

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)*

Excursus: Distinct And Compelling Community

February 4th, 2018

Mark 9:50

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning. I want to invite you to open your Bibles this morning to Mark 9:50; that’s on page 845 in your pew Bibles. We are doing something a little bit different this morning.

Normally, our habit here is to go through a book of the Bible and to preach on a paragraph sized unit of the text and we preached on this text – Mark 9:42-50 – last week. But if you will look at your Bible there, you will see that the story that comes next is actually something we preached on here about 3 months ago. Back in October we did a series called Family Matters and we preached on Divorce – we used the longer version of this teaching by Jesus in Matthew 19 but we covered all these bases so we talked as pastors about using this week to drill down on something that we could use a refresher on as a church. So you can think of this message as “an excursus” – an aside – or you can think of it as a drilling down on the last point of our message from last Sunday.

Let me remind you of where we left off last week. Mark 9:50 says:

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.” (Mark 9:50 ESV)

That is the second part of a very obscure cultural idiom that Jesus used at the conclusion of his talk with the disciples in the house of Peter. In the first part of the idiom or expression he talked about fire. We agreed that “fire” related to the process whereby God purifies people. In this

second half of the expression he talks about salt. William Lane says:

salt typifies that quality which is the distinctive mark of the disciple, the loss of which will make him worthless.”¹

So Jesus wants the disciples to be distinctive and that distinctiveness has something to do with their inner community. He goes on to say:

Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another. (Mark 9:50 ESV)

We agreed that taken as a whole Jesus seems to be saying that you have to take your sin seriously lest it corrupt your distinctive character and obscure the witness of your community. He put those themes together in the Sermon on the Mount as well. He said:

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.

14 “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. (Matthew 5:13–14 ESV)

Same theme – and very similar metaphors. Jesus seems to be saying that there is supposed to be something distinctive and compelling about the Christian community. Who we are together is part of our witness to the world. And so today I just want to drill down on that. I want to spend some time answering the question:

What Is Supposed To Be Distinctive and Compelling About The Christian Community?

Well, the answer we would have to give first comes out of the passage we have just been looking at. What is supposed to be distinctive and compelling about our community is:

1. Our concern for children

Jesus has just been saying that. The disciples were jockeying for positions and preferment in the Kingdom of God:

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.”

¹ William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), 349-350.

(Mark 9:36–37 ESV)

Do you want to be great in the Kingdom of God, Jesus said, then take care of one of these little children. Nobody ever said stuff like that before Jesus. We assume this high value on children because we grew up in a Christian culture – but it was not there in our culture – or any other culture – until that culture assimilated the teaching of Jesus Christ. James Edwards for example says:

We are mistaken if we imagine that Greek and Jewish society extolled the virtues of childhood as do modern societies in general. Societies with high infant mortality rates and great demand for human labor cannot afford to be sentimental about infants and youth. In Judaism, children and women were largely auxiliary members of society whose connection to the social mainstream depended on men (either as fathers or husbands). Children, in particular, were thought of as “not having arrived.”¹⁰ They were good illustrations of “the very last” (v. 35).²

The Jews didn’t think this way before Jesus. The Greeks didn’t think this way before Jesus. The Romans didn’t think this way before Jesus – the Chinese and the Indian cultures still don’t think this way largely because those cultures have never been sufficiently exposed and saturated by the teachings of Jesus. This is a DISTINCTLY CHRISTIAN value.

Perhaps you are aware that abortion and infanticide was incredibly common in the Roman world before Christ. If the pregnancy was unwanted, it was terminated. If the child was born and it was the wrong sex, it was exposed. Historian Jack Lindsay, for example discovered through a study of 600 family inscriptions that only 6 families raised multiple daughters³. Meaning that almost no Roman woman was ever permitted to have a sister – think about that! Christians on the other hand took a hard stance against the killing of any infant. Justin Martyr (100-165) said:

“we have been taught that it is wicked to expose even new-born children... for we would then be murderers.”⁴

By the way, isn’t horrific that he has to say: “even new-born children” as if it was a strange and novel thing to think that killing a 2 day old baby was a sin. But it was a strange thing to say because it happened all the time. Do you know that there was a population crisis in the Roman world in the 4th century because so many babies were being aborted and exposed! That Christians were NOT doing it was seen as ODD and DISTINCTIVE.

²James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 287-288.

