

-Redeemer Presbyterian Church -

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK

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Introduction to Mark's Gospel

FELLOWSHIP GROUP CURRICULUM STUDIES IN MARK

Introduction

Mark's Gospel is generally considered to be the earliest of the four gospels in the New Testament. When it appeared around 65 - 70 AD it was utterly unique as literature and apart from the other three gospels, nothing similar has appeared before or since.

What is this genre called "gospel"? It can hardly be considered *biography* for it takes little interest in the details of Jesus' life. In Mark's account, Jesus' birth and childhood are ignored. In each of the four gospels only three years of public ministry are described and even that material is highly selective. The gospels do not account for everything Jesus did (Jn. 20:30, 21:25) and more than a third of their content focuses on the last week of Jesus' life.

The gospels, are not truly *historical* accounts. While they explain historical events, they impinge only slightly on the world affairs of the day and make no attempt at a chronological presentation. Yet readers soon realize that the gospels cannot be considered *myth*.

As one expert on myth says, "*Greek mythology is largely made up of stories about gods and goddesses but it must not be read as some kind of Greek Bible an account of Greek religion. According to the most modern idea, a real myth has nothing to do with religion; instead it is an explanation of something in nature.*"

Myth is about man's search for meaning. Gospel, on the other hand is about God's search for man.

What then is a gospel? A Gospel is a writing which announces good news. A gospel proclaims the good news about Jesus Christ. A gospel is not a life of Jesus. Instead, it instructs us how to find life in Jesus Christ. As such, it is a kind of interactive literature which demands response, asking: Will you receive the news or reject it?

Having received it as true, the genius of a gospel is that it will continue to challenge us to further response. It is not a story of a past accomplishment that bears one reading and one response. The beauty of the gospels is that for the curious inquirer, the new believer and the seasoned veteran there is a great benefit to be had in regular study of the gospels especially for the purpose of responding to the challenge of the life of Jesus.

Themes and Structure

Mark announces his purpose from the first sentence: "*The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*" His purpose is to tell us the good news about Jesus Christ. In order to do that he answers two questions. First: ***Who is Jesus?*** Second: ***What did he come to do?***

These themes divide the book into two sections. The first eight chapters deal with *Who is Jesus?* climaxing with Peter's confession in 8:29. When Jesus asks, "Who do you say I am?" Peter replies, "You are the Christ." He is the one anointed by God, the King of the coming Kingdom.

From this point forward Jesus announces his purpose in coming: *"The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected...and killed and after three days rise again."*

And so the second eight chapters climax in his death and resurrection. The King is rejected. But through that rejection he triumphs and accomplishes his purposes.

The distinctive emphasis of Mark's Gospel which is not so apparent in Matthew or Luke is that Jesus came as a servant. This underlies both sections of Mark.

In Mark 10:44 Jesus announces, *"Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be the slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

Because of this emphasis Mark's gospel serves wonderfully as a training manual for Christians. In it, Jesus Christ, the great servant of God, teaches people how to serve him and their fellow man.

The Author

The author of the Gospel is not recorded, but unbroken tradition tells us that it is John Mark who was with Peter in Rome during Nero's persecution. Mark was a Jewish Christian. His mother, Mary, owned a house to which Peter came after his release from prison (Acts 12:12). The house was a frequent meeting place for the disciples.

As a result, Mark had a great amount of exposure to those who had been with Jesus and their preaching. Many believe that Mark was Peter's secretary and that his gospel reflects Peter's teaching. Bishop Papias (AD. 140) wrote: *"Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately all that he remembered of the things said and done by our Lord, but not, however, in order."*

How to Use This Material

The questions and the study guide to those questions are designed to assist you in enabling your group to work through the passage so that it is understood. The study guide is made pastoral in nature so that you can better help people to appreciate the depth of the material and to find its application in their lives.

The commentary subtitled *Further Notes* was developed by the staff at St. Helen's, Bishopsgate in London. It is meant to satisfy the curiosity of those who enjoy exploring beyond the central issues of the text. It covers things which did not get covered in the section subtitled *Commentary on the Passage and Notes on the Questions*.

It is critical that in your preparation to lead a group you make this material your own. The study guide is not meant to be read to the group. Instead, it should be

digested well enough through your preparation that its themes are easy to recall. In this way you will find it straightforward to guide people through the questions. Good preparation will free you to focus on the people in the group. You will know which questions will best serve them and know when to fill the gaps in their understanding of the passage so that the application of truth is achieved.

The study guide is not exhaustive. You and your group will have insights not found in the notes.

Even the questions must become your own so that you can rephrase them in your own words. (If you don't know what you are asking, neither will anyone else in the group!) You may want to delete certain questions that the study suggests you ask. Or you may want to add your own questions which you think will help mine the text. Know which questions not to ask if time constraints arise in a given meeting. In the early studies an asterisk marks those questions considered essential. Preparation like this will make for a group atmosphere of discovery and learning.

Finally, you will notice that some questions are multiple, an arrangement designed to gain progressive insight into the passage. Look to appreciate how the questions flow. This will assist you to choose which ones must stay together and which can be discarded. In the early studies, a forward slash (/) is inserted to separate questions that do not necessarily relate together.

But don't be daunted by all these instructions. Leading a bible study is equal parts art and science. Because it is an art each person will lead his or her group through the passage in a unique way. Be disciplined enough to prepare the study material from the guide but free enough to ensure it communicates to your group. Because leading a bible study is partially an art you should also be encouraged by the fact that your skills will certainly continue to grow and develop.

FURTHER BACKGROUND MATERIAL

Author.

Mark's author is anonymous, but earliest tradition refers to John Mark, who was with Peter in Rome (1 Pet 5:13) as the author. He was a Jewish Christian, whose mother owned a house in Jerusalem used by the disciples. He was an early associate of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 12:25, but appears to have disappointed Paul by his failure to persist in missionary work (Acts 13:5,13; 15:31).

Later, Paul's opinion had changed (2 Tim 4:11). So presumably had Mark. As a contemporary of the apostles, Mark is placed close to the source of accounts about Jesus. His personal commitment as an evangelist is apparent in the whole flavor of the book.

Date.

Very early indeed. Peter was martyred around AD 60 and early references suggest that Peter was the source of much of Mark's material. This would be

consistent with the prominence given to Peter's repeated failures. A date is therefore usually assigned between Peter's death and the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

The Setting of the Gospel.

The tradition is that Mark wrote his gospel for the Christians in Rome, in the context of Nero's persecution, particularly subsequent to the fire of AD 64. He emphasizes faith in God's sovereignty and sufficiency in adversity, and Jesus' radical expectation of a commitment to himself entailing an abandonment of life and an acceptance of suffering and service (8:34-38).

This tradition is supported by the gentile "feel" of the gospel. Latin terms are frequently employed along with Roman time periods. Jewish customs are not assumed to be familiar and the climactic statement in Mark rests with a Roman soldier recognizing Jesus.

Historical reliability.

Various factors point to Mark's reliability: difficult or offensive material is often included without modification or "*smoothing*". This is also apparent in Mark's reluctance to create geographical or temporal links between sections when they are not known, frequently preferring the simple "*and*" (kai).

Striking detail is found in sections likely to be from Peter, but is often lacking elsewhere, providing evidence that Mark edited with a light hand rather than worked to achieve a consistent, finished style. Mark's sources will have been Peter, coupled with other oral and possibly written material, governed by both friendly and hostile eyewitnesses. When these provide material grouped in topics, he does not contrive to set them chronologically.

The above all tends to suggest that in Mark we have an honest compiler rather than a literary artist (the Greek in Mark being notoriously "*rough*").

Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge our indebtedness to the staff at St. Helen's Church, Bishopsgate in London. They have granted us permission to use the material they have developed on Mark's gospel as the basis for what you now hold in your hands. We are especially grateful to R.C. Lucas, their senior minister, and Doug Olsen, who is also on staff, for use of their insights into Mark's Gospel.

Study 1 - The Beginnings

MARK CHAPTER 1:1-15

Questions

1. What is the best news that you have received during the past month? How did you respond to it?

READ Mark 1:1-15

2. * What title or headline would you want to give this passage of Mark?
3. * What does verse 1 reveal about Mark's understanding of the events he was about to describe? * By calling it a gospel what kind of response is Mark seeking in his readers?
4. Is the gospel something we respond to once or continually? Why? / Can you think of a metaphor that explains the type of response we need to make?
5. In verses 2-8 John the Baptist is introduced as the one preparing the way for the coming of Jesus. * What is the significance of Mark quoting the Old Testament?
6. John is preaching "*forgiveness of sins*". * How serious is the problem of sin? * How valuable is the forgiveness of sins? * Is such forgiveness an automatic benefit for everyone? * If not, what is involved? / How would you define repentance?
7. * What was the center of John's preaching? / * What was his angle or main point about the "*one to come*"? * How did knowledge of Jesus' identity affect his view of himself? / * How does it affect your view of yourself?
8. * What do we learn about Jesus in the stories of his baptism and desert experience? Mark put these stories side by side, why?
9. What was Jesus' message? How did it differ and how was it similar to John the Baptists? What is the relationship between the two messages?
10. * What do you think is meant by the phrase "*the kingdom of God*"? What is implied by the term "*kingdom*"? Why is its arrival such good news?

LEADER NOTES MARK 1:1-15

Main Points.

This passage declares itself the beginning of the gospel message. Here and throughout this gospel Mark's purpose is to draw our attention to the greatness of Jesus. **"Who is this person?"** is his immediate theme.

He answers that Jesus is the powerful one from God. Anchoring this gospel's origins in Old Testament prophecy, he introduces John the Baptist as the forerunner of the Messiah. Jesus appears with a majesty attested by John and the Father and the Holy Spirit at his baptism. Then again by angelic and demonic activity in his desert experience. We are then confronted by Jesus the King proclaiming his kingdom.

Commentary on the Passage and Notes on the Questions.

1. What is the best news that you have received during the past month? How did you respond to it?

The studies will begin with an *"approach"* question as a warm up and conversation starter. Use this question before the passage is read.

2. * What title or headline could we give to this passage of Mark?

This simple question will focus people on the passage as a whole. It is our goal in group studies to model intelligent Biblical interpretation. Therefore we avoid a fragmentary approach to Bible study. We look for the flow and themes of entire passages. Detail is best understood in terms of the broad picture.

A number of different titles would be equally appropriate: The Beginnings of the Gospel; The Forerunner of the Messiah; John Prepares the Way of the Lord; Jesus Prepares for Ministry; The Preparations for Jesus' Ministry; Initial Clues about who Jesus Is; What John's Ministry Tells Us About Jesus; etc. All of these and more enable you to see the big picture.

3. * What does verse 1 reveal about Mark's understanding of the events he was about to describe? * By calling it a gospel what kind of response is Mark seeking in his readers?

Mark clearly regards his gospel as true. Therefore it was genuinely good news. For many people a sacred story does not have to be true so long as it helps you feel better about life and encourages you to improve. This is not Mark's purpose. He describes real historical events which he witnessed or recorded through eyewitnesses. He was close enough to the events, and the people to report accurately and explain their significance.

The gospel goes on to show how God through Christ accomplished the redemption of mankind. It becomes like a marriage proposal to all people which individuals must accept or reject. Whenever the gospel is presented to people God is in essence asking: *"Will you marry me?"*. It requires a *"yes"* or a *"no"*.

Mark says that Jesus is the Son of God, that is, God himself incarnate. Immediately we are faced with a claim so bold that it is unrepeated in human

history. Much that follows in this passage and throughout Mark's gospel is written to reveal Jesus' identity and to enable people to see his greatness and glory. This powerful and exalted one, through his death and resurrection, had come to reconcile us to God. By calling it a gospel he was saying: *"This is good news which demands a response."* It was not merely information.

Finally, by using the word *"beginning"*, Mark probably intended people to make a connection to Genesis 1:1 (*"in the beginning.."*). Thus Mark was seeking to underscore the grandeur of what he was writing.

4. Is the gospel something we respond to once or continually? Why? / Can you think of a metaphor that explains the type of response we need to make?

Actually, we do both. We become Christians once and for all at the moment of our first believing in Christ, departing the kingdom of darkness, entering the kingdom of light. This Spirit-led exercise of faith is the proof that we are regenerated, born again, given new life. We are legally forgiven, acquitted of guilt, are no longer under God's wrath, no longer need fear God's condemning judgment and have become part of God's family. This heritage is permanent.

Yet a continued response is also necessary. Consider marriage. It has a definite beginning. However, to enjoy marriage we must continually develop the relationship, be willing to re-order our life, cultivate friendship and intimacy. If we don't, although we are legally married, the relationship loses its life. It dies. There is no growth or joy in it. In our relationship with God, it is the gospel which provides the basis for its ongoing development.

We must continue to expose ourselves to the character of Christ and the good news that in Christ we have been radically forgiven so that it to penetrates more deeply into our hearts. Then we will find ourselves growing in humility. We will be less defensive. We will find ourselves quick to forgive others and to reach out to people to meet their needs. There will be less emphasis on advancing our own causes and more emphasis on advancing Christ's cause. There will be a deeper concern for the poor and the victims of injustice. There will also be a deepening experiential knowledge of God's love and a greater joy in worship.

It is ordinary Christian experience that the more we expose ourselves to the good news of the life of Christ the more we realize a daily response is necessary.

5. In verses 2-8 John the Baptist is introduced as the one preparing the way for the coming of Jesus. * What is the significance of Mark quoting the Old Testament?

This was not some new and exotic religion, it had its antecedents in the beginning of time and had been anticipated throughout history. Mark demonstrates this by quoting from Isaiah who wrote 800 years earlier and Malachi who wrote 400 years earlier, claiming that their statements referred to the coming of John the Baptist and Jesus. He shows that Christianity is the fulfillment of the ancient record of God's actions and plans in the Old Testament.

One present writer explains this by referring to Judaism and Christianity as "*Old Testament Judaism*" and "*Christian Judaism*". Christianity has all of its roots in God's dealings with the Jewish people. Without Judaism there is no Christianity.

Everything relating to John the Baptist and Jesus was part of God's original plan. It was not something new he did out of frustration with history. Even John's camel hair habit and desert food illustrated that he was the "*Elijah to come*" who was predicted in the Old Testament (Mal. 4:5, 2 K 1:8, Mark 9:11-13). The fact that Christianity is so deeply grounded in history is no doubt a comfort to many believers who care deeply that their religious beliefs have integrity.

6. John is preaching "*forgiveness of sins*". * How serious is the problem of sin? * How valuable is the forgiveness of sins? * Is such forgiveness an automatic benefit for everyone? * If not, what is involved? / How would you define repentance?

Sin is the central human problem. It refers not to behavior but to something more fundamental, a universal attitude. According to one writer: "*The essence of sin is Godlessness ... the will to live without God, to ignore him, to be one's own source and beginning...*"

Sinners position themselves in rebellion to God, contrary to God, distant from God. Sinful behavior is a symptom of this fundamental heart attitude whether it is hideous and horrifying or appears attractive and morally upstanding. The issue for chronic offenders and the morally upright alike is whether they are motivated by love and dependence on God or by independence and contempt of him.

That attitude is considered a far greater evil than any particular behavior. It is that attitude which is at the core of the breakdown of society. It creates alienation from God (loss of divine destiny), alienation from one another (breakdown in relationships), alienation from the created order (the rape and destruction of our natural world given for us to tend like a garden) and alienation from ourselves (we don't know who we really are apart from a relationship with God).

Ultimately it leaves us under the judgment of God, sealed with eternal punishment on our death. Therefore, it has tremendous consequences both for this life and the life to come. Until one sees how great is the problem, the solution seems unremarkable. And sin's deceit is that it cannot recognize itself.

Once we see the horror of sin and the predicament it has left us in then forgiveness becomes precious. Indeed, nothing could be more valuable. In 1 Corinthians 15:17 Paul writes. "*if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.*" Unless our faith delivers forgiveness and so deals with this problem of God's judgment of sin, it isn't worth a cracker. The fact that the God of the Bible holds out the possibility of forgiveness does not guarantee that forgiveness is an automatic for everyone. Repentance is required. Future studies will have more to say about the content of our repentance and what genuine repentance looks like.

Suffice it to say now that repentance is essentially a turning toward God and his purposes and a turning away from those things which are contrary to God's purposes for mankind. One necessarily involves the other. By definition, you cannot turn to God without simultaneously turning from the thoughts, attitudes and actions which offend God. Repentance involves more than sorrow, but it does not involve less. It involves acknowledgment that you have grieved God.

"More than a wringing of the hands or a hanging of the head, it is a working, of the heart so that your sin is as odious to you as any punishment." It is not what you have to do in order to get God to take you back, it is the description of what going back to God looks like. When it is genuine it always produces a new lifestyle.

7. * What was the center of John's preaching? / * What was his angle or main point about the "one to come"? * How did knowledge of Jesus' identity affect his view of himself? / * How does it affect your view of yourself?

Central to John's preaching is the greatness and glory of Jesus. But this view of Jesus does not reduce him to self-hatred. When he compares his worth to that of Jesus some might make the mistake of thinking so. Rather, his exalted view of Jesus inspires in him a gladness for the opportunity to serve him. John knows that he is not even worthy of that honor.

Now, Jesus said John was the greatest among all the Old Testament prophets (Lk. 7:28). If John viewed himself as fortunate, how much more should we? So we see the focus is not to diminish our self respect but to develop in ourselves the appropriate awe and profound respect for the majesty of Jesus. The more specific is our recognition of Christ's majesty, (e.g. his beauty, power, might and glory) the more we will both want to serve him and consider it a privilege to do so. Our service of Christ often lacks zeal and perseverance because our thoughts of him are so small. One of Mark's goals is that we sense the greatness of Jesus in ways that we have never realized.

Optional question: To what degree do you view it as an honor to serve Jesus?

8. * What do we learn about Jesus in the stories of his baptism and desert experience? Why has Mark included them?

Mark leaves out details about Jesus' baptism and desert experience that are found in the other gospels. He has a different focus.

We have noticed that Mark wants us to see the glory of Jesus. One reason for Mark's concern is that many Gentiles (Mark's main audience) considered Jesus' death on the cross very demeaning and unworthy of a hero. The most despicable criminals died this way. This was a stumbling block for many Gentiles in choosing to embrace the Christian faith. (Would the law execute someone without good reason?)

Therefore, Mark extends himself to show the majesty of Jesus and to show his readers that the cross was God's plan for him; that he was not a weak, tragic figure to be despised because he had died in this way. Both the account of his

baptism and his temptation stress the extraordinary greatness of his character. In his baptism, two things attest to his glory. First, heaven is not merely opened, but "*torn open*", and the powerful Spirit descends upon him. Second, the Father's voice acknowledges the glory of the Son. Regardless of his crucifixion, he was the Son whom the Father loved and with whom the Father was well pleased.

When Jesus goes into the desert his identity is further revealed. Unlike the other gospels, this passage tells us nothing about the nature of temptation or how to overcome it. Instead, the temptations of the archdemon, Satan, acknowledge Jesus' stature as the very Son of God. Temptation does not end in this passage. Jesus has come to overthrow evil. The conflict which begins here will continue throughout his ministry. We too can expect opposition in our desire to live for God. The fact that hostile, wild beasts do not hurt him also attests his greatness. Finally, the fact that angels minister to him throughout his time in the desert shows that he is a person who has the favor of God. Our first impressions of Jesus are meant to have a lasting impact on us.

9. What was Jesus' message? How did it differ and how was it similar to John the Baptists? What is the relationship between the two messages?

Whereas John came preaching Jesus, Jesus comes preaching the kingdom of God. While both preached the need for repentance, John preached that something was about to happen. But Jesus preached something had happened. John predicted what was about to take place. Jesus preached that something had been fulfilled. With the beginning of Jesus' ministry something new had happened. That "*something new*" was himself: the King of the kingdom had appeared. John preaches Jesus. Jesus preaches the Kingdom. But by preaching the kingdom Jesus includes John's message in his own, for Jesus himself is the King.

10. * What do you think is meant by "*the kingdom of God*"? What is implied by the term "*kingdom*"? Why is its arrival such good news?

The kingdom of God refers to God's rule or reign. A kingdom implies the presence of a king. Jesus is the King. Therefore, whenever he talks about the kingdom he is also talking about himself. We can say that wherever Jesus reigns the Kingdom is present. Jesus' rule prior to his second coming is primarily in human hearts, made visible in the community of his followers. When Jesus says that "*the Kingdom of God is within you*" (Luke 17:20) he is referring to the fact that he takes up residence in the hearts of those who believe in him.

A kingdom also implies a law of the land and the power to enforce that law. Jesus the King gives us his commands. He reigns in our lives and we are called to continually submit to his kingly rule. Through his reigning in us the kingdom's influence is brought to bear on the world. The fullness of the Kingdom will not come until Jesus returns and restores all things to their proper place and beauty and subdues all of his enemies. Then the kingdom will be fully visible. Wherever groups of believers are faithful we see clear signs of it. Those signs serve as "*previews*" of coming attractions. The Kingdom is working itself out in our midst. In those "*previews*" we see the certain hope of the kingdom's fullness.

Evil will finally be overthrown - both within us and outside of us. That is good news.

Further Notes

MARK 1:1-15

Mark is intensely concerned with the person of Jesus Christ, this does not make his account simply a biography. Jesus' identity and work is presented in terms of the "*Gospel*", the "*Good News*", (used seven times), the message of which Mark is at pains to establish and challenge people to respond to. Immediately, Mark confronts his readers with the identity and authority of Jesus. This structured introduction of his major concern goes well beyond v 1, as Mark shows why this message is uniquely the "*Good News*".

v1. Mark's own introduction. He confidently titles Jesus both "*Christ*", i.e. the Messiah, the hoped for King and deliverer of Israel and "*Son of God*", proclaiming his divinity (1:11, 3:11, 9:7, 14:61, 15:39), thus the thrust of the whole book.

v2-3. Mark is not spreading a recently invented religion, as the origins of the Good News are founded in the Old Testament. The outworking of God's preordained plan, as seen in the fulfillment of scripture starts here, and becomes a strong theme in the second half of Mark. These quotations from Isaiah and Malachi serve to introduce John, the messenger, his message of preparation, and that following him. God himself is to visit his people. Further, their broader context reveals the import of God's coming: to judge, to rule and to comfort (Mal: 3:5, Isa 40:9-11).

v4 - 8. John's location, dress, diet and message amplify both his fulfillment of the above scriptures and his role as "*Elijah who is to come!*" (Mal 4:5, 2 Ki 1:8, Mk 9:11-13). John's message matches what Jesus later preaches himself and teaches the disciples to say: that the first response to the coming Kingdom must be repentance (1:15, 6:12). The response of the crowds (v4) shows John to be a powerful figure, yet his principal work is to testify to Jesus, (the evangelist's job to this day). The introduction provided by v:8 is extremely forceful. To undo sandals was considered so demeaning no slave would be asked to do it. Compared to Jesus, John does not even aspire to this! The contrast in v8 is just as striking. John's water baptism only supplies a sign of being washed clean, soaking the outside. Jesus alone is the source of the Holy Spirit, "*the real thing*", washing men's hearts. The possible reasons for Jesus' baptism are discussed at length in Jesus is clearly approving of John, his ministry and hence his message.

v9-11. The possible reasons for Jesus' baptism are discussed at length in Cranfield. Jesus is clearly approving of John, his ministry and hence his message. Mark's main interest lies with the subsequent events. The Spirit and the Father both show their approval of Jesus, the voice supplying the interpretation without which these events would be incomprehensible. God speaks, and we hear scripture! Even for this unique moment, God's word already given is sufficient, providing yet another revelation as to the person and work of Jesus. The two O.T. passages alluded to (Psa 2, Isa 42:1.2) showing that he is to be both mighty ruler and gentle servant. This apparent contradiction is depicted and resolved in the two halves of Mark, but here again the plot is made clearer in advance.

v12-15. These two short vignettes conclude Mark's introduction, outlining the purpose and style of Jesus' ministry. The temptation account is remarkably short, with lots of good sermon material left out. Key is the immediate clash with Satan. Jesus has come to overthrow evil, and the conflict which begins here continues through to the climax of the gospel almost without let up. The sections from 4 -13 are linked by the presence of the Holy Spirit (not otherwise prominent in Mark). The relationship with Jesus is interesting: Jesus gives the Spirit (v8), is given the Spirit (v10) and is led (driven!) by the Spirit (v12).

v14-15. These verses establish some of Jesus' priorities which will grow familiar in later chapters. The silencing of John does not terminate his message. Mark shows that opposition cannot stop the Gospel (3:6-8, 4:1-20, 6:1-13). Jesus is met as a preacher, an unmissable theme. His concern is the gospel (used seven times in Mark), presenting a message with an authoritative demand. "*The kingdom of God*", i.e. God's kingly rule (Isa 52:7) is near "*at hand*", within reach. The response called for is as John demanded, repentance. We cannot have the good news without being willing to turn our lives around. There is no room to accept only part of Jesus' proclamation.

Study 2 - Unstoppable Power

MARK CHAPTER 1:16 - 45

Questions

1. * Consider those who have authority over you in your life - bosses, governments, teachers, parents. Is your response to authority usually positive or negative? Why?

READ Mark 1:16-45

2. * Do you notice any themes that run throughout this passage?
3. * What seems to be the reason that Simon, Andrew, James and John respond so quickly and decisively to Jesus? * What does this response tell us about Jesus?
4. * What are the ramifications for the disciples lives when they take up Jesus' call to "*Follow me!*"? * Do the things he requires seem reasonable things to ask of people? Why or why not? / * If you yourself claim to be a follower of Jesus Christ what have been the consequences of that in your life?
5. * In vs. 21-22 attention is given to the manner of Jesus' teaching. What is Mark trying to tell us about Jesus? What effect do you think he means it to have on us?
6. * In vs. 23-28, what is Mark asserting about Jesus?/ How does he go about demonstrating this in the details of the passage? Why is it important to demonstrate this?
7. * What are we being taught about Jesus in vs. 29-34? How does Simon's mother-in-law react after being healed and what does this tell us about Jesus' call on our lives?
8. How does Jesus react to Simon's exasperated plea, "*Everyone is looking for you!*" and why do you suppose Jesus reacts the way that he does? What do you learn about Jesus' character, priorities and purposes?
9. * What does the healing of the leper reveal about Jesus? / What did he intend by specific instructions? / What is the result of the Leper's actions and what does that teach us?
10. * How has your vision of Jesus been enlarged in this study? * What are some of specific ways that this vision of Jesus will effect the way you live?

LEADER NOTES MARK 1:16-45

Main Points

Mark's chief objective in these initial chapters is to tell us who Jesus is - that he is the Christ, the Son of God. In this particular section Mark wants us to see Jesus' power and authority.

- Jesus' power and authority over men is demonstrated (the disciples fall in)
- His power and authority in teaching is demonstrated (the huge crowds).
- His power and authority over the demonic world is displayed.
- Finally his power and authority over sickness is made known.

His power and authority know no bounds for they will be demonstrated in other geographical regions to which he goes. Jesus' power and authority make him an absolutely magnetic character (the emphasis on the crowds throughout the passage makes this clear). These displays of power and authority are meant to show forth the reality of the coming Kingdom and to bring forth the response of repentance by the people. Throughout this passage Mark's plan is that the landscape of our minds be completely taken up with the grandeur and glory of Jesus.

Commentary on passage and notes on the questions

1. * Consider those who have authority over you in your life - bosses, governments, teachers, parents. Is your response to authority usually positive or negative? Why? As usual, an "approach" question to get people warmed up.

2. * Do you notice any themes that run throughout this passage? See MAIN POINTS above: Jesus' power and authority are seen throughout the various stories.

3. * What seems to be the reason that Simon, Andrew, James and John respond so quickly and decisively to Jesus? * What does this response tell us about Jesus?

Jesus was a man of authority. His words were commanding and his commands were irresistible. Notice that Jesus doesn't ask the various men if they want to follow him. He tells them to do so. Simon, Andrew, James and John simply obey. They don't think about whether they should go with him. They go immediately, leaving behind cast nets, boats, fathers and hired crew. We are meant to recognize the speed of response. The impression is given that if we had been there we also would have been affected by his presence and followed suite. His words have force behind them like: *"Hither! Behind me!"*

4. * What are the ramifications for the disciples lives when they take up Jesus' call to "Follow me!"? * Do the things he requires seem reasonable things to ask of people? Why or why not? / * If you yourself claim to be a follower of Jesus Christ what have been the consequences of that in your life?

To follow Jesus necessarily involves cost. These men are no longer their own. They belong to Jesus. They give up the option of calling their own shots in life. Jesus calls the shots. Decisions they make now relate to his purposes. Nothing is to get in the way. Not former occupations, not family. This is not to say that everyone should literally leave their occupations and family when they become Christians. To do so could be disobedient and dishonoring to God. But if we are not always to actually leave those things, we must be willing to do so.

Absolutely everything is to be approached differently when a person becomes a Christian. A new attitude of serving God and his kingdom and purposes affects our work life, family life, and every other facet of life. Sometimes no formal changes will be seen, but even then a new approach and motivation will be underlying whatever we do.

Whenever someone becomes a Christian they also become a fisher of human beings. This was not merely a cute metaphor which fit the setting. If you look at Jeremiah 16:16; Ezekiel 29:4f; 38:4; Amos 4:2; Habakkuk 1:14-17, you will see there is a wealth of Old Testament material which serves as the background for Jesus' use of the phrase "*fishers of men*".

In the Old Testament God was the fisherman and the image stressed divine judgment (i.e. if you don't repent you are likely to get a hook in your mouth). By taking up this metaphor Jesus stressed his message of the nearness of the Kingdom and the necessity of responding in radical repentance. The cost of following Jesus involves the willingness to take that message of judgment upon our lips. We are to risk the rejection and unpopularity that comes from it.

[Optional question: *What is your reaction to Jesus call to convey a message of coming judgment which requires repentance? What are ways that you can do this that are true to the Scripture but sensitive to the hearer? Is it reasonable for Jesus to ask his followers to endure such costs?* It is apparent from the passage that when a person really comes into contact with Jesus and the compelling force of his character (as these fishermen had done) to do anything other than follow him and endure those costs is immediately recognized as absurd. The reason why there is often little change in our lives is that we have so little contact with the real Jesus in his greatness, glory, and mercy. When we really see Jesus, we will both want to follow him and be compelled to follow him. From a purely practical standpoint, the alternative to following Jesus is enduring condemning judgment. It is a far more costly choice.]

5. * In vs. 21-22 attention is given to the manner of Jesus' teaching. What is Mark trying to tell us about Jesus? What effect do you think he means it to have on us?

Mark is again relating the great authority of Jesus. Here the focus lies on the authority of his teaching. Notice that Mark does not even tell us what Jesus taught. He only tells us that Jesus' teaching had an awe-inspiring effect on the crowds. They were "*being knocked out with astonishment.*"

Teachers were respected in Mark's environment. His statement "*not as the Scribes*" was not a slam on them, but a way of showing how much further Jesus

vaulted over them. Authority emanated from him. Here was an overpowering person. Here was a person who by his sheer presence and the manner in which he spoke, demanded to be heard and to whom we ourselves had better listen.

6. * In vs. 23-28, what is Mark asserting about Jesus?/ How does he go about demonstrating this in the details of the passage? Why is it important to demonstrate this?

This time the emphasis is on Jesus' authority over demons. This was a necessary proof of his kingdom come. He is reigning and no one is a match for his reign. Jesus' purpose in coming was to "*destroy the works of the devil*" (1 John 3:8). When his Kingdom is fully established demonic powers will be fully overthrown.

Why did Jesus forbid the demon to speak? Some believe that Jesus either had a desire to keep his identity hidden for a time or a desire not to have his identity revealed by an unreliable source (would you trust a demon to tell the truth?). More likely, however, this was Jesus' response to a defensive maneuver on the part of the demon to gain control over him. In accordance with the common concept of that day, the use of the precise name of an individual or spirit would secure mastery over him. By using the plural in address to Jesus ("*What do you want with US*"...) it is likely that the demon is speaking on behalf of the entire demonic world.

Jesus presence threatened all demons. (It is unlikely that anything like the modern idea of schizophrenia is being represented.) This particular demon is outmatched and reduced to silence by Jesus' command. The absence of any popular techniques used in exorcism (an appeal to some deity, an incantation, physical manipulation) underlines the authority of Jesus' command. Mark again spotlights the crowds reaction. Here is a man unlike any other ever encountered.

For those who have difficulty accepting the reality of the demonic: While it might be best to leave such a conversation until after the group meets, a quick point to make is that Scripture draws a clear distinction between demonic possession and general sickness (Mark 1:32 - 34; 6:13).

[If further discussion is necessary to convince someone about the reality of the demonic world, I would suggest the following apologetic:

Many people seem to have simplistic and superstitious beliefs in Satan even to the point of hysteria. The demonic overshadows everything. Satan is blamed even for things which are our own responsibility! They won't face the more complex biblical picture of a fallen world of human activity and demonic activity contributing to the problem of evil in our world.

But demonic activity need not be the province of the lunatic fringe. Novelist John Updike reasons that "*the realization that life is flawed admits the possibility of a fall, therefore of a cause behind the Fall, and therefore of Satan.*"

To take Updike's statement one step further: Life is not merely flawed, but marred hugely by evil, injustice and oppression in our own experience and in the

lives of those we read about world-wide. Yet it requires a person to do acts of evil and hatred; otherwise the acts can hardly be characterized in such moral terms. Impersonal forces can hardly have such acts ascribed to them.

While human beings are certainly responsible for acts of injustice and evil, yet the scope of some crimes suggests that there is an evil greater than ourselves which is at work in our world. Consider the genocide of Nazism, Communism, and the nations of Cambodia, Rwanda, and former Yugoslavia, to admit such a possibility. The evidence of evil greater in scope than the imagination of the human heart seems to be written large in every issue of the New York Times. The empirical evidence for a personal devil seems overwhelming. Belief in Satan is not illogical, it fits the facts. To think otherwise is insane.

Finally, if we believe or are open to believing Christ's teaching on heaven and the Holy Spirit and angels, what reason other than prejudice do we have for disbelieving his teaching on Hell, the devil, and fallen angels.

There are serious consequences for dismissing a real Satan. In a war, the first order of advice is KNOW YOUR ENEMY. Failure to do so makes his traps invisible. We fall into disaster unexpectedly. It is disorienting, confusing, and might be fatal. In Vietnam an invisible guerrilla army inflicted huge casualties on US troops. To have regarded the enemy as non-existent would have been insane. It would have made for annihilation.]

7. * What are we being taught about Jesus in vs. 29-34? How does Simon's mother-in-law react after being healed and what does this tell us about Jesus' call on our lives?

Now we see Jesus authority over illness. It is a very unpretentious account of healing. Her immediate recovery again shows the greatness of Jesus' power. That the women gets up and begins serving not only attests Jesus' power, it instructs us that Jesus' healing in our lives frees us for service to Jesus and others. It is the natural response. There is no coercion. We serve gladly.

8. How does Jesus react to Simon's exasperated plea, "Everyone is looking for you!" and why do you suppose Jesus reacts the way that he does? What do you learn about Jesus' character, priorities and purposes?

Jesus responds to Simon's plea by saying that they should go and continue their ministry elsewhere. We would not expect this from a person who is drawing crowds (see vs. 32-34). Why not bask in the success? There seem to be at least two reasons why Jesus makes this choice.

First, Jesus does not measure his success by the size of the crowd. He is much more concerned about the response of the crowd. To this point their response is not the one he intended. Jesus had come to preach repentance and the nearness of the kingdom, but the people think only of relief from pain and affliction. They were attracted to Jesus as a performer of miracles. His call to submit to God apparently leaves them cold. They valued healing for pain more than pardon for sin. Secondly, Jesus has a message to spread. He cannot confine it to one place. The fact that he does take his teaching, exorcism, healing ministry elsewhere is

another way for Mark to communicate to us the greatness and glory of Jesus. His ministry is not geographically confined, his authority knows no bounds.

The account of Jesus praying in the early morning has only a little to do with teaching us lessons of personal devotion. Mark is again drawing our attention to the magnetism of Jesus' character. Only by going out early can he escape the crowds. We can only speculate on the content of his prayers. Some believe he needed guidance on the choice to move on to other regions. Perhaps he was getting confirmation to emphasize teaching over against healing. This would connect what has taken place in vs. 32-34 with what he says in vs.38.

But the facts suggest otherwise: while Jesus did not come to heal the multitudes, he does not cease to do healing work for the sake of his teaching. A choice does not have to be made between healing and teaching. Both testify to the nearness of God's Kingdom. Perhaps Mark's only purpose was to reinforce the closeness of Jesus as Son to God the Father.

9. * What does the healing of the leper reveal about Jesus?/ What did he intend by specific instructions? / What is the result of the Leper's actions and what does that teach us?

Rabbis considered it as difficult to heal a leper as to raise the dead. Yet Jesus has the power to instantly and radically heal him. This is amazing power.

Jesus' compassion is also emphasized. Both his emotions of compassion and his willingness to touch an untouchable person characterize Jesus as one who is undeserving of the coming crucifixion, which was such a scandal to Greeks. Jesus' power is such that he was not afraid of contact with the diseased man.

Why did he tell the leper to be silent? We can only speculate. Perhaps because the healing of leprosy was considered such a difficult thing he was concerned that it would have sent the crowds into absolute hysterics eclipsing his purpose of preaching the kingdom's arrival and calling people to repentance. Yet the crowds were already animated. Perhaps the purpose of the command was to speed the authentication of the miracle not to muzzle the leper. To be sure, the leper disobeyed Jesus by not going immediately to the priest. We might all empathize with the leper. How hard it would have been to contain the news of what Jesus had done for him!

The passage concludes with a remarkable picture of Jesus' impact. His presence draws crowds so large that he can no longer enter cities openly.

10. * How has your vision of Jesus been enlarged in this study? * What are some of specific ways that this vision of Jesus will effect the way you live?

A fairly straightforward application question. You may not have time for it at the end of your group or it may seem too vulnerable a question to have people answer. In that case, encourage the group members to take some time during the week to share their answer with one other person in the group. If an individual is talking to someone they trust they are more likely to be deeply honest in their self-assessment.

Further Notes

Mark 1:16-45

Most of the major themes of Mark are introduced early on: the authority of Jesus, preaching/teaching, service, opposition, *"who is Jesus?"*, priorities of Jesus, the disciples, the crowds, all acquire their first references in chapter one. In particular, these early episodes depict many different aspects of Jesus' authority (5 in this passage), beginning to feed the key question: *"Who can it be, who is master of all these?"*

v16-10. Jesus calls the fishermen with a firm summons to discipleship. The call is to be transformed, and to serve, *"I will make you become fishers of men"*. Their lessons begin when they accept Jesus as Master. Their immediate response, (v18, 20) marks Jesus' authority over men. Discipleship is seen both as costly and a priority duty, even above family ties. (v20, see 3:31-35. Their first instructions are the easiest any guide can give: *"Follow Me"*

v21-18. Jesus came preaching, and hardly stops. He is described as teaching 16 times and teacher 11 times in Mark. Note that Jesus is where he should be on a Sabbath. The break with Judaism is not of his making (Mk 2:22. Acts 13:14, 43-47). v22 *"With authority!"*: Jesus is not like any other teacher, as the audience clearly recognize and the reaction of the demon drastically demonstrates, since he presumably had attended previous sermons in comfort.

This word finds him out, this word must be opposed, interrupted. Jesus' authority meets this challenge by banishing and silencing him, with a word. Although accurate, demonic testimony is unacceptable to Jesus because of its source (1:32. 3:11, 3:22) and its premature revelation of the Messiah (8:30, see Cranfield and Cole for more detail). Already Jesus is becoming famous but his response is again distinctive (v29a).

v29-31. The theme of service stands out both in the disciples' report and in Simon's mother-in-law's action following her healing. Jesus' authority reveals a new facet, power over disease.

v32-34. following that morning service, the town thought Jesus could heal. Dealing with the sick remains a major human problem. Here was someone who could truly cope. No wonder they came as soon as the Sabbath allowed. Jesus meets their hopes (many- *"large numbers"* not *"a good proportion"*). Note the distinction between sick and possessed.

v35-39. Despite lack of sleep, Jesus is up *"a great while before the day"*, making prayer time a deliberate priority. Although not mentioned frequently, Mark clearly conveys this characteristic of Jesus, especially in denoting times of great difficulty, as here (6:46. 14:32). The crowds are looking for Jesus the healer. Jesus' response, amazingly, is to walk away from sick people in order to preach, a shattering statement of priority. This seems wrong, but dare we disagree with Jesus? Why is this shocking decision correct?

v40-45. A preaching story might be logical here, but this healing account helps us better comprehend Jesus' decision. The leper's question touches on Jesus'

concern, not his ability. The reply shows that Jesus was neither coldly clinical nor otherworldly in his choice in v38. Jesus cares deeply, going beyond what is necessary to heal (i.e. a word, 3:5; 7:29), giving a human touch so long denied an untouchable.

The contact does not defile Jesus, but the leper catches Jesus' purity! Sadly, in a lesson on discipleship, the ex-leper shows that good intentions are no substitute for obedience, actually performing a disservice, illustrating the results of healings Jesus feared. Our risk of disservice is different. We're not told to be silent . Rather the reverse.

Study 3 - Authority to Forgive

MARK CHAPTER 2:1-17

Questions

1. * What is the greatest thing your friends have ever done for you?

READ Mark 2:1-17

2. What is Mark's reminder to us about Jesus in setting the stage in vs. 1-4?
3. * What do you think prompted the paralytic's friends to get him in front of Jesus? What might we learn from them?
4. * Jesus did two things for the paralytic. Which was the most important? Why? How are the two actions related? / How do Jesus' priorities differ from ours with regards to forgiveness and relief from pain? How can we bring our priorities into line with Jesus' priorities?
5. Do you think that most people in our culture care about the forgiveness from God? If not why not?
6. * What was Jesus' "*blasphemy*" according to the teachers of the law? / He answers their charge with a question. * What is the correct answer to that question and what is the point of it?
7. * What is the response of the crowds to Jesus' actions of forgiving and healing? Is there a lesson for us here?
8. Look at verses 13-14. * What makes Jesus' approach of Levi unique from his approach to the first group of disciples he called? * How is Levi's response similar to theirs and what are we reminded of about Jesus' character as a result of his response?
9. The Pharisees' interpretation of the law was that the "*righteous*" (those concerned with keeping the traditions of the law) were to remain separate from "*the sinners*" (those showing blatant disregard for those traditions). * What things was Jesus communicating to both of these groups by eating with "*tax collectors and sinners*" and by speaking the words of vs. 17?
10. * Why is self-righteousness so ugly to God? * What are some of the subtle ways it manifests itself in our lives? How can we combat it?

LEADERS NOTES MARK 2:1-17

Main Points

Jesus' identity remains Mark's special focus. In this passage we learn that Jesus has the authority to forgive sin - something understood to be the prerogative of God alone. We also see that he has the authority to sit down and eat with sinners - something which the teachers of the law believed was forbidden.

Some past lessons are also revisited with slightly different emphases. In showing how Jesus has authority over sickness (the account of the paralytic) we are reminded of the connection between sin and disease. In showing the authority of Jesus over men (the account of Levi's call), it is demonstrated that all people, no matter how sinful they may be, are not beyond Jesus' reach and authority.

Commentary on the Passage and Notes on the Questions

1. * What is the greatest thing your friends have ever done for you?

An "approach" question to get people talking and to prepare them for what is to come.

2. What is Mark's reminder to us about Jesus in setting the stage in vs. 1-4?

Jesus popularity and magnetism immediately strike us here. The crowds are growing. In Mark 1:33 it was reported that the *"whole town was gathered at the door"*. In this passage, so many gather that there is *"no room left, not even outside the door"*. To get in to see him you have to dig a hole in the roof and climb through it! People are drawn to Jesus. He is a man of power and glory! Mark belabors this point. He announced at the start of his book that Jesus was the Son of God and he is going to drive that point home. When Peter makes his confession in chapter 8, his conclusion that Jesus is the Christ will be obvious to us as well.

3. * What do you think prompted the paralytic's friends to get him in front of Jesus? What might we learn from them?

Perhaps it was their love and concern for their friend. But clearly they have faith in Jesus. This faith is unlike modern notions of religious faith. For most people today, faith has no objective grounds. It is more like wishful thinking disconnected from reality, the antithesis of reason. It deserves ridicule.

The faith of the four friends of the paralytic is of a completely different nature. They are not going through all this trouble on a crazy whim saying, *"Who knows? We'll try anything once, no matter how foolish and against reason it appears. Maybe it will work"*. They come instead with a confidence based on reason. Jesus has a reputation for power and authority and has healed people. Jesus has inspired certainty in them. That is Mark's preeminent point: Isn't Jesus great?

The strong person of Jesus is the foundation of their faith. The foundation seems so strong that they willingly take a person in a truly wretched condition onto a roof which they partly disassemble. Jesus both forgives the man (something they

didn't expect) and heals the man (something they did expect). Their trust is an encouragement for us. Jesus rewarded them. When we bring a person to Jesus, we may rest assured that they will always be enriched by our trust in him. We tend to doubt this. What if Jesus doesn't come through, and our friend is disappointed? This event challenges our fears. When we, like the four friends in Mark, really recognize Jesus, we will not hesitate to bring either our friends and their problems or ourselves and our problems to him.

4. * Jesus did two things for the paralytic. Which was the most important? Why? How are the two actions related? / How do Jesus' priorities differ from ours with regards to forgiveness and relief from pain? How can we bring our priorities into line with Jesus' priorities?

Forgiveness is the most fundamental of all human needs. Consciously or unconsciously we all desire God's forgiveness for our most fundamental problem: sin. Sin is *"a perverted energy within people that enslaves them to God-defying, self gratifying behavior, and by distraction, deceit, and direct opposition weakens and overthrows their purposes of righteousness"*.

Sin is the moral equivalent of a wolf in sheep's clothing, presenting itself to us again and again as good, desirable, and a necessity of life, thereby corrupting our conscience so that we lose the sense of guilt, and cherish it as if it were a friend rather than an enemy. A diseased body can effect us for a lifetime. A diseased soul effects us for an eternity. To have a healthy body is a very legitimate desire. However, when we understand the destructive consequences of sin, the desire for a healthy body pales in comparison to the need for a healthy soul. To be forgiven means that you can be nourished as a human being, no matter what your outward circumstances.

All of the things which are most important cannot be taken away from you when you are assured of God's forgiveness: communion with God, deep-seated joy, genuine freedom. If you are not forgiven and, therefore, not restored to a relationship with God, which lies at the center of our humanity, then you remain an empty shell no matter how healthy and beautiful looking the shell may be.

We often get our priorities backwards regarding forgiveness and healing. We value healing from pain more than we do pardon of sin. As long as this is the case, we will have a good deal of joylessness in this life. Our circumstances in this life will rarely, if ever, be what we want them to be. Disappointment in this world is inevitable. Something is wrong with everything.

Only when we see forgiveness as our deepest need and know that need met in Jesus Christ will there be a joy in our lives which is greater than our circumstances. Only when we value and cherish our forgiveness above everything else will our lives be characterized by gratitude. Only then will we be able to obey God and serve his purposes in hard times rather than serving our own purposes.

The Scriptures do relate forgiveness and healing to one another. The very fact that sickness exists is because of our sin. Adam and Eve's rebellion against God not only caused their nature's to become sinful (anti-God in orientation), but also

brought about a fall in the neared order in general. Everything that is wrong with this world has it's origins in our choosing against God.

If God is going to bring about a restoration to our world, it will inevitably deal with both the cause and the symptoms. When Jesus comes he wages war on both sin and disease. Healing of disease is often a sign and token of God's forgiveness, as it is in this case (see also 2 Chronicles 7:14; Ps. 103:3, 147:3; Is. 19:22, 38:17, 57:18.)

Healing and forgiveness are sometimes interchangeable (Ps 41:4; Jer 3:22; Hos. 14:4). Healing is a gracious movement of God in to the sphere of withering and decay of which death is its' darkest expression (Rom 8:18-25).

Still, we must not make the mistake of thinking that disease or illness in a person can be correlated in some one to one fashion with a person's sin. The Bible distances itself from that view (Jn 9:1-3). Jesus' pardoning of the paralytic communicates that man can be genuinely whole only when the breach occasioned by sin has been healed through God's forgiveness.

5. Do you think that most people in our culture care about the forgiveness from God? If not why not?

To a large majority of our population, the church has a wonderful solution to a problem that no longer exists. It is as if someone invented a needle for a record player that never wears down. The problem is that no one makes records anymore. The invention serves no purpose. (Apologies to extreme audiophiles!)

We offer forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ. The problem is that many people have been convinced that neither sin nor guilt exist any longer. They have been explained away. Sin is just the standards of another culture that have been imposed on us. Those standards have no grounds in ultimate reality. Therefore, it doesn't matter if someone breaks them.

Guilt is the feeling that we experience when we break those standards. But since the standards don't really exist, our guilt is something which can be easily dismissed. *"It's unhealthy to feel guilty,"* we are told. Freud believed that to have feelings of guilt was pathological and a form of mental illness.

However, if we are honest with ourselves, we realize that the problem of a guilty conscience is not so easily dismissed. Guilt can't be thrown off easily or completely. It continues to nag us. The reason is because there are ultimate standards in the universe. God has carved them into our hearts and minds. We have a sense of right and wrong, of justice and injustice.

Our sense of what is right and wrong is often distorted, but we know there are standards all the same. Depending on whether we live up to them or fail to do so, we find that our consciences either excuse us or accuse us. We long to escape the accusations of the conscience which serve as foreshadows of the final judgment. We long to have a new start where we can leave the past behind.

What we all need, whether we admit it or nor, is forgiveness. The head of a large English mental hospital was quoted as saying, *"I could dismiss half my patients tomorrow if they could be assured of forgiveness."* There is a healing, a

freedom and a joy that we all need which come only through knowledge of forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

One of the tasks we must seek to accomplish with those whom we are trying to share the gospel is to get them in touch with their deep-seated awareness of guilt, sin and coming judgment. Only as we bring that awareness out of them will they see the gospel as the good news that it is.

