However, their response is not limited to them; rather, their response reflects the attitude of most people, at least that of most “respectable” and “religious” people. It is the attitude of the world, as **1 Sam 16:7** says, “*Man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.*” The problem is not only that we look “on the outward appearance,” but that we tend to be very *selective* about which “outward appearances” we look or focus on. Thus, the scribes and Pharisees only looked on the fact that Jesus was eating with “tax collectors and sinners.” They did *not* consider the fact that these people’s lives were in the process of being deeply and fundamentally changed by Jesus. Nor did they consider the reasons why people may have felt compelled to live lives as “sinners” or endeavor to do anything to change the circumstances or social conditions that led people to adopt such lives. Their attitude reflects the favoritism shown by religious people in **Jas 2:1-13** to a rich, well-dressed man over a poor, shabbily dressed man. However, as Douglas Moo observes, the *principle* that James discusses applies to “the treatment of any person on the basis of external considerations—be it race, nationality, wealth, or manner of dress” (Moo 1989: 1155).

The attitude is deeper than simply looking to the outside and favoring people “like ourselves.” It is an attitude to which all people are prone, especially respectable and religious people who are not “tax collectors and sinners.” It is usually an unstated attitude which says, “I have obeyed the rules, you should too; I have worked hard and made something of myself, you should too; I have gone to church and paid my tithe, so God should bless me, but your (poverty, poor physical condition, bad lifestyle) is your own fault—you have no one to blame but yourself, so don’t come to me for help.”

This attitude is epitomized by the older brother in the parable of the “prodigal son” in **Luke 15:11-32**.<sup>11</sup> The parable is very familiar to most of us. It is significant to note that, at the beginning of the three parables Jesus told in **Luke 15** (the parable of the “prodigal son” was the third), he was speaking to two groups of people “*tax collectors and sinners*” and “*the Pharisees and the scribes*” (**Luke 15:1-2**). Timothy Keller points out, “These two kinds of people correspond to the two brothers later in the parable. Tax collectors and sinners are like the younger brother in the parable. They have engaged in immoral, irreligious wild living (v.13). They have left the traditional morality of their families. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law, however, are like the elder brother in the parable. They have stayed with the traditional morality of their upbringing. They are deeply devoted to studying and obeying the Word of God. They pray and worship constantly.” (Keller n.d.: “The Two,” n.p.)

In this parable, “Jesus shows us a father with two sons, and actually both are equally alienated from his

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denarii, i.e., an entire year’s worth of wages.

<sup>11</sup> The parable should actually be called the parable of the father and the two sons, since it has as much to say about the father and the older son as it does about the younger (“prodigal”) son.

heart. One has expressed alienation by running far away, but the elder brother is just as angry and just as much a stranger to the father. The father must ‘go out’ to each of them to urge them to come in (vv.20, 28). But here's the remarkable part. One of his sons is a very good person, one is a very wicked person, but in the end, it is the evil son who comes in to the father's feast and dance, and it is the good son who absolutely will not.” (Ibid.) But why did the older brother remain outside instead of participating in the feast. The older brother tells us: “It is because all these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed... (v.29). It is not his badness keeping him out, but his ‘goodness.’ It is not his sins that are keeping him from sharing in the feast of the father so much as his ‘righteousness.’ The elder brother in the end is lost, not despite his good record, but because of it.” (Ibid.)

In other words, there is not just one way of being far from God, but two ways: one way, of course, is to break God's rules and live a licentious life like the younger brother. The other way to be far from God is to *keep the rules* like the older brother. Why was the older brother so angry? Keller summarizes: “He feels he has the right to tell the father what he should do with his robes, rings, and calves. It shows that he is just as resentful of the father's control of his goods as was the younger brother. The younger brother went away to get out from under the father's control of his wealth, but the older brother stayed home and “never disobeyed” as his way to do the same thing. At heart they were absolutely the same. Both were trying to escape the authority of the father, both resented his control and rebelled. But one did it by breaking all the father's rules, and the other did it by keeping them.” (Ibid.)

This is very important for us to know since, although there are some “younger brothers” in the church, most people in the church are not former prostitutes, drug addicts, thieves, or murderers; most people in the church are relatively religious, respectable people who try to keep the rules and do the right thing. The issue, however, is *motive*: “The difference between a religious person and a true Christian is that the religious person obeys God to get control over God, and to get things from God, but the Christian obeys just to get God. Religious persons obey to get leverage over God, to control him, to put him in a position where they think he owes them. Therefore, despite their moral and religious fastidiousness, they are actually attempting to be their own saviors. Christians, who know they are only saved by grace and can never control God, obey him out of a desire to love and please and draw closer to the one who saved them.” (Ibid.)

The thing we must realize is that, as we see in the parable in **Luke 15** and the reaction of the Pharisees to Jesus' interaction with “tax collectors and sinners” throughout the NT, is that it is easier to win “younger brothers” to Christ than it is to win “older brothers.” Jesus and the gospel are more attractive to younger brothers, because they more easily recognize their lostness and need than do older brothers. It is because the older brothers keep the rules and are respectable and successful that they do not recognize their need at all (or the hardness of their own hearts). Thus, we must heed Christ's warning and teach our people that “*the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.*” (**Matt 21:31-32**)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What, if anything, make's Levi's decision to follow Jesus more profound than, for example, Peter's, Andrew's, James's, or John's?
2. If Jesus is the incarnation of God himself, then how he treated people may be the most important part of the gospel message. Do you think this is true? Why or why not?
  - How *did* Jesus treat people?
  - Why is it important that we note how he treated people?
3. Today, many Christians appear to think and act like Jesus (if he were here today) probably would be found in a church or possibly in a café that does not serve alcohol (as opposed to going to a bar), and that his friends would be preachers, not prostitutes. Where do you think we would find Jesus today? If it is someplace “less respectable” than a church or a café that does not serve alcohol, are you willing to go there?
4. Today, who is viewed as a “tax collector and sinner”? What, if anything, should we do with respect to such people?

5. What is the significance of *eating* with “tax collectors and sinners”?

6. In Jesus’ time, the outcasts of society flocked to Jesus because they knew he was on their side and loved and forgave him. Do most outcasts today flock to the church because they know that it is on their side and will love and forgive them? Why or why not?

- If this is *not* the case, why is it not, and what should we do about it?

7. Discuss the “two ways of being far from God,” i.e., being like the younger brother in **Luke 15** and disobeying the rules versus being like the older brother and obeying them.

- If we understand this, why is it harder to win “older brothers” to Christ?
- How might understanding the two types of brothers—and the fact that probably the majority of people in the church are “older brother” types—affect the way we preach and present the gospel?

**2:18-22:** <sup>18</sup> *Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. And people came and said to him, “Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?”* <sup>19</sup> *And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. <sup>20</sup> The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. <sup>21</sup> No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. <sup>22</sup> And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins—and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins.”*

#### **vv. 18-22—Jesus and fasting: the significance of Christ**

In this series of events in Jesus’ ministry, this is the one in which he is not confronted or questioned by his opponents. Rather, people who saw that John the Baptist’s disciples fasted and the Pharisees fasted, but Jesus’ disciples did not fast, were wondering why that was the case.<sup>12</sup> However, implicit in their question lies the criticism of the Pharisees, namely, that Jesus is breaking with tradition. Thus, both the question and Jesus’ answer take us back to the issue raised in **vv. 1-12**, namely, who Jesus is, and also to the issue raised in **vv. 13-17**, what Jesus does.

#### 1. Fasting in the OT

In the law fasting was only required on the Day of Atonement (**Lev 16:29, 31; 23:27-32; Num 29:7**). After the exile, four additional annual fasts were observed (**Zec 7:5; 8:19**). Fasts were sometimes called for by leaders and prophets in response to particular events, such as times of national danger, repentance or humility (**2 Chron 20:3; Ezra 8:21-23; Neh 1:4-11; Jer 36:9; Joel 1:8-2:17**). Fasts also were observed privately for various reasons (**2 Sam 12:15-23; I Kings 21:27; Pss 69:1-15, 35:13-14, 109:4-21**).

#### 2. Jesus and fasting: Jesus as the bridegroom

Jesus fasted during his temptation in the wilderness (**Matt 4:2**). Although he did not repudiate fasting, he did not give his disciples any instruction or advice to fast on any regular basis. One reason for this is indicated in Jesus’ answer in **v. 19** to the question about why his disciples did not fast. Michael Spencer notes, “One period for which fasting was forbidden was during a wedding celebration. For as long as two weeks the bride and bridegroom were surrounded by feasting and friends, known as the ‘children’ of the bridegroom. For many people, this wedding celebration was the biggest party of their life and was an occasion of joy by the entire community. Sorrow was banished and fasting would have been ridiculous and insulting. Jesus’ first century audience would have laughed at such an idea. Jesus is comparing himself to the bridegroom. The bride may have waited for years for his arrival to bring her into his family, just as the Jewish people had waited for the promised one. This time when Jesus is present and bringing the joy and freshness of the Kingdom is no time to fast, but a time to soak in the joy and gladness of such an event.” (Spencer 2020: “Reconsider Jesus – The Bridegroom and The New Wine”) Jesus acted this out in **vv. 14-16** in feasting with Levi and the “sinners.”

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<sup>12</sup> In **Matt 9:14-17** and **Luke 5:33-39**, in both cases, as in **Mark 2**, immediately after the call of Levi. In Matthew, those asking the question were identified as the disciples of John the Baptist. In Luke, it says “they” asked him; the “they” are not specifically identified, but the scribes and Pharisees are implied, since they were mentioned just before that.

God had compared himself to a bridegroom in **Isa 62:5**. Now Jesus is saying, “*I am that bridegroom*” (see also **Matt 9:15**; **Luke 5:34-35**; **John 3:28-29**). By calling himself the bridegroom, Jesus was, in effect, saying that he was the fulfillment of everything the OT had pointed to. N. T. Wright indicates the theological depth of Jesus’ answer: “Fasting in this period was not, for Jews, simply an ascetic discipline, part of the general practice of piety. It had to do with Israel’s present condition: she was still in exile. More specifically, it had to do with commemorating the destruction of the Temple. Zechariah’s promise that the fasts would turn into feasts [**Zech 8:19**] could come true only when YHWH restored the fortunes of his people. That, of course, was precisely what Jesus’ cryptic comments [regarding His disciples not fasting and new wineskins] implied. In other words, the party is in full swing, and nobody wants glum faces at a wedding. This is not a piece of ‘teaching’ about ‘religion’ or ‘morality’; nor is it the dissemination of a timeless truth. It is a claim about eschatology. The time is fulfilled; the exile is over; the bridegroom is at hand. Jesus’ acted symbol, feasting rather than fasting, brings into public visibility his controversial claim, that in his work Israel’s hope was being realized; more specifically, that in his work *the Temple was being rebuilt*. Those who had got so used to living in exile that they could not hear the message of liberation were deaf indeed.” (Wright 1996: 433-34)

In **v. 20** Jesus cautioned, “*The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.*” This is probably a veiled hint of his coming crucifixion and then his ascension back to the Father. Assuming this to be the case, we should bear in mind certain things when we consider the issue of fasting today. First, our situation is not identical to that of the disciples when Jesus was physically present with them. Consequently, **v. 20** suggests that fasting by Christians is acceptable today. **Acts 13:1-3** and the early church manual the *Didache* (c. 70-110), sec. 8.1 indicate that the early church practiced fasting. Second, fasting can be a spiritual discipline for consecration of oneself to God, for seeking God, his will, and a closer relationship with him, and for other similar reasons; fasting also may have various health benefits (see Wallis 1968: *passim*). However, fasting, like any spiritual discipline, can easily become a form of legalism or can cause us to think that we who fast are spiritually superior to those who do not. That was certainly the attitude of the Pharisee in **Luke 18:12** who told God, “*I fast twice a week.*” Jesus said that he was simply exalting himself (**Luke 18:14**; see also **Matt 6:16-18**). As Spencer says, “Christianity needs traditions that can give meaning and can shape spirituality, but at the same time needs to be careful to avoid any form of legalism, asceticism, or new versions of old rituals. Whether we are talking about fasting, tithing, or other meaningful spiritual practices we must remember that it is only through the person and work of Jesus that we have standing before God. The Holy Spirit is received through faith, not efforts or rituals.” (Spencer 2020: “Reconsider Jesus – The Bridegroom and The New Wine”) Finally, while Jesus is not present with us bodily as he was with his earthly disciples, he not only is present with us but is *in* us in the person of the Holy Spirit (**John 14:16-18**; see **Acts 2:1-4**; **1 Cor 3:16**; **Gal 4:6**). Consequently, the Christian life should not be characterized by sorrow or gloom but by joy and peace (see, e.g., **John 14:27**; **Gal 5:22-23**; **Phil 4:4-7**). “Christian Joy is not the manipulation of emotion, but the response of the whole person - spirit, mind, will, body and emotions - to the presence and the truth of God.” (Spencer 2020: “Reconsider Jesus – The Bridegroom and The New Wine”) The Spirit leads, guides, empowers, and communicates with us. Let us draw on him and be in close communion with him, and if fasting helps you draw closer to him, then good.

### 3. The patch on an old garment and new wine in old wineskins

In **vv. 21-22**, Jesus’ illustrations of a patch on an old garment and new wine in old wineskins would have been familiar to his audience. The illustration in **v. 21** indicates, “If one tries to mend a shrunken piece of cloth with a new patch, the patch will eventually shrink and tear away from the shrunken cloth, because the shrunken cloth will have no give left in it” (Sproul 2021: n.p.). Regarding **vv. 22**, “In Jesus’s day, people used animal skins—like goatskin—for storing liquids. Fermented drinks like wine expanded, and since an old wineskin would already be stretched to its limit, the new wine would tear the seams. This is why new wine needed to be preserved in new wineskins. As the wine expanded, the new skins would stretch to accommodate it.” (Jesus Film Project 1995-2021: “New wine and old wineskins”) Jesus was saying and, by healing the paralyzed man through his word alone and by eating with “tax collectors and sinners,” he was demonstrating that God “is not confined behind traditions, but reaches out to include sinners in surprising ways. It was not the laws of Judaism or the God of Judaism or the heart of the serious Jew that Jesus spoke about; it was the loyalty to a kind of religion that did not move with God into the future and hope, but moved backward into tradition and, as a result, bound people to their old sins. Jesus did not come to patch up such a system. He did not come to pour the new wine into the old wineskins. Traditional religion will always tear away under the dynamic pressure of the Holy Spirit at work in the Kingdom. God is active in His Kingdom, breaking down walls, setting people free, healing the hurting and including the outcast. . . . Jesus was confronting all who knew him with

fundamental choices as to what relationship with God was all about and what God himself was like. . . . We should realize that the ‘bursting, ripping’ power of the Gospel is a continual application. Anywhere that the old, i.e. the human and fallen, dominates, the Gospel brings dynamic life and new life. This is part of our commission to go into the world as leaven, as a new colony, as pilgrims and aliens, as lights in the darkness. And once in the world, we represent not the old, but the new, Christ and His Kingdom.” (Spencer 2020: “Reconsider Jesus – The Bridegroom and The New Wine”)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why should we be joyful when our bridegroom is in heaven?
2. Christians often side with the “old,” not the “new.” How do they do this? What sort of “newness” would God like to bring into your world: personally, your family, your work life, your church?
3. If you fast, how do you fast and what benefits have you experienced from fasting?
4. Do you have any suggestions for helping people not turn fasting into a form of legalism?

**2:23-28:** <sup>23</sup> *One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain.* <sup>24</sup> *And the Pharisees were saying to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?”* <sup>25</sup> *And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: <sup>26</sup> how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?”* <sup>27</sup> *And he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. <sup>28</sup> So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”*

#### vv. 23-28—Eating grain on the Sabbath

According to **Deut 23:25**, it was legal to pluck heads of grain from a neighbor’s field. However, the “oral law” forbade doing this on the Sabbath. Jesus’ first answer to the Pharisees referred to what David did, as recorded in **1 Sam 21:1-6**, for which David is not condemned in the OT.<sup>13</sup> Jesus appeared to be making a three-fold argument with his reference to David. First, “Since David was not condemned, why are you condemning me?” Second, the issue with David was not merely picking and husking grain but was “the much more serious charge of eating *the bread of the Presence*, which, after its solemn presentation to God, was hallowed from secular uses, and might be eaten only by the priests” (Cole 1989: 129); consequently, there is no basis to condemn Jesus or his disciples.<sup>14</sup> Third, human need takes precedence over ceremonial aspects of the law.

In **vv. 27-28** Jesus goes to the more fundamental issues of the nature of the Sabbath itself and his relationship to the Sabbath. In **v. 27** Jesus statement that “*the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath*” essentially is saying that “the Pharisees, with all their hedging restrictions, originally designed to avoid any possibility of infringing the sabbath, had ended by making the sabbath an intolerable burden (*cf.* Mt. 23:4). They had now quite forgotten that in origin the sabbath was God’s merciful provision for His creatures.” (Cole 1989: 129)

**Verse 28** presses home Jesus’ major point that the primary issue is not so much what can or cannot be done on the Sabbath, but the issue is his identity; the primary issue relates to Christology. He begins by again calling himself the “*Son of Man*,” as he had done in **2:10**. Thus, he is again asserting his identity and authority as God who has come to earth as a man. Jesus then said that he is “*Lord of the Sabbath*” (**Mark 2:28**; see also **Matt 12:6**; **Luke 6:5**). The Pharisees claimed that Jesus’ disciples were guilty of breaking the Sabbath because they picked heads of grain on the Sabbath. Jesus’ is saying that “the disciples are innocent *because* [He] as the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath” (Carson 1982: 67). By saying that, Jesus was asserting his “superiority over the Sabbath and, hence, of the authority to abrogate or transform the Sabbath law” (Moo 1984: 17). Only God has authority over the Sabbath and the authority to abrogate or transform the Sabbath law. He made a similar

<sup>13</sup> The reference in **v. 26** to Abiathar raises certain difficulties, since **1 Sam 21:1** says that Abiathar’s father, Ahimelech, was high priest at that time. The Greek wording of **v. 26** does not strictly mean that Abiathar was high priest but is broader in scope (see Cole 1989: 129n.2; Blomberg 1986:147-48). Further, the OT itself seems to conflate, confuse, or interchangeably use Ahimelech and Abiathar (compare **1 Sam 22:20** with **2 Sam 8:17**; **1 Chron 18:16**; and **24:6**).

<sup>14</sup> This is what is known as an *a fortiori* argument (i.e., an argument from the stronger case to the lesser case), e.g., if you do not trust your child to safely operate a bicycle, then *a fortiori*, you do not trust him to operate an automobile.

claim to have equality with God in **John 5:17-18** when he healed a man on the Sabbath and told him to “*pick up your pallet and walk*,” in violation of Sabbath regulations. R. T. France points out that Jesus “is being progressively revealed as [Lord] in his teaching and action, in relation to spiritual powers and physical illness, in the declaration of the forgiveness of sins, and now even (*kai*) in relation to that most sacred of divine institutions, the sabbath. The Christological stakes could hardly be pitched higher than this.” (France 2002: 148) His claim to be Lord of the Sabbath “is not only a messianic claim of grand proportions, but it raises the possibility of a future change or reinterpretation of the Sabbath” (Carson 1982: 66).<sup>15</sup> Jesus’ claim to be “*Lord of the Sabbath*” relates not only to his own conduct but also affects the conduct of others. If we recognize who Jesus is, then we are faced with a choice: either submit to him and obey him (as did the many who picked up his pallet and walked) or opposed him (as did the scribes and Pharisees).

