

The Beginning of the Gospel

A Sermon on Mark 1:1-8

Preached by Paul Liberati, January 3, 2021

The Beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God – Mark 1:1

In 1989 a woman by the name of Janie Tinkleberg came up with the acronym WWJD which many of us know stands for *What Would Jesus Do?* And, Tinkleberg, you remember, took that acronym and placed it on a bunch of friendship bracelets and passed them out to the youth of her church. And of course, that sparked off a whole movement that lasted all the way through the 90s and into the early 2000s, where the whole emphasis (in the broader Evangelical Church) was on trying to figure out what Jesus would do in the various social and ethical situations that we face today.

And despite whatever shortcomings were attached to that movement, I think it's fair to say that there's nothing inherently wrong with asking that particular question. After all, the Bible reminds us that, as Christians, we're called to be disciples, and according to 1 Peter 2:21, that includes, *following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ*. And so the problem wasn't so much that the question was wrong. The problem was that it was being posed to a generation that didn't have the necessary background to answer that question accurately.

You see, Congregation, before we can answer the abstract and hypothetical question of what Jesus *would* do, you and I first need to study the word of God and learn what Jesus Christ has already done! Because the truth is that when we get those two questions out of order, we automatically lose sight of the absolute uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

You remember, in Acts chapter 9, when Paul was confronted by Jesus on the Damascus Road, he asked the Lord a total of two questions *but* he asked those questions in a very particular order. Before he turned and said in verse 6 – *Lord what would you have me to do?* He first of all said in verse 5, *Lord who are you?* In other words, there's no

question that all of us are called to follow Jesus — and yet the fact is that, before we can do that in a way that truly pleases God, we need to know who Jesus is and what Jesus came to accomplish.

Well, this morning, Congregation, that is exactly what we find in our text. As we open up with our new sermon-series in the Gospel of Mark, we recognize that right here in the opening section of this book, Mark lays down a solid foundation.

1. The Timing of the Gospel

Now, as you look at what Mark says in verse 1, the first thing we see is that he starts off with a very interesting *reference to time*. Notice that he doesn't just say, The Gospel of Jesus Christ, but instead he says, The *Beginning* of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And the reason that's so interesting is that down through the years, this statement has caused a lot of commentators to scratch their heads and wonder about exactly what Mark means to say.

The obvious question here is: Did Mark mean to say, in the absolute sense of the term, that the Gospel of Jesus Christ *began* at this time?

Well, as you think about that question, and you consider everything that the Word of God says, you should realize that, contrary to the assumptions of Dispensationalism, the answer has to be, No, the Gospel did not *originate* in the year AD 26. The Gospel did not *originate* in the ministry of John the Baptist. But instead, we know that the message of Jesus Christ has always been with the people of God in every generation of His mercy.

In case you think that what I'm saying is too much of a stretch, just consider what the Word of God actually says. For example, in Hebrews 4, the Bible reminds us that when the children of Israel were wandering in the desert for 40 years—they were listening to the same Gospel as we have today. In verse 2, the apostle Paul says, *For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as unto them*. And, it wasn't just in that generation because, in Galatians 3:8, Paul says that the Gospel was *preached unto Abraham* as well.

So, the truth is that Moses had the Gospel and Abraham had the Gospel and, if you really want to locate the historical beginning of the preaching of the Gospel, you would have to go back to the garden, back to the very foundation of the world. Because the truth

is that, ever since the day when we sinned and fell in our rebellion against God, God Himself has been graciously and faithfully preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In Question 19 of the Heidelberg Catechism, that's exactly what the Catechism says. There, after laying down a couple of key propositions about the plan of our salvation—the Catechism says: *But from where do you know these things?* And the answer is *From the Holy Gospel, which God Himself first revealed in Paradise, afterwards proclaimed by the holy patriarchs and prophets, and foreshadowed by the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law, and finally fulfilled by His well-beloved Son.*

