

## Following Jesus With Mark

### *The Messiah on Mission (session three)*

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**Claire:** Welcome back! We're really excited today to walk through the Gospel of Mark and, in a sense, almost running with the disciples of Jesus. We're trying to capture the vitality and the momentum of this amazing revelation of Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, and how Mark reveals that to his readers—readers who are experiencing crises of their own: persecution, delay of his second coming, misinterpretations of who Jesus is. Mark is guiding us

on this journey. We left off, in our last session, looking at the first half of the book.

The book very neatly divides into two sections: the first half, the revelation of Jesus as Messiah; the second half, the revelation of Jesus as the Son of God, who is a suffering King. Now we want to wrap up what we were saying about the first half of the book. We had shown how Jesus amazed everybody with his words and with his works and with his claims. We left on a cliffhanger that not everybody is convinced that there are mixed reactions to Jesus and His words, works, and claims.

Mark, very honestly, reveals to us what people are thinking. First, there's the group who refuse to believe in him. The religious authorities, they represent the status quo. They see Jesus as an outsider and an authorized itinerant preacher and faith healer. The faith healer has come to town. Oh, oh. Just going to confuse people. Doesn't have any right, never studied. The priests are unhappy with Jesus's ministry and his challenges, as are the scribes.

When we think of the scribes, we shouldn't just be thinking of people who take notes. They're not secretaries. The scribes are the real authorities on the law. They're the students of the law who help to figure out what practice should be and what should be your observance. The scribes are authorities. They know the text. Then the Pharisees, who have some very deep and passionate debates and altercation with Jesus and His authorities over issues that are near and dear to both their hearts. How to observe Shabbat. How to observe dietary rules and rules of ritual purity.

In chapters two and three, and seven and eight, we see their negative reactions that they're having in growing intense rejection of Jesus and his claims. We see, sadly, that people in his hometown of Nazareth also reject him in chapters three six. In Nazareth, where Jesus grew up, the town in which he spent the majority of his life, his town, people are unconvinced. They don't believe that he's the Messiah. In one way, we can sympathize with that because when you grow up with somebody, and you've seen them grow up, if they do well and they are successful in business, well, you applaud, and you're very happy for them. If they come across saying, "I'm the Messiah," you really have a hard time jumping on that bandwagon because you've known them so intimately.

We see that this kind of skepticism also affected his family at first. His mother and his brothers. They thought he was beside himself. They thought he was losing his mind and that he was delusional. They come seeking him out to say, "Honey, calm down, come home." The religious authorities reject Jesus. His townspeople reject people. In fact, that's a catalyst for Jesus to relocate from Nazareth and to make Capernaum his base of operations. He knows that nothing is going to happen out at Nazareth.

Then some people go so far as to ascribe his power to Satan. In Mark 3, the scribes say that Jesus only does what he does, because the devil is helping him do it. It's not that he really is from God at all. This leads to discussions, of course, about what is blasphemy of the Holy Spirit? The unforgivable sin? When religious authorities who are in a position to recognize the movement of God and to recognize the hand of God at work tell other people that it's of the devil. That's blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. It's not just saying, "Oh darn, you holy spirit," that's not blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. Blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is when people who have religious authority and religious education and training and should recognize what God is doing but attribute it to the devil.

There is another group of people who embrace Jesus and who are favorably impressed by him. The everyday folk, the people on the margins, tax collectors, sinners, women, people who do not have a higher theological education but who are hungry for the manifestation of the kingdom of God in their lives, these are the people who are drawn. They are hearing something fresh and new, and Jesus is meeting their needs. He's healing their diseases. He's delivering them from oppression. He's feeding them with bread in the wilderness, and they're open to him.

What comes as a surprise to us is that the disciples themselves are a little bit ambivalent. They're not quite sure what to make of Jesus. We see that in chapter 4:41, they're filled with amazement. Chapter 5:43, they're astonished. In other verses in chapter 4:13, and 6:52, and 7:18, and 8:17 and 18 and 21, they are befuddled. They don't know what to make of who Jesus is and what it is. Jesus will say to them, "Don't you understand? Are you deaf? Are you blind even though you have eyes? Don't you see having ears? Don't you hear? Don't you understand about the loaves, about the bread?"

