

Jesus Messiah: Seeing Christ In The Gospel Of Mark

*“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”
(Mark 1:15 ESV)*

*And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said,
“Truly this man was the Son of God!”
(Mark 15:38–39 ESV)*

One Who Is Not Against Us Is For Us

January 21st, 2018

Mark 9:38-41

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Introduction:

Good morning! I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Mark 9:38-41.

The text before us is only three verses long, but it comes with some unique challenges. This story is not remarkably complex, and I suspect we will dissect it and understand it rather quickly, but the application of this text will require some thought. Some of us are going to be inclined to overhear these verses, and some of us are going to be inclined to disregard them altogether.

I believe this text provides a timely correction and encouragement for us, and I am coming into this sermon with anticipation and expectation that God is going to use His word to refine us this morning. I hope that you are as well.

Please look with me at Mark 9:38-41. Hear now from the Word of the Lord:

³⁸ John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” ³⁹ But Jesus said, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰ For the one who is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward. (Mark 9:38-41 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In the text we studied last week, the disciples had just received a gentle yet firm rebuke from Jesus. They were arguing about greatness and power, but Jesus wanted them to focus on humility and service. In today's text, we encounter phase two of that discussion. Here, we catch a glimpse into the divisive nature of man.

I know that there's nothing new under the sun and that history repeats itself, but I can honestly say that, in my lifetime, I have never seen as much division in the culture as I do today. Our Prime Minister just recently removed internship funding from any institutions who don't hold to his liberal opinions on morality. South of the border, the vitriol and hatred between Republicans and Democrats is at an all-time high. Every other day there is another story in the media that highlights the very real racial tension that undergirds our culture. We are living in a season where "Us" and "Them" is the prevalent mindset.

And that's exactly what we see Jesus addressing here. The disciples have developed an "Us" mentality, and Jesus will have nothing to do with it. A spirit of elitism is like a virus when it enters into the church. How many church splits have borne this out?

In this interaction between Jesus and his disciples we learn some valuable lessons that need to shape us. So, let's look at the Book and ask this question:

What Does This Text Teach Us About Christian Living?

The first thing we see in the text is this:

1. Pride ruins everything

Now, pride is a strong word, and I want to help you see why I chose to use it as a diagnosis of the disciple's attitude. We need to remember first of all that casting out demons was one of the primary responsibilities of the disciples. When Jesus called them to himself back in chapter 3 we read:

“And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach ¹⁵ and have authority to cast out demons.” (Mark 3:14-15 ESV)

Casting out demons in Jesus’ name was a disciple job. That was part of their job description. What a shock it must have been for them to see someone else – someone who was not a part of their inner circle – using the name of Jesus to wage war against the devil! And, to make matters worse, earlier in this chapter we found the disciples embarrassed and discouraged because their attempts to cast out a demon had failed. Do you remember that story?

¹⁴ And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵ And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him. ¹⁶ And he asked them, “What are you arguing about with them?” ¹⁷ And someone from the crowd answered him, “Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. ¹⁸ And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, **and they were not able.**” (Mark 9:14-18 ESV)

How embarrassing that must have been for the disciples. Jesus gave them a task to perform and, in the presence of a large crowd no less, they failed to cast out the demon. Now, 20 verses later, we find them irate that some outsider was succeeding where they had failed. Notice that their first inclination was not to praise God that the demon was fleeing in Jesus’ name. No, their first inclination was to command that man to fall in line. Look at the language in verse 38 of our text:

“Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because **he was not following us.**” (Mark 9:38 ESV)

It’s not that the man wasn’t following Jesus. That’s not their concern in this story. Their concern was that the man was not following “us”. There’s that insidious language that we see in the world today. How great must our pride be to witness with our own eyes a victory accomplished in Jesus’ name – a person being freed from the tyranny of the devil – only to sneer because the work wasn’t accomplished by “our” crowd. J.C. Ryle gave this diagnosis:

“Men of all branches in Christ’s church are inclined to believe that no good can be done in the world, unless it is done by their own party or denomination.”¹

Pride ruins everything. Secondly, we learn:

¹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository thoughts on Mark* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 190

2. Assumptions are unhelpful

Why were the disciples so eager to shut this man down? The disciples appear to have made the assumption that anyone operating outside of their circle was operating in disobedience. But where did that assumption come from? What verse supported the disciples' attitude?