There's no question that when Mark mentions the *beginning* of the Gospel, that he cannot be speaking in an absolute sense. So, I think the best way to explain this reference is to say that Mark is not talking about the beginning of its *existence*, but only to the beginning of its *fulfillment* in the coming of Jesus Christ. In fact, if you look down to verse 15, you can see that Jesus says essentially the same thing; the reason he's calling men to *repent and believe the Gospel* is precisely that *the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand.*

2. A Summary of its Contents

Now, as Mark opens up in verse 1, he also provides us with the very *contents of the Gospel itself*—at least in summary form. And you'll notice here, that he doesn't just mention the Gospel, but he says that it's the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

You know it's sad, but we live in a time when the vast majority of people in the world have no understanding of what the Gospel message even is. In fact, I'd be willing to bet that if you took a survey on any local college campus, and you asked 100 people to explain the basic elements of the Christian Faith, you wouldn't find more than 5 or 10 people who even knew where to start. Well, here at the end of verse 1, Mark tells us exactly where to start, and he says that we need to start with the identity of Jesus Christ the Son of God.

You'll notice here that Mark describes the Lord in three distinct ways. First of all he says that his name is *Jesus*—which, if you think about it, is a clear declaration of his saving mission. The name Jesus means *savior*, which is why when the angel was speaking to

Joseph in Matthew 1:21 he said, *And you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.* And so first of all, the Gospel is the Gospel of Jesus.

But secondly it's the Gospel of Jesus *Christ*. And here, the difference between these two designations is important for us to see. Because if the name Jesus is a declaration that he's the savior of his people, the term Christ is a reference to the *way* that he saves them. The term Christ is the Greek term for the Hebrew *Mashiach* (messiah) and it refers to the fact that Jesus was *anointed* by God to be the Prophet, Priest, and King of his people.

You see, Jesus can save us, because as our Prophet, he alone can reveal the truth and will of God to our souls. Jesus can save us, because as our High Priest, he alone has offered up the sacrifice that can truly take away sins, the sacrifice of himself on the cross. And Jesus can save us, because as our King, he alone can defend us from all of our enemies, and he can preserve us in the redemption that he alone provides. In sum, Jesus is our savior, because he was anointed with the Holy Spirit to be our Prophet, Priest, and King.

But there's something else that Mark wants us to see. And that is that this Jesus who saves us from our sins is no mere man. And so he says that the Gospel is the Gospel of Jesus Christ—*the Son of God*. We realize that, even up to this point, if all we had was the prospect of a human savior, who was called to be our prophet, priest, and king, then our salvation could never be secure. But here we see that our Savior is more than a mere man. In addition to being flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone, Jesus is also God of God, Light of Light, and Very God of Very God.

As you think about that, you realize what a comfort it really is because it reminds us that our salvation is secure in the hands of Jesus Christ. Our salvation is secure not merely because of the forgiveness of our sins, but even more than that: because in Jesus Christ you and I have been brought into *union with the true and living God*. The whole reason that the Gospel is good news is that it's all about what God has done for us in and through the Person and Work of His Son.

The Gospel then, according to Mark, is all about Jesus. And if you understand that, then you understand the foundation of everything we are and everything that we're called to do. So to sum it up, the Gospel is about the Greatness of the Son of God.

3. The Greatness of Another Man, John

Now, as we move along in our passage, we begin to see that there's a lot more that Mark is unfolding in our text. And while it's true that Mark's purpose in writing is to showcase the Greatness of Jesus Christ—by the time you get to verses 2 you cannot help but be confronted by the *greatness of another man*, emerging on the scene. And who is that man, but John the Baptist.

Now, the reason that I say that John the Baptist is such a great man, is that in verses 2-6 there's several things about John that really grab our attention. First of all, in verses 2-3 we see that Mark quotes two back-to-back Old Testament prophecies, both of which are speaking about John. The one is from Malachi 3:1, and the other is from Isaiah 40:3. While we normally emphasize the fact that all the prophets foretold the coming of Christ, here we see that the prophets also foretold the coming of John the Baptist. So we can say, *John was a prophet whom the prophets prophesied about*. That's amazing because it shows us the greatness of the role that he played as he introduced the world to Jesus Christ. It's no wonder that, when the people asked Jesus about John, Jesus said that *among them that were born of women, there had not arisen one greater than John the Baptist*.

