
The Greatest and the Smallest

The Gospel According to Mark

Mark 9:30-50¹

Pastor Dale Evans

Sunday Morning, January 24, 2016

Context

Road signs are intended to provide markers for quick, easily understood information for the driver. They should be clearly visible and unambiguous in their meaning. They should not require deep thought or “in-cab-conferencing” to interpret and follow their instructions. But sometimes we are struck with situations that do just that, causing us to misunderstand the information because it is just moving by too fast. We are perplexed with meaning and often fail to smoothly execute what is intended from the sign’s message.

This morning’s text is set in the middle of a section that began in Mark 8:22 and runs to 10:52. The Gospel of Mark’s literary style involves many units that overlap with artful transitions. This reminds us that as God was using Barnabas’s nephew, John Mark to write this portrayal of Jesus, the Holy Spirit incorporated the person and personality of Mark to craft not only a factually accurate and theologically informative account, but one that involves compelling, even enjoyable reading.

This section is framed by two accounts of Jesus healing a blind man, the first in 8:22-26, the second is in 10:46-52 with the named, Bartimaeus. The section includes Peter’s confession in 8:27-30, which can represent a hinge in the entire book, bringing the first half to a close and opening the second half. The entire unit then contains three sub-sections where Jesus predicts his impending death to his disciples followed by “instruction” regarding the nature of discipleship. The first of these sub-sections runs from 8:31-9:29, the second from 9:30-10:31 and the last from 10:32-45. We will examine the first three parts of this middle section from 9:30-50 this morning.

Grouping “discipleship instruction” with Jesus’ declaration of his impending death should cause the reader to make connections between the two concepts. The Gospel of Mark is underscoring the importance and the intentionality of Jesus sacrificial death. We, the readers, are then faced with coming to grips with the centrality of Jesus death and the profound implications it should have on our thinking and living. Let me repeat that, coming to grips with the centrality of Jesus death has profound implications on our thinking and living.

Let’s begin reading together at Mark 9:30 and see first a “perplexing prediction.”

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

A Perplexing Prediction (vs. 30-32)

³⁰ They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, ³¹ for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise." ³² But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.

Divine Delivery (30-31a):

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, ³¹ for he was teaching his disciples...

This is an example of the divine method of delivering the truth of the gospel. Some teaching was done in parables but the Gospel of Mark indicates Jesus frequently took his closest disciples aside for times of focused instruction, explanation and clarification on key points. Sometimes Jesus was avoiding making more public statements that would be misused and misinterpreted to suggest he was claiming to be a revolutionary or political radical. Other times he likely desired calm and quiet to clearly express his intentions.

Divinely Delivered (31b):

...saying to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise."

Mark records a succinct and focused statement of this divinely delivered instructional session. The core of the content presented involved at least four observations. First, Jesus describes himself in a common fashion in Mark's Gospel as "the Son of Man". This has two implications: he is identifying himself as human and a "true son of mankind." But he also is alluding to the deliverer seen in Daniel 7:13,14:

"behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed."

Second, Jesus announces he will be *killed*. It will not be of "natural causes." He will be murdered, his life taken away violently. When we add this thought to the previous we should be a bit perplexed, the one whose kingdom will not be destroyed is to be destroyed himself?

Third, Jesus does not leave death as the end; he will rise again, he will come back to life. The dying does its purpose but is not the end of the story.

Lastly, Jesus death is of divine ordinance. He will be delivered into the hands of men. When the passive voice is used with no obvious agent of the action, the author expects us to understand that God himself is the agent. God is delivering Jesus into the hands of men. The death of Jesus is not a mistake, a strategic error on Jesus' part. It is intentioned and designed to accomplish its purpose.

Dread of the Divine (32)

But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.

This is just too much for the disciples to digest at this time. Likely their understanding of the nature of the kingdom, the work of “Messiah” and the goal of God in the coming of Jesus are still unclear. But they recognize they should be farther along in this learning process than they currently are. Instead of asking for clarification, they sit in silence and in fear. Which eventually leads them into a perplexing situation in verses 33-37.

A Perplexing Situation (vs. 33-37)

³³ And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?” ³⁴ But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. ³⁵ And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” ³⁶ And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”

Diagnostic Question (33)

And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?”

We have arrived back at Capernaum and likely are in Peter’s (or Peter’s in-laws’) house again. The group is a bit smaller and he will eventually narrow it down even further to just “the twelve.” But he knows, either from overhearing their discussions, or from Holy Spirit inspired insight, that they have been in a fuss along the way. He takes this opportunity to expose their hearts with a diagnostic question. Each of Jesus’ death predictions is followed with some teaching regarding greatness or humility. Whether or not this event came just after Mark expects us to see this in response and connected to that teaching.

Dreadful Quarrel (34)

But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.

But again, they realize their lack of sophistication and insight and are silent. Could it be that they were sizing up the options for after Jesus is gone? Were they comparing gifts and talents to see who should be the next spokesman? Their dreadful quarrel was clearly not a discussion over sacrificial, servant leadership.

Dynamic Quest (35-37)

And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."