**3:1-6:** <sup>1</sup>*Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand.* <sup>2</sup>*And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him.* <sup>3</sup>*And he said to the man with the withered hand, “Come here.”* <sup>4</sup>*And he said to them, “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent.* <sup>5</sup>*And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.* <sup>6</sup>*The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.*

#### vv. 1-6—Jesus heals on the Sabbath

This last of the five events recorded from **2:1–3:6** culminates with the Pharisees and the Herodians counseling together about how to destroy Jesus. Now it is not simply Jesus’ disciples doing something on the Sabbath as in the previous event, but it is Jesus himself. Further, the healing Jesus performs on the Sabbath is not in a private house as in **2:1-12** but was in the synagogue. Further, given that he told the man with the withered hand to stand and come forward, Jesus appears to have deliberately healed the man as a *challenge* to those who were watching him so that they might accuse him.

Jesus’ question in **v. 4** (“*Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?*”) reiterates the principle behind the Sabbath that he had stated in **2:27**: “*The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.*” The answer, which the Pharisees knew but could not bring themselves to admit, is “*to do good . . . to save life.*” In Matthew’s account of this event, Jesus makes this clear by giving an example, “<sup>11</sup>*He said to them, ‘Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out?’* <sup>12</sup>*Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.*” (**Matt 12:11-12**) The *silence* of the Pharisees, even though they knew the correct answer to Jesus’ question, amounts to “doing harm.” R. Alan Cole observes, “To abandon the helpless man would be to cause him to remain crippled; this would clearly be *to do harm*” (Cole 1989: 132). The silence of the Pharisees is equivalent to the “passing by on the other side” by the priest and Levite in Jesus’ parable of the good Samaritan (**Luke 10:29-37**). In other words, *failure* to do good when we can amounts to doing evil; and to *not* save a life when we can amounts to killing it.

In **v. 5** it says that Jesus was both angry and grieved at the same time. He was angry because the Pharisees had murder in their hearts and, as Luke’s account of this even tells us, “*He knew their thoughts*” (**Luke 6:8**). He was grieved because of “*hardness of heart*” (**v. 5**). Jesus knew that humanity’s real problem is not religion, tradition, or ignorance, but the human heart itself (see **Jer 17:9**), and only Jesus can change our heart and give us a “heart of flesh” instead of our “heart of stone” (**Ezek 36:26**). This healing marks a turning point in Jesus’ ministry, because the Pharisees desired to keep their hard hearts rather than follow Jesus. Thus, they “*went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.*”

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Jesus claimed to be God incarnate and the “Lord of the Sabbath,” yet the chief criticism of him was that *he was not religious enough!* What is the implication of this for us as followers of Jesus?
2. What do you think of the statement, “*failure* to do good when we can amounts to doing evil; and to *not* save a life when we can amounts to killing it.”

<sup>15</sup> How Jesus fulfilled and replaced the OT Sabbath is discussed at Menn 2021: 89-91.

**3:7-12:** <sup>7</sup> *Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the sea, and a great crowd followed, from Galilee and Judea* <sup>8</sup> *and Jerusalem and Idumea and from beyond the Jordan and from around Tyre and Sidon. When the great crowd heard all that he was doing, they came to him.* <sup>9</sup> *And he told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, lest they crush him,* <sup>10</sup> *for he had healed many, so that all who had diseases pressed around him to touch him.* <sup>11</sup> *And whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, “You are the Son of God.”* <sup>12</sup> *And he strictly ordered them not to make him known.*

#### vv. 7-12—Jesus heals many with afflictions and unclean spirits

In many respects, this section is similar to **1:21-34**. Although Mark does not tell us why Jesus withdrew, Matthew indicates that it was because Jesus was aware of the plot to kill him (see **Matt 12:15**). **Verses 7-10** show that, despite the opposition of the scribes and Pharisees, great crowds from multiple areas of the region, both in and outside of Israel, still followed Jesus, probably in large part because of his healing ministry. The reference to the boat in **v. 9** is repeated in **4:1** and indicates a practical way that Jesus was able to teach large crowds yet avoid being crushed. When Jesus saw large crowds “*he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd*” (**Mark 6:34**). However, he was not particularly impressed with the size of crowds “*for he himself knew what was in man*” (**John 2:23-25**). What matters to Jesus is the depth of a person’s commitment to him (see, e.g., **Matt 10:37-39; Mark 8:34-38; Luke 14:25-33; John 6:53-66**). That being said, although Jesus knew how fickle the crowds could be, that many were there to see miracles or be fed, and that most probably would not end up being his disciples, he taught and healed them anyway. Further, while Jesus could show lavish compassion to the crowds, he never watered down his message about how to enter the kingdom and the implications of being in the kingdom. That is why, in **John 6:66**, many people who had been following him walked away from him and followed him no more. This is a fine line the church must learn: how to reach out and act with love toward people of all kinds, who may themselves be very unlovable, and yet never water down the gospel and its implications for our lives in order to draw crowds. **Verses 11-12** are akin to **1:24-25** in that the unclean spirits know who Jesus is and publicly identify him as the Son of God, yet Jesus rebukes them and orders them not to make him known.

### DISCUSSION QUESTION

1. What do we, the church, need to do or change what we are doing to walk the fine line that Jesus walked, namely, to reach out and act with love toward people of all kinds, who may themselves be very unlovable, and yet never water down the gospel and its implications for our lives?

**3:13-19:** <sup>13</sup> *And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him.* <sup>14</sup> *And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach* <sup>15</sup> *and have authority to cast out demons.* <sup>16</sup> *He appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter);* <sup>17</sup> *James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder);* <sup>18</sup> *Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Zealot,* <sup>19</sup> *and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.*

#### vv. 13-19—Choosing the Twelve

Luke tells us that, before choosing the Twelve, Jesus spent the whole night in prayer (**Luke 6:12**). As with his other actions and sayings, choosing the Twelve had deep theological significance. Jesus’ founding the church on the basis of 12 disciples/12 apostles symbolized that He was founding a new, spiritual Israel. Jesus’ selection of 12 disciples/12 apostles (**Matt 10:1-2; Mark 3:13-19; Luke 6:12-26**) is symbolic of the 12 tribes of Israel. “They are the representatives of and the active nucleus for the formation of the twelve new tribes” (Goppelt 1982: 108). James recognizes this by beginning his letter “*to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad*” (**Jas 1:1**). That letter is obviously written to *Christians* (see **Jas 2:1**). “In using the phrase [*ai dōdeka phulai; “the twelve tribes”*], the author looks on the recipients of the epistle as the true Israel. The church has quite naturally appropriated the title, for it was the work of the Messiah to reestablish the twelve tribes (Je. 3:18; Ezk. 37:19-24; Pss. Sol. 17:28), and Christians recognized themselves as the true heirs of the Jewish faith (Romans 4; 1 Cor. 10:18; Gal. 4:21-31; Phil. 3:3).” (Davids 1982: 63) Cole highlights certain correspondences between OT Israel and the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles: “Just as the old Israel had twelve ‘founding fathers’, so had the new; even some of the names of the founders are the same. In both old and new, there is a Simeon and a Levi, as well as a Judah. Other correspondences unknown to us may well exist, for Andrew and



Philip almost certainly had a Hebrew ‘name in religion’ as well as their Greek names. . . . As there had been of old a beloved tribe, Benjamin, so there was now a beloved disciple, John, and, in the new Israel, all are both priestly and royal (Rev. 1:6), as ideally in the old Israel (Ex. 19:6). (Cole 1989: 135-36n.3)

That Jesus was inaugurating the new, true, spiritual Israel in the Twelve is confirmed in the New Jerusalem. On the twelve gates of the New Jerusalem are written “*the names of the twelve tribes of Israel*” (Rev 21:12), but on twelve foundation stones of the New Jerusalem are “*the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb*” (Rev 21:14). By doing this, Revelation is asserting the essential unity between Old Testament Israel and the followers of Jesus and his apostles as the new, true, spiritual Israel (see Walker 1996: 239). Interestingly, although one might think that the “foundation” of New Jerusalem should be OT Israel, since it came first, it is the names of the twelve apostles which are on the foundation. This indicates that Christ and the gospel are the foundation of New Jerusalem.

The apostles themselves recognized the significance of the “12”: In Acts 1:12-26 they concluded that it was necessary to fill Judas Iscariot’s position as apostle. Additionally, although Paul was an apostle (see, e.g., Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1; 9:1), the NT (and Paul himself) recognizes a distinction between the apostleship of Paul and “the Twelve” (see Acts 6:2; 1 Cor 15:5, 8). This may have to do with the fact that Paul’s ministry primarily was to the Gentiles (see Acts 9:15; 13:46; 18:6; Gal 1:16; 2:7), whereas Peter, the evident leader and spokesman of the Twelve, primarily was an apostle to Jews (see Gal 2:7-8).

All that being said, “It was a strange group of men our Lord chose to be his disciples. Four of them were fishermen, one a hated tax collector, another a member of a radical and violent political party. Of six of them we know practically nothing. All were laymen. There was not a preacher or an expert in the Scriptures in the lot. Yet it was with these men that Jesus established his church and disseminated his Good News to the end of the earth.” (Wessel 1984: 643)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. On several occasions Jesus withdrew from people (see also Mark 6:31, 46; 7:24; 14:34-35). What is the importance to you of withdrawing from time to time?

- When do you sense this need?
- What strategies do you have for recharging your batteries (spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional)?

2. Verses 14-15 indicate that Jesus called the Twelve to go into the world exactly as Jesus himself had done, with the same authority that he had. What does this imply for our lives, for how we relate to people, etc.?

3. What, if anything, does the symbolic nature of Jesus’ choosing 12 apostles tell us about what we (the church) should be like?

4. What, if anything, do the nature and characteristics of the apostles tell us about what we (the church) should be like?

**3:20-35:** <sup>20</sup> Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. <sup>21</sup> And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, “He is out of his mind.” <sup>22</sup> And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, “He is possessed by Beelzebul,” and “by the prince of demons he casts out the demons.” <sup>23</sup> And he called them to him and said to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? <sup>24</sup> If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. <sup>25</sup> And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. <sup>26</sup> And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end. <sup>27</sup> But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder his house. <sup>28</sup> Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, <sup>29</sup> but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin” — <sup>30</sup> for they were saying, “He has an unclean spirit.”

<sup>31</sup> And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. <sup>32</sup> And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you.” <sup>33</sup> And he answered them, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” <sup>34</sup> And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! <sup>35</sup> For whoever does the will of God, he is my

*brother and sister and mother.”*

**vv. 20-35—Disbelief, opposition, and Christ’s true family**

This section begins by talking about Christ’s earthly family, then discusses the accusation the scribes make against him, and concludes with Christ’s earthly family and Christ’s definition of those whom he considers his true family.

1. Jesus’ earthly family think he is mad

We often forget that Jesus came from a family and had (half-) brothers and sisters.<sup>16</sup> During Jesus’ ministry on earth, his brothers did not believe in him (**John 7:5**) and, as **v. 21** tells us, they even thought he was out of his mind. The point is that everyone—from the religious leaders to his own family—missed who Jesus really is. We therefore should not be surprised when people we know and talk to about the Lord to not understand or believe, and we should not be surprised when members of our own family do not understand or believe or even think that we are mad for following Jesus. Jesus himself said this would be the case (see **Matt 10:34-36; Luke 12:51-53**). Love of, and loyalty to, family is strong, but Jesus calls us to love and be loyal to him supremely, even over our earthly families (**Matt 10:37-39; Luke 14:26-33**).

2. Opposition of the religious leaders and “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit”

The religious leaders went beyond thinking that Jesus was mad. They were his enemies and accused him of being “*possessed by Beelzebul,*” and said “*by the prince of demons he casts out the demons*” (**v. 22**; see also **Matt 12:31-32; Luke 12:10; John 10:20**).<sup>17</sup> That accusation is logically absurd, as Jesus points out in **vv. 23-27**. However, that accusation was far worse than being logically absurd. The context of Jesus’ reference to the “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” is the scribes’ attributing Christ’s work of healing and casting out demons as being the work of the devil, even though any objective person would acknowledge such work as good, *they themselves knew* that what Jesus was doing was good (see **3:1-5**), and they knew that Jesus was actually destroying Satan’s work (**3:23-27**). It is important to see that when the scribes leveled their charge against Jesus they *fully knew or should have known who he was*. Jesus did not hide who he was from the religious leaders: at his baptism the Spirit publicly descended on him like a dove (**1:10**); God’s voice from heaven proclaimed, “*You are my beloved Son*” (**1:11**); the Spirit immediately drove him into the wilderness (**1:12**); Jesus told the religious leaders that he could do what only God could do by forgiving someone with his mere word and then proved it by healing the paralyzed man (**2:5-12**); he said he was the “*Son of Man*” (**2:10**); he said he was the bridegroom (**2:19**); he said he was the “*Lord of the Sabbath*” (**2:28**); he said he was the stronger one who could bind Satan and proved it by repeatedly casting out evil spirits (**3:27**; see **Mark 1:4-8** where John the Baptist prophesied the coming of one “*mightier than I*”).<sup>18</sup> The scribes were present when Jesus healed the paralyzed man in **Mark 2:1-12**. They knew that only God could forgive sin by his word and thus accused Jesus of blasphemy when he forgave the man (**2:7**). But when Jesus physically healed the man, **v. 12** says that “*they were all amazed and glorified God.*” Presumably, that included the scribes who “*never saw anything like this*” (**v. 12**). “There was only one possible deduction; if Jesus did expel demons, it could only be because He was in possession of a power and authority stronger than that of Satan. So great a power, to any Jew, could only be the power of God (Lk. 11:20). This in turn meant that Satan’s reign of sin and death was over, and that God’s reign had already begun, in the hearts and minds of men whom Jesus had ransomed and redeemed from Satan’s power.” (Cole 1989: 142; see also **John 10:21**)

In Matthew’s account of this confrontation, Jesus specifically says that he is acting by the power of the Holy Spirit: “*But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you*” (**Matt 12:28**). By claiming that the work of the Spirit was the work of Satan, the religious leaders were repeating the history of their ancestors, as recounted Isaiah: “*But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit; therefore he turned to be their enemy, and himself fought against them*” (**Isa 63:10**). Isaiah then continues with a prayer that God “*would rend the heavens and come down*” (**Isa 64:1**) to aid his people. C. K. Barrett points out, “The prayer of the prophet had been answered. God had rent the heavens; he had come down . . . in the descent of the Spirit . . . upon Jesus [**Mark 1:10**], who immediately proceeded, as a second Moses, with the

<sup>16</sup> For more on Jesus’ brothers and sisters, see the discussion at **vv. 31-35**, below.

<sup>17</sup> Beelzebul is sometimes translated as Beelzebub. Beelzebul is the original form of the Hebrew Baalzebub, which means “Lord of the flies,” and is a mocking alteration Baalzebub, which means “Lord Baal or Prince Baal” (Cole 1989: 140; Stoops 1993: 70). “In Aramaic, Beel-zebul may have been construed as ‘Lord of Dung.’” (Stoops 1993: 70).

<sup>18</sup> “The description of Satan as ‘the strong one’ [*ho ischuros*, **Mark 3:27**] finds its counterpart in the description of the Bearer of the Holy Spirit as ‘the Stronger One’ [*ischuroteros*, **Mark 1:7**]” (Lane 1974: 143n.92).

work of delivering his people. His mighty works had been made known. The demons recognized their master. But this new work of God was greeted in precisely the same way as the old. The people instead of welcoming it rebelled against it, and grieved (blasphemed) God's Holy Spirit, as Mark says. . . . Since this is God's final, eschatological, deed of salvation, those who utterly reject it can, in the nature of the case, find no salvation." (Barrett 1958: 105)

It appears that Jesus' actions of eating with "tax collectors and sinners," saying that fasting (which the Pharisees did twice per week) need not be observed since he was present, allowing his disciples to violate the oral law and do "work" on the Sabbath, and publicly healing the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath, in the synagogue, in defiance of what the leaders felt was lawful, caused the religious leaders to accuse Jesus of being led by Satan. Robert Deffinbaugh observes, "The real question was not so much, 'How can He claim to be God?' but 'How can He claim to be the Messiah and yet shun us, while socializing with the scum?' The Jewish leaders were obviously snubbed." (Deffinbaugh n.d.: Background [2]) As Jeffrey Gibson adds, "Surely, what upsets them is that it is not just anyone, but the 'holy one of God' who countenances these things" (Gibson n.d.: II). Jesus recognized this (**Luke 7:34**, "*The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'*"); see also **Matt 11:19**). In other words, they knew who Jesus was, they knew that the charge that he was possessed by Beelzebul was false, but they deliberately made the charge anyway to try to destroy him.<sup>19</sup> In fact, in **3:6** they had already decided to destroy Jesus; hence, the allegation in **3:22** was simply part of their already-established plot (Deffinbaugh n.d.: Background [4], "The Jewish leaders determined to destroy Jesus [v. 6] before they had come up with a good reason for doing so. . . . This [the allegation in v. 22] is not merely one thoughtless statement but the long-discussed, well-thought-out position taken by the leadership who had already rejected Jesus as Messiah").

The religious leaders probably knowingly turned from the one they knew to be the Messiah sent by God, and accused him of being controlled by Satan, because such a Messiah did not match their conception of who Messiah should be and what Messiah should do.<sup>20</sup> They could not accept that God would act so contrary to the way they always had pictured him. Such a Messiah and God also threatened their selfish greed for their own privileged positions and authority (see **John 11:48**, "*If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away our place and our nation.*").<sup>21</sup> Consequently, although they knew otherwise, they deliberately chose to portray Jesus as a sorcerer and the false prophet and worker of miracles described in **Deut 13:1-5**. The irony is that "when the bona fide Lord of the House casts out unclean spirits, they confess him to be the Holy One/Son of God [**1:24**; see also **Matt 17:9**; **Mark 1:34**; **3:11**; **Luke 4:41**], but those responsible for the purity of Israel and the house of God accuse him of having an unclean spirit (3:30)" (Watts 2007: 150).

It was because the scribes were not innocently mistaken but knew that what they were saying about Jesus was false that, in v. 29, Jesus says, "*Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.*" He says that it is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit because, as the scribes well knew, Jesus was not led by Satan but by the Holy Spirit and it is the Holy Spirit who reveals Christ to the world.

<sup>19</sup> Jesus' parable of the vine-growers in **Mark 12:1-12** makes clear that the religious leaders acted with full knowledge of who Jesus really was.