If we look back to the Old Testament, we discover that the followers of Jesus look a lot like the followers of Moses. Consider this story from the book of Numbers:

²⁶ Now two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the Spirit rested on them. They were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. ²⁷ And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." ²⁸ And Joshua the son of Nun, the assistant of Moses from his youth, said, "My lord Moses, stop them." ²⁹ But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!" (Numbers 11:26-29 ESV)

Does that sound familiar? "Moses, stop them! They're doing our job!" Moses' response was the same as Jesus' response:

But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me." ⁴⁰ For the one who is not against us is for us. (Mark 9:39-40 ESV)

What do you know about these men that leads you to believe that they should be silenced? Nothing? Then leave it alone! Praise God that there are other laborers in the field and stop making assumptions about their motives and their hearts! God sees into the heart of man. You do not. So deal with the evidence you have in front of you. If the evidence you have in front of you is demons being cast out in Jesus' name then praise the Lord!

The disciples were being too exclusive in their fellowship. I appreciate what commentator R.T. France has to say here:

The cliquishness which too easily affects a defined group of people with a sense of mission is among the 'worldly' values which must be challenged in the name of the kingdom of God... disciples are called on to be cautious in drawing lines of demarcation. They are to be a church, not a sect.²

Amen. That's a good word for the disciples and that's a good word for us. Thirdly, we see that:

² R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark (The New International Greek Testament Commentary)*, Reprint ed. (Chicago: Eerdmans, 2014), 378-379.

3. God rewards generosity toward his children

This note was touched on in the text we studied last week. Do you remember that? Jesus took a child into his hands and told them that, whatever they did to a child – whatever they did to the weakest and lowliest in society – they did to him. We see point two of that teaching here. God loves when we value those whom the world disregards but He especially loves when we are generous to fellow believers.

Jesus says:

For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward. (Mark 9:41 ESV)

Giving a cup of cold water was a common courtesy in those days. Jesus isn't referring to some profound gesture of selfless giving. His example is entirely ordinary. To put it in our terms, you might paraphrase and say: Whoever invites you to their house for dinner because you are a disciple will by no means lose his reward.

This is simple, basic generosity. Isn't it encouraging to know that, not only does God love when we love one another, but that He also REWARDS it? Are you having your Christian friend over for coffee today? Boom! Rewards are waiting for you in Heaven! Did you just write a letter to encourage a fellow believer in Christ who's going through a rough time? Boom! Treasure!

As we are generous towards one another, God is generous towards us.

That makes sense to me. Do you want to become one of my favorite people in the world really quickly? Do something nice for my kids. Right? Jesus tells us here that this is how God operates. He loves His children, and He loves when His children love one-another.

The disciple's approached this stranger who was working in Jesus' name with anger and distrust, and they thought that Jesus would be impressed. Instead, Jesus flips that assumption on its head and tells them that what he's really impressed with is a generous spirit and a self-less love for fellow followers of Christ.

Now, as I mentioned off the top, the text itself is not overly complicated, but this does require some thoughtful application. Let's turn our attention to how we ought to apply this teaching to our own lives.

Application: Three Probing Questions

I mentioned off the top that some of us are going to be inclined to overhear this text. Some of you may even now be shouting in your hearts: Death to denominations! Doctrine divides! To you I would say: Be careful to hold this verse in tension with the rest of Scripture. As we look elsewhere we will discover that there ARE times when separation is necessary. There are times when we need to rebuke those who would call themselves followers of Christ. In fact, Jesus himself said:

³⁰Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. (Matthew 12:30 ESV)

There are some folks who are against Christ. There are some people who are scattering while the rest of us are gathering. We're going to spend some time wrestling with how to hold that truth in tension with this truth.

But there are also some of us who are going to be inclined to let go of today's verse and to hold fast to a divisive and elitist spirit. To do that would be to disobey Jesus' clear instructions. By God's grace, I'm praying that we will all wind up on the narrow middle road holding both of these truths in tension.

So, let's ask some challenging questions to make sure that we're rightly applying this verse in view of everything else the Bible says. First, I think we should ask:

1. Is division ever appropriate?

The short answer is this: Yes. Division is appropriate at times. At times, it is absolutely necessary. We should be slow to take this step. We should grieve when taking this step. But the

Bible is clear that there are times when we must clearly and openly separate ourselves from people who would call themselves Christians.

Take, for example, this exchange between the Apostle Paul and the believers in Galatia.

⁷You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? ... ¹²I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves! (Galatians 5:7,12 ESV)

There were “Christians” who had come to Galatia and had taught the church that all that was necessary for salvation was faith *and* circumcision. So long as the Galatians would accept circumcision, they could receive the grace of God. These teachers were preaching a false gospel and Paul did not hold any punches in addressing their damnable error. He openly rebuked these men.

The principle here is this: Separation is necessary when anyone adds to or subtracts from the gospel of Jesus Christ. Such people are not Christians. If someone tells you that salvation comes from faith plus works, or plus attending mass, or plus circumcision, or plus knocking on a certain number of doors – if anyone adds or subtracts anything from the gospel of Jesus Christ then we must confront them and separate from them. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone.

