

**Mark 1: 1-8; "Behold I send My Messenger", Sermon # 1 in the series -
"Astonished at His teaching", Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall
on February 17th, 2008, in the Morning Worship Service**

It is a very important part of the Christian's spiritual growth and maturity that he or she come to implement the teaching of the Lord Jesus into their lives. That teaching begins with receiving and believing the gospel. But it does not end there. It ends in becoming a faithful servant to the Christ who is your Master. It is my purpose, at this time in the life of our church to attempt to go through the gospel of Mark, and to supplement our study of this book with material from Matthew and Luke where the text may be better amplified by that means. The Gospel of Mark is a book which describes one particular emphasis in the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. It was His ability to teach with authority and to authenticate His ministry by the demonstration of His power that caused the people of His day to be amazed. Listen to a few verses from this book. Mark 1: 22. "And they were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes." Mark 6: 2 - "And when the Sabbath had come, He began to teach in the synagogue." "And many hearing Him were astonished, saying, 'Where did this man get these things?' "And what wisdom is this which is given to Him, that such mighty works are performed by His hands!" And Mark 11: 18 - "And the scribes and chief priests heard it and sought how they might destroy Him; for they feared Him, because all the people were astonished at His teaching." Now I want you to understand that just because a person was astonished at Jesus' teaching did not mean that he or she believed in Him for salvation. In the verse after the one that I just quoted to you from Mark 6, it says that the reaction of many who were astonished was this. "Is this not the carpenter, the Son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon?" "And are not His sisters here with us?" "So they were offended at Him." Such is the depravity of the human heart. Here was teaching delivered with the power and authority of God, by someone from their own home town, and since Jesus was not from a great family, and had not been taught by some great human teacher among the Jews, therefore His teaching and His ministry are rejected.

But Jesus was a man with a message and a ministry that were not to be stopped or ignored by any man! So, as we go through this book, when you are astonished at His teaching, you ought to let that astonishment lead you to consider whether you really know this man, Christ Jesus, the One who is the Son of God. When you hear of the astonishing things that He said and did, it ought to lead you to consider the state of your soul; the state of your heart and life before God. Those of us who are his followers must learn from Him, not only the message of salvation, in order to convey it to the many lost people around us, but we must also pray to be those who will be able to speak and to live our lives in such a way that we are walking in the power and the strength of the Lord God ourselves, even as He did. Our purpose as Christ's disciples is to glorify God while we live. We can only do this as we learn more about how Christ lived and what He expected of those who followed Him in His three and a

half years of ministry upon the earth. That is the purpose of my bringing us, as a congregation, to this book. God would have us all to be "astonished at His teaching", astonished in the sense that we will receive the gospel and Christ Himself, so that our lives will never be the same. They will never be the same when we come to realize the greatness of the power of Christ to do "exceedingly abundantly beyond all that we ask or think." What we specifically want to see is that God does give power to those who believe in Jesus in the context of their ministry. It is given in the context of serving others. It says in Mark 10: 45, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." Only Jesus can atone for the sins of men; it is true, but Christ's Church is called to serve as He served, and to give of her life and to spend her strength in spreading the gospel and living out the truth of Christ's teaching. This book of Mark will help us to know how to begin do that, as a church.

The book begins at the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It begins by stating that the gospel is Christ's gospel. He is the author of it, and He is the subject of it. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ, whom John calls, "The Son of God. It is a very strong and simple statement meant to make us think about the person of Christ. Jesus Christ is God's son. He is unique among all men. God the Father has sent His Son into the world to proclaim good news to a whole race of men, fallen and condemned in their sins. He is to be the only Mediator between God and man; the Prophet to teach them, the Priest who has offered sacrifice for them, and now intercedes for them. He is their King and the King of this world and Ruler of all creation. But He lays aside the Kingly crown and robes and takes upon Himself human nature in order to serve. He enters into our sphere of existence in order to serve God's purpose and to meet man's greatest need; to save us from our sins. That is what the name Jesus means. He came to serve us by living the perfect life that we cannot live in the sight of God, and giving Himself finally, to take our place in judgment at the cross. He was and is the Christ which means, "The Anointed One." He was anointed of God's Spirit, given the Spirit without measure, in order that all of His service on our behalf would be fully completed. Mark is the gospel that reveals Jesus as the Servant.