6. * What was Jesus' "*blasphemy*" according to the teachers of the law? / He answers their charge with a question. * What is the correct answer to that question and what is he trying to get across by asking it?

Blasphemy is an affront to the majesty of God. The answer to the question, "*Who can forgive sin but God alone?*" carried the implied answer, "*Nobody*". By forgiving the paralytic Jesus has claimed authority to do what only God was able to do and thus was accused of blasphemy.

While OT prophets could pronounce God's forgiveness the teachers understood Jesus to be doing more than this. His words implied, "*Now as I speak, and because I speak, your sins are this minute forgiven.*" For a mere man to say this would be blasphemy: only God could forgive sin because sin is sin against him (Ps. 51:4). Either Jesus was God or he was an evil, idolatrous blasphemer.

When Jesus asks, "*Which is easier to say: 'Your sins are forgiven' or 'Get up, take your mat and walk?'*" it may be that he is asking difficult question to stimulate reflection. On the surface, it is much easier to say, "*Your sins are forgiven*" for no human being can falsify the statement. However, it is the far more difficult thing to actually do. To have the prerogative to make that statement will cost Jesus his life.

Only because of his substitutionary death are anyone's sins forgiven. The harder thing to say is "*Get up, take your mat and walk*" for people can tell if it is only hot air. To demonstrate that his pronouncement of forgiveness was not hot air Jesus says the less easy thing. Because the paralytic walks due to Jesus powerful word, his prerogative to forgive is made manifest.

7. * What is the response of the crowds to Jesus' actions of forgiving and healing? Is there a lesson for us here?

The crowds praise God. They do so because Jesus has the power to forgive and heal. With his coming God's kingdom has come - a new order which reverses the effects of the fall. The crowds reaction leads us to ask a question of ourselves: Do we continue to be amazed at the fact of God's forgiveness or do we treat it in a ho-hum fashion?

Regular praise of God is one of the foundation marks of maturity in God's people. Knowing and experiencing his forgiveness is one of the chief sources of that praise and worship. It is the foundation blessing he gives. We are to value it. Admit our sin in light of it. We are to thank God for it.

** Optional question:* When we value forgiveness, what difference does it make in our lives?

8. Look at verses 13-14. * What makes Jesus' approach of Levi unique from his approach to the first group of disciples he called? * How is Levi's response similar to theirs and what are we reminded of about Jesus' character as a result of his response?

The earlier disciples which Jesus called were fisherman. As such, they were not men of prestige, but neither were they looked at with disdain. Not so in the case of Levi. He was a tax-collector. The taxes he collected went to the Romans - the enemy who had taken away the Jewish people's right to autonomous self-rule.

Tax-collectors were notorious for taking more than they should collect and lining their own pockets. They were despised. If the tax-collector was Jewish he was considered a traitor and an outcast from society. Tax-collectors were excommunicated from the synagogue and their families were treated with equal disdain. Jews did not associate with them. Still, Jesus goes up to Levi and tells him, *"Follow me."*

Levi, like the fishermen, immediately drops everything he is doing and follows Jesus. He forsakes his occupation right in the middle of pursuing it. Jesus' power and the greatness of his person are again seen in causing Levi to respond this way. Not even the wicked are beyond his reach. That should serve as a lesson to us that no one is beyond salvation.

9. The Pharisees interpretation of the law was that the *"righteous"* (those concerned with keeping the traditions of the law) were to remain separate from *"the sinners"* (those showing blatant disregard for those traditions). * What things was Jesus communicating to both of these groups by eating with *"tax collectors and sinners"* and by speaking the words he does in vs. 17?

Having forgiven sins (vs. 1-12), Jesus now sits and eats with *"sinners"*. *"Sinners"* was a technical term. It referred not merely to the lost - those without God. The term referred to the worst of the worst - those who were truly wicked and beyond redemption.

The bottom line of Mark's account is this: Jesus has come to deal with sin. That was the purpose for which he came. Knowing that he would deal with sin decisively on the cross, Jesus is able to sit down and eat with those whose sinful habits had reeked havoc on their lives. The Pharisee's prohibitions about eating with sinners are declared null and void in light of who Jesus is and what he is going to accomplish on behalf of sinners through his death and resurrection.

By engaging in table fellowship with out-and-out sinners Jesus tell them know that they are nor beyond God's reach. In fact, it is those who know their true condition and who know their need of God to whom God reveals himself and draws near. There may well be a foreshadowing of the *"marriage feast of the lamb"* in this picture (Rev. 19:9).

At that feast, which takes place at Christ's return at the end of history, Jesus sits down and eats with God's people. That it is "*sinners*" who are sitting with him now and who will sit with him then was a shock to the sensibilities of the religious people of Jesus' day. It is those who consider themselves righteous who are in the greatest danger. They believe it is their moral behavior which makes them acceptable to God. However, by thinking this way the Pharisees just prove that they are blind to their own moral bankruptcy. They do not see how deep the sin problem is. No actions they perform can merit for them God's favor.

Because of the Pharisees' blindness to this truth, they are actually in worse shape than the "*sinners*", for they are unable to respond to Jesus' call of repentance. Jesus' statement in vs. 17 serves as an indictment against the Pharisees. As long as they hold on to their own righteousness as the means by which they secure their standing before God, Jesus can have nothing to do with them. Denying that they are sick, they will not go to the doctor. The teachers of the law are aware that Jesus is not being complementary of them. From this point on in Mark's gospel the teachers of the law will become increasingly hostile towards Jesus and are painted in an increasingly unattractive light.

10. * Why is self-righteousness so ugly to God? * What are some of the subtle ways it manifests itself in our lives? How can we combat it?

Self-righteousness is especially ugly because it is an attitude which conveys, "*I am morally superior to the rest of you. I don't need God's forgiveness - at least not in the way that others do. My upright behavior has me in with God.*"

It is a haughty and prideful attitude. The self-righteous person has a woefully inaccurate estimate of his or her own sin and how deep it goes. He or she also demonstrates a lack of knowledge of who God is - seeing neither his holiness, purity or hatred of sin. The self-righteous person, contrary to what they may believe, is far from godly. Genuine growth in godliness always makes people more aware of their sin - not less so. Growth in godliness makes individuals more humble and more willing to associate with people with less perfect backgrounds. Self-righteousness has the opposite effect.

Self-righteousness expresses itself in our lives in very subtle ways. One way that it is expressed is in our refusal to associate with certain kinds of people. Somehow we believe that we are above certain people or better than them. Some Christians entertain the idea that if they spend time with those whose moral lives are not quite up to par with theirs, they will be contaminated in some way. How do we combat self-righteousness?

The first key to combating it is to keep our eyes clearly focused on the cross of Christ and what Jesus' work tells us both about ourselves and about others. It is a great equalizer. The cross reminds us that we are all guilty before God and deserving of condemnation. Whatever differences or distances there might be between the moral behavior of us and another person, that difference is minuscule compared to the difference between what we are before God and what we should be. We come to realize that no great chasm exists between our moral life and the moral lives of those to whom we tend to feel superior. Without God's

mercy neither person stands a chance. We must see that it was our sin that required that Christ die if we were to be right with God. The cross reminds us that we all share the same plight and must look to the same solution if we are to be right before God.

Second, if we are to combat self-righteousness we must learn to spend time with others whose struggles are not our struggles. In doing so, we usually find that while we might not struggle with all the same things which they do, they also do not struggle with all the same things we do. There is plenty of sin left within each of us. Perhaps it is not they who will contaminate us, but we ourselves who will contaminate them!

The cross convinces us that humility is the only appropriate attitude before God and before others. Self-righteousness is completely incongruent with what Jesus' death tells us about ourselves. It leads us to the realization that we must not only repent of our sins as Christians. We must also repent of our righteousness, if we believe that it gets us close to God. Any righteousness that we may have actually only drives us further away from God if it is considered as merit-producing.

Anyone who comes to Christ must come offering nothing in their hands to gain God's acceptance. God's acceptance of us is a free gift. If you bring something else in your hands, you can't receive the gift. You are not nearer to God if you come offering something to him, but farther away. The teachers of law made the mistake of not understanding that principle. The question for us is how much do our attitudes and behavior reflect that of the teachers of the law?

Further Notes

Mark 2:1-28

Typical Markan themes abound. For example: preaching (v2,13): service, "*they came, bringing*" (v3); authority: to forgive sins (v5, 10), over man (v16), over the Sabbath (v28); priorities: preaching (v2), forgiveness (v5), sinners (v17), himself! (v19, 24). Additionally, two more themes are developed.

1. "*The Son of Man*" This is Jesus' usual title for himself. In O.T. scripture it is used to denote both simply "a man" (Eze 2:1, Psa 3:4) and also a manlike ruler and judge, whose reign is over all peoples for ever (Dan 7:13-14).
2. Opposition. Throughout Ch 2 and 3 establishment criticism increases, leading to the remarkable statements of 3:6 and 3:22: there is a gradual escalation of complaint, voiced at first amongst themselves (v6), then to the disciples (v6), and then directly to Jesus (v18, 24).

v1-12. The crowds, whatever their reason for trying to see Jesus, are as usual being taught. The friends' astonishingly persistent behavior expresses their confidence in Jesus, hence "*faith*" in v5 (Jas 2:14-26). "*Brought to Jesus*" occurs seven times in Mark. They bring a paralytic, obviously expecting healing. Jesus' response is a shock to all: to the man, whose need must have seemed obvious; and to the scribes, who rightly see this forgiveness as a divine prerogative alone. Jesus maintains the priority of need met in 1:38. Although Jesus willingly supplies evidence that they have reached the wrong conclusion

from their true premise, the scribes do not grasp the alternative, that Jesus does have divine authority.

v13-17. Note that Jesus never stops teaching. Levi's call shows discipleship as Jesus' gracious choice. The disciples certainly wouldn't have voted to include a notorious sinner like Levi. Jesus' *"Follow me"* causes and enables him to sacrifice his former life, to which he was previously stuck, another form of paralysis (compare v12, 14, "and he rose"). Levi immediately starts to serve in evangelism (1:17), inviting his friends to meet Jesus, naturally, at home where they're comfortable. The Pharisees criticize Jesus' behavior since it leads to defilement by contagion (see 7:1-23). Jesus' priorities frequently clash with *"being religious"*. This doctor is prepared to make housecalls; but treating people who think they're healthy is almost impossible, hence the priority to those who will listen.

v19-20. Again questioning. Jesus does not criticize fasting but his defense is remarkable. The common practice of fasting regularly was suspended as inappropriate during wedding celebrations. Jesus holds that his presence is equally an overriding cause for celebration! *"As long as I am here"*: the theme of *"who is Jesus"* continues to emerge. (For the law and practice of fasting see Lev 16:29, Lk 18:12, Jesus' teaching, Matt 6:16-18). The first hint of Jesus' fate suggests that there will be times when fasting is correct.

v21-22. Not the easiest parable to understand. Jesus responds to being expected to conform to traditional religion. Like others of Jesus' parables it takes the form *"You wouldn't dream of..., so why do you expect me to...?"* (e.g. 4:21, Matt 7:7-11). The coming new church and new family will be wine from God's vineyard as before but with new outward forms (Isa 5:7).

v23-28. The offense is not theft but Sabbath-breaking (see Deut 23:23, Ex 20:8, 23:12). Hand plucking was specifically allowed as a measure for poor relief but had been defined by the Pharisees as *"reaping"* and hence proscribed work. Jesus gives three answers: in v25-26 defending an accusation of lawbreaking from scripture, quoting precedent. David was not so constrained by formal rules. God is not served by making men starve. Jesus next draws out the basic principles involved. The Sabbath was intended as a rest for man's benefit, not as a religious duty. The final point in v28 appears as a staggering statement of authority, partnering v10. Jesus actually claims the right to regulate God's institution, the Sabbath. The question of v7 is again raised: blasphemy or truth?

Study 4 - Jesus: Bridegroom & Lord of the Sabbath

MARK CHAPTERS 2:18 - 3:6

Questions

1. * Have you attended a wedding which is particularly memorable? If so, what made it memorable?

READ Mark 2:18-3:6

2. Do you detect any theme or themes which runs through these anecdotes from Jesus' life?
3. In Mark 2:18 some people question why Jesus' disciples do not fast while John's disciples and the Pharisees do engage in this practice. * When was fasting appropriate and what was its purpose for each of these groups?
4. * What do you think Jesus was trying to communicate by referring to himself as the Bridegroom? * Why did his presence make fasting inappropriate? * What does this imply living as we do between Jesus' first and second comings?
5. * What does Jesus mean by metaphors "new patches on old garments" and "new wine in old wineskins"?
6. Why are the Pharisees especially horrified at the disciples' behavior during their walk through the grain field? What is the essence of Jesus' response?
7. What is Jesus saying about himself by declaring that "*the son of man is Lord of the Sabbath*"?
8. How does the account of the healing of the man with a withered hand on the Sabbath reinforce the point Jesus has just made in the previous passage?
9. * What is the Pharisees' response to the previous events and why do they respond that way? / * How are the Pharisees contrasted with Jesus in this passage? How does Jesus deal with them?
10. What negative characteristics in the Pharisees' lives are sometimes displayed in our lives? How can we combat them?
11. Summarize what Mark has made clear about Jesus in this passage? Which of these things is most striking to you and what are the ramifications for your life?

LEADER'S NOTES MARK 2:18-3:6

Main Points

Mark reveals more of Jesus' identity. He is the Bridegroom who has come, therefore, his presence is a cause for rejoicing. He comes with power and authority which is beyond any previous human experience. Everything in human history has been forever changed by this decisive event.

Jesus also refers to himself as the Son of Man who is Lord of the Sabbath. By doing so, he is claiming not so much to be the Messiah, but to be God incarnate. These open, provocative claims lead to plots of his death. These plots reveal how deep the sickness of sin goes into man's heart.

Commentary on the Passage and Notes on the Questions

1. * Have you attended a wedding which is particularly memorable? If so, what made it memorable? Approach question.

2. Do you detect any theme or themes which runs through these anecdotes from Jesus' life?

The focus here is the overview of the passage. Note that Jesus has the authority to overturn the prevailing pieties of his day. Because of his presence, fasting is redundant. Likewise, the Sabbath practices of the day do not relate to God's purpose as Jesus reveals it to be.

3. In Mark 2:18 some people question why Jesus' disciples do not fast while John's disciples and the Pharisees do engage in this practice. * When was fasting appropriate and what was its purpose for each of these groups?

Fasting was commanded only once a year in the Old Testament: the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16). It was optional at other special times. It was mainly used to demonstrate to God how serious the people were about particular issues. Such occasions would include repentance for sin and times of desperate need and trouble e.g. Ex. 34:28, 2 Samuel 12:22, Neh. 1:4). Fasting was not intended to manipulate God or to get something out of him (i.e., "*If I fast God will forgive me*" or "*If I fast he will answer this prayer*"), but was intended to express complete dependence upon God.

The pious ritual of additional fasts did not in general please God (Is. 58). The Pharisees and John's disciple fasted ritually, twice a week. While Jesus suggests elsewhere that the Pharisees may have fasted largely for show and self-exaltation (Mt. 6:16), the initial reason for doing so was to express piety and self-consecration. John's disciples probably fasted as an expression of mourning over the delay of the Kingdom's coming. It was believed that the Messiah and the long-awaited salvation would come when Israel made itself ready and worthy. The practice was meant to hasten this event.

4. * What do you think Jesus was trying to communicate by referring to himself as the Bridegroom? * Why did his presence make fasting

inappropriate? * What does this imply living as we do between Jesus' first and second comings?

The metaphor of bridegroom and bride is one of the most prevalent in the OT to portray God's relationship to his people. (Hos. 2:16-20; Is. 54:5, 62:4-5, Jer. 2:2,32; 31:32; Ezek. 16:8). By referring to himself as the Bridegroom, Jesus hints that he himself is God, the covenant Bridegroom of Israel, come to consummate the marriage. Therefore Jesus reaffirms the appropriateness of the metaphor of God as loving husband. In the same way that a husband delights in his bride on the day of their wedding (and hopefully afterwards as well!), so God delights in us and adores us. Jesus makes that an everyday event for us. The primacy of this metaphor is also the reason why God's people are regularly referred to as adulterers when disobedient.

Because Jesus the Bridegroom is now present fasting is not only inappropriate, but impossible. With Christ's coming God's promise is fulfilled. It's time to celebrate, not fast. Jesus does not suggest that John's disciples and the Pharisees should not have been fasting, but since the kingdom they longed for had come now was a time for rejoicing. To fast in the face of Jesus' appearing would be like mourning at a wedding. Feasting with joy is in order. Thus Jesus' authority overturned the prevailing pieties of the day.

By giving his disciples permission to feast and rejoice, Jesus makes clear what he has come to do. Rejoicing related to the great victory Jesus would make over sin and its consequences. Sin and its devastating effects rightly causes sorrow and mourning. But Jesus has already demonstrated his authority over sin (Mark 2:1-12). He has also demonstrated the gracious character of the Kingdom. It does not come to those who have made themselves worthy - there are none worthy, instead, it comes to sinners and must be received as the gracious gift that it is (Mark 2:15-17).

The natural response to Jesus' presence on earth and future presence in the New Creation is joy (Is. 61:2-3, 65:17-19). To fast would be to deny both who he is and what he came to do. Jesus did not say that his followers will have no cause ever to sorrow again. A day will come when the Bridegroom will be "*taken away*" from them.

"*That day*" refers to the day of Jesus' crucifixion, the true Day of Atonement, where man's sinfulness will be seen and mourned as never before. "*That day*" having taken place, joy in His presence will continue to be the characteristic posture of Christian people. To be sure the joy we have now is only a foretaste of future joy in heaven. Christians are naturally a singing, dancing people.

Nonetheless, while there are times when fasting will be very appropriate as Christians, Jesus' words suggest that fasting has limited use now that he has been revealed. To avoid tangential discussion, it is important to remember that this passage is primarily about who Jesus is and not about our present day practice with regard to fasting.

5. * What does Jesus mean by metaphors "new patches on old garments" and "new wine in old wineskins?"

These metaphors further support Jesus' identity: His coming changes everything! Perhaps it extends the wedding metaphor. A wedding requires good clothes on the part of the guests and an ample supply of wine on the part of the host. His two analogies of clothing and wine focus on the power of what is new: the power of new wine to expand and thus burst wineskins that have already been stretched to their fullest; the power of new cloth to shrink and thus rip the already shrunken garment on which it has been sown.

Jesus himself is what is new. His presence radically effects our world: our religious practices, our relationships, our lives. Nothing is conducted in quite the same way now that he has appeared to bring salvation. Jesus' emphasis is not so much on the destruction of the old as it is on the power of new. The New Covenant is established in his death and resurrection and therefore, his pronouncements and authority supersede what has come before.

It is important to note that Jesus is not rejecting the Old Testament in any way in his speaking of the new and the old. He always upheld the Scriptures. The new covenant replaces the old covenant but not the Old Testament which foretold it.

6. Why are the Pharisees so horrified at the disciples' behavior during their walk through the grain field? What is the essence of Jesus' response?

The keeping of the Sabbath was of crucial significance to the Pharisees. Keeping it was one of the most important symbols of obedience to God's law and loyalty to God and the Jewish people. In the Old Testament, the death penalty was prescribed for those who broke it. Its breach was a most serious matter. Some rabbis believed that the Messiah would come if all Israel kept the Sabbath. Because of the seriousness of the command, the Pharisees set up an intricate, detailed system of what you could and could not do on the Sabbath. This system went beyond the commands of Scripture, created a legal maze for ordinary people and the true intention and purpose for the Sabbath was lost.

The Pharisees believed that Jesus' disciples were breaking the Sabbath. Although plucking corn and removing the husk with your hand to remove and eat the grain was allowed on other days (Deut. 23:25), the Pharisees said it was reaping, and so forbidden on the Sabbath (Ex. 34:21). They were intent on knowing why Jesus would let his disciples engage in this unlawful act.

Jesus' replied with a counter question in true rabbinical form. He did not deny that the disciples were in breach of the tradition. His precedent illustrates this: David and his men had done what was unlawful when they entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread (1Samuel 21:2-7) apparently on the Sabbath.

Jesus' first point is that the Sabbath has been misunderstood by the Pharisees. Scripture had not condemned David's actions which suggests that the whole law was meant to be a blessing rather than a burden. Each part of the law was a gift from God to man and not man doing something for God. *"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath"*. The disciples' action is not violating the humanitarian purpose of the law, even though it violated the Pharisees' rule.

Jesus' second and more important point is that He is able to rule on the appropriateness of his disciples' actions because he is the Son of Man. Jesus is again underlining and emphasizing his authority. Instead of saying, "*you must let Scripture determine your life and thinking*", he says in effect "*Let what I say determine your life and thinking*". By this pronouncement Jesus demonstrates his authority and Lordship over religious practice. This ends all discussion.

7. What is Jesus saying about himself by declaring that "*the son of man is Lord of the Sabbath*"?

The phrase "*Son of Man*" leads a double life on Jesus' lips. First, it refers to Jesus as a human being. This is how the phrase is often used in the OT. Second, it alludes to the human-like figure in Daniel 7:9-14. This figure is no ordinary human being for he has been "*given authority, glory, and sovereign power over all peoples*" (i.e. on earth). He is also worshipped, which was unthinkable to Jews unless he was God (Ex. 20:3-6).

With this background laid, Jesus probably meant his statement "*the son of man is Lord of the Sabbath*" to be understood like this: If the Sabbath came into being on account of human beings, then it came into being on account of me. But since I am no ordinary human being, but the figure like a son of man in Dan. 7:13, I am more than a beneficiary of the Sabbath. I am also its Lord, who can let my disciples break it. Jesus use of the word "*Lord*" stresses his unique authority.

8. How does the account of the healing of the man with a withered hand on the Sabbath reinforce the point Jesus has just made in the previous passage?

The Sabbath was always meant to bring life to people, not to stifle it. God established it for positive purposes, not negative ones, it was meant to be a period of joy and refreshment. When we view from the perspective of what it takes away rather than what it gives, we completely misunderstand it. By healing the man's hand Jesus reaffirms that the Sabbath is a life-giving day. Healing is what the Sabbath is all about, not something from which to refrain during it.

9. * What is the Pharisees' response to the previous events and why do they respond that way? / * How are the Pharisees contrasted with Jesus in this passage? How does Jesus deal with them?

This scene is full of tension. The Pharisees appear to have reached their limit with Jesus. His statements were undermining their personal religion and their public authority. A conspiracy is set into motion to do away with him. They begin "*looking for a reason to accuse*" him. This fairly ominous language indicates some proposed legal action which would lead to his judicial death.

The great irony of this passage is that the Pharisees are so concerned about whether Jesus is violating the Sabbath by doing good and giving life, that they commit the ultimate evil, plotting his death on the Sabbath. The contrast between Jesus and the Pharisees is extreme. Not only would they fail to save lives on the Sabbath. They would actually use the Sabbath to kill Him.

Jesus responds by challenging their thinking and interpretation of the law. *"Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?"* Their silence testifies to his successful exposure of their motivation. For Jesus this causes anger and distress. If he was distressed about the death that awaited him he could have done the healing in secret. But He is deliberate in healing people openly. By calling attention to this Mark may well be foretelling us that Jesus' death was part of God's plan, which he was willing to fulfill.

Jesus is angry and distressed at the way the Pharisees mislead ordinary people. They have a commitment not to the law of God, but a commitment to rule-keeping. This commitment may masquerade as devotion to God, but in reality it reveals a self-righteous, hard-heartedness. The phrase *"stubborn hearts"* is borrowed from such passages as Exodus 7:14, 22; 8:19; 9:35 where equivalent terms are used to describe the Pharaoh's resistance to Moses demand that Israel be set free.

Mark is likening Jesus' critics to Pharaoh. By doing so he wishes to describe their unresponsiveness to Jesus in serious terms. It is disobedience to God's revelation and not simply innocent misunderstanding. Unlike the Pharisees, Jesus gets angry to save life, not kill, to do good, not harm. Ultimately, Jesus trumps them by doing the healing without lifting a hand. Technically, it is not a work at all. The power of his word alone heals the man.

10. What negative characteristics in the Pharisees lives are sometimes displayed in our lives? How can we combat them?

There is so much wrong with the Pharisees, it's scary. Scary because, those who seem to have it all together on the outside and who are held in such high esteem, can be so spiritually sick. The Pharisees' hearts are rock-hard even though their outward life is characterized by obedience. They care more about abstract Laws than people. They are easily threatened - a clear sign of a lack of humility and an abundance of pride. They are more concerned about losing positions of power and esteem than they are of being right before God. Scariest still, these same evil tendencies affect us.

One of the chief ways to combat these things is to be aware that the tendency to behave this way is latent in us all. To be unaware of this is most dangerous. Being religious can be a mask over truth. And after all, Jesus' hardest words were aimed at religious people. We must therefore keep watch over ourselves and be on guard against subtle expressions of these maladies. As we discover further on, the remedy to this self conceit is in the cross of Christ.

11. Summarize what Mark has made clear about Jesus in this passage? Which of these things is most striking to you and what are the ramifications for your life?

A summary and application question to tie things together at the end.

Study 5 - The New People of God

MARK CHAPTER 3:7-35

Questions

1. * Make a charade of one of the most challenging things you have ever been asked to do. Then explain what made it so challenging.

READ Mark 3:7-35

2. * What does Mark tell us about the crowd in vs. 7-12 and why? What is he emphasizing about Jesus?
3. Why do you suppose Jesus gave the demons strict orders not to tell who he was?
4. * Look at verses 13-19. What does the calling of the twelve tell us about Jesus and his purposes? (Why twelve? How are they different from the crowd? Are there any surprising things about the list?)
5. * What are the two charges leveled against Jesus in vs. 20-22 and why do you suppose each group made their particular charge?
6. * Jesus answers the second charge first. How would you put his answer in your own words? What is Jesus saying about himself?
7. In this passage, what is the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit?
8. What does vs. 28 teach us about sin and forgiveness?
9. * According to this passage, what characterizes those who would follow Jesus? Which characteristic do you think you most need to work at developing?
10. When we are opposed or rejected by those who are closest to us, what comfort can we receive from Jesus' words in vs. 33-35? Are there situations in your life where you really need to grab hold of this comfort?
11. * If we learn to see ourselves as part of God's family, rather than merely his subjects, how might that transform our attitude toward his commandments?

LEADER'S NOTES MARK 3:7-35

Main Points

Beginning with the power of Jesus' reputation to draw massive crowds, Mark further demonstrates His power and glory. With this authority established he proceeds to Jesus calling into existence a new Israel founded on the twelve apostles. Those in God's family sit at Jesus' feet, receive his forgiveness and listen to his voice. Those who do not acknowledge his authority from God and instead attribute his behavior and power to either mental instability or demonic possession are outside God's family.

Commentary on the Passage and Notes on the Questions

1. * Make a charade of one of the most challenging things you have ever been asked to do. What made it so challenging. Approach question.

2. * What does Mark tell us about the crowd in vs. 7-12 and why? What is he emphasizing about Jesus?

In the previous passage Pharisees began plotting the death of Jesus. Lest we think for even a moment that Jesus is deserving of this death, Mark calls attention to his ever-growing popularity. The crowds come from an increasing number of regions where they have *"heard all he was doing"* and have now grown so large that they are physically threatening in size. They are larger than those drawn to John the Baptist and from further afield than Judaea. Jesus asks his disciples to provide a boat from which he can teach and avoid the crush of the crowd. Two reasons are given for the ever-increasing crowds: the healing he has performed and the continual acknowledgment from the demonic realm of his divine sonship. His holiness means just to touch him brings healing. He is hero, not a villain.

It stretches the point to construe his withdrawal from the crowds as an attempt to escape or retreat. Jesus had deliberately provoked the Pharisees in the previous passage. As the story unfolds we will see He is consistently pro-active towards His goal, never reacting. Mark makes it clear later that He knows the cross awaits him. None of the gospels suggest a fatalism about the cross. Instead, we are shown how deliberately he steered his course towards it.

3. Why do you suppose Jesus gave the demons strict orders not to tell who he was?

In Jesus' presence demons fall prostrate and shout out his true identity. Mark's purpose is to highlight Jesus' power and strength. Just as the sick were *"falling on"* Jesus to touch him, so the unclean spirits were *"falling toward"* Jesus to acknowledge, visibly and audibly, his divine sonship. Mark's point has nothing to do with exorcisms. None happen. The issue is the magnitude of Jesus' greatness.

Jesus' does not want demonic testimony to create a circus attracting increasingly large and therefore dangerous crowds so he forbids them to speak. The people were easily misguided, their popular expectations were of the Messiah as a triumphant ruler. Therefore, demonic recognition jeopardized his mission. He would show what he meant by *"Messiah"* before he claimed to be Messiah. No

proclamation of Jesus as Christ was proper until the decisive events of his death and resurrection took place. Only this would disclose the meaning of Jesus' person and work in sufficient fullness. It might also be noted that the demons' immediate compliance to Jesus' command for their silence reinforces his authority and power. The demons are completely subject to him.

4. * Look at verses 13-19. What does the calling of the twelve tell us about Jesus and his purposes? (Why twelve? How are they different from the crowd? Are there any surprising things about the list?)

As the crowds increase, Jesus' ministry expands. It is necessary for him to call helpers. The fact that Jesus ascends a mountain and summons them is a symbol of his sovereignty (remember God summoning Moses up Mount Sinai). Here Jesus delegates his authority to preach, heal and drive out demons. Calling twelve apostles is reminiscent of the twelve tribes of Israel. After the Exodus, God led Israel to Mt. Sinai, where he commissioned them as his special people, a "*holy nation*" and "*kingdom of priests*", and entered into a covenant relationship with them (Ex. 19:1-6). However, old Israel was rejecting Jesus as Messiah and refusing his offer of forgiveness. Therefore, they themselves were rejected by God. Jesus is here portrayed as the founder of a reconstituted Israel.

As with old Israel, the emphasis is on Jesus' choice of the twelve, rather than their choice of him (v13, c.f. Ex. 19:4-5; Deut. 7:6ff). Note the disciples respond at once. We have observed that the common characteristic of those he calls is that they are sinners (1:16-20; 2:13-17). Mark will show us that this new Israel is similar to the old, slow to understand (4:13), hardhearted (8:17) and fearful. Eventually, they all abandon Jesus at the cross.

The list of the Apostles deserves special note. Firstly, Jesus renames some of them. Naming is a function of authority and shows superiority (e.g. Adam's naming of the animals). Renaming may also imply both Jesus' intention to change these men and his ability to do so. Secondly, is the inclusion that Judas would betray Jesus. Because Judas has also been sovereignly chosen by Jesus, we are meant to understand that the crucifixion will take place not only according to God's plan, but also by Jesus' choice. Therefore, we need not be scandalized by it. A note of caution is in order. According to this passage, the apostles have a unique calling. Because their commission seems to go beyond that of other Christians we must be careful how we apply what is said of them to ourselves.

5. * What are the two charges leveled against Jesus in vs. 20-22 and why do you suppose each group made their particular charge?

From Jesus' family comes the charge, "*He is out of his mind*". From the Pharisees comes the charge, "*He is possessed by Beelzebub*" (Beelzebub had once been the name of a Canaanite divinity, "*the lord of the high place*", but by this time it was used by Jews to denote the ruler of the abyss, the abode of demons). Seeing the amazing crowds around Jesus, his family make the mistake of presuming He has lost control of his life. As well intentioned as their concern may have been, Jesus makes it clear that they neither understand who he is or the nature of what he has come to do. The Pharisees take a more diabolical position

to preserve their own esteem and sense of authority. According to them Jesus is an agent of Satan himself.

The charge that he has Beelzebub, the Lord of demons, attempts to explain how he is able to cast out lesser demons. Does this provoke sympathy for the Pharisees? For generations they misconstrued the nature of God and his Messiah. Rather, the absurdity of their charge reveals their true hardness of heart. They are not merely ignorant. They are immoral. Although the charge that Jesus is out of his mind is perhaps less malevolent than the charge that he has an evil spirit, both are responses which disqualify people from Jesus' new Israel.

6. * Jesus answers the second charge first. How would you put his answer in your own words? What is Jesus saying about himself?

Jesus reveals the absurdity of their charge by explaining that Satan and his demons have a unity in purpose. Therefore, it is impossible for Satan to cast himself out. By definition exorcism requires an agent of holiness. This is the point of Jesus' parable in vs. 23-26 and anticipates his next parable in vs. 24-27. Satan is the strong man and Jesus is the one who enters his house. It is not that Satan is opposing himself enabling Jesus to go in and conquer him. Instead, Jesus is saying, *"However strong Satan may be (and he is indeed strong) I am infinitely stronger."* By saying, *"No one is able...unless..."* Jesus implies that he has been able. The taking of articles from the house represents Jesus' take over of the demoniac. Now the articles belong to Jesus. He is an agent, not of Satan, but of the Kingdom of God. Indeed, he is the King! The Pharisees have grossly misinterpreted the data. As usual, Jesus has reduced his enemies to speechlessness. He triumphs before a real debate can start.

7. In this passage, what is the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit?

Many people have fallen into despair because they believe that they have committed the sin of blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. However, most commentators agree, the very fact of a person's concern over having committed it proves that they have not committed it. It is the Pharisees' action which define this sin. They stubbornly persist in the action of calling that which is good, evil, to preserve their own power and authority. This is so deliberately self serving. Clearly they are blind to God's gracious work in Jesus of bringing release and relief to the bodies and minds of men and women. The light is there for those who will accept it, but if some refuse the light, where else can they hope to receive illumination? One might ask, *"What if one were to repent of blasphemy of the Holy Spirit? Is there no forgiveness for the person who repents of this sin?"*

The answer seems to be that the nature of the sin is such that one does not repent of it, because those who commit it can't tell that they have. Remember, it is not an isolated instance of calling good "evil" which is considered blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, but a persistent attitude. Those who have committed this sin have consistently refused the Spirit's powerful help in recognizing the truth about Jesus. It is worth pointing out that while Jesus knew that specific individuals had committed blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, we are not so perceptive. Whereas Jesus can see the heart, we cannot. We might suspect that a person has gone this far, but any such judgments must be held with a degree of uncertainty and

hoped against. A helpful and practical way of reading this passage is to understand "*eternal sin*" not as a sin that goes on for ever and can never be repented of (indicating a "*point of no return*"), but as a sin which, as long as we continue in it, will subject us to its eternal consequences.

8. What does vs.28 teach us about sin and forgiveness?

With all the emphasis given to the unpardonable sin in this passage we must not make the mistake of missing Jesus' ringing affirmation, "*I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them.*" Jesus is not saying that all sin will be forgiven, but that all sin can be forgiven. This is the good news. There is no sin you can commit that cannot be forgiven if you come to God in repentance, trusting in the work of Jesus Christ as righteousness. There is absolutely no limit to the forgiveness available through Christ.

9. * According to this passage, what characterizes those who would follow Jesus? Which characteristic do you think you most need to work at developing?

Positively, those who are Jesus' followers sit at his feet and listen to him. That his disciples sit in a closed circle (v. 34) and others are outside of it (v. 31), implies that there is an intimacy in the relationship that is cultivated. They know themselves as his family members (v. 35). They receive his forgiveness (v.28), and they do his will (v. 35). Negatively, Jesus' followers do not try to act in authority over him or tell him what to do (V. 21 - "*they went to take charge of him*"). They do not call good, evil (v. 29).

10. When we are opposed or rejected by those who are closest to us, what comfort can we receive from Jesus' words in vs. 33-35? Are there situations in your life where you really need to grab hold of this comfort?

In verses 33-35 is found the affirmation that if we are Jesus' followers, however much we might be rejected by others and kept on the outside of their circle, we are on the inside of the circle that matters most; the family of God, with the Creator of the universe as our Father and Jesus as our elder brother. Our place in this circle cannot be jeopardized; Our inclusion is not dependent on our performance. The qualification is simply NOTHING. But so few of us have it. As long as we are intent on bringing something in our hands to make us acceptable to God, our security of position will be threatened. Our lives will be less joyful. There will be little comfort for ourselves when we feel rejected or opposed. When this is deeply known, no amount of rejection can destroy us.

11. * If we learn to see ourselves as part of God's family, rather than merely his subjects, how might that transform our attitude toward his commandments?

When we see ourselves as a child of God whose status cannot be revoked, it changes completely the way we live the Christian life. Gratitude becomes the primary motivation for obeying God. Obedience to God's commands is an expression of love to the one who has loved us first. His commands are perceived as for our highest good and benefit. They are the means for taking on the family-likeness and so pleasing our new-found Father. John Newton put it

like this: “*To see the law by Christ fulfilled and hear his pardoning voice, Changes a slave into a child and duty into choice*”

Further Notes

The predominant themes are conflict and opposition, climaxing in v6 and v22. The questioning of Ch 2 reverses as Jesus silences the Pharisees with just one question. The rejection and misunderstanding in v20-22 highlight the developing idea of “Who is Jesus?” Jesus responds as he had predicted in 2:21-22 by starting anew, with a new Israel (v13-19) and a new family (v34-35), both marked by being with Jesus and by service.

v1-6. Following Jesus' assertion of authority over the Sabbath (2:28), he now proclaims it's true character and purpose: "to do good!" (v4), a great liberating principle. Jesus' priority again clashes with the Pharisee concept of “*religious observance*” which appears to leave them free to plot murder. This unites Pharisees and Herodians in judgment already that Jesus is a dangerous enemy of the state. The opposition to Jesus from all quarters is extreme.

v7-12. Having been rejected, Jesus appears to accept their decision, moving on (5:17-18). The crowds do not share their leaders' verdict, flocking from far afield (the towns are N, S, E and W: Idumea is 100+ miles, on foot!) but the (literal!) pressure is still for healing, against Jesus' preference (1:38, 3:14, 4:1-2).

v13-19. Jesus' authority stands out as he calls “*the twelve*”. Note his authority even to delegate his own power. In its setting the selection of the disciples is, firstly, a response to the rejection by the Pharisees. A new Israel (hence twelve) is needed as the old refuses to recognize its Messiah. Secondly, it is a response to the needs of the crowd, Jesus being able to reach many more through his servants than he could alone. He spends time with only a few in order to better serve the many. The disciples' work matches what Jesus himself was doing (1:39), since they will carry on Jesus' work after he goes away (2:20). Like his enemies, Jesus' followers come from every quarter.

v20-34. The first of Mark's sandwiched stories, where the layered context helps the interpretation. The family's assessment seems to be “*He's gone mad*” or perhaps a well intentioned “*He's overdoing it*”. While awaiting the consequences of this verdict, the top theologians comment. Theirs is not a misunderstanding. They actually seem to prefer holding an untenable position, a mixed inability and unwillingness to see the truth described as - “*hardness of heart*” (3:5, 8:17). Jesus undermines their argument. If he were evil, there would be civil war in hell. A country in that state is weak but since evil is manifestly strong, their diagnosis will not stand. Rather, (v27), Jesus is stronger than Satan (who then is Jesus?). The warning in v29 has caused much anxiety, v29 states that universal forgiveness is available. The dreadful exception is directed here to experts who confidently assert, against reason, that white is black, describing acts of the Holy Spirit as demonic. The unforgivable nature of the sin lies with their conviction of righteousness, seeing nothing to repent of. To be anxious about possible offense before God renders this sin impossible. If you're worried that you've committed it, you haven't, (see Cranfield). Jesus' treatment of his family again shows the painful pressure of priorities met in 1:38. The priority is to

spiritual relationship and service, above even family ties and discipline. Jesus' family cannot comprehend him, so he establishes a new family which can include them (2:20, Acts 1:14).

No-one, not even Mary, can make claims on the basis of the old family, Jewish kinship. The new family, however, is open to all. You enter God's family by being with Jesus and doing God's will (cp. 3:14). Even if we are rejected by our families, Jesus has provided for us (10:29-31).

Throughout Ch 2-3, Jesus' words and actions have been powerful and controversial. ***Just who does he think he is?***

Study 6 - The Secret of the Kingdom

MARK CHAPTER 4:1-34

Questions

1. * Do you recall a time in your life when a failure to listen on your part got you into some kind of trouble?

READ Mark 4:1-34

2. * Make as many observations as you can about the details of the parable in vs. 1-9. Note the similarities and contrasts between “the seed” and “the soil”.
3. * What two groups does Jesus distinguish between in vs. 10-12 and what characterizes those two groups? / What do you suppose the “*secret of the kingdom of heaven*” is?
4. * Summarize in a sentence or two the basic meaning of the parable of the soils as explained in vs.13-20. Why does Jesus explain the parable?
5. * How can we apply this parable? What are its warnings and encouragement?
6. If we assume that the parables in vs. 21-25 flow from the parable of the soils, what are their meanings and how do they relate to the original parable?
7. * What is Jesus saying about the Kingdom of God in the parable in vs 26-29? (What does the seed stand for? Where does the seed's power come from? What is the outcome of the seed being sown?) What does the parable tell us about our relationship to the Kingdom of God?
8. How does the parable in vs. 30-32 expand and build upon the parable that came before it?
9. * Summarize what this passage tells us about Jesus and the Kingdom and state how it is connected to the points of the previous chapters.
10. What lessons about listening to Jesus Christ do you discover in this chapter and which are the most pertinent to you? What will you specifically do to incorporate this teaching into your life?

LEADER'S NOTES MARK 4:1-34

Main Points

In the previous chapter Jesus had made it clear that a new community was being formed - the old community was rejected because they had rejected Jesus and refused to receive forgiveness. The distinction between those communities is brought out boldly in this passage. Whether one is on the inside or the outside of this new community is dependent on one's response to the teaching of Jesus.

Those who belong to the new community know the "*secret of the Kingdom*". They acknowledge the authority of Jesus' teaching. To them, Jesus explains the parables. They will bear fruit in their lives - growing into who God intends them to be. Those on the "*outside*" harden their hearts in response to the parables. They do not recognize the Word of Life authority of Jesus' teaching. Those on the outside are not given explanations of the parables. They do not experience life change in keeping with God's purposes.

Commentary on the Passage and Notes on the Questions

1. * Do you recall a time in your life when a failure to listen on your part got you into some kind of trouble? Approach question.

2. * Make as many observations as you can about the details of the parable in vs. 1-9. Note the similarities and contrasts between "the seed" and "the soils".

Leaders, encourage thorough discussion here. Notice the following things: 1) It is the same sower who sows all the seed. 2) While seed falls into four different places there are ultimately only two groups: seed which does not bear fruit and seed which bears fruit. 3) There are three obstacles to growth. 4) Of these, two begin to grow and one does not get a chance to grow at all. 5) The seed is never described as bad, only the soil. This parable deals with what actually happens when a sower sows seed. It stretches the point to conclude that an equal amount of seed falls in each type of soil. We do see 3 different yields described for the seed that falls on good soil (thirty, sixty and a hundred fold). Jesus is not trying to tell us about proportions of people who fall into each category, but types.

3. * What two groups does Jesus distinguish between in vs. 10-12 and what characterizes those two groups? / What do you suppose the "*secret of the kingdom of heaven*" is?

Jesus identifies a group on the inside ("*the Twelve and others around him*") and "*those on the outside*". The first group has been given "*the secret of the Kingdom of God*." The second group are "*ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding*." What is the "*secret*" or mystery which has been given to those on the inside? Most likely it is Jesus as the Christ - the one in whom and through whom the Kingdom has come. The mystery or secret is that God's reign is being established through Jesus and his teaching. The mystery also includes the Twelve and others as subjects in God's kingdom as well as family members in God's royal household. They have roles in the kingdom's arrival.

Although Mark tells us that the mystery has been given to them, he stops short of implying that the disciples understand the mystery. Having been "*given the secret*" at this point is synonymous with being called to follow Jesus. The disciples failure to understand the secret is seen time and time again by inappropriate responses to Jesus and also by their need to have the parables regularly explained to them (v. 34). However, the fact that this mystery has been given to them and is being revealed to them is evidenced by their pursuit of Jesus and their striving to understand what he is saying to them. They rely on Jesus for understanding and they work hard at understanding. What was Jesus saying about the "*outsider*" by quoting from Isaiah 6:9-10? At first glance it looks as if by speaking in parables He will deliberately keep those on the outside in confusion. There is reason enough for this possibility: We have all wickedly, foolishly and irrationally chosen to ignore God and go our own way. If God hardened some in this choice it would be just desserts. Justice alone would exclude humanity from the Kingdom. That any persons are included on the "*inside*" is by God's amazing unmerited grace and mercy.

Less harshly, Jesus is engaging in what might be called "*prophetic irony*". The prophets often expressed a consequence or a result as if it were a purpose. Jesus uses language from Isaiah's call to proclaim God's message to ancient Israel. God says in essence to Isaiah, "*Go and deliver my message, but don't expect them to pay attention to it. The effect of your preaching will be their persistent refusal to accept what you say, to the point where they will have rendered themselves incapable of accepting it.*" In its form it is an ironic statement, so predictable was the hard hearted response of the people, God may as well ordain it so.

But God's heart intention is that no one be left on the outside no matter the entrenched lack of response from His people. What was true in Isaiah's ministry is reproduced in Jesus' ministry. When he spoke in parables to a "deaf" audience it revealed only their hardness of hearts. It confirmed their condition. Their hearts became more callused. But, God takes no delight in this response. In either of the above interpretations we must hold together the biblical tension between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. Scripture teaches God's absolute sovereignty and man's absolute responsibility. It is a mystery to us how both can be true, but Scripture encourages us to believe that this is the case.

4. * Summarize in a sentence or two the basic meaning of the parable of the soils as explained in vs.13-20. Why does Jesus explain the parable?

The word "*parable*" is not defined precisely anywhere in the Bible. Parables can be short or long, simple or complex, explained or unexplained. Fascinatingly, Asaph refers to the whole outline of Israel's history in Psalm 78 as a parable (Ps. 75:2). Most commentaries point out that we should avoid allegorizing details which are only there for vividness (not everything in a parable stands for something else). Parables usually have a central point. Still parables may have allegorical elements, or more than one "*point of reference*". Jesus himself identifies meaning in many, but not all, of the details in the parable of the soils. It is important not to try to get the parable to answer questions which it was never

intended to answer. Jesus begins his explanation by saying, "*Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?*"

He is not saying that this is the easiest parable to understand, the key to understanding the harder parables. Instead, he is indicating that this is a foundation parable. The parable of the soils concerns the proclamation of the message of the kingdom of God and its reception by various kinds of listeners. (The message might be in other parables.) The point of the parable is the importance of responding wholeheartedly to Jesus and his message as the one in whom the kingdom of God has come. It does not mean some general pedagogical, psychological, or even homiletic instruction about preachers and listeners and the risks that occur during the process of listening. It is specifically about listening to Jesus the King through whose words alone we can experience the kind of transformation and growth that God desires for us. It is only by listening to Jesus' words that we become subjects in God's kingdom. The parable tells us that God's rule is accomplished through the teaching of Jesus. It may be that the harvest of thirty, sixty, and one hundred fold is a reference to the final judgment and the large numbers who will have followed Jesus. However, the context makes it more likely that the yields are the fruit of discipleship in Christian's lives in the present (i.e. when you really listen and submit to Jesus the King it will produce growth and change in your life). The yields do not depict a normal harvest, but a miraculous, abundant one.

Those outside the kingdom are depicted by the three soils that do not allow the seed to develop. The soil, not the seed, is the problem. Some people have the word snatched away by Satan. People like the Pharisees reject the message outright. Satan's role emphasizes the reality of war between the kingdom of God and Satan's evil kingdom. So attuned are they to the dark world that the message of light and freedom threatens them. The other two groups which fail to produce the fruit of discipleship in their lives fail because of: 1) fear of persecution and trouble. 2) concern for riches and possessions. Warnings to be ready for persecution reappear in Mark at several points (8:34-38; 10:35-40; 13:9-13), as do strong words about the danger of concern for possessions (10:17-31).

5. * How can we apply this parable? What are it's warnings and encouragement?

When hearing Jesus' message we must welcome the word *immediately*, so that Satan cannot snatch it away. We must welcome it *deeply*, so that persecution because of it cannot induce us to apostatize. We must also welcome it *exclusively*, so that other concerns do not stifle it. Although they didn't always understand Jesus parables, the disciples seemed to have responded to them in all these ways. The reception of this message goes beyond intellectual assent. It results in changed behavior, commitment and devotion. We see real dangers in discipleship. Two great obstacles which confront us regularly are persecution and competition from the world for our hearts. Either may cause shipwreck and we best not presume on our capacity to withstand these forces. Mark reminds us that Jesus' message is not as convenient as aspirin nor some antidepressant. It is a declaration of war upon the power of evil. As is in any war, participation demands preparedness for opposition and sacrifice. The encouragement for

listening carefully is the promise of significant change in our lives. Our lives will bear fruit. The flip side is that if we don't see any change in our life we need to examine ourselves and ask if we are really numbered among those on the inside who are truly listening to his message. There is always the possibility that we are deceived.

6. If we assume that the parables in vs. 21-25 flow from the parable of the soils, what are their meanings and how do they relate to the original?

The remaining parables of the chapter are spoken to the larger crowd and they prove the meaning of the first. Because of Mark's preamble on "the soils" we are assisted to understand them without further elaboration or explanation on Jesus' part. The parable of the lamp in which Jesus proclaims that *"whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed"* speaks of His willingness to reveal the message of the kingdom to those who have ears to hear. If we respond to the message by hearing it immediately, deeply, and with undivided loyalty it's meaning will be explained to us. Jesus himself will make sure that we recognize him and are not left in the dark. The phrase, *"If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear"* serves as a challenge and invitation to anyone on the outside. A person outside need not be hopeless.

In vs. 24-25 we get a socio-economic parable based on the idea that *"the poor get poorer, and the rich get richer"*. Jesus is saying that what is true in socio-economics is also true in the realm of one's relationship to God. Those who hear the parables will get an explanation. Just as it takes repeated investment of money to make money, it takes repeated good listening to recognize the significance of Kingdom parables. Those who don't develop the habit will lose their significance. Remember, hearing in the right way is not equivalent to understanding the parables. To understand them requires Jesus' personal revelation. Hearing in the right way implies an eagerness to hear, a deep delight in hearing, and a jealous protection of what you have heard so that nothing distracts you from attending to it.