³Jack Lindsay as cited in *The Triumph Of Christianity*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 127.

⁴Justin Martyr, *First Apology*.

This was something we were KNOWN FOR and I think it can be fairly argued that to the extent any culture sheds its Christian beliefs and values it places children and babies at risk.

Listen, I would be so bold as to say that far from speaking in tongues, far from exercising miraculous healing powers – the definitive proof that you are filled with the Holy Spirit of Jesus is that you have a very soft spot in your heart for children. Jesus said:

“Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 19:14 ESV)

Secondly, the Christian community is supposed to be characterized by a distinct and compelling respect for women.

2. Our respect for women

And so it has been throughout its history. In the citation I referenced a minute ago from James Edwards you heard him say that women and children were considered ancillary members of Jewish and Greek society before Jesus – not many of us realize that. Christianity was the driving force in the liberation and elevation of women over the last 2000 years. Did you know that before Jesus, upper class women in Greek society were denied access to the front rooms of their houses? They were secluded in the back and forced to work largely as domestic staff in their own homes. Their husbands could divorce them without cause or explanation, they could and often did force their wives to abort or expose their newborn babies and they were never taught to read and write.

Things weren't much better in Jewish society. Rabbi Eliezer in the Babylonian Talmud says:

“Better to burn the Torah than teach it to a woman”.⁵

Historian Rodney Stark – who has described himself as “incapable of belief” and yet who writes very positively about the early Christian church says:

⁵ Rabbi Eliezer, Babylonian Talmud (ca. 90 CE) as cited in *The Triumph Of Christianity*, 124.

“Women were especially drawn to Christianity because it offered them a life that was so greatly superior to the life they otherwise would have led”.⁶

Jesus welcomed women into his circle. He encouraged them to learn, he spoke to them directly and he insisted that they be treated kindly and with respect. The early church taught that a man had to be gentle with his wife – in fact Peter threatened men who were rough with their wives saying:

husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered. (1 Peter 3:7 ESV)

Your wife is a Christian, Peter says, and she is small so if you are rough with her then God will ignore your prayers. Paul forbade men who were “strikers” from serving as pastors or elders in the church – 1 Timothy 3:3. Paul said that men and women were EQUAL with respect to their salvation graces and dignity in Christ. In Galatians 3:27-29 Paul said:

For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. 27 For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Galatians 3:26–29 ESV)

Women inherit the promises of Abraham through faith in Jesus Christ just like men do. There is no distinction. There are no second class Christians. We all have it all through faith in Christ – nobody had ever said that before.

And nobody had ever said that women have sexual rights in a marriage. The Bible says:

For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. (1 Corinthians 7:4 ESV)

Likewise the husband – no one had ever said that before! In Greek and Roman culture the woman was the sexual servant of the man – there was no command or compulsion towards reciprocity and mutual care and kindness – not even a whiff of that – but the Bible commands equality, consideration and reciprocity in the bedroom.

⁶ Rodney Stark, *The Triumph Of Christianity*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 122.

We have forgotten how revolutionary that was.

The Bible also says that while divorce is a tragedy and is never God's desire or intention, it is permitted in certain cases – we talked about that when we talked about divorce back in October. What is significant is that those provisions were to apply equally to men and women. A woman could divorce her husband if he was a persistent and unrepentant adulterer – again – no one said that before Jesus and therefore it is not hard to see why, as Stark said:

“Women were especially drawn to Christianity because it offered them a life that was so greatly superior to the life they otherwise would have led”.⁷

No kidding. Christian women could not be hit, their babies could not be killed, they could not be easily divorced, they were to be treated with dignity, kindness and consideration and they were to be offered all of the graces and promises of God through faith in Jesus Christ – co-equally with their husbands in particular and men in general. That is why women FLOODED into the church over the first 3 centuries.

This was something distinctive and compelling about Christian community.

3. Our care for widows

Thirdly and we need to begin moving quickly here, the church is also supposed to be known for its care for widows. James, the brother of Jesus said:

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. (James 1:27 NRSV)

One of the first things we learn about the early church is that they ran a MASSIVE food and visitation ministry to widows. In Acts 6 we read that it was big enough that it required the creation of a whole new layer of leadership and oversight. The Apostles would carry on giving leadership to prayer and the ministry of the Word and then a new type of leader would be created to oversee the food distribution to the widows – and they chose 7 men to do that. It took 7 people to OVERSEE – not to do – but to MANAGE – the food distribution ministry of the early church

⁷ Rodney Stark, *The Triumph Of Christianity*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 122.

to widows in ONE CITY. That's how big it was and it happened in every city that had a Christian church. In 251 AD the Bishop of Rome wrote to the Bishop of Antioch and mentioned that his church was currently supporting 1500 widows and distressed people through their benevolent ministries.