<sup>20</sup> Frank Powell observes that the religious leaders "were looking for a Messiah who would be 'like unto Moses,' or who, like the great national hero and idol Judas Maccabeus (B.C. 167-161), with a strong and mighty arm would deliver them from their oppressors; one who would effect the supreme deliverance so that the Promised Land would pass into their undisputed possession forever; one who would be attended by every circumstance of power and glory as foretold by the prophets. None other would satisfy them. Jesus fulfilled none of these prophecies. Jesus was not a warrior and, in any case, gave no sign of being willing to lead a revolt against Rome. On the contrary, He was a man of peace. His kingdom was 'not of this world.' He had not denounced the Romans; but He had certainly denounced them—the Rulers of the Jews. . . . Moreover, Jesus taught that He had a mission to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews. In the estimation of the Jewish Rulers such a person could not possibly be a 'true' Jew or their Messiah. In their conception of things Jehovah was not concerned with the Gentiles." (Powell 1954: 90-91)

<sup>21</sup> This is also indicated in **Mark 11:15-19** when Jesus "cleansed the temple" by driving out those who bought and sold in the temple, overturned the tables of the moneychangers, would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple, and himself taught in the temple. **Verse 18** says that the chief priests and scribes sought to destroy him "*for they feared him.*" Clearly, "Jesus' action had challenged their authority and no doubt cost them a good deal of money" (Wessel 1984: 728). Beyond that, however, lay the prospect that, if the crowds followed Jesus, the future position and authority of the religious leaders probably would come to an end, since Jesus was forcefully demonstrating that the temple service, as administered by those leaders, was not acceptable to God. Further, in v. 17 Jesus quoted from **Jer 7:11**, which is part of a discourse in which God castigates the leaders of Israel and promises to cast them out of his sight.

Blasphemy is similar to apostasy.<sup>22</sup> Neither is committed inadvertently or by accident, but each is intentional and deliberate. As Walter Grundmann states, “This sin is committed when a man recognizes the mission of Jesus by the Holy Spirit but defies and resists and curses it” (Grundmann 1964: 304; see also Bremer 1993: 91-92). Does this sin apply in our day, since Jesus is no longer on earth and we cannot see him physically work miracles as did the scribes and Pharisees? I believe it does, because we still have the description and witness of Jesus in the Bible and the Holy Spirit is still active in the world revealing Christ to the world today. Given our situation, Hermann Beyer says the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit “denotes the conscious and wicked rejection of the saving power and grace of God towards man. Only the man who sets himself against forgiveness is excluded from it.” (Beyer 1964: 624) R. Alan Cole defines it as “the sin of the wilfully blind, who persistently refuse the illumination of the Spirit, oppose the Spirit’s work, and justify themselves in doing so by deliberately misrepresenting Him. For such, there can be no forgiveness, for they have refused the only way of forgiveness that God has provided.” (Cole 1989: 142) William Smith puts it like this: “In a word any person who has been enlightened by the Spirit to the truth about Christ and to see the mighty works of the Spirit through Him, who then goes away from Christ, rejects the Gospel, and now lives as the enemy of Christ.” (Smith 2004: n.p.)<sup>23</sup>

It should be noted that the “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” is not “a single event that, once done, is too late to undo. It is not simply making an insulting remark about Jesus or the Holy Spirit. Rather, it is a sustained stance toward Jesus that denies the power of the Spirit of God at work in Jesus. . . . In the Gospel of Luke, the statements about the eternal sin and blasphemy of the Spirit appear in the context of admonitions to faithful confession of Jesus before others (12:8-10). . . . Luke links denial of Jesus with the blasphemy of the Spirit, a link that immediately calls to mind Peter’s denial of Jesus after his arrest. . . . Peter committed what might seem to be the unforgivable sin, yet through the grace and love of Jesus he is kept in the fold. In the end, it is not our power to keep ourselves from sinning upon which we rely, but on the merciful forgiveness of God through Jesus Christ, who ‘ever lives to make intercession for us.’” (Thompson 1999: 82)<sup>24</sup>

### 3. Jesus defines his true family

This section closes with another reference to Jesus’ earthly family. This is not by accident because, after being thought of as mad and accused of being possessed by the devil, Jesus defines who his true family is. **Verse 31** refers to “*his mother and his brothers.*” The Bible frequently states that Jesus had at least four brothers (James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas are named) and at least two sisters (see **Matt 12:46-47; 13:53-56; Mark 3:31-32; 6:3; Luke 8:19-20; John 2:12; 7:3, 5, 10; Acts 1:14; 1 Cor 9:5; Gal 1:19**).<sup>25</sup> Because of their view that Mary was a perpetual virgin, Roman Catholics hold that Jesus’ brothers were actually his cousins. However, “the only passage where the brothers of Jesus are not conjoined with His mother is John 7:3, 5, 10. The conjoined mention of the mother of Jesus appears to imply that children of the same mother are meant.” (Zodhiates 1993: “*adelphos*,” 80) Further, the fact that Jesus was the oldest of actual “brothers” (not cousins) is “supported by the *prima facie* meaning of ‘first-born’, *prōtotokos*, in Lk. ii. 7. It is unlikely that Luke would have used this word, if he had known that Mary had not given birth to other children, for the word *monogenes* (used in Lk. vii. 12, viii. 42 of ‘only’ children) lay ready to hand. We should also note that the natural implication of the words in Mt. i. 25 ‘knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son’ is that, after that birth, normal marital relationships followed and other children were born.” (Tasker 1982: 22-23)

Although, as we have seen, his earthly family did not believe in him, they did after his resurrection. They were all in the upper room on the Day of Pentecost (**Acts 1:14**). Jesus appeared to his half-brother James after the resurrection (**1 Cor 15:7**), and James became the leader of the church in Jerusalem (**Acts 12:17**); he

<sup>22</sup> B. M. F. van Iersel equates the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit with apostasy, like that mentioned in **Heb 6:4-6** (van Iersel 1980: 27-28).

<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, when it came time to finally do away with Jesus, the religious leaders knew that they could not make the claim that Jesus was possessed by Beelzebul or had an evil spirit stick. Consequently, in **John 10:33**, although they knew better, their preconceived notions of what God and Messiah were like and how they should act led the Jewish leaders to fasten on the claim of blasphemy (“*The Jews answered him, ‘It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God’*”; see also **Matt 9:2-3; Luke 5:20-21; John 5:17-18; 8:58-59**). That is also the position they took at his trial before the Sanhedrin (**Matt 26:57-66; Mark 14:61-64; Luke 22:67-71**). Thus, their position ended up similar to many people today who reject Jesus as their Lord, i.e., “he may not be Satan, but he is no Messiah and certainly is not God.”

<sup>24</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield rightly says, “It is a matter of great importance pastorally that we can say with absolute confidence to anyone who is overwhelmed by the fear that he has committed this sin, that the fact that he is so troubled is itself a sure proof that he has not committed it” (Cranfield 1972: 142).

<sup>25</sup> His putative or earthly father, Joseph, is not mentioned, presumably because he was no longer living.

played a key role at the important Council of Jerusalem, by apparently chairing the Council and announcing its judgment (**Acts 15:13-29**). He was known as one of the “pillars” of the church (**Gal 2:9**). His half-brother Jude was author of the epistle of Jude (**Jude 1**; see also **Matt 13:55** [the Greek for Jude is “Judas”]).

Despite the natural love and affection of earthly families, in **vv. 34-35** Jesus defined those whom he considered to be his true family: “*And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.’*” Jesus realized that earthly families, however good they may be, are transient; his family and his kingdom are everlasting. In their natural state, earthly families are unredeemed; only his family consists entirely of the redeemed. There is a saying, “Blood is thicker than water.” Jesus is saying, “That may be true, but earthly blood cannot give one eternal life—only *my blood* gives eternal life.”

In short, our spiritual family in Christ is more important than our earthly family; indeed, the Spirit is more important than anything of earth. That is why Jesus so strongly contrasted our love of him compared to our love of our earthly families and our earthly lives: our natural love of our earthly families and our earthly lives should be like hatred compared to our love of Jesus (**Matt 10:37; Luke 14:26**). From the cross, Jesus demonstrated that following him is more important than loyalty to our earthly family. As the oldest son, it was his responsibility to take care of his mother; when he was not able to do so, it was to give that responsibility to one of his brothers. However, at the time when Jesus was being crucified, his earthly brothers did not believe in him. Consequently, from the cross Jesus gave that responsibility to his disciple John, as **John 19:26-27** relates: “*When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold, your son!’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your mother!’ And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.*” Jesus placed the Spirit over the flesh and demonstrated its importance even from the cross. His seriousness about the importance of the spiritual versus earthly family should cause us individually and corporately as the church to reconsider which family is more important to us and how to demonstrate that.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What should the fact that even Jesus’ family did not believe in him tell us about the importance of prayer in evangelism?
2. What is the “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit”?
3. It seems apparent that the scribes’ preconceptions of what they thought the Messiah and God himself should be like led them to accuse Jesus of being possessed by Beelzebul and having an unclean spirit. What misconceptions do we have of God that cause us to misunderstand him and/or become angry with him?
4. The scribes *demonized* Jesus. What results (thoughts, words, deeds) tend to flow from demonizing those we don’t understand or disagree with?
5. What is your reaction to Jesus’ words about family?
  - Do you think he means that we should neglect our earthly families in order to serve God? Why or why not?
  - Do you think he means we should treat believers and unbelievers significantly differently? Why or why not?
6. Do people outside of our church see us as a family?
  - If not, why not?
  - If so, do they see us as a good, well-adjusted family, or as a dysfunctional family?
7. Do we see ourselves as a family, and do we act as loving family members toward each other?
8. What can we do as a church to make sure that all of the people in our church are treated like they are beloved members of our family?

**4:1-34:** <sup>1</sup>Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. <sup>2</sup>And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: <sup>3</sup>“Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup>And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. <sup>5</sup>Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. <sup>6</sup>And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. <sup>7</sup>Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. <sup>8</sup>And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.” <sup>9</sup>And he said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

<sup>10</sup>And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. <sup>11</sup>And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, <sup>12</sup>so that ‘they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.’”

<sup>13</sup>And he said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? <sup>14</sup>The sower sows the word. <sup>15</sup>And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. <sup>16</sup>And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. <sup>17</sup>And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. <sup>18</sup>And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, <sup>19</sup>but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. <sup>20</sup>But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.”

<sup>21</sup>And he said to them, “Is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket, or under a bed, and not on a stand? <sup>22</sup>For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light. <sup>23</sup>If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” <sup>24</sup>And he said to them, “Pay attention to what you hear: with the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you. <sup>25</sup>For to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.”

<sup>26</sup>And he said, “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. <sup>27</sup>He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. <sup>28</sup>The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. <sup>29</sup>But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”

<sup>30</sup>And he said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? <sup>31</sup>It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, <sup>32</sup>yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

<sup>33</sup>With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. <sup>34</sup>He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything.

#### vv. 1-34—Jesus teaches in parables

Parables may be seen as extended, narrative similes or metaphors—i.e., narratives or stories in which characters or other elements stand for something else, generally to illustrate a moral or spiritual truth. The central theme uniting Jesus’ parables is the kingdom of God, which is both present now but will have a future culmination. The kingdom is “the dynamic power of God’s personal revelation of himself in creating a human community of those who serve Jesus in every area of their lives” (Blomberg 1990: 326). The kingdom involves both personal transformation and social reform. In his parables, “Jesus clearly has three main topics of interest: the graciousness of God, the demands of discipleship and the dangers of disobedience” (Ibid.).

Jesus used parables to “elicit a response from the listener, either positive or negative” (Osborne 1991: 241). One way he did this was to reverse people’s expectations or have plot twists in his parables: “The hated Samaritan, not the priest or Levite, is the one to bind the wounds of the robbery victim (Lk 10:30-37); normally the Samaritans were the muggers not the saviors!); the profligate son is the one given the banquet (Lk 15:11-32); the poor and the crippled sit at the great feast (Lk 14:15-24); the steward who alters the master’s credit sheet is lauded (Lk 16:1-13). By doing so Jesus can force the hearer to take a new look at God’s kingdom realities.” (Osborne 1991: 243)

Jesus’ used parables both to reveal and to conceal, largely depending on his audience (see **Matt 13:10-17; Mark 4:10-13**). Jesus revealed by: (1) illustrating something in a memorable way; (2) inviting further reflection by those to whom the meaning was not immediately clear; and (3) endeavoring to win the audience to

accept a particular set of beliefs or to act in a certain way. Parables conceal when: (1) the hearer simply fails to grasp the meaning of one of the story's metaphors; or (2) even though he may understand the meaning, the hearer rejects the appeal to bring about some kind of transformation of his life. Thus, in **Mark 12:12** the Jewish leaders understood that Jesus had told the parable of the wicked tenants against them, but they were unwilling to change their ways and, instead, redoubled their efforts to destroy him.

The key to interpreting the parables lies in recognizing what a small handful of major characters, actions, or symbols stand for. The basic principle of interpreting parables is “one main point per main character.” “Each parable makes one main point per main character—usually two or three in each case—and these main characters are the most likely elements within the parable to stand for something other than themselves, thus giving the parable its allegorical nature. . . . At the same time, elements other than the main characters will have metaphorical referents only to the extent that they fit in with the meaning established by the referents of the main characters, and all allegorical interpretation must result in that which would have been intelligible to a first-century Palestinian audience.” (Blomberg 1990: 163) The major characters represent various aspects of the kingdom of God—they generally relate to God, God's people, and those who are not God's people.

### 1. **vv. 1-20—Parable of the sower and the soils**

In some respects the parable of the sower and the soils is the “parable of all parables,” since Jesus explicitly interpreted only this one (**Matt 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-20; Luke 8:4-15**) and the parable of the wheat and the tares (**Matt 13:24-30, 36-43**). Further, in **v. 13** he stated, “*Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?*”

Jesus' explanation in **vv. 14-20** makes the parable fairly straightforward: the sower is the person who sows the word (the gospel, i.e., the seeds); the four soils are the hearts of different people which reveal their responses to the word. To put it another way, the condition of the heart precedes the reception of the gospel; the response to the gospel reveals the condition of the heart. Some people think that the first two groups (those on the path and the rocky, shallow soil) are unsaved, but the third group (those who were choked by the thorns) are saved but “baby” or “carnal” Christians.<sup>26</sup> That is not true. The first three groups are all equally worthless to the sower; someone who deserts Christ for materialism (group 3) can hardly be said to be better than one who falls away under persecution (group 2). Only the fourth group (the good soil) represent the saved. The wording Jesus uses in the parable treats all of the first three groups alike but distinguishes the fourth group: (1) The first three groups are all described in the singular; only the fourth group is described in the plural, and there are three good seeds (30, 60, 100) to correspond to the three bad ones of groups 1-3. (2) The first three groups are all described in the past (technically, *aorist*) tense and are not shown as continuing; only the fourth group is shown as continuing (Jesus uses an imperfect verb and to present participles to describe them). (3) In his explanation, Jesus uses “these” for the first three groups (**vv. 15, 16, 18**) but “those” for the fourth group (**v. 20**). (4) In **v. 16** the word for “receive” (*lambanō*) is much weaker than the word for “accept” in **v. 20** (*paradechomai*), i.e., “to receive as merely a self-prompted action without necessarily signifying a favorable reception” versus “to receive, embrace with assent and obedience” (Zodhaites 1993: *lambanō*, 907; *paradechomai*, 1102). (5) The fourth groups is the only group Jesus describes as “good.” (6) Only the fourth group is said to bear fruit. Throughout his ministry, Jesus stressed that “*the tree is known by its fruit*” (**Matt 12:33**; see also **Matt 7:15-18, 20; Luke 6:43-45; John 15:4-5**). Indeed, the very purpose for which Christ saves us to bear fruit, and fruit is the evidence of genuine faith (**Rom 7:4; Eph 2:10**; see also **Gal 5:22-23; Eph 5:8-9; Col 1:3-6**). On the other hand, he also stated that “*every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire*” (**Matt 7:19**; see also **Matt 3:10; Luke 3:9; John 15:2, 6**).

The context of this parable is that Jesus had announced the presence of the kingdom of God in **1:14-15**. He had been demonstrating its presence (and his identity as Messiah) via his healings and miracles in **chapters 1-3**. He had a band of followers—the Twelve and others—plus a large “mixed multitude” of listeners, some disbelievers, some (his own family) who thought he was out of his mind, and powerful enemies, who were determined (and plotting) to kill him. In this context Jesus now addresses “*the secret [or ‘mystery’] of the kingdom*” (**v. 11**): specifically, the kingdom of God is not coming in the way that most people expected; rather, it is present now in the person of Jesus and comes through a personal relationship with Jesus (through the sown word of the gospel). He explains why, contrary to expectations, the kingdom and he as its head were not being universally accepted, but rather were causing such division. He is pointing out that Satan is actively opposing

<sup>26</sup> Jesus did not say that one-fourth of the seed was sown on each type of soil; he was using a common example of a farmer sowing seed, some of which happens to land in poor soil.

the proclamation of the gospel and some reject it totally; many react to the gospel with less than saving faith: some superficially express interest but without the commitment of true discipleship. Consequently, in **v. 12** he quotes **Isa 6:9-10**, God’s call to Isaiah, which resulted in the hardening of all but a remnant. As Royce Gruenler points out, “Isaiah’s message will only confirm them in their rebellion, as Jesus’ message serves to confirm the rebellious in their rejection of him. The clause *otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!* is extremely ironic, for they have no intention of turning and being forgiven.” (Gruenler 1989: 773) However, his emphasis is on the fact that some will have the authentic response of faith, obedience, and commitment, and there will be a great harvest in the end. Likewise, we should sow indiscriminately: we should expect some to reject but can be confident of a harvest.

## 2. **vv. 21-25**—What is hidden will be revealed, and by your standard you will be judged

**Verse 21** literally says, *Is not the lamp come . . .* This points to Jesus and his mission:<sup>27</sup> *“This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil” (John 3:19); “Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’” (John 8:12); “I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness” (John 12:46). Verse 22* points to the coming judgment when *“what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops” (Luke 12:2-3; see also Matt 10:26-27; Luke 8:17; 1 Cor 4:5). Verses 21-22* also balance **vv. 11-12**, i.e., Jesus is the light and came to reveal light in darkness, but “those outside” do not understand because they love the darkness rather than the light.

**Verses 23-25** provide a warning to those on “the inside.” Deffinbaugh states it like this: “The principle behind this parable is this: ‘The truth you fail to use, you lose,’ or ‘You only truly possess the truth you practice.’ This is the meaning of our Lord when He said, ‘Take care what you listen to. By your standard of measure it shall be measured to you; and more shall be given you besides. For whoever has, to him shall more be given; and whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him’ (Mark 4:24-25). Lest the disciples (or we) become proud over the knowledge we have, while others remain in ignorance, let us ponder the awesome obligation that falls upon us who know better.” (Deffinbaugh n.d.: The Principle)<sup>28</sup> In short, Christ is the light; he is the measure (see **John 14:6; 1 Pet 2:6**); those who reject him will lose everything; but those who know him, love him, obey him, and follow him will inherit everything (see **Matt 5:5; 19:29; 25:34; Acts 20:32; Rom 4:13; Eph 1:11, 14, 18; Col 1:12; 3:24; Heb 1:14; 6:12; 9:15; 1 Pet 1:4; Rev 21:5-7**).