7. * What is Jesus saying about the Kingdom of God in the parable in vs 26-29? (What does the seed stand for? Where does the seed's power come from? What is the outcome of the seed being sown?) What does the parable tell us about our relationship to the Kingdom of God?

Again, the parables of Jesus are not just wise, practical sayings. They are specifically about the reality of God's kingdom. This was Jesus' purpose (Mark 1:15). If we divorce the parables from his teaching about the kingdom, we will miss their meaning. This becomes clearer in the next two parables. The first parable specifically focuses on the source of the kingdom's growth and expansion. It is Jesus' authoritative word which in this parable is represented by the seed. The accent in the parable falls on the phrase *"all by itself"*. Jesus' teaching on the kingdom proves so authoritative that it has an automatic effect. There is no emphasis on the person who sows the seed or on his activity after sowing. It specifically downplays any watering or cultivating that the sower does - it grows *"whether he sleeps or gets up"*. The words of Jesus alone are the dynamic of real life and therefore we must give them our most serious attention. God's

kingdom is established, not by conquest but by spoken words. A person participates in God's kingdom not by joining an army but by hearing the message in the right way. We come into the kingdom when Jesus resides in our lives through His words received and made alive in us by His Spirit. The evidence of the power of His teaching is in the quality of our discipleship. The stages of growth relate to the inevitability of growth. It is not comment on the process of growth.

8. How does the parable in vs. 30-32 expand and build upon the parable that came before it?

The parable of the mustard seed demonstrates the out of proportion result in our lives of letting the message of the kingdom take root. The smallness of the mustard seed was proverbial in Palestine. It grows into a huge tree. The manifestation of the kingdom in Jesus' ministry and word might seem insignificant but in the day of its full appearance it will be significant indeed. In the OT, world powers were seen as trees. Birds sheltering in the branches represented other nations under the protection of the world power (Ezek.31: Dan 4). Most, including Israel, were cut down by God because they became proud, but the prophets also pictured a great tree which would grow from the tiny remnant of Israel to shelter the nations.(Ezek. 17:22-24).

9. * Summarize what this passage tells us about Jesus and the Kingdom and state how it is connected to the points of the previous chapters. See Main Points above as well as the rest of the text.

10. What lessons about listening to Jesus Christ do you discover in this chapter and which are the most pertinent to you? What will you specifically do to incorporate this teaching into your life?

This is a straight forward application question. Certainly, for most of us, our attitudes towards Jesus words and those he commissioned to speak on his behalf (the apostles) are far more flippant and casual than they ought to be.

Further Notes

Jesus continues to teach. His message in all three parables counters the opposition and rejection found in chapters 2 and 3 by declaring that the powerful Word of God will spread and produce a great harvest. Neither the hostility of the world (v3-7) or the apparent insignificance of the word (v30-32) matters. Also here is Jesus' new priority of training the disciples, together with the first signs of their failure to understand him. This is the first time Mark records the content of Jesus' teaching at any length, most of his earlier words following interruptions.

These notes do not follow the verse order as is usual. Grouping the material as below seemed the easiest way to draw out the many connections between the sections in each of the two categories.

Jesus Teaching in Parables

v3-9, 14-20. This parable, often called the parable of the sower or the parable of the soils, is even more focused on *"the word"*, which occurs eight times in v14-20. The enemies of the word and its harvest in this parable are classically

the world the flesh and the devil, clearly depicted (in reverse order). Jesus' own explanation encourages an allegorical interpretation of this parable, at least. For example: the word - seed on the path - doesn't "*sink in*" and so can easily be taken away. Many possible applications can be found without effort. e.g. "*Have you ever thought of weeding the thorns on your patch?*" The emphasis on listening (v3) and hearing (v9, 23-24) supports the pressing of applications, as typically in the Old Testament it conveys the sense of be warned, hear and obey.

v26-29. This parable of the seed growing secretly is not so easy to understand as we're not given the interpretation! The common features are the seed sown and the good harvest. Here neither the man's lack of control nor the slow results actually imply a failed harvest. The parable may also be differentiating between what a man should do, what he can't and God's essential work (1 Cor 3:5-9). Here the harvest seems in doubt because the mustard seed seems so insignificant but again the seed grows and bears fruit (v8, 20, 27, 32). The inadvisability of treating all the parables as allegories is illustrated by the problems commentators have had trying to decide exactly what "*the birds of the air*" represent. They vary from the inclusion of the gentile nations to evil teachers within the church (but see Ezek. 17). Overall the main thrust is that the kingdom of God will grow by the spreading of the word: Jesus is warning hearers to take heed and preachers to be patient and not despair.

Jesus' Teaching about Parables (v10-13, 21-25, 33-34)

v10 Even the disciples found the parables difficult, so why did Jesus use them? (NB. Jesus didn't invent parables, they were a common rabbinical teaching method).

v12. Is the hardest in the passage. Either Jesus is being deliberately obscure to prevent people hearing, or people have disqualified themselves by refusing to see the truth, a decision God ratifies (v24-25. Ezek 2:3-5). The answer is found in Jesus' determination to teach. Like Ezekiel he continually proclaims his message to a people whose unwillingness to hear becomes an inability. It is illogical (v21) to suppose that Jesus came into the world in order to hide the kingdom of God. He could have best done that by not coming at all! Note that Jesus explains why he uses parables by using a parable, showing that Jesus' intention generally in using parables was to explain, since they are a good way to communicate, particularly new or unwelcome messages.

The critical point is what you do with what you have understood (v24-25). The choice is grow or die. The parables met each person at their own level, perhaps with the intention of slipping under their guard (2Sam 12:1-7). "*As they were able*": the disciples could take more and got it! (v33-34).

Study 7 - Authority over Death

MARK CHAPTERS 4:35-5:43

Questions

1. Do you think reflecting on death is healthy or morbid? Why?

READ Mark 4:35-5:43

2. * Describe the change in the disciples behavior in the account of vs.35-40. How would you explain this? How does this capture the theme for this whole passage?
3. * What does this passage tell us about faith - what is it, how is it built, and why is it so important?
4. * To what does Mark draw our attention in order to communicate how desperate is the state of the demon possessed man?
5. * What is the response of the former demoniac and the response of the crowd to the exorcism that Jesus performs and why do they respond in those ways?
6. How do these two accounts effect your view of Jesus and your response to him?
7. * Mark weaves two stories together in vs. 21-43. Why do you suppose he does that? * What are the similarities between the stories? What is the relationship between them?
8. * What authority does Jesus display here which we had not yet seen? Why is knowledge of his authority over death crucial to our lives?
9. * What has been communicated throughout this passage about appropriate and inappropriate fear? /* Do you recognize any fears in your own life that keep you from doing some of the things you are made for? How does what is taught here enable you to deal with those fears?

LEADER'S NOTES MARK 4:35-5:43

Main Points

The disciples question in 4:41, "*Who is this?*", the theme of this lesson, reminds us of the key theme of this half of Mark's gospel. Though Mark has just spent a chapter conveying the teaching of Jesus, more important than being a religious teacher, Jesus is the one who has authority over death.

In three successive miracle stories Jesus overcomes the threat of death (the calming of the storm), heals a man who lives in the realm of death (the demoniac in the tombs) and delivers two people from death (the woman with the hemorrhage who is on the brink of death and the little girl who has died).

In addition to telling us of Jesus' authority over death, Mark also seeks to communicate what is an appropriate response to Jesus. He is both an object of faith and an object of fear. To fear other things is inappropriate.

Commentary on the Passage and Notes on the Questions

1. Do you think reflecting on death is healthy or morbid? Why?

Approach question.

2. * Describe the change in the disciples behavior in the account of vs.35-40. How would you explain this? How does this capture the theme for our whole passage?

A small flotilla of boats sets out across Lake Galilee carrying Jesus, the apostles and other disciples. At the onset of a furious storm, while Jesus sleeps everyone else is filled with fear for their lives including the experienced fishermen. With boats being swamped by waves it is clearly a desperate situation. The apostles feel powerless and perhaps frustrated with Jesus' apparent lack of concern. When Jesus acts to quell the storm they are overtaken by another fear. They are faced with no mere man but someone completely other. Whatever power there is in wind, sea and nature Jesus was the master of it.

Notice that Jesus does not call on God to quell the storm. He does it by the power and authority of his own word. His sleeping in the boat is not evidence of his trust in God, rather it is his confidence in his own abilities as God's Son. He successfully commands the wind and the sea without prayer to God or adjuration in God's name. His divine nature is thus established. That his actions testify to his deity is established in Old Testament accounts of the quelling of storms, all attributed to God (Ps. 65:7; 89:9; 106:9; 107:23-30; Proverbs 30:4).

Each of the stories about Jesus in this passage make it increasingly evident that Jesus is someone beyond all of human experience. If prior to this point we have made the mistake of thinking of Jesus as just a man with the special blessing and favor of God, surely we can no longer do so. Beginning with the account of Jesus calming the storm and climaxing with the account of his raising the little girl from the dead, Mark demonstrates that such conclusions are utterly inadequate.

The disciples' reaction to Jesus arises out of their experience of his divine holiness (i.e. they realize that he is set apart and different from them in nearly every conceivable way). They have a reverential fear and awe before him. The

fear of God that the Scripture describes consists of two components: 1) the feeling of awe and danger that flows from knowing one is in God's hands for weal or woe, and that God is neither subservient or tame; and 2) fascination - the feeling of being allured, even entranced by God's beauty, goodness, mercy and love. Mark signals that it is this kind of fear that the disciples are experiencing in the presence of Jesus. Mark communicates this by changing the description of their reaction from the word "*afraid*" (v. 40) which marked their attitude to the storm to "*terrified*" (v.41) which marks their attitude toward Jesus. The reaction is completely appropriate.

3. * What does this passage tell us about faith - what it is, how it is built, and why it is so important?

In response to the disciples' fear of the storm, Jesus asks the question, "*Do you still have no faith?*" The issue of faith arises again and again in this passage (4:50; 5:34, 36; 6:6). The faith that is being spoken of has Jesus as it's object. He is reprimanding them for not trusting in his power and his intention to exercise it on their behalf in light of all that he has already done. Their fear of the storm demonstrates that they have learned very little about who Jesus is from their previous experience. The power that he has exercised in the past ought to lead them to believe that he can exercise his power in their present situation. But they don't believe. They fear the storm.

Faith always has an object. Faith asks questions about the object it will believe in. So, far from being opposed to thinking and questioning, faith always reasons and asks. (To have faith in the reliability of anybody we cross reference with others who have known the person, we observe their behavior over time, we validate their character before we trust them.) The disciples have had time to ask themselves who Jesus is. Jesus implies by his question that enough has been revealed to them about himself for them to be aware of his benevolent power. Their lack of trust reveals the flaws in their own characters.

Faith is not built by trying harder to believe or striving to work up faith. Instead, it is built by staring at faith's object and reasoning with oneself about the evidence that calls for a response of trust. If the evidence is negative we are sensible to remain wary. If positive, then it should bring a new confidence to our attitudes and actions. Jesus states that their fear of the storm and fear for their lives would not have been present had they had faith in him. If they had realized that he was the Creator, they would not have feared the creation.

4. * To what does Mark draw our attention in order to communicate how desperate is the state of the demon possessed man?

How desperate is the demoniac's plight is indicated by the following things:

1) He lives among the tombs, he inhabits a place of death. It creates a backdrop for the ensuing contest between Jesus and the power of death. 2) People have given up on trying to chain him any longer. No one was a match for his strength. 3) In all likelihood he was naked. This is implied by the fact that he cuts himself with stones and also by describing him, when eventually healed, as clothed. 4)

The demon possessing him says his name is legion. A legion referred to a unit of Roman soldiers about 6000 strong.

Jesus delayed the exorcism (v8) until the disciples could hear what he was dealing with. The demon's declaration "My name is Legion" set up further testimony to the true identity of Jesus. Jesus is engaged in a battle not with one demon but with a military horde of 6000 of them. When Jesus does perform the exorcism it serves to highlight how strong and powerful he is.

5. * What is the response of the former demoniac and the response of the crowd to the exorcism that Jesus performs and why do they respond in those ways?

The demoniac responds with gratitude for what the Lord had done for him and asks Jesus if he can go with him. The townspeople respond with fear and ask Jesus to go away. Mark highlights the changed condition of the former demoniac by stating that he was *"sitting there, dressed and in his right mind."* No longer is he out of control, cutting his naked body with stones, tormented and violent.

The imagery conveys "shalom", calmness and wholeness. The contrast between what he was and what he has become is vivid. Like with the storm, so great is the difference that it sends fear into the hearts of the people. However, given the chance to make a proper assessment of Jesus and to respond appropriately, the people quickly turn their attention to what they have lost. Because this was a gentile area, pigs were used for both economic and religious purposes (offered as sacrifices in religious rituals). This had been an unusually large herd. Most numbered around 100 to 150 pigs. The people count more their economic loss than the gain made in restoring the man to wholeness. They reject the evidence of God in their midst! Yet even in rejection Jesus remains authoritative. The people dare not try to order Him to leave. Instead, they plead with him to go.

It is worth noting that when Jesus tells the former demoniac to go back to his family and tell them *"how much the Lord has done for you"*, Mark reports that he began to tell *"how much Jesus had done for him."* This identification of the Lord with Jesus is part of Mark's continuing efforts to let us know the identity of Jesus.

Some people in your group may be persistent in asking about the relationship between the demons and the pigs: Once Jesus has forced the demons to name themselves, they know defeat is immanent and they grovel. Apparently the most the demons can hope for is to be left in their home territory rather than being banished to the wilderness or to ruins. (These places were considered dangerous to human beings because demons wandering and lurking in such places were desperate for human hosts.) While demons would not normally want animal hosts, Jesus was now master of their fate, so they bargained. It seems likely that Jesus was able to accomplish a dual purpose. Banishing the demons permanently and ridding the territory of an animal that since Moses was unclean to Jews. When the demons enter the pigs, they immediately rush down a steep slope into the lake. Animals have no resistance to the demons' great urge to destroy life. Mark writes nothing about the spirits leaving the pigs and therefore, we are to

think that they remain in the water. Other ancient literature leads us to believe that demons considered this fate worse than having no host at all.

That Jesus allows the demons to enter the pigs but will not allow them to remain in the man shows how much value he places on human life. What is exposed is Satan's cruel and immensely destructive attitude to people. Only Jesus' power can overcome it. Jesus thought it more important to teach us this, so that we will believe and be saved, than to spare two thousand pigs. Evidently, the townspeople who ask Jesus to leave do not value human life nearly as much.

6. How do these two accounts effect your view of Jesus and your response to him?

This question could be saved to the end of the Bible study and be asked with regards to the entire passage. Jesus consistently reveals himself to be an object of fear and an object of faith. We rightly have reverential awe before him and tremble at his greatness when in his presence. Yet he persistently demonstrates that he exercises his greatness and power benevolently and is therefore worthy of our trust and obedience. The men and women following him are not wrong to tremble at the power of Jesus' word. He is revealing himself as Christ and God. The faith he demands, a faith which acknowledges and relies on his power however terrible the circumstances, is inseparable from awe.

7. * Mark weaves two stories together in vs. 21-43. Why do you suppose he does that? * What are the similarities between the stories? What is the relationship between them?

Mark links passages together because they have something in common. The stories complement one another with different perspectives of the same truth, or they emphasize a truth. (Remember, the account in 3:20-35 where Mark communicates that both Jesus' family and the Pharisees have wrong, unbelieving responses to Jesus). What are the connections between these two accounts?

- 1) Both stories are about women being healed.
- 2) When the stories begin both women are on the verge of death. The woman with the hemorrhage had suffered for twelve years, seen many doctors for no benefit and deteriorated. The bleeding also made her a social outcast. The young girl's situation is so bad that she dies before Jesus arrives.
- 3) Both stories show Jesus' intention to save and give life.
- 4) Both stories reinforce the importance of faith. Some look at the actions of the woman and conclude that her behavior looks more like superstition than faith. However, there is no hint of rebuke for superstition. She is commended for her faith in Jesus. She believes that Jesus has the power to heal her. In the second story Jairus is encouraged to exercise faith even amidst dire circumstances.
- 5) Both stories deal with fear. The woman with the hemorrhage trembles with fear before Jesus. In the case of Jairus, Jesus warns him against the wrong kind of fear (fear which demonstrates unbelief). Once the little girl is raised from the dead, the family reacts with astonishment.

6) Both stories highlight the power of Jesus. In both cases the healing is immediate and complete. While the story of the woman with the hemorrhage does portray Jesus as overflowing with power, it is not something detached from him and beyond his control. The power has its origin in Jesus and is inseparable from him. Further, the delay in getting to Jairus' daughter because of the woman with the hemorrhage calls on Jairus for a greater faith. Jesus need not hurry, confident in who he is and what he can do. He wants Jairus to have that confidence in him also even in the face of death. The faith exercised in this passage serves as rebuke for those who do not believe.

Some people contrast Jesus' instructions to the demoniac and those to the parents of the little girl who was raised from the dead. It can appear that the former demoniac is told to speak freely while the little girl's parents are sworn to secrecy. A closer reading of the text reveals that the former demoniac is told to tell his family, while the little girl is brought to life in the presence of her family. Jesus' miracles are consistently revealed to the same intimate family circle. Perhaps this has to do with avoiding a circus atmosphere and crush of a large crowd.

8. * What authority does Jesus display here which we had not yet seen? Why is knowledge of his authority over death crucial to our lives?

For the first time we see Jesus raise someone from the dead. It demonstrates that his authority extends beyond the grave. This has been alluded to throughout the book so far, but most especially in this passage. Because death casts a shadow over the entirety of each of our lives we determine our lives as either totally meaningless or totally meaningful depending on what death is. If death is the end then it renders everything that we do valueless and empty.

However, if there is life after death, then life itself is chock full of meaning. What happens to us after death is determined by how we have lived. By referring to the little girl as asleep when everyone knew that she was dead, Jesus says something about himself. His own eventual death and resurrection would render death as harmless as sleep for those who believed. Jesus transforms death so that like sleep it is a harmless, temporary state - something we rise from in the morning. Because Jesus has authority over death we escape its tyranny.

9. * What has been communicated throughout this passage about appropriate and inappropriate fear? /* Do you recognize any fears in your own life that keep you from doing some of the things you are made for? How does what is taught here enable you to deal with those fears?

We see in these stories that faith is the antidote to fear. But not some abstract notion of faith (i.e. faith in faith or a nebulous, mystical sense that things will work out O.K.). It is faith in Jesus - the powerful Son of God, that is advocated. It is faith then, which includes fear in the sense of reverential awe. As long as we grow in a true view of God and are rightly relating to him in fear (knowing his power and greatness) and faith (knowing his goodness and desire and ability to work for our good) then nothing need paralyze us with fear. When we are afraid it means we have lost sight of who God is. He alone is worthy of our fear and once he is feared all other fears dissipate. This does not mean that there will always be the endings to circumstances we might expect. It does mean that he is

in control, is wise and good, and therefore, can be trusted. We don't need to shrink back from life's situations but can approach them with boldness and courage. No power is a rival for Jesus who is for us and on our side.

Further Notes

MARK 4:35-5:20

We have here two detailed miracle stories. Mark's particular emphasis is that Jesus can do what man cannot. Faced with the impossible Jesus is all-sufficient. (Mk 10:27). There are early signs of the disciples' understanding of their master failing to match what he does and says. This feature grows steadily. Two outstanding questions follow from the stories but are present most clearly in v40-41 *"Why should we be afraid if Jesus is with us?" "Who is it who can do such things as these?"*

v35-41. The disciples set out on the lake in obedience to Jesus and immediately run into severe difficulties! The description in v37 and the disciples' words in v38 show that even experienced fisherman couldn't cope. They were sure they were perishing. The feeling of the disciples here is surely one we can identify with: we're in trouble and Jesus doesn't seem to care, just as though he was asleep. Their awakening of Jesus, however, does not seem to be primarily an appeal for help, more a feeling that he also should be worried! Jesus does care and can help. He displays his authority over nature with a word. Parallels with Genesis 1 are surely appropriate. As in the parable of the sower, the power of the word of God is a theme throughout the whole Bible (e.g. Isa -46:11. Ex 12:27-28. Acts 12:24).

More particularly here, see Psa 65:1, 7, Psa 124:1-5. Before pressing personal applications, make sure the passage is understood as history. Jesus did this. *"What does that make Jesus?"* remains Mark's persistent cry.

Ch 5:1-20. Mark has recorded Jesus dealing with possession before but underlines the sheer impossibility of this case in v3-4. Violent, uncontrollable. alienated, self-destructive: a terrible catalogue. This man is beyond all human help.

Once more, the demons recognize and worship Jesus, while declaring that there is no association between them, contrary to the Pharisees' view (3:22). The deliberate emphasis on names in v9 may be associated with the idea that knowledge of someone's true name gives power over them (see possibly Rev 2:17) but certainly again marks the severity of the man's condition. Strictly,, a legion would mean 4000 to 6000 men but as there are only 2000 pigs a reluctance to take numbers mathematically is probably wise, although the identify confusion of me/ we/ he/ them in v-9-10 is striking.

No definitive answer to the pig problem exists although there are many suggestions: proof of cure for the man and for us; sign of the demons' destructiveness; a *"medical necessity"* due to the violence of their exit. Mark's focus is on v15. Look at the difference Jesus has made: *"sitting there, clothed and in his right mind."* The people weren't so much afraid for the rest of their pigs as of Jesus' power. They saw him as uncontrollable! So they wanted him to

go away and he agreed! The idea that Jesus might go away if you tell him to has terrifying implications.

The story ends with lessons on priorities and service. Here, against the normal injunction to silence, the command is to speak, since the marveling crowds cannot obstruct Jesus' ministry. Rather, witness to the absent Jesus is needed. The healed man obeys but note the transposition of "*Jesus*" for "*Lord*" in v19-20.

What can we tell our friends? Certainly 5:19 but can we also meet I Pet 3:15? Col 4:6?

MARK 5:21-43

These two stories continue the theme of Jesus' authority over the impossible. All man's enemies, all that is outside man's control submit to Jesus but as Ch 6 shows, miracles alone do not force people to recognize him.

Jesus' dealings with these two disparate individuals out of the whole crowd highlight both the importance of faith, its character and the wide range of people who come to trust Jesus. The sandwiched nature of the story illustrates Jesus' priorities as he takes the time to comfort and teach an unclean woman with a chronic problem, causing a (male) church leader in urgent need to wait.

v21-24. Jairus comes to Jesus in daylight, unlike Nicodemus, in front of the crowd falling before Jesus, not presuming on his respectability and religious status and being prepared to risk censure from his superiors. Like many others he has come to Jesus on someone else's behalf. His request is urgent and his faith seems clear. He is convinced that Jesus can help where no-one else can. Jesus responds as he never rejects those who come to him in trouble (Matt 11:28-30, Jn 6:35-37). The crowd follows, presumably eager to see another miracle.

v25-34. The woman, unnamed, comes secretly, hidden in the crowd. Unlike Jairus she has no status or wealth, her condition even barring her from the synagogue (Lev 15:25-30). Her problem is chronic rather than urgent but like Jairus she is beyond all human help, yet trusts in Jesus to deliver her. Mark pinpoints the start of her transformation in v27: someone had been talking about Jesus! (Rom 10:14). She *heard* about Jesus, *believed* he could help and *came* to him.

Her desire to touch Jesus' robe is less a belief in magic than a humility which denies any right to Jesus' time (Matt 8:7). Her conclusion is justified in v29 as she is healed in the act of touching the robe.

Jesus emphasizes in v34 that it was her faith that made all the difference. As the confused disciples point out, lots of people were in contact with Jesus' clothes but only one profited from "*touching him*". Physical proximity to Jesus is not enough as Judas forcefully shows again later. There is a warning here to people who merely "*attend church*". Despite poor Jairus, Jesus stops and seeks out the woman. He isn't seeking fame for the cure. That's caused enough problems already. Jesus wants his followers in the open (Matt 5:14-15) and upon her admission accepts her as "*daughter*". (Mk 3:35), declaring her faith and

pronouncing the end of her uncleanness. Her assurance of healing can now rest on his promise and not on her experience alone.

v35-43. Meanwhile, Jairus is told to give up by his servants, since Jesus' delay has been fatal. Jesus rejects their assessment that there is nothing for him to do. His assured rejoinder is amazing: death is not to be feared! Jesus brings only the inner circle of disciples (9:2, 14:33), rejecting a large audience but selecting a small group, to train more effectively. Both the servants and the mourners are certain the girl is really dead, Jesus' comment in v39 seeming silly enough to laugh at. Jesus dismisses them as he had the crowd (and they went!). Despite the privacy there were witnesses and a record of the actual words spoken: with great effect, as she responded! Both this inanimate corpse and inanimate nature (4:39) hear Jesus' voice. Of course they were amazed!

Jesus is right to say that as long as he is present death need not be feared. The early church understood this in calling a burial ground a cemetery, "*sleeping place*". This is very different to the earlier graveyard. "*a place with tombs!*". Mark is still emphasizing the importance of deciding who Jesus is, on the basis of evidence such as this passage.

Study 8 - The Rejection of Jesus

MARK CHAPTER 6:1-30

Questions

1. * Was there ever a time in your life where you felt fairly helpless and dependent? If so, what did you learn from that situation?

READ Mark 6:1-29

2. * Why do people in Jesus' home-town react so negatively towards him?
3. * How does this passage support what we have already learned about faith and what new insights do we gain about faith and unbelief?
4. * Why does Jesus instruct the Twelve as he does? What was he trying to teach them?
5. * In what ways do you think the instructions given to them are applicable to us, if at all? What is not applicable?
6. How do verses 14-15 reiterate the theme of the first half of Mark's gospel?
7. * Mark's account of John the Baptist's death is longer than the other gospels. What is Mark's purpose? What features of the story tie it to other sections of our study? * What does it suggest about Jesus?
8. * Why do you think Mark sandwiched this account of the death of John in between the mission and the reporting back of the Twelve (vs 7-13; v30)?
9. * How are we to respond to persecution when it comes? What forms does it take in our culture?

LEADER'S NOTES MARK 6:1-30

Main Points

Jesus has demonstrated great power and has shown himself to be the Son of God. He is worthy of our fear and our faith. Yet, he meets with unbelief and rejection. First, in his hometown, familiarity blinds the people to his message. They do not believe in him as the one in whom the kingdom of God has come. Then the Twelve are sent out with Jesus' authority to preach and cast out demons. They meet both acceptance and rejection.

Finally, John the Baptist faces ultimate rejection and is killed. If John, a *"righteous and holy man"* (6:20), was beheaded, then it should not surprise us when Jesus meets with crucifixion. Jesus and his followers will meet with rejection. However, the reason lies not with them, but with those who oppose them. They are hard-hearted and blind.

Commentary on the Passage and Notes on the Questions

1. * Was there ever a time in your life where you felt fairly helpless and dependent? If so, what did you learn from that situation?

Approach question. It corresponds to the passage about the mission of the Twelve in vs.7-13.

2. * Why do people in Jesus' home-town react so negatively towards him?

The main reason for their unbelief is their familiarity with Jesus. All of their questions arise from the dilemma, *"How can a person so well known be so significant?"* His fundamental message which he undoubtedly preached in their synagogue was *"God's reign has arrived with me! Repent and believe the good news!"* But his ordinariness foiled them. They did not deny his miracles and wisdom, yet they took offense at him. There was a pride and hard-heartedness at work. They did not have ears to hear or eyes to see. So their awe at Jesus' words and miracles turns to unbelief just as happened to townspeople in the region of the Gerasenes (5:1-20). They refused to see what God was doing. Note: Because Jesus likens himself to a prophet in the proverb he uses to explain the people's unbelief we ought not to conclude that Jesus was just a prophet. According to his testimony and the testimony of others he was far more - he was the Son of God.

3. * How does this passage support what we have already learned about faith and what new insights do we gain about faith and unbelief?

The vital nature of faith is emphasized. Our greatest need is that God be working to rescue our lives yet without faith we will be left in our personal dungeons. We are told that because of the people's unbelief, Jesus was unable to perform many miracles. How are we to understand that statement?

It is not that God is hindered in his capacities by our lack of belief. It is his prerequisite that before he will act faith must be demonstrated. His character is such that when faith is not present he is not pleased and will not reveal himself in power. It is the way he set up the world. *"Without faith it is impossible to*

please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (Heb. 11:6).

When faith is absent God refuses to act. Jesus won't force people to respond to him. Those who reject the revelation that they are given, will not get more. Indeed, even what they have will be taken away from them (4:25). Their unwillingness to trust Jesus in spite of his transparent life and work means Jesus will reveal no more of his greatness. Mark's purpose is to indicate that openness to God, faith, is rewarded by God's miraculous power, but a lack of openness will mean the reverse. The people from Jesus' hometown have all the evidence they need to believe (remember faith is not a leap in the dark, but arises from an honest assessment of the facts), but they refuse to do so. Their unbelief is disobedience which arises from a chosen blindness.

4. * Why does Jesus instruct the Twelve as he does? What was he trying to teach them?

The intent of Jesus' instructions to the Twelve was to make them dependent upon the hospitality of those to whom they preach. They were to carry no provisions (no bread, no bag, no money), and the prohibition against two garments (no extra tunic), probably refers to an outer garment, a cloak, commonly used as a bedroll in ancient times by poor people, shepherds, and those who had no lodging for the night. For both food and shelter, they were utterly dependent on others. This means a response to him and his message is concrete and measurable. If the Apostles were provided with food and shelter by someone, it was synonymous with their acceptance of the good news.

A lack of hospitality proved a rejection of the message. Jesus tells them that if they are rejected in a village, they are to perform a symbolic act of warning, ridding their sandals of the dust of the town to prefigure God's rejection of the town for its disobedience. Because the Apostles go with Jesus' authority their rejection is more of a rejection of Jesus than of themselves (Lk. 10:16). By reporting this, Mark continues to highlight the fact that in spite of Jesus' greatness, rejection was a common, if not an irrational or blind response.

5. * In what ways do you think the instructions given to them are applicable to us, if at all? What is not applicable?

The Apostle's calling here was unique and to miss the context for it is to go wrong in the application of the passage. We are not personally called in the way they are to literally go from town to town shaking the dust from our feet where we are not accepted. Their mission at the time was to Jewish towns. What was at stake was Israel's acceptance or rejection of their King. Their mission would serve as testimony to the general rejection of Jesus by Israel. It was a mission for its own time and purpose. The instructions Jesus gave them about what to take was also unique for the moment. They are not meant as instructions for us to follow. Still, there are plenty of similarities between what Jesus called them to do and what he calls us to do.

- We ourselves are to spread the message that the kingdom of God has come in Jesus Christ.

- We are to do so everywhere we go.
- We are to look for people's acceptance or rejection of the message and let them know that the message calls for a response.
- We are to let people know there are consequences for rejecting the message.

“Wiping the dust from their feet” might mean for us withholding from interaction with someone who continues to reject the message. *“Don't throw pearls to swine,”* says Jesus, meaning that just as pigs don't appreciate pearls those who cannot see the value in the message we have and continue to spurn it should not continue to hear it. It is too precious to have trampled in mud. This only refers to people who consistently ridicule the message, not those who might on a bad night or day spurn our efforts to share our faith.

6. How do verses 14-15 reiterate the theme of the first half of Mark's gospel?

Mark tells us of various responses and different opinions towards Jesus. Mark is reminding us that this is the universal question that all must answer: *“Who is Jesus?”* Mark is intent that we not be distracted by the details. This is the question we are to be asking ourselves throughout our reading of the book. All the answers here are, of course, wrong. The question is in the process of being answered. Still, the answers given demonstrate that Jesus was viewed as no ordinary person. This helps to keep the question before us.

7. * Mark's account of John the Baptist's death is longer than the other gospels. What is Mark's purpose? What features of the story tie it to other sections of our study? * What does it suggest about Jesus?

The answer to the question implied in vs. 1-6 and vs. 7-13, *“Why don't people see who Jesus is?”* is now answered. Herod could not believe because he would not repent. That is why Mark extends this account; to highlight this lack of repentance as the core problem of unbelief. John had courageously confronted Herod not with just a general call to repentance but with the specific sin of marriage to his brother's wife (Lev. 18:16; 20:21). Herod had heard John teach and had come to fear him.

Knowing that John was a righteous and holy man he protected him and even liked listening to him. But his response is not deep enough. Herod's birthday serves as an opportunity for Herod to repent decisively and publicly. It is also an opportunity for Herodius to get rid of John. Herod misses his opportunity while Herodius takes advantage of hers. Herod had made a stupid promise. When he is trapped by it he shows his true colors as much as he feared John, he feared the reaction of the crowd more.

Another reason Mark included this lengthy account was to ground the gospel message in the Old Testament as he has done earlier (1:2-3; 6). Mark has made the connection between Elijah and John the Baptist in those passages. Here he continues to do so. This is important because in the Old Testament we are told that before the Messiah comes, Elijah must return. This story has a striking resemblance to the story of Ahab, Jezebel, and Elijah (1 Kings 16:29-34; 19:1-3).

Finally, Mark's inclusion of this lengthy account of John's death foreshadows Jesus' death. John is renowned for righteousness and holiness. Herod's strange thought that Jesus might be John come back to life reaffirms that Jesus too had such a reputation. Like John, he will be murdered. Neither of them deserved such an end. They meet death from Herod's government (a tie between John's death and the plotting that the Pharisees are doing with the Herodians to take Jesus' life [3:6]), not because of their wickedness, but because of their godliness in the face of unbelief and a lack of repentance.

8. * Why do you think Mark sandwiched this account of John's death in between the mission and the reporting back of the Twelve (vs 7-13; v30)?

The reason Mark sandwiches this account in between the mission and the reporting back of the Twelve may have been to indicate that persecution of the followers of Jesus is inevitable. While we have said that their particular mission was unique for its time the response of people as we undertake Christ's mission in our own time is likely to be similar. John was murdered for his faithful proclamation of God's message. The same thing would happen to Jesus. We can expect persecution as well. The placement of the account of John's death has more to do with this concern of Mark than with the chronology of the events.

9. * How are we to react to persecution when it comes? What forms does it take in our culture?

Chiefly, Mark wants us to realize that persecution and rejection are inevitable. There should be no surprises here. A servant is not greater than his Master. Paul tells us, *"For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him"* (Phil. 1:29). In addition to expecting persecution we are not to scale down in our spreading of the message. Persecution will lead us to rejoicing nonetheless: In Acts 5:41, we are told that after the apostles have been flogged *"they left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name."* Why? The Apostles already belonged to the only One who really mattered. If they are rejected by others, as unpleasant as it may be, it could not destroy them. *"Who needs the acceptance of the serfs, when you have the acceptance of the King."*

In addition to this, they count it a privilege to suffer in the same way as their Lord did. If the Creator of the Universe suffered for them, then to suffer for him in a far smaller degree than he did for them, was considered an honor. The forms of persecution can be as sinister as death or imprisonment. Such activities still take place in many countries. Persecution can also be much more subtle. It can take place on the intellectual realm in the form of being ridiculed for Christian beliefs both theological and moral. Many of us certainly get intimidated when people appear to have more intellectual fire power than we do or even when the majority of the culture holds an alternative and opposing religious or moral view. Many have felt the anger of those who think the Christian views on various issues horribly intolerant. Or been excluded from group activities in the work place.

Mark 6:1-29

This section builds on the theme "*Who is Jesus?*" which climaxes in 8:27-30. Increasingly, people's varying assessments of Jesus are shown, depicted mainly by their response to him. As in Ch 3, rejection leads to a redirection of the ministry rather than its frustration (Acts 13:46-47), as the disciples begin to fulfill Jesus' call to service in evangelism (1:17).

v1-6. The disciples are with Jesus to learn (3:14). Here and in the story of John is a lesson showing what may result from preaching the good news, just as Paul also warns Timothy (2 Tim Ch 3-4). As usual, Sabbath, synagogue, teaching. Here is the crowd's difficulty: they recognize and apparently accept both Jesus' remarkable teaching and his miracles, yet this doesn't fit into their previous understanding of him as the village carpenter and possibly illegitimate at that! Their resolution of the discrepancy between what they "*know*" and what they can see and hear appears to be to ignore the latter and refuse (as in showjumping!) to account for Jesus' full character. No wonder Jesus marveled, what more could he do to encourage belief if they had heard and seen so much? On v5 Cranfield notes that "*it is not that Jesus was powerless apart from men's faith but that in the absence of faith he could not work mighty works in accordance with the purpose of his ministry*". For those, however, who needed him, the question of his identity was more than academic. Some trusted him to be more than a carpenter and were healed.

v7-13. As before, Jesus moves on, now expanding the ministry through the Twelve. The new family and the new church grow as the old reject (2:21-22, Ch 3). The authority of Jesus extends to his ability to delegate it! Practical details can be found in abundance (note that these instructions vary according to circumstances (Lk 22:35ff): in pairs for fellowship, staying at one house out of politeness and to avoid gossip. They are specifically briefed on possible rejection. The instruction is to treat that town as though it was gentile territory, as a warning. The summary of their message is "*repent*" (1:4, 1:15, Acts 2:38, Acts 17:30). This remains a basic instruction and we change it at our peril.

v14-16. Again "*who is this?*". Nobody here thinks he's just a carpenter. The guesses all convey respect, yet fall far short of the mark.. Herod's conclusion appears to be prompted by a guilty conscience.

v17-19. At first sight this section looks very much like a digression, Mark having dealt with John very briefly in Ch 1. However, two possible reasons for its inclusion are:

Firstly, as a sandwiched story. While the disciples are preaching, Mark gives the result of another's faithful preaching, taking up the theme of rejection with applications to the disciples, Jesus and ourselves. John told the truth, was imprisoned and killed.

Secondly, as supplying a fuller picture of Herod. V16 alone would show him simply as an evil man, which is far from the full picture.

He is much more human than that and his route to evil more subtle. The disciples' and John's message was to repent. Herod tried to sit on the fence. He

put John in prison to please his wife and angered his wife by keeping him alive. He feared John as a holy man but finally decided his pride was more important than John's life!

Confused? So was he (v20). He would not make up his mind, trying to have his cake and eat it too. Finally he was trapped by circumstances and his own priority of "*saving face!*". He gave a promise he shouldn't have, kept it out of pride, at the expense of justice and someone-else's life.

The warning for us as hearers:- the command is repent. Fence sitting can be fatal. Evil is subtle (Gen 3:1!) and insidious.

The warning for us as speakers:- preaching the truth is often unacceptable and will cost us hardship, possibly even our lives.

Study 9 - Understanding the Loaves

MARK CHAPTER 6:30-56

Questions

1. After a busy day, how do you like to unwind?

READ Mark 6:30-56

2. How does Jesus demonstrate compassion in vs. 30-35? What do we learn about his attitude to people in these verses?
3. In Jesus' conversation with the disciples what do we learn about discipleship? Are there situations which you face consistently where a similar lifestyle is called for?
4. Why does Jesus feed the five thousand people? What does He reveal about himself in this action? What OT passages prefigure this feeding?
5. According to verse 45-48, what sets the stage for Jesus' going out to the disciples?
6. What might have been Jesus' intention in going out to the disciples? (Hint: Look at Exodus 33:12-34:7 where the language of "*passing by*" is used). What is revealed about his intention in his conversation with them?
7. According to Mark, the disciples respond strangely to Jesus because they have not understood about the loaves. What was their reaction and what should the disciples have understood about the loaves?
8. The disciples inability to understand about the loaves is due to their hard-heartedness. What might have led to this hard-heartedness? How can we recognize and counteract hard-heartedness in ourselves?
9. In summary, what does this passage teach us about who Jesus is and what he came to do? What does it teach us about our appropriate response?

LEADER'S NOTES MARK 6:30-56

Main Points

Two stories account for the majority of this passage. In both of them, Mark continues to answer the question, "*Who is Jesus?*". The first is Jesus' feeding of the five thousand with five loaves and two fish. Mark makes it clear that understanding this miracle is crucial for understanding the identity of Jesus. By it Jesus is identified as the Messiah - the shepherd-king, who like Moses in the desert, teaches and feeds the people.

The second is the account of Jesus' walking on the water and calming of the winds. The disciples are amazed at his calming of the winds because "*they did not understand about the loaves*". As we shall see Jesus is trying to get them to see in his miracles something more than his ability to perform them. He is revealing himself. The fact that in this second story Jesus walks on the water, "*passes by them*" and says, "*I am*", all point to the fact that he is more than the Messiah. He is God incarnate.

Commentary on the Passage and Notes on the Questions

1. After a busy day, how do you like to unwind? Approach question.

2. How does Jesus demonstrate compassion in vs. 30-35? What do we learn about his attitude to people in these verses?

First, Jesus acts with compassion toward his disciples, requesting that they come with him "*to a quiet place to get some rest.*" He understands we need solitude and time for reflection in order to rest. We are not just vehicles for getting his work done nor are we defined simply by what we do. That would be a recipe workaholicism and burn-out. The institution of the Sabbath was God saying that we need time to rest, to delight in his creation, and to delight in him as Creator and Redeemer. In this case because of his magnetism and greatness the ministry has been intense so that they have been unable to rest.

Second, he has compassion on the crowd who are "*like sheep without a shepherd.*" By making that statement Jesus makes clear that Israel (and humanity as a whole) need a shepherd. Leaderless and unprotected from marauding predators they are at constant risk. Sheep are also endangered by their own stupidity. Where this phrase ("*like sheep without a shepherd*") is used in the Old Testament, it primarily points to the people's need for rule, rather than simply for provision (Num. 27:17,18; 1 Kings 22:17; Ezek. 34). That rule would be exercised by the Messiah -the true shepherd.

Jesus' compassion causes him to exercise that rule by his authoritative teaching. He exercises compassion by teaching people God's truth. To live well, human beings need God's truth and rule in their lives. In looking at the Old Testament, we find that in Numbers 27:15-23, Joshua, whose Hebrew name becomes Jesus in Greek, is put forward as leader of God's people in order that they "*may not be like sheep not having a shepherd*". However, under Joshua, Israel never enjoyed the full scope of what was promised by God. Joshua pointed forward to the Messiah, the unique "*prophet like Moses*" (Deut. 18:15, 34:9-12; Heb. 4:8-

11). In Ezekiel 34, God condemns the leaders of Israel for failing to shepherd the flock and promises that he himself will rescue them as their true shepherd, giving them abundant pasture and ruling over them in the person of his servant David. The Messiah leading Israel in the second Exodus was often pictured as a shepherd leading a flock (Is. 40:9-11).

3. In Jesus' conversation with the disciples what do we learn about discipleship? Are there situations which you face consistently where a similar lifestyle is called for?

This conversation is one of many passages in Mark's gospel which call Christ's followers to a life of self-sacrificing service. Here they give up much needed rest in order to care for the people. While it is legitimate to care for our own needs, where that care conflicts with obedience to God it must be set aside. This is part of what Jesus' call to self-denial is about. I give up the right to direct my life surrendering my own desire for comfort and security to ensure the safety and security of others.

This is a hard call and we are rarely able to be consistent in this unless our faith taps into resources beyond our own. For these we must look to God. Lest Jesus' disciples be deceived about their own resources, he tells them to give the people something to eat. The disciples' desire to be obedient to Jesus is admirable. They even work-out the budget! Thus they realize quickly how few resources they have. Jesus wants them to recognize their inadequacy. After sharing with Jesus the acclaim of the crowd due to their successful ministry, now focus is thrown back on Jesus alone. He is the Redeemer. They are his servants who must live in dependence on him. When we serve others, we must do so in reliance upon Jesus. Efforts which arise out of our own resources are ultimately doomed to fail.

4. Why does Jesus feed the five thousand people? What does He reveal about himself in this action? What OT passages prefigure this feeding?

It is not because they are starving. He could have sent them home for food, but chose not to do so. Nor is it to demonstrate his power to perform another miracle. He could draw their attention to any number of exorcisms or healings which he had performed in the past. Apparently, something more is going on here. There are strong indications that the feeding accounts are very important events for Mark. In both 6:45-52 and 8:14-21 the disciples are rebuked for their failure to understand the significance of the feedings.

Jesus' main purpose is again to reveal his true nature. There are clues in the passage which suggest this. For example, the Greek word for desert is used in vs. 31, 32 and 35 (though disguised by the NIV). If this is intentional, Mark is drawing some parallel between this feeding and the supply of manna to the Israelites in the wilderness under the leadership of Moses. Taken together with the passages mentioned above (see Question 2) in which the Israelites are likened to sheep without a shepherd (Num. 27, Ezek. 34), Mark is suggesting that Jesus is here fulfilling the role of the longed-for king of Israel, the Messiah, who, like Moses, teaches the people and feeds them.

The reference that the people were organized into groups of hundreds and fifties parallels Moses' organization of the Israelites during the wilderness march (Ex. 18:21). The effect of these details is to show that this miracle is full of prophetic significance and forces the question about Jesus as Messiah, the divinely sent provision for Israel and the fulfillment of the prophecies of a future salvation.

This account immediately follows the episode about "King" Herod (who wasn't really a king, but a tetrarch), suggesting that Jesus is the rightful king and the true leader of Israel rather than the wicked Herod. After the feeding, all those who ate are described as "*satisfied*". Twelve baskets full of fish and bread scraps are collected, a detail which declares the meal unambiguously a miracle of superabundant provision. Clearly Jesus is the Redeemer-Shepherd.

5. According to verse 45-48, what sets the stage for Jesus' going out to the disciples?

Jesus has gone up on the mountain to pray after commanding the disciples to head for home across the lake. They make it to the middle by evening yet by the fourth watch of the night (3:00 am to 6:00 am) they have hit a mighty headwind and are making no progress. They are not in danger and there is no mention of fear until Jesus appears.

6. What might have been Jesus' intention in going out to the disciples? (Hint: Look at Exodus 33:12-34:7 where the language of "*passing by*" is used). What is revealed about his intention in his conversation with them?

The phrase "*he was about to pass by them*" provides the main clue to understand what is going on in this passage. That phrase does not merely mean he was going to beat them to the other side. The previous verse tells us that he was going out "*to them*." Jesus expected them to see him. That his intention was to "*pass by them*" is almost certainly an allusion to God's passing by Moses in order to reveal his glory. (Ex. 33:19,22; 34:56). "*Passing by*" was the significant thing he meant to do. Jesus is intending to reveal himself as the Redeemer God to the disciples. Two other details in the passage confirm this interpretation. The first detail is Jesus' walking on the water. This carries an emphasis on his supernatural power - supernatural to the point of divine, for only a divine being can walk on the water (Job 9:8; 38:16; Ps. 77:20).

The second detail which confirms this interpretation are Jesus' words, "*It is I*". The language in this story suggests that it has the force of a divine "*I am*" statement associated with the title Yahweh (Ex. 3:14, Jn. 8:58; see also Is. 41:2-14; 43:1-13; 44:1-5; 46:4; 48:12). Jesus speaks the way God does. He is more than a new Moses or a new shepherd-king like David. When Isaiah prophesied the true redemption of Israel he made clear that it would be by Yahweh who would achieve it (Is. 41:4; 43:3; 51:12). In Mark 6, having shown by the loaves that he is Messiah, Jesus shows by "*passing by*" and declaring "*I AM*" that he is the Redeemer God Isaiah heralded. He is God incarnate.

7. According to Mark, the disciples respond strangely to Jesus because they have not understood about the loaves. What was their reaction and what should the disciples have understood about the loaves?

The disciples are firstly afraid for they think Jesus is a ghost. They are still self absorbed and doubtful of His power and care for them. Had they deeply trusted in his goodness and authority they would have seen the situation as it was. Once Jesus had revealed himself and stepped into the boat, calming the winds and water, the disciples react in amazement. Their amazement after all that He had done is the more amazing. They are not commended for their amazement, Mark charges them with hard-heartedness. In spite of the miracle of the loaves and walking to them on the water they fail to recognize Jesus' true nature.

The feeding miracle revealed Jesus' true significance and power. Understanding would have kept the disciples from amazement when the wind died as Jesus got into the boat. The evidence of the loaves, 12 baskets of food scraps was in their face, with them in the boat! Hard-heartedness, a term from the OT (Ex. 14:8; Ps. 95:8) which connotes a serious condition of unbelief or even disobedience, does not seem too harsh in this context. Their reaction is no better than the reaction of Jesus' explicit enemies. We are not supposed to make the same mistake but to respond with intelligent reverence and holy awe at this revelation of Jesus' person.

8. The disciples inability to understand about the loaves is due to their hard-heartedness. What might have led to this hard-heartedness? How can we recognize and counteract hard-heartedness in ourselves?

Hard-heartedness is seen as something inherent in fallen human beings unless God does a work of grace to counteract it. In our fallen state, we are naturally unresponsive to God. This is in no way meant to suggest that we are held less than fully responsible for this condition. Indeed, by our rejection of the truth we can further harden our hearts. Even Christians, whose hearts have been softened by God, are subject to hardening of the heart - a decreased responsiveness to God. One evidence of a hard-heart is forgetting or casting aside a lesson which has already been taught. Our need for continually going over the same lessons time and time again ought to be a cause for humility but that in itself is insufficient.

We must take seriously Jesus words, *"whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him."* It encourages us to do all we can to keep our hearts tender before God. The realization that our hearts are far harder than we wish them to be ought not to bring us to despair. The disciples behavior might help us to realize that God is patient and will continue to work on us to soften our easily callused hearts. A second thing which demonstrates hard-heartedness in our lives is how quickly we become fearful in our circumstances. Our self absorption blinds us to the presence and power of One for whom nothing is impossible. Our worry betrays a lack of faith in God's love and sovereignty.

We must cherish all of God's actions on our behalf not forgetting them the way the disciples did. Central to these is the cross of Christ which for all time

demonstrates God's love and power for us. The primary evidence of tender-heartedness towards God is the belief that Jesus is the Redeemer and that we can do nothing to save ourselves. An increasing responsiveness to God's word and obedience to his commands also signal the growth of a soft heart before him.

9. In summary, what does this passage teach us about who Jesus is and what he came to do? What does it teach us about our appropriate response?