What is it that they are supposed to understand? What are the loaves and the bread supposed to tell them? Well, right now we want to look at the sequence leading down to this question and leading up to Caesarea Philippi and see how Mark builds this momentum to the moment when the ears and the eyes of the disciples will be opened. We're going to begin by saying that within the Gospel of Mark, we have three missionary journeys of Jesus, missionary journeys in which the disciples accompany him. Each missionary journey ends up with a surprising encounter. A surprising extension of God's mercy through Jesus to somebody unexpected.

The first missionary journey is from Mark 4:35 to 5:21. I want us to turn and look at the person who is the unexpected recipient of God's mercy and grace. In your Synoptic Gospels book, that would be on page 81. It's section number 106. The text is Mark 5: 1-20. The encounter with a Gerasene demoniac. This story is told by Matthew, Mark

and Luke. It's part of what we call our triple tradition. Some of us have struggled with this passage because, of course, it contains within it the story of these people who are raising pigs on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. We are befuddled and we say, "Why are these Jewish people raising pigs," which is nonkosher meat of course. So why are they raising unclean animals?

In reality, this story is not about Jews at all. I heard a wonderful lecture once at the Society of biblical literature convention. It was for me an aha moment where the scholar unpacked the story of the Gerasene demoniac for me and helped-- Well, not for me, but for the whole audience. [chuckles] For me, it was a revelation, and helped me to understand the setting.

First of all, they come to the other side of the sea. It says in Mark 5:1, picking up at verse one, to the country of the Gerasenes. Now, Geresh, Gerasa, in Matthew, Gadara, these are both on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. The eastern side of the Sea of Galilee is called the Decapolis. Decapolis is a Greek word meaning 10 cities, Decapolis. On the other side of the Sea of Galilee are all these cities-- Greek word for city is a polis. All these cities that have been settled by Gentiles, these are former soldiers from the Macedonians, from the time of Alexander the Great, from the Hellenistic wars, and part of their reward and compensation for services to be given citizenship and land rights in a city.

The eastern side of the Sea of Galilee is populated with Gentiles. In this era, Gentiles are pagans. We come to the Gentile part of this area. We're coming to Gerasa, to one of the major population centers, and when Jesus comes out of the boat, there met Him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit who lived among the tombs and no one could bind him anymore, even with a chain, for he had often been bound with fetters and chains but the chains he wrenched apart, the fetters, he broke in pieces and no one had the strength to subdue him.

Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains, he was always crying out and bruising himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and worshiped Him, and crying out with a loud voice, he said, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me." For He had said to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit."

Well, this story is written in a very typical Markan fashion, full of detail. Much richer detail than Luke and then that Matthew used. In fact, they clean up the narrative a little bit. They streamline it, they provide explanatory notes. For us, the picture is a picture that we need to embrace of a pagan man who is demon-possessed. The demon that he is possessed by inflicts harm on him. He is a suffering person.

How is it that he lives among the tombs? What does that mean? We need to envision a graveyard for pagans. In a pagan society, part of your responsibility is the maintenance of your ancestral tombs. The pagans feel that their deceased relatives have a role, they have an impact on their present life. If you neglect the tombs of your ancestors, bad things will happen to you. In pagan religion, gifts of food and gifts of drink are brought to the burial places of the ancestors. This man survives in a graveyard because food and drink is brought there on a regular basis by all kinds of other people.

The setting for this story is within the world of pagan religion. This man comes, he lives there, he eats and drinks from the offerings that have been brought to sustain the ancestral spirits. When Jesus sees him, He says, "Come out." The demon within this man knows who's Jesus identity. He knows that he is the Son of the Most High God. We see throughout the Gospels that although Jesus will tell people to be quiet, the spirits always know who Jesus is. They recognize His authority instantly. They're also afraid. "Have you come to torment me? Do not torment me."

In Matthew, He says, "Have you come to torment us before the time?" The demonic spirits that torment men know that there is an appointed day of judgment when they will be cast into a lake of fire, but it's not now. "Is it too soon? You can't hurt us. You can't put us into the lake of fire," is what Matthews demon is saying in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus says to him, "What is your name?" The man says, "My name is Legion, for we are many."

Again, it's a very subtle connection to the pagan Gentile world because Legion, which means many, also evokes Rome and its overarching, stifling control and power on the Mediterranean world. Another hint that we're dealing with a Gentile demon-possessed man who is part of the larger world of pagan religion. The demon negotiates with Jesus. He begged him eagerly not to send them out of the country. Now a great herd of swine was feeding there on the hillside. They begged him saying, "Send us into the swine. Let us enter them."