## 3. **vv. 26-29**—Parable of the seed, growth, and harvest

This parable is telling us that the kingdom of God begins inauspiciously, grows mysteriously, is controlled by God, and will continue to the end (see also **1 Cor 3:6-9**). The kingdom of God has been inaugurated already and is present now but has not been consummated and is not what the religious leaders and people expected.<sup>29</sup> Thus, **Luke 17:20-21** says, *“Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, “The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.”* The reference to the sickle and the harvest parallels the parable of the wheat and the tares (**Matt 13:26-30, 36-43**) and the description of the reaping and judgment at the end of the age in **Rev 14:14-20** (see also **Joel 3:13**). Among other things, this tells us that the church will be present on the earth all the way until the end when Christ comes again and brings judgment.

## 4. **vv. 30-34**—Parable of the mustard seed

This parable stresses the difference between the small beginning of the kingdom and its large and surprising end. Since membership in the kingdom is based on our faith in Christ, in **Matt 17:20** Jesus compared faith to *“a grain of mustard seed.”* The fact that the mustard plant grows so that *“the birds of the air can make nests in its shade”* indicates that the kingdom is a force for good for everyone, just like God who *“makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt 5:45)*. Since the church is

<sup>27</sup> Although most translations use the indefinite *“a lamp,”* the Greek for **v. 21** includes the definite article (*ho*; i.e., *the*), which reinforces the fact that the lamp being talked about is Jesus.

<sup>28</sup> In *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis observes, “The word ‘mine’ in its fully possessive sense cannot be uttered by a human being about anything. In the long run either Our Father or the Enemy will say ‘mine’ of each thing that exists, and specially of each man. They will find out in the end, never fear, to whom their time, their souls, and their bodies really belong—certainly not to *them*, whatever happens.” (Lewis 1961: 98)

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of the “already, but not yet” nature of the kingdom, see n.2 above and associated text.



the visible embodiment of the kingdom of God on the earth, we need to be mindful of this aspect of the kingdom and do what we can to show God's goodness to the just and the unjust alike.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why did Jesus teach in parables? Why did Jesus deliberately hide the truth from some (**vv. 11-12**)?
2. In the parable of the sower and the soils, of the four types of people on whom seeds were sown, which was/were truly saved? Why?
3. How do you see the word being snatched, scorched, or choked in your own life and in the lives of professed believers you know? What do you intend to do about it?
4. Does fruit *always* (in some time, in some measure, and in some way) accompany saving faith?
  - What about the thief on the cross?
  - Do you think some supposed fruit is really just “flesh?” How, if at all, can you distinguish the two?
  - On the other hand, do you think that some fruit is visible only to God? If so, does this mean that we should *never* conclude that someone is not really a Christian if they claim to be, but should just always assume that their profession of faith is true?
5. How are you individually and your church being a light in the darkness (**v. 21**)? What do you think you and the church should be doing to be a better, more effective light?
6. How do we see “the standard of measure” (**v. 24**) that people use show up in their lives?
7. Does Christ make for a radically different measure in your life compared to the lives of the non-Christians you know? If so, how?
8. **Verses 22-25** stress the coming judgment. What do you think of the judgment and how, if at all, does it affect the way you live?
9. In what ways should we be sowing seed in our families, communities and world?
10. In these parables, Jesus repeatedly used the word “seed,” and even emphasized its smallness in **v.31**. In light of this, why are Christians continually obsessed with the size of things (their ministry, their church, the number of people they've led to the Lord, etc.)? Is concern about size consistent or inconsistent with **vv. 20, 24, 27** and **32** (in this regard see **1 Cor 3:6-9**)?
  - How can we affirm those who do “small things” for God?
  - Who do you know is doing kingdom work but, because it is not “big,” is generally overlooked? What can you do about it?

**4:35-41:** <sup>35</sup> *On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.”* <sup>36</sup> *And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him.* <sup>37</sup> *And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling.* <sup>38</sup> *But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”* <sup>39</sup> *And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!”* *And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.* <sup>40</sup> *He said to them, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?”* <sup>41</sup> *And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”*

#### vv. 35-41—Jesus calms the sea

The parables having been finished, Mark returns to the actions of Jesus. As was true in **chs. 2-3**, the events of this episode of Jesus calming the sea highlights who Jesus is and the absolute power and authority he has. This event highlights some important points. First, the disciples had seen Jesus perform many miracles. Thus, they knew or should have known that he could have stilled the storm. Their question, “*Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?*” (v. 38) indicates that they were rebuking him, not for his *inability* to still the storm, but for his *indifference* to them and insensitivity to their needs.

In turn, Jesus’ rebuke of them, “*Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?*” (v. 40) This raises an important issue of faith that relates to them and also to many of us. First, the disciples were thinking of themselves (what would happen to them), not of Jesus (what would happen to him). Second, although they did go to Jesus, they had no peace, but fear. They had not yet learned the truth of **1 John 4:16-18**: “*God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.*” The same is true of many of us when we focus on ourselves and our circumstances (however bad they may be), rather than on the Lord (who is the Lord over those circumstances). Third, Jesus had said, *Let us go across to the other side*” (v. 35). The fact that he was asleep should have inspired the disciples’ confidence and trust in him! In other words, Jesus has control of the situation, regardless of what it is, and as long as you are faithfully doing what he has told you to do, the silence of God should inspire your trust to keep doing what you are doing. Fourth, they should have had that trust (as should we) because Jesus demonstrated that he is in charge of and has power over *everything* (see **Pss 89:9; 93:4**). In fact, he used the same word (*phimoō*) in telling the sea to “*be still*” (v. 39) as he had used in **1:25** in telling the unclean spirit to “*be silent.*” His reversing the chaos of the natural world is another example of the presence of the kingdom.

In v. 41 the disciples ask the question that everyone needs to consider and answer, “*Who then is this?*” He is the God-man, the creator, sustainer, and redeemer of the world. Hence, we should cling to faith and trust in him despite fear-inducing circumstances particularly since, without him, where can we go? Do we really want to be on our own when our situations are difficult and fearful? We can trust him even (or especially) when we do not like or understand our circumstances, because he not only has demonstrated his absolute power but has proven that he is trustworthy.

An interesting aspect of this event is its parallel with Jonah. “Jonah boards a boat headed in the opposite direction of the nation to which he had been directed to prophesy; Jesus sets off in a boat toward the ‘other side,’ leaving behind a crowd that presses upon him” (Powell 2007: 160). The context of both accounts involves the movement from Jewish to Gentile territory. “As Jonah was in the ship it was seized by a mighty wind, and was tossed by ‘a mighty tempest in the sea.’ The sea ‘wrought and was tempestuous,’ and ‘the ship was like to be broken.’ In Matthew 8:23-27 Christ likewise was aboard a ship in a similar situation. There was ‘a great tempest in the sea,’ and ‘the ship was covered with the waves.’ Jonah lay down in the sides of the ship, fast asleep, while the mariners cried out in fear and ‘cried every man unto his god.’ Christ lay ‘in the hinder part of the ship, asleep’ (Mark 4:38) until His disciples awoke Him, saying ‘Lord, save us: we perish.’ How similar is the Old Testament cry, ‘Arise, call upon thy God . . . that we perish not.’ In Jonah we read, ‘and the sea ceased her raging,’ and in Mark, ‘and the wind ceased, and there was great calm.” (Stanton 1951: 246-47) After the sea was calmed, **Jonah 1:16** (LXX) says, “*And the men feared a great fear.*” Similarly, the Greek of **Mark 4:41** literally says, “*and they feared a great fear.*” Because Jesus is “greater than Jonah,” there are contrasts between the two. In the two accounts of the storms at sea, “Jonah was weary of God’s service. Jesus was weary *in* God’s service. Also, Christ did what Jonah could not do [but what God did in Jonah’s case]. He rebuked the wind and calmed the troubled sea, so that the men marveled at His mighty power.” (Ibid.: 247)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Compare and contrast the disciples' and Jesus's mindset, actions and reactions on the boat ride to the other shore. What lessons can we draw from this incident?
2. Does God sometimes (often) seem to be asleep or indifferent to you or to what's happening in your life? Why do you think this is so?
  - How do you react during such times?
  - How should you react during such times?
  - If there is a difference between how you should and how you actually react, why is there that difference, and what will you do about it?
3. Why do you think that some people seem to believe that their lives should be "smooth sailing" once they become Christians?
  - What does this belief tell us about such peoples' conception of Christ?
  - How, if at all, do you think this idea should be dealt with when you are trying to lead a non-Christian to Christ?
4. In **v.40** Jesus said "*Have you still no faith?*" Using this passage (**vv. 35-41**), what is faith?

**5:1-20:** *They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. <sup>2</sup> And when Jesus had stepped out of the boat, immediately there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit. <sup>3</sup> He lived among the tombs. And no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain, <sup>4</sup> for he had often been bound with shackles and chains, but he wrenched the chains apart, and he broke the shackles in pieces. No one had the strength to subdue him. <sup>5</sup> Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always crying out and cutting himself with stones. <sup>6</sup> And when he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and fell down before him. <sup>7</sup> And crying out with a loud voice, he said, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me." <sup>8</sup> For he was saying to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" <sup>9</sup> And Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "My name is Legion, for we are many." <sup>10</sup> And he begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. <sup>11</sup> Now a great herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside, <sup>12</sup> and they begged him, saying, "Send us to the pigs; let us enter them." <sup>13</sup> So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the pigs; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the sea.*

<sup>14</sup> *The herdsmen fled and told it in the city and in the country. And people came to see what it was that had happened. <sup>15</sup> And they came to Jesus and saw the demon-possessed man, the one who had had the legion, sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, and they were afraid. <sup>16</sup> And those who had seen it described to them what had happened to the demon-possessed man and to the pigs. <sup>17</sup> And they began to beg Jesus to depart from their region. <sup>18</sup> As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed with demons begged him that he might be with him. <sup>19</sup> And he did not permit him but said to him, "Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." <sup>20</sup> And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and everyone marveled.*

### vv. 1-20—Jesus heals the Gerasene demoniac

In this healing of the demoniac, Mark continues considering the question raised by the disciples in **4:41**, "*Who then is this?*" The answer is explicitly given in **v. 7**, "*Jesus, Son of the Most High God.*" The "*country of the Gerasenes*" (**v. 1**) was on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee and was largely Gentile country. It is, therefore, no surprise that Jesus is called "*Son of the Most High God,*" since that phrase was regularly used by Gentiles (see **Gen 14:18; Isa 14:14; Dan 3:26; Acts 16:17**). As we saw in **1:24**, the demons know who Jesus is and fear him because they know what he will ultimately do to them (see **Matt 25:41; Jas 2:19**). The formerly demon-possessed man clearly recognized who Jesus was. After he had been delivered, Jesus told him, "*Go*

*home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you.”* The man obeyed and “*began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him.*”

Besides Jesus’ divine nature and power over the demonic realm, this episode tells us other things of practical importance. First, as noted above, “*country of the Gerasenes*” was on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee and was largely Gentile country.<sup>30</sup> Thus, it was outside of Jesus’ typical environment. However, he intentionally went outside of his way to release one man from demonic oppression. This is similar to Jesus’ going outside of his way in **John 4** to bring a Samaritan woman to faith. This shows how Jesus intentionally goes out of his “comfort zone” to bring people of different background (tribal, racial, ethnic, cultural, etc.) to himself. Are we willing to do the same?

Second, we should observe the man both before and after he was delivered. Before Jesus cast out the demons, **vv. 3-4** say, “*No one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain, <sup>4</sup>for he had often been bound with shackles and chains, but he wrenched the chains apart, and he broke the shackles in pieces. No one had the strength to subdue him.*” Although humans could not bind the man, he had been completely bound by Satan and the demons. **Verse 5** adds that “*he was always crying out and cutting himself with stones.*” After he was freed, **v. 15** tells us that he was “*sitting there, clothed and in his right mind.*” The presence of God in our life does not lead to fanaticism and manic behavior but to peace, sanity, self-control and restoration of the person to harmony with others and with God (see **Gal 5:22-23**). I have heard a number of preachers sound almost like growling animals or angry men as they yell their “message” with a clearly affected voice. I am not sure how much of this is culturally influenced or imitation of others, but it seems to me that such posturing is one good way to convince people (especially unbelievers) that you *are* crazy; it also is the precisely opposite effect Jesus has on someone who is truly connected to him. Remember: God wants spiritual fruit, not religious nuts.

Two other aspects of this man’s conversion are noteworthy: (A) The man clearly did not contribute to his own salvation at all. He had been the helpless victim of the demons; he did not have the ability to, and did not, make any effort to assist in his own conversion. His election, calling, and regeneration (i.e., being “born again”) was from start to finish God’s work of his pure, sovereign grace. (B) His *response* to his conversion demonstrated the reality of his being born again: he wanted to follow and serve Jesus (**v. 19**). And he did so (**v. 20**), just as the Samaritan woman in **John 4** had done. Jesus knew that, given the reaction of the rest of the people of the region to Jesus’ presence (**vv. 15-17**), that one converted, formerly demon-possessed man could have a greater impact on that region even than the physical presence of Jesus himself.

Finally, it is important to note the response of the other people of the area and Jesus’ response. The people were afraid (**v. 15**) and “*began to beg Jesus to depart from their region*” (**v. 17**). Their fear may have been from various reasons: they were in the presence of a person who had obvious, amazing, and supernatural power. The natural response to people in the presence of God (or angels) throughout the Bible is one of fear. Additionally, when they saw what happened to the pigs, they may have feared further financial loss if Jesus remained. Again, since they had tried to bind the formerly demon-possessed man with chains, but Jesus had now freed him, they may have feared what Jesus might do to them. Their reaction is akin to that of the chief priests and scribes in **Mark 11:18** when Jesus cleansed the temple.

“The saddest thing in the whole story is that Jesus granted their request, and left them. There are times when the worst possible thing for us is that the Lord should grant our prayer (Ps. 106:15, ‘He gave what they asked’). The Gerasenes wanted only to be left alone by this frightening supernatural Jesus. It was to be their judgment that Jesus did leave them, to return no more, for there is no evidence, in Mark at least, for any later ministry by Jesus in this area.” (Cole 1989: 159) C. S. Lewis concludes, “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’ All that are in Hell, choose it.” (Lewis 1946: 66-67)

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. How is the Gerasene demoniac like you? How is this event an excellent example of what true conversion is like?
2. Have you ever gone outside of your comfort zone and “invaded enemy territory” with the Gospel? What were the results?

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<sup>30</sup> While most commentators assume that the demoniac probably was a Gentile based on the region where he lived and the many pigs, Rikk Watts lists a number of reasons that raise questions about that assumption (Watts 1997: 164-66).

3. The reactions of the people (**vv.15-17**) are amazing. Why do you think they became frightened and entreated Jesus to depart? Have you ever encountered a similar reaction when you have acted faithfully to Jesus?
4. Why didn't Jesus allow the man to come with him when he asked to do so?
- How could the formerly demonized man be a *better witness* than Jesus himself (had Jesus remained in that area)?
  - Is that true of you (why or why not)?

**5:21-43:** <sup>21</sup> *And when Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered about him, and he was beside the sea.* <sup>22</sup> *Then came one of the rulers of the synagogue, Jairus by name, and seeing him, he fell at his feet* <sup>23</sup> *and implored him earnestly, saying, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live."* <sup>24</sup> *And he went with him.*

*And a great crowd followed him and thronged about him.* <sup>25</sup> *And there was a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years,* <sup>26</sup> *and who had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse.* <sup>27</sup> *She had heard the reports about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his garment.* <sup>28</sup> *For she said, "If I touch even his garments, I will be made well."* <sup>29</sup> *And immediately the flow of blood dried up, and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.* <sup>30</sup> *And Jesus, perceiving in himself that power had gone out from him, immediately turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my garments?"* <sup>31</sup> *And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing around you, and yet you say, 'Who touched me?'"* <sup>32</sup> *And he looked around to see who had done it.* <sup>33</sup> *But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling and fell down before him and told him the whole truth.* <sup>34</sup> *And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."*

<sup>35</sup> *While he was still speaking, there came from the ruler's house some who said, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the Teacher any further?"* <sup>36</sup> *But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the ruler of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe."* <sup>37</sup> *And he allowed no one to follow him except Peter and James and John the brother of James.* <sup>38</sup> *They came to the house of the ruler of the synagogue, and Jesus saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly.* <sup>39</sup> *And when he had entered, he said to them, "Why are you making a commotion and weeping? The child is not dead but sleeping."* <sup>40</sup> *And they laughed at him. But he put them all outside and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him and went in where the child was.* <sup>41</sup> *Taking her by the hand he said to her, "Talitha cumi," which means, "Little girl, I say to you, arise."* <sup>42</sup> *And immediately the girl got up and began walking (for she was twelve years of age), and they were immediately overcome with amazement.* <sup>43</sup> *And he strictly charged them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.*

#### **vv. 21-43—Jairus's daughter and the woman with hemorrhage**

This section is framed like **3:20-35** was. It begins with a short beginning concerning Jairus's daughter, then moves to the healing of the woman with the discharge of blood, then concludes with the raising of Jairus's daughter. Mark has shown Jesus to be the divine Son of God with power over nature and demons. Here he is shown to have power over death itself. Both accounts continue the theme of human helplessness and highlight the element of ritual uncleanness which had been at least implied in the account of the healing of the Gerasene demoniac. "According to Jewish law contact with graves, blood, or death made one ceremonially unclean" (Wessel 1984: 660). This section also adds a new focus: the element of faith. Whereas earlier events highlighted the unbelief of people (particularly Jesus' opponents), these two events highlight the faith of those who approach Jesus.

#### **1. vv. 21-24a—Jairus approaches Jesus**

Jairus is described as "*one of the rulers of the synagogue*" (v. 22). Rulers of the synagogue were prominent laymen of good reputation who assisted with the building and worship (Wessel 1984: 660). Jairus obviously has heard of Jesus and believes that he can heal his daughter. His helplessness and desperation are so great that he abandons all pride and falls at Jesus' feet, imploring Jesus to come. Without saying a word, Jesus agrees.

## 2. **vv. 24b-34**—The woman with the discharge of blood

The woman is said to have had “*a discharge of blood for twelve years*” (v. 25). The wording is similar to **Lev 15:25** which says, “*If a woman has a discharge of blood for many days, not at the time of her menstrual impurity, or if she has a discharge beyond the time of her impurity, all the days of the discharge she shall continue in uncleanness. As in the days of her impurity, she shall be unclean.*” A comparison of the wording of Leviticus and Mark indicates that woman had what Leviticus was talking about. If this had started with puberty, then half her life would have been spent with this disease or problem. Her suffering was terrible: she had suffered under many doctors; she had spent all she had; and she was getting worse (v. 26). Beyond that, **Lev 15:26-27** say, “*Every bed on which she lies, all the days of her discharge, shall be to her as the bed of her impurity. And everything on which she sits shall be unclean, as in the uncleanness of her menstrual impurity. And whoever touches these things shall be unclean, and shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening.*” That meant that “she could not attend the synagogue and would have been shunned even by members of her own family, who would have become unclean if they had touched anything she sat on or lay on” (Cole 2006: 1180). She could not get married. This is probably why she approached Jesus from behind (v. 27).