A summary and general application question to bring the study to a close.

Further Notes

Mark 6:30-56

The question *"Who is Jesus!"* again seems unavoidable in all three narratives in this section. In the two great feeding miracles in Mark, Jesus establishes himself as the only true feeder and guide, *"the Good Shepherd"* (Jn 10:11). The other themes all hang round the issue of Jesus' identity. Note: Jesus' priorities (v34), service (v37, 41), the disciples slowness to understand (v37, 52).

v30-34. The disciples have discharged their commission to preach and heal, which Mark notes with the singular use of the title Apostle, *"commissioned agent"*. Jesus next commands rest, a necessity not a luxury (Ex 20:8-11). As before (3:20-21), the crowds never seem to stop coming. Jesus does not express frustration, as we might, nor does he try to move away. His response is compassion: pity reinforced with a determination to help. Typically, the primary need for teaching is met first. Ezekiel Ch 34 is highly relevant. Since the shepherds of Israel had not looked after their flock, the Lord would be against them (Eze 34:10). This is promptly illustrated in Mark by Jesus' rejection of pharisaic standards in 7:1-23.

v35-44. The disciples' suggestion seems quite reasonable, unlike Jesus' reply. Jesus repeatedly asks the unexpected or apparently impossible (e.g. 5:30-31) and here takes the disciples step by step to show why he acted as he did, since their comment shows that they did not see the correct answer (which is?). Following Jesus' instructions, the disciples do feed the crowd, when their hopelessly inadequate resources are given to him: a powerful lesson on service and another picture of the ability of Jesus and Jesus alone to meet people's needs (so who is Jesus?). v42-44 leave no room for any rationalization of the miracle: 5000 satisfied with five loaves and more than that left over!

v45-46. The disciples have failed to grasp the intended lesson in the feeding of the 5000 (v52). Jesus' response is prayer. Note the quiet statement of authority: *"while he dismissed the crowd"*. Prayer is highlighted only three times in Mark, at key points in Jesus' ministry (1:35. 14:32). The difficulty here is that even the disciples who know Jesus best seem unable to realize the import of his actions and character. They cannot begin to understand his work until they have recognized him (8:31) but this they show no signs of doing.

v48-52. Jesus' coming to the disciples is not simply another rescue as in 4:35-41, as the boat was not in danger and Jesus did not initially intend to join them. The

result of Jesus' time of prayer is a priority to enlighten the disciples. In the next two chapters, Jesus increasingly attacks their lack of understanding and supplies private instruction. He commences with a great sign purely for their benefit. Jesus' actions are again God-like (Job 9:8, Psa 77:19, Isa 43:16). The disciples are terrified and astounded, yet v52 records that their incomprehension of the earlier feeding miracle is largely responsible. Although they know Jesus can do the impossible, they fail to apply this knowledge both to their present situation and also to their assessment of Jesus' identity. We are being pointed to the difference that understanding who Jesus is should make. Even his cry of reassurance, "*It is I*", has echoes of the Divine Name (Ex 3:14).

v53-56. Mark rarely merely repeats himself, yet this scene is already very familiar. Apart from recording an historical event, Mark could be showing, with reference to the disciples, that people's responses to Jesus are conditioned by their recognition of him. Here the crowd see Jesus as a healer and come to him on those terms alone. This contrasts effectively with the position of the Pharisees in Ch 7. Their opinion of Jesus and hence their treatment of him is very different. These people at least saw their need and had faith in Jesus' ability to help them. It seems unlikely that the Pharisees in Ch 7 would admit to having a need!

Study 10 - The Root of All Evil

MARK CHAPTER 7:1-37

Questions

1. What is one family tradition from your childhood that you will always remember?

READ Mark 7:1-37

2. Why do you suppose the Scribes and Pharisees engaged in the rituals detailed in this passage? What mindset lies behind these activities?
3. How does Jesus answer the Pharisees question? What is Jesus saying about them in his answer? What example does he use to prove his point?
4. Why is the Pharisees' behavior so odious to God? What do we do that might be considered the same type of behavior? How do we fall into a Pharisee pattern of regarding God and religion? Is there a remedy for this?
5. How does Jesus change the topic in vs. 14? In your own words, what is his basic point?
6. Mark tells us that Jesus declares all foods "*clean*". Is Jesus doing the very thing he rebukes the Pharisees for - "*setting aside the commandments of God*"? If not, why not?
7. What is Jesus' assessment of humanity? What is our culture's assessment of humanity? What accounts for the discrepancy between the two assessments?
8. What is Jesus trying to get across to the gentile woman in vs. 24-30? Why does her reply meet with such approval from Jesus?
9. What is unique about the healing in vs. 31-37 in comparison to past healings? Why do you think Mark continues to give accounts of Jesus healings? What is his purpose?
10. What further applications can you draw from this passage? What does it tell us about who Jesus is and how we are to respond to him?

LEADER'S NOTES MARK 7:1-23

Main Points

Mark continues his task of telling us who Jesus is and what he came to do. Although Mark's gospel has called our attention to the problem of sin previously (1:4; 2:1-12; 2:13-17), in this passage he gets more explicit about this fundamental problem with which Jesus came to deal.

Jesus tells us both about the nature of sin as well as exposing the strategies we employ to avoid the truth of our dangerous condition. Having shown us the source of real "*uncleanness*", Jesus then heals a person popularly regarded as unclean because she did not submit to the rituals and traditions - a Gentile. His ministry reaches people who recognize the real problem. Finally, through his healing of the deaf-mute, he demonstrates his authority to bring true wholeness back to people. He comes to bring an end to sin and its effects.

Commentary on the Passage and Notes on the Questions

1. What is one family tradition from your childhood that you will always remember? Approach question.

2. Why do you suppose the Scribes and Pharisees engaged in the rituals detailed in this passage? What mindset lies behind these activities?

Washings for ritual purity were done after going to the marketplace because of unavoidable contact with "*unclean*" persons, (i.e. both Gentiles and Jews who were not careful about maintaining purity). Creating a plethora of traditions and rituals not found in the Old Testament, the Pharisees might appear to increase the demands of the law. In Mt. 23:4, Jesus, speaking of the Pharisees law-making says, "*They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders*". But a closer look exposes the reverse affect. The traditions and rituals served to decrease the demands of the law. Because the Pharisees put all their emphasis on the outward conformity to the law they neglected heart attitudes and motives. By making the laws more numerous and specific while neglecting sins of the heart, *the Pharisees made the law obeyable*.

Certainly they made it burdensome, but if one was rigorously careful it could be carried out. Sin in the heart and mind, which is much more difficult to root out, was ignored. Having made the law obeyable, one could attain a right standing before God self-sufficiently. Being thus justified why would a person admit to moral bankruptcy? This lifestyle of self-justification appeals to many people because it avoids the pain of admitting flaws and moral failure and submitting to real repentance. Many people do avoid real Christianity, unwilling to face God's view of sin and our need for divine rescue. Legalism is a major cop-out. Religious legalists prefer to look down their nose at those who do not conform to their rules achieving a phony sense of moral superiority.

3. How does Jesus answer the Pharisees question? What is Jesus saying about them in his answer? What example does he use to prove his point?

In response to the Pharisees question, *"Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders?"*, Jesus calls them hypocrites, quotes Isaiah 29:13 and accuses them of letting go of the commands of God. The rituals which they viewed as binding were not part of the Old Testament law but additions to it. These rituals had grown up as a *"fence"* of stricter rules to protect people from breaking the supposedly more lenient rules of the Torah, or scriptural law.

So they are called hypocrites for speaking as if they were concerned about honoring God, when truly they were concerned about a form of religion and justifying themselves in it. Because this conflicts with attitudes and motivation that reflect God's real nature, Jesus ruthlessly exposes their wickedness by citing a real case. The Pharisees had a tradition of labeling a portion of their wealth *"Gift"*. In so doing, that portion was set aside for God's purposes. As pious as it seemed, this artificial poverty became an excuse for leaving the care of their own elderly parents to others. Such ordinary family care for the aged might not have looked impressive and godly to observers, but it still matters a great deal to God. Jesus makes it clear that the teachers and the Pharisees were more concerned with impressing each other than God. Their pretense made them hypocrites.

4. Why is the Pharisees' behavior so odious to God? What do we do that might be considered the same type of behavior? How do we fall into a Pharisee pattern of regarding God and religion? Is there a remedy for this?

Rather than driving them closer to God, the Pharisees behavior drove them further away. This was because it enabled them to ignore their need for God's mercy and forgiveness. They could be righteous in and of themselves. Instead of humility before God they became proud of their achievements. They could look holier than others but pay no attention to God's real character. Thus God is offended. In the law they missed the reflection of the Law-giver. Worse they ignored it as inadequate and substituted their own rules. They were utterly deluded.

That Jesus quotes from Isaiah reminds us that playing at religion rather than dealing with God was a problem well before the Pharisees time and warns us that we are vulnerable to the same disease. And the solution is not to swing the pendulum and become careless of the letter of the Law. It is more that our concern must not stop there. The chief thing to avoid in Pharisaic religion is to regard the law as an abstract code when it is a rule of life that reflects the image of God. True religion has a relationship with God at its center, not laws. When we break biblical commands, we are not offending abstract laws, but the God who stands behind the laws. Obeying the law willingly, demonstrates a desire to please God and to avoid grieving him.

If we are coldly formal in our obedience to God's commands then it is likely we have lost sight of His love for us. To see the law as a gift from our loving God and Father for our enjoyment, is to unmask the phoniness of outward conformity. We realize that loving a Person is at the center of true religion. True religion works from the inside to the outside, coming from a heart at peace with God and

demonstrated in our behavior. As Jesus thundered, self-righteousness and pride (two traits commonly found in those who obey God in a cold and formal manner) are repugnant to God and must be ruthlessly dealt with. Our obedience becomes charged with warmth and passion when thankfulness to God is driving us.

Above all, we must strive to genuinely deal with God and allow him to deal with us on a regular basis: enjoying his love, singing his praise and goodness, and allowing him to convict us of our wrong-doing and root out sin that dwells so deeply within us.

5. How does Jesus change the topic in vs. 14? In your own words, what is his basic point?

Having exposed the Pharisees moral bankruptcy, Jesus points to the real problem with which true piety must deal. True religion must account for and deal with - unclean hearts. Initially he ignored their question, but attacked the basis of their views. Now he deals more directly with their question. While the Pharisees had asked about eating with unclean hands, Jesus takes the topic further by saying nothing from the outside can defile a person: not unwashed hands (about which the OT said nothing) nor unclean foods (about which the OT said plenty). Jesus turned people's attention from cultic defilement (which took place when you did not follow prescribed rituals) to moral defilement. Our twisted and rebellious hearts are the problem. It was from the heart that wickedness and evil arose. Jesus came that he might deal with our dark hearts.

6. Mark tells us that Jesus declares all foods "*clean*". Is Jesus doing the very thing he rebukes the Pharisees for - "*setting aside the commandments of God*"? If not, why not?

At Mount Sinai, God set the nation of Israel apart for a special purpose (Ex 19:3-6). Certain foods were declared unclean for Israel, not because they were intrinsically unhealthy or evil (note the repeated "*for you*" in Lev. 11) but because God made the food laws a sign of Israel's separateness (Lev. 20:25-26). The laws were a sign that they belonged to the holy God intimately and this intimacy would be seen in the blessedness of their peculiar lifestyle. These commandments and others like them, ("*uncleanness*" could be transmitted by contact from unclean food to people, cooking utensils and their contents and by touching objects deemed to be impure [Lev. 11:24, 33-35]), were a daily reminder of Israel's unique status before God. Although no food could intrinsically harm a man's heart, breaking the God-given food laws did make a man unclean because it showed that relating to God's holiness was no longer important.

Since Mark's intention is certainly not to portray Jesus as a hypocrite (substituting the traditions of men for the commandments of God) we are left to ask why Jesus is able to overturn laws concerning clean and unclean foods. There are at least two explanations for why Jesus is able to declare all foods clean where previously they were not. First, he has the divine authority to do so. Jesus' authority has been an emphasis of Mark's from the start. It is the prerogative of Jesus as God's Son to change the Law. Such a change does not count as a human tradition for Jesus' word is divine. The word of the elders is not. This is yet one more example of Jesus' claim to be God. Secondly, the food laws were always

intended to be only temporary. Unlike many of the commands which were binding for all people at all times, the laws pertaining to food were in force only in the Mosaic covenant (the relationship God set up with the nation Israel). This covenant was now being replaced by the new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34).

This changes nothing in relation to God's character. The new covenant reveals the same holy God as the old and reiterates the need for a holy heart. However, in the new covenant Israel no longer has special status. The canceling of the food laws is symbolic of the canceling of the whole Law which separated Jew and Gentile (Eph. 2:13-15). With Christ's coming, death and resurrection and the inauguration of the new covenant, people were no longer bound by the Old Testament ritual law. Jesus' declaration that all foods were clean was of huge significance and had vast implications. It was so radical and unexpected that even with Jesus' explanation the disciples are unable to take it all in. Peter himself had to learn it all over again more than once (Acts 10; Gal. 2:11-13).

7. What is Jesus' assessment of humanity? What is our culture's assessment of humanity? What accounts for the discrepancy between the two assessments?

Jesus' diagnostic of the human condition is as bleak as it gets. In this passage he rattles off a list of wicked acts which characterize humanity. With regards to Jesus' attitude toward mankind we are told, *"He would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man"* (Jn 2:24). Our condition is more serious than we want to believe. While outside factors may have an impact on ugly behavior in our lives, Jesus makes it clear that responsibility for such behavior lies squarely on our own shoulders.

Most modern thinkers flatter humanity. Mankind's nature is essentially good, not evil; immoral behavior is from ignorance not from a wicked heart. Education is the panacea that will alleviate the ills of a society. This arises for a number of reasons. Perhaps there is a sense of *"so much beauty in the wreckage"* of our world that leads us to an optimistic conclusion. Perhaps the real reason is that without a sense of God's real nature who can face our real condition without genuine despair? With this strange faith in humanity one can be fairly optimistic about the future. Our problems are not viewed as widely nor as catastrophically as in the scriptures. We can pretend we can do something about them. Just as we began this study - we do prefer to avoid dealing with God and admitting how serious our condition is. It enables us to avoid a dependent relationship with him. We prefer to believe we can save ourselves.

The testimony of Jesus and the Scriptures is both the highest and the lowest view of mankind. Made to reflect the Most High we have become just man-like things cut off from our original destiny. One of the indicators that a person is truly a Christian is that they agree with assessment of Scripture that our condition is far worse than we can even know and that we are utterly lost unless God acts to redeem us. Mark now leads us to the clear evidence of God's willingness to redeem us in the next two sections of Chapter 7.

8. What is Jesus trying to get across to the gentile woman in vs. 24-30? Why does her reply meet with such approval from Jesus?

Jesus words to the woman with the demon possessed daughter, *"First let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs"* are often viewed as derogatory and harsh. F.F. Bruce says *"Maybe the tone of voice encouraged the woman to persevere...What if there was a twinkle in his eye as he spoke."* The word for dog refers to household pets and was probably not the insult that many infer. So what did Jesus mean?. Because the woman was a gentile (v. 26), Jesus words to her indicate that Israel has a priority in the purposes and plans of God. Jesus was not an itinerant wonder-worker. His coming related to God's historic plan, to proclaim the fulfillment of Israel's prophetic hopes. It was Israel, the children of the OT covenant, to whom the kingdom of God was to be proclaimed first. The woman's response conveys a number of things.

First, she acknowledges his authority. Even if she did not understand completely the theological significance of his words, she acknowledged his right to speak them. She does not try to contradict him, but submits to his assessment of her situation. Second, her response demonstrates humility. She acknowledges her dependence upon him for a grace to which she had no right. She is willing to take the left-overs. Third, she is a woman of faith. While the word *"faith"* is not mentioned in this account, the woman's reply expresses the kind of faith that Jesus so greatly appreciated and that never failed to receive what it asked from him.

The Pharisees have demonstrated on numerous occasions that they are on the *"outside"*, no matter how grounded in tradition they may be. This woman however, an *"outsider"* because she is a gentile, demonstrates by her faith that she is really on the inside. She has acknowledged Jesus. He heals her daughter, revealing that redemption is for all those who believe in him and rely on him.

9. What is unique about the healing in vs. 31-37 in comparison to past healings? Why do you think Mark continues to give accounts of Jesus healings? What is his purpose?

Uniquely, this healing takes place in the Gentile region of the Decapolis. Having addressed misconceptions about *"uncleanness"* Jesus in this and the previous account heals people traditionally viewed as *"unclean"*. Mark is saying to a gentile audience that Jesus' message reaches to them and is meant for them. Also unique to this event is the subject, a *"deaf-mute"*. In the Greek OT, the same word is used to describe this man's condition in Isaiah 35:5-6. It is an extremely rare word which takes place only this once in the New Testament and only in Isaiah 35 in the OT, which suggests its use by Mark is deliberate.

Isaiah 35 describes a future when God would bestow blessing and healing on his people. Deliberate or not Mark's continual accounts of healings are meant to be indications that the Kingdom of God has come in Jesus Christ. The fact that the kingdom had arrived was Jesus' central message. Each healing proved it. Each healing shows Jesus himself at the heart of that message. Mark will not allow us to forget that he is the King of the Kingdom.

A third unique feature is Jesus' use of physical means (spit) and heavy sighing. Although common practice among healers of the day, Jesus did not use a magic formula of mystic words; he gave intelligible commands. One last unique aspect of this healing is the response of the crowd. It is expressed in more emphatic terms than previously. They are *"overwhelmed with amazement"*. Perhaps this is meant to be analogous to the response of the people in Isaiah 35 (*"They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them."*) or maybe it is just because the healing of deaf-mutes was so rare. In any event, the response is appropriate to the arrival of the kingdom.

10. What further applications can you draw from this passage? What does it tell us about who Jesus is and how we are to respond to him?

A summary and wrap-up question. Questions like this help people to keep from missing the forest for the trees. Mark's chief concern is to let us know who Jesus is. It behooves us not to miss the answer he is giving to that question.

Study 11 - You are the Christ!

MARK CHAPTER 8:1-30

Questions

1. Do you recall a time when your first impression of a person was radically altered after you got to know them? What were the details?

READ Mark 8:1-30

2. What are the similarities and the differences between the feeding miracle in 8:1-10 and the one in 6:30-44?

3. Why did the Pharisees ask for a sign and why did Jesus deny their request? By his refusal, what is implied for our own lives of faith and for those with whom we seek to share the gospel?

4. In vs. 17-21 Jesus calls his disciples to reflect on the details of the feeding miracles and asks, "*Do you still not understand?*" What did he want them to understand?

5. What does the disciples' incomprehension mean in regard to our own ability to grasp truths about God?

6. Why might the healing of the blind man come between Jesus' rebuke of the disciples and their confession of Him as the Christ? Do you see any significance in the healing taking place in two stages?

7. Why is Jesus' question, "*who do you say that I am?*", so important?

8. In confessing Jesus to be the Christ, what was Peter saying about him?

9. Why would Jesus instruct his disciples to be silent and not allow them to preach that he is the Christ? Why are we in a different position from the disciples with regards to making it known that Jesus is the Christ?

LEADER'S NOTES MARK 8:1-30

Main Points

As we come to the climax of the first half of Mark's gospel the light dawns for the disciples as Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ. But it is an embryonic understanding. Their appreciation of just who Jesus is has yet to develop. Everything in this passage builds to Peter's confession of Christ's identity. The miracle of the feeding of the four thousand, Jesus' refusal to give the Pharisees any additional signs and Jesus' probing of the disciples are all designed to bring us to the inevitable conclusion of who Jesus is.

While Mark 8:31-9:1 rightfully belongs to this passage and should be read during the study, it contains enough important material that it deserves to be studied separately.

Commentary on the Passage and Notes on the Questions

1. Do you recall a time when your first impression of a person was radically altered after you got to know them? What were the details?
Approach question.

2. What are the similarities and the differences between the feeding miracle in 8:1-10 and the one in 6:30-44?

The most significant difference between this feeding and the prior feeding is that this takes place in Gentile territory. Jesus again reveals that he is the Redeemer, Christ not only for Jews, but for all the nations. We know Jesus is ministering to Gentiles because this account of feeding 4000 comes in the midst of other events which happened in Gentile lands. Another clue is that the word used for basket is different from the word used in 6:30-44. In one case the word for smaller Jewish baskets is used and in the other the word for larger gentile baskets.

A second difference is that in the first the people are described as "*sheep without a shepherd*" and the emphasis falls on his desire to teach the people. In the second feeding the emphasis falls on the hunger of the people. In addition to this we are told again that the feeding takes place in the desert. Combining these two details Mark is probably alluding again to Isaiah 35 where God's promised time of new blessing involves a miraculous abundance in desert places.

A third difference to note is that the people came from "*a long distance*." A better translation would be "*from afar*". This seems like another OT allusion to God gathering his people from distant lands where this exact language is used. One final difference is the numbers involved. In the first case five thousand are fed. In this case the number is four thousand. In the first case five loaves and two fish are used. In the second, seven loaves and a few small fish. In the first feeding, twelve baskets full are leftover. In the second, the number is seven. The number of baskets full of leftovers have cause some to speculate that these might be numbers which symbolize Jews and Gentiles. Twelve in the case of the Jews would symbolize the twelve tribes of Israel, seven in the case of the Gentiles would symbolize completeness or perfection, meaning that God's people were now complete.

Numerical symbolism can be valid. The fact that Jesus specifically asks them to recall the number of baskets left over heightens the possibility of significance in these numbers. However Mark is not concerned with symbolic numbers elsewhere in his gospel. To unduly focus on numbers can lead to fanciful interpretations and obscure the intended meaning of the text.

3. Why did the Pharisees ask for a sign and why did Jesus deny their request? By his refusal, what is implied for own lives of faith and for those with whom we seek to share the gospel?

It is hard to say what the Pharisees were really looking for. Clearly, like a tongue working at a broken tooth, the issue of who Jesus is was troubling them. They had said that he is in league with Beelzebub. To proceed to ask for some further sign of Jesus authenticity suggests that they do know his identity. Therefore Jesus sees it as one more demonstration of their blindness and hard-heartedness. They already know but will not accept him. They knew the scriptures, Jesus had already given them in both word and deed an abundance of evidence that he fulfilled the scriptures and had refuted their absurd efforts to cast him as satanic.

To test him in this way was like Israel's tempting of God in the wilderness. There, Israel doubted God's previously demonstrated works and demanded new ones (Ps. 95:9-10; 78:17-20,40-43, 56; Num. 14:1-10, 20-25). In Psalm 95 in particular, God declares *"For forty years I was angry with that generation...They shall never enter my rest."* Here Jesus uses the same language, *"Why does this generation ask for a sign? No sign will be given to it."* Jesus is grieved and pained by their unbelief. Another sign, no matter what it's nature would not convince people with their eyes tightly closed. His departure is a judgment on those who presume to judge him.

The Pharisees' request certainly has applications for our own lives. First, Jesus' reminds us that the scripture record of God acting in history is adequate to bring people to faith. Nothing more is needed. We are told as much in John's gospel: *"Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."* When we demand further signs to convince us that Jesus is the Christ then our behavior is like the teachers who Jesus condemned. It is an authority issue - we are challenging the authority of the Most High - a perilous response.

God has given us sufficient cause for confidence in his love for us in sending Jesus to die for us. This is not to say that we cannot desire further demonstrations of God's goodness and favor. However, to demand them and to predicate the goodness and work of God in Jesus Christ on the basis of them is evil and displeasing to God. Of course, the testimony of Scripture is not only sufficient to cause us to believe in Jesus, it is sufficient for our friends. To fail to believe in Jesus upon reading the records of his life is inexcusable. Jesus' indicates that those unwilling to trust him make their refusal by deceiving themselves. Of course we should deal with intellectual obstacles and mistakes as

to facts for the sake of our friends. We may need to give evidence of the reliability of the Scriptures. However, ultimately, the fault does not ultimately lie with God or with the inadequacy of Scripture or the inadequacy of our explanations, but within the person. As the Pharisees had an ax to grind with God, and thus refused to believe, so it is with our friends who persistently refuse to trust in Christ.

4. In vs. 17-21 Jesus calls his disciples to reflect on the details of the feeding miracles and asks, "Do you still not understand?" What did he want them to understand?

The context of Jesus' question is his warning to avoid the example of the Pharisees. Yeast was a symbol for evil. Jesus is telling us to avoid having the same attitude, evil disposition, and arrogant self absorption as is found in the Pharisees. The disciples, seem to think Jesus wants them to avoid buying additional loaves from the Pharisees and Herod's supporters. They do not realize Jesus is telling them to avoid becoming like the Pharisees and Herod in their resistance to his authority. He calls his disciples' attention back to the miraculous feedings.

When Jesus asks them to recount those past feedings, they remember them perfectly well. It is therefore doubtful that they had forgotten that he could provide for them. Everything suggests that it was not the occurrence of the feedings that slipped the disciple's minds, but rather the significance of the feedings. They have had repeated exposure to his teachings and deeds and yet they are as blind to who he is as the crowds. It seems obvious to us that the miracles of the loaves reveal that Jesus is none other than the Messiah and Lord.

The disciples had seen Jews fed like Israel in the desert under Moses leadership. They had also seen a second feeding, with the added significance of redemption for Gentiles (see notes on question 2), but it made no difference to their understanding. Jesus' feedings revealed he was not just a prophet or wonder-worker but the Son of God, whose ministry not only brought the fulfillment of the prophetic hope of Israel, but also was the basis for the preaching of salvation to the whole world. They were still blind and deaf (8:18).

5. What does the disciples' incomprehension mean in regard to our own ability to grasp truths about God?

That the disciples had spent large amounts of time in Jesus' presence, hearing his teaching and watching him perform miracles, yet still remained clue-less about his identity, demonstrates a universal myopia in recognizing who Jesus is. The disciples were not especially dumb and thick-headed. Their problem is the problem of all of us. We who come to see who Jesus is, do so only because God opens our eyes. We are all like Paul on the Damascus road (Acts 9), stubbornly and persistently resisting God until he acts to change our hearts, open our minds to his truth, and knock the scales off our eyes.

This is why in other places Paul says, *"no one can say 'Jesus is Lord.' except by the Holy Spirit"* (1 Cor. 12:4), and *"The man without the Spirit does not accept the things of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot*

understand them for they are spiritually discerned." (1 Cor. 2:14) Jesus says, *"I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."* (Jn. 3:3)

We are completely dependent upon God's grace and intervention. We will remain in our natural, hardened state toward God unless God miraculously changes our heart, giving us ears to hear and eyes to see. When God does give us the undeserved gift of eyes to see, it ought to be cause for never ceasing gratitude and thankfulness.

6. Why might the healing of the blind man come between Jesus' rebuke of the disciples and their confession of Him as the Christ? Do you see any significance in the healing taking place in two stages?

From the previous study we saw there was reason to believe that Mark had Isaiah 35 in mind when he wrote. The healing of the blind man is quite likely a further reference to this passage (*"Then will the eyes of the blind will be opened"*) which looks forward to a new age of blessing inaugurated by the coming Messiah. This is Jesus' way of leading his disciples to the conclusion and Mark's way of leading us to the conclusion that he is the Christ. Why the two stage healing?

Certainly Jesus did not have to do it this way. He has healed people instantaneously from a distance and even raised the dead. It cannot be a question of this being a more difficult miracle to perform. One reason for the two stage healing may be merely to highlight and emphasize the miracle and its significance. It gives us a chance to savor the miracle and prevents us from passing over it too quickly lest we miss its importance. On the other hand, riding on the back of Jesus' earlier statement about the blindness and deafness of the disciples (8:18), it is possible that Mark is using it as a metaphor about our own need for help to recognize Jesus. Looking at the structure of the whole passage before us, some believe the two stage healing of blindness to be purposely analogous to the two stage revelation of Jesus as the Christ. First, Jesus is proclaimed Christ. Second, so we might see clearly who the Christ is and what he has come to do, we are told of his suffering, death and resurrection (8:31). This may be going further than the text warrants. Dogmatism ought to be avoided.

7. Why is Jesus' question, "who do you say that I am?", so important?

If a merely human teacher came to you after a number of years of spending time with you and imparting knowledge to you and then said, *"Have you understood what I have been trying to teach you all these years!"* The most important issue is this: *'who am I?'*, you would probably think the person vain and somewhat sick and become rather disenchanted with him or her. Yet this is just what Jesus does! Were he an ordinary man the question is fairly unimportant. One good man can be replaced by another. However, if he was God incarnate, as he implicitly claimed, then it is the most important question that we will ever face.

The answer we give to the question has both temporal and eternal consequences. It affects how you live now and what your fate will be after death. When Jesus

asks, "*Who do you say that I am?*" we must realize that this is the ultimate question to which we and our friends must be brought. And when we answer it we must allow the implications of the answer to dawn upon us daily.

Optional question: What are some of the daily implications for our lives of proclaiming that Jesus is the Christ? (This question will be explored at greater length in Lesson 12)

8. In confessing Jesus to be the Christ, what was Peter saying about him?

Messiah literally means "*anointed*". In the OT, the term implied being set apart and empowered by God's Spirit for a special task. Many prophets, priests, and kings were anointed. From the time of David onward, however, a specific "*Anointed One*" was expected. God had promised David a descendant who would rule over Israel for ever (2 Samuel 7:12-16). Solomon bore some similarity to the one promised but fell short of the standard; when he sinned, God deprived David's family of most of the kingdom in a way that showed the promise would be fulfilled, but only in the future (1 Kings 11:11-13).

After even this part of the kingdom had been sent into exile for sin, the prophets promised that God's "*Anointed*", a descendent of David, would one day come to lead the whole people back not only to the land but to the New Creation (Is. 9:6,7; 11:1-16; Jer. 33:14-26; Ezek. 37:24-25). Peter was confessing Jesus to be this "*Anointed One*" when he called Jesus the Christ.

9. Why would Jesus instruct his disciples to be silent and not allow them to preach that he is the Christ? Why are we in a different position from the disciples with regards to making it known that Jesus is the Christ?

Neither the crowds nor the disciples themselves understood what the task of the Messiah was. Jesus' rebuke to Peter is evidence of this. More teaching must be done before they could proclaim Jesus as the Christ. Indeed, it was not until after the death and resurrection of Jesus had actually taken place that an intelligible proclamation of him as the Messiah could take place. The popular expectation of the Messiah in Jesus' time was that he would be a military leader who would defeat and overthrow Israel's oppressors. He would come to liberate Israel politically. It is because Jesus was not fulfilling this role that the imprisoned John the Baptist questions whether Jesus is truly the Messiah.

In response to John, Jesus cites Isaiah 35:5-6 and 61:1 as support (Mt. 11:1-14). Interestingly, Jesus omits all references to judgment, to "*the day of vengeance of our God*". This is not because Jesus rejected the reality of judgment. His teaching is full of it. But it lay ahead in the future. Jesus' task at his first coming was to proclaim works of grace and mercy for the oppressed and to offer a sacrifice for sin. Only in the future with Jesus' second coming would final judgment come upon the oppressors themselves. Because the crowds had the expectation that judgment on the nations would be coming in the here and now, Jesus forbade his disciples from proclaiming him the Messiah lest the crowd go into hysteria.

This command, of course, does not apply to us since we live on this side of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. He has now given the command to *"go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."* We proclaim him as the *"Christ who was sacrificed to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him"* (Heb. 9:28). It is the concern of the remainder of Mark's gospel to let us know that this is what Jesus came to do.

Further Notes

Mark 8:11-30

This complex passage is thoroughly embedded in its context. The theme of the disciples' slowness in understanding, first met in 4:10-13, climaxes with Peter at last (after 6:37, 52, 7:17-18 8:4, 15-21!) realizing the answer to the central question of Mark Ch 1-8 (e.g. 2:7, 4:41, 6:2-3, 14-15). These current sections (starting from at least 7:31 and possibly earlier) all speak of blindness and sight, understanding and incomprehension.

v11-13. The demand for *"proof"* is perennial. The attitude of the Pharisees seems to suggest that they have already decided that Jesus isn't the Messiah. Their problem is that they are blind to the signs Jesus has already done (Matt 16:1-4), so another miracle will not produce faith (Mk 6:2, Lk 16:31). Again Jesus leaves those who will not accept him and moves on.

v14-21. The poor disciples again. First, Jesus' parable. Leaven, yeast, as usual represents unseen but persuasive influence, hence the warning is in general, is against unconsciously accepting ideas and practices patterned on the examples of the Pharisees and Herod, with legalism, self righteousness and hypocrisy on the one hand and political expediency equivocation and materialism on the other. With respect to the pressing issue of *"Who is Jesus?"*, they present two different dangers: that of minds confidently made up, fixed in spite of the evidence, as well as that of minds insincerely uncommitted, refusing to make a decision. The disciples, however, are still stuck on *"bread"*, feeling guilty for not having brought any! Jesus' rebuke, showing his near frustration with them, points out the stupidity of worrying about physical needs with Jesus present, as they have twice experienced. This shows how they and we *"forget"* Jesus' actions, not by being unable to recall the details but by failing to digest their significance and live in the light of them. Once more, what should they have understood?

v22-26. The second *"difficult miracle"* (7:31-37). Note again the point of service: *"some people brought"*. Like the previous case, done in private with physical signs. The two stages and the question are unique. Various reasons have been suggested: to encourage the man's weak faith, to show that Jesus always completes his work, an example of faith gradually improving (Prov 4:18?) but these all feel a little weak. A technical medical point is fascinating: it is not enough to see. For functional sight the brain must be able to understand what is seen. Key to these two miracles is their close relationship to the disciples (v18). Mark's choice of this story and its location makes this aspect his principal

message. It is they (and us!) above all who cannot speak properly because they have not heard and cannot see properly because they have not understood. Jesus is always trying to make people see and they often respond very slowly.

v27-30. The question of all time: *who is Jesus?* Jesus forces the issue by asking it himself. The first set of opinions all have the hallmark of respect. The modern view is often still Jesus as a great teacher. Being aware of public opinion and quoting it is fairly easy. Having to make up our own mind as Jesus' second question challenges is much harder! Peter's reply is remarkable, God given, just because it is not one of the popular ideas. Peter has reached an understanding for himself. Note the crucial point that Jesus accepts Peter's assessment, thus undermining any possibility of his being a good teacher only. He is either much more or much less.

The injunction to silence we have met before with respect to miracles. Here, as the disciples do not understand properly the significance of Jesus as Christ (v31-33), those outside the group would certainly misconstrue such a claim.

Study 12 - What Jesus Came to Do

MARK CHAPTERS 8:31 -9:1

Questions

1. What is one of the hardest things you were ever asked to do?

READ Mark 8:31-9:1

2. Why does Jesus say the events in v. 31 "*must*" happen? What does this verse tell us about the purpose of Jesus' life and ministry?
3. Why does Peter rebuke Jesus in v. 32 and why does Jesus respond by rebuking Peter so harshly?
4. What are some ways in which we, like Peter, distort the character of God? Give examples of false images, pictures, and expectations that we have of him.
5. What does it mean to "*deny yourself and take up the cross*"? Are there regular moments when you sense the call for self-denial? How successful are you in denying yourself in those situations? What causes you the most difficulty?
6. This gospel was written, at least in part, for Christians who were undergoing severe persecution. How would these words of Jesus give courage, hope and comfort to them? How would you apply this to your own life in your present circumstances?
7. In your own words, what is the paradox in Jesus' teaching in vs. 35-36? How do you make sense of this in your own life and what perspective is required?
8. How do Jesus' words in v38 give further definition to and clarify his command in v35? Are there moments when you are ashamed of Jesus?
9. What is the connection between Jesus' promise in 9:1 with his words in vs. 33-38? In what way might some of those present have seen the kingdom of God come with power before tasting death? How are these words meant to encourage us as we seek to follow Jesus?

LEADER'S NOTES MARK 8:31-9:1

Main Points

Most scholars regard verse 31 of Mark 8 as the second half of Mark's gospel. Mark's primary, though not exclusive, concern in the first half was to answer the question, *"Who is Jesus?"* Peter's confession, *"You are the Christ"* brought this section to its climax.

The chief concern in the second half of the Mark's gospel is to answer the question, *"What did Jesus come to do?"* What is partially answered now becomes explicit: He has come to die for our sin and be raised from the dead so that we might experience redemption. The second half also deals more explicitly with the question, *"What does it mean to follow Jesus."*

Jesus' death becomes the paradigm upon which Christian discipleship is based (*"deny yourself and take up the cross"*). It is the central metaphor for what it means to follow him. This passage (8:31-9:1) is part of a fairly distinct section of Mark's gospel that extends from 8:31-10:52. *"The primary purpose of this section is to explain what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah and what it requires to be identified with him."*

Throughout these chapters Jesus and the disciples are on their way to Jerusalem. This destination is finally announced in Mark 10:32ff. Therefore, while Mark is telling us what Jesus' mission is in these chapters, we are being led closer to Jerusalem where his mission will be accomplished. Mark 8:31-9:1 is to Mark part II what 1:14,15 was to Mark part I: a summary proclamation about Christ and demand for a response which is then expanded on in the chapters which follow.

Commentary on the Passage and Notes on the Questions

1. What is one of the hardest things you were ever asked to do?

Approach question.

2. Why does Jesus say the events in v. 31 *"must"* happen? What does this verse tell us about the purpose of Jesus' life and ministry?

Jesus is engaging in prophecy here, predicting what will take place. The intention of biblical prophecy was not to record history in advance but to provide certainty when these events took place that they represented what God had planned and fulfilled. It is for this reason that Jesus indicates events yet to happen *"must happen"*. Jesus did not found a new religion based on his death for people's sin. He was the fulfillment of Israel's prophetic hopes. The rejection and death of the Servant as described in 8:31 was foretold in Old Testament Scripture, most obviously in Isaiah 52:13-53:12 but also in Psalm 22 (see Mark 15:29-34), Psalm 118:22f (see Mark 12:10f), and Zechariah 13:7 (see Mark 14:27). Even in Daniel 7:25 the *"Most High"* is spoken against. Isaiah 53:7,10 speaks of this death of the Servant in language reminiscent of both the Exodus 12 *"price of redemption"* and the Leviticus 16 *"sacrifice for sin."*

A second reason why Jesus says these things *"must"* happen is that the redemption of humanity depended on it. God's fail-safe plan was to redeem a

people for himself and Jesus' death was essential for the accomplishment of that plan. It is sometimes said that if there had been another way for God to redeem us, he would have used it. If he could have spared His Son from judgment he would have. Scripture confirms this to be true. In Hebrews 2:17 we read *"For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people."* It was necessary for our forgiveness that Jesus be killed and resurrected. That Jesus says these things *"must"* happen reminds us that he came to deal with our central problem - sin.

3. Why does Peter rebuke Jesus in v. 32 and why does Jesus respond by rebuking Peter so harshly?

For Peter, it was inconceivable that the Messiah should suffer. The Messiah was one who would triumph, not suffer and die. Influenced by the surrounding culture, Peter probably held the popular belief that Messiah, like King David, would overthrow Israel's oppressors and Rome was their major foe at this time. A rejected Messiah was incompatible with Jewish convictions and hopes. Because of this misconception, Jesus forbade Peter and the other disciples from proclaiming that he was the Messiah. The power of Peter's misconception is demonstrated by the speed of his "rebuke" to the one he had just called Messiah. Jesus found the rebuke presumptuous and struck it down.

When Jesus had been tempted by Satan in the wilderness to accept world dominion on his adversary's terms (*"It will all be yours if you bow down and worship me"*) he refused to yield. The temptation relied on the common conception of the conquering Messiah as opposed to His Father's path of humility, obedience, suffering and death. Peter was repeating the same temptation however unwittingly and so Jesus calls him "Satan". Imagine if Jesus had adapted to Peter's expectations, what might have resulted. The disastrous nature of the consequences explains the harshness of Jesus' rebuke.

According to Jesus, Peter *"did not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."* Unable to accept a suffering Savior as a fundamental part of God's will he would have shaped Jesus in his own image. Of course, God's way of dealing with the problem of sin and human rebellion fails to conform to the niceties of human expectations. Jesus shows no inclination to justify the ways of God to men. He simply affirms that the way of the cross is the will of God.

4. What are some ways that we, like Peter, distort the character of God? Give examples of false images, pictures, and expectations that we have of him.

We also tend towards making gods in our own image. For example when we say *"I like to think of God as..."* with total disregard for what Scripture reveals. We develop expectations to which we want God to conform. We decide how God ought to behave in certain situations and what ought to be given to us. We decide which circumstances given to us are fair and which are unfair and hold him in contempt when he does not abide by our standards. We may see God as a Santa Claus figure, an old man who doesn't really notice how we live

and who gives us what we ask for. We may view him as one whose primary job is to secure our happiness believing that our happiness is what matters most and that he could not possibly want us to suffer.

Making God in our own image condemns us to regular frustration and potential bitterness because our view of reality is out line with the way the world really is. But even more dangerously, the habit of making God in one's own image may leave one eternally condemned. Believing ourselves to be following and worshipping the true God, we may actually be using our religious devotion to an invented god to keep the true God at a distance. The Bible's analysis is that what often passes for seeking God is really just a front for evading him. The only antidote to this tendency is to allow the Scriptures alone to be that which informs you of God's nature and ways, and to neither add nor subtract from their testimony. We pick and choose what we like and dislike about what the Bible tells us about God's character, ways, and plans at our own peril.

5. What does it mean to "*deny yourself and take up the cross*"? Are there regular moments when you sense the call for self-denial? How successful are you in denying yourself in those situations? What causes you the most difficulty?

It is important to realize that for the early disciples these words were meant to be taken literally. Just as Jesus was to be executed, execution for the disciples of Christ was also a very real possibility. Neither the Roman nor Jewish authorities were friendly to Christianity. Persecution was common. People were put to death from the earliest stages of the life of the church, the first martyr being Steven (Acts 7). Therefore, when Jesus called the first disciples to follow him he meant that they were to be willing to follow him to death.

How do we become willing to do that? Jesus says firstly by "*denying oneself*". Let's contrast this with Peter's denial of Jesus. When Peter denied Christ what he did was to disown him, repudiate him, turn his back on him. As John Stott says, "*Self-denial is not denying ourselves luxuries like candies, cakes, cigarettes, and cocktails (though it may include this); it is actually denying or disowning ourselves, renouncing our supposed right to go our own way*". Self-denial becomes an obvious component of discipleship when we realize that we are no longer our own because we belong to Christ. Because he has died for us we are his. But He is not like a slave owner who buys us so he can take advantage of us. Instead, he buys us because he loves us.

Coming under his rule and living for him is not destructive to ourselves. It fulfills us because it was for him that we were created in the first place. Living for Jesus entails doing whatever he asks, including a willingness to die for him. Belonging to him, we identify with him to the extent that we give him our complete allegiance, delight in what he delights and hate everything that he hates. While Jesus' command might have meant death for the early disciples (and might mean so for us depending on when and where we live) they also have present implications for the lives of those who are never faced with martyrdom. Because the truth that underlies the command is the fact that we belong to Jesus and not to

ourselves, ultimately his words serve as a call to live for his purposes and not our own.

This means firstly, we are to deny the sinful self. Anything that is contrary to God's purposes for us must be rooted out (see Mark 7:21.22 if you are wondering what those things might be). Secondly, we are called to deny ourselves things that are legitimate in themselves in order that we might love others and meet their needs. To live a self-indulgent, luxuriant lifestyle in light of the misery of so many in the world who are either without Christ or basic material goods is unconscionable. Knowing Jesus' extravagant love for us, we are called to love our neighbors.

Denial wasn't done just for the sake of denial. Self-denial has nothing to do with self-hatred. To engage in this kind of self-denial is of little to no benefit and can actually be harmful - making oneself proud and leading others into a misunderstanding of Christianity. It can lead others to believe that we think the material world and material things are evil. It can lead them to believe that being human is something we are trying to escape. But God made us and made the material world and both are to be seen as good and delighted in (1 Timothy 4:3.4). Self-denial is to be done for the sake of the gospel - for Jesus' purposes in us and his purposes in the world around us. In the final analysis self-denial is a matter of a sustained willingness to say "No" to oneself in order to be able to say "Yes" to God and his will.

Optional Question: What are some misconceptions people operate under when it comes to understanding Jesus' call to self-denial?

6. This gospel was written, at least in part, for Christians who were undergoing severe persecution. How would these words of Jesus give courage, hope and comfort to them? How would you apply this to your own life in your present circumstances?

It is very likely that, in addition to recording the words of Jesus, Mark had a pastoral concern for those who would be reading his gospel. They were undergoing persecution and were justly frightened. By juxtaposing Jesus' words about his own destiny with his call to discipleship an identification would be formed between Jesus' disciples and Jesus himself. By calling Jesus' words to mind, the early Christians would realize that he was asking them to endure only what he had endured. His words would serve as a reminder that suffering and persecution were to be expected. In John 15:20 Jesus says, *"No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also."*

In persecution and suffering, they had the high privilege of imitating their Master, the one who had given his very life-blood for them. Knowing that they were following in the footsteps of Jesus provided strength and comfort to them. We also must see, in any kind of suffering which we undergo, that Jesus is only asking us to imitate him. *"If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps."* (1 Peter 2:20, 21). Knowing that he has gone before us in suffering but is now

seated in glory, should serve to comfort and encourage us. A future with Him awaits us.

7. What is the paradox in Jesus' teaching in vs. 35-36? How do you make sense of this in your own life and what perspective is required?

The paradox is that in belonging to him (losing yourself) you fulfill the purpose for which you were created. To preserve your life by remaining in charge will result in permanent separation from God and from what you were created to be. It is eternal loss. Christian self-sacrifice leads to long term blessing. Loving God is the same as seeking the best for oneself. In fact, the two are inseparable. In losing yourself, you actually become yourself. God has set the world up in such a way that when you go against God, you go against yourself. When you go for God (doing what he requires), you go for yourself.

This does not mean that obedience comes easily or pleasantly in the moment. It can be excruciatingly painful, like a death. But the rewards are incomparably great. Jim Elliot's famous words bear repeating here: *"He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose."* The perspective we must gain in order to live out this paradox is the incomparable value of having a relationship with God. Unless our greatest treasure is communion with God we will not have the endurance to live out Christ's demands. Biblical self denial proves itself as we dare to experience it. It becomes an acquired taste. Another perspective which assists us on this path is serious consideration of short and long term consequences of our choices. So often, short term satisfaction guarantees the loss of eternal blessing.

8. How do Jesus' words in v38 give further definition to and clarify his command in v35? Are there moments when you are ashamed of Jesus?

Here Jesus clarifies his paradoxical statements. We were told that whoever saves his life will lose it. Here Jesus says that whoever gains their life through denial of him and the gospel, (being ashamed of him and the gospel), will suffer infinite loss when he returns to judge the world, (he will be ashamed of them and deny any association with them). This shame is folly because those before whom we feel the shame are *"a sinful and depraved generation."* We are ashamed of the Lord of glory before those who ought to be ashamed of their own lives. It is absurd. It is like a child being ashamed of a father who risked his life to save many people when the child is in the presence of a group of mass-murderers. It shows that we have our values all wrong. Shame and denial of Jesus arises in a number of ways.

1) We may be ashamed of mentioning our allegiance to Jesus. We are afraid the world will think we've gone crazy because of our devotion to the unseen. Actually, it is the world which has gone crazy in their denial of God. C.S. Lewis demonstrated the absurdity of denying God by likening our rebellion against God to the scent of a flower rebelling against the flower.

2) We are ashamed of the exclusiveness of Christianity. It seems an arrogant claim? What is truly amazing is that God has provided any way at all for his rebel

creatures to be restored to him. That he has done so at the expense of the suffering of his own Son shows how loving and merciful he is.

3) We are ashamed of our lifestyles - those things we do which the world disapproves of and those things we avoid which the world applauds.

4) We are ashamed of people in the church who don't have it all together in the way that we believe we do. The Scriptures tell us that Jesus is not ashamed to call us his brothers (Hebrews 2:11,12) but we are often ashamed to be numbered among those who belong to him.

In the final analysis, our shame arises from the fact that our values are upside down. Our only hope for being released from such shame is to gain God's perspective on reality and hold to his values.

9. What is the connection between Jesus' promise in 9:1 with his words in vs. 33-38? In what way might some of those present have seen the kingdom of God come with power before tasting death? How are these words meant to encourage us as we seek to follow Jesus?

With the news of Jesus' impending death and that his suffering and death is meant to serve as the basis and pattern of their own Christian lives, the disciples need re-assurance that they are following the right person. If Jesus' claims turned out to be false their lives would be given in vain. Jesus' prophecy in 9:1 is meant to be a word of comfort addressed to those who heed his call to follow in spite of the cost involved. If some people actually will "*see the kingdom of God come with power*" in the here and now, then everyone can live out Christ's call with confidence - devoid of the fear that their investment will have been without purpose.

So what do Jesus' words mean? His statement has often puzzled people because it seems to indicate his second coming would take place in the not too distant future. If interpreted in this way it would mean that those who happened to live long enough would not taste death but would witness Jesus' second coming. The puzzling thing, of course, is that Jesus' statement would have been wrong. This interpretation of Jesus' words suffers from the fact that Mark wrote this book nearly forty years after the events taken place and it would be unlikely for him to include a saying that his readers would regard as a flat error. The time period that the phrase would have referred would have been over without the radical transformation of the world having taken place.

Evidently, these words referred to something beyond what people had seen from Jesus up to this point. Though they had seen him exercise tremendous power, the kingdom had not yet "*come with power*" as it would one day in the foreseeable future. The major clue to discerning what event Jesus is referring to is to be found in the fact that the account of the transfiguration follows these words in each of the gospels. In the transfiguration, Jesus is revealed in his glory. For a short time his glory is not masked and hidden. The King is seen in all his power and greatness. This event prefigured the resurrection of Jesus as Lord and Christ which was shortly thereafter followed by a tenfold multiplication of his followers. "*The kingdom was visibly on the march.*"

We need not have seen the transfiguration to be encouraged ourselves by the fact that it happened anymore than we need to have been witnesses to the resurrection in order to put our trust in Christ. By a well-grounded faith in Jesus and his promises we know these events have happened. The experience of others is recorded to strengthen our faith. To know that others were witnesses of these events can encourage us to follow Jesus. When we reflect on the transfiguration and the resurrection it serves to remind us of what awaits us - future glory - and therefore gives us courage to live lives of self-sacrifice without reservation.