The beginning of this gospel ministry of Jesus did not begin with Jesus Himself. It began with His forerunner John the Baptist. God calls John, "My Messenger" in verse 2. We need to ask ourselves, "Why would someone so great and glorious as our Lord Jesus need to have someone go before him and be His forerunner?" The answer of the text is; so that the way would be prepared before Him. Someone this great needs a herald. John the Baptist fit that bill very well. He was a very important public witness; he had a very important prophetic preaching ministry to give to all the nation of Israel. He was to be the herald to announce the coming of the Messiah into the midst of Israel, God's people. He was to be the prophet who would announce the coming of the Gospel dispensation. For Jesus Himself says in Luke 16: 16, "The law and the prophets were until John." "Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it." So what we want to do this

morning is to ask the question, "In what ways did John the Baptist prepare the way for the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ?" And as a follow-up question we should ask; "How is it that you and I can prepare the way for Christ today, so that unsaved people around us will have a greater revelation of Jesus Christ to their souls and be saved from their sins?" The 3 ways that John the Baptist prepared the way for the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ are, 1st of all, by becoming a voice in the wilderness; 2nd - His use of water baptism; and 3rd - His lifestyle and attitude of humility. I think that you and I will be able to learn much from these 3 things.

1st- John the Baptist prepared the way for the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ by becoming a voice in the wilderness. (Verses 2 and 3)

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight." "John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins." You see here how directly related to each other are the forward progress of the gospel and preaching. John's preaching is described as, "a voice crying." Preaching gives a living human voice to the words of God. It is the sound of a voice which declares the will and ways of the one true and living God. It is a voice making itself heard. It is a voice to be listened to and heeded so that we will not perish in our sins. It is a voice speaking the goodwill of God toward sinners, and peace to heart that receives the gospel. God makes Himself known through the voice of faithful men preaching. 1 Corinthians 1: 21 - "For since in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe." Whenever you hear one who is preaching God's Word, will you not remember that God uses this medium of the human voice, the voice of the one preaching, to speak to you? He uses the voice; the sound of the voice, the tone of the voice, the loudness or softness of the voice, the emotions and feelings which lie behind the voice. God rides on the words sent forth by this voice, in order to draw near to you Himself; to your mind and your heart; to your emotions and will, to convince you of the truth. The voice of God is coming through the voice of a man. And John was a voice "crying", it says. It is the voice of a man who is of like nature to ourselves; lifting up his voice to teach, to warn, and to exhort you. The voice of the Lord when He chooses to work through a mere man is very powerful. The voice of John spoke so powerfully to the people's minds and hearts and consciences of the people of Israel that they thought that he must be someone very great.

Turn with me to John chapter 1, verse 19. It says, "Now this is the testimony of John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' "He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, 'I am not the Christ.'" "And they asked him, 'What then?' "Are you Elijah?" ""He said, 'I am not.'" "Are you the Prophet?" "And he answered, 'No.'" "Then they said to him, 'Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us?' "What do you say about yourself?" "He said, 'I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Make straight the way of the Lord.'" He is saying, "Do not think that I am anyone great like the Christ, the Prophet, promised by Moses in Deuteronomy 18, or even the prophet Elijah, calling

down the fire of judgment from God. I am a voice; think only of the voice. And this is how we ought to view the true and faithful preacher of the gospel. He would not have you think of him as anyone great and spiritual and powerful. He would have you think only of the voice and God speaking to you through it. Let me ask you if you think of great preachers this way? The great preacher is not the one who lifts up his voice to prevail over others by the power of his natural strength or intellectual ability. He is calling out to you, he is delivering this Word, remembering that it is God who is riding His words. He will use warnings, but they will be God's warnings. He will use pleadings and invitations to come to Christ, because He is acting on God's behalf. He will beseech you and entreat you on God's behalf, to be reconciled to Christ. His success in preaching is because of God Himself. It is God and His power; it is Christ and His salvation that he makes known. He preaches not Himself, but Christ Jesus as Lord. His cry is the cry of God Himself to you.

John the Baptist's cry was not made in the temple or the synagogue. His cry was made in the wilderness. The wilderness was the backdrop for his preaching. And there was a reason for this in the purpose of God. The people of that day thought that religion was to be found in the temple and in the rituals which the priests who ministered there were regularly engaging in. The people had come to believe that they were accepted by God in their participation in these rituals. In the temple of that day, the voice of God was not being heard however. The Scribes and the Pharisees had so twisted and tied up the truth of the Word of God, that the people were not hearing God's voice, but rather the voice of religious, but unsaved men. John's ministry was very different. He was crying out and saying very clearly, "Come out to me; I am in the wilderness; a completely different place, a place where God has not been put into a man's religious box, a place where a prophet will speak to you God's words. I will declare to you what God is truly like and what He is looking for from you." "Your heart is just like this wilderness." "It is barren and rocky and wild." "But God is coming in judgment and He is coming in salvation." "You must prepare yourself for these great things, that He is doing, that are coming down the road to you. His actual words were, "Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight." He is saying, "You have made crooked paths through this wilderness of your heart and life. because of your sin, which prevent God's coming to you. He would put the straight paths of righteousness down through this wilderness of your hearts. You need to prepare the way of the Lord. You need to make His paths straight.