Her faith was profound. She simply said, “*If I touch even his garments, I will be made well*” (v. 28). “Hundreds of years before Jesus was born, the prophet Malachi had foretold the Messiah who would come ‘with healing in his wings’ [**Mal 4:2**]. To some, that meant He had healing ‘in the edges of his clothing.’ And the prophet Zechariah had predicted that people from every nation would want to clutch the hem or the tassel of the Messiah’s garment because they would recognize that God was with him [**Zech 8:23**].” (Vander Laan and Markham 1996: 74) The woman’s touching Jesus’ garment was acting out her faith. “This was her affirmation that she recognized the messianic character of Jesus and His work. She believed He was the Messiah. Because she believed that—because of her great faith—the power of Jesus flowed through her. It healed her body, and it restored her to the community from which she had been separated for so long.” (Ibid.)

Her faith may be more profound than appears on the surface. For her to touch a person (both Jesus and those in the crowd whom she would have bumped into) would make that person ceremonially unclean. For Jesus to announce to the crowd that he had been touched by her (**vv. 33-34**) would announce that *he* was ceremonially unclean. The woman would have known that, and yet her faith compelled her to proceed. However, she may also have understood that, as had been the case when Jesus touched and healed the leper in **1:40-45**, since Jesus was the Messiah and divine Son of God, impurity and “uncleanness” was not transferred onto him, but his purity and “cleanness” was transferred onto the person he touched or who touched him. As Vander Laan and Markham observe, “The magic wasn’t only in Jesus’ touch; it was in His righteousness. People recognized Him as the Messiah because of His holiness. Moses had healed. Elijah had raised the dead. So those acts, miraculous as they were, were not what set Jesus apart. Those would have made him one of the great prophets. What set him apart was His perfect obedience to the Father.” (Vander Laan and Markham 1996: 74) Further, we should note that by calling for the woman (which is, in essence what he did in v. 30), and then taking the time to talk with her, Jesus was affirming this woman and affirming her faith—this a woman who probably had never been affirmed by anyone for twelve years. He did this even though it was taking valuable time from his mission to heal Jairus’s daughter.

There is another aspect of this event that is beneath the surface but is not by accident. The healing of this woman, as also was suggested in the healing of the Gerasene demoniac and as will be apparent in the raising of Jairus’s daughter, is a sign or picture of spiritual salvation. **Rom 10:9-10** says, “*If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.*” (See also **Matt 10:32; Luke 12:8**) This woman had believed in her heart. She realized that when Jesus called for her, he was calling her to “confess with her mouth,” and she did so (v. 33). “She had been already healed by her faith, but open confession brought her a word of confirmation from Jesus. . . . This in turn brought a realization of the means by which she had entered into this experience (*your faith* . . .), the promise of God’s peace, and a sense of security for the future.” (Cole 1989: 162) Her bodily healing parallels salvation: she had tried all kinds of means to “heal herself,” but all of them were in vain; she realized her helplessness and saw that only Jesus could heal her. The same is true of all of us with respect to salvation. It should therefore be no surprise that when Jesus told her, “*Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease*” (v. 34), the word for “healed” (Greek = *sōzō*) is the same word for “saved” (i.e., salvation from eternal death). Jesus’ calling her “daughter” speaks of the fact that when we are saved, we are adopted into God’s family (see **John 1:12; Rom 8:14-17, 23; 9:4; Gal 3:26; 4:5-7; Eph 1:5; 2:19; 1 John 3:1**). His telling her to “*go in peace*” signifies the peace that only he gives, not as the world gives (see **John 14:27**); in other words, “the tranquil state of a soul

assured of its salvation through Christ, fearing nothing from God and consequently content with its earthly lot, whatever it is. This is the direct result of redemption by Christ.” (Zodhiates 1993: *eirēnē*, 520)

One practical application of this event for us is that “we, too, can work to restore others to the community of faith. Our acceptance of, our commitment to, and our testimony of the reality of Jesus being not only the Messiah but also our Messiah opens us to become channels of God’s healing and renewing power, whether for our own physical, emotional, and spiritual brokenness or for the needs of others.” (Ibid.: 74-75)

### 3. vv. 35-43—Jesus raises Jairus’s daughter

In v. 35 Jairus learns that his daughter is dead, so the person who informed him said, “*Why trouble the teacher any further?*” Jesus’ answer to Jairus is to apply the lesson of the woman who had the discharge of blood: “*Do not fear, only believe*” (v. 36). Even among the Twelve, Jesus had an “inner core” (see also **Matt 17:1; Mark 9:2; Luke 9:28**). When Jesus says that the girl is only “sleeping” (v. 39), it is a synonym for the death of the righteous as in **1 Thess 4:14** (see **Luke 8:55**). As with the leper and woman who had the discharge of blood, Jesus did not hesitate to touch someone who would have made him “ceremonially unclean” (v. 41). Telling the parents to give the girl something to eat (v. 43) reveal Jesus’ concern for the ordinary needs of humanity, including the need for refreshment after an ordeal.<sup>31</sup> The fact that Mark records that Jesus was speaking in Aramaic (v. 41) and told the parents to give the girl something to eat (v. 43) are small details that could only have come from an eyewitness (probably Peter) and corroborate that this is a true historical account, not something made up later. This account completes several episodes which together reveal Jesus’ identity as Messiah and God come to earth. He has power over the physical realm: illness and disease (**1:30-34; 2:11-12; 3:1-5; 3:25-34**), acts of nature (**4:35-41**); the realm of human relationships, both familial (**5:19, 43**) and societal (**1:40-44; 2:14-17; 5:19-20, 34**); and the spiritual realm: sin (**2:1-12**), the Sabbath, God’s law, and religious customs (**1:40-41; 2:14-3:6; 5:5, 27-34, 41**), Satan and demons (**1:24-26, 34, 40-44; 3:22-27; 5:1-13**), and death (**5:35-43**). We thus have a fairly comprehensive answer to the disciples’ question in **4:41**, “*Who then is this?*”

The raising of Jairus’s daughter gives us another sign or picture of salvation. The girl was dead and could do nothing to raise herself back to life, just as we were “*dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked*” (**Eph 2:1-2**) and could do nothing to raise ourselves to new life. Her being raised from death to life was completely done by Jesus; she contributed nothing, just as we contribute nothing to our regeneration and justification, which are accomplished entirely by Jesus. Physically, she was, in a sense, “born again,” just as we must be born again to even see the kingdom of God (**John 3:3**). Just as she physically arose and “*began walking*” (v. 42), so we arise and “*walk in newness of life*” (**Rom 6:4**). Just as she was to be given something to eat, so we are to be disciplined in our new life, first with the “milk” and then the “strong food” of the word of God (see **1 Cor 3:1-2; Heb 5:12; 1 Pet 2:2**).

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The event with the woman with the discharge of blood represented an interruption of Jesus’ and Jairus’s plans. How did Jesus see and deal with this “interruption”? How do you tend to see and deal with interruptions of your plans?
2. Why did Jesus ask who touched him and look around for the woman who touched him? How did Jesus’ response to the woman demonstrate his love for her?
3. How do you deal with the idea that, because of the emphasis of faith in these two events, they teach that, if you pray for healing and are not healed, it is because you have a lack of faith?
4. Jairus (male, ruler, important in the community) and the woman (female, unnamed, ceremonially unclean and, thus, probably an outcast) both humbled themselves before Jesus in times of desperate need. What kind of people find it hard to humble themselves before Jesus?
  - How can we help such people to humble themselves before Jesus?
  - Do you think God is insulted when people only show up in times of crisis?

<sup>31</sup> Something similar occurred in **1 Kgs 19:1-8** for Elijah when he was hiding from Jezebel in the cave.

5. How are the healing of the woman with the discharge of blood and the raising of Jairus's daughter a good examples or parables of salvation?

6. In these examples, as was frequently the case, Jesus appears to have ignored or even dispersed a large crowd of people (when he could have ministered to them) in order to concentrate on and minister to a specific individual. Why do you think he did this and what does this tell us about Jesus?

- Do these examples of Jesus tell us anything about what should be important to us and how we should go about spreading the Gospel?
- Why do you think Christians are so often more concerned about the numbers and size of their ministry, influence, and church than with their depth and quality?

**6:1-6:** *He went away from there and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. <sup>2</sup> And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, "Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands? <sup>3</sup> Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. <sup>4</sup> And Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household."<sup>5</sup> And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. <sup>6</sup> And he marveled because of their unbelief. And he went about among the villages teaching.*

#### vv. 1-6—Jesus in Nazareth

Although it is unnamed, Jesus' hometown was Nazareth, a small village in Galilee, west of the Sea of Galilee (see **Mark 1:9, 24; Luke 4:16; John 1:46**). The questions and comments of the people in **vv. 2-3** indicate that this probably was the first time that Jesus taught in his local synagogue. His reputation as a teacher and miracle worker obviously had preceded him. **Verse 3** again mentions Jesus' biological family<sup>32</sup> and his occupation before he began his public ministry.<sup>33</sup>

This event reveals a continued evolution of people's responses to Jesus. It shows how fickle people can be. As he was speaking, the people in the synagogue go from being "astonished" (**v. 2**) to being "offended" (**v. 3**) at him. This suggests that their astonishment was based on the fact that Jesus obviously was a very good teacher, i.e., the people were amazed at his *style*. However, their offense appears to stem from their consideration of the *substance* of what Jesus said.<sup>34</sup> That is indicated in Jesus' statement in **v. 4** about his being a "prophet" (to be discussed immediately below) and Luke's account of this in **Luke 4:16-30**. In Luke's account, Jesus read from **Isa 61:1-2**, a passage that alludes to the year of Jubilee. He quoted, "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He appointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord*" (**Luke 4:18-19**). He then stated, "*Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing*" (**Luke 4:21**). The word "release" in **Isa 61:1 (Luke 4:18)** is the same word in **Lev 25:10**. The verbs in this passage ("*preach the gospel to the poor,*" "*proclaim release to the captives,*" "*set free [the] oppressed*") refer to "the practice of the jubilee year authorized in Leviticus 25, when all properties lost in economic transactions will be returned in order to permit a stable, functioning community. Thus, the series of verbs is taken to be an announcement of the jubilee." (Brueggemann 1998: 214) "*The favorable year of the Lord*" alludes to the "year of Jubilee" which is "now made symbolic by his [Jesus'] own saving acts" (Marshall 1978: 184). In **Luke 4:14-21**, when Jesus quoted **Isa 61:1-2** and said, "*Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,*" in substance He was saying, "I am the fulfillment of what that always pointed to; in me the ultimate Jubilee is now here."

Jesus was making astounding messianic claims: God's Spirit is on *me*! God has anointed *me*! I am the

<sup>32</sup> For more on Jesus' biological family, see the discussion at **3:20-21, 31-35**, above.

<sup>33</sup> Jesus, like most people of his time and culture, had followed in his putative father's (Joseph's) footsteps as a carpenter (see **Matt 13:55**).

<sup>34</sup> This should be a warning or caution to us to not necessarily accept at face value when people come forward and "accept Jesus" at evangelistic rallies. They may do so for emotional reasons, being carried away by the "heat of the moment," to impress or please their friends, or for other reasons. The parable of the sower and the soils (**Mark 4:1-20**) has already shown us that there is a temporary faith that is not saving faith. True, saving faith endures, transforms the person on the inside, and transforms their works and lives.



fulfillment of what the OT has always been pointing to! It is in that context that the people question the source of Jesus' wisdom and power and raise the fact that he is simply a carpenter from a family in a small village who everybody knows. They do not believe he is who he claims to be and reject him. As we have seen, many of the religious leaders have rejected Jesus, as did the people in the region of the Gerasenes, the mourners at the funeral for Jairus's daughter, and even his own family. Now, the people of his hometown reject him as well. This is an example of the saying, "Familiarity breeds contempt." Jesus "marveled" (Greek = *thaumazō*) at their unbelief (v. 6). There are only two places where Jesus is said to have "marveled": here and in **Matt 8:10** where he marveled at the faith of a centurion who said, "*Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed*" (**Matt 8:8**). The contrast is striking: a pagan, Roman Gentile has great faith, but the Jews of Jesus' hometown who knew him do not. This was a clear example of **John 1:11** ("*He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him*") which foreshadows his ultimate rejection by the fickle crowd in Jerusalem and his crucifixion.

Jesus' calling himself a "prophet" (v. 4) not only is expressing his amazement at the people's unbelief but is building on what he had been saying which caused the people to reject him. The reason is that in **Deut 18:15-19** Moses said, "<sup>15</sup>*The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen [lit. 'brothers'], you shall listen to him.* <sup>16</sup>*This is according to all that you asked of the LORD your God in Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, let me not see this great fire anymore, or I will die.'* <sup>17</sup>*The LORD said to me, 'They have spoken well.* <sup>18</sup>*I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen [lit. 'brothers'] like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.* <sup>19</sup>*It shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of him.*" Jesus is claiming to be that prophet. The NT, not once but four times, identifies Christ as the predicted prophet. In **John 1:45**, after meeting Jesus, Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "*We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.*" In **John 6:14**, after Jesus performed a miraculous sign, the people who witnessed the miracle said, "*This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.*" The only "Prophet" that can be referring to is the prophet predicted in **Deut 18:15-19**. **Acts 3:22** and **Acts 7:37** both quote the prophecy as having been fulfilled by Jesus. Peter's speech in **Acts 3:11-26** is about God raising up Jesus whom the Jews had killed (as also had been prophesied) and how Jesus fulfilled OT prophecy; consequently, the people needed to repent or they would be destroyed when Christ comes again. In **Acts 7**, Stephen reviewed the history of the Israelites for the Jewish leaders. After quoting the prophecy in Deuteronomy he concluded, "*You are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become.*" (**Acts 7:51-52**) The "Righteous One," of course, is none other than Jesus who had been betrayed and murdered at the instigation of the Jewish leaders.

This entire episode is stressing the unbelief of the people who knew Jesus. This stands in contrast to the great faith of Jairus and the woman with the discharge of blood in the immediately preceding episodes. Because of the lack of faith of the people of Nazareth, Jesus "*could do no mighty works there,*" (v. 5), again in contrast to what had just happened with the woman and Jairus's daughter. However, Walter Wessel reminds us, "It was not, of course, that he did not have the power to do more miracles than he did at Nazareth. The inability was related to the moral situation. In the climate of unbelief he chose not to exercise his miraculous power. One of the great emphases of Mark's Gospel is that Jesus performs his miracles in response to faith." (Wessel 1984: 666)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How could people go from being *astonished* (v.2) to being *offended* (v.3) by Jesus? On the other hand, does this passage provide us any grounds for *hope*?
2. Like a vaccine, *familiarity* with the things of God and the language of religion ("God talk") may be a fertile ground for the rejection of the real Jesus. How do we overcome the danger that our (and our kids') "faith" is just enough to "inoculate" us against the real thing?
3. Have you experienced the truth that it is harder to be a faithful servant of Jesus within your own family than with non-family members?
  - How have you dealt with this phenomenon?

- How *should* we deal with this phenomenon?

**6:7-13, 30-32:** <sup>7</sup> *And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.* <sup>8</sup> *He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in their belts—* <sup>9</sup> *but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics.* <sup>10</sup> *And he said to them, “Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there.* <sup>11</sup> *And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.”* <sup>12</sup> *So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent.* <sup>13</sup> *And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.*

<sup>30</sup> *The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught.* <sup>31</sup> *And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.* <sup>32</sup> *And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves.*

#### vv. 7-13, 30-32—The Twelve are sent out and return

When Jesus appointed the Twelve, he did so that “*they might be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons*” (**Mark 3:14-15**). Now he is accomplishing the second part of his reason for appointing them. In **2 Tim 2:2** Paul articulates one of the important principles behind this: “*what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.*” This is a principle that we, the church, need to follow. The three main functions they carried out were to proclaim that people should repent, cast out demons, and anoint with oil those who were sick and heal them.<sup>35</sup> Their commission was patterned after Jesus’ own ministry. Jesus and the apostles did not divorce the “spiritual” proclamation of the gospel from the “physical” needs of people. Indeed, meeting people’s physical needs often opens them to be receptive to the gospel. This is also a principle that the church needs to know and practice (the interaction between the “spiritual” and the “physical” are discussed in the sections on Discipleship and Mission in Menn 2017b).

Jesus never sent out his disciples singly, but always in groups of two, perhaps in conformity to the OT’s requirement that a matter is confirmed by “*two or three witnesses*” (**Num 35:30; Deut 17:6; 19:15**). There are certainly practical reasons for this: the two can encourage each other, help each other, protect each other, etc. They were to take virtually nothing with them, but trust in God for their provision which would be provided by those in the villages who were receptive to the gospel. R. Alan Cole points out, “Poverty is never an ideal in the Bible, although, if need be, it must be gladly embraced in God’s service and for Christ’s sake” (Cole 1989: 170). Following the Last Supper, Jesus ascertained that the apostles had learned to trust God for their provision: “*When I sent you out with no moneybag or knapsack or sandals, did you lack anything?*” They said, “*Nothing.*” (**Luke 22:35**) At that time he then said that, because they had learned to trust God, they could thenceforth take a moneybag, knapsack, and a sword with them when they went out (**Luke 22:36**). How

<sup>35</sup> James discusses this last function in **Jas 5:14-15**, “*Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord;* <sup>15</sup> *and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.*” “Anointing with oil” was seen as having medicinal value in biblical times (see **Luke 10:34**), which has led some commentators to conclude that “James is prescribing prayer and medicine” (Burdick 1981: 204). However, the majority and probably better view sees the anointing with oil as a symbolic act that the sick person is being set apart for God’s special attention and care (see Moo 1985: 179; Moo 1989: 1162). This is indicated in that the anointing is to be done “*in the name of the Lord*” (**v.14**), and anointing with oil is symbolic of the action or presence of the Holy Spirit (see **1 Sam 16:13; Ps 89:20; Luke 4:18; Acts 10:38**). “It is neither the oil nor the elders that heal, but it is the Lord himself, since the anointing is done in his name. Some in Africa believe it is actually the oil itself that has miraculous power to heal. Others think that healing depends on the quality of the oil used. Such people must stop thinking of the oil as sacred or as possession special powers and must cling only to the promises of God. That is why the author of this letter recommends prayer (5:15). It is the prayer of faith rather than the repetition of special formulas that brings miraculous healing.” (Andria 2006: 1516)

While **v.15** says “*the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick,*” it is not the prayer itself that has some special power to heal any more than it is the anointing oil that has special power to heal—it is God who heals. “A true prayer of faith, then, always includes within it a tacit acknowledgement of God’s sovereignty in all matters; that it is God’s will that must be done. And it is clear that it is by no means always God’s will to heal those who are ill (*cf.* 2 Cor. 12:7-9). Therefore, the ‘faith’ that is the indispensable condition of our prayers for healing to be answered—this faith being the gift of God—can be truly present only when it is God’s will to heal. . . . In this life, we shall not, most of the time, be able to know whether God’s will is to heal; we shall not always be able to sense whether that ‘faith’ that gets what is asked for is present. When our sincere, fervent prayers for healing go unanswered, therefore, it is not our lack of faith that is at fault; the context in which such faith could be present was absent.” (Moo 1985: 182, 186-87)

different so many contemporary “evangelists” are, who travel in their private airplanes, wear fancy clothes, stay at the most expensive hotels, and get rich from the millions of dollars they take from gullible people.<sup>36</sup> **Verse 11** (“*shaking the dust off your feet as a testimony against them*”) shows that rejection of the gospel has serious consequences. Paul and Barnabas continued this practice (see **Acts 13:51; 18:6**). The gospel brings salvation for those who accept it but judgment for those who reject it. Shaking off the dust from the feet was a sign that those who reject are subject to God’s judgment.