Further Notes

MARK 8:31-38

Peter's confession of Jesus as Christ, the Messiah brings the first half of Mark to a close. Jesus' words and actions have all been principally directed to this end.

This recognition is not just a turning point in Mark's Gospel but also in the history of Israel itself. The coming of the Messiah was understood to be the culmination of many prophecies and promises, heralding a new age for Judah. The expected Messiah has indeed come but not as expected. There is a new lesson of "*Who is Jesus ?*" to be taught as Jesus' priorities and values clash with other peoples preconceptions.

v31-33. Jesus' immediate priority is therefore to teach (this priority unchanged) the character of the Messiah. Note that Jesus still uses his preferred title "*Son of Man*" which was more able to convey ideas of both Majesty and Suffering. (See Cranfield for a very full discussion).

Paul's basic gospel, "*nothing... except Jesus Christ and him crucified*" (1 Cor 2:2) exactly echoes verses 29 and 31. Jesus begins to teach (and keeps on teaching: see 9:11-13, 9:30-32, 10:32-34) the path that is ordained for him, that he must travel if he is to be the Savior.

The prophecies of Jesus' death later become more detailed. Here the bare message is suffering, rejection and death but with resurrection as well. The disciples repeatedly fail to grasp this last clause. Jesus knows what is going to happen and accepts it. There is no question of a mistake, or Jesus taken by surprise. This builds into the theme of God's plan, God in control despite appearances (see 4:38-40).

Peter, on the other hand, cannot understand or accept, proceeding to correct the person he has just identified as his Messiah! (see Acts 10:14 for another classic Peterism). Having begun to understand, he mistakenly thinks he understands everything. Jesus' reply is stunning, particularly with respect to the clear cut sides: God on one, man and Satan on the other. Peter, not unnaturally, has man's point of view of the situation, but to hold on to this against God's revealed attitude is to deny him, thus taking Satan's part.

v34-38. Jesus expands the lesson on suffering: not only must Jesus not avoid suffering but suffering and self-denial is the prescribed route for all of Jesus' followers (note "*the multitude*", not just "*the disciples*"). To FOLLOW Jesus

means to deny our own independence, becoming subordinate to his plan for our lives. To follow JESUS means heading into many of the pains and difficulties he endured, as we try to emulate him. The reference to "*cross*" implies picking up your death warrant, being prepared to die, much more than just enduring daily difficulties. In the simplest terms this is what it will mean to be a Christian (2 Tim 3:12).

In v35-36 Jesus explains for those who find this too hard. It may sound suicidal, actually the reverse is the case. It is those who try to look after themselves, "*playing safe*" who will find it hopeless, because there is nothing acquirable which can in the long run buy your life, in either the sense of fulfilling or securing it. The only profitable use of a Life is to spend it, giving up your rights, time, resources and even life itself; for others. as Jesus commanded but above all for Jesus himself and the good news about him, the Gospel (Lk 12:20-30).

In v38 Jesus again puts the alternatives in the clearest terms. If we are ashamed of Jesus now, avoiding closely following him in his path of service, then we have no basis for a hope of being joined with him, following him in glory. Jesus' view of the future never ends with his death. He is totally confident of resurrection, the glorious approval of God the Father and of returning with angels. This is the Lord, claiming his Kingdom. Little trace remains of a mere "*good teacher*".

Study 13 - Listen to Him!

MARK CHAPTER 9:2-29

Questions

1. How often do you deal with doubt when it comes to faith issues?

READ Mark 9:2-29

2. Just prior to this passage Jesus says, *"I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God, come with power."* How do his words connect with the transfiguration? So what was the purpose of the transfiguration?
3. What do the details of the Transfiguration account reveal about Jesus? Why does Mark tell us about the mountain? Jesus' clothes? Moses and Elijah? The cloud? The voice from heaven? (see Deut 18:14 - 22)
4. How do we listen to Jesus today? What are some of the more important things which you have learned from him recently?
5. To what did Jesus refer when he said *"Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him"*? How would understanding this reveal to the disciples God's purposes for Jesus and themselves?
6. How does the account of the demon-possessed boy connect and flow from the previous sections?
7. Why does Jesus speak so harshly to the disciples upon learning of their failure to drive the demon from the young boy?
8. What does Jesus want from the man before he will heal his son? Why are his words, *"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief"* sufficient to meet with a response from Jesus?
9. What new lessons do we learn about faith from this account?
10. Following his stern words Jesus says to the disciples *"This kind only come out by prayer"*. What does he mean by this? What lessons are there for us here and what are some concrete ways you can apply those lessons?

LEADER'S NOTES MARK 9:2-29

Main Points

Here in Mark's gospel (8:31-10:52) *"the primary purpose is to explain what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah and what it requires to be identified with him."* In the transfiguration, Jesus is identified as the Messiah who is leading a second Exodus (a deliverance from slavery). This exodus will be accomplished by his death. Because this is contrary to popular expectations there is special need for God to add his approval of Jesus and to call the disciples to listen to him.

They must especially listen to him when he speaks of his destiny. From the mountain top follows a descent into the valley of the shadow of death. First, in speaking of the death of John the Baptist (*"Elijah has come"*) there is a reminder not only that Jesus will die, but that suffering for righteousness sake is part and parcel of the Christian life. Second, in the account of the demon-possessed boy we see how destructive are the forces of evil. Only the death of Jesus can reverse their impact. We also see to what extent the disciples remain under the power of evil as they continue to manifest unbelief.

Commentary on the
Passage and Notes on
the Questions

1. How often do you deal with doubt when it comes to faith issues?

Approach question.

2. Just prior to this passage Jesus says, *"I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God, come with power."* How do his words connect with the transfiguration? So what was the purpose of the transfiguration?

The connection between Jesus' words in 9:1 and the event recorded in 9:2-8 is the connection between promise and fulfillment. The transfiguration was a revelation of the Kingdom come with power. Since glory connotes power, the divine glory seen in the transfigured Jesus means that on this occasion some of those who heard the prediction in 9:1 now see God's rule as having come in power even before the Son of Man's coming in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. One of the indicators that Jesus' promise in 9:1 is a reference to the transfiguration is that in each of the gospels which record those words (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) the account of the transfiguration follows on its heels. Therefore, it's obvious that all the gospel writers saw a strong connection between the two.

A second indicator that the relationship is one of promise and fulfillment is Peter's reaction. Evidently, he believes that the Kingdom has come in power. That is probably why he asks them whether or not he ought to set up shelters for them where they could live permanently. They would then be able to exercise their rule from the mountain. Peter's belief that the kingdom had come in finality was mistaken. He had not yet been able to hear Jesus' prediction of his sufferings and death. However, he did see the kingdom come in power.

As regards the purpose of the transfiguration, one ought to take note that the event is oriented toward the disciples. It is for their benefit. He was transfigured

"before them". Elijah and Moses appeared "before them". The voice spoke for their ears. The purpose of the transfiguration, at least in part, was to encourage the disciples with the truth that though many might be ashamed of the Son of Man (Mark 8:38), he has openly been revealed as the one who possesses the glory of the Father. He is who he has claimed to be. In the transfiguration, the three disciples were given a glimpse of what all people will see on the last day when the Son of Man comes in glory. It reassures them that what Jesus said in Mark 8:38 was true. When things turn bad and Jesus faces death, they need not doubt that he is the Messiah. Secondly, it encourages them to follow him unreservedly.

He had just told the disciple that his death would serve as the pattern for the life of his followers. For those of us who follow him and are willing to face ridicule or suffer or die for him, it is important to know that glory follows suffering. His vindication and coming triumph provided assurance that they would share in his glory if they held fast their commitment to him. Finally, it would encourage the disciples to realize that what Jesus predicts come to pass. The transfiguration can also encourage us in all these ways. (See question # 9 of Mark lesson 12)

3. What do the details of the Transfiguration account reveal about Jesus? Why does Mark tell us about the mountain? Jesus' clothes? Moses and Elijah? The cloud? The voice from heaven? (see Deut 18:14 - 22)

The transfiguration reveals Jesus in his divine glory. It is a supernatural event reminiscent of OT revelations of God. The event occurs on a high mountain as did the revelations of God which Moses and Elijah received (Ex. 24; 1 Kings 19). It is noteworthy that the event is described as happening "*six days after*" Jesus promise because Moses vision at Sinai also took place six days after it was promised (Ex. 24:12-16). The fact his clothes became dazzling white is probably meant to be an allusion to Dan. 7:9 which is a description of a vision of God in which "*His clothing was as white as snow.*" Neither Moses nor Elijah shine. Jesus is singled out and revealed in his deity.

Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus representing the law and prophet's which witness to Jesus. They are now superseded by him. The fulfillment of all things has come. This is further identified by the words spoken from the cloud. In Deuteronomy 18:15 Moses says "*The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.*" Jesus is identified as that prophet. "*This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him*" says the voice from the cloud. The voice confirms Jesus' unique status. This was none other than the voice of God who often spoke from a cloud in the OT (Ex.13:21, 19:16; 24:15-18).

The voice admonishes the disciples to listen because until now they had listened poorly. While Jesus speaks clearly to them of his need to suffer and die, they are unable to hear it. The voice is pointing to his prediction of death and resurrection besides his summons to cross-taking. Because the disciples still do not understand (are unwilling to do so) they are told not to tell anyone about what they had seen. Not until after the death and resurrection takes place will they finally begin to make sense of it all. The fundamental purpose of Jesus'

transfiguration is to reveal the divine glory of Jesus. The Messiah is both God and man.

4. How do we listen to Jesus today? What are some of the more important things which you have learned from him recently?

The way we listen to Jesus is by reading the Scriptures as though they were addressed to us. We must read the Bible in such a way as to allow scripture to master us rather than putting the emphasis on our mastery of scripture. We must seek to apply the Scriptures to the concrete details of our life and be ready to do whatever they ask us to do. Our listening to Jesus in the Scriptures should extend beyond the gospels to both the Old Testament and the remainder of the New Testament. The Apostolic writings in particular explain Jesus' life and work. Jesus commissioned them to speak on his behalf and their writings are every bit as much his voice as the gospels.

5. To what did Jesus refer when he said "*Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him*"? How would understanding this reveal to the disciples God's purposes for Jesus and themselves?

In Malachi 4:5 we read, "*See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.*" The expectation of the Jews was that Elijah must return prior to the Last Day when the Messiah would come and bring final judgment. The disciples believed this to be the case but were confused by the fact that they had just seen Elijah but that he had gone away without conducting his ministry. They therefore deduce that the teachers of the Law must be wrong, since the Messiah, in the person of Jesus, is present with them. If the teachers are not wrong, then their belief that Jesus was the Messiah must be false. They ask Jesus about this.

Jesus confirms the interpretation of the teachers of the law Elijah must come first. Before going on to tell them that Elijah has already come, Jesus asks a question which serves to challenge their interpretation of what it means for Elijah to restore all things. Because the Messiah, who comes after Elijah, must suffer and be rejected, evidently Elijah's restorative work is something other than the triumphant display which the disciples expected. If the Messiah must suffer (Jesus is making reference to Isaiah 53:3) then perhaps Elijah will also suffer. By asking this reflective question, Jesus seeks to cause the disciples to re-examine Elijah's role. Only then does he go on to say that Elijah has come. Throughout Mark's gospel hints have been made that John was the fulfilling the role of the returning Elijah (Mark 1:2-8, see lesson I; Mark 6:14-29; see lesson VIII).

Here, Jesus makes the identification with greater clarity. Without identifying John by name, he states in John, Elijah has come. John had done a work of restoration. He led the people to renewal through repentance and forgiveness. However, his work did not end in triumph but in suffering. The fact that he suffered at the hands of Herod and Herodias (Mark 6:14-29) strengthened the identity of John with Elijah, who in his own ministry was harassed by a wicked

woman and a weak king (1 Kings 19:2,10). Elijah (John) suffered, just as the Messiah would suffer.

With this conversation, the way is further prepared for the disciples to expect Jesus' suffering and also their own suffering. To follow Jesus means that one walks the way of the cross. Mark's readers would find encouragement in this exchange between Jesus and his disciples. The persecution that they were undergoing was to be expected. Jesus and John had suffered and so would they.

6. How does the account of the demon-possessed boy connect and flow from the previous sections?

This entire segment of Mark's gospel takes one from a literal mountain top experience to a conversation about suffering then to a place where unbelief is rampant. It progresses from light to darkness. If Peter had initially believed that the Kingdom had come in power (9:5), all of his illusions are destroyed. There can be no mistaking that world is still full of darkness. It is quite possible that the passage is following the pattern of the passage in Ex. 24 in which Moses descends the mountain only to find the people engaged in activities of rebellion and unbelief. If the six day reference was an allusion to Ex. 24, this passage is likely an allusion to Ex. 24 also.

7. Why does Jesus speak so harshly to the disciples upon learning of their failure to drive the demon from the young boy?

We are told that the disciples tried to cast the demon out of the boy but were unable to do so. Evidently, the reason for this is that they did not pray (9:29). What is implied is that they have stopped depending on Jesus. They failed because they did not act in sincere faith. The disciples had been tempted to believe that the gift they had received from Jesus (Mark 6:7) was in their control and could be exercised at their disposal. This was a subtle form of unbelief, for it encouraged them to trust in themselves rather than in God. It was ugly and Jesus would not tolerate it. His rebuke implies that the disciples are in many ways no better off than the teachers of the law. To refer to them as an "*unbelieving generation*" means that they are indistinguishable from unregenerate men who demand signs but are fundamentally untrue to God.

8. What does Jesus want from the man before he will heal his son? Why are his words, "*I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief*" sufficient to meet with a response from Jesus?

Jesus wants an expression of genuine faith from the man. His statement, "*if you can*", expresses unbelief. Perhaps the disciples inability to heal the boy has led him to doubt whether Jesus himself can do anything to remedy the situation. What Jesus conveys to the man is that if his son is to be healed, everything depends upon his ability to believe, and not on Jesus' ability to act.

While Jesus' hands are not tied by the unbelief of people (he has sovereign power and can do anything he wants), God is pleased to act in response to faith. God's general requirement for him to act is that faith be present. His character is such that when faith is not present he is not pleased and will not reveal himself in power. Though the man confesses that his faith is somewhat wavering, he has

real faith all the same. In fact, his admission that his faith is imperfect is a way of confessing his sinfulness and demonstrates how realistic a picture he has of his condition. Evidently, Jesus is pleased with the man's response.

9. What new lessons do we learn about faith from this account?

We do learn that unbelief is our natural condition. Apart from the work of God in our life, we resist God and do not trust him. The teachers of the law, the disciples, and the man himself all testify to this reality. Humanity as a whole is mired in unbelief. A second thing we learn is that when one finds oneself unable to believe we are to cry out to God for help. Third, we learn that faith need not be perfect for God to respond. One popular teaching says that if you ask God for healing and do not receive it, it is because your faith is imperfect. The man's cry, *"I believe. Help my unbelief."* and Jesus' healing of his son is a direct contradiction of this teaching.

God does not play a game of *"cat and mouse"* with us in regards to our faith. He doesn't say, *"You almost got it right. Try it again and then maybe I will respond to you."* God demands genuine faith but he knows our weakness and treats us accordingly. This does not mean that we should not seek to strengthen our faith. It pleases God for us to express confidence in him and be expectant of his working in our lives and in our world. Growing in faith is part of our overall Christian growth and it should be part of our hope that we grow in this virtue.

10. Following his stern words Jesus says to the disciples *"This kind only come out by prayer"*. What does he mean by this? What lessons are there for us here and what are some concrete ways you can apply those lessons?

See Question 7. Prayer is the chief means of declaring our dependence upon God. Jesus says, *"Apart from me you can do nothing."* It is primarily in prayer that we give our assent to this truth. We are called to live lives of radical reliance on God. It is not good enough to have put your reliance on God in some past situation. Moment by moment reliance on God is required from us if we are to combat evil in the world and evil within ourselves.

Study 14 - Relationships Among Christ's Followers

MARK CHAPTER 9:30-50

Questions

1. What was your best experience in working on a team to accomplish something? What made it a positive experience?

READ Mark 9:30-50

2. What themes run through this passage of Mark's gospel? How does Jesus' prediction of his death in v.31 set up the remainder of the chapter?
3. Why might the disciples have argued about who among them was the greatest? (Hint: consider what they understood the role of the Messiah to be)
4. Why does the welcoming of a child serve as a strong indicator of one's willingness to be a servant to all? How does welcoming a child serve as an indicator of accepting Jesus and God the Father?
5. What kinds of attributes, actions, and attitudes are present in those who you would consider "*servants of all*"? In what kind of situations do you find it most difficult to be a servant to others? What concrete steps can you take to be more of a servant? (Be as specific and practical as you can be)
6. Look at vs. 38-42. The disciples indicate their unwillingness to receive the exorcist who is ministering apart from them in Jesus' name. What does Jesus indicate is necessary for people to be included among his followers? What are the implications of this passage for Christian relationships?
7. What might be the connection between the previous sections of this passage and vs. 43 - 49. What is Jesus' main point in these verses?
8. What truths in this passage would help you live the Christian life? How might you go about making sure these truths have an impact on your life?
9. From vs.50 and the teaching which precedes it, what does "*salt*" stand for? What is Jesus saying?
10. Summarize the teaching of this passage about life in Christian community?

LEADER'S NOTES MARK 9:30-50

Main Points

This section of Mark's gospel identifies the task of the Messiah and explains the lifestyle his followers must lead. The emphasis here is on how disciples are to manage their relationships with one another. Jesus predicts his death which serves as the framework and background for his instructions. He then calls them to serve all people - even children and those ministering outside their own circle. Anyone who has received Jesus' message is to be an object of their service. If the disciples do not serve in this way they are likely to drive would-be followers away.

The disciples are then given instructions about their own propensity to sin which has the effect of diminishing the pride which may have hindered their service of others. Jesus concludes by saying that the "*salt*" of good relations among his followers must not be allowed to go bad. The presence of flourishing relationships among Jesus' disciples demonstrates the power of Jesus and the reality of his kingdom.

Commentary on the Passage and Notes on the Questions

1. What was your best experience in working on a team to accomplish something? What made it a positive experience? Approach question.

2. What themes run through this passage of Mark's gospel? How does Jesus' prediction of his death in v.31 set up the remainder of the chapter?

See Main Points. The nature of our relationships with one another in the Christian community is the main theme of the passage. We are to live at peace with one another, accepting one another, and serving one another in humility. If Jesus, the Master, would serve us, his servants, then serving our fellow-servants, high and low alike, is the only logical course to follow. Pride and consequent self-service cannot look any more absurd or ugly than when they stand in the shadow of the cross.

3. Why might the disciples have argued about who among them was the greatest? Hint: consider what they understood the role of the Messiah to be.

They were probably considering the positions they would have under the Messiah when his kingdom was established. Remember, their expectation of the Messiah. The Essene community on the Dead Sea from the same period, ranked members annually according to the worthiness of each individual. It may have been a common attitude. But we cannot say with dogmatic certainty that this was the issue which gave rise to the argument. The text does not tell us. What we can say is that the passage speaks powerfully to all who would view themselves as superior to others and behave in a self-important manner.

4. Why does the welcoming of a child serve as a strong indicator of one's willingness to be a servant to all? How does welcoming a child serve as an indicator of accepting Jesus and God the Father?

Though children in Jesus' day were important and loved by their parents, the general attitude was that they were *"to be seen, but not heard."* They were without status. More often than not they were considered a bother and a nuisance. Certainly they were not *"great"* by the world's standards and the *"great"* would have given them little time and thought. To receive and care for a dependent, helpless, child with no status, meant a humiliation and lowering of oneself. A person had to consider themselves unimportant in order to care for or speak to and pay attention to people without status. Jesus was saying that this kind of servant attitude was where true greatness lay. It was a servanthood that cared for others and honored them without the possibility of any return.

We often serve others if they are considered greater than us and if it enhances our reputation to be spending time with them. However, the genuine servanthood to which Jesus calls us means that we serve people who in the world's eyes are *"lower"* than us. We must be servants *"of all"*, and not just servants to those whom we choose to be. We can not consider ourselves *"above"* serving anyone. We are to honor *"all"* others above ourselves and consider *"all"* others greater than ourselves. One's willingness to receive a child demonstrates genuine servanthood.

Jesus' use of the phrase *"welcomes one of these little children in my name"* means *"because they belong to me"* or *"for my sake"* and makes clear that the little children Jesus speaks of are his followers. The preeminent reason we are to serve the *"outcasts"* who belong to Jesus is because he himself has received, welcomed and served them. This explains the God-centeredness of Jesus' language (*"whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me"*). When we serve others in need who belong to Christ it doesn't merely make us nice people. Instead, it is a demonstration that we have received Jesus and his message as well. And if we have welcomed the message and person of Jesus, we have also welcomed the One who sent him to preach that message. The service of *"all"* who belong to Jesus (and especially those considered to be of little value) means that we belong to God. Of course, if we do not serve them, then the opposite conclusion is also to be drawn - we do not belong to God.

5. What kinds of attributes, actions, and attitudes are present in those who you would consider *"servants of all"*? In what kind of situations do you find it most difficult to be a servant to others? What concrete steps can you take to be more of a servant? (Be as specific and practical as you can be)

Genuine servants serve *"all"* people and not just those from whom they can derive some return. They do not care if they are seen when they serve. They are content to serve behind the scenes, out of the limelight. They are willing to do what are considered menial tasks. They serve *"not to please men, but to please God"* and therefore serve diligently and joyfully even when no one is looking. Genuine servants do not demand to win all the time and they are glad to let others be first. They take joy in the good fortune of others. Genuine servants lead a lifestyle of service. They are consistent in their service of others. If serving others is not a regular, ongoing part of one's daily life, then it is likely that one's service of others is actually self-service masquerading as the real thing.

This is just a start of a servant's characteristics. Expect that your group will be able to add more.

When it comes to serving others we are often too caught up with our own agenda. To disregard our agenda does not mean being irresponsible. But we must learn to set aside our goals and what we are trying to accomplish in order to care for others and enable them to accomplish their goals. The ability to distinguish between selfishness (where our chief concern is our agenda) and service of God (where our chief concern is God's agenda) is paramount to our avoidance of a life of self-service. Your group will have many more examples.

What steps can be taken to have the lifestyle of a servant? One writer suggests engaging of the discipline of *"not letting your right hand know what your left hand is doing"*. Find someone with a need and secretly meet it without ever taking credit for it. He suggests that not only will this train us in true servanthood in which we are not concerned with getting credit for what we have done, but it will have a contagious effect on community life. The person served, not knowing who has shown kindness to them, will suspect everyone and will then in turn show kindness to far more people.

As a motivator to serve those to whom we have an aversion or are reluctant to serve, we must argue with ourselves along these lines: *"If Jesus was willing to serve this person and welcomes him, then how can I refuse to serve him. After all, a servant is not greater than his master."* Christianity makes us a debtor to all persons.

6. Look at vs. 38-42. The disciples indicate their unwillingness to receive the exorcist who is ministering apart from them in Jesus' name. What does Jesus indicate is necessary for people to be included among his followers? What are the implications of this passage for Christian relationships?

Jesus' call to welcome and serve a little child leads naturally to the question of whom we are to welcome and serve. That is, what is the scope of our service and how are we to identify those whom we are to serve. On the one hand, Christian love is indiscriminate and promiscuous. All people are potential objects of our service (the parable of the good Samaritan makes this clear). However, the primary place of service is the Christian community (Jn. 13:34,35; 15:9-13; Gal. 6:9,10). In order to find out who belongs to Christ, the disciples raise the issue of a man who is casting out demons in Jesus' name who does not belong to their particular band. Mark may intend some irony in the Twelve's telling the independent exorcist to stop doing what they themselves have recently tried and failed to do.

The disciples' impulse is to exclude him. Jesus corrects them with the words, *"Whoever is not against us is for us."* Jesus says that using his name to work a miracle and turning around to slander the owner of that name cannot go together. Either the name will not be effective or the person who thinks so much of the name as to use it in working a miracle will not slander its owner. Anyone who claims to be a follower of Jesus must be received unless he or she gives reason to think otherwise. They must be given the benefit of the doubt. One need not be

part of their band in order to be considered Christ's follower. As a matter of fact, giving minimal hospitality to the Twelve because they belong to Christ suffices to insure entrance into God's kingdom; such hospitality gives evidence of faith in the gospel they preach. (Notice that general humanitarianism is not in view here). If even minimal hospitality brings such insurance, then following Jesus and the Twelve must not be required. They are to stop forbidding the independent exorcist.

At first glance, it may seem as if v. 42 belongs with the next grouping of verses rather than this one. (The NIV paragraph structure indicates their preference for this grouping.) However, verse 42 is concerned with our relationship to others, while vs. 43ff is concerned with how we view ourselves. For that reason, it may be wiser to consider it part of the preceding paragraph. In that case it is giving a further reason for why they should not forbid the exorcist. Their pretensions to grandeur, which are exhibited in forbidding the exorcist, are likely to cause little ones to stumble themselves. The word "*fall*" refers to "*unbelief, serious sin, or false teaching*". The disciples' pride and exclusive tendencies will cause the little ones who are watching them to call into question the truth and power of Jesus and his message and possibly reject it. This disastrous consequence of their striving for greatness is to be avoided at all costs. It would be better to have a millstone tied around one's neck and jump into the sea. Self aggrandizing behavior is not only inappropriate, it warrants eternal judgment.

We ourselves must be very careful to not count others as being on the outside of the Christian community just because they are different from us. To be sure, there is a difference between being inside the Christian fellowship and outside of it. Jesus is not trying to obliterate those distinctions or even blur them. Not everyone belongs to the Christian community. What is essential to belonging is that one professes their belief in Jesus Christ and his core message and seeks to live in accordance with those beliefs. If a person meets those prerequisites, then no matter what other differences exist they are to be viewed as belonging to Jesus and seen as people deserving of our service. There are far too many people within Christ's camp who act and speak like enemies of one another.

7. What might be the connection between the previous sections of this passage and vs. 43 - 49. What is Jesus' main point in these verses?

This group of verses indicates our propensity to fall and therefore, serves to caution us against pride which excludes others, and trains us in humility which serves and accepts others. As long as we maintain a self-righteous and superior attitude, we are likely to view others who are different from us as being on the outside of the kingdom. Once we see that, before God, we are without status, helpless, and dependent and are included among his followers only by his grace, our pretensions and proud tendencies melt away. The basic intent of this passage is not only to remind us of our sinfulness (which includes our aspiration to greatness in the eyes of the world) but also of our need to be ruthless with sin in our life (much of which damages our life together).

8. What truths in this passage would help you live the Christian life? How might you ensure these truths have an impact on your life?

This passage gives us a perspective on how serious sin is, how glorious the kingdom is, and how horrible hell is. We realize that we must do everything we can to maintain discipleship and avoid the sins that subvert it. The parts of the body symbolize various kinds of activity: the hand that grasps for things that it should not, the foot that goes where it ought not, and the eye that desires what it ought not.

Sin is to be dealt with ruthlessly. Just how ruthless we are to be is demonstrated by Jesus' call to self-maiming. Maiming the body, if necessary to enter God's kingdom, shows self-mercy in comparison with keeping one's body whole at the cost of going to hell. So great are the glories of the kingdom and the miseries of hell. Self-mutilation was prohibited in Judaism (Deut. 14:1; 1 Ki. 18:28; Zech. 13:6). By contradicting this prohibition, Jesus' advocacy of whatever self-mutilation might be necessary to enter God's kingdom raises the glories of the kingdom and the miseries of hell to almost unimaginable degrees.

While the language of maiming is to be viewed as hyperbole we must not lose sight of the point that participation in the kingdom of God is worth any sacrifice. If these truths are to have an impact upon us it is certainly important that we meditate upon them. As long as the kingdom of God means little to us, and as long as we do not see the danger and guilt of sin, Jesus' words will have little impact on us. Dealing with sin in a ruthless manner is sometimes called mortification -a word which means "*put to death*". Mortification has two sides. On the one hand, a person must become increasingly attached to God. His beauty, glory, love, and holiness must entrance us so that he is what we most want and so our desire to please is the overwhelming motivation of our life. This is mortification's positive side and without it the negative side of mortification is useless.

The negative side involves seeing and convincing yourself of sin's ugliness so that you do your best to avoid even the occasions for sin. To feed sin even in the slightest of ways is to guarantee that it stays alive and continues to haunt you. Only by starving it and refusing to indulge it will its power decrease. For more on this see John Owens', "*Sin and Temptation*".

9. From vs.50 and the teaching which precedes it, what does "*salt*" stand for? What is Jesus saying?

In verse 49, salt refers to the fire of judgment which falls on all people and either purifies them or destroys them depending on whether they belong to Jesus or not. In verse 50, the metaphor changes and salt refers to good relations among believers. It is parallel with the phrase, "*be at peace with each other*". This sentence is therefore a suitable wrap-up of everything Jesus has said about our life together as his disciples. "*Salt losing its saltiness*" is a way of-referring to the breakdown of peaceful relations which Jesus says are difficult to restore. "*Without peace within the community, hostility from without will lead believers to apostatize.*" Their quarreling amongst themselves about who is the greatest and their tendency to exclude others must be put to an end. They are to be at peace with one another. They must follow Jesus who came "*not to serve but to be served.*"

10. Summarize the teaching of this passage about life in Christian community?

If you have made your way through the entire passage you have covered a lot of ground. It never hurts to get a few people to summarize the teachings of the passage. In a passage which dealt with life together, in a setting where you are experiencing that life, (small groups), it is especially important to do so. You might even ask, *"What are the specific implications of this passage for our small group?"*

Study 15 - The Standards of the Kingdom

MARK CHAPTER 10:1-31

Questions

1. Has there been an occasion in your life where God did something which you thought was nearly impossible?

READ Mark 10:1-31

2. How did the Pharisees' question test Jesus? What did they hope to achieve in their dialogue with Jesus?
3. What does Jesus say about the meaning and purpose of marriage in these verses? How is this different from the Pharisees understanding and our current cultural view of marriage?
4. How is it that little children coming to Jesus are a model for us? What attitude in them are we to imitate? What prevents us from imitating them?
5. In vs. 17 a man addresses Jesus with the words, "*Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*" Why does Jesus challenge the man's words?
6. What does Jesus uncover about the man by asking him to sell all that he owns? Is this a command that all are meant to obey?
7. Jesus says, "*it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.*" What effect did Jesus mean for this to have on the disciples? What are the implications of this statement for us?
8. How is Jesus' promise in vs. 29-31 true? What does it tell us about the church and our responsibilities as members of it? What are some of the ramifications (be specific as possible) for life in your fellowship group?
9. What is the connecting theme through the verses of this passage?
10. In looking over the passage, what things do we learn about the character of Jesus? What are the implications of these insights for our lives?

LEADER'S NOTES MARK 10:1-31

Main Points

In this passage we continue to get teaching on Christian discipleship from Jesus. The teaching is given in the context of conflict during three encounters: with Pharisees, with the disciples, and with "the rich young ruler". Each encounter exposes the sin in the heart of those taught and their need of salvation. Jesus offers it but to receive it they need to respond as children, acknowledging their dependence and helplessness.

Commentary on the Passage and Notes on the Questions

1. Has there been an occasion in your life where God did something which you thought was nearly impossible?

Approach question.

2. How did the Pharisees' question test Jesus? What did they hope to achieve in their dialogue with Jesus?

John the Baptist had earlier lost his head for denouncing the illegitimate marriage of Herod to Herodias, his brothers wife. (Mk. 6:18). His thundering words seemed likely to incite revolt. It seems that the Pharisees are hoping to get Jesus into a similar predicament. If Jesus proclaims divorce illegal, then perhaps Herod will imprison him so that he is out of the Pharisees' way.

3. What does Jesus say about the meaning and purpose of marriage in these verses? How is this different from the Pharisees understanding and our current cultural view of marriage?

The Pharisees begin by asking if it is "*lawful*" for a man to divorce his wife. Jesus is aware of their duplicity and asks what is "*commanded*". This puts the focus on what God desires rather than what God allows. Their own wickedness emerges, and desiring to trap Jesus they persist that Moses "*permitted*" divorce. They are no longer on the high ground, but Jesus intends to stay there. The passage of Scripture which the Pharisees refer to is Deuteronomy 24:1-4. It is a passage which presupposes the fact of divorce and is mainly concerned with prohibiting a divorced and remarried woman from remarrying her first husband. Rabbis had taken this as giving sanction for divorce. But in actuality it does not.

Moses command is given so that matters aren't made worse than they already are. As Jesus says, "*It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law.*" The word "*your*" implicates the Pharisees in the same attitude. That Jesus takes issue with the ancient Rabbis and disagrees with their interpretation is unexpected and jolts the Pharisees. Some would have thought he was attacking the perfection of the OT law. Jesus was attacking the use of this passage to justify shedding wives whenever husbands wished to. Divorce was not God's intention. A religion which encouraged divorce, (and the Pharisees religion did), destroys a God-made relationship and is unjust. The Pharisees cannot report Jesus to Herod with a clear conscience. Jesus has once again demonstrated his authority. So powerful is his argument, that once he is finished the Pharisees disappear.

Jesus saw marriage as a relationship which closely reflected the image of God. In marriage the love in the Godhead could be reflected - the sharing of his love, kindness, patience and faithfulness. It was to be a permanent relationship. This was God's intention from the very beginning. Jesus' putting emphasis on the fact that God made man, both male and female, that the image of God is reflected in the two sexes and implied that both must be respected as equal partners. In addition to this, in a culture where men were allowed to divorce but women were not, Jesus emphasized that the man also must forsake all others - *"For this reason a man must leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh"*. According to Jesus, men did not have more rights in marriage and divorce than woman did.

Speaking to the disciples in the house, Jesus returns to the purpose of Deuteronomy 24. Moses' point is not that divorce is permissible, but that divorce perverts God's design. Indeed, to divorce and remarry is to commit adultery. Therefore, the Rabbinical interpretation that divorce is permissible is corrupt. Not only does divorce break the creation ordinance, it breaks Sinai law as well. This was also revolutionary. In Jewish law, a man was considered to have committed adultery not against his wife but against the husband of the woman he committed adultery with. Jesus contradicts this. The man is guilty of adultery *"against her"* if he divorces and marries another woman. Men and women have equal rights and responsibilities.

Why wasn't Moses explicit about the immorality of divorce? We don't know. All that we know is that he was making allowances for man's hard-heartedness. According to Jesus, in the Kingdom of God such allowances are not made. Marriage in our own day reflects the Pharisees view more than it does the view of Jesus. Marriage is seen primarily as a place of fulfillment, not a relationship in which one is called, first and foremost, to honor God. As soon as a person is unhappy in marriage or not getting out of it what he or she hoped, the relationship is viewed as non-binding and able to be discarded. Deeper purposes are not seen. To be sure in our own day a woman can divorce a man just as easily as a man can divorce a woman. But beyond that no *"progress"* has really been made.

4. How is it that little children coming to Jesus are a model for us? What attitude in them are we to imitate? What prevents us from imitating them?

People without children might easily err here. Jesus is not commending children as innocent and humble because they are neither. Most likely he meant that children were totally dependent upon the will of others and had no legal or social right to make claims for particular treatment. They had an objectively humble place in society. To be childlike is to accept our incomplete growth and to simply depend upon the good pleasure of God. Once we believe that we have a status that bestows rights to be heard and received, we have ceased to be childlike. *"The person who imagines that he or she is somehow worthy of God's favor and that participation in the kingdom depends upon social or religious rank will never enter the kingdom that Jesus announces."*

Of course, we resist an attitude in which we are not in charge and where it is not for us to make demands. We want to be in control. We want to earn what we get. We don't want charity. Thus, pride is our undoing. Our pride and wanting things to be ours by right must be surrendered in order to enter the kingdom.

5. In vs. 17 a man addresses Jesus with the words, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Why does Jesus challenge the man's words?

Jesus queries the man's perception of what is good and what is not. The man is using the word casually and needs to reflect on what he is saying especially over an issue as important as eternal life. To get your values wrong on such an issue will have disastrous consequences. Jesus is not denying his own goodness. In fact, he may intentionally be borrowing the scribes' phraseology from Mark 2:7 where they ask "*who can forgive sins but God alone?*" There he demonstrated his divinity. Here he asks, "*Who is good but God alone?*" with highly reminiscent language, probably an ironic hint to his identity to draw the man out.

6. What does Jesus uncover about the man by asking him to sell all that he owns? Is this a command that all are meant to obey?

The man has not really kept all the commandments. He has failed to keep the first commandment "*to have no other gods before me.*" and it is of this sin idolatry that the man seems unable to repent. Perhaps he hoped that one more work on top of others would enable him to inherit eternal life. When Jesus says, "*One thing you lack*" he is not saying there is one more thing in addition to the others which you must do. Instead, he means that the man is lacking the one and only thing necessary - which is to follow Jesus and give him complete allegiance.

The addition of the command "*Come, follow me*", to the command, "*Go sell everything that you have and give to the poor*" implies that charity by itself will not suffice. Charity apart from discipleship is useless. Paul himself says, "*If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.*" Salvation comes when we look to Jesus in complete dependence for his mercy and grace. This shows our renunciation of idolatry. Jesus' words were spoken to a specific individual in a specific situation. Other New Testament Christians have wealth and use it for the benefit of others without being instructed to sell all that they have. Yet we need to ask ourselves honestly what it says to our own situation. Because if anything is competing with God for our allegiance, it must be dealt with ruthlessly and mercilessly. We must have no other gods. The basic teaching of Christianity with regards to our salvation is that though "*the entrance fee to the Christian life is nothing at all, the annual subscription is everything, you have.*" Other implications of this command are explored in the next question.

7. Jesus says, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." What effect did Jesus mean for this to have on the disciples? What does this imply for us?

The prevailing belief of the day was that riches were a sign of God's favor and blessing upon a person. Rich people were certain to inherit eternal life. Jesus turns this wisdom upside down. "*it is harder than impossible for the rich person to be saved,*" says Jesus. "*If a rich person can't be saved, who then can be saved?*", the disciples ask. Jesus' main point is that salvation for anyone is impossible! If anyone enters the kingdom (synonymous with "*inheriting*

eternal life" and being "*saved*"), it is only because of a miracle of God. And Jesus is certainly saying that riches are a massive obstacle. No attempts at softening the metaphor can avoid the plain meaning. Jesus meant it literally. Riches compete in a fierce way for our allegiance. In another passage Jesus says "*No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve both God and money.*" (Mt 6:24) Here, the rich man's preoccupation with this world outstrips his concern for eternal life.

Jesus demonstrates here that riches hinder participation in the kingdom of God and that accumulation of wealth and attachment to it prevent a person from following Him. Only the work of God can cause a rich person to lose their dependence upon wealth. To say "*I don't love money. I am not attached to it*" proves little. We must all ask the question of our own attitudes or risk great loss.

8. How is Jesus' promise in vs. 29-31 true? What does it tell us about the church and our responsibilities as members of it? What are some of the ramifications (be specific as possible) for life in your fellowship group?

Jesus agrees that the disciples have given up everything to follow him. They are not like the rich man. They have inherited eternal life. And Jesus says they have privileges already, here and now, that come from following him. Not only does one inherit eternal life, but one gains a new family. For the disciples this family is made up of those who they encounter on their mission who offer them hospitality. Those who offer cold cups of water to the disciples in their journey demonstrate that they accept Jesus' message and belong to him. Therefore, they and the disciples are part of the same family. They are the mothers, sisters, brothers and children of the disciples who entertain them in their homes and support them from their fields.

This does not mean that prosperity is promised to the disciples. The riches they receive in this life are different from those which the rich man held onto. Jesus reminds them that those who follow Christ will suffer persecution as well. We also have this same promise fulfilled in the church. We belong to each other. We have the responsibility to be there for anyone else who belongs to this family. Of course, there will be people in the church that we would not have chosen for our own family but this is a community of faith and God has done the choosing. Whoever has welcomed Jesus and his message is part of our family. We have obligations to them or else we undermine God's promise to them. We not only have mothers, sisters, brothers and children through the church, we are the mothers, brothers, sisters, and children and must act accordingly. Interestingly, even though we leave "*fathers*" for the gospel, Jesus does not include "*fathers*" among those whom we gain. This is most likely because he understood God to be our Father. As such, he is the only Father we need.

9. What is the connecting theme through the verses of this passage?

Each section of this passage highlights the radical standards of Christ's kingdom. They confront all human cultures. Our attitude toward marriage, toward children, and toward money are all affected by being disciples of Christ. While we may

often fall short of these standards, we must never cease to pursue them. Our striving to live them is a mark that we truly belong to him.

10. In looking over the passage, what things do we learn about the character of Jesus? What are the implications of these insights for our lives?

Since the Gospels are the main source for our knowledge of the character of Jesus, it is important that we continually ask what is being revealed about him in all of his encounters, even when these things may be incidental to the main point of a passage. In the first encounter with the Pharisees, we see his wisdom. He is able to teach the word of God with clarity and cut through attempts to obscure its meaning. He teaches truly and can guide us in our understanding of God's intention for us. In his encounter with the disciples, we see both his indignation and warmth. He does get disturbed when people (children in this case) are not treated with the respect which they deserve. When people, who are part of God's family, are treated as outcasts because they are unimportant in the eyes of the world, he finds it offensive. We should be indignant about the same things over which he is indignant. We also ought to strive to avoid being the cause of his displeasure. Finally in both his encounter with the children and his encounter with the rich man we see his warmth love and compassion. It is important to note that he exhibits such warmth not only to those who are his followers, but even for those who are intent in going their own way.

Further Notes

MARK 10:1-31

Mark opens this section with his characteristic emphasis of Jesus, with the crowds, teaching (cp. Matt 19:2). Following each of the three topics we find the disciples needing to receive further private instruction. The common theme is God's standards: standards so high as to be almost unbelievable, even to the disciples (v24, 26), highlighting the theme of service and discipleship, "*taking up your cross*" (8:34-38), as well as touching on the idea of true and false religion (Ch 2, 7:1-23).

v1-12 The question is phrased to tempt or trap Jesus, as the Pharisees seek material to use against him. If he can be made out to be either lax or fanatical, their job of destroying him (3:6) will be easier.

The question isn't genuine because they already have an answer they're happy with (v4). Jesus takes them straight to scripture (Deut 24:1-4). If something is lawful it is permitted but as Jesus expounds, that does not make it good. The crucial difference is one of attitude. Not "*What can I, get away with? What is permissible?*" but "*What is right*" "*What is intended as best?*".

Moses' instruction was given as the lesser of two evils. God's intention from the very beginning was lifelong commitment, shown here as Jesus illuminates one scripture by another (Gen 2:24) (see also Mal 2:13-16). Matthew makes it even clearer that the disciples found this teaching hard. At the very least from here, wanting to marry someone else is no grounds for divorce. v12 is another gentle touch, as Jewish women could not initiate divorce.

v13-16. The disciples have still not learnt the lesson about "*greatness*" (9:33-37, 10:35-45). Jesus links being part of God's kingdom (13-16, 17-22, 23-31) with accepting his assessment of priorities and values. The disciples were not "*receiving children*" as instructed (9:37). The children's qualification for the kingdom is not of course their innocence but their weakness and dependence. Neither we nor little children can earn our way therefore we must receive it as a gift.

v17-31. This young ruler (Matt 19:20, Lk 18:18) is clearly not the sort that the disciples will rebuke for approaching Jesus, hence the ensuing conversation is quite a shock for them. He is sincere, he respects Jesus and his question is genuine.

Jesus' reply is difficult. It is totally inconsistent with many other scriptures for Jesus to be denying his deity, therefore there is either an indirect challenge for the man to consider the implications of calling Jesus good (e.g. as in 2:7), or a warning not to judge goodness by human standards, neglecting God's perfect goodness (Matt 5:48). Jesus refers him to the commandments (Lev 18:5), not apparently to the first, great, commandment but to numbers five to nine. These outwardly checkable laws he had kept (Jesus' look in v21) is surely proof.

Jesus in love touches the key issue. It is actually the first commandment: are you prepared to put God and Jesus first? Giving up your-wealth is not one of the commandments. Neither is giving everything to the poor all we have to do (1 Cor 13:3) but we cannot enter the kingdom with riches (v23 lit. "*things*") as our God. This the young man appears unable to swallow. "*What must I do to enter the kingdom?*":- have God as King.

The parable in v25 should not be softened. It is impossible for the rich to get in and as the disciples' astonishment shows it is not that the poor are any better off in this respect. Neither riches nor poverty can earn you the keys to the kingdom. So who can be saved? Those who are willing to let God save them (v27).

Peter, as so often, is disarmingly frank and slightly off the point but must have been cheered by Jesus' comforting reply. Note the contrast between v21 and v30. The Christian life is not simply struggle and sacrifice now for an enjoyable future but is eminently worthwhile here, "*in this time*". This is not just a rosy-hued picture, as Jesus' realistic addition of "*persecutions*" to the list shows. We will never be worse off for following God but this means turning around and repenting of our flawed human sense of values.

Study 16 - Jesus the Servant

MARK CHAPTER 10:32-52

Questions

1. Can you recall any rivalry with others in your growing up years?

READ Mark 10.32-52

2. What new information does Jesus reveal in this prediction of his death? Why does he predict his death more than once?
3. What behavior from the disciples shows their failure to accept or understand Jesus' warning to them of his approaching death?
4. What does Jesus mean when he asks the brothers James and John if they can "*drink the cup he will drink and be baptized with his baptism*"? In what sense do the disciples eventually share in his cup and baptism? In what sense, if any, do we share in his cup and baptism?
5. How does biblical greatness differ from the way the world views greatness? Why is it so hard to achieve the kind of greatness that Jesus speaks of? What motivations are given us in this passage for pursuing this kind of greatness?
6. Give examples of relationships which require of you to become a better servant. In what specific ways might you serve these people better?
7. What is meant when Jesus says he "*came to serve and give his life as a ransom for many*"? What do we learn about his death here that we have not been told elsewhere?
8. What is new in this healing account? What makes it significant?
9. What is Bartimaeus' response to being healed and what are the implications for us?

LEADER'S NOTES MARK 10:32-52

Main Points

Concluding a section which began at 8:31 this passage of Mark's gospel explains not only that the Messiah had come to die but that the reason for his death was to "*ransom many*". We have earlier learned that he would die and there has been much focus on the implications for his disciples. Here we learn why he will die. Christ's death as a sacrificial death is pre-eminent in this passage.

In the last miracle which Jesus performs, just before entering Jerusalem, he gives sight to a blind man, who has identified him as the Messiah. The Messiah has come to die. Interestingly, twice in this passage Jesus asks the question, "*What do you want me to do for you?*" In keeping with his identity, he will not give earthly glory (what the disciples wanted from him), but he mercifully will give people eyes to see in order that they may know him and follow him.

Commentary on the Passage and Notes on the Questions

1. Can you recall any rivalry with others in your growing up years?

Approach question.

2. What new information does Jesus reveal in this prediction of his death? Why does he predict his death more than once?

This prediction is far more detailed than any previous revelation about his death. The chart below compares the three predictions:

	8:31 Son of Man must die	9:31 Man kills him	10:33-34 He dies a sinner's death
Place	-----	-----	Jerusalem
People	Son of Man	Son of Man	We/Son of Man
Suffering	Many things	-----	Mocked, spat on flogged
Opposition	Reject'n priest/scribes	-----	C'demned by priest/scribes
Delivered up	-----	To men	To Jews, to Gentiles
Death	Be killed	Men will kill	Gentiles will kill
Resurrected	After 3 days	After 3 days	After 3 days

As before, the main purpose of prediction is to remind us after its fulfillment that it belonged to the purpose and plan of God and was no accident. That Jesus says it three times helps us to grasp its impending reality. The threefold warning also brings to a focus how central is his death to his identity and task. It is the reason for his coming. The substitutionary nature of Christ's sacrifice fills much of the remainder of the passage. We are told not only that he must die, but why he must

die. Jesus earlier spoke of the impossibility of salvation. In this passage, the answer to how the impossible is possible with God is becoming clearer.

3. What behavior from the disciples shows their failure to accept or understand Jesus' warning to them of his approaching death?

The disciples are still operating under the popular conception of the Messiah. All they can anticipate is triumphal. They imagine themselves in positions of power when Jesus overthrows the enemies of the Jews, reveals himself as Messiah, ascends an earthly throne and establishes his kingdom. They do not register that when Jesus calls *"he bids us come and die."* They clutch a dream that is a fantasy. That illusion prevented them from understanding Jesus' words. Pathetically, they ask Jesus for a blank check. *"We want you to do for us whatever we ask."* Jesus asks them, *"What do you want me to do for you?"* Their expectations and desires are out of line with God's ways and purposes and so Jesus tells them that their request cannot be fulfilled. By asking further questions, Jesus seeks to give them an appropriate and realistic understanding of what it means to be one of his followers.

4. What does Jesus mean when he asks the brothers James and John if they can *"drink the cup he will drink and be baptized with his baptism"*? In what sense do the disciples eventually share in his cup and baptism? In what sense, if any, do we share in his cup and baptism?

The language of *"drinking the cup"* and being *"baptized with the baptism"* which Jesus uses is Old Testament language which referred to the judgment of God. The cup represents God's wrath at man's sin (Job 21:20; Ps. 60:3), particularly pride (Ps. 75:8). The gentiles had to drink it but so did Israel, who was no better (Is. 63:6; Jer 25:19-29; 49:12; 51:7; Lam.4:21; Obad 15-16 and Ezekiel 23:31-34). It was this wrath which led to exile; for Israel to return, the cup must be taken from her (Is. 51:17-23). Only then will Jerusalem become an instrument of God's judgment rather than the one judged (Zech. 12:2).