Here’s the tricky part: Sometimes, powerful and miraculous things can happen under such ministers. We might be tempted after reading today’s text to assume that the presence of miracles is a sure sign of God’s blessing, but we need to remember that Pharaoh’s wise men were able to turn their staffs into serpents. We need to remember Paul’s warning to the Thessalonians:

The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, ¹⁰and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. (2 Thessalonians 2:9-10 ESV)

The devil has miracles too. The devil will send adorning signs and wonders in order to draw people away from the truth of the gospel to a lie that is more to their liking. Does that scare you? If miracles can be faked, and the devil himself can sometimes appear as an angel of light, then how can we trust that a church or ministry is truly from God?

Here's how: We watch for the one mark that will shape everything else – the true proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. If the gospel is preached, I don't care which denominational label is written on the sign in the parking lot, we can thank God for them.

This leads naturally to our second question:

2. Are denominations necessary?

³ This is my own layman definition. I wanted to be as clear as possible so that I didn't speak over the heads of people who actually needed the answer.

3. How should we treat those who are not “with” us but who love Jesus?

When I say “with” us, I’m referring to theological alignment. How do we view the church that has different views on baptism, polity, ordination, philosophy and the like? I believe our text today gives us a pretty clear answer:

So long as a church is faithfully preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ we ought to celebrate that! Perhaps we have too much disagreement to plant a church together, and maybe that disagreement is so great that it would be hard to have a service together, but so long as the gospel is preached we can thank God for one another. Amen?

In our church’s core values, this is value number six. This conviction is part of who we are:

We need each other. We need other healthy, Bible-preaching churches in this city. God is going

⁴ Taken from “What We Believe: Our Core Values” at www.firstbaptistorillia.org. Accessed on January 16, 2018.

to glorify Himself through people who don't agree with us on every doctrinal issue. And that's great!

Very practically, I want to make sure you hear this. You will, from time to time, hear us criticize another teacher from the pulpit. I promise you, that will only take place when that minister has moved away from the gospel and when we believe that you need to be warned about that teacher's error. The prosperity gospel is destructive. It is leading people to hell. The Hebrew Roots movement is bringing many people to put themselves back under the yoke of the law. Errors like these will arise from time to time and, as your pastors, we need to confront them openly in the same way that Paul did with the Galatians.

But friends, let's lean towards grace and not division. I believe that's at the heart of this text. Let's assume the best until we hear the worst. The disciples missed this, and I worry that we will miss it too if we're not careful. As William Lane put it:

“Jesus opposed the narrow exclusivism of the Twelve with an open and generous spirit.”⁵

Or, more significantly, as the Jesus put it:

By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:35 ESV)

We should allow for healthy debate about doctrines and convictions. Can I tell you something? I really believe that I'm right on all of my theological convictions. That's why I hold them! That's why we call them “theological convictions” and not “theological inklings”. But I also recognize that I've been wrong before. I recognize that God is using people who disagree with me across this city and across this world to do mighty things for his kingdom and for his glory.

I am so thankful for the tremendous theological minds that are constantly arising out of the Presbyterian world. I am so thankful for the way that the Pentecostal movement has embraced world mission. I praise the Lord for the Christian Reformed movement where my grandfather grew in his faith. I praise God for the work that He did through my Grandmother, a Church of God of Prophecy preacher in the southern states of America. I disagree on various theological

⁵ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, NICNT, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 343.

points with every group I just mentioned, but I will not allow those disagreements to create a theological elitism in my soul. I won't allow that to keep me from thanking God for the work that they've done. Do you have an elitist attitude? Do you find yourself frequently questioning the salvation of every Christian who disagrees with you? Jesus rebuked that error firmly. It springs from pride – assuming that you love the Bible more than everyone who thinks differently than you. I'd rather partner with a brother who disagrees with me on baptism than one who has a prideful spirit.

As we conclude, I want to leave you with the words of J.C. Ryle, a pastor who was as reformed as one could be but who recognized the necessity of the teaching that Jesus has put before us in today's text. He wrote:

Let us beware of the slightest inclination to stop and check others, merely because they do not choose to adopt our plans, or work by our side. We may think our fellow Christians mistaken in some points. We may fancy that more would be done for Christ, if they would join us, and if all worked in the same way. We may see many evils arising from religious dissensions and divisions. – But all this must not prevent us rejoicing if the works of the devil are destroyed and souls are saved. Is our neighbor warning against Satan? Is he really trying to labour for Christ? This is the grand question. Better a thousand times that the work should be done by other hands than not done at all.⁶

Amen? Amen. Let's pray together.

⁶ J. C. Ryle, *Expository thoughts on Mark* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 191.