**Verses 30-32** report that when the apostles returned, they gave an account of what had happened on their missionary journeys. Debriefing, unburdening oneself, and accountability in ministry is important, and Jesus and the apostles demonstrated these things. Additionally, rest, relaxation, and recreation are necessary for mental and physical health. When we are tired and physically run down our minds are not as sharp. Further, if we are spending all of our time on our jobs, our lives get unbalanced and our relationships with our family and friends suffer. Maintaining strong relationships with the people who are closest to us, and taking the time to “recharge our batteries” and reorient our priorities, are important if we are to have alert, well-functioning minds and lives. Jesus recognized the importance of physical rest and recuperation. Many people in ministry today do not seem to realize this like Jesus did. By not taking time to eat properly and get sufficient rest, our physical health, our relationships, and our ministries will suffer. That is not good stewardship, and it is not honoring to God. We should learn the lessons demonstrated by Jesus and the apostles.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What was the *authority* that Jesus gave his disciples? What *worldly provisions* were they to take with them?
  - Do you think there is any relationship between the two?
  - What, if anything, does this tell us?
2. When Jesus sent his apostles out, no one who saw them would have been attracted to Christ by their wealth or by the prospect of getting rich. Why do you think so many modern “evangelists” do the exact opposite (flaunt their wealth)?

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<sup>36</sup> The early church faced similar problems with false “prophets” and false “apostles” who were only in it for the money. An early church manual of instruction, *The Didache* (c. 70-110), stresses the importance of evaluating a person’s motives and lifestyle in order to discern whether or not he is a false prophet or apostle. It says: “Now concerning the apostles and prophets, deal with them as follows in accordance with the rule of the gospel. Let every apostle who comes to you be welcomed as if he were the Lord. But he is not to stay for more than one day, unless there is need, in which case he may stay another. But if he stays three days, he is a false prophet. And when the apostle leaves, he is to take nothing except bread until he finds his next night’s lodging. But if he asks for money, he is a false prophet.

Also, do not test or evaluate any prophet who speaks in the spirit, for every sin will be forgiven, but this sin will not be forgiven. However, not everyone who speaks in the spirit is a prophet, but only if he exhibits the Lord’s ways. By his conduct, therefore, will the false prophet and the prophet be recognized. Furthermore, any prophet who orders a meal in the spirit shall not partake of it; if he does, he is a false prophet. If any prophet teaches the truth, yet does not practice what he teaches, he is a false prophet. But any prophet proven to be genuine who does something with a view to portraying in a worldly manner the symbolic meaning of the church (provided that he does not teach you to do all that he himself does) is not to be judged by you, for his judgment is with God. Besides, the ancient prophets also acted in a similar manner. But if anyone should say in the spirit, ‘Give me money,’ or anything else, do not listen to him. But if he tells you to give on behalf of others who are in need, let no one judge him.” (*Didache* 1989: 11.3-.12)

The early Christian document *The Shepherd of Hermas* (c. 95-154) similarly emphasizes a person’s character and conduct in evaluating whether or not he is a false prophet: “Determine the man who has the divine Spirit by his life. In the first place the one who has the divine Spirit from above is gentle and quiet and humble, and considers himself to be poorer than others, and gives no answer to anyone when consulted. Nor does he speak on his own (nor does the Holy Spirit speak when a man wants to speak), but he speaks when God wants him to speak. . . . Now hear, he said, about the earthly and worthless spirit, which has no power but is foolish. In the first place, that man who thinks he has a spirit exalts himself and wants to have a seat of honor, and immediately is arrogant and shameless and talkative and well acquainted with many luxuries and with many other pleasures, and receives money for his prophesying, and if he does not receive money he does not prophesy. Now, can a divine spirit receive money and still prophesy? It is impossible for a prophet of God to do this, but the spirit of such prophets who do so is earthly.” (*Shepherd of Hermas* 43.7-.8, .11-.12)

- What are the spiritual implications of this?
- Why do people listen to, follow, and give money to such people?
- What should be do about this?

3. What is the importance of debriefing and accountability?

- How, if at all, do we do this with modern evangelists and church leaders?

4. What is the importance of eating properly and getting proper rest and recuperation?

- Are you getting eating properly and getting proper rest and recuperation? If not, what are you going to do about it?

**6:14-29:** <sup>14</sup> King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him."<sup>15</sup> But others said, "He is Elijah." And others said, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old."<sup>16</sup> But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."<sup>17</sup> For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her.<sup>18</sup> For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."<sup>19</sup> And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not,<sup>20</sup> for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.

<sup>21</sup> But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee.<sup>22</sup> For when Herodias's daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you."<sup>23</sup> And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom."<sup>24</sup> And she went out and said to her mother, "For what should I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist."<sup>25</sup> And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter."<sup>26</sup> And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her.<sup>27</sup> And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison<sup>28</sup> and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother.<sup>29</sup> When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

#### vv. 14-29—The fate of John the Baptist

"King Herod" actually refers to Herod Antipas who was the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea (the land east of the Jordan) from 4 BC to AD 39. Herod's brothers were tetrarchs of the other regions of Palestine. This Herod needs to be distinguished from his father, Herod the Great, who had been the king of all of Palestine from 40-4 BC. It is Herod the Great who had enlarged the temple and who had ordered the murder of the baby boys in Bethlehem (see **Matt 2:1-23**).

The beginning of **v. 14** probably refers to Jesus' miracles which Herod had heard about, since **vv. 14b-16** focus on Jesus' identity and his miraculous powers. The idea that Jesus was John the Baptist reincarnated, or Elijah returned to earth, or one of the prophets evidently was widespread, since the disciples mention those three views when Jesus asked, "Who do people say that I am?" (**Mark 8:27-28**)

Although we have discussed the return of the disciples from their mission (**vv. 30-32**) above, we should note that Mark actually gives this account of the death of John the Baptist *between* Jesus' sending out his disciples and their return. This may be to highlight the cost of discipleship. That idea is corroborated by a number of parallels between the deaths of John the Baptist and Jesus. Both were executed by secular rulers. Herodias and the chief priests schemed to bring about the execution but initially were prevented from doing so until the right "opportunity" presented itself (**Mark 6:21; 14:11**). Herod and the chief priests both promised to give material goods (to Herodias's daughter and to Judas) which brought about the executions (**Mark 6:23; 14:11**) Herod and Pilate did not want to execute their prisoners but caved in to pressure from others (**Mark 6:26; 15:15**). John died as a prophet; Jesus died as the prophet (**Deut 18:15-19**). Both John and Jesus were buried by their disciples (**Mark 6:29; 15:45-46**).

The details surrounding John the Baptist's imprisonment and death (**vv. 17-29**) provide certain practical lessons for us. First, how John's death was brought about highlight the importance of Jesus' distinction between our earthly families and his true, spiritual family (**Mark 3:31-35**). "It was Herod's infatuation with Herodias that had led him to imprison John: and so even devotion to partners can lead astray. . . . Even the obedience of a daughter to her mother becomes in this case a sin: and so, outside Christ, even 'natural' virtues can become distorted into vices." (Cole 1989: 174)

Second, John exhibited great moral courage in publicly denouncing Herod's marriage to Herodias. Such a marriage was illegal (**Lev 18:16; 20:21**). To speak the truth against those in power and authority may have serious consequences, as John and faithful Christians through the ages have experienced (see **John 15:20; Acts 14:22; 2 Cor 4:7-11; 2 Tim 3:12**). Speaking the truth, despite the risks to our safety and lives, is one important test of our faithfulness to Christ. We need to recall with whom our primary allegiance lies and who is the ultimate ruler: it is Christ, not our earthly nation or ruler. **Ps 2:2-4** reminds us, "*The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, 'Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.' He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.*" Jenny Cox concludes, "These biblical examples are given to us to encourage us to live godly lives in obedience to the calling of the Father. This godly life involves both the prophetic call to proclaim repentance from sin, and a willingness to suffer persecution as a result of that proclamation. Unlike the unbelievers who have no strength when temptation comes, Christian men and women are given the anointing of the Holy Spirit in order to stand when the day of evil comes. The strength of the Holy Spirit will be required for us to walk in this way. Let us, then, pray for that strength to walk in obedience regardless of the personal cost." (Cox 2013: n.p.)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think John the Baptist troubled himself with preaching against Herod's personal life?
2. In this passage Herod is subject to and displays a host of different (and sometimes conflicting) emotions and influences. What are they?
  - How, if at all, is identifying the emotions and influences that people are subject to help us in witnessing to them?
3. What does this passage tell us about the potential cost of discipleship?

**6:33-44:** <sup>33</sup> *Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them.* <sup>34</sup> *When he 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.* <sup>35</sup> *And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late.* <sup>36</sup> *Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat."* <sup>37</sup> *But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." And they said to him, "Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?"* <sup>38</sup> *And he said to them, "How many loaves do you have? Go and see." And when they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish."* <sup>39</sup> *Then he commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass.* <sup>40</sup> *So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties.* <sup>41</sup> *And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he divided the two fish among them all.* <sup>42</sup> *And they all ate and were satisfied.* <sup>43</sup> *And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish.* <sup>44</sup> *And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men.*

### vv. 33-44—Jesus feeds 5000

The feeding of the 5000 is the only miracle reported in all four Gospels (see also **Matt 14:13-21; Luke 9:12-17; John 6:1-14**). This scene reveals much about the character of Jesus. His plan had been to get away from the crowds with his disciples so that they could rest and recuperate from their mission trip (**vv. 30-32**). Now, however, he sees that a great crowd had arrived at the place where he and the disciples had gone, so he abandoned his previous plan because "*he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things.*" (**v. 34**) Jesus' compassion is not merely a sentimental feeling but is active and outreaching. Again, we see that Jesus is not only concerned with the spiritual state of

the people (he taught them many things) but also with their physical needs (he fed them). And compare Jesus' meal with that of Herod (v. 21). Jesus' meal is simple, satisfying, sustaining, and life-giving; Herod's banquet was sumptuous and brought death. Since Jesus could feed 5000 men with only five loaves of bread and two fish, he can always take care of our physical needs. As Jesus said, "*I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst*" (**John 6:35**). Note that Jesus was a good steward: he did not allow the leftover food to be wasted. Presumably, the twelve baskets full of the leftovers would serve as the disciples' food after the crowd dispersed and they were able to have their time of rest and recuperation. The twelve baskets full of the broken pieces also illustrate what Paul said in **Eph 3:20-21**: "*Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*"

Another important aspect of Jesus is revealed in the fact that he recognized that the people "*were like sheep without a shepherd.*" That phrase first appears in **Num 27:15-18** when God told Moses to appoint Joshua as his successor: "<sup>15</sup>*Moses spoke to the LORD, saying,* <sup>16</sup>*“Let the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation* <sup>17</sup>*who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the LORD may not be as sheep that have no shepherd.”* <sup>18</sup>*So the LORD said to Moses, “Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him.”* Joshua is a “type” of Christ. In Hebrew, “Joshua” is “Yehoshua” or “Yeshua”; the same name in English is “Jesus.” Further, **Heb 4:4, 8** use the same Greek word, *Iēsous*, for both Joshua and Jesus. More importantly, Joshua led the people to victory over their enemies and entered the promised land. However, the fulfillment of the type is greater than the type itself. While Joshua did defeat his enemies and led Israel to the promised land, **Heb 4:8** says he did not give his people true “rest.” On the cross, Jesus defeated the greatest enemies of all—sin, death, and Satan—and led his people to the promised land of salvation and eternal life, i.e., our true “rest”; when he comes again, Jesus will bring with him the ultimate promised land of the new heaven and new earth.

The “sheep without a shepherd” theme occurs again in **1 Kings 22**. King Ahab wanted to wage war, but the prophet Micaiah said, "*I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd. And the LORD said, ‘These have no master; let each return to his home in peace.’”* (**1 Kgs 22:17**) The phrase denotes a people or, in the latter case, an entire nation without godly, spiritual leadership. This theme culminates in the OT in **Ezekiel 34** where God condemns the leaders of Israel: "*Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? <sup>3</sup>You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. <sup>4</sup>The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. <sup>5</sup>So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts.”* (**Ezek 34:2-5**) As a result, God promises, "*I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken.”* (**Ezek 34:23-24**) This prophecy finds its fulfillment in Jesus who said, "*I am the good shepherd*" (**John 10:11, 14**; see also **Matt 26:31**; **Mark 14:27**). He is called the “*great shepherd*” in **Heb 13:20** and the “*chief shepherd*” in **1 Pet 5:4**. *The ultimate fulfillment of Jesus as our shepherd will last forever in the new heavens and new earth, “For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”* (**Rev 7:17**)

All of this is hinted at in this account of Jesus and the 5000. It also should cause us to assess the church and its leadership. Some so-called “big men of God” look and act more like the false shepherds of **Ezekiel 34** than like the “good shepherd.” If this is allowed to continue, it will only result in weakness and scattering of the flock and will bring the judgment of God on his faithless people.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What was Jesus's attitude toward his disciples and toward the crowd?
  - What was the disciples' attitude toward the crowd?
  - What does this tell us?
2. This is the only one of Jesus's miracles that is reported in all four Gospels. Why do you think that is?
  - What lessons can we draw from this miracle?

3. Some Christians tend to downgrade the “social gospel” as a liberal invention, and say that one should “just preach the simple Gospel.” Did Jesus “just preach the simple Gospel?”

- What is the role of caring for people’s physical needs in Christianity?

4. This miracle, and particularly the explanation following it given by Jesus in **John 6:26-71**, begins to highlight what the late Richard Wurmbrand called the difference between being a “customer of Christ” vs. being a “disciple of Christ.” What is the difference and why does it matter?

5. Compare and contrast Jesus’s meal in this passage with Herod’s banquet in the preceding passage.

**6:45-56:** <sup>45</sup> *Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd.* <sup>46</sup> *And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray.* <sup>47</sup> *And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land.* <sup>48</sup> *And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them,* <sup>49</sup> *but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out,* <sup>50</sup> *for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”* <sup>51</sup> *And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded,* <sup>52</sup> *for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.*

<sup>53</sup> *When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored to the shore.* <sup>54</sup> *And when they got out of the boat, the people immediately recognized him* <sup>55</sup> *and ran about the whole region and began to bring the sick people on their beds to wherever they heard he was.* <sup>56</sup> *And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well.*

#### vv. 45-56—Jesus walks on water and healings at Gennesaret

Throughout his gospel, Mark has been revealing who Jesus is. The events depicted in these scenes show us further and deeper aspects of who Jesus is and give us deeper answers to the question raised in **Mark 4:41**, “*Who then is this?*”

##### 1. vv. 45-52—Jesus walks on water

This scene opens with Jesus dismissing the crowd and instructing his disciples to get in the boat while he went up on the mountain alone to pray. **Luke 5:16** says that Jesus would often withdraw to pray by himself in isolated places. Mark records three such instances: the one here, after the initial excitement over him in Capernaum (**Mark 1:35**), and following the Last Supper (**Mark 14:26-42**). He fasted for forty days, and undoubtedly spent that time in prayer, before he began his public ministry (**Matt 4:1-2; Luke 4:1-2**). We should note the contrast between Jesus’ prayer life and that of most of us. If he, being fully God and fully man, prayed so frequently, why do we not do so? All of the occasions of his solitary prayers immediately preceded or followed events of great importance. His entire life was one of great importance. One can therefore infer that a deep prayer life and having a life of importance are linked. Perhaps the shallowness of some of our lives is related to the shallowness of our prayer lives.

**Verses 47-48** show the contrast between Jesus and the disciples who are on their own. The fourth watch would have been between 3:00AM-6:00AM, which means that they had been battling the wind with continuous, back-breaking rowing, all night, without making much headway. The fact that the disciples had been battling the wind and sea all night when Jesus was not in the boat with them, and that the wind ceased as soon as he entered the boat, does *not* mean that if Jesus is the Lord of our life, and if we have a regular and deep prayer life, then our lives will be nothing but “smooth sailing.” This actually is more like a picture of the discipleship of the Christian life. The disciples were in the boat as a result of direct obedience to Jesus’ command. “The storm does not show that they had deviated from the path of God’s will: instead, God’s path for them lay through the storm, to the other side of the lake” (Cole 1989: 179). Although it might have seemed to them (and us) that Jesus had abandoned or forgotten about them, he had not. Jesus specifically told us that we will face persecution and hard times (**John 15:20**; see also **Acts 14:22; 2 Cor 4:7-11; 2 Tim 3:12**). He uses the hard times to deepen and mold us. As was true with the disciples, it takes more than one set of difficult circumstances for us to come to the point of understanding and trust. But with Jesus, our lives will be eventful and worthwhile; without him, our lives essentially will be worthless and futile.

The wording of **vv. 48-52** draws on the OT to reveal who Jesus really is. His “*walking on the sea*” and the phrase “*pass by them*” (**v. 48**), along with the disciples’ not perceiving that it was Jesus but thinking they saw a ghost (**v. 49**) are drawn from **Job 9:8-11**, which refers to God, “*who alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the sea*” (**v. 8**); “*Behold, he passes by me, and I see him not; he moves on, but I do not perceive him*” (**v. 11**). Additionally, Jesus’ intending to “*pass by them*” draws on **Exod 33:22** and **34:6-8** when God’s glory “*passed by*” Moses, and God revealed his nature to Moses. This is confirmed in **v. 50** when Jesus tells the disciples “*It is I.*” The actual wording in the Greek is, “*I AM,*” which is the phrase God used to identify himself to Moses at the burning bush: “*Then Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’*” (**Exod 3:13-14**) “*I AM*” when translated is YHWH (i.e., Yahweh; Jehovah). Jesus was identifying himself as God, and demonstrating that fact by doing something only God could do (walk on water), and confirming that by causing the wind to cease as soon as he got into the boat (**v. 51**). When that happened, they had to have remembered when Jesus stilled the storm (**Mark 4:35-41**) Their terror was turned to astonishment, but they still did not truly grasp who this Jesus was.

There are lessons for us in this. Some people think, “If I only saw a miracle, I would believe.” That is not true. The disciples saw many miracles, yet their hearts were hard and they did not understand (**v. 52**). We will only understand and believe when the Holy Spirit regenerates our hearts and gives us the faith we cannot generate on our own (see **Eph 2:8-9**). Additionally, our security, peace, and faith cannot be based on our circumstances. Circumstances may be good or bad; they constantly change. But changing circumstances have nothing to do either with God’s existence or his presence: “*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever*” (**Heb 13:8**). For the Christian, we must not focus on the storms and hardships of life and be terrified but should keep our focus on Jesus in the storms and hardships of life and realize that he is with us, he is using those storms and hardships to draw us to himself and to mold us into his image, and we should draw upon his presence and his Spirit to enable us to have inner peace and security despite the storms and hardships.