Why are the swine being raised? Because in pagan religion, you have different offerings that are appropriate for different occasions. If you want to offer something to Zeus, you will sacrifice the bull. Bulls are the highest order and the most expensive, so bulls are offered to Zeus. If you want to offer something to Hades, to the god of the underworld, you will offer a pig. These swine that are there on the hillside are being raised as part of the economic undergirding of pagan religion. They're there so that people coming to offer offerings can buy a swine and offer it to Hades, bring offerings for their relatives, et cetera. They're part of the larger institutional world of pagan religion.

Jesus said, okay, and he cast the demons into the swine, and the swine run off the hill into the lake and are drowned. The herd size was about 2000 that rushed down into the sea and the herdsmen fled. They told it in the city and the country. People came out to see what it was that had happened. They came to Jesus and they saw the demoniac sitting there clothed in his right mind, the man who had had the Legion, and they were afraid.

Those who had seen it told what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine, and they begged Jesus to depart from their neighborhood. Well, I would guess so. Think of the economic loss when all of the animals that had been designated to be part of pagan worship to the god of the underworld had been destroyed because Jesus has stepped across the Sea of Galilee.

As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed with demons begged Jesus that he might be with him but Jesus said no. He said, "Go home and tell your friends how much the Lord has done for you and how he has had mercy on you." He went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and all men marveled.

In Mark, he says, "Tell them how much the Lord has done for you." In Luke, he says, "Tell them how much God has done for you." Jesus gives permission to this Gentile man, formerly demon-possessed, to go out and become a missionary for the God of Israel to the Gentile people. Now it's not time for Jesus to start a big ministry to the Gentiles, but this action is a foretaste. It is a foretaste of his kingdom coming against the gates of hell. It's a foretaste of how pagan religion will collapse against the truth and the reality of the kingdom of God that Jesus will bring through his suffering, death, and resurrection. It is a foretaste of what will happen when his followers go out. It is a setting not about Jesus preaching to the Jews, but it's about Jesus anticipating his ministry to the Gentiles. That's an unexpected encounter at the end of the first missionary journey.

The second missionary journey begins in Mark 5:31 and goes to Mark 8:10. That story also ends with a very unexpected encounter. In your books, it would be found on page 94. It's section 116, the story of the Syrophenician woman. In my book, I'm going to turn there right now.

Now, as a backdrop to this story, we realize that as part of Mark's exciting pace, as part of Mark's breathless run through the Galilee as Jesus ministers, there is a growing weariness among Jesus and his disciples. They think people can't get into the house because there are so many people in the house, they don't have time to eat. Jesus has to escape to the mountains at nighttime to go pray just to get away from the crush of

people. He'll get on a boat and people will follow on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus has no time to rest. He also sees that the disciples have no time to rest.

Finally, in desperation, Jesus heads away from Capernaum, heads away from the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. We're at Mark 7:24-30. He heads out to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Now, Tyre and Sidon are on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, exactly where they are today in Lebanon. Everybody remembers Lebanon, Tyre and Sidon. The region of Tyre and Sidon is not simply the two towns, but it's also the hinterland spreading from those cities, across the northern Galilee region, the Bekaa Valley, and somewhere Jesus finds hospitality.

I am assuming from Mark's narrative, that he's staying with a Jewish family who lives in that region. We don't know the specific city. "He arose and he went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon, and he entered a house and would not have anyone know it because he's tired and he wants some rest." He needs to get as far away as he can so he can recharge his batteries, but he could not be hidden. His reputation preceded him. "Immediately, a woman whose little daughter was possessed of an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet."

Now, if Mark's Gospel was the only gospel that we had, and I was trying to visualize this, I would assume that she sought him out and found where he was staying. The rumors went around, "Jesus, that healer, is here. Go find him." She comes and she-- Jesus clearly wants to be hidden, but she barges into his private space, creating a very uncomfortable moment for everyone. Extremely nervy of her to do this. Mark continues by saying, "Now, the woman was a Greek, a Syrophenician by birth." Wow, that's like the triple whammy. She's a woman. She's Greek. She's a Syrophenician.