But you know, it's not just the Person of John but notice also the Preaching of John as well. In verses 4-5, Mark says that when he was preaching the Baptism of repentance *all the land of Judea* went out to hear him preach. And so we see here that it wasn't just a few people here and there, but as we find in all the Gospels, there were multitudes that came out to hear what John had to say. In verse 5, Mark says that the people didn't just *hear* John, but they were moved into real and decisive action. It's one thing for you to sit back and *listen* to the preaching of Baptism, but it's quite another thing for you to get up, and turn from your sinful ways, and be baptized that very day. Mark says that, in response to the preaching of John, *all were baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins*.

Here, we see something very interesting. Even though we're looking at the Greatness of Jesus Christ, there's a certain sense in which, for a time, John the Baptist was taking center-stage. And this reminds us of a very practical lesson—namely, that you and I

need to be very careful to maintain the right perspective when it comes to the servants of Jesus Christ.

Sadly, we live in a time when so many people are given over to following the celebrity preachers of our day and, as a consequence, they end up diminishing the glory of Jesus Christ. As you look around at the landscape of the Reformed and Evangelical Church, you find that all too often, whole ministries are built upon the personalities of mere men. How many times have you heard someone say that they won't join a particular church because they were *not satisfied with the quality of the preaching?*

There's always the danger of making too much of mere men, and too little of Jesus Christ himself. And, the truth is that this is exactly what happened with John. In Luke 3:15, the Bible says that there came a time, when everyone was looking at John and they began to wonder if he was their Messiah. And, in John chapter 3, we have a clear instance of what that looked like. As John was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, some of John's disciples came to him with concerns about the ministry of Jesus. In verse 26 it says, *And they came to John and said to him, Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified--behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him.* In other words, John's disciples were so caught up in the work that he was doing, they became envious of the fact that more people were following Jesus Christ.

4. John Maintains the Supremacy of Christ

Can you believe that?! How could that have possibly happened? Well, there's one thing that we know for sure. John played absolutely no part in their confusion. You can see that because, in verses 27-30, John turned around and corrected them on the spot, saying, *A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ!* In other words, John says to his disciples—Don't look to me, as if there's anything I can do to save you. All I'm here for is to point you to the one who can save you, and that is Jesus Christ alone. John had to do that more than once because of the great influence of his preaching and ministry that took hold of the hearts and minds of God's people.

In fact, when you look back at the last two verses of our text, you can see that Mark provides us with another example of how John did that. In verse 7, he shows that John was very intentional about *maintaining the absolute supremacy of Jesus Christ* over and above himself. Mark says, *And he preached, saying, There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose. I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*

Here, we have a beautiful expression of the humility of John the Baptist, and in some sense, I would argue that it's one of the best pictures of humility that we have in the word of God. By comparison, you remember how Paul said that he was *not worthy to be called an apostle*, and at one point, he even said that he was *less than the least of all the saints*. Well, here, John is saying something very similar and yet, I would argue that John goes further than Paul.

In those days, when a man had any number of household servants, it was always the least of all the servants who had the job of taking off the master's shoes and washing his master's feet. So, when John says that he's not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of the Lord's shoe, he's saying that he's not even worthy of the lowest task of the lowest servant in the home.

What a beautiful picture of a truly humble and thankful man! John was a man who was thankful just to stand in the presence of Jesus Christ. And Congregation, as we think about that confession of John the Baptist, we too need to ask ourselves, do we have that kind of reverence for the Lord? Can we say with the Psalmist in Psalm 84:10, *I would rather be a door keeper in the house of the Lord (for a single day) than to dwell in the tents of wickedness (presumably for ever).*

Well, as we think about that question today, and as we contemplate the unspeakable privilege of being invited to the Lord's Table, my prayer is that all of us would come with the same humility as we find in the confession of John. The truth is that the only way for us to do so is if we are constantly being renewed in our appreciation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And that means that, in the end, our first and primary question is not: What would Jesus do? or What can we do for Jesus? Rather, our number one question must be: What *did* Jesus do? and What does he *continue* to do for me? **Amen.**