## 2. **vv. 53-56**—Jesus heals at Gennesaret

Both Bethsaida (**v. 45**) and Gennesaret (**v. 53**) were towns on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus may have changed their destination after he entered the boat. The biggest point of **vv. 53-56** is not the many healings that Jesus performed but the faith in Jesus that the common people had, in contrast to the unbelief of the disciples. “*The people immediately recognized him and ran about the whole region and began to bring the sick people on their beds to wherever they heard he was*” (**vv. 54-55**), whereas the disciples “*all saw him and were terrified*” (**v. 50**). It is one of the marks of the truth and authenticity of the Bible that the unbelief of the disciples is made so clear. If these biblical accounts had been made up decades later when the church had gained acceptability, influence, and power, the disciples never would have been portrayed as weak and faithless but would have been portrayed as champions of faith. We can trust the Bible and, more importantly, we can trust the one who is the Bible’s central figure: Jesus Christ.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Note how Jesus had to get away by himself to pray to the Father. What does this say to us about our relationship with God?

- Would you say that it is a *sin* to be prayerless? Why?
- If so, how great a sin is prayerlessness? Why is prayerlessness so rarely considered (or preached about) as *sinful*?

2. Why is prayer important?

- What is the cure for prayerlessness (anything besides “pray more”)?

3. According to the example of this passage, what is the *opposite* of faith?

4. This passage can be seen as an answer to the disciples’ question found at **Mark 4:41**. How does this passage answer that question?



5. Note the contrast between **v. 52** and **vv. 53-56**. What did the crowd understand about Jesus that Mark wants us to see?

**7:1-23:** *Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. <sup>3</sup> (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, <sup>4</sup> and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) <sup>5</sup> And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” <sup>6</sup> And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, “‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; <sup>7</sup> in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ <sup>8</sup> You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.”*

<sup>9</sup> *And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! <sup>10</sup> For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ <sup>11</sup> But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban”’ (that is, given to God)— <sup>12</sup> then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, <sup>13</sup> thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.”*

<sup>14</sup> *And he called the people to him again and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand: <sup>15</sup> There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.” <sup>17</sup> And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. <sup>18</sup> And he said to them, “Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, <sup>19</sup> since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) <sup>20</sup> And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. <sup>21</sup> For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, <sup>22</sup> coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. <sup>23</sup> All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”*

#### vv. 1-23—Traditions and what really defiles people

As in **chs. 2-3**, a deputation of scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem came to investigate and question Jesus. Both **vv. 1-13** (Jesus’ dispute with the scribes and Pharisees) and **vv. 14-23** (Jesus’ explanation of what truly defiles people) are linked by the concept of “defilement” or “uncleanliness.” The scribes and Pharisees raise the issue in **vv. 2** and **5**, and Jesus explains what true defilement is in **vv. 15-23** by using the verbal form of the same word used by the Pharisees.

#### 1. vv. 1-13—Jesus disputes the Pharisees concerning traditions

The first five verses concern the ceremonial washing of hands. The issue is not hygiene but adhering to ceremony and tradition, i.e., “*the tradition of the elders*” (**v. 5**). At the time of Jesus, these were extensive oral traditions. About AD 200 these traditions were written down in the *Mishnah*. So important was the issue of ritual or ceremonial cleanliness that one of the six divisions of the *Mishnah* was dedicated to “purities” and the issue of uncleanness (see Neusner 1988: 893-1137). The OT itself only required the ritual washing of hands for priests and elders in connection with offering sacrifices (**Exod 30:18-21; 40:30-32; Deut 21:6**) or if an Israelite had a discharge (**Lev 15:11**). These traditions had been developed by the rabbis as extensions of what the OT actually said; they acted as a “fence around the law.” In other words, if one followed the traditions then one would not even get to the law to violate it and thereby would be honoring God (see Wessel 1984: 678; Cole 1989:182-83).

When Mark is explaining some other these traditions in **vv. 3-4**, he mentions “*the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches*.” The actual word which has been translated as “washing” is *baptismos*, or “baptism.” In effect, by their traditions, the Pharisees baptized unessential things but opposed the baptism of John the Baptist and of Jesus which required a cleansed heart. Jesus himself uses this idea when responding to the Pharisees, by quoting **Isa 29:13** (see also, e.g., **Amos 5:21-26; Isa 1:10-15; Jer 7:21-26**). He is saying that Isaiah’s critique of the religious establishment before the exile into Babylon applied equally to the religious establishment in Jesus’ day, even though the Jews had been back in their land for over 500 years. In other words, nothing had changed. Jesus’ calling them “hypocrites” denotes “the wicked man who has alienated himself from God by his acts” (Wilckens 1972: 564). Their hypocrisy “consists in the jarring contradiction

between what they say and what they do, between the outward appearance and the inward lack of righteousness. . . . Their hypocrisy is, therefore, sin; failure to do God’s will is concealed behind the pious appearance of outward conduct.” (Ibid.: 567-68) Jesus emphasizes the seriousness of this in **vv. 6-7**, “*This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me.*” Today, every denomination has its own traditions. We tend to “baptize” our traditions, thinking that they are correct and godly. We need to seriously assess ourselves. We all honor Christ with our lips, but is our worship of him really “in vain”?

In **vv. 9-13** Jesus cited a specific example of the hypocrisy of the “*tradition of the elders*,” namely, the practice called Corban. Corban was dedicating something (for example, money) to God. Once it was so dedicated, it was not supposed to be used for any other purpose. Although such a practice sounds spiritual (“*seek first the kingdom of God*,” **Matt 6:33**), Jesus was pointing out how easily it could be abused so as to enable a person to avoid his or her true responsibilities. One has a duty to care for one’s parents. But when they need help, if you tell them, “The money I would have used to help you I have dedicated to God,” you can avoid helping your parents. What Jesus is saying is that true spirituality is demonstrated primarily by how we treat people. The reason is that all people are made in the image of God, and how we treat God’s image shows what we really think of him. Hence, **1 John 4:20** says, “*If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.*” This principle is found throughout the Bible (see, e.g., **1 Sam 15:22; John 13:34-35; Jas 1:27**).

## 2. **vv. 14-23**—Jesus says that defilement is from within<sup>37</sup>

In these verses Jesus describes where true defilement lies: it is not external, but internal; it is not the failure to perform certain religious rituals, but is the condition of the heart. His central point is that *everyone* is “defiled” and “unclean,” because we are all born with a corrupt and defiled heart, and we cannot change that on our own. All religions, including all branches of Christianity, have their own rituals and traditions. These can be good things if they point a person to God. However, rituals and traditions tend to “externalize” religion. By that, I mean that people tend to think (as the Pharisees evidently did) that “if I am properly acting according to my church’s rituals and traditions (e.g., I attend church each week; I tithe), and if I avoid certain “unclean” places (e.g., bars; certain cities), then I am in right standing with God. This makes righteousness subject to my control and also means that I really do not have to make any fundamental changes in my life to be in right standing with God. Jesus will have none of that! By locating the source of our problem within us, Jesus is saying that everyone—Jew and Gentile, tax collector and Pharisee—is in the same boat. The only solution to our problem is the gospel, i.e., it is not what we try to do to get right with God, but what God through Christ has done for us (see the discussion at **Mark 1:1**, above). This is one reason why Jesus said, “*Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you*” (**Matt 21:31**). They recognized their sinfulness and did not have their external rituals and traditions to delude them into thinking that they were righteous as did the Pharisees (see also **Luke 18:9-14** and the discussion at **Mark 2:13-17**, above, of the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son).

That Jesus was getting to the very core of religion is seen in Mark’s comment in **v. 19**, “*Thus he declared all foods clean.*” The Jewish dietary laws, along with circumcision and the Sabbath, were at the very center of what made Jews distinct (see **Daniel 1**). Yet Jesus sets aside all of the Levitical dietary laws; he reacted the same way to the Sabbath (**Mark 2:23–3:6**), and later the church did the same with circumcision (see **Acts 15:1-29; Rom 2:25-29; 3:30; 4:9-12; 1 Cor 7:18-19; Gal 5:2-6; 6:15**). It is no wonder that the Jewish leaders found Jesus to be dangerous.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In **vv. 10-13** Jesus makes a very important point. However, the principle behind his point covers more than merely the example he used. Articulate the important principle that Jesus is stating here in your own words.

- Are there other Biblical examples you can think of that make a similar point?

2. Why do you think people are so prone to develop rituals and traditions, particularly in religious matters?

3. Many Evangelicals and Pentecostals like to think of themselves as nontraditional (or at least not “tradition

<sup>37</sup> Although some translations of the Bible include **v. 16**, “*If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear*,” that verse is not in the earliest manuscripts; hence, it is not included above.

bound”). What traditions do we, in fact, have, both with respect to how we conduct our religious services and how we live our lives?

- How do our traditions run the risk of becoming “traditions of men” that end up putting a barrier between us and the Lord?

4. Jesus gets to *the heart* of what it is that causes all defilement, uncleanness, evil and strife within and among people: it is what is within us, inherently a part of us, what we all are really like at the fundamental core of our being—not anything external to us, what happens to us or the circumstances of our lives. Do we, nevertheless, still tend to emphasize external matters rather than the “internal” things that defile us? If so, how and why?

5. Jesus’s prescription for people is “inside out” (*i.e.*, changing the *heart* first in order to lead to changed behavior) rather than “outside in” (*i.e.*, changing behavior in order to change the heart). Why do you think this is?

- If this really is the way of Christianity, why do we still struggle with behaviors we know are wrong and want to change?
- What must we do to actually change such behaviors?

6. If Jesus’s diagnosis of humanity’s problem is that it is found within the human heart, and his prescription is that we must therefore get a new heart and change our lives from the “inside out,” does this mean that Christians should *not* work to alleviate evil social conditions, laws, circumstances, injustices, poverty, disease, illiteracy, etc., but should only “preach the gospel” as the way of dealing with these issues? Why or why not?

**7:24-37:** <sup>24</sup> *And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden.* <sup>25</sup> *But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet.* <sup>26</sup> *Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.* <sup>27</sup> *And he said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”* <sup>28</sup> *But she answered him, “Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”* <sup>29</sup> *And he said to her, “For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.”* <sup>30</sup> *And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.*

<sup>31</sup> *Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.* <sup>32</sup> *And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him.* <sup>33</sup> *And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue.* <sup>34</sup> *And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.”* <sup>35</sup> *And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.* <sup>36</sup> *And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.* <sup>37</sup> *And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, “He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”*

#### vv. 24-37—Jesus heals a Syrophenician woman’s daughter and a deaf man

The two events in this section and the feeding of the 4000 in **8:1-10** dramatize the point Jesus made in **vv. 14-23**, namely, just as there are no unclean *foods*, so are there no unclean *people* (*i.e.*, Gentiles). Or, to put it another way, all people are equally “unclean”; Jews are no closer to God than are Gentiles, since all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, have equally been made in the image of God, and all people are equally lost in sin. God brought that point home to Peter in **Acts 10**.

#### 1. vv. 24-30—Jesus heals a Syrophenician woman’s daughter

Tyre and Sidon were two cities on the Mediterranean Sea coast and were part of ancient Phoenicia. It was a Gentile area. Matthew’s account (**Matt 15:21-28**) provides certain information that supplements Mark’s account. **Verse 24** begins with Jesus and his disciples going to a distant region, entering a house, and not wanting anyone to know where he was. This suggests that he wanted a quiet time of rest and recuperation as in **Mark 1:35; 3:7; 6:31-32**, and perhaps a time to teach his disciples apart from the crowds. Robert Guelich says that “*And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know*” indicates that “He simply sought privacy away from the public. This excludes any desire by Jesus to engage in mission activity in this area.” (Guelich 1989:

384) As on the other occasions when he had withdrawn, however, people had heard of him, knew of his whereabouts, and “*he could not be hidden*” (v. 24).

There appears to be more going on in Jesus’ interaction with the Syrophenician woman than meets the eye. First, theologically, Jesus’ statement in v. 27, “*Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs*” reflects what he said in Matthew’s account of the incident with the Syrophenician woman, “*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*” (Matt 15:24; see also Matt 10:5-6). It also reflects the fact that, in God’s plan, the order of salvation is “*to the Jew first and also to the Greek*” (Rom 1:16; see also Acts 1:8; 13:46; Rom 2:10). The reason is that “only the Jews could understand the significance of Jesus. No Roman, Indian or Japanese could have accommodated Him, because He was embedded in the history and the inspired writings of Israel alone.” (Nehls and Eric 2010: 116) As Paul put it in Rom 9:4-5, it was the Israelites “*to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever.*” The Gentiles “*were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world*” (Eph 2:12). However, God had promised to bless the entire world through Israel (see Gen 12:3; 22:18). Given this background, “Instead of seeing Jesus’ messianic mindset in terms of either or, one ought to see his mission as to Israel on behalf of the nations. In other words, in narrowing his focus to Israel, Jesus does the work necessary for the entire world to be blessed.” (Wax 2013: Christ’s Mission to Israel for the World) Thus, in his meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus said “*salvation is from the Jews*” (John 4:22) not “*salvation is for the Jews.*”

Second, despite the above theological order of salvation, Robert Gundry suggests that Jesus’ statement about the children being fed first as opposed to the dogs relates primarily, not to the order of mission to Jews and Gentiles in general, but to Jesus’ wanting to teach his disciples in private, which is why he “*went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know.*” (v. 24) Gundry points out that the only other place in Mark where Jesus did not want to be known was in Mark 9:30-31 because he was teaching his disciples about his coming death and resurrection. The parallelism of the phraseology of 7:24 and 9:30 “suggests that Jesus wants privacy to teach his disciples here, too. . . . But if the underlying reason is the same as that in 9:30-31, taking the bread from the little children and throwing it to the little dogs means depriving the disciples of the attention that teaching them demands and giving it instead to the woman’s daughter and other Gentile children in her train. Verse 27 does not contrast the whole Jewish nation and all Gentiles, then, but the Jewish disciples of Jesus and Gentile children.” (Gundry 1993: 373) That view is supported by the fact that, in Matthew’s account, when the woman first requested that Jesus help her daughter, at first “*he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, “Send her away, for she is crying out after us.*” (Matt 15:23) Further, until this point in Mark, all of Jesus’ healings and exorcisms had been done in person. That would mean he would have had to go where the daughter was, instead of remaining in the house with his disciples, which would be contrary to why Jesus had sought the privacy of this house with his disciples in remote territory in the first place.

Third, Jesus nevertheless did engage the woman. Although Jesus’ statement, “*Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs*” (v. 27), might sound harsh or insulting, it is not—and the woman did not take it that way. The typical Greek word for “dog” (*kuōn*) did have a generally negative connotation. However, Jesus did not use that word but rather *kunaria*, or “little dogs,” and “there is no parallel to the use of the pet dogs of the household in this pejorative sense”; indeed, the little dogs “are admitted to the house and can be found under the table at meal time in contrast to the yard dogs or the stray scavengers of the street” (Lane 1974: 262).<sup>38</sup> Thus, Jesus’ statement painted “a delightful picture,” of “these household dogs, pets of and loved by the children” (Robertson 1930: 326). William Lane correctly concludes, “It seems probable that the woman, at least, understood Jesus’ statement on this practical (non-theological) level” (Lane 1974: 262).

There was a deeper, practical reason why Jesus made the statement he did, namely, to reveal her faith and confirm that Gentiles are on the same level as Jews. The Syrophenician woman demonstrated faith by coming to Jesus, falling down at his feet, and begging him to cast the demon out of her daughter. Matthew’s and Mark’s accounts give a complete picture of the order of events. She began by addressing him as “*Son of David*” (Matt 15:22). “Son of David” was a Jewish term for the Jewish Messiah. In other words, she, a Gentile, was coming to him on Jewish terms. This evidently is what led to his statement to the woman, “*I was sent only to the*

<sup>38</sup> Kenneth Wuest adds, “And He must have spoken Greek to this woman, for she would not know the Aramaic of the Jews” (Wuest 1973: 152)

*lost sheep of the house of Israel*” (**Matt 15:23**). In Matthew’s account she then renewed her appeal, not on Jewish grounds, but on the universal ground of human need, i.e., “*Lord, help me*” (**Matt 15:25**). Jesus answered her by saying “*Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs*” (**Mark 7:27; Matt 15:26**). Jesus’ statement “alludes to a current domestic scene. The table is set and the family [his disciples] is gathered. It is inappropriate to interrupt the meal and allow the household dogs to carry off the children’s bread. On this level of understanding the metaphor is intelligible in the life-situation depicted in Ch. 7:24ff. It has specific reference to the necessity for rest, which accounts for Jesus’ presence in the district and to the woman’s intrusion upon that rest.” (Lane 1974: 262) His metaphorical response implicitly invites a reply. “The woman clearly understood this and did not hesitate before the apparent obstacle before her. She felt no insult in the comparison between children of the household and the pet dogs. Instead she neatly turned it to her advantage: the crumbs dropped by the children, after all, are intended for the dogs! Jesus’ comparison is not rejected but carried one step further, which modifies the entire scene: if the dogs eat the crumbs under the table, they are fed *at the same time* as the children (and do not have to wait, as implied by the affirmation in verse 27a). . . . There does not have to be an interruption of the meal [i.e., he can continue to remain in the house and teach his disciples], for what she requests is not the whole loaf but a single crumb.” (Ibid.: 263) Jesus commends both her faith (**Matt 15:28**) and her answer (**Mark 7:29**), and for the first time in Mark he exorcises a demon remotely.

In short, the interaction here shows Jesus to be not only the Jewish Messiah, but the savior of the entire world—and the Gentiles do not have to wait until after the Jews get their portion but begin receiving their portion at the same time. Although Jesus and the disciples may have gone to the region of Tyre and Sidon for reasons of privacy, not mission, he did deliberately go into Gentile territory and interacted with the first person clearly described in Mark as a Gentile, and he did exorcise the demon from the Syrophenician woman’s daughter. By doing so, he was illustrating for his disciples what he had just taught in **vv. 14-23**, that just as all kinds of food are equally clean, so are all kinds of people. In fact, this and the following two events (healing the deaf man in Decapolis and feeding the 4000) mark the beginning or foreshadowing of the gospel mission to Gentiles; after his resurrection, Jesus makes it explicit in such passages as **Matt 28:18-20** and **Acts 1:6-8** that the gospel is, indeed, intended for all—Jew and Gentile alike.

## 2. **vv. 31-37**—Jesus heals a deaf man

Decapolis was a league of ten Greco-Roman cities founded (with the exception of Damascus) following the death of Alexander the Great. “Under Roman rule, the cities of the Decapolis were not included in the territory of the Herodian kingdom, its successor states of the Herodian tetrarchy, or the Roman province of Judea. Instead, the cities were allowed considerable political autonomy under Roman protection. Each city functioned as a polis or city-state, with jurisdiction over an area of the surrounding countryside” (“Decapolis” 2021: “Autonomy under Rome”) All except one were east of the Jordan River. The majority of their population were Gentiles and they “almost invariably sided with the colonial power in revolts by the indigenous population” (Overman 1993: 162). As with his trip to the region of Tyre and Sidon, Jesus would have gone out of his way to visit Decapolis. By doing so, he was reaching out to Gentiles and laying the foundation for the mission to the Gentiles which would begin in earnest after his resurrection (see **Matt 28:18-20; Acts 1:8**).