Jesus then calls the twelve into a more intimate conversation and corrals a child (Peter's?). He then is able to deliver a dynamic object lesson that establishes much of the nature of the quest to grasp the implications of Jesus' death.

A Perplexing Proposition (vs. 38-50)

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.

42 "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. 43 And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. 45 And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. 47 And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 48 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.' 49 For everyone will be salted with fire. 50 Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

Dubious Competition (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."

This interaction follows Jesus' object lesson on humility for several reasons. The first and foremost is that God wants us to read this next. But in literary context it could be either that John was still bothered by the idea of status in the kingdom and following protocol or social stratification. Jesus makes a remark about "receiving a child 'in my name'" and John connects this to another incident that involved "Jesus' name" and takes the time to "interrupt" this lesson to shift it to something else (which is still related). Or it could be that Mark, in the composing of this section of his narrative is stringing together thematically related concepts using verbal clues that connect each section. The narrative moves forward both "chronologically" but more importantly "topically." In this instance the "in your name" connects this scene with the previous one. Here John is concerned about someone who is involved in casting out demons but is not part of their tight circle. Feel the irony on two fronts, this "someone" is "able" to cast out demons without Jesus' direct presence and John is offended because this "someone" is not following "us" (not just following Jesus).

Directed Clarification (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."

Jesus' response again illustrates a need for humility in one's work in the gospel. They may be special in their calling, but they are not special in themselves. Their roles, abilities and mission is bound in the work that the Holy Spirit is accomplishing because of the work that the Christ is soon to bring to completion.

Daring Comparisons (40-50)

This is further illustrated by Mark's linking of several lines that are linked by these catchwords or phrases to drive home the point of what discipleship looks like. Be careful that your imagination doesn't over do it when filling in details, this all could be stated in one setting with the child still in front of Jesus, but it is not necessary. The relatedness of the words, not the chronology is what is important.

For the one who is not against us is for us. 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.

There is much debate on how this text should be applied in our contemporary context, but it is more important to see what Mark is saying here. The disciples are confused and struggling, they should recognize that humble obedience leads to great service for the kingdom and their "privilege" is not an exclusive situation.

"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'

The idea of "loss" connects this next set of sayings which are four related ideas describing the "ultimacy" of Jesus' call to follow him. The depiction of life in terms of humility and dependency is not illustrating a life of greater, deeper discipleship; it defines discipleship. The "little ones" here are not limited to children or pictures of the humble but broadens to see Jesus picturing all who are of faith, regardless of their "status" or position. The physical hyperbole establishes the risk of not just "following" Jesus, but following him with the right attitudes. Heavy rocks as necklaces and impromptu amputations are graphic enough to make a point. But they are connected to visions of judgment and punishment that have eternal implications. Don't lose that idea. The metaphor is easily understood, remove and avoid those situations and concerns that cause you to sin (especially against a fellow believer), the risk is great in failing to do so.

For everyone will be salted with fire. 50 Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

"Fire" links the next set, then followed with links to "salt." Jesus has said that the life of a disciple should be characterized with a God-ward disposition of service. Sin, but especially pride in its many forms, needs to be removed as it is exposed. The nature of Old Testament sacrifice included this as the believer brought his sacrifices to atone for their failures as they understood them, and according to Leviticus 2:13, to burn their offering with salt. Taking up the mantle of discipleship, bearing the cross with Jesus involves the constant awareness of weakness and challenge and the "daily" need to submit to Jesus' work and sacrifice.

Our lives of discipleship are the salt that is the result of testing that comes from following Jesus. It is measured in its true presence, "can you make it salty again?" as well in its expression. The last sentence provides at least one definition of salt in the parallel structure given. Salt in yourselves is equated with peace with one another. Conflicts, bitterness, envy, strife that may be derived from pride and arrogance have no place in the community of believers.

Reflect and Respond

So what did we see here? One, coming to grips with the centrality of Jesus' death has profound implications on our thinking and living. The gospel, all that God has done in Christ to restore our relationship with him, in particular his work of the cross, is what all of life is about. There are many competing "gospels" for our devotion and attention such as NFL and college basketball playoffs, the global economy, our individual health status, our personal family struggles all competing for our attention. None of these in and of themselves are evil, but when they blur, mask or outright replace the gospel and its work, they become idols that can reveal our hearts' true devotion that is not placed in Christ and Christ alone.

Disharmony, especially over privileges and position, has no place in the community of believers. This theme frames the section that follows Jesus' passion prediction. Gospel-centered living will exclude competition for the "chief seats" and authority. The Apostle Paul's use of the diversity of body parts and body life to the Corinthians has its roots in Jesus' teachings such as this.

We need to use care as we define the "us" of ministry and truth. There are some who wish to eliminate all boundaries in the expression of Christian truth. There is still boundary of "in Jesus' name" and the need for "faith" as we experience from last week's text. But recognizing the weak and those perhaps "different" from us should cause to consider exactly what it is that we are using as "boundary markers." To use something other than the message and power of the gospel can define us as "outsiders" and risk eternal judgment.