Historian Paul Johnson writes:

“The Christians... ran a miniature welfare state in an empire which for the most part lacked social services.”⁸

The Christian concern for widows and for the poor was weird – it was distinct and it was compelling. Thanks be to God!

Fourthly, the church is also supposed to be distinct and compelling in terms of its ethnic diversity.

4. Our ethnic diversity

The Apostles taught that the former distinctions of Jew and Gentile became meaningless through faith in Jesus Christ. In Galatians 3 Paul said:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Galatians 3:28–29 ESV)

Before Christ humanity was divided into tribes and nations and tongues but in Christ what was formerly apart is now coming together – that was one of the major themes of Pentecost! People from every tribe, tongue and nation heard the Gospel in their own language – what was APART was through the Gospel and through the Spirit coming back together – that is part of what has always been distinctive and compelling about the church.

We don't care what colour you are. We don't care where you come from. If you are in Christ then you are welcome here. You are brother, sister, father, mother. You are home. Sunday morning in the church should be the most multi-cultural gathering in its city, week, by week, by week. Now,

⁸ Paul Johnson as cited in *The Triumph of Christianity*, 113.

obviously, you can only be as ethnically diverse as your city is. We aren't going to bus people in from other places just to make a point – but we ought to make the point to the extent that it can be made in our city. This church should be the most ethnically diverse gathering that happens in the City of Orillia on a weekly basis. There should be absolute peace and unity, regardless of tribe, nation or tongue. That is part of our witness to an increasingly divided world.

Fifthly, the church should be known for its familial fellowship.

5. Our familial fellowship

The church isn't just a family of families – the church is an actual family. Jesus said that. He said:

“Who are my mother and my brothers?” 34 And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! 35 For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.” (Mark 3:33–35 ESV)

The church is supposed to become the new nuclear unit. Jesus had a biological mother – he had biological brothers and sisters – but he said: “This group takes priority over that group.” He said that to Peter too. Peter said following Jesus had cost him dearly in terms of family relationships and Jesus said to him:

“Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, 30 who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. (Mark 10:29–30 ESV)

Did you lose a mother or a sister or a brother Peter because of your faith in me? Well look around. You have gained a hundred mothers, a hundred sisters and a hundred brothers. The church is your family now.

Do you know in some cultures it is the belonging – even more than the believing – that attracts people to the Christian faith. It is the chance to have a mother and father and sisters and brothers – safe people who love you, feed you, teach you, protect you and nurture you – that attracts people to the church.

In North America church is where we bring our families – but in most of the world the church IS OUR FAMILY.

We'll come back to this in a minute, but I want to finish our list.

Sixthly, the Christian community is supposed to be characterized by a distinct and compelling culture of mercy.

6. Our culture of mercy

Most cultures that have never come under the teaching of Christ have very little interest in mercy and a very low regard for the practice of forgiveness. In the Greco-Roman world mercy was actually considered a weakness and was considered an impulse that should be suppressed.

Historian E.A. Judge for example says:

“Pity was a defect of character unworthy of the wise and excusable only in those who have not yet grown up.”⁹

Jesus, on the other hand said:

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” (Matthew 5:7 ESV)

Jesus consistently taught that the standard we use with others will be the standard that is applied to us by God at the final judgment. He said:

For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. (Matthew 7:2 ESV)

if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:15 ESV)

Therefore, as you might imagine, Christian churches put a heavy emphasis on mercy, pity and forgiveness. Now, that isn't to say that we wink at sin, by no means. Churches are supposed to practice church discipline but if a person truly repents – then he is to be forgiven. Jesus said that:

⁹ E.A. Judge as cited in *The Triumph Of Christianity*, 112.

If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, 4 and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.” (Luke 17:3–4 ESV)

This was crazy! No one had ever said anything like this before – which is why the disciples said in the very next verse:

“Increase our faith!” (Luke 17:5 ESV)

We are going to need help with this Jesus – this is totally different than the culture that we have been raised in.