**Verse 32** says that, in addition to being deaf, the man had a “*speech impediment*” (later, in **v. 37**, the people call him “mute”). The only other place in the Bible where the Greek word translated “speech impediment” is used is in the Septuagint (LXX) translation of **Isa 35:6**, “*Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the stammerers shall speak plainly.*”<sup>39</sup> That is theologically and eschatologically significant because: “The prophecies of return from exile, and of the return of YHWH to Zion, saw these events as being marked by the dramatic restoration of creation, focused on the healing of the sick [e.g., **Isa 35:1-10**: “*Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. Then the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute will shout for joy.*”]: . . . We can say with confidence that Jesus intended his ‘mighty works’ of healing to be understood symbolically as a fulfillment of this expectation. . . . Thus it was that, when the eschatological prophet John was puzzled by what Jesus was doing, and perhaps by what he was not doing, Jesus replied by alerting John’s messengers to the symbolic value of his characteristic praxis [practice; action]: ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind are seeing, the lame are walking, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are being raised up and the poor are hearing the good news. And blessed is the one who is not offended at me’ [**Matt 11:4-6; Luke 7:22-23**, quoting from **Isa 35:5** and **61:1**].” (Wright

<sup>39</sup> The Septuagint was the Greek translation of the OT. It was in common use during Jesus’ day, and Jesus and the apostles frequently quote from it.

1996: 428-29) Thus, Mark is again using this healing to both: (A) dramatize that Jews and Gentiles are equal in God's sight; and (B) identify Jesus as Messiah—God come to earth as a man—who is fulfilling the prophecies of Isaiah, now in the territory of the Gentiles as well as in Israel. The words of the crowd, "*He has done all things well*" (v. 37) echo the "*very good*" of **Gen 1:31** and contrast with Jesus' assessment of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, "*Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites*" (7:6).

One other aspect of this healing is worthy of our attention. In v. 33 it says that Jesus took the man aside from the crowd privately. This may have been for Jesus to fix his undivided attention on the man but also may have been so that the man could fix his undivided attention on Jesus. We should remember Jesus' concentration on the individual, not the masses, in our relationships both individually and as churches. This is particularly important in the areas of evangelism and discipleship.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. How do Jesus's interactions with the Syrophenician woman and the deaf man illustrate the principle announced by Jesus in **vv.14-23** in which he declared all foods clean?
2. What do you think was Jesus's purpose in saying to the woman, "*Let the children be filled first, for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs*" (v. 27)?
3. How was Jesus testing the woman? How did she react?
  - What can we learn from her response?
  - What qualities does her response demonstrate about her?
4. How does God test us and our faith?
  - How have you reacted when God tests you and your faith?
  - Is there a difference between "testing you" and "testing your faith"?
  - What are God's purposes in doing this?

**8:1-10:** <sup>1</sup>*In those days, when again a great crowd had gathered, and they had nothing to eat, he called his disciples to him and said to them,* <sup>2</sup>*"I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat.* <sup>3</sup>*And if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way. And some of them have come from far away."* <sup>4</sup>*And his disciples answered him, "How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?"* <sup>5</sup>*And he asked them, "How many loaves do you have?"* *They said, "Seven."* <sup>6</sup>*And he directed the crowd to sit down on the ground. And he took the seven loaves, and having given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and they set them before the crowd.* <sup>7</sup>*And they had a few small fish. And having blessed them, he said that these also should be set before them.* <sup>8</sup>*And they ate and were satisfied. And they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full.* <sup>9</sup>*And there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away.* <sup>10</sup>*And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha.*

### **vv. 1-10—Jesus feeds 4000**

This is the counterpart to the feeding of the 5000 in **Mark 6:33-44**. After healing the deaf man, there is no indication that Jesus had left Decapolis. Consequently, we may infer that he was still in primarily Gentile territory. This can be inferred, not only by the lack of indication of Jesus' leaving Decapolis, but for other reasons in the text. First, Matthew does not include the account of the healing of the deaf man. Instead, after Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman in the region of Tyre and Sidon, Matthew says, "<sup>29</sup>*Jesus went on from there and walked beside the Sea of Galilee. And he went up on the mountain and sat down there.* <sup>30</sup>*And great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them,* <sup>31</sup>*so that the crowd wondered, when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they glorified the God of Israel.*" (**Matt 15:29-31**) Since Decapolis was on the east side of the Sea of Galilee, Matthew's account is consistent with Jesus'

being in Decapolis, near the Sea of Galilee. Additionally, Both Mark and Matthew refer to the “crowd,” and both accounts end with the crowd expressing its amazement at the healings Jesus performed. Indeed, in Matthew’s account the crowd “*glorified the God of Israel.*” That language indicates that those glorifying God were not Jews from Israel, but were Gentiles. Additionally, after the feeding of the 4000, Mark reports, “*And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha*” (8:10). Matthew’s version of the feeding of the 4000 concludes, “*And after sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan*” (Matt 15:39). “From these two passages it is reasonable to infer that ‘the borders of Magadan’ and ‘the parts of Dalmanutha’ were contiguous. We may perhaps gather from the narrative that they lay on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. After the feeding of the 4,000, Jesus and His disciples came to these parts. Thence they departed to the other side’ (Mark 8:13), arriving at Bethsaida. This is generally believed to have been Bethsaida Julias, Northeast of the sea.” (“Magadan” n.d.: n.p.) In other words, Jesus had fed 5000 Jews and then crossed into Gentile territory; now he feeds 4000 Gentiles and crossed back into Jewish territory.

All of this is important because, as we have seen, in 7:20-23 Jesus said that defilement does not come from without but from within. The important implication of that principle is that all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, are equal: equally defiled and equally in need of the gospel to be saved. Immediately after announcing that principle, Jesus demonstrated that by healing two Gentiles from outside of Israel. Now, his feeding of the 4000 in Decapolis demonstrates the same thing, only this time on a large scale, and the numbers of the baskets of leftovers demonstrate this. The twelve baskets of leftovers from the 5000 would naturally suggest the twelve tribes of Israel. The seven baskets of leftovers from the 4000 suggest Gentiles. Why? Because Deut 7:1 says there were “*seven nations*” in the land when Israel entered the land! In John 6:41-58, Jesus told the Jews that he was the “*bread of life.*” Now, by feeding the 4000 in Gentile territory he is showing that he is the bread of life for all people, everywhere.

But there is even more to the theological symbolism than that. The “baskets” filled with the 5000 in Greek are *kophinos*; the “baskets” filled with the 4000 are *spuris*. “The *kophinos* was proverbially the Jewish traveling basket. . . . The Jews carried their food in these wicker baskets while traveling in Gentile countries to avoid defilement. . . . Their sizes were variable, but they were probably not as large as *spurides* (the pl. of *spuris*, a long reed basket).” (Zodhiates 1993: *kophinos*, 883). *Kophinos* is often translated as “lunch basket” and is always used regarding the 5000; *spuris* is often translated as “hamper” and is always used regarding the 4000 (Wessel 1984: 690n.19). We have good biblical evidence that the *spuris* was considerably larger than the *kophinos*, since Acts 9:25 reports that Paul escaped from a plot to kill him in Damascus when “*his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket [i.e., spuris].*” This indicates that, while Christ’s mission to Gentiles may have begun small (i.e., the Syrophenician woman only received the “crumbs” from under the table), in the end the Gentiles will be filled to overflowing and, given the size of their baskets, the harvest of Gentiles will be larger than that of Jews (as has proven true in history). Finally, the early church regarded the number “seven” as indicating fullness or completeness. Hence, the “seven” churches [in the book of Revelation] signify the universal church (Aune 1997: 130; see also Johnson 2001: 14; Schüssler Fiorenza 1991: 53). William Milligan adds, “Every reader of the book of Revelation is familiar with the singular part played by that number in its structure, and with the fact that (unless chap. xvii. 9 be an exception) it never means that numeral alone. It is the number of unity in diversity. . . . Their number—seven—must thus be regarded as typical of unity, and the seven churches as representative of the one universal church.” (Milligan 1896: 28-29) In other words, typologically and symbolically, the feeding of the 4000 with the seven baskets full of leftovers indicate that Christ’s church will not be complete until the Gentiles have been fully “grafted in” (see Rom 11:17-24) to form one united body in which “*there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*” (Gal 3:28; see also Eph 2:13-22; Col 3:11; Rev 5:9; 7:9).

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Since Mark already recorded one feeding miracle (feeding the 5000 in 6:33-44), why do you think he includes this miracle?

- How does the context or flow of Mark’s narrative help us to understand it?

2. Why did Jesus perform this miracle?

- What does it say (or what is He saying) about himself and about others?

**8:11-21:** <sup>11</sup> *The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him.* <sup>12</sup> *And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, “Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation.”* <sup>13</sup> *And he left them, got into the boat again, and went to the other side.*

<sup>14</sup> *Now they had forgotten to bring bread, and they had only one loaf with them in the boat.* <sup>15</sup> *And he cautioned them, saying, “Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.”* <sup>16</sup> *And they began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread.* <sup>17</sup> *And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened?”* <sup>18</sup> *Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember?”* <sup>19</sup> *When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?”* They said to him, “Twelve.” <sup>20</sup> *“And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?”* And they said to him, “Seven.” <sup>21</sup> *And he said to them, “Do you not yet understand?”*

#### vv. 11-21—The Pharisees ask for a sign and the disciples do not understand

As Jesus is concluding his ministry in Galilee, in preparation for his final journey to Jerusalem, the opposition of the Pharisees and the lack of understanding of his own disciples again come to the forefront.

##### 1. vv. 11-13—The Pharisees ask for a sign

The irony in **vv. 11-13** is amazing: the Pharisees argued with Jesus and demanded a “*sign from heaven*,” when all the time, standing before them and speaking directly to them was the *man from heaven*. The Pharisees undoubtedly had already heard of the many miracles Jesus had done, which is why they came to him. But their demand was not sincere but was only “*to test him*” (**v. 11**). Their problem was their determined attitude of unbelief; it was a problem of the will, not of the intellect or of visual experience. As Jesus said in **John 7:17**, “*If anyone’s will is to do God’s will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority.*” The Pharisees were examples of the (non-biblical) proverb, “There are none so blind as those who will not see” (see also **Isa 6:9-10; Jer 5:21; Ezek 12:2; Matt 13:13; Mark 4:12**). The phrase, “*And he left them*” (**v. 13**) is one of the most terrible and sobering condemnations of abandonment one could imagine.

Jesus’ use of the phrase “*this generation*” in **v. 12**, particularly coupled with his deep sigh, shows that he is using “*this generation*” pejoratively, as referring to “unbelieving, rejecting humanity, unresponsive to God and oblivious to the possibility of facing his judgment” (Nelson 1996: 383). He does this throughout the Olivet Discourse and elsewhere (see **Matt 12:39-42; 23:36; 24:24; Mark 13:29-30; Luke 11:29-32; 21:31-32**). Neil Nelson adds that, in the Olivet Discourse, “Matthew seems to have deliberately juxtaposed the phrase ‘this generation’ with his account of the days of Noah in 24:37-39 in order to echo the notorious generation of the flood (Gen 7:1 LXX). The flood generation is a type of ‘this generation’ that sees the end signs, just as the flood itself typifies the judgment that will occur at the *parousia*. ‘This generation’ in 24:34 represents a long line of unbelieving, unresponsive people from the time of Noah to the end of the age.” (Ibid.: 383-84) The same thing is occurring here.

##### 2. vv. 14-21—The disciples do not understand

The disciples’ dullness, lack of understanding, and absent-mindedness is on full display in this section. **Verse 14** (“*Now they had forgotten to bring bread, and they had only one loaf with them in the boat*”) is highly ironic: although they may have only one physical loaf of bread with them, the “*bread of life*” (**John 6:35, 48, 51**), who had just fed 5000 and 4000 by multiplying very few loaves of bread, was seated with them in the boat!

Their guilty consciences about not bringing bread caused them to completely misunderstand Jesus’ statement in **v. 15**. They were so caught up in their own worlds that they could not see the basic truths about Jesus. We should not be too hard on them, however, for we also often are so caught up in our own self-centered worlds that we fail to perceive Christ’s presence, leading, and power in our lives.

Jesus’ statement in **v. 15** about “*the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod*” refers to their beliefs and teaching. **Matt 16:6** has “Sadducees” instead of Herod or Herodians. Leaven often has a negative connotation in the Bible and refers to the unseen pervasive influence of false doctrine and the wrong focus in life. The Pharisees and the Herodians/Sadducees represent almost opposite ends of the false doctrine spectrum. The Pharisees were religious conservatives, but all they were interested in was one’s external performance and adherence to the “*tradition of the elders*” (**7:3, 5**). Jesus called them “hypocrites” and a people that “*honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me*” (**7:6**). The Herodians “were influential persons who were



partisans of the Herodian dynasty,” primarily interested in political power and influence (Hoehner 1992: 325). The Sadducees were religious liberals who did not believe in the resurrection (**Matt 22:23; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27; Acts 23:8**). “The Herodians were theologically in agreement with the Sadducees and politically both of these parties would have been the opposite of the Pharisees” (Hoehner 1992: 325). Cole adds that the Sadducees “were the shrewd, wealthy, priestly aristocracy, with a worldly leavening influence at least as dangerous as that of the hard religious formalism of the Pharisees” (Cole 1989: 198). The ultimate “leaven” of the Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees was that, for different reasons, they all did not understand who Jesus was and therefore rejected him as Messiah and Son of God. Jesus’ warning to the disciples in the boat is just as relevant to the church today. Religious formalism, hypocrisy, emphasis on our traditions instead of real transformation of the heart, devotion primarily to politics or economics, and doctrinal heterodoxy are always threats to the holiness and Christ-centeredness of the church as a whole and to Christians individually—and when that happens, it reveals that we also do not understand who Jesus is.

Jesus’ statement to the disciples in **v. 18**, “*Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?*” is like what he said in **4:12-13** concerning his parables and the disciples’ failure to understand them and alludes to (**Isa 6:9-10; Jer 5:21; Ezek 12:2**). Jesus’ questions to the disciples in **vv. 17-21**, which are equally applicable to us, address these threats.

- “*Do you not yet perceive or understand?*” (**v. 17**) suggests that we use our minds. We need to stop and think about what has happened to us individually and as a church and why. What does the Bible have to say about our situation? The disciples were only focusing on their physical circumstances (the forgotten bread) but needed to be “*transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect*” (**Rom 12:2**).
- “*Are your hearts hardened?*” (**v. 17**) asks us to examine the condition of our hearts, i.e., the deepest part of us; our true selves. We need to be honest about why are we doing what we are doing. Truth should move us. If we have not acted on something we say we believe, that indicates we really don’t believe it.
- “*Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?*” (**v. 18**) was a statement he repeatedly used when he taught. There is a deeper meaning to most things. The food he provided to the 5000 and the 4000 was more than just physical food but was pointing them to the fact that they all had a deeper need that only he, “*the bread of life*,” can fill (he made that clear to the woman at the well in **John 4:9-14**). Everything we do will have eternal consequences. We need to see beyond the physical to the spiritual.
- “*And do you not remember?*” (**v. 18**) directs us to all the ways God has acted in our lives in the past. Nothing happens to us by accident. He is using everything to conform us to the image of Jesus Christ (see **Rom 8:29**). Remembering how he has acted in the past, and understanding that we are part of his overall plan, can give us the confidence to draw upon him as we go through our lives now.

Considering these things confronts us all with his final question, “*Do you not yet understand?*” (**v. 21**)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How was the request for a sign from heaven (**v. 11**) not an honest quest for belief, but a sign of hearts hardened against God?
2. What were the distinctive characteristics of (A) the Pharisees, and (B) the Herodians/Sadducees, that Jesus was warning his disciples about? What did those two groups share in common?
3. In **vv. 17-21**, Jesus asked his disciples a series of questions, concluding with “*Do you not yet understand?*” What was he trying to get them to see and understand?
4. In Jesus’ rebuke of his disciples (**vv. 17-21**), he cites *only* his two “feeding” miracles. What did these two miracles tell the disciples (and tell us) about Jesus, his values, and his kingdom?

**8:22-26:** <sup>22</sup> *And they came to Bethsaida. And some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him.* <sup>23</sup> *And he took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village, and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, “Do you see anything?”* <sup>24</sup> *And he looked up and said, “I see people, but they look like trees, walking.”* <sup>25</sup> *Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.* <sup>26</sup> *And he sent him to his home, saying, “Do not even enter the village.”*

#### vv. 22-26—Jesus heals a blind man

The inability of the Pharisees and the disciples to see (“*Having eyes do you not see?*” **v. 18**) set the stage for Jesus’ healing this blind man. Again we see the faith of others (“*some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him,*” **v. 22**). Again we see Jesus focusing on the person in need instead of on the crowd (“*And he took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village,*” **v. 23**). Again we see that Jesus did not want to be known simply as a miracle worker (“*And he sent him to his home, saying, ‘Do not even enter the village,’*” **v. 26**).

This is unique in that it is the only healing in which Jesus asks a question during the healing process, and it is the only healing which takes place in two stages. In doing it this way, Jesus is demonstrating that his powers are not confined to a “box,” i.e., there is not only “one way” in which he does things. There is a lesson for us in that: we often think that there is only one “right way” to do things when, in fact, there are different “right ways” to do things. In other words, we “baptize” our own culture, or church tradition, or the way we were taught as the “right way” to do things. We need to step out of our own “boxes.” It also illustrates the true of **Phil 1:6**: “*And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*”

At another level, this healing is an acted-out parable of the disciples. Thus, it is no surprise that it immediately follows their lack of understanding and Jesus’ questioning them in **vv. 14-21**. The blind man here is representative of the disciples, who have eyes but do not see and ears but do not hear. Only slowly and in stages do they grasp who Jesus really is and what his program is all about. Soon, in **v. 29**, Peter will confess that Jesus is the Christ; however, even then he does not understand what Christ is all about, and Jesus has to rebuke him, “*For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man*” (**v. 31**). Even after the resurrection, the disciples still misunderstood what Jesus and the kingdom were all about (see **Acts 1:6-8**). This healing also is a parable of us: “*For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.*” (**1 Cor 13:12**)

This healing brings to a conclusion the first half of the book of Mark and anticipates the opening of the spiritual eyes of the disciples. Beginning in **v. 27** and through to the end of the book, the focus is on Jesus’ full revelation of himself, his proceeding to Jerusalem, and his death.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This is the only healing in two parts. Why do you think Mark included this account (it is not, by the way, included in the other Gospels)?
  - Does the context or place in Mark’s narrative show you some connection or give you some clue as to why Mark may have recorded this?
  - What lessons can we draw from it?
2. How is this healing an “acted out parable” of the lives of Jesus’s disciples? Of us?
3. This healing really brings to a close the first half of Jesus’s ministry as recorded by Mark. Summarize the main things we have learned about Jesus and his kingdom up to this point.

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