Being overwhelmed with water is also an image of God's wrath (Gen. 6:13,17; Ex. 14:24-28; Ps. 42:7-10) and of the judgment from which he saves us (Gen. 7:1; Ex. 14:29,30; Is. 43:2; 54:9, Jonah 2:3-6). Using this language, Jesus referred to his unique wrath-enduring death and subsequent resurrection. It is the ordeal which he must soon undergo. This is a unique, once for all, sin-bearing death, which cannot be shared by the disciples. It is a task for Jesus alone.

When Jesus spoke about his cup and baptism, perhaps James and John imagined fellowship with him and whether or not they will be able to handle the glory of reigning with him. Their understanding, proves far off the mark. Their quick affirmative response to Jesus' question demonstrates their utter failure to understand the severity of the metaphors which he has used. They have grossly underestimated his words. They do not know what they are promising. Still Jesus tells them that they will drink the cup he drinks and be baptized with his baptism. **How?** We have said they could not bear the wrath of God. For fallen human beings such a death would lead only to destruction.

First, we share in Jesus' cup and baptism by placing our trust in him. By believing in Jesus, he becomes our representative. In that sense we share in Jesus' death and resurrection (Rom. 6:1-5). Second, we share in those things not by dying for sin but by suffering (and perhaps dying) for Jesus and the gospel. In so doing, we imitate Jesus' death. In Col. 1:24 Paul writes, *"I rejoice in what was suffered for you (Christ's suffering to do away with sin), and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, which is the church."*

Paul is not saying that Christ's death was somehow insufficient as a sacrifice for sin and that he has to make up for what is lacking in it. He simply explains that the Church by its very mission to complete the calling of people out of darkness will complete the sufferings of Christ. There will be resistance by the spiritual powers of darkness until Christ Jesus returns. The victory won by Jesus is the ground upon which Paul stands and it enables him to suffer the terrible abuses that he did experience with hope rather than despair. This is the victory of faith.

5. How does biblical greatness differ from the way the world views greatness? Why is it so hard to achieve the kind of greatness that Jesus speaks of? What motivations are given us in this passage for pursuing this kind of greatness?

By the indignant response of the others it was clear that the whole group of Jesus disciples had aspirations of greatness. They were ticked off that if James and John were granted their request, the rest might miss out. Therefore, Jesus confronts them all in their desire for greatness. Power in the world is used selfishly. Other peoples interests and concerns do not count. Only the self is aggrandized as it manipulates others for its own advantage. But Biblical greatness uses power in order to serve others. We attempt not to control others, but to set them free to be who God intended them to be. Through our service to them we seek to make them great. Only their goals and purposes really matter. We concern ourselves for the reputation of God and others before ourselves. The language of being *"a slave of all"* is especially powerful.

Slaves have no rights. They belong not to themselves, but to another. They exist for the service of others. To be the slaves of *"all"* is the radical nature of Jesus' example. We do not pick and choose those before whom we will give up our rights. If we are to be *"great"* in the kingdom then we give up our rights before all people, without exception. The costs of discipleship are great but the reward for the investment is a glorious destiny. Pride is the obstacle to this destiny. We always want credit for what we do. (Just try to do something in secret for another person and see how hard it is to keep it to yourself). We also want others to think highly of us. We want prestige and honor. We are afraid that if we become *"a slave of all"*, that audience we seek to impress will think less of us.

Humility is the antidote if we are to become as a slave to others. Yet, it is probably the least valued virtue in America. One writer put it this way: *"What we usually see is a stooping forward unattended with the slightest effort to leave by a single inch the seat in which we are so firmly established. It is an*

act of a superior, who protests to himself while he commits it that he is a superior still, and that he is doing nothing else but an act of grace towards those on whose level, in theory, he is placing himself. Humility is one of the most difficult virtues both to attain and ascertain. It lies close upon the heart itself, and its tests are exceedingly delicate and subtle. It's counterfeits abound."

Serving others seems difficult when we lack trust in God. The objection arises: *"If I am busy meeting other peoples needs, then who is going to take care of my needs; Who will serve me?"* For fear of loss many reject a life of servant-greatness. The alternative is the personal pursuit of worldly greatness. Ultimately, we don't serve others because we don't believe God is good and means what he says about providing for our needs. Jesus offers us at least two motivations to empower us to live lives of servant-greatness.

Firstly by example: He was God incarnate and yet genuinely served others. His entire life is characterized by the sentence *"The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve."* This is why the great Lord of glory came to earth. If it was not below him to be the slave of all, then it is not below us either. His example quiets all excuses we might offer for living in a self-serving manner. Secondly our gratitude: When we truly understand the rescue he made for us nothing is too much to offer him in return. Our gratefulness compels us to be compassionate toward others and seek to meet their needs. We become debtors to everyone because of the love given to us in Christ. A Christian life without gratitude is not really a Christian life.

6. Give examples of relationships which require of you to become a better servant. In what specific ways might you serve these people better?

Some people may be threatened by this question and unwilling to answer it out loud. A couple of suggestions: Having asked the question say, *"This question might be best used in a time of private reflection. This does not mean it is unimportant, but only that it is highly specific and personal. Having said that and knowing that the question might be met with complete silence, would anyone be willing to answer it now?"* You could make it a question for small groups (2 or 3 people) for sharing and prayer at the end of the study. Or you might decide that this question will be met by silence and say, *"This is a question for personal reflection and application. Please take some time to seriously consider and answer it in the near future. Studying the scripture is useless unless we apply it specifically and concretely."*

7. What is meant when Jesus says he "came to serve and give his life as a ransom for many?" What do we learn about his death here that we have not been told elsewhere?

The purpose of Jesus' death is new in this account from Mark. Jesus says his death is a *"ransom for many"*. Ransom is drawn from ancient economic life in which a *"slave, a prisoner, or a forfeited parcel of land or other possession might be freed by a purchase price paid."* The metaphor presents Jesus' death as the price of liberation for the many. Having been ransomed by him, we are

slaves under new ownership. We need not fear this owner, however. He loved us so much that he died for us. What he asks us to do will be in keeping with his loving purposes for us. Some Old Testament background information further enables us to understand Jesus' words:

1) When Israel was redeemed from slavery in Egypt, Israel's firstborn only escaped death because lambs were killed in their place. Otherwise they would have been judged like the firstborn of Egypt. God commanded Israel to remember this in the annual sacrifice of the Passover lamb (Ex. 11:1-12:42). The lamb was the "*ransom*" price of redemption from God's wrath. Membership of Israel in every generation depended upon payment of a ransom (Ex. 30:12).

2) In the annual ceremony of the day of atonement, God illustrated how men could be rescued from death by the death of another. Israel's sins were "*laid on*" one goat which carried them away, while another was killed as a substitute. A substitutionary death atones for sin, satisfying the righteous wrath of God (Lev. 16). Jesus' death, which is the ultimate act of service for others, is to be understood as a substitutionary sacrifice. When spoken of in the context of "*drinking the cup*" and "*being baptized*" it becomes clear that Jesus was to die a wrath-bearing death in our place. The Judgment meant to fall on us was going to fall on him instead. He took the hit for us. He paid the price for us.

8. What is new in this healing account? What makes it significant?

This is the final miracle that Jesus performs in Mark's gospel. Jesus is for the first time identified as the "*Son of David*". This was a title which was used of the expected Messiah in the time of Jesus. Elsewhere in the New Testament, Davidic descent is claimed for Jesus as evidence that he is the Messiah (Rom. 1:1-4; Matt. 1:1; 12:23; 2Tim.2:8; Rev. 3:7; 22:16). It is important to stress that the Messianic expectations did not involve the belief that the Messiah would be a divine person. The term in its usual Jewish sense referred simply to a great leader endowed with righteousness who was going to be sent by God to rule over Israel and restore the nation to spiritual and physical prominence. Therefore, while Bartimaeus was correct in attaching this designation to Jesus, it did not communicate sufficiently Jesus' true significance.

Secondly Bartimaeus cries for "*mercy*." He is asking for something he knows he does not deserve. Such an attitude is exceedingly important in one's relationship to God. There is a sharp contrast between his approach to Jesus and that of the disciples. When Jesus asks Bartimaeus, "*What do you want me to do for you?*" this contrast is furthered by the nature of the request. He does not ask for greatness, but for his sight only. There is perhaps some significance in the fact that Jesus' final act of healing is one which restores sight since he has all along been trying to get his followers to see who he is. As Jesus approaches Jerusalem he is now identified strongly as Messiah.

9. What is Bartimaeus' response to being healed and what are the implications for us?

Bartimaeus follows Jesus along the road. The road leads to Jerusalem where Jesus will soon die. Freed by Christ from one form of suffering, he takes the road

to endure a much greater form of suffering. He no doubt regarded separation from his savior a worse suffering than the risks of discipleship. For us it is never business as usual as a Christian. To be a follower of Christ means that his life and death set the pattern for your life.

Further Notes

Mark 10:32-52

v32-34. Once more, Mark repeats the pattern of 8:31-38 and 9:30-37, with a lesson in service for the disciples following a prediction of his own service in suffering. Once more the disciples are amazed at Jesus' behavior. They are fully aware that moving into Judea again means danger (Jn 11:7-8, 16). Jesus is still formally teaching the disciples, the details again becoming more specific: mocking, spitting, scourging at the hands of the gentiles. Without even the comfort of ignorance Jesus deliberately walks into pain and death for us. We also should be amazed.

v35-65. Not Peter this time but the other two of "*the three*". Their approach is circuitous, almost crafty. Jesus' sensible reply is worth noting (contrast Herod in 6:22!). Their request is remarkable. Either they have totally failed to appreciate Jesus' coming trial and death, or they have realized something of the kingdom of God coming in power through the transfiguration. Jesus describes their request as ignorant (as many of ours are?), in fact it is doubly so.

Firstly, they have mistaken what being close to Jesus would entail, otherwise they might well not have made the request. Two crucified thieves flanked Jesus at his greatest victory (15:27) and it is to this suffering that he refers in the parable of the cup and baptism. Obviously they cannot share in Christ's unique suffering for the sins of others (see Ps. 75:7-8. Isa 51:17, Rom 6:3ff for some references on "*cup*" and "*baptism*") but as Jesus agrees, suffering and sacrifice is the path they will have to follow (e.g. Acts 12:2). v40 marks Jesus' continual service, even in heaven! Secondly, as Jesus now makes plain, they and the rest of the twelve (v41) have a totally wrong attitude to "*authority*" and "*rank*" (despite 10:33-37). v42-45 give "*two ways to live*". The common view is that authority confers rights and privileges. Jesus turns this priority around. To be great is to serve. An increase in power is principally an increase in duty and responsibility, denying oneself in order to help others. The greatest example is of course Jesus himself, who having authority over all, gave up his life for all.

v45 is for studying in detail and memorizing.

The Son of Man:	(Dan 7:13-14), master, ruler, with " <i>all authority</i> "
came:	pre-existent, " <i>came down from heaven</i> ".
not to be served:	although it was his right (Phil 2:6).
but to serve:	true service, meeting our needs, not our wants (Mk 1:38, 2:5).
and to give his life:	(Isa 53:1-6). the ultimate descent (Phil 2:7-8).

as a ransom for many: paying a price for us that we could never meet ourselves (Ps. 49:7-9, Isa 53:11-12).

Jesus simply states that this is what he came to do. His instruction to us is even simpler: *"Follow me"*.

v46-52. The last healing miracle in Mark illustrates once more Jesus' continuous service, especially to those who are of *"no account"*.

Bartimaeus' addressing Jesus as Son of David is unusual, found only here in Mark. It was certainly a term of high respect and possibly messianic (Isa 11:1ff, Eze 34:23ff, Jer 23:5, 33:17), in which case it is highly appropriate as the King draws near to his city (11:1-10).

It is also useful to look at this story as an example of conversion (it works so well, Peter may well have so used it). Note that he did not cry out to anyone but found out who it was first, persisted despite opposition, knew his need, came to Jesus, made an earnest request, was made whole and followed Jesus.

Study 17 - The King is Judge

MARK CHAPTER 11:1-25

Questions

1. Do you believe anger is ever appropriate? If so, what makes it appropriate?

READ Mark 11:1-25

2. Why does Mark tell us about Jesus' instruction to find a specific colt and bring it to him?
3. What is being communicated about Jesus in the account of his entrance into Jerusalem? Why doesn't Jesus silence people who address him as Messiah, as he had done previously?
(Mark sandwiches the account of Jesus' cleansing of the temple between an account of Jesus' cursing a fig tree and its consequent withering. As in previous places where this sandwich structure appears we are led to believe that there is a connection between these passages.)
4. Why does Jesus approach the fig tree and then curse it? Was this reasonable?
5. Why does Jesus clear the temple? What in particular has provoked his anger?
6. The disciples return to Bethany to find the fig tree has withered from the roots. What do you suppose is the connection between Jesus' curse on the fig tree with its resulting destruction and the clearing of the temple? What is being communicated by sandwiching these passages together?
7. What insights does this passage give us into the legitimacy, purpose and appropriate expression of anger?
8. Look at Jesus words in vs. 22-25. In their context what do they teach us about prayer?
9. Jesus says that for our prayers to be effective we must forgive others. What conditions must be met according to Jesus, before we forgive a person?

LEADER'S NOTES MARK 11:1-25

Main Points

The remainder of Mark's gospel is set in or near to Jerusalem. Jesus' identity as the Messiah and Son of God is proclaimed openly as he carries on the task of teaching his disciples. Jesus' use of the colt and his entrance into Jerusalem captures the enthusiasm of the crowd who honor him as the saving king. His power displayed in effectively cursing the fig tree and in cleansing the temple demonstrates that his task is not only to save many but also to judge an unproductive and rebellious Israel. Thus Mark persists with his themes.

Commentary on the Passage and Notes on the Questions

1. Do you believe anger is ever appropriate? If so, what makes it appropriate? Approach question.

2. Why does Mark tell us about Jesus' instruction to find a specific colt and bring it to him?

In procuring a donkey colt in a semi-clandestine way Jesus is now very deliberate about facing his destiny. It seems he has arranged quietly for this colt to be available in the same way as he set up the last supper with his disciples. In this way Judas is never certain of what is about to happen and cannot betray him until the appropriate moment. And the disciples are left with a sense of his authority as his plans continually bear fruit. Jesus didn't just roll along to his death, he carefully prepared every step of the way. The theme of Jesus' authority which has been dominant throughout the gospel continues to get emphasis here. The donkey colt is the traditional mount of the King of Israel. Its symbolism was a powerful statement of his claim to be Messiah. Jesus was certainly provoking the religious authorities to respond to the claim.

3. What is being communicated about Jesus in the account of his entrance into Jerusalem? Why doesn't Jesus silence people who address him as Messiah, as he had done previously?

The imagery of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem communicates his dignity and honor. Mark's purpose is that we realize that Jesus is the "*Christ, the Son of God.*" Jesus, though he had walked the entire distance from Caesarea Philippi, says that he "*needs*" a colt for the last two miles. Whereas ordinary pilgrims would enter Jerusalem on foot at the time of the Passover, Jesus deliberately takes the seated position of a dignitary. The donkey emphasizes the humility of a real King of Israel in contrast to a war horse. Jesus chooses this means of entrance as a fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy that the Messiah would return in peace on a donkey's colt (Zech. 9:9).

His dignity and honor is affirmed by the people as they throw their garments on the donkey to make a saddle for him and then place their garments on the ground which has the effect of laying down a red carpet for his entrance into the city. With their shouts of praise, (using the words of Psalm 118:25), the crowds proclaim Jesus to be the Davidic King sent by God "*Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David.*" The phrase "*Hosanna*" means "*save us!*" or

"*save now!*". This was especially appropriate in that the OT associated Zion's King with the rescue of God's people (Zech. 9:11; Is. 11:10-16; Jer. 30:8,9; Ezek. 34:22,23).

We don't know if the crowds understood what they were saying. Most likely they did. But their perception of Messiah was nonetheless triumphal. It is likely that they cried for political and religious autonomy. A salvation from Roman oppression. It is unlikely they would have rejoiced as much over the salvation he was bringing from individual sin.

Interestingly, Jesus does not silence the crowds for saying that he is the Messiah. Perhaps now that he has fully explained to his followers about his death and its purpose the truth can be broadcast. Now there are witnesses who can explain the truth about Messiah when he is gone. Note that his entrance is to the temple and not just the gates of Jerusalem. Jesus is the Master of the house which is rightfully his to inspect. His inspection sets the stage for the events of the next day when he cleanses the temple.

(Mark sandwiches the account of Jesus' cleansing of the temple between an account of Jesus' cursing a fig tree and its consequent withering. As in previous places where this sandwich structure appears we are led to believe that there is a connection between these passages.)

4. Why does Jesus approach the fig tree and then curse it? Was this reasonable?

Jesus approaches the fig tree because he is hungry. When he comes to the tree he finds nothing to eat. He then curses the tree saying, "*May no one ever eat fruit from you again.*". This seems quite unreasonable, especially when we have been made aware by Mark that it was not the season for figs. However, fig trees in Palestine begin to develop leaves near the end of March and the foliage coating is usually complete within a week. Concurrent with this, and sometimes prior to it, small nubs appear all over the tree which quickly grow to about the size of almonds. They are not the figs themselves, but forerunners to the figs. They are edible and are often eaten by peasants and others who are hungry.

The events being described by Mark are occurring in early April which means that these nubs should be present. This is what Jesus is looking for. Their absence provokes Jesus' curse. The first reason for his curse is that he is unable to satisfy his hunger. The second reason is that when these nubs are not present it indicates there will be no figs when their season arrives some six weeks later. Jesus found nothing but leaves and knew that it was an absolutely hopeless, fruitless fig tree. We will look at the significance of his behavior after we look at the cleansing of the temple.

5. Why does Jesus clear the temple? What in particular has provoked his anger?

Jesus words interpret his actions. A place intended for devotion toward God had been turned into a circus of economic activity. It said much about the priorities of the rulers of Israel and their lack of concern to make it possible for ordinary people to approach their God unhindered. Worse still, the market activity took

place in the only place where unconverted Gentiles could go to pray. The temple was divided into three areas: the sanctuary into which only the priests could go, the Court of Israel into which all male Israelites could go to offer sacrifice, and the Court of the Gentiles - beyond which no gentile could go unless he were a full convert to Judaism.

Jesus' anger was directed not at the practices of selling sacrifices and exchanging money to pay the temple-tax themselves. These were necessary. He was angered that the leaders allowed this to take place within the temple, making it impossible for any Gentile to use the area for prayer or serious devotion to God. It was a callous disregard for Gentiles and Israel's leaders were essentially denying their call to be *"a light to the nations."* Their behavior was synonymous with a church without concern for non-believers. The temple was to be *"a house of prayer for all nations"*. The priests had made a farce of it, more concerned about revenue than reverence. Jesus' calling the temple a *"den of robbers"* was a quotation from Jeremiah 7:11 in which it is predicted that the sinfulness of the priestly leadership would bring on the judgment of God. Israel soon went into exile after that prediction. It was no accident that similar destruction of the temple and the nation followed Jesus' rebuke only 40 year later in 70AD.

Thus the outcome of his tirade in the Temple is the attraction of the crowds and stiff opposition from the chief priests and the teachers of the law. Their spiritual bankruptcy is seen in their plot to kill Jesus. They fear Jesus because he has such a powerful hold on the crowds. *"He will be crucified, then, not because of any weakness in him. Quite the contrary, it will be because of his power! Furthermore, the power for which he will be crucified is a power that he exerts for the benefit of all nations, Gentiles as well as Jews. He uses his power for the sake of Gentiles (remember, they are Mark's primary audience) and at great cost to himself. So for his crucifixion Jesus deserves honor and worship, not scorn and ridicule."*

6. The disciples return to Bethany to find the fig tree has withered from the roots. What do you suppose is the connection between Jesus' curse on the fig tree with its resulting destruction and the clearing of the temple? What is being communicated by sandwiching these passages together?

Having reported Jesus' cleansing of the temple, Mark returns to the fig tree. We are led to believe by his arrangement of the material that the two accounts have a close relationship. *"The incident of the fig tree both interprets the cleansing of the temple and is interpreted by the latter incident. Jesus' disappointment with the fig tree is like his disappointment with Israel and the temple, her chief shrine. His judgment pronounced upon the tree is like the threat of God's judgment soon to fall on the city of Jerusalem."*

Like the fig tree full of leaves, which had all the form of a fig tree but which was lacking the fruit which made it a fig tree, Israel had the form of being God's people but lacked content of character which would have proven their identity. Some commentators have looked at the cursing of the fig tree and said that it

does not seem worthy of Jesus: "*There is petulance in it.*" "*It is a tale of miraculous power wasted in the service of ill-temper*". But it was an object lesson, a symbolic demonstration of his message, not a rash act, but a solemn prophetic word pronounced for the benefit of his disciples (and for Mark's readers).

7. What insights does this passage give us into the legitimacy, purpose and appropriate expression of anger?

Flipping a table was a violent act. For many people, this does not square with their general understanding of who Jesus is. However, all four gospels include this account. It is not the main purpose of the passage to teach us about anger but it contains many helpful insights which are worth gleaning. First, it suggests that anger is a legitimate emotion and not always sinful. Anger is in fact like a warning light which signals to you that something is wrong with the car. The question which must be asked when one is angry is "*what has gone wrong?*" There are two possibilities. Firstly it is a sign of frustration of one's own plans and desires perhaps blamed on others. This kind of anger is self centered and can produce vengeful behavior and so needs to be suppressed. Or it may be that you have witnessed gross injustice or evil to others (perhaps including yourself), which requires an appropriate expression of anger.

Christianity does not call a person to suppress such anger, but to appropriately express it. Working from the raw feelings to appropriate behavior is called sublimation. Appropriate expressions will focus on restoring and healing the consequences of the injustice. It has the good of others in view. It may mean an informed choice "*allowing love to cover over a multitude of sin*", to expressions as strong as Jesus' in this passage. Appropriate expressions are carefully considered and not impulsive. Notice that Jesus initially withheld the expression of his anger against the priests in charge of the temple. In vs.11 he goes to the temple and looks at the same circus but he does not come back and cleanse the temple until the next day. His behavior has a dramatic impact as he highlights the wickedness of what he finds. Jesus' anger is measured. He is violent with tables and chairs and pieces of silver not with the bodies of those present.

It contrasts with our own experiences of being ruled by anger. Our responsibility remains to express our anger wisely and to leave vengeance for God.

8. Look at Jesus words in vs. 22-25. In their context what do they teach us about prayer?

At its most basic level Jesus is telling his disciples that praying in faith really makes a difference. The power of prayer is not fiction, but a reality. Therefore we are fools if we do not pray. The emphasis on the importance of faith - of truly trusting in God - which is found throughout Mark, continues to be highlighted here. Prevailing faith has incalculable effects. Still, the words do have a context. One should not forget that a chapter earlier James and John asked Jesus to give them whatever they asked and he declined. So the words must not lead us to believe that we will get whatever we ask for without restriction.

The specific context suggests that it is not faith in general that is being encouraged but faith in God's coming salvation. It might be that Jesus is saying, *"Judgment on the temple is coming and on those who trust in it. The only way to escape judgment is to trust in God not in religion. He is the one who is able to do the impossible (able to put a camel through the eye of a needle and move a mountain) and therefore he can save you. Make sure when you pray, your trust is in him alone and not in anything else. The logical result of that is that you will pray as a forgiven sinner and will therefore forgive others."*

The faith that Jesus is demanding is faith in the course of mission. In fact, it is possible that the reference to moving the Mount of Olives is an allusion to Zechariah 14:4 which mentions the removal of the Mount of Olives on the day of God's promised future salvation. The emphasis of our praying is to be for the extension of the kingdom of God and not just seeking to obtain things for our own benefit.

9. Jesus says that for our prayers to be effective we must forgive others. What conditions must be met according to Jesus, before we forgive people?

In many ways this is a hard saying, not because it is hard to understand, but in that it is hard to carry out. We feel unless a person apologizes to us, we are free to hold a grudge against them. We believe it is our right to be bitter and to speak against a person who has wronged us until they have admitted their wrong and asked for our forgiveness. Jesus actually says that the responsibility to forgive others rests with us regardless of their response to us. We are called to unconditional forgiveness. Until we forgive others, we will lack joy, assurance, and power in prayer.

(Question for private reflection: Is there someone in your life against whom you hold a grudge and for whom you need God's help to forgive?)

Further Notes

MARK 11:1-25

The events in Jerusalem are recorded in disproportionate length in all the gospels, a clear indication that this is the climax, not just the end, of Jesus' ministry. Typical themes show clearly in this section. Note: *"who is Jesus?"*, authority, opposition, true and false religion, teaching crowds/disciples, fulfillment of scripture. These repeated features help us keep track of Mark's chief aim, that of presenting the uniqueness of Christ and our need to respond to him.

v1-11. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is that of a triumphal king. Either by prior arrangement (Cranfield) or by miraculous foreknowledge (Cole) he borrows an unbroken foal for this last stage of his journey (note the faithful service of the two disciples). This deliberate act in fulfillment of scripture (Zech 9:9) declares both Jesus' authority and his determination to take the path ordained for him (8:31, 9:12).

The context in Zechariah 9:10 also implies a statement of coming in peace, the king having eschewed the more normal war-horse. The crowds of Passover pilgrims acknowledge him in service and praise as to a king (2 Ki 9:13, Psa 118:25-26). The cry of Hosanna ("*save, we pray*" or "*save now*") takes up an appropriate Passover psalm (bunches of palm leaves were called hosannas when used with Psalm 118 at the feast of tabernacles).

The ensuing quotation again emphasizes the authority of Jesus, coming truly in the name of the Lord. In Jesus the kingdom of David was to be established for ever but the crowd's messianic proclamation did not mean that they understood the situation. This was their Messiah, yet in many ways not the "*expected one*". Verse 11 is almost an anticlimax, yet clearly historical (no novelist would put it in!). The point is that the temple is coolly inspected. Judgment follows.

v12-19. The fig tree is most easily understood where Mark has placed it, in terms of the sandwiched material on the temple, providing an acted parable of judgment. The fig tree is condemned because it did not have the fruit it professed to have (a fig tree in leaf would normally have some fruit, despite the season). This illustrated the judgment coming to the temple and Judaism for the same faults (Jer 8:8-13 helps greatly).

In the case of the temple practices, the market set up in the Court of the Gentiles had effectively prevented "*all nations*" coming to pray where they were allowed. The trade was in any case corrupt and people had become so lacking in respect as to use the temple as a short-cut! (v16-17). Jesus' response is drastic (Mal 3:1-3), a case of direct action (.N.B. as here, anger may well be justified but we must make sure it's God's anger not ours (Jas 1:20)). The authorities are afraid for their power and their standards. They cannot admit he's right, so he must be silenced, lest the people listen to him.

v20-25. Peter's problem however, is not that Jesus cursed the fig tree but that the curse was so effective! Jesus' response is to teach concerning faith and prayer, even more important than explaining the "*why?*" of the fig tree.

The first lesson is, above all, trust God (cp. 9:22-24). The impossible is indeed possible for those who rely on God, not least in their obtaining admission to his kingdom (10:27). All that is needful is some, not perfect, faith. It is the object of faith, not the quantity that matters (a mustard seed of faith is enough). Verses 23-24 taken in isolation would appear to preach the power of positive thinking but this is to forget the lesson of dependence on God in v22!

The other conditioning phrase is "*in prayer*". To pray truly must imply seeking God's purpose, asking "*thy will be done*" rather than simply saying "*I believe you can do this for me*". Similarly, adding "*in Jesus' name?*" to a petition does not necessarily make it true prayer. The last condition is clearer. We must forgive others if we hope to obtain forgiveness ourselves (Matt 18:23-35). None of these conditions are meant to water down Jesus' promise of the ability to experience God's power in answering prayer. The problem lies with us, not God. (For additional references on prayer, see Jn 14:13-14, Jas 4:1-3, Matt 6:33, 7:7).

Study 18 - Escalating Conflicts

MARK CHAPTERS 11:27-12:17

Questions

1. Did you ever pass by an opportunity and later regret it?

READ Mark 11:27-12:17

2. The Chief priests and teachers of the law ask Jesus "*By what authority are you doing these things?*" What are "*these things*" which they are referring to and what did they hope to reveal in asking Jesus this question?
3. Why does Jesus return the question to the Chief priests and teachers? How does this embarrass them?
4. Read Isaiah 5:1-7. What is the main point of Jesus' parable in Mark 12:1-12? How is it similar and how is it different from the parable in Isaiah? Who are the tenants? The owner? The servants? The son? The others to whom the vineyard will be given?
5. What does this parable reveal about Jesus' view of himself? What are the implications of those views for us?
6. In vs. 13-17, how exactly are the Chief priests and teachers trying to trap Jesus? What is the nature of the trap?
7. How does Jesus evade the trap of the Herodians and Pharisees and why are they so amazed by his answer? What are the implications of his words for believers?
8. Specifically how does Jesus differ from Israel's leaders? Of which characteristics identified in them do you need to remain wary? What characteristics in Jesus do you need to develop?

LEADER'S NOTES MARK 11:27-12:17

Main Points

In Jerusalem the opposition against Jesus escalates. Since his disciples (the New Israel) have been called and taught, he does not need to avoid the opposition. His death on the cross need no longer be delayed. He has already proclaimed who he is (the Christ, the Son of God) and what he has come to do (accomplish redemption through his death) and now the only thing left is for him to do it. His conflicts with the leaders of Israel, which are recounted in this passage and the next, serve not only to expose their evil motives and pronounce judgment upon them but also to carry him closer to the crucifixion.

Commentary on the Passage and Notes on the Questions

1. Did you ever pass by an opportunity and later regret it? Approach question.

2. The Chief priests and teachers of the law ask Jesus "By what authority are you doing these things?" What are "these things" which they are referring to and what did they hope to reveal in asking Jesus this question?

, "These things" refers not so much to his teaching but to his recent behavior in the temple. They wanted to know, who gave him a commission to put a stop to buying and selling within the bounds of the temple or to forbid people to use the outer court as a short cut on their business errands. The questions were rhetorical. The Sanhedrin did not need to be told that Jesus lacked the kind of authority that rabbinical ordination confers, but they would not dream of suggesting that he got authority from God. Their questions were to intimidate and embarrass Jesus, to leave him defenseless, and expose him as an impostor. Achieving this, Jesus would lose favor with the crowds, and they need fear him no longer.

3. Why does Jesus return the question to the Chief priests and teachers? How does this embarrass them?

The correct answer to the Chief priests' and teachers' question was, "By the authority of God." However, this would have played into their plans. First, they had no intention of giving any credence to that possibility. Second, they could interpret it as a Messianic claim which they could take to Pilate as evidence of insurrection. Jesus won't answer their question unless they answer a question of his first. Knowing that his questioners would not believe him if he said his authority came from God, he tests them to see if they were capable of recognizing divine authority when they saw it. He reminds them of John the Baptist's ministry and asks where they believe his authority came from - God or man? This put to them a terrible conundrum. "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'From men'..." (They feared the people, for everyone held that John was really a prophet.)

If they could recognize divine authority when it was expressed in the actions and teaching of John, they might be expected to recognize it when it was manifested

in the words and deeds of Jesus. If they had answered Jesus' question correctly, they would in fact have answered their own too. John clearly taught that the one who followed him would be the LORD who would *"baptize with the Holy Spirit"*, ushering in the Messianic age.

Just as John defined his ministry in terms of Jesus' ministry (1:7,8) so Jesus defined his ministry in terms of John's (9:12,13; 11:29-30). If John was the prophet from God of whom Malachi spoke, then Jesus was Lord. If Jesus was an impostor, then John was too. The Sanhedrin balked at answering Jesus' question and only say, *"We don't know."* Jesus in effect says to them, *"If you cannot recognize divine authority when you see it in action, no amount of argument will convince you of its presence."* Jesus' repetitious words, *"I will ask you one question. Answer me?...Tell me?"* suggests that he asks this question with force and authority. He is now on the offensive, instead of the defensive. The power of his character is seen.

The Sanhedrin's answer was so pathetic that it did not qualify as a genuine answer to Jesus' question. Since they do not answer his question, he does not answer theirs. The Sanhedrin are embarrassed and lose face, not Jesus. Their motives are exposed. They are concerned more for maintaining their positions of power than they are about knowing what is true and obeying God. Their plan to embarrass Jesus comes back on their own heads. He is victorious in debate.

4. Read Isaiah 5:1-7. What is the main point of Jesus' parable in Mark 12:1-12? How is it similar and how is it different from the parable in Isaiah? Who are the tenants? The owner? The servants? The son? The others to whom the vineyard will be given?

Unlike some parables, Jesus tells this one with no hidden meanings. When it is completed we are told that the Chief priests and teachers knew that the parable was about them and looked for a way to arrest him. Thus they are in the process of bringing the parable to fulfillment as soon as it is told. The main point of the parable is that the leaders of Israel have rebelled against God and will be judged with a finality that will remove from them the right to care for God's people once and for all. The vineyard was a common OT symbol for Israel (Ps. 80:8-15; Ezek. 17) but the details at the beginning and end of 12:1-12 connect it particularly strongly to Is. 5:1-7. The same words for *"vineyard"*, *"planted"*, *"put around"*, *"wall"*, *"dug a pit"*, *"wine press"*, *"built"* and *"watchtower"* occur in the Greek versions of both passages. In both, the owner looks for fruit and, when he receives none, acts in judgment.

Jesus' hearers would have understood that the *"man"* in the parable was *"God"*, that the *"vineyard"* was the house of Israel and that the missing fruit was justice and righteousness. All of these things would be similarities between the parables in Isaiah and Mark. However, there are differences as well. Tenants, servants, and a son appear in Jesus' parable and it becomes clear that this parable is an account of Israel's entire discreditable history. The *"tenants"* are the leaders of Israel in each generation who were answerable to God. The chief priests, elders and teachers of the law knew Jesus was referring to them in the character of the tenants. The *"servants"* are the prophets who throughout Israel's history tried to

collect the rent for God by calling his people to justice and righteousness. What this parable makes clear is that things were not getting progressively better. Israel was not learning something as their history went on. Instead things were getting progressively worse.

Each of the servants (the prophets are often referred to as God servants in the OT - Jer. 7:25,26; 25:3-7; Amos 3:7, Zech. 1.6) are shown to experience increasing maltreatment. The son stands for Jesus whose coming is the last resort. While in the parable the owner believes that the tenants will treat his son well, we should not conclude that God really thought Jesus would be treated well. Throughout the gospel it has been clearly portrayed that Jesus will die. The effect of the owner's belief that they would respond to his "*beloved*" son evokes the sense that such rejection of him is truly astonishing and wicked. Interestingly, the farmers in the story killed the last messenger not because they didn't know who he was, but because they did. Their motive in killing him was to take for themselves what belonged to the son. Perhaps, Jesus means to communicate by this that the leaders of Israel know in their heart of hearts that he has come from God. They planned to kill him so that Israel would honor and give allegiance to them rather than to him. And like the tenants, they deceived themselves into believing that judgment wouldn't come to them for their actions.

Jesus, however, makes clear that judgment would come. "*What then will the owner of the vineyard do?*", he asks. Here the ancient near eastern obligation of a family to seek blood vengeance for the killing of one of their own comes to the fore. Their punishment fits the crime; those who kill the Son and throw him out of the vineyard will themselves be thrown out as well as killed. The last thing to notice is that the vineyard is given to others. Since the parable might have ended with the destruction of the tenants this statement ought to be seen as significant. The care for the true people of God is taken away permanently. In this parable, unlike in the exile which Isaiah foretold, the priestly role of Israel among the nations is abolished forever. A transfer of leadership from the Sanhedrin to Jesus and his disciples is in view. Ironically, the "*others*" are not "*let*" the vineyard, but "*given*" it. Those who deny themselves, take up the cross, and follow Christ do "*inherit*" the kingdom.

5. What does this parable reveal about Jesus' view of himself? What are the implications of those views for us?

First, by identifying himself with the son who is sent "*last of all*", Jesus portrays himself as the last and most important messenger of God. In Hebrews 1:1 we are told, "*In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.*" Jesus is God's final word. The events surrounding his Son are the last major redemptive events prior to Jesus' return and the final judgment. Second, Jesus, applying Psalm 118:22,23, explains himself as "*the stone which the builders rejectedit became the capstone.*" The reference comes from the same psalm which the pilgrims sang as Jesus rode into the city on a colt. By using this verse, Jesus changes the metaphor at hand from a vineyard to a building. The figure of speech implies that the rest of the building will be made by

Jesus' disciples just as he and they are "*the others*" to whom God gives the vineyard.

Jesus warns the leaders of Israel that killing God's Messiah would achieve neither the removal of God's authority over them nor the removal of the Messiah. Indeed, his rejection would eventually issue in a marvelous victory, and the beginning of a new "*temple*" - one made with living stones. There are at least a few implications for us in Jesus' portrayal of himself. The first is that, as God's final messenger, Jesus deserves our complete attention. There is not another messenger that we should wait for who is going to tell us something beyond what Jesus has revealed. As the last bearer of revelation from God, his words supply everything we need to live the Christian life. Through him God has sufficiently communicated what we need to know in order to please him.

The only event we wait for now in salvation history is his return. It is, therefore, important that we intently listen to him and give him our complete devotion. The second implication of what Jesus has communicated about himself is that just as the teachers were unable to escape from Jesus' authority or judgment, neither can we. This may seem a rather absurd point at first. We are inclined to say, "*I don't want to evade his authority.*" Yet, every time we sin we are communicating that we don't take his authority or judgment seriously. Remembering who he is will prevent us from treating our sin too lightly.

6. In vs. 13-17, how exactly are the Chief priests and teachers trying to trap Jesus? What is the nature of the trap?

To understand the trap that is being set for Jesus, it is important to understand the political situation. The land of Palestine was under the rule of the Romans, and the Jews were essentially captives in their own country. Some Jews went along with this quite willingly and were, therefore, able to profit considerably. Such people included tax collectors as well Jews who were well-off and benefited from a stable government. The Herodians were included among this latter group who had a stake in the ability of the Romans to govern Palestine successfully.

The Pharisees and other Jews chafed under Roman rule. While they did so partly out of national pride and the burden of heavy taxation, their major concern arose from deeply held religious beliefs. They believed that God alone was Israel's king and that it was high treason against him for his people to recognize any Gentile ruler by paying him tribute. What made the paying of taxes doubly offensive is that they were required to pay them in the emperor's silver coins, inscribed with his image and a text which described him as a god. For some, to even handle the coins was considered idolatrous. Notice that although it is the Herodians and Pharisees who are questioning Jesus, they have been sent by the Chief priests and teachers. Normally, the Herodians and Pharisees had little to do with one another. Yet both groups respected the ordained religious leaders of Israel and if the leaders believed that Jesus needed to be discredited, then they were willing to become strange bed-fellows to accomplish this. When these groups come together and ask Jesus "*Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?*" they are asking whether it violates the laws of God.

This was the trap: If Jesus supports paying the taxes, the Pharisees can accuse him of compromising in support of the blasphemous Roman system. He will then lose favor with the crowds. If he challenges the tribute, the Herodians can accuse him of sedition against the state, an offense punishable by death. They thought they had Jesus in the perfect dilemma.

7. How does Jesus evade the trap of the Herodians and Pharisees and why are they so amazed by his answer? What are the implications of his words for believers?

To evade the trap, Jesus referred to Caesar's image and inscription on the coin. *"Whose face is this? Whose name is this?"*, he asks. *"Caesar's"*, they answered. *"Well"*, said Jesus, *"the coin which bears Caesar's face and name is obviously Caesar's coin; let Caesar have it back. It belongs to him."*

Jesus demonstrates a cleverness that even the scrupulous would have appreciated: such coins were unfit for use by people who were so scrupulous about keeping the law of God, and should go back where they came from. Caesar's coins were best used for paying Caesar's tribute. If that was what Caesar wanted, let him have it. The claims of God were not transgressed by such use of Caesar's money. While this answer would not satisfy those most opposed to paying tribute, it certainly silenced and perhaps even delighted the majority of people. Jesus' cleverness and wisdom amazed even those who desired to bring him down. While the first part of Jesus saying carries the implication that the state has a legitimate role in God's world, the far more profound ramifications are found in the second part of his saying: *"Give to God what belongs to God."*

If the coin bearing Caesar's image belonged to Caesar, then human beings, who bear the image of God, belong to him in their entirety. Jesus' point is that our whole allegiance and life is due to God. The rulers in Israel were primarily committed to themselves. Maintaining their status and positions of power was their chief allegiance. Jesus' words condemn them. He says what really matters is seeking God's kingdom and his righteousness with all of our heart. We are to give him our all. His claims are made on every area of our lives - our time, our leisure, our work, our family life, our sexuality, our finances, our church involvement, etc.

(Optional question: What is an area of your- life which you especially need to surrender more fully to God?)

8. Specifically how does Jesus differ from Israel's leaders? Of which characteristics identified in them do you need to remain wary? What characteristics in Jesus do you need to develop?

Perhaps the most glaring difference between Jesus and his opposition is that he fears God and they fear man. The desire of the leaders of Israel to please man and to avoid pleasing God undermines every area of their lives. Though they are supposed to be the moral authorities, in actuality they have no personal moral authority. Because they do not care about pleasing God they cave in on any and every principle. They use flattery. Ulterior motives operate regularly in their

lives. They have no integrity. They are "*men without chests*" willing to compromise whenever it will bring benefit to themselves.

We all struggle with these same issues and the portrait that is painted of the rulers of Israel helps us to see how ugly such lives really are. What shines forth in Jesus is not only his cleverness and wisdom, but especially his integrity - his unwillingness to compromise and his undiluted, invincible desire to please God.

Further Notes

MARK 11:27-12:17

The relatively simple structure of Mark shows again in the constant reiteration of the same themes: Mark does not have many lessons to teach but they are often hard to learn.

"*Who is Jesus*" continues from the last passage and the episodes of opposition and rejection continue to build. Whether Jesus is presented as Prophet (v27-33), Priest (v15-19), King (v1-10) or even Son (12:1-12), he is not welcomed by the Jewish authorities. They press their questions. Jesus responds firstly by questioning them and then by turning to teach, addressing the scribes (12:1), the crowds (12:35-37) and the disciples (12:41-44, Ch 13).

v27-33. The question of authority could be directed at Jesus' right to preach as well as his actions in clearing the temple, Jesus having no recognized training or commission to teach. Jesus replies with a question (Jesus' questions are a feature worth looking out in Mark), suggesting that they are more in need of establishing their authority and perceptiveness before him than vice-versa.

Jesus perhaps picks on their attitude to John as he also had an "*unofficial*" ministry, and one whose message testified to Jesus. To acknowledge John, the forerunner, would be at least in part to grant authority to Jesus. However their concern for truth has become a casualty to their desire for face-saving and expediency. Their inability to admit faults is a total block to receiving the message of and about Jesus (Mk 2:17, 1 Jn 1:8-10).

Ch12 v1-12. Not a difficult parable to grasp: even the scribes and elders understood it! The setting is taken from Isaiah 5:1-7 but Jesus adds the tenants, messengers and the son: the priests, prophets and himself. He depicts the crimes of the rulers (and people?) of Israel in detail as failure to give God his due (Mal Ch 1, 2), active rebellion (Psa 2), persecution of the prophets (Lk 13:34) and intent to murder Jesus himself (Lk 3:6, 11:18).

No wonder they wanted Jesus out of the way! Note Jesus continuing to teach, even to such an unlikely audience, the God figure presented as both patient and judging, the son as the final messenger from the father and whose treatment determines the final judgment, the fact that the son is killed because he is recognized, not because he isn't. The way of service and its cost is highlighted, both for Jesus and other "*servants of the father*".

In quoting Psalm 118:22-23 Jesus is again seeing in himself the fulfillment of scripture and in particular that God had always intended that his Son's triumph and vindication should follow death and rejection (Acts 4:11, 1 Pet 2:7). The blindness

of the scribes is seen in their failure to ask *"is this true?"* or even *"why do the crowds support him?"*

v13-17. The aim is to trap Jesus with an *"impossible"* question, possibly all they have learnt from Jesus' question in v30! The Pharisees and the Herodians come together (3:6). Despite their natural antipathy, they share a common interest here.

The trap: to say *"yes"* would discredit Jesus as a Roman sympathizer, *"no"* would enable him to be denounced to the Romans. In asking for the coin, Jesus demonstrates their insincerity, because in using Roman coins they show that they have already answered their own question affirmatively, despite the blasphemous nature of the image and title on the coin, an offense to pious Jews.

Jesus' answer is, as described, amazing. It is worth following up the implications in detail: firstly to the Christian's duty to the state authorities (Rom 13:1-7, 1 Tim 2:1-4, 1 Pet 2:13-17) and secondly to the Christian's duty towards God. This can be found in the continuation of the vineyard parable in Isaiah 5:7-25 as well as many other places. We bear God's image and likeness: how should we give ourselves to God?

Study 19 - Teaching With Authority

MARK CHAPTER 12:18-44

Questions

1. Have you ever been involved in a formal debate? What was it about and what was the outcome?

READ Mark 12:18-44

2. What are the Sadducees attempting to accomplish in questioning Jesus about the resurrection?
3. How does Jesus answer them and what does he indicate is the source of their error?
4. How do we combat the Sadducees' error in our own lives so that we are innocent of knowing "*neither the Scripture nor the power of God*"?
5. In vs. 28-34 a teacher of the law asks Jesus which commandment is the most important. What does Jesus' answer tell us about the nature of Christianity? Why does Jesus name two commandments in reply instead of the one for which he was asked? How are the commandments related to one another?
6. What additional information does the teacher of the law add to Jesus' answer and what is the significance of the addition?
7. In vs. 35-37, Jesus, who previously had been on the defensive, goes on to ask his own questions. What is the purpose of his question? What is he trying to communicate about the Messiah?
8. Of what flaw is Jesus accusing the teachers of the law of in vs. 38-40? How do they fail to be obedient to the great commandment?
9. A poor widow is contrasted with the teachers of the law. What are the contrasts? How does her life demonstrate obedience to the great commandment? What changes would be required in your life for you to emulate her?

LEADER'S NOTES MARK 12:18-44

Main Points

Jesus has previously defeated the chief priests, teachers of the law, and elders in debate (11:27-12:12), and also the Pharisees and Herodians whom they sent (12:13-17). Now he defeats the Sadducees (12:18-27). Jesus' identity as the Messiah is further established as he proclaims what is at the heart of true religion and draws attention to the failure of Israel's leaders. They stand condemned and powerless before Jesus. He also continues to challenge current perceptions of the Messiah, replacing them with a more biblical understanding.

Jesus has silenced his enemies, has the crowd firmly on his side, and has established his Messianic identity. As his death approaches, we are made aware that it will not happen because he is a criminal, nor will it happen because he is unable to defend himself and escape his enemies. Instead, it will be because he has chosen to die in accordance with the will of his Father.

Commentary on the Passage and Notes on the Questions

1. Have you ever been involved in a formal debate? What was it about and what was the outcome? Approach question.

2. What are the Sadducees attempting to accomplish in questioning Jesus about the resurrection?

Mark tells us that the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection but that death was final, that one passed into oblivion. Apparently, any judgment that happened occurred in this life. Elsewhere we learn that they ascribed far more authority to the first five books of the Bible than they did to the remainder of the OT and that they did not believe in angels (Acts 23:8). Although they were eventually condemned as a heretical group after the Jewish revolt of 66-70 A.D., at this time they were players on the religious scene and opposed Jesus' obvious authority. Not as vindictive toward Jesus as the chief priests, teachers of the law and the Pharisees, they saw no need to encourage the development of more groups of people who held to what they considered foolish beliefs. Thus, they seek to belittle Jesus and his belief in resurrection with the clever logic of their question.

First, they draw attention to the Moses command regarding Levitical marriage (Deut 25:5-10). If a married man died without an heir, then his brother was to marry his wife in order to provide an heir who would carry on his name. The Sadducees had full respect for this command but believed that if there was a resurrection it would create unresolvable problems. A problem for two people is more pronounced if it involves seven so they give a series of seven brothers in marriage to the same woman in unsuccessful attempts to pass on the family name. They want to know who will be married to who at the resurrection. While perhaps a man might have a harem, in this example a woman inherits one. This conclusion seems absurd. Therefore, the resurrection must also be absurd.

3. How does Jesus answer them and what does he indicate is the source of their error?

Jesus charges them with knowing neither the Scripture nor the power of God. This is the source of their error. Their error leads them to wrong beliefs, which in turn leads to wrong living. Having accused them of standing on a faulty foundation he proceeds to answer their question by pointing to the nature of the resurrection life. Contrary to the Sadducees conception that resurrection life would be identical to life in the here and now, Jesus states that in the resurrection our life will be analogous to that of the angels. (Because Sadducees did not believe in angels, Jesus' reply added insult to injury). Jesus' saying does not mean that the resurrected dead will be spirits without some sort of body but that in their resurrected body they will not renew earthly relationships like marriage and the begetting of children. In heaven our primary intimacies will be with God. While the OT does not reveal much about what heaven will be like, Jesus presumes to tell them and thus speaks with unprecedented authority.

Once he has answered their question, Jesus deals with the issue behind the question: the resurrection. Mark's readers, knowing that Jesus has predicted his own resurrection, will realize that more is at stake here than winning a theoretical argument. Indeed, the followers of Jesus were living in a Hellenistic environment which was hostile towards the idea of resurrection because of their philosophical belief that the body was evil. The hope of the believers was tied into Jesus' defense of the resurrection. Jesus proceeds to prove the resurrection by referring to a part of the OT which the Sadducees would have viewed as authoritative (Exodus 3:6). While the verse itself does not grammatically demonstrate the necessity of the resurrection, the context of the verse does.

Here God describes himself as a deliverer who will rescue Israel from oppression. And He grounds his ability to deliver in the fact that he is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God had promised these men that he would be their Savior and Provider (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-18; 17:1-8). However, if these men are not alive then this reference is a discouragement rather than an encouragement. It means that God does not have the power to save his people from death. God's word to Moses is to be taken as a proclamation that he has not forgotten his relationship with the Patriarchs and that they and the rest of the righteous dead will yet enjoy his favor. Again, it ought to be apparent that Jesus had not only answered the Sadducees but that all who were followers of Jesus (ourselves included) could take comfort and courage from his answer.