This woman is like bottom rung of any totem pole. She has no status. She has no leverage. There's nothing to recommend her that he should help her. She is completely on the margins. She bursts in on him. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first. For it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Okay, I'm just going to say this was not a very nice response. I know that people would like to say, well, Jesus is toying with her and he's trying to draw out of her faith and that he intends the whole time to heal her daughter, but in reality, that isn't what the text says.

The text tells us he didn't want to be bothered. The text in the Gospel of Mark has let us know how completely exhausted he is. He just says, "I am tired. I want to be left alone. I'm here to be the Messiah to the Jews, and I have to reserve my strength for them. I can't just give to the dogs what little I have. I have to give it to the children." It's not a politically correct response and it's a very harsh response. But this woman is not to be

easily dissuaded. She is tenacious like a dog. If Jesus wants to call her a dog, she's going to be like the dog begging at the table, who you say, "Go away," and the dog comes right back and begs again, and you say, "Go away," and the dog comes back and begs again.

"Okay, Lord," she says, "Yes, Lord, yet, even the dogs under the table eat the crumbs of the children. You can call me a dog. I'll accept that. I will settle for a crumb." She knows that for Jesus to heal this little girl, it's a crumb. It's not major. It's just something small. Then Jesus says something to her that I don't think we often notice, and this is so important. Jesus said to her, "For this saying, you may go your way. The demon has left your daughter," and she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone. He doesn't say, "Because of your faith, your daughter is healed." There's no *pisteuo* there. He says, "Because of this saying, because of this *logos*, this response," He says, "this perspective that you have, this insight, this thought, this realization, your daughter's healed." What did she say to Him that caused Him to respond like that?

She said to Him, "Jesus, I believe you're the Messiah of the Jews, and I know you can do this healing, and it's not a big thing for you, but maybe, Jesus, your view is too insular. Maybe you're supposed to think beyond the Jews. If you're the Messiah of the Jews, isn't there a promise somewhere back there in your Holy Scripture about how the seed of Abraham would bring blessing to all the nations? Do you not think that we could have a ripple effect, Jesus? That maybe we, Gentiles, I know we're on the periphery and we only are asking for crumbs, but shouldn't there be a ripple effect to the Gentiles as well, of your mercy and of your blessing and of your healing?"

I think this is a critical turning point in Jesus' self-awareness and understanding of His mission in this Gospel. Because of this insight, He says, "The demon has left your daughter. You can go your way. Your child is healed." From this point in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus returns and he goes and he feeds 4,000 people who are Gentiles. The feeding of the 5,000, which occurs in Mark 6:30-34, are Jewish listeners, are Jewish people who have come to hear the Messiah of the Jews teach, but the feeding of the 4,000, which occurs in Mark 8:1-9, is of a Gentile audience.

He begins to heal other people who are probably Gentiles. In chapter 7:31-37, He heals a deaf, mute man who is probably a Gentile. In chapter 8:23-26, He heals a blind man who may also be a Gentile. This encounter stirs Jesus to rethink what it means to be the Messiah. It leads to His third missionary journey, beginning in Mark 8:13 and extending to Mark 9:33. In this third missionary journey, the encounter is going to be, once again, with a group of people.

The disciples by now must be very excited. They must be very excited because they know every time Jesus takes them someplace, something big and extraordinary happens. This missionary journey will. As they cross the sea, they talk about the loaves, they talk about the bread. Jesus says, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees." They're trying to figure out, "What is he talking about?" They're worried because they have no bread in the boat. Jesus says, "What don't you understand? Don't you understand about the loaves?"

He says to them, "Having ears, don't you hear? Having eyes, don't you see?" They're with Jesus, and He's just healed a deaf man, and He's just healed a blind man, and there's some connection that they're supposed to make between the loaves, blindness, deafness, and Jesus' ability to heal, to give sight, to give hearing. What is it that they are supposed to find? What is it that they are supposed to understand?

When they come to Caesarea Philippi with Jesus, the one who gives hearing and the one who gives sight, and he says, "Who do you think that I am?" Peter finally has his ears unstopped, his eyes open, and he says, "You're the Messiah," and it has to do with the loaves.

In our next section, we're going to explore what it was about the loaves that they should have recognized. We're going to look at what the ramifications are when Peter gets the answer right, but he gets it totally wrong at the same time. Jesus will embark on a new way of teaching His disciples, to prepare them for what it means to be the Messiah. Thank you.

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