And it was. Christians have always been very different with respect to mercy and forgiveness.

Lastly, our community is supposed to be distinctive and compelling in terms of its explicitly Christological focus.

7. Our Christological focus

That is to say that the focus of our gatherings is not actually the gathering. We don’t get together to celebrate getting together – we get together to see:

the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:6 ESV)

We gather on the Lord’s Day – the first day of the week to remember that because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – **EVERYTHING HAS CHANGED** – and as we look at that, as we read about that and preach about that – **WE ARE CHANGED!** The Bible says that:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18 ESV)

Seeing Jesus – and being filled with the Spirit of Jesus we are changed so as to be more like Jesus – before God and with one another. That’s what motivates and empowers us to do all this distinct and compelling stuff. We love children because we saw Jesus loving children and we have the Spirit of Jesus in us motivating us to love children. And women. We saw Jesus teaching, loving, including women. And widows. And the poor. And sinners. He reached out to them and he

wrapped them in. He made them a family and he told them to show mercy and grace to each other.

That's what was so distinctive and interesting and compelling and attractive about the early church. Jesus said it would be. He said:

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

He said that the quality of our community would be part and parcel of our witness to the world.

Application And Evaluation:

So, how are we doing with that? I'll let you in on a little secret: I was asked to preach this message. At our recent Board Retreat we discussed a concern that we are not hitting it out of the park on every aspect of this description. We are very good at certain pieces of it. We are good, generally speaking at valuing children. Our church is kind of known as the baby church. We love your kids and you seem to realize that and appreciate that. And we are known generally as being very good to widows and seniors – our compassionate ministry to the poor and vulnerable in our midst is well known and respect in the community. And there are other things we could mention that we are also doing well at, but concern was expressed over one of item in particular.

There was general agreement that we are not hitting it out of the park in terms of our intimate, familial fellowship. We have heard some distressing reports about people who have attended here for 6 months and have not been invited into anyone's home or greeted by name or wrapped into a group.

Now, some of that is cultural. I had this conversation with a woman in our church last week. She was telling me that she and her daughter have been coming for several months now and haven't been wrapped in – no one has invited them over and taken them out – they have been having a hard time breaking in to our fellowship. That shouldn't happen, but I explained to her that we are Canadians sometimes and that means we are cold and cautious. We look for cues and indicators that you would like us to do what we ought to know that you want us to do. So I told her to give us a chance and to stick around a little longer after services – she did tend to scoot out quick –

and I told her to give off a vibe that said: “I am here and I would like to be included”. I don’t really know what that looks like but I know that if we paid better attention we would spot it and I hope that having heard the Word this morning and having been prompted by the Holy Spirit I trust – we will do something about that. This is a place where our “Canadian” gets in the way of our “Christian” and it needs to change.¹⁰

So, I am going to suggest two things. First of all I am going to suggest that for the months of February and March we shut down the balcony – except for moms who are nursing or otherwise managing fussy babies. We don’t need 100 people in the balcony during our lowest attendance months of the year and it makes it harder to connect. When 50 or 100 people sit up there it makes down here feel a little colder and disconnected. So we’re going to close that off until after the March Break; there is too much space in here and it is too easy for people to get in and out untouched.

Secondly, and this one’s a little scary – today after the service I want you to find someone that you don’t know well and invite them over to your house for dinner. It doesn’t have to be this Sunday – you need some time to prepare; but sometime in the next 14 days have someone in this room over to your house who has never been there before. That’s what I’m asking.

I know that’s scary. I know it’s not very Canadian but this is part of what it means to follow Jesus. He left the comfort of heaven – he risked embarrassment and shame – he paid a heavy price in order to reach out and wrap us in; that’s what he did for us and before he left us he said this to us:

As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you. (John 20:21 ESV)

Are you seeing that? Jesus was sent to wrap us in and then he sends us out to wrap others in – that is Christianity in a nutshell.

So, in just a minute we are going to gather round the Lord’s Table. Jesus is going to gather us in again. We are going to consider his life and death on our behalf. And then, right after that, he’s going to send us out to see others and to reach others and to wrap them in. We’re going to do this

¹⁰ If time insert story of welcoming committee in Georgia.

– terrifying as it is - because we follow Jesus and because this is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God; let's pray together.