4. How do we combat the Sadducees' error in our own lives so that we are innocent of knowing *“neither the Scripture nor the power of God”*?

One thing we must avoid is being selective about what passages of Scripture we will take seriously, picking and choosing which parts of Scripture we will be obedient to and which we will disregard. This has as much to do with beliefs as it does with behavior. Our beliefs and behavior must be shaped by the Scriptures. Rejecting certain doctrines will invariably effect how you behave. The Sadducees in rejecting resurrection also rejected the doctrine of the final judgment. This, in turn, causes one to live poorly because on this basis it no longer matters how you behave. Sin is discounted. The opposite is also true. If we begin behaving in ways contrary to the commands of Scripture, it is not long

before we adjust our doctrine to justify our actions. We must know the Scriptures and submit to them.

The second thing we will do to avoid the Sadducees' error is to become a praying people who genuinely deal with God. We will also believe that he is at work and look for evidence of his working. This will prevent us from not knowing the power of God. Paul accuses another group of not knowing the power of God when in 2 Timothy 3:1-9 he writes, *"they have a form of godliness but deny its power"*. They are people who can put on a pretty good outward display of religiosity, but whose religion is ultimately without substance. Paul indicates that some people live deliberately like this to take advantage of others. However, any one of us can slip into this kind of existence. Whenever we are not experiencing any of God's power in our lives and grow cynical about God's ability to work it usually means that we have ceased to be fervent in prayer and have failed to open our eyes wide enough to see God's hand involved in our circumstances so that we can respond with thanksgiving. These disciplines must be central in our lives if we are to escape the charge spoken against the Sadducees.

5. In vs. 28-34 a teacher of the law asks Jesus which commandment is the most important. What does Jesus' answer tell us about the nature of Christianity? Why does Jesus name two commandments in reply instead of the one for which he was asked? How are the commandments related to one another?

Jesus' answer to the scribe's question gives us the fundamental insight that Christianity is not so much a religion as it is a relationship. A loving relationship with God, not rules, is at its core. Flowing inseparably from that relationship are our relationships with others. Christianity does have rules that are to be obeyed. In fact, it was commonly understood in Christ's day that the OT law included 613 commandments. Part of the reason for the Scribes' question was a desire to organize this body of material around a basic commandment so as to give a fundamental premise on which to hang the individual commands. This did not render the other commandments superfluous. Instead, the fundamental purpose and character of the OT law could be discerned.

In Jesus' answer we are able to discern the continuity between OT Judaism and Christianity - in both God has been pursuing a relationship of love with his people. The scribe's commendation of Jesus' answer may be included by Mark to show that Jesus was not to be seen as a Jewish heretic, but one whose grasp of what the law really represented was quite profound. Jesus gives two commandments instead of the one he was asked for because a person might claim to love God, who is invisible, without much objective evidence. It was possible to believe that acts of worship alone were adequate evidence of love for God. Jesus is not interested in allowing that belief to have any credence. No-one can rest on abstract fulfillment of the first commandment. Indeed, it seems that this was the problem of Israel's leadership they were full of religious devotion but had very little love for the fellow man. No such dichotomy between love for God and love for people was tolerable.

The apostle John was blunt about it, *"If anyone says, 'I love God', yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen."* We make our love for the invisible God visible when we love our neighbor who is God's image bearer. That includes people who do not relate with God. It also means that we will not be able to love indiscriminately unless we do love God.

6. What additional information does the teacher of the law add to Jesus' answer and what is the significance of the addition?

When commending Jesus for his answer the scribe states that loving God and neighbor *"is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."*

When he speaks in this way he is confirming the fact that in true religion, relationships (with God and with others) are more important than rituals. It is also likely that Mark includes this transaction as a prophecy that the temple and its worship were about to be discarded. The rituals of OT religion were about to be superseded because of Christ's work of establishing a new people of God apart from those activities. (Remember that this theme of judgment on Old Israel and the establishment of new Israel has come up in a number of previous lessons).

Mark doesn't tell us that this man followed Jesus. He may have been purposefully ambiguous so that his readers questioned themselves with regards to how close they were to the kingdom. What accounted for the scribe's closeness to the kingdom? He knew God's standards: love God and love your neighbor. He also knew that animal sacrifices could not make up for the sin of selfishness toward others. To have accepted God's humanly impossible standard and the inability of religion to save us is a vital step towards crying to God for forgiveness. Things were optimistic for the Scribe. Is it like that for us?

7. In vs. 35-37, Jesus, who previously had been on the defensive, goes on to ask his own questions. What is the purpose of his question? What is he trying to communicate about the Messiah?

Having had his authority questioned, Jesus now questions the authority of Israel's teachers and continues to expose their ignorance of the Scripture. He seems quite interested in clearing up misconceptions about the Messiah prior to his death. Here he demonstrates that the Messiah is not merely a gifted and blessed human being, but is divine. The teacher's problem was not that they failed to see how Jesus matched up to OT promises of Messiah's authority, but that having underestimated the OT messianic promises, they thought Jesus was claiming more authority than even the Messiah should. He was claiming a status far above what the popular understanding of the Messiah would allow.

While it had always been understood that when the Messiah came he would be a descendant of David, Jesus demonstrates that the designation *"Son of David"* is inadequate to communicate who he is. Quoting Psalm 110:1 as a reference to the Messiah, Jesus shows David addressing the Messiah as *"my Lord"*, implying that the Messiah is greater than David. He didn't merely model David. Actually, David's life modeled the Messiah's. In light of all of Mark's gospel, Jesus' question is a hint that the Messiah properly understood is actually the Son of God,

whose transcendent power and significance surpass any human figure. By associating the Messiah with the throne of God "*sit at my right hand*" divine significance is attributed to him. A second thing Jesus gets across by quoting Psalm 110 is that the Messiah's work would be far greater than David's. This work would concern itself not with merely national deliverance (as in the case of David) but would involve redemption for all peoples. Through Jesus' words, David's place as a model and image of the Messiah is being challenged. The people must be prepared to change their inadequate conceptions of the Christ.

8. Of what flaw is Jesus accusing the teachers of the law of in vs. 38-40? How do they fail to be obedient to the great commandment?

The scribes chief flaw is that they love themselves more than God. They are more concerned with getting honor for themselves, than giving honor to God. They delighted in how their position enabled them to be served, rather than how it enabled them to serve. They enjoyed their place far too much. It appears to be a short step from enjoying the privileged status their position gave them to actually taking advantage of others ("*they devour widow's houses*"). Certainly in the church there are those who have inherited their mantle, leaders who prey on the poor who can ill afford to give as heavily as they are solicited to do. Jesus words of judgment do not get much harsher than those found here: "*Such men will be punished most severely.*" Mark surely intends his readers to see in Jesus' words not only a condemnation of the abuses of the Jewish teachers but also a warning about the development of similar abuses in Christian circles. Would Jesus say, "*Beware the Fellowship Group leaders at Redeemer*"?

9. A poor widow is contrasted with the teachers of the law. What are the contrasts? How does her life demonstrate obedience to the great commandment? What changes would be required in your life for you to emulate her?

The widow is set in stark contrast to the scribes. Jesus words must have surprised his listeners. The crowd gave adulation to the scribes so their own actions as well as the scribes are undermined. A change in value systems is required of all parties. The widow was certainly not viewed as a heroic character in the culture. She would have been viewed as worthy of compassion, but would not have considered a person with much to offer. She was viewed as expendable and insignificant. The rich and influential were the heroes to be emulated. Jesus turns these values upside down. Contrary to popular opinion large gifts did not in and of themselves merit the favor of God. Abundant giving often creates a sense of self-satisfaction and the opinion that God is lucky to have a rich and generous person on his side. Jesus exposes the pretentious nature of these attitudes.

By holding up the widow as an example to emulate, Jesus demonstrates where true value lies. It consists of living a life of extravagance toward God - giving one's all to him without reservation. She, one of the "*least of these*", is the one who is worthy of honor, not the scribes. Her whole-hearted commitment to God and determination to withhold nothing are exalted. Others gave what they would not miss. She gives all that she has, becoming totally dependent upon God. It is she, not the scribes, that we must imitate.

Study 20 - Living in the Last Days

MARK CHAPTER 13:1-37

Questions

1. What was one thing in your life for which you waited as if forever? How long did you have to wait?

READ Mark 13:1-37

2. What would you say is the dominant theme or themes in this passage? What is its main point and why would you say so?

3. In v. 2 Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple. (This occurred in 70 A.D.) What was the significance of the destruction of the Temple?

4. What questions do the disciples ask Jesus and upon your initial examination of the passage what is your understanding of Jesus' answers?

5. What is it that Jesus says will take place in v. 5-13 and what is its relationship to the end of time?

6. To what might the "*abomination that causes desolation*" refer and what is its relationship to the end? Why did Jesus choose this particular historical event as a key reference point in his discussion of the end times?

7. What is Jesus talking about in v.24-27? How do these events differ from those mentioned in v 5-23? What do they tell us about Jesus' return?

8. What are "*all these things*" Jesus refers to in verse 30 which will happen before "*this generation*" passes away?

9. In v. 32-37 Jesus' key instructions are "*Be on guard! Be alert! Keep Watch!*" What does the context suggest he means by those instructions? What kinds of activities does this suggest? Name an activity you might take more seriously.

LEADER'S NOTES MARK 13:1-37

Main Points

The tendency when reading a passage about the end times is to figure out details and dates. However, the dominant theme of this passage is a call to Christ's disciples to faithful living and to warn them against being deceived by false claims about the end being near. And by individuals trying to pass themselves off as prophets or the Messiah. It is essential to remember when interpreting literature about the last days that those who wrote it were writing primarily for first century Christians. Therefore, the interpretation must have been accessible to those living in the first century. Before we can apply it successfully to ourselves, we must understand how it applied to them.

Essentially, Jesus is saying that the entire time between his first and second coming will be marked by trouble and the prevalence of evil. One climax of this evil will be the "*abomination that causes desolation*". Throughout this period, false teachers will appear who will attempt to lead people astray. In light of this, we must avoid being duped by false teachers and continue to live obediently as we expect Jesus' return, which could happen at any time.

The passage may be analyzed as follows:

- A. (v. 1-2) Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple. (This took place in 70 A.D.)
- B. (v. 3-4) The disciples ask two questions:
 - 1. When will the Temple be destroyed?
 - 2. When will the end of the age come?
- C. (v. 5-13) Jesus states the characteristics of the period between his first and second comings - earthquakes, wars, persecution, preaching of the gospel.
- D. (v. 14-23) Zoom lens focus on a particular period (A.D. 66-70) which belongs to period mentioned in above.
- E. (v. 24-27) An account of Jesus' second coming.
- F. (v. 28-31) A reference to v. 14-23 above, which is a sign of the nearness of the end.
- G. (v. 32-37) Instructions for how to live in light of the above: Don't guess dates. Live faithfully.

Commentary on the
Passage and Notes on
the Questions

1. What was one thing in your life for which you waited as if forever?
How long did you have to wait? Approach question.

2. What would you say is the dominant theme or themes in this passage?
What is it's main point and why would you say so?

(See Main Points) The dominant theme is a call to persistent faithful obedience to Christ during days of trouble and false teaching. This is evident because there is

a repetition of these themes in the passage: False teachers are mentioned in v. 5, 6, 21, 22. Calls to be on guard, watch, and live faithfully are found in v. 5, 23, 33, 35, 36, 37. These same applications are invariably found whenever any of the biblical writers speaks about the last days. "*The last days*" is a technical term in the Bible. In the NT it becomes clear that it is the designation used to refer to the entire period between Christ's first and second coming. The intention of the biblical writers in referring to these days is not to get us to guess about the date of Christ's return, (he explicitly cautions against it - v. 32, 33), or to get us draw conclusions about correlation between the things foretold and current events, (there is only one such identifiable item in this passage - v. 14). Instead, Jesus wants us to know that evil is not going to take a rest and neither should we. We should not follow false Christs who give us directions other than Jesus' for how we ought to live. They are telling lies about God and if we believe them, it will only bring harm to us. We must remain attentive to God and live expectantly, knowing that Jesus could return at any time.

3. In v. 2 Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple. (This occurred in 70 A.D.) What was the significance of the destruction of the Temple?

A theme which has run throughout Mark's gospel is that Old Israel's time has run out and those who belong to it stand under judgment. A new people of God is founded which consists of the followers of Jesus. The prediction of the destruction of the temple is in keeping with this theme. This prediction in v. 2 caps a section (11:1-12:42) in which the primary location of the activities has been in the temple. The temple is the place which is central in OT religion. Having inspected the temple, Jesus pronounces it desecrated by the priestly leadership. He then speaks of the judgment to fall on Israel's leaders (12:1-12).

Love of God and love of neighbor is placed above and somewhat contrasted with temple ritual (12:33). When Jesus announces that the temple will come under judgment and be destroyed, it is its desecration which explains harshness of the prediction. In Mark 15:38 we are told that with Jesus' death the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, indicating that a new way had been opened up for meeting God. Later, in Peter's epistle it is announced that Christ's followers themselves become a living temple in which God dwells (1 Pet. 2:4, 5). Paul also speaks of Christians in this way (1 Cor. 3:16, 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16). The destruction of the temple then is God's final word of judgment on Old Israel and confirms the sole legitimacy of Christ's followers as the people of God.

4. What questions do the disciples ask Jesus and upon your initial examination of the passage what is your understanding of Jesus' answers?

In response to Jesus' prediction the disciples questions are, "*When will these things happen? What will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?*" The way in which they phrase their questions implies that they equated the destruction of the temple with the end of time itself. Popular belief disallowed the destruction of the temple, for God would surely not allow tarnish upon his honor and such a blow to his people. So cataclysmic would such an event be that it could not be imagined apart from the end of time and final

judgment. With this in mind Jesus breaks the disciples question down into four questions:

A1 When will the temple end? A2 What will indicate it is about to happen?

B1 When will the world end? B2 What will indicate it is about to happen?

Interestingly, Jesus gives what must be considered very dissatisfying answers to all the above. With regards to B1, he says explicitly, *"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father...You do not know when that time will come."* His answers to A1, A2 and B2 are themselves quite vague. Jesus answers the questions most clearly in v. 28-37 (which will be examined below), but even there he is far from specific. Emphasis falls on the fact that the disciples are to be ready at all times for these events to take place and to live in such a manner that whenever Christ returns they will be doing what is pleasing to him.

5. What is it that Jesus says will take place in v. 5-13 and what is its relationship to the end of time?

There are two primary schools of interpretation for v.5-13. One school sees these verses as referring to the period from Christ's ascension to 70 A.D. at which time the temple was destroyed. The second school believes these verses refer to the entire period from Christ's ascension until his second coming. Because these words are just as true for the entire period as they are for the specific period in the first century, many scholars find the latter school preferable. What does Jesus say will take place during this period? False messiahs will arise. Wars will take place and other wars will be rumored to take place. Earthquakes and famines will be normal occurrences. In addition to this, the followers of Christ will be turned upon (even by their own families) and be persecuted. In the midst of these activities the good news of God will be proclaimed throughout the world.

These are the kinds of events that have happened throughout history and which continue to happen to this very day. Rather than characterize them as signs, it would be more appropriate to designate them as non-signs for they give no real indication that Christ's return is significantly closer. Jesus says, *"Do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come...these are the beginning of birth pains."* The disciples ask Jesus for signs and he gives them non-signs. These *"non-signs"* demonstrate the end to be near only in the sense that it could happen at any time.

In the meantime, evil will be present on all sides during Christ's physical absence from the earth. In that period, Jesus' disciples are to be faithful to God, stop their ears to the claims of false messiahs, and speak the gospel even when persecuted, trusting the Holy Spirit to provide them with the words to say when brought before their accusers. They are not to lose hope amidst widespread misery, but trust that God will win out and stand firm.

6. To what might the "abomination that causes desolation" refer and what is its relationship to the end? Why did Jesus choose this particular

historical event as a key reference point in his discussion of the end times?

Verses 14-23 goes over in part ground that has just been traversed in verses 5-13. Here additional features are forecast and certain details are brought into prominence that could not be seen in the broad brush strokes of the initial picture. Think of verses 5-13 as a picture of an entire chain of mountains and verses 14-23 as a close-up of one particular mountain while still keeping the others in view. Details can be seen in this picture and the central detail is the "*abomination that causes desolation*". The prediction of an "*abomination that causes desolation*" has its origins in the book of Daniel (Dan. 9:24-27; 11:31; 12:7, 11). According to these passages something would take place in the temple which would cause it to be desecrated and the regular sacrifices to cease. Most commentators think the "*abomination*" referred at least partly to the Syrian King Antiochus IV, known as Epiphanes, who in 196 BC entered the holy of holies and eventually erected an altar to Zeus on the altar of burnt offering, probably placing a statue to Zeus over it and sacrificing a pig on it. The Jews believed a further fulfillment of the abomination took place when in 63 B.C., the Roman general Pompey defeated their nation, captured Jerusalem and desecrated the temple by intruding into the holy of holies.

However, this passage makes it clear that Jesus did not think that Daniel's prophecy had been completely fulfilled in these events, but awaited further fulfillment following his death and resurrection. Jesus was most likely referring to events during the Jewish revolt of 66-70 AD. During this period the temple was first profaned by Jewish zealots and later by the Roman army, who in 70 AD carried their ensigns (which bore the emperor's image) into the temple courts and then proceeded to offer sacrifices to them. Daniel said that the sign that the temple is about to fall (answering A2 above) will be the desecration. However, Jesus makes clear that even that would not be the end (v.20).

The warnings that Jesus offers in these verses were spoken as instructions for first century Christians to follow when the "*abomination*" took place. When the Roman army moved into Palestine and began to sweep away Jewish resistance, many Jews fled to Jerusalem for safety, believing that God would not allow the holy city to fall again. Jesus, however, says to flee to the mountains instead of taking refuge in the city, recognizing that God would not defend it, but allow it to be destroyed in judgment. They are to flee quickly from the approaching army (v. 15-16). Jesus then speaks with concern for those pregnant or nursing, knowing that the hardship of winter outside the city will make things especially difficult. We do learn from the historian Josephus that the war was very costly and that so many Jews were crucified that the hills were denuded of trees to provide the crosses. We are also told that during the siege of Jerusalem several rival groups appeared with leaders claiming to be sent by God to deliver the people. Thus, Jesus' warnings about false messiahs.

What is the relationship of this event to the end? While Jesus makes it clear that this isn't the end, the "*abomination*" was the "*sign*" of the destruction of the temple (answering A2 above), and the destruction of the temple was the "*sign*" of the end of the world (answering B2 above). Essentially, the "*abomination*"

and the ensuing destruction of the temple is the last milestone before final judgment. Jesus was saying that once the temple had been destroyed, his return could happen at any moment. A still further fulfillment of the abomination may be found in the events described in 2 Thessalonians 2. For more on the "abomination" and the end of the world, see John Stott, *"The Gospel and the End of Time"*. (IVP, 1991, pp. 156-173)

7. What is Jesus talking about in v.24-27? How do these events differ from those mentioned in v 5-23? What do they tell us about Jesus' return?

In verses 24-27, Jesus is speaking about his second coming. The imagery used in v. 24-25 is commonly found in prophetic literature to refer to the final day. These events in the heavens are seen as taking place so closely to Christ's return that no time distinction is made between the two occurrences.

In the same way that a king enters a town with an entourage, the heavenly events are Jesus' entourage as he appears to reclaim what is rightfully his. This is the first real and unmistakable sign of his coming. The passage makes it clear that there will be no doubting or mistaking his return. It will be clear and obvious to all. Though the events in 5-23 are local to some degree, the events of 24-27 are cosmic and universal. While the earlier events (5-23) are a result of evil in the world and will involve suffering for God's people, these events (24-27) are the direct manifestation of God and will mean vindication and salvation. When Jesus, as a preface to these words about his second coming, says, "*in those days, following that distress*" he is referring back to the events of 70 A.D. This is a vague statement which is ambiguous with regard to how much time might unfold between the events of the temple's destruction and his return. But it does confirm that Jesus saw the destruction of the temple as the event which served as the prelude to his return.

There may be certain things which take place which give hints of Jesus' return (the scripture certainly suggest a few things that may indicate the his return is getting closer), but a certain humility ought to always accompany our educated guesses. History, after all, is full of examples where people have labeled individuals the anti-Christ and predicted the end, all of which to this point have been wrong.

8. What are "all these things" Jesus refers to in verse 30 which will happen before "this generation" passes away?

If our interpretation has been correct up to this point, then "*all these things*" of v. 29 and 30 refer to the events of v. 5-23 whose central event is the destruction of the temple. Jesus is saying that the temple's destruction will take place before the generation to which he is speaking passes away. "*These things*" does not include his second coming, of which he explicitly states his ignorance with regard to its time. His answers to the above questions are then:

A1: In this generation. (v. 30)

A2: The sign of the temple's destruction will be the "abomination". (v. 14)

B1: I don't know. (v. 32)

B2: The sign of the end of time will be the temple's destruction. (v. 24-30)

9. In v. 32-37 Jesus' key instructions are "*Be on guard! Be alert! Keep Watch!*" What does the context suggest he means by those instructions? What kinds of activities does this suggest? Name an activity you might take more seriously.

Perhaps the most important question on this passage: When Jesus calls us to watch and be alert it cannot refer to trying to discern when he will return. He has just discouraged us from doing that. It means instead that we are to be on duty, doing our jobs, being faithful to all God has asked us to do. As Jesus spells it out in the parable, the contrast is with sleeping on the job. When Christ returns it is not to surprise us in the sense of catching us non-expectant and unprepared. Even though he is a long time in coming back in accordance with our timetable we must avoid falling into complacency and laziness. Each must work at their assigned tasks: welcoming and serving little ones (chpts. 9-10), praying for the forgiveness of all the nations (12:22-25), loving God and our neighbors (12:28-33), giving our all (12:44), witnessing to Christ crucified whatever the cost (13:9-11) and "*denying self, taking up the cross*" and following Jesus (8:34-38).

We must avoid throwing in the towel regardless of how prevalent evil is or how long Jesus seems to be in coming. Indeed, this whole passage implicitly reminds us that he is still in control. He has not abdicated the throne even though he is physically absent. We should therefore not fear what man can do to us, but fear Jesus as we await his sudden return which could happen at any moment.

Further Notes

APPENDIX

It is possible that further questions may arise on two points which come out of this passage of Scripture.

First, some people may be interested in knowing how other Scripture which speaks of the end times fits into Jesus' account. I suggest that you tell people that you want to concentrate on what Jesus says in this passage and steer clear for the time being from what other biblical authors have to say. As a matter of fact, if in response to your questions some one brings up data from elsewhere I would suggest that you say, "*As important as looking at what the rest of Scripture has to say on this subject is, for the time being, let's just stick to what Jesus said to his disciples in this passage so as to make sure we don't miss his major point.*"

If you yourself want to delve more into this subject I would refer you to the pages in Stott, *The Gospel and the End of Time*, mentioned above.

The second place where a question may arise is to why if Jesus was divine, was he limited in his knowledge about the day of his return. If the question does not come up, don't bring it up. It is an unnecessary diversion from the main points of the passage. If it does come up, you can find below a few paragraphs from J.I. Packer on the subject which are helpful.

"It is true that Jesus' knowledge of things both human and divine was sometimes limited. He occasionally asks for information. He declares that He shares the ignorance of the angels as the day appointed for his return. Yet; at other times he displays supernatural knowledge and power. The impression of Jesus which the gospels give is not that he was wholly bereft of divine knowledge and power, but that he drew on both intermittently, while being content for much of the time not to do so. The impression in other words, is not so much one of deity reduced as of divine capacities restrained.

How are we to account for this restraint? Surely, in terms of the truth of which John's gospel in particular makes so much, the entire submission of the Son to the Father's will. Part of the revealed mystery of the Godhead is that the three persons stand in a fixed relation to each other. The Son appears in the gospels, not as an independent divine person, but as a dependent one, who thinks acts only and wholly as the Father directs. The Son can do nothing of himself, "I can of mine own self do nothing" (Jn 5:19,30). "I came down from heaven not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me" (6:38). "I do nothing of myself, I do always the things which please him" (8:28).

It is the nature of the second person of the Trinity to acknowledge the authority and submit to the good pleasure of the first. That is why He declares Himself to be the Son, and the first person to be his Father. Though co-equal with the Father in all eternity; power, and glory, it is natural to Him to play the Son's part, and find all his joy in doing the Father's will, just as it is natural to the first person to plan and initiate the works of the Godhead and natural to the third to proceed from the Father and the Son and do their joint bidding. Thus the obedience of the God-man to the Father while He was on the earth was not a new relationship occasioned by the incarnation, but the continuation in time of the eternal relationship between the Son and the Father in heaven. As in heaven, so on earth, the Son was utterly dependent upon the Father's will.

But if this is so, all is explained. The God-man did not know independently, any more than he acted independently. Just as He did not do all that He could have done, because certain things were not His Father's will (Mt. 26:53), so He did not consciously know all that He might have known, but only what the Father willed him to know. His knowing, like the rest of His activity, was bounded by His Father's will. And therefore the reason why He was ignorant of the date of his return was not because he had given up the power to know all things at his incarnation, but because the Father had not willed that he should have this particular piece of knowledge while on earth, prior to his passion.

Calvin was surely correct to comment on Mk 13:32 as follows "until he had fully discharged his mediatorial office, that information was not given to him which he received after his resurrection."

So Jesus limited knowledge is to be explained not in terms of the mode of the incarnation, but with reference to the will of the Father for the Son while on earth. And therefore we conclude that, just as there are some facts in the gospels which contradict the kenosis theory, so there are no facts in the gospels which are not best explained without it."

from *Knowing God*, J.I. Packer

Study 21 - Preparation for Death

MARK CHAPTER 14:1-26

Questions

1. Have you ever given yourself to a cause or a project with a total commitment? If so, what was it and how did it effect your life?

READ Mark 14:1-26

2. How would you describe the act of the woman in vv. 3-9? Is there something in her behavior we need to emulate? What would hold us back?
3. Was Jesus being callous and flippant about the needs of the poor in this passage? On what basis do you make your case?
4. How do you think these events might have influenced Judas' decision to betray Jesus?
5. Why does Jesus stress the fact in vv. 18-20 that his betrayer is one of the twelve? What do they reveal about themselves by their response to his prediction? How are the Twelve different from the woman who breaks the jar of perfume upon Jesus?
6. As Christians are there times when we are like Judas, and in what ways do we differ from him?
7. What was the significance of the Passover meal and what was Jesus trying to communicate in the words he used at this celebration?
8. What do we learn from this passage that might affect the way we come to celebrate the Lord's Supper?

LEADER'S NOTES MARK 14:1-26

Main Points

The focus of the remainder of Mark's gospel is on Jesus Christ's death. Wickedness becomes very visible in the plotting of the teachers of the law and in the betrayal of Judas. Through the woman anointing him with perfumed oil ("*preparation for my burial*") which will be remembered wherever the good news is preached, and in his celebration of the Passover, Jesus interprets to his disciples the grace that his death will bring. His death is everywhere present. Although it happens at the hands of wicked men, the purpose of God to benefit many is clear.

Commentary on the Passage and Notes on the Questions

1. Have you ever given yourself to a cause or a project with a total commitment? If so, what was it and how did it effect your life? Approach question.

2. How would you describe the act of the woman in vv. 3-9? Is there something in her behavior we need to emulate? What would hold us back?

Her actions were extravagant and lavish. We are told that the perfume was worth more than a year's salary. The jar was apparently sealed to preserve the perfume. In order to use it, the jar had to be broken. It has been suggested that perhaps that jar of perfume was an heirloom which could have been sold at a time of financial need. While anointing the head of a guest with oil was customary in the culture, this was well beyond a customary expression as is evidenced by the indignation of others present. Just imagine taking a years salary (think of yours), buying a bottle of perfume and dispensing it in a moment. "*Foolish, short-sighted, insane, unthinkable, a waste, fanatical*". Is this more like the way we would respond? Yet this woman not only does this, Jesus commends her for it. Note that it is her actions, not her name, which Jesus says will be remembered.

The woman models to us an unreserved dedication to Jesus. He is her ultimate allegiance and of incomparable worth. This is complete devotion. We need take no concern as to what others think of our devotion to Christ. Of course, it does not present an excuse for deliberately weird behavior. We should seek to present the gospel intelligently and persuasively to others, with wisdom. While we tread a path seeking "*balanced*" lives, in our approach to Jesus, he is to have our "*all*". Our lives are to be lived extravagantly and lavishly for him. "*If Jesus Christ is God and died for me than no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him.*"

We often fail in this because we fear the opinions of others. Who wants to be known as a fanatic? Let's value more the judgment of God and remind ourselves of just how insubstantial the judgments of human beings can be. Perhaps we also fail by believing we can outgive God, that we will be short-changed if we live lavishly toward him. Not trusting in his goodness, we reckon that we had better withhold something of ourselves to make sure that we can take care of our own

needs. It seems too risky to completely depend on Him. Perhaps we fail to fan into flame the embers of our love for God at the fire of the cross. If we spent more time reflecting on and immersing ourselves in the truth of God's love for us demonstrated in Jesus' passion then we would find ourselves giving our all to him with greater regularity.

3. Was Jesus being callous and flippant about the needs of the poor in this passage? On what basis do you make your case?

Indignation arose partly because the Passover was a time when a special sacrificial offering for the poor was taken so the lavish anointing seemed to insult the moment. Extravagant at any time the act appeared even wicked given the moral imperative to help the poor at this time. Still, the charge that Jesus is callous towards the needs of the poor cannot stick. In fact the words he speaks in v. 7 are an allusion to Deut. 15:11 which reads, *"There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open handed toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land."* Jesus affirmed the scripture's meaning, which was to encourage generosity. His ministry focused largely on the poor and needy. This is obvious in even the most superficial reading of the gospels. Love for God must be expressed in love for the poor. Jesus' words must not be misused, but understood in their context. Jesus is contrasting the perpetual opportunity to give to the poor with this unique moment in which God himself was present and about to die. Jesus' own words clearly enable us to understand what he meant.

Perhaps the woman sensed she was about to lose Jesus, or perhaps she didn't actually see herself as preparing Jesus for burial, yet that is how he interprets her action. But it was a most beautiful expression of devotion, loyalty and honor. Jesus credits her with performing an act in recognition of his coming death. This was a totally unique event in all human history and therefore, her extravagant act was completely appropriate. Jesus then makes it clear that his death is good news central to the gospel which will be preached throughout the world. Sin is the cause of poverty which is only a symptom evil in the world. Jesus knows himself as the destruction of sin. Therefore the woman's anointing of Jesus highlights the importance and centrality of his death. By allowing such lavish treatment of himself in preparation for death, Jesus points to the true hope of the poor.

4. How do you think these events might have influenced Judas' decision to betray Jesus?

Throughout Mark's gospel the Twelve (including Judas) did not hear Jesus' predictions of his death and did not appreciate his significance. Mark's gospel is also quiet in regard to Judas. Other gospels explain Judas stole from the common purse, a thief with a weakness for money who was angry at the "waste" of the ointment. Had it been sold and put into the common purse he might have embezzled some of it. Note that Mark follows this story with the account of Judas' betrayal. Jesus' response to the woman was perhaps like a last straw for Judas, disillusioned with the cause and wanting an escape that would leave him

with some profit for the time spent. We really don't know. What is clear is that he was influenced by Satan and that his action was seen as heinously wicked.

5. Why does Jesus stress the fact in vv. 18-20 that his betrayer is one of the twelve? What do they reveal about themselves by their response to his prediction? How are the Twelve different from the woman who breaks the jar of perfume upon Jesus?

By explicitly stating that his betrayer will be one of the Twelve, Jesus makes it clear just how wicked we are and how much we are dependent upon God's grace if we are to escape from the blight of our sin.

The emphasis here is on Judas as a representative of the Twelve, not an exception. Four times Jesus says the traitor is: *one of you* (v. 18); *one who is eating with me* (v. 18); *one of the Twelve* (v. 20); *one who dips bread into the bowl with me* (v.20). They were all weak. The remainder of this chapter will make that abundantly clear. The Twelve had shown insensitivity to Jesus' teaching on numerous occasions (4:10-13; 6:36-37, 51-52; 8:14-21, 31-33; 9:32-37; 10:13-16), but here we see the beginning of their complete collapse. Chief among their problems is the denial of their own capacity for sin. We are told that each one said "*surely not I*" in response to Jesus' accusation. Until one recognizes how deep one's problem runs, there is no chance of finding its solution. That is the position in which the disciples find themselves. They are still unaware of their need of radical mercy. Until they are aware of it, they cannot taste of it. Until they taste of it, they are incapable of giving themselves in the way in which the woman gave herself.

Whereas she demonstrates undiluted loyalty and love for Jesus, the Twelve are most likely part of the group which criticizes her action. Whereas they have demonstrated a preoccupation with their own coming rewards, the woman solely concerns herself with honoring Jesus. She is credited with recognizing Jesus' coming death, while after hearing repeated predictions the Twelve are still clueless. They still hold back from giving themselves to Jesus, not yet understanding who he is. But she "*did all that she could.*"

6. As Christians are there times when we are like Judas, and in what ways do we differ from him?

Judas betrayed Jesus. Though he had tasted of Christ's love and seen Christ's power displayed on his behalf, he chose to ignore this and act against Jesus, instead of loving him through obedience and submission. Though Jesus was without guile, Judas didn't trust him. Jesus says of Judas, "*it would be better for him if he had not been born.*" While Judas is fully deserving of his judgment, we must recognize that we are also guilty of betraying Jesus on a regular basis. Every time that we sin, we are guilty of turning against Jesus. Each time that we do what he has forbidden us to do, or fail to do what he has asked us to do, we slight him. Each sin is an act of betrayal and ought not to be taken lightly. After all, what causes the greater grief: an acquaintance that betrays you or a spouse that betrays you? Our failures are far more ugly than the failures of the non-believing person. We have acted disobediently and unfaithfully, even though we

have been assured of Jesus' love for us. Just as Judas rejected Jesus, we too reject Jesus whenever we work at cross purposes to him.

The thing which has the potential to set us apart from Judas, the thing which determines whether we are really Christians, is whether or not, having sinned, we turn to Christ for forgiveness and for strength to live lives which are pleasing to him. Judas went into despair after having betrayed Christ. He saw his sin as being beyond forgiveness. He eventually committed suicide, being so discouraged by his action that he was unable to live with himself. The Christian will not get to the place where his heart refuses to be comforted, even though his betrayals of Christ might be great. Proverbs 18:10 says, *"The Lord is a strong tower. The righteous run to it and are safe."* Proverbs 24:16 reads, *"For though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again, but the wicked are brought down by calamity."*

What is clear is that the thing which distinguishes the righteous from the wicked is not that one fails and the other does not, but what one does when they fail. They get back up and run to God for mercy.

7. What was the significance of the Passover meal and what was Jesus trying to communicate in the words he used at this celebration?

God commanded Israel to observe the annual feasts of Passover and unleavened bread, the one following immediately after the other, to remind them how he had rescued them from slavery in Egypt (Ex. 12:14-20). The tenth of the plagues involved the death of every firstborn male in Egypt, whether he be Hebrew or Egyptian. Israel could only be saved by killing a lamb at twilight, eating the flesh with bitter herbs (symbolizing slavery) and unleavened bread (symbolizing the need for hasty flight) and smearing blood on the doorpost. When God saw blood on a house he *"passed over"* it and spared the firstborn (Ex. 12:1-13).

Once Israel was in the land, every male Jew came each year to eat the Passover meal in Jerusalem (Ex. 12:24-28; 23:15; 34:18; Lev. 23:4-8; Num. 28:16-25; Deut. 16:1-8). Lambs were killed and eaten in the evening as commanded and, although no destroying angel swept over the city, the night was kept as a *"night of watching"* (Ex. 12:42; Mk 14:32-42). The notion that men could be saved from the judgment their sins deserved if a perfect substitute died in their place and bore their sins away was communicated in Lev. 16. Blood signified life (Lev. 17:11), so shed blood signified death. Although breaking bread and passing a cup of wine were not new to the Passover meal, the words which Jesus spoke while doing so were a radical departure. It is likely that these words were spoken over the bread that initiated the meal and the cup that closed it.

The language that Jesus uses would have been recognized immediately as symbolic since the use of symbolism was already a feature of the Passover meal. It is picture language which symbolized sharing in the effects of the sacrifice. By saying *"this is my body"* and *"this is my blood...poured out for many"*, Jesus communicates that only a man can be a fit substitute for a man and only a sinless man can die for another's sin. The animal sacrifices did not achieve atonement but only pointed to the future sacrifice of the only sinless man, the Son of God. As in Mark 10:45, *"many"* implies an exclusion - not *"all"* are saved by his death.

The bread and wine should not be viewed as each having a distinctive significance, but both elements are brought under one meaning. Sharing them represents the inclusion of oneself into the fellowship of people redeemed by Jesus' death and called to follow him.

One final thing to notice in Jesus' words is that he refers to the wine as "*my blood of the covenant*". Jesus' death inaugurated the new covenant of Jeremiah 31. In the OT, God made several covenants with Israel. Normally, a covenant was an agreement between two parties, entailing obligations on both. The covenant was ratified by the shedding of blood to indicate that the party who broke the covenant would die. Two of God's covenants with Israel were, unusually, unconditional promises:

- Abraham was promised that a people would descend from him through whom the world would be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3)
- David was promised that a Son would reign eternally and build the temple (2 Sam. 7:11-16)

The covenant after Passover, however, was conditional (e.g. Lev. 26); Abraham's descendants promised to obey God or die (Ex. 24:3-11). When Israel rebelled, the question was how could God keep all three covenants. The answer is that the shed blood of the new covenant, which the OT promised (Jer. 31:31-34) and Jesus inaugurated (Mk. 14:12-26), both satisfied Sinai's death penalty and guaranteed the promise to Abraham and David.

8. What do we learn from this passage that might affect the way we come to celebrate the Lord's Supper?

We should approach the table with gratitude. Although a solemn affair, which reminds us that it is because of our sins that Christ had to die, it is simultaneously a joyous occasion because it acknowledges that Christ did indeed die for our sins. We are to think back on what Christ did for us until our hearts are filled with thanksgiving. We should approach the table expecting to meet Christ there.

Eating together had great significance in the Ancient Near East. To share a meal was to establish or perpetuate a relationship. Our fellowship with Jesus is furthered at the table. We should therefore, expect to hear him speak of his love for us there. Also, the Lord's supper always serves as a renewed call to take up the cross. He has given himself in sacrifice for us and we are to live sacrificially for him. The record of the disciples' failure after eating this meal is to be taken by us as an admonition to avoid a similar failure in times of testing after we have eaten at this table.

Finally, the Lord's supper is meant to make us to anticipate the future. Jesus' words that he would not drink the fruit of the vine again until he does so anew in the kingdom of God probably refers to the joyous situation of the fully realized kingdom of God of the future. Therefore, everytime we celebrate the Lord's supper we anticipate that future fellowship of the redeemed with their Lord. Thus the Supper trains us in the development of an eternal perspective. When we partake of it we realize that this world and this life is not all there is.

Study 22 - Suffering at the Hands of His Friends

MARK CHAPTER 14:27-52

Questions

1. Have you faced a particularly difficult situation in the past year? Who provided you with the most support?

READ Mark 14:27-52

2. What does Jesus' continual reference to prophecy tell us about his death and how does that assist us to interpret the meaning of our own lives?
3. How do the disciples contrast with Jesus throughout this entire passage? What is it in them that we would not want to imitate?
4. Why does Jesus ask his disciples to come with him to Gethsemane? What does he ask them to do while they are there?
5. What details tell us the horror of Jesus' situation in this passage?
6. What comfort is there for us in realizing the extent of anguish and suffering Jesus went through? How would you concretely appropriate and access this comfort in the midst of difficult trials?
7. How is Jesus' prayer, *"Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will!"* a model for our own prayer life? How do we fall short of this? What enabled him to pray like that?
8. How does the approach of Jesus' captors towards him differ from his approach to them?
9. Why do the disciples deny Jesus? What lessons can we learn from their failure?
10. What do you suppose we are to make of Mark's reference to the young man who fled naked (v. 52)?

LEADER'S NOTES MARK 14:27-52

Main Points

Jesus makes the last of his predictions (27-31) and then from verse 42 on, prediction gives way to fulfillment. The betrayal by one, the denial by all, the deliverance into the hands of the chief priests, teachers of the law and elders, and the initiation of his suffering are all seen in this passage. That these predictions are all fulfilled demonstrates again that the events which are occurring are part of God's plan and not a tragic accident. When Jesus eventually accomplishes salvation, he is a person who is deserted by everyone, without exception. The fact that we contribute nothing to our salvation is indelibly etched into history.

Commentary on the Passage and Notes on the Questions

1. Have you faced a particularly difficult situation in the past year? Who provided you with the most support? Approach question.

2. What does Jesus' continual reference to prophecy tell us about his death and how does that assist us to interpret the meaning of our own lives?

Jesus links his life to prophecy to reassure us that nothing happens by chance. God is never taken by surprise. Things do not happen that are beyond his control, but take place according to God's plan. This is true of what is certainly the most wicked act of history - the crucifixion of God's only Son. It was not just an unfortunate mistake. It was God's will and purpose from the beginning. But if this is true of Christ's death, then it has tremendous significance for the events of our lives as well. If this, the most blatantly evil act of history, was not something that took place outside of God's control, then there is no reason to believe that anything that happens in our lives takes place apart from God's control. That does not necessarily mean that we can fit it all together. And it certainly does not mean that we can always know *why* a particular thing has happened. Our net of meaning is too small.

We will always be caught up in a certain degree of mystery. But in the mystery, there is the certainty that "*all things work together for good for those who love God.*" While others might do things to us that are meant for evil, God means them for our good and trumps their evil acts so that they bring benefit. In the long run, if anything happens by chance, then everything happens by chance. Nothing is certain and nothing is secure. However, if God is completely sovereign, then we can say along with J.I. Packer, "*Nothing happens to me that does not ultimately express God's love for me.*"

3. How do the disciples contrast with Jesus throughout this entire passage? What is it in them that we would not want to imitate?

Throughout Christ's passion he remains God dependent. He prays. He submits to God's will and resolves, in God's strength, to do that which is pleasing to God. He fears God and not man. The portrait of the disciples in general, and Peter in particular, is the polar opposite. They are full of self-confidence. They are not trusting in God, but in themselves. Peter says emphatically, "*Even if I have to*

die with you, I will never disown you." None of them believe that they can fall away. There is no humility about their lives.

Perhaps it is commendable that Peter has now accepted Jesus' death and the command to *"lose your life for me"*. However, he still completely misunderstands the reasons for these things. Jesus and the disciples handle temptation in completely different ways. Jesus, not *"willing"* the cross from his own point of view (v. 36), prays repeatedly (v. 36,39) and is ready when the hour comes. He enters into the difficult situation he has been called to, instead of fleeing from it (v. 42). The disciples, who think they are ready for battle (v. 38), repeatedly fail to pray (v. 37, 40, 41) and when the time comes run for their lives (v. 38, 50).

Of course, Judas, who is still numbered as being among the Twelve, demonstrates appalling hypocrisy. He respectfully calls him *"Rabbi"*, and kissing him, hands him over to the religious leaders. Jesus continues to be obedient and the disciples continue to fail miserably. The drastic contrast makes it clear that *"the life and mission of the church rests upon Christ alone, not upon human leadership"*.

4. Why does Jesus ask his disciples to come with him to Gethsemane? What does he ask them to do while they are there?

The notion is sometimes entertained that Jesus brought the disciples with him to Gethsemane in order that he might seek comfort from them in his hour of need. But this has no basis in the text. The disciples' regular dull-mindedness and hard-heartedness which has been apparent throughout the Gospel makes it obvious that they have very little to offer Jesus. Jesus never turns to them, but only to God. The reason for Jesus' last words before the cross, *"Watch and pray"*, was not so that they would help him in his fight against temptation but to help them in theirs. His repeated urging of them to stay awake and pray reflect a concern that they be prepared for the physical and spiritual dangers that lie ahead of them.

Three times he goes to them only to find them prayerless. They ought to have been anticipating the trials which they were about to face, (He had just told them that they would all deny him), asking God to give them strength to be faithful in the midst of the coming difficulties. They ought to have been cultivating a healthy fear of God (a strong desire to avoid grieving or offending the one to whom they would eventually have to answer) and killing their inordinate fear of man. Instead, they only fell asleep. Although their promises sounded fine enough (*"the spirit is willing"*), without God's help, which comes in prayer, they would never keep them (*"the flesh is weak"*). In the trial, they failed miserably. Until we see that by ourselves we are prayerless, sleepy, self-reliant failures we will do no better. We too will succumb to being ashamed of Jesus and his words.

5. What details tell us the horror of Jesus' situation in this passage?

Martin Luther said of Jesus, *"No one ever feared death so much as this man."* The language used to describe his emotions is extremely strong. He is *"deeply distressed and troubled"*, *"anguished"*, and so *"overwhelmed with sorrow"* that he *"falls to the ground"*. What grieved his soul *"to the point of death"*

was not the physical pain, terrible though that was, nor the hurt of being deserted by all his friends, but the "separation" from his Father implied by the "cup" of God's wrath (see Lesson 16, Q. 4). The word "Abba" magnifies the horror of it. At that time, only he could call God "Abba", which was an intimate family term. Twice earlier God had called Jesus "My Son whom I love" (1:11; 9:7). The very imagining of separation from the one with whom he had a perfect relationship feels like death to him. It was horrifying. This was no cheerful martyr's death which Jesus was about to undergo. He dreaded it. Nothing else he could imagine compared with the hideousness of this experience of separation. How wonderful that love must have been with the Father - richer than the greatest joys the earth has to offer. How terrifying and destructive the breaking of it must have been - more painful and devastating than the greatest tragedies that life can bring. Both are beyond imagining. It is likely we will never know what his love for us cost him. We only know that he paid the price.

6. What comfort is there for us in realizing the extent of anguish and suffering Jesus went through? How would you concretely appropriate and access this comfort in the midst of difficult trials?

One of our great fears is that God is indifferent and impassive to our pain. We believe that he does not care about our suffering. We argue thus, *"If God cared, he would not allow me this much suffering, tragedy, and despair. Since I have them, it is obvious that he does not care."* It is Gethsemane that cures us of this kind of thinking. What we find here is not only that God is the God of the sufferers, but the God who suffers. The charge that he does not care cannot stick. Though he does not always explain our suffering, he does share our suffering. Indeed, he cares about our suffering so much that he is willing to undergo it in far more vile concentrations than we ever will in order to bring our suffering to an end. Our suffering will never reach the level that his did. He actually was forsaken by God.

We are promised that Christ will never leave or forsake us. This is not meant to trivialize our own pain, but to reassure us that he knows such pain and that we are not alone. Christ is utterly sufficient to meet us in our need. Having been tempted and suffered he is able to help us. This applies to every area of life. After all, his sufferings were those of flesh and blood. We see Jesus at his most human in this passage. Why he did not prevent evil and the suffering it brings in the first place is a question that Scripture does not answer for us. However, if Jesus gets intimately involved in evil and suffering in the world, hating it all the while, suffering as the only true innocent, then we can be assured that he cares and we can trust him. God is not dispassionate, far away, or unaffected. Gethsemane and the cross convince us of this. We are not alone and we are not without help. The way to appropriate these truths is to speak them to ourselves in prayer when we are in trials of one sort or another. These truths must be taken to heart in the major and minor disappointments and the devastating tragedies.

We must say to ourselves, *"I know that he is not oblivious to my pain, for he willingly endured incredible suffering himself - suffering from which he shrunk. He is not callous to my situation or disappointments. He was a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering. He has known oppression and*

affliction. Not only that, but he has also lived through it and promises to be with me in my suffering. If he, the innocent Son of God, underwent suffering, then there is no good reason to believe that I will be exempt from it either. However, knowing that ultimately he is in control of it, I know that no ultimate harm can come to me through it. If he was raised to new life, then he will raise me to new life through this as well. In these things will I take comfort. I will trust in his goodness and wisdom. I will take to heart his promise to never leave me or forsake me”.

And, of course, we must ask him to comfort us. We are told that he is able to sympathize with us and that he will give us grace in our time of need as we go to him (Heb. 5:15,16). If we do not receive his comfort by faith in this manner, then merely knowing that his comfort is there will not do us any good. We will fall into despair rather than being conquerors.

7. How is Jesus' prayer, "*Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will!*" a model for our own prayer life? How do we fall short of this? What enabled him to pray like that?

Jesus went into prayer with a strong desire not to die. He was acutely tempted to go the other way. But prayer for Christ was not primarily a place to get what he wanted. Prayer was about meeting with God and communicating with him. In that communication he would be shaped and formed so as to desire what God wanted. Jesus knew that his Father could take the cup from him, but he also knew that it was not his Father's will to do so. The "*hour*" suggests not only an hour of testing, but also a decisive moment in God's plan to judge and save. Prayer is the place where our desires get shaped so that they conform with God's desire. It should not be an especially uncommon experience for us to go into prayer ready to ask for one thing, only to find that, having spent time with God reflecting on his purposes and concerns, we ask for another thing.

In prayer we ought to be always asking for God's will and not our own. What enables us to do this? Inevitably, we must have a trust in God and his goodness. We must believe that he will not ask us to do or endure something that would, in the final analysis, harm us. When Jesus submitted his will to the Father's, he knew that his Father would never let his beloved Son die if there was another way to save man (8:31; 9:7). His own perspective was renewed in prayer and his resolve strengthened. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that "*for the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame*" (Heb. 12:2) When we have the kind of trust Jesus did, we will find that the words "*Your will be done*" are not merely a submission, but will become increasingly the voice of joyful desire.

8. How does the approach of Jesus' captors towards him differ from his approach to them?

Beginning at verse 42, prediction gives way to fulfillment. Here we find Jesus being treated as a criminal which is what he foretold would happen in 10:33, 34. His captors come heavily armed. They come stealthily and at night, not wanting the crowds to know what they are up to. They are full of deceit. The whole scene demonstrates the captors are the wicked ones, not Jesus. Jesus himself

goes unarmed. He is not a man of violence. He does not attempt to flee, but rises to meet them willingly when they come. He confronts them in honesty, asking literally, "*Am I a robber?*" He is being "*numbered with transgressors*" (Is. 53:12). Jesus, of course, knows what they do not know: what is happening is God's will. The handing over of the Son of Man to sinners was, in its most profound sense, something done by God and not by Judas. These events are all part of the deliberate plan of God. He is treated like a criminal because he will die in the place of the true criminals -rebellious humanity.

9. Why do the disciples deny Jesus? What lessons can we learn from their failure?

One of the reasons that they deny Jesus is that they have not prayed and watched. When the trial comes, they have no strength or resolve. It becomes immediately apparent that their assertions that they would not deny Jesus were based completely on self-confidence. Even when Peter follows at a distance, it was only to deny him. Jesus had said, "*Let us go*" but no one went with him. We must remember that apart from Christ we can do nothing. We must not see ourselves as adequate or competent in and of ourselves. We need to become radically dependent upon God in prayer.

A second reason for the disciples failure is that they have still failed to understand the kind of messiah Jesus is. Peter and the rest of the disciples were apparently expecting Jesus to put up a fight when his captors arrived. They had not yet given up the notions of a militaristic Messiah. When Jesus did not offer any resistance, they were surprised. When they realized that Jesus was not going to die in battle, but would be humiliated, all the disciples deserted him. We must realize that the kind of Messiah we serve bids us to die for him. We must not expect to avoid ridicule, shame, and rejection by others if we have identified ourselves with Christ. Our understanding of him demands that we expect these things. If we don't expect them we are following a false messiah and are bereft of true faith. Along with the benefits of belonging to Jesus, we must accept the costs. If you deny him you can avoid the costs, but others are incurred (remember Jesus' warning from 8:38).

10. What do you suppose we are to make of Mark's reference to the young man who fled naked (v. 52)?

A number of suggestions have been made as to why Mark includes this curious detail about a young man fleeing naked from the scene of Jesus' arrest. Foremost among these is that the young man is Mark himself, at that time a youth and probably son of the people who provided the upper room. Another possibility is that it is Mark's intention to demonstrate that everyone denied Jesus. He was left completely alone. The word for "*young man*" implies courage. However, he thought no shame worse than that of a crucified Lord. He therefore leaves a costly garment behind and flees the wrath of man as if it were the wrath of God. Better to run away and experience the shame of nakedness and suffer material

loss, than to be identified with a suffering Messiah. This makes it clear that Jesus accomplishes the work of salvation without help. We contribute nothing.

Study 23 - Suffering at the hands of His Enemies

MARK CHAPTERS 14:53-15:15

Questions

1. Did you have any enemies when you were growing up? How did they become your enemies?

READ Mark 14:53-15:15

2. In vv.55-59 what do we learn about the leaders of Israel and about Jesus?
3. Jesus was charged with saying, *"I will destroy this man made temple and in three days will build another."* In what ways was this charge false and in what ways did it point ironically to profound truth?
4. What does Jesus reveal about who he is during his trial before the Sanhedrin and Pilate?
5. What is blasphemy and who is guilty of committing it?
6. How are Jesus and Peter contrasted in this passage? What are the implications of this passage for our own witness to Jesus? How do we get strength to avoid the failure of Peter in our own life?
7. Why do you suppose the once receptive crowd now turns hostile toward him?
8. What was the significance of Barabbas being released from prison instead of Jesus?
9. According to this passage, who is responsible for putting Jesus to death? What does this tell us about ourselves?

LEADER'S NOTES MARK 14:53-15:15

Main Points

This passage concerns itself with the trial of Jesus. There are two main purposes. The first is to show us who Jesus really is. He is the Christ (14:61-62), the King of the Jews (15:2) who through his substitutionary death (15:11, 15) and resurrection was creating a new people of God (14:58). The second purpose is to present Jesus as a role model of the kind of courageous and faithful behavior we are to emulate in the event of going through such a trial ourselves.

Commentary on the Passage and Notes on the Questions

1. Did you have any enemies when you were growing up? How did they become your enemies? Approach question.

2. In vv.55-59 what do we learn about the leaders of Israel and about Jesus?

It is immediately obvious that Jesus is not going to get a fair trial because the outcome is rigged. The Sanhedrin is a group of 71 leaders of the Jews, composed of the leading priests and respected men. They had arranged for false witnesses to be at preliminary interrogation which was taking place in the middle of the night. They were not merely asking for evidence with which to convict Jesus, they were creating it. Truth is not their concern. Their purpose is the execution of Jesus. The sentence is a foregone conclusion thus their wicked deceit is clear.

Equally clear is Jesus' innocence. The Law required two witnesses to convict a person (Num. 35:30; Deut. 17:6; 19:15). But the testimonies of the witnesses do not agree. Three times Mark lets it be known that Jesus is innocent (v. 55, v.56, v. 57-59). Interestingly, Jesus responds to their false charges with silence. In so doing he fulfills Is. 53:7, *"He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth."* Only to the charges which are true does he give a verbal response. This similar pattern of responding with silence to false charges and with words to true charges is repeated before Pilate. Jesus deliberately picks the charges upon which he will be condemned.

3. Jesus was charged with saying, "I will destroy this man made temple and in three days will build another." In what ways was this charge false and in what ways did it point ironically to profound truth?

In none of the gospels does Jesus make the statement that he is charged with making. Nowhere has he said that he is physically going to destroy the temple. He has only said that it will be destroyed (Mk. 13:2). The charge is false. However, he had claimed authority to pronounce judgment on the temple which would lead to its utter destruction. This destruction would come by the will of God as judgment upon the Jewish leaders for their rejection of Jesus' message (12:1-10). He had also prophesied a new temple (12:10). Mark has presented Jesus as the replacement of the temple. He is the means by which we gain access to God. Jesus' death is the new sacrifice which renders the temple ritual useless. Therefore, the charge brought against Jesus, while false, is not without

considerable ironic truth. The aspect of the charge which makes it clear that Mark means us to see truth in the statement is the reference to building another temple "*in three days*." This is an obvious reference to the resurrection which Jesus has already predicted three times (Mk. 8:31; 9:31; 10:34).

Elsewhere Jesus said, "*Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days*" (Jn. 2:19). However, no one understood what he was saying at the time. Although the Jewish leaders were wrong to accuse Jesus of threatening the temple himself, on a more profound level this is precisely what he was doing. Mark means for his readers to see that Jesus' death is the end of the Jewish temple and that his resurrection is the raising up of a new temple which offers a superior redemption - one in which the certainty of the forgiveness of sins is known with a new fullness. (see Lesson 20)

4. What does Jesus reveal about who he is during his trial before the Sanhedrin and Pilate?

Unable to get the results he wanted from the trial, the High Priest appeals to Jesus for help. He asks, "*Are you the Christ, the Son of the blessed One?*"

To this Jesus responds, "*I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.*"

In this response Jesus brings together statements he has made earlier in a concentrated and explicit way. He is the Christ - the promised Messiah of the Old Testament. He is the Son of the Blessed One, which is a reverent way of saying that he is the unique Son of God. It is quite possible that he is here making a claim to deity with the words, "*I am*", which was God's self-designation in the Old Testament (see Lesson 9, Question 6). He is David's Lord who will sit at God's right hand (as in Psalm 110). He is the Son of Man of Daniel 7:13-14 who is given rule by God in order that he might judge the world.

Before Pilate he accepts the designation, "*the King of the Jews*." He acknowledges that he is the king of God's people. It turns out, of course, that he is the rejected king. But that makes him no less a king. Instead, it is a forfeiture of their standing as his people. A new people is being established which includes both Gentiles and Jews. It is made up of those who have acknowledged and believed in Jesus as the messiah. Jesus was not making the kind of kingship claims of which Pilate was accusing him. He was not claiming earthly political power. He is not a revolutionary intent on overthrowing the government. His kingship is more profound and substantial than that. He is the King of the universe. Although it is being used as a form of mockery, the fact that the phrase, "*the King of the Jews*" or "*the King of Israel*" occurs six times in this chapter is meant to convey that to Jesus belongs a true kingship.

5. What is blasphemy and who is guilty of committing it?

Though in later history the charge of blasphemy was restricted to an irreverent use of God's name, it most likely referred to a larger range of offenses during the time of Jesus. Jesus was most likely accused in this manner of making a mockery of God. Jesus' claims and his words seemed to the religious authorities to be a serious affront against their belief of what God had promised. While a

false claim to be the messiah was not necessarily viewed as blasphemous, making that claim and investing it with a divine status would have been. In addition to his claim, Jesus had engaged in practices which they considered a breach of the law. His claim to being the messiah in conjunction with those actions would have the effect of giving those violations divine justification. Those who followed him would then be led astray. For these reasons Jesus was charged with blasphemy.

Although Jesus was the one charged with blasphemy Mark intends us to see that actually it is the leaders of Israel who are guilty of it. The cry of blasphemy is so wrong as to make the cry itself blasphemous. Jesus is only guilty of blasphemy if he is not God. But Mark has made it clear that Jesus' claim is true. The religious leaders are the ones who are disparaging the Son of God. Their charge against him is a blatant rejection of the one who God has acknowledged (1:11; 9:71). Jesus warns them that one day they will have clear proof of who he is (vs. 62); turning a blind eye now to the evidence that he is sinless, and so must be God, will be fatal then. Mark will become quite explicit about the fact that it is they who are guilty of blasphemy in 15:29-32. Throughout the trial, the religious leaders unwittingly fulfill prophecy (Jesus' predictions which are themselves based on the OT) which confirms Jesus' claims and their own guilt.

6. How are Jesus and Peter contrasted in this passage? What are the implications of this passage for our own witness to Jesus? How do we get strength to avoid the failure of Peter in our own life?

Because Mark is writing to Christians who are undergoing trial and persecution themselves, his account of Jesus and Peter before their respective inquisitors are meant to be an example to follow and an example to avoid. The familiar technique of sandwiching one account (Jesus' trial; 55-65) in between another account (Peter's trial; 54 and 6-72) tells us that we should relate the two accounts together.

Jesus, having prayed three times in the garden of Gethsemane faces the whole Sanhedrin and shows unhesitating courage. Peter, having fallen asleep three times in the garden, faces a mere servant girl and anonymous bystanders and falters shamefully. He is full of cowardice. Jesus meets rigged evidence with either silence or confession of the truth. Peter meets true allegations about being Jesus' companion with denial three times. Each of the denials is worse than the one before. First he is evasive. Then he denies being a follower of Jesus. Finally he denies even knowing him. That three denials are recorded underscores his utter failure. Jesus is beaten by guards. Peter sits with guards and warms himself. Jesus takes up the cross and loses his life now. Peter shuns the cross and saves his life now. Peter fails with behavior similar to Judas. Jesus holds a straight line. The message is clear: Peter is not like Jesus, and with all of us, is dependent upon Christ's merciful forgiveness.

Further, Jesus is an example to us all in situations where we too must witness to the truth. We must not be undisciplined and prayerless. We must know we are in a battle and be regularly on our knees asking God for strength. We must not be cowardly or ashamed like Peter. We must be courageous. We must not let the immediate consequences of speaking the truth control our behavior. Instead, we

must let the long term consequences determine our actions. Rather than avoiding scorn and rejection, we must accept them as inevitable.

7. Why do you suppose the once receptive crowd now turns hostile toward him?

The crowds have been thronging around Jesus from the very beginning of Mark's gospel. However, at no point has Mark led us to believe that they are actual followers of Jesus. Like the dwarves in the Tales of Narnia, although they evidently enjoyed seeing the religious authorities put in their place, they are not interested in throwing in their lot with Jesus. They are content to be on the sidelines. This indifference to Jesus or simply a favorable attitude are not adequate. The crowd's fickleness leaves them on the outside. That they are on the outside is seen in how quickly they turn on Jesus. They had been sufficiently on Jesus' side to arouse the envy and fear of his enemies. Even Pilate assumes they will support Jesus. Now, ironically, the envy and fear prove groundless at the very moment when his enemies initiate His murder.

Confronted with a humiliated Christ who will defend neither himself nor them, the crowds reject him. This messiah failed their expectations along with the religious leaders and even his own followers. He was not seeking to overthrow the Roman oppressors. Jesus was not who they thought he was. Influenced by paid agitators he becomes to them a somewhat pathetic figure and they now call for him to be crucified. It is imperative that we ourselves understand who Jesus is, what he is seeking to accomplish in our lives and in the world, and how he is seeking to accomplish it. If we operate under false assumptions in these areas, then like the crowds and the disciples, we will find ourselves disappointed and faithless when troubles arise.

8. What was the significance of Barabbas being released from prison instead of Jesus?

Two things are evident in the account of Barabbas' release from prison. The first point is the ugly attitude and sheer guilt of the leaders and people in preferring Barabbas to Jesus. Three times Pilate seeks to release Jesus, but each time the offer is rejected. Ironically, they find Jesus guilty for claiming to be the very thing they most wanted him to be but which he refuses to be - a political liberator. The second point of the Barabbas account is that it is a picture of substitution. Barabbas was the true criminal. He was the insurrectionist who was guilty of murder. But Jesus is charged with the crime instead and sentenced to die by crucifixion. Jesus was not deserving of death. Barabbas was. But Jesus takes his place. Jesus had earlier said that he was going to give his life as a ransom for many. As the innocent one, he dies in the place of the guilty. We ourselves are all Barabbas. We are delivered from the guilt of our sin by virtue of the death of Christ on our behalf.

9. According to this passage, who is responsible for putting Jesus to death? What does this tell us about ourselves?

Jews, Gentiles, and even his own followers are seen as participants in the death of Jesus. It is important to see this lest we fall into mistakes that have plagued

the church in the past. Oftentimes, the Jews alone have been charged with having killed Jesus and it has led to a great deal of ugly anti-Semitism. The Gospel writers had no intention or desire to justify anti-Semitic attitudes of later generations. After all, the majority of them were Jews themselves. One must not fail to realize that not all the Jews were against him even at the time his death. Luke tells us that as Jesus carried his cross *"a large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him"* (Luke 23:27).

We also know that there were 120 Jewish Christians before Pentecost, 3000 Jewish converts at Pentecost and another 5000 who followed shortly after that. In Acts 6:7 we are told that many Jewish priests were *"obedient to the faith."*

Assigning collective guilt to the Jews on the basis of the Scriptures does not fit the totality of the evidence. Justifying anti-Semitism and atrocities against Jewish people on the basis of the cry, *"His blood be on us and our children"* (Mt. 27:25) is a clear misuse of Scripture. We must distance ourselves from such attitudes and actions. According to this passage, among the Jews, it is the leaders who bear the brunt of the responsibility for Jesus' death. They reject him as God's Christ, the true fulfillment of the ancient Jewish hope for messianic salvation. They initiate the proceedings against Jesus and are vehement in their opposition to him from the start. However, they apparently do not have the authority to carry out the death penalty (Jn. 18:31).

Therefore, having accused him as deserving of death, they hand him over to the Roman authorities. Pilate seeks to release Jesus. And although his hand is somewhat forced by the Jewish leaders, he is still treated as sharing in the responsibility for Christ's execution. Both Pilate and the Jewish leaders are spoken of as *"handing Jesus over"* to death. In aftermath of the trial before the Sanhedrin and the trial before Pilate, guards mock, beat, spit upon, and mistreat Jesus. Eventually the Roman guards oversee his crucifixion. The clear teaching of the scripture is that all mankind is in rebellion against God. The whole world was in opposition to Jesus and is guilty of killing Him. Gentile and Jew, secular and religious, leader and those led all participated in the crucifixion.

Christianity addresses not a Gentile problem or a Jewish problem, but a human problem - sin. We all wish we could kill God and live without His authority over us. Mercifully, the execution that we carried out is that which brings us healing and forgiveness. Just as none of us are free from guilt, so none of us are without the need of Christ and the benefits which his death and resurrection bring.

Further Notes

MARK 14:53-72

Despite already having decided that Jesus has to die the authorities apparently need at least the appearance of legality in their actions, although there is no sign of any attempt to give Jesus a fair trial.

The events proceed apace, possibly to preclude any objections from *"the people?"* (11:32, 14:2). From now on power seems to be in the hands of the

Jewish and Roman authorities, with Jesus strangely passive. The emphasis on fulfilled scripture functions to show that God is still in control.

v53-54. This seems to have been a preliminary hearing prior to a formal session at dawn (15:1). Despite the hour, the council and witnesses are already gathered. Several details are clearly contrary to Jewish legal practice, such as meeting at night, using suborned witnesses and the High Priest's pre-judgment of the verdict (v64). Peter follows, if cautiously, making at least some attempt to fulfill his rash disbelieving promise of v31.

v55-65. The attempt is to justify their attitude towards Jesus, rather than decide what that attitude should be but the their most serious charges and best witnesses are, to say the least, feeble. There is no attempt to pursue the early accusations of Sabbath breaking or demon possession (3:2, 3:22). Even their clearest indictment is garbled (13:2, Jn 2:19), leaving them no usable evidence. Having thus totally failed to incriminate Jesus, he is invited to incriminate himself. He does not make one of his devastating replies. Jesus' role as leader and teacher is over and he now assumes the passivity of a sacrificial lamb (note "led" v53, 15:1, 16, 20, Isa 53:7).

The marked exception to this is in his reply to the High Priest's formal question. This was not a random inquiry. Jesus' identification as Messiah and also as Son of God was known despite his injunctions to silence (possibly through Judas?).

The High Priest as was normal uses the term "*Blessed*" as a circumlocution for the name of God. Jesus treats this, the central question of Mark (8:29), with full respect, neither ignoring it (e.g. 7:5-6) nor turning the tables on his questioner. The answer is positive and Jesus adds a corrective to the probable misunderstanding of the term "*Messiah*" by also claiming the majesty of the Son of Man in Dan 7:13 (see also Psa 110:1). Jesus is proclaimed Son and Heir (12:6-7) but the priests, convinced of their authority, instantly dismiss this as false and blasphemous, the rending of the garments being a formal reaction to heresy. The ensuing violence is a mocking of the "*Messiah*", who was supposed to be able to discern without seeing (Isa 11:3)

v66-72. Jesus, on trial, confessed who he was and was condemned. Peter now fails to confess his allegiance, to his self-condemnation. The challenge is a common one today: "*You're one of those Christians, aren't you?*". Peter progressively gives in under pressure. His first reply although dishonest, is merely evasive (and unconvincing, given the location!) and he promptly retreats to avoid further threat. Having started, he finishes, solemnly promising ("*invoke a curse*"), that he does not know Jesus, exactly as Jesus foretold, even to the timing. Peter instantly breaks down and it is in his brokenness that he still has a future. He knows what a dreadful thing he has done, unlike those examining Jesus, who are confident in their own righteousness (Jn 9:41, 1 Jn 1:8). Peter's fall is recorded particularly vividly, as Peter has nowhere spared himself in his recounting in Mark.

While teaching Jesus' authority and the importance of listening to him, this story gives both a stern warning and a strong encouragement. Jesus has already spoken about the fate of those who are ashamed of him (Mk 8:38), yet it is our

almost constant temptation to avoid identifying with Christ, by silence and evasion as well as by denial (2 Tim 1:8-12). The great encouragement is in seeing what became of ruined, fallen Peter: the Holy Spirit is able to do so much with so little even (or especially?) after such a failure (Acts 2:14, 36, Ezra 10:2).

Study 24 - Suffering at the Hands of the Father

MARK CHAPTER 15:16-39

Questions

1. Has there been a time in your life when you felt forsaken and alone? If so, how did you get through it?

READ Mark 15:16-39

2. Why did Jesus receive such vicious treatment from the Roman soldiers? Why was Mark interested in communicating all the details of Jesus' humiliation?
3. What truths are contained in the insults hurled at Jesus which help us to understand why he died on the cross?
4. Jesus cries out, "*My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?*" In what sense was Jesus forsaken by God?
5. How can understanding his cry help you at times when you feel forsaken by God?
6. Why do you suppose Jesus rejected the wine mixed with myrrh when it was offered to him (v. 23), but drank the wine vinegar?
7. What is the significance of the temple curtain being torn from top to bottom at the time of Jesus' death?
8. How does the response of the centurion contrast with the response of others who were present at the crucifixion?
9. What kind of response do you think Mark was interested in provoking in the lives of his readers by recording these events? What kind of response is this passage provoking in you?

LEADER'S NOTES MARK 15:16-39

Main Points

Here we see the terrible dichotomy between who Jesus was and how he was treated. In vs. 39 the centurion cries out, *"Surely, this man was the Son of God"*.

However, throughout the saga leading to that cry Jesus is mercilessly abused, mocked, tortured and taunted. By laying out the incongruence between Jesus' identity and his punishment, Mark is communicating that the treatment Jesus received was part of the redemptive purpose of God. Indeed, it is the very incompatibility of these things which gives the clue that something profound is taking place. In Jesus' brutal humiliation God is bringing about our salvation.

Commentary on the Passage and Notes on the Questions

1. Has there been a time in your life when you felt forsaken and alone? If so, how did you get through it? Approach question.

2. Why did Jesus receive such vicious treatment from the Roman soldiers? Why was Mark interested in communicating all the details of Jesus' humiliation?

Labeled an insurrectionist, Jesus was now fair game to the Roman soldiers. They loathed zealots who opposed their government and endangered soldiers' lives. It was a mutual hatred between Jew and Roman. Jesus was, therefore, a perfect target for their contempt. They are unrelenting in their cruelty to him. In fact, they appear to do their job with cruel relish. On a more profound level, mankind's hatred toward God is demonstrated. Jesus, the God-man, who has been completely righteous in all of his actions, is treated with animosity and rejection by all people. The soldiers beat and mock him. His disciples have all denied and turned from him. They are utterly faithless. Although they had promised they would follow him to death, there is no-one even to carry his cross. Jesus said that his followers must take up the cross and follow him, but no such followers are to be found. A stranger is picked out of the crowd to carry Jesus' cross against his will. Jesus is utterly alone and alien. He has been forsaken by all. The vicious brutality of fallen humanity is totally unmasked.

3 What truths are contained in the insults hurled at Jesus which help us to understand why he died upon the cross?

The soldiers treatment involves a mock inauguration, full of vicious pageantry, in which they call out *"Hail, the king of the Jews"*. Though their words are riddled with sarcasm, one of chief roles of a king is to deliver his people, and in the very suffering he is enduring he has begun his work of delivering people from sin. He is the King of kings and worthy of sincere homage. The next insults which are hurled at Jesus come as he is upon the cross: *"So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself"* and *"He saved others, but he can't save himself. Let this Christ, the king of Israel, come down from the cross, that we may see and believe."*

Again the ironic truth in the words is hard to miss. It is actually by staying on the cross that the temple and its ritual are rendered superfluous. They will no longer be the necessary, God-appointed means for coming into God's presence. At the very moment that they are ridiculing the notion of anyone being able to destroy the temple, Jesus, hanging on the cross, is "*destroying*" it. The other note of irony in these taunts is that only by refusing to save himself will Jesus be able to save others. His life is a "*ransom*" for others. Had he saved himself - something which he was quite capable of doing - no one would be saved

4. Jesus cries out, "*My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?*" In what sense was Jesus forsaken by God?

We are told that darkness falls over the land in vs.33. On a number of occasions when darkness falls on the land in the OT it is a sign that something momentous is happening. It is often a sign that judgment is taking place (Amos 8:9; Ex. 10:21). Darkness in the daytime symbolized God's wrath (Is. 13:9, 10; Jer. 15:6-9). While in this instance it may mean that those who have rejected Jesus are being divinely judged, it might also be communicating that Jesus himself is experiencing the judgment of God for the sake of others. When he does cry out, "*My God, why have you forsaken me*" he is quoting from Ps. 22:1 in which a righteous man is suffering unjustly. Jesus' death was a fulfillment of this psalm. His death was according to God's plan. Although he would one day come to judge, he was now separated from the Judge and identified with the judged (1:9; 10:45; 14:36). He was cut off from the Father. He was under the curse of God's wrath.

We cannot imagine what one who was perfectly loving and perfectly loved suffered during separation from his Father. We cannot imagine what one who was perfectly holy and who even at the moment was obeying "*his God*", suffered from being under a curse (see Deut.21:23; Is. 59:2; Mk 9:42-48;14:21). The cry does, however, show us he really suffered. In one sense there was no reason why God forsook Jesus. He had committed no sin and deserved no judgment. In another sense, the reasons were man's sin, God's wrath, and God's mercy. Jesus was the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 - "*cut off for the transgression of my people*", the Lamb on whom God lays the sin of the sheep.

Everyone-else's perceptions are as murky as the cloud. Confusion reigns. Seeing no connection between the darkness and his cry, they mistakenly believe he is calling out for Elijah to save him. They believe he is appealing to be released from the cross. Mark has already made us wiser.

5. How can understanding his cry help you at times when you feel forsaken by God?

To feel forsaken by God at times is part of the normal Christian experience. It is a pattern repeated throughout the psalms. However, though we sometimes feel that way, the Scriptures assure us that those who belong to Christ will never actually be forsaken (Deut. 31:6; Mt. 28:20; Heb. 13:5). Jesus alone truly experiences it. When we have lost the sense of God's presence and feel as though we have been abandoned, we can be assured that he himself has gone through the real thing. He actually has been forsaken. Therefore, having gone through real forsakenness, Jesus can identify with us, help us and comfort us in

our experiences of forsakenness. He never asks us to endure what he actually endured. In our own experiences of forsakenness, we must go to him who knows forsakenness on the deepest of all possible levels, trusting that he will give us help and grace in our need.

6. Why do you suppose Jesus rejected the wine mixed with myrrh when it was offered to him (v. 23), but drank the wine vinegar?

Jesus had earlier told the disciples that he would not drink the cup of wine again until he did so with his disciples in the kingdom (14:25). Therefore, when wine mixed with myrrh is offered him, he refuses to drink it. The wine mixed with myrrh would have been similar to the sweet wine which he had drunk with his disciples. The myrrh was meant to have the effect of a sedative which would have made the pain more bearable. However, Jesus knows that he has come to suffer and to drink the cup of the wrath of God against mankind. He refuses to let his awareness of that "*cup*" to become dulled by drinking the drugged wine.

When he does finally drink, it is not sweet wine of which he partakes, but sour wine - wine vinegar (15:36). He does this right after he has cried, "*My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?*" and just prior to his last breath (15:37). Therefore it is not unlikely that the drinking of the sour wine is meant to symbolize his drinking the cup of God's wrath which he had referred to earlier (10:38 - see Lesson 16, question 4) and which he had prayed would be taken from him (14:36). Even to his last moments he made his life clear sign and symbol of God's plan and purpose.

7. What is the significance of the temple curtain being torn from top to bottom at the time of Jesus' death?

The temple has been the place up to this point in history where a person gained access to God. The temple had two vast curtains. One was situated between the outer court and the holy place. The priests alone were able to enter the holy place and they did so regularly to carry out their ministry. A second curtain separated the holy place from the most holy place. The most holy place was entered but once a year by the high priest. There he offered a sacrifice for his sins and the sins of the people. In the most holy place the actual and immediate presence of God dwelt in a special way. The rarity with which this place was entered and the precautions which had to be taken in order to do so symbolized the holiness of God and the difficulty of gaining access to his presence.

Jesus' loud death cry accompanied by the miraculous tearing of this inner curtain in two meant that Jesus' death provides the basis for a new access to God. The sinless Son of Man is banished so that sinful men could be welcomed. The sin in man's heart is atoned for by a substitutionary death. The "*ransom*" price for redemption has been paid. Therefore, Jesus' death does not signal defeat, but victory. The way to God is opened wide. The stringent demands for access to God have been met by Jesus so that the former restrictions fall by the way side. The "*most holy place*" can now be entered by all of us who trust in Christ. While the tearing of the curtain symbolizes a new means of access to God it simultaneously invalidates OT worship. The temple is superseded and in that

sense is judged and destroyed. The chief institution of the Jewish tradition that rejected Jesus is invalidated. No more sacrifices are needed.

8. How does the response of the centurion contrast with the response of others who were present at the crucifixion?

Seeing the manner in which Jesus dies the centurion, who is the chief executioner, exclaims, *"Surely this man was the Son of God."* It is unlikely that he meant it in the way Mark intended his readers to understand it. Originally it might have meant something like, *"This man behaves like a divine hero."* Jesus is being likened to figures to be found in the Hellenistic religious tradition. But Mark surely means his readers to understand it as *"ironic confession of the true significance of Jesus"*. Interestingly, the centurion is the only human character in Mark's gospel to use the title, *"the Son of God"*, for Jesus. Only God and demons have used this title previously. It is also significant that the only human being to use this title is a gentile. Mark's gospel, you will recall, was written to gentiles. The centurion's confession served to let his gentile readers know that this was a confession they too should make.

The centurion's response is contrasted with others who mocked Jesus. The other soldiers did nothing but hurl abuse at him. The Jewish onlookers did the same. As mentioned above, they completely misunderstand who Jesus is. The centurion alone rightly identifies Jesus and access to God is now open for the gentiles.

9. What kind of response do you think Mark was interested in provoking in the lives of his readers by recording these events? What kind of response is this passage provoking in you?

Undoubtedly Mark wanted us to acknowledge Jesus' true identity. We can no longer put off a response. We, like the centurion, ought to recognize his true significance. In the fullness of his explanation we can only be grateful for what Jesus did. Fallen humanity, including ourselves, murdered the Messiah, who agreed to die for us. For us and for our salvation he endured humiliation at our hands. We spat upon, hit and mocked him, and he gave himself up for us. Our wickedness is completely exposed and his love is completely revealed. The contrast between the two could not be greater. God's attitude toward us and our attitude to him could not be further apart. Is there a response other than endless gratitude which we could make? Our praise to God ought to swell to new levels when we read and meditate on this account. Finally we must cherish the access to God, our Father, which has been obtained and make consistent, regular use of it. God's continual welcome of us is our most precious inheritance and it should be exercised constantly.

Further Notes

MARK 15: 21-39

Mark's message climaxes with the crucifixion of Jesus. Each detail is individually highlighted, the frequent *"and"* jerking attention from point to point.

Having been betrayed, abandoned by his friends, mocked, beaten and whipped by his enemies, he was brought out to die. Jesus of Nazareth was killed by

crucifixion: nailed naked in front of a jeering crowd, he died from exhaustion, asphyxiation, exsanguination and dehydration. But this is far from the whole story (in these terms alone it is not even remarkable; two others suffered similarly at the same time).

It is the many other elements occurring before during and after Jesus' death which convey its unique character and significance. The fulfillment of ancient prophecy (e.g. Psa 22, Isa 9, Amos 8:7-10) and Jesus' own teachings start to show this. Later, the resurrection, the changed disciples and the powerful spread of the gospel all add their testimony to the evidence and explanation found during the crucifixion itself.

v21-27. Mark names a witness to the events, presumably known to the early church, at least through his sons. Jesus died unexpectedly quickly (v44-45). His weakness here in part explains why. Jesus faced the cross without the offered soporific, as he had vowed (14:25) and so not to avoid the full measure of God's wrath (14:36). The bare snapshots of the dicing soldiers (v24) and the two thieves (v27) are important to Mark and to us as they again show the fulfillment of scripture (Psa 28:18, Isa 53:12), God, even here, fully in control, the context of the references helping to explain something otherwise incomprehensible.

The first of the "*words of the cross*" recorded by Mark is Pilate's indictment, clearly displayed. Pilate, like Caiaphas earlier (Jn 11:49-51) becomes an unwitting prophet, his revenge on the Jews (Jn 19:19-22) actually proclaiming what Mark was establishing in Ch 1-8: Jesus as King and Lord.

v28-32. Echoes of Psalm 22 are found in the mockery from all sides, even from Jesus' fellow sufferers. The taunts once more form unperceived prophecy. Jesus' prophecy of the sign of the temple (Jn 2:19-22) now appears totally false to the crowd, even as it was being enacted. Similarly v30-31 are also true. He could have come down from the cross, and it is because he is set on saving others that he cannot save himself (Isa 53:3-6, 10-12). v32 is the final, cynical demand for a sign. "*If you are the Christ, prove it*". They will not see the signs that are there throughout Jesus' ministry, even here.

v33-39. The unnatural darkness was not an eclipse (Passover was at full moon) although Luke says "*the sun failed*" (Lk 23:45), an immediate and powerful "*sign*" both of the darkness of man's sin in God's eyes and of the mourning appropriate to the death of God's only Son (Amos 8:7-10). It is at this literally dark hour that the true horror of the cross becomes clear. Jesus, the beloved Son, one with the Father, is accursed by him and banished from his presence (Mk 1:11, Jn 10:30, Deut 21:22-23, 1 Jn 1:5). Jesus feels the full weight of God's wrath against sin, sacrificing himself that we might live (Heb 9:28, Gal 3:13, 2 Cor 5:21, 1 Pet 2:24).

Jesus' loud cry, quoting Psa 22:1, expresses the depth of his pain but not necessarily simple despair, as Psalm 22 ends in confidence and hope. This is still unclear to the bystanders who only hear a cry to Elijah for help. v37 Jesus does not die passively. He has done exactly what he came to do (10:45): now this is accomplished he dies in victory (Jn 19:20).

The jump in scene to the temple (v38) marks both the uniqueness of Jesus' death and its purpose. The curtain barrier to the Holy place is torn away. Jesus' atonement has given us access to God, a new relationship and life (Heb 10:19-20).

The final word (and remarkable event) lies with the centurion in charge of the execution. He does "see and believe" (v39). The darkness, the earthquake (Matt 27:51), Jesus' words are all signs of who Jesus is. Exactly what he meant by "*Son of God*" is unclear (it was one of the Emperor's titles) but he knows this is someone very special.

The first half of Mark ended with a Jew recognizing Jesus from his authority. Here a Gentile looks at the cross and sees the Son of God, just as Mark introduced him in Ch 1:1.

Study 25 - The New Beginning

MARK CHAPTERS 15:40-16:8

Questions

1. What was the most surprising and unexpected news you have heard in your life?

READ Mark 15:40-6:8

2. Why do you suppose Mark tells us about the women who were present at the crucifixion and why does he mention that these same women saw the tomb where Jesus was laid?
3. What is being communicated to us by the account of Jesus' burial by Joseph of Arimathea?
4. What do you think was the attitude of the women as they approached the tomb on the first day of the week? What were they expecting to find?
5. What is "*the young man dressed in a white robe*" seeking to communicate to the women?
6. What do you make of the women's reaction to the angel's message? Why silence and fear?
7. The earliest and most reliable manuscripts of Mark's gospel end with 16:8. Why do you think Mark ended his gospel in this way?
8. Looking back over the whole of Mark's gospel what are one or two insights or truths you received that were most helpful? What difference, if any, has studying this book in its entirety made in your life?

LEADER'S NOTES MARK 15:40-6:8

Main Points

The initial point of this passage is to convince us that Jesus was really dead and that there were reliable eyewitnesses to his death and place of burial. The women, Joseph of Arimathea, the centurion, and Pilate are all witnesses of the reality of Christ's death. The second point is to convince us that Jesus really rose from the dead. Though he died a criminal's death, he was not a criminal at all. The resurrection vindicates Jesus. He is the prince and pioneer of salvation for anyone who believes in him. Mark's unusual ending (9-20 are not considered part of the original manuscript by most scholars) is perhaps a device which challenges the reader to personally respond to the gospel. It creates a deliberate tension which can only be resolved by our personal response.

Commentary on the Passage and Notes on the Questions

1. What was the most surprising and unexpected news you have heard in your life? Approach question.

2. Why do you suppose Mark tells us about the women who were present at the crucifixion and why does he mention that these same women saw the tomb where Jesus was laid?

Mark mentions three women by name who were witnesses to Jesus' crucifixion. They saw Jesus die and were able to testify that he was indeed dead. In verse 17, Mark tells us that these women saw where Jesus was laid. The word for "watched/saw" implies careful scrutiny. By giving us this information, Mark prohibits us from drawing the conclusion that people thought Jesus had risen from the dead because they went to the wrong tomb. The women knew exactly where he had been buried. They did not go to the wrong tomb and mistakenly report that he had been raised from the dead. The reality of these events are thus emphasized. Jesus really died. He was really buried. And the tomb was really empty. Therefore, he truly rose. These women served as the guarantors of the events.

The fact Mark records that women were the witnesses points to the authenticity of the account for during this period in history the testimony of a woman was not accepted as evidence in a court. If Mark was trying to make the account more believable to skeptics he would have had men serve as witnesses. He would not have invented women witnesses. By stating that women were the witnesses the historicity and reliability of the account is confirmed. In a period in which women were not held in high esteem, these women are held out as being far more courageous than the disciples. As witnesses of the death of Jesus and the first witnesses of the resurrection they have been held up as having an important and significant role in the Christian tradition.

3. What is being communicated to us by the account of Jesus' burial by Joseph of Arimathea?

The account of Joseph of Arimathea's burial of Jesus also serves to confirm that Jesus had actually died and was buried. No theories which purported that he had

merely swooned and had not really died could be seriously entertained in light of the evidence. Again, Mark gives us the specific name of the man involved in the event. He could be investigated as a witness. It was highly unusual that Jesus was buried at all. Normally the bodies of crucified criminals were left on the cross to be consumed by scavengers. According to Roman law, only if special permission was granted, could a crucified individual be buried. However, Jewish custom required that even criminals be given burials. To fail to observe this custom was to defile the land. Pious Jews felt obligated even to bury an enemy. For one reason or another, Pilate granted Joseph of Arimathea permission to bury Jesus' body. The fact that Joseph carries out this task and not Jesus' disciples points again to the disciples' faithlessness and Jesus' utter abandonment. Joseph had Jesus' body sealed in a rock tomb, from which there could be no human escape. Foreboding gloom hangs over the scene as this chapter comes to an end.

By drawing our attention to actual events for which there were witnesses Mark is highlighting the historical nature of the Christian faith. Among the religions of the world, Christianity is unique in that it stands or falls depending on whether certain historical events took place or not - especially the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Christ. Take away any of those events and you no longer have Christianity. Prove that they did not take place and you have successfully destroyed the Christian faith. This can be said for no other belief system. If you proved that Confucius, the Buddha or even Mohammed did not exist, the religions that are based on their teachings would not change. Their existence is not fundamental to the belief systems. That is because they are primarily ethical and philosophical systems. The same cannot be said for Christianity. If Jesus did not exist, die and rise from the dead, there is no Christianity. *"If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins...If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men"* (1 Cor. 15:17,18).

4. What do you think was the attitude of the women as they approached the tomb on the first day of the week? What were they expecting to find?

The women had admitted defeat. They fully expected to find Jesus dead, the wonder of life in his presence was over, now their master was dead, and they appear to be reconciled to that fact. They had come to the tomb, in which they had seen him placed a few days earlier, with spices to anoint the body. The spices were not for embalming but for perfuming the corpse, a gesture of love and respect. Their desire to anoint the body means that they would be pouring perfumed oils over him. These perfumes were probably quite expensive and the fact that they had purchased them for the purpose of anointing him means that they did not expect him to rise from the dead.

On the way, they ponder how the stone in front of the tomb would be moved so that they could go about their task. The stones that were placed in front of tombs were intended to keep out wild animals and intruders. Evidently, these stones were placed in a channel which was cut on slope at the base of the entrance to the tomb. It enabled a stone to be rolled into place with some ease but required a team effort to remove it. Uncertain of how they would gain access to the body, their devotion compels them to go anyway. They come to pay their last respects.

5. What is "the young man dressed in a white robe" seeking to communicate to the women?

Essentially, the "young man dressed in a white robe" (whom Mark intends for us to understand to be an angel) proclaims the truth that Jesus has risen from the dead. He specifically asks them to look at the place where they had laid him. He wants them to be convinced that the tomb is empty. He wants no doubt to be left in their minds with regards to what has happened. The resurrection was a fact to which they could attest. Their master was not dead after all. He was alive. Death could not hold him. He is vindicated by God against all the slander and charges that were leveled against him. But this is not all the angel communicates. He instructs the women to share the news with the disciples and Peter and then recalls Jesus' earlier promise that after he had risen he would go ahead of them into Galilee (14:28). By recalling these words there is an implicit call to return to discipleship and also a proclamation of forgiveness for the cowardice and faithlessness which they had displayed.

That this is part of the intended message becomes clear through the specific mention of Peter, who was the chief offender. The disciples are forgiven and reinstated. The cross and resurrection are the basis for forgiveness. Satan has been soundly defeated and none is beyond the sovereign grace of the cross. Finally, in these words there is a germinal form of the mandate given to all Christians to "Go and tell". The women were to be the first to proclaim the gospel. Jesus' other disciples (ourselves included) were to follow suite.

6. What do you make of the women's reaction to the angel's message? Why silence and fear?

The women are shocked, the new is unexpected. It was truly "awesome" news provoking in them a deep trembling fear. This is not the reaction of people who viewed resurrections as common place or saw the miraculous as normal. The news was just as surprising and out of the ordinary to those who lived in the first century as it is to those of us who live in the 21st century. They were no more prone to believe it than we ourselves are. There is little room for the reaction, "Well, people back then believed in resurrections, but we modern people can not be expected to do so. We know such things cannot happen."

They were confronted by the angel, saw the indisputable evidence and were awed. It was too much for them. And so would it be for us if we had the same experience. They are amazed, shocked, and full of fear. At least initially, they don't say a word to anyone. We must assume that they eventually overcame their fear and heeded the angel's command. But their initial reaction is exactly what we would expect and thus adds a note of authenticity and credibility to the account.

7. The earliest and most reliable manuscripts of Mark's gospel end with 16:8. Why do you think Mark ended his gospel in this way?

There is quite a bit of debate surrounding the ending of Mark's gospel. Almost all scholars agree that the two alternate endings we sometimes find in manuscripts are additions added later in history. They were not part of the

original text. They were most likely added because people found verse 8 to be an unsatisfying ending (See “*Problems with the Ending of Mark’s Gospel*”). Some scholars wonder if there was yet another authentic ending which has been lost. At present we know of no such ending and we must be satisfied with the ending we have. Apparently this is the ending which God has left us with. How are we to understand it?

The first thing we must say is that the gospel ends with the confidence that the resurrection has taken place and that Christ is triumphant. Though the gospel ends on a final note of fear and silence, this in no way undermines Jesus' victory and vindication. Christ's resurrection is not viewed as an epilogue on Mark's gospel, but as the climactic event. If it had not happened then everything that came before it is rendered meaningless. A dead Messiah is of no use to anyone. Jesus has been raised and Mark means for us to believe. So why does Mark end the gospel in this manner? Perhaps the best explanation is that he intends for his readers to be personally engaged by the story. The story can't be left the way it is. Something must be done with it. It demands response. We are left with a command to follow. Will we do so and become part of the story or will we, determined to create our own stories, reject it? Will we live by narratives other than the gospel which shape our lives in false or distorting ways? Or will the gospel become the defining story of our life. If we follow the latter course then we end up doing what the well intentioned, but misguided second century preachers did - we add to the story. But we do so legitimately -not finishing the story for others, but only for ourselves, and thus becoming part of the story that God himself is writing.

8. Looking back over the whole of Mark's gospel what are one or two insights or truths you received that were most helpful? What difference, if any, has studying this book in its entirety made in your life?

You may want to take a whole small group session to go over this question, asking people to read back over the entire gospel and come prepared to share their reflections. It is a question for sharing and celebration of what has been learned and how it has changed one another's lives. Individuals may share things as broad as “*It gave me a renewed certainty that Jesus is God and is to be obeyed as such*” to specific things such as, “*I became less selfish in my relationship with my roommate as a result of reflecting on Jesus' call to servanthood*”. Take time to specifically thank God for the Scriptures, what has been learned, and how the lives of those who have attended the study have been effected and changed.

*Some Problems with the
Ending of Mark's
Gospel*

PROBLEMS WITH THE TEXT

There are two textual problems associated with the end of Mark's Gospel:

- Some manuscripts go on beyond v8, with variations on two main alternatives:
 - A a shorter ending of one verse as in RSV footnotes

B a longer ending of twelve verses as printed after the line in the NIV and after a space in most RSVs

- If the book ends at v8, it is a very abrupt ending.

THE SHORTER AND LONGER “ENDINGS”

A The shorter ending

Neither the most reliable nor the majority of manuscripts have this verse. It seems to have been added in the 2nd century in an attempt to round off the Gospel.

B The longer ending

Although it is more common than the shorter ending, the earliest and most reliable of manuscripts do not have this ending.

Consequently, the leaders and theologians of the early church did not accept it:

- many 2nd century commentators do not mention it
- in the 4th century, Eusebius said he thought the Gospel ended at 16:8.

Internal evidence also suggests it is inauthentic:

- its style and vocabulary are different to the rest of Mark (e.g. calls Jesus '*the Lord*').
- uses a word for '*go*' which Mark never uses elsewhere
- it doesn't follow naturally from v8. Why wasn't the description of Mary Magdalene in 16:9b included in 15:40 when she was introduced? Why no mention of Galilee?

Again it seems to be a 2nd century attempt to round off the Gospel and so is best excluded from a reading of Mark's Gospel.

There is a danger that we may seem to exclude the longer ending on theological rather than on purely textual grounds, mainly because of its emphasis on '*signs and wonders*'. The important thing to stress here is that almost all of what it teaches is also found in other universally accepted parts of Scripture (e.g. Matt 28; Lk. 8:2; 24:9-53; Jn 20-21; Acts 1:1-9; 2:4; 5:12-16; 14:3; 16:18; 20:10; 28:5). The only detail which is unique, the promise of protection from the effects of drinking poison (v18), is in principle no different from the promise of protection from the effects of poisonous snakes in the same verse. So we are not denying that Scripture says these things, only that it says them in this context and in this particular way.

THE ABRUPT ENDING

If neither the shorter nor the longer ending is authentic, we are left with two possibilities:

- a) The Gospel was meant to end at 16:8.
- b) The Gospel was not meant to end at 16:8, but either it was never finished or it was finished and the ending has been lost.

Arguments in favor of b) include:

- to end with fear is unlikely
- to end with the word *'for'* is unlikely
- the lack of a resurrection appearance is unlikely
- the lack of an explicit *'great commission'* is unlikely

Cranfield argues that if an original ending has been lost, it must have happened after Mark's death (or he would have rewritten it) but while there were still very few copies around (or the copy which first lost its ending would have been completed from those which had not). This seems an unlikely circumstance. He therefore thinks the book was never finished.

Arguments in favor of a) (the solution assumed in the study notes) include:

- scholars say that to end a sentence, or even a book, with 'for' is not impossible
- Mark's argument is complete without any further addition. It is quite clear that Jesus has risen and that the Eleven will be recommissioned. The emphasis remains firmly on the cross and we are left waiting for the prophecies of the return of the Son of Man to be fulfilled. If we assume that Mark intended to end at 16:8, the facts that he ends with fear and doesn't describe a resurrection appearance, just like the abruptness of his opening verses (1:1ff cf. Mal 3:1 *'suddenly'*), actually contribute to his meaning.

Further Notes

MARK 15:40-16:8 (9-20)

Jesus' purpose is accomplished in his dying, the words of the centurion being the first recognition of this uniquely powerful event. This however is far from the end of the story. *"in accordance with the scriptures"*, there is still much to be fulfilled.

v40-41. Mark records some of the witnesses to Jesus' death who will also testify to his resurrection. As at the tomb later, it is the women who predominate, despite their unacceptability as legal testimony in Jewish law. Mark again mentions the theme of service, here the inconspicuous ministry of all the women who had followed Jesus (acknowledged only here and Mk 1:31.)

v42-47. Mark's usual explanation of Jewish custom places Jesus' death on a Friday afternoon. According to Deut 21:22f a criminal's body should be buried before sunset but as a Roman execution, the disposal of the corpse is in the hands of Pilate. The story of Joseph is another example of costly and apparently useless service (14:3-5). His not so secret support for Jesus, although coming so late, is

courageous in risking the wrath of both Pilate and the Sanhedrin. He also *"did what he could"*, as a council member, obtaining access to Pilate to request and receive the body.

Note that Jesus was certainly dead. Pilate requires confirmation and is given it, the centurion's life depending on not making a mistake. Joseph and the women obviously found no trace of life, or they would not have entombed Jesus. Joseph provides a rich, almost royal, burial for Jesus (2 Ki 21:26) in fulfillment of Isa 53:9. That his body was not just thrown into a common pit as was more usual for criminals is vital for the assertion that Jesus' body was raised.

The location of the corpse was known to all. The women's participation in the burial undermines "*wrong tomb*" theories and the tomb is made secure by Jesus' friends as well as his enemies (Matt 27:62-66).

Ch16:1-8. As soon as possible the women come to the tomb. Their aim is to serve a dead Jesus by anointing his body. Their expectation is to find the tomb sealed. They have no anticipation of the resurrection. However, Jesus is no longer there: the stone is rolled away to prove this (to provide evidence, not to let Jesus out! (Jn 20:19)), and they are able to enter the tomb to see for themselves.

They see and are also told, the testimony of the young man (clearly an angel, not the gardener!) confirming that Jesus is risen, not merely gone. The second part of his message is a mild rebuke as well as a great statement of promise. The disciples and especially Peter had often failed to accept or understand Jesus' words, particularly with respect to the resurrection and they certainly have forgotten his promise of a reunion in Galilee (14:28). Peter is mentioned specifically: after all he has done and failed to do, Jesus still wants him.

Even now the women do not really understand. They are amazed and afraid because something incredible has happened. They finally understand when they meet Jesus and later the Holy Spirit.

If finishing here, Mark's gospel ends suddenly on the announcement that Jesus is risen. If the climax to Mark is found in the centurion and Jesus' death, this is reasonable. In many ways, including the resurrection, Jesus' death is marked as unique. "*Jesus died for us*": that he died is clear, we know he died "*for us*" because we are told.

This vindication of Jesus (men condemned him to die, God reversed the verdict) authenticates Jesus' words as true, confirms Jesus as divine, shows the power of God is greater than death, provides a first sign of our own resurrection (1 Cor 15:20) and establishes Jesus as alive, so that we can know him today.

No wonder we celebrate the first day of the week as the Lord's day!