I would have you see, this morning, that those of you who are raised in a Christian religious context are this way as well. You are given the good word of God; you are raised to understand that the Lord has paths of righteousness, and that you need to walk upon them to please God and to be blessed. But very often, there is the tendency in this context, to choose to modify or even leave the ancient paths of the Word of God and the ministry of that Word which is prophetic to your soul. All men need to have a prophetic ministry of the Word of God to their souls. They need to be warned, they need to be confronted with the way that their own heart is -- unwilling

to do things as God commands it; even unwilling to receive His promises of salvation! Listen to Jeremiah Chapter 6, verse 16. "Stand in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; Then you will find rest for your souls." "But they said, 'We will not walk in it.'" "Also, I set watchmen over you, saying, 'Listen to the sound of the trumpet!'" "But they said, 'We will not listen.'" This is why the prophetic voice is so much needed even in our day. Religious people need to be awakened up out of their lethargy and to be confronted with the crooked paths that they make for themselves, and to be told, "Prepare the way for the Lord." "He is coming down the road of your heart." "Make His paths straight." This requires repentance. It requires turning from our own crooked paths to the straight and true paths, the paths of righteousness which He has made for us to walk upon. We now come to the second way that John the Baptist prepared the way for the Lord.

2ndly - It was John's use of Water Baptism to preach Repentance that prepared the way for the Lord.

Notice how it is worded in the text in verse 4. "John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins." Now I can think of no other verses in the whole of the Word of God that have confused so many people in their thoughts as the verses which use this phrase, "baptism for the remission of sins." It certainly sounds like what is being said is; that if a person was baptized with water baptism that he or she would most certainly, by that means, receive pardon and the forgiveness of their sins. Multitudes of people have been, and are today being deceived by not thinking of what John is truly trying to say. What John is saying in this phrase is, that people should be baptized if they are believing John's word concerning repentance and faith in the Christ who was about to be revealed. The act of being baptized was in itself an act performed in faith that Christ was about to be revealed, and that He would be the Way that people would be saved. The same kind of wording is used by the Apostle Peter in the book of Acts, Chapter 2, in his sermon on the day of Pentecost. In verse 37, after Peter finished his sermon, it says, "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?'" "Then Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'" To remit in financial matters is to pay the debt that we owe. We cannot, by our own means and strength, pay the debt of obedience that we owe or make the sacrifice of punishment necessary to satisfy the justice of God which He requires of us. There must be remission of these debts of sin. John's preaching of the gospel was to prepare people for seeing their need of Christ and the forgiveness of sins that would come through Him.

If you will turn over with me to Matthew 3, you will find an example of the way that he preached. "In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, 'Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!'" And in verse 5 it says, "Then all Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out

to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins." You see, people liked this new kind of ministry. It became very popular to go out to the wilderness setting and have this rugged prophet baptize them in the river. It was all so symbolically cleansing! But John knew that there were some who were coming for the wrong reasons. Verse 7 says, "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "Brood of vipers!" "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" "Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourself, 'We have Abraham as our father.'" "For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones." You see that John was trying to make a tremendous distinction between an outward profession of faith, and repentance and the inward reality. Did these Pharisees and Sadducees really believe that they were sinners who needed to be saved from their sins? Hardly! They saw how popular it was to be baptized at that time, and they wanted to cash in on the benefits of identifying with John. And you and I must be warned against a superficial view of the significance of believer's baptism as well. When we are baptized it is our saying that we are fleeing to Christ for salvation from the wrath of God which is most certainly coming upon the ungodly. And not only upon the ungodly, but even upon the religious people who do not believe that they have anything really to repent of. If we really know our own hearts, we know that we have many things that we need to repent of. And we know that we need grace to repent thoroughly and deeply, so that we do not engage in the sins which we once loved and held to.

This ordinance of John's Baptism was the pledge of faith to believe in the Christ who was soon to be revealed publicly. To identify with Him there must be the pledge of repentance in the hearts and the fruit of repentance in the actions of the people to whom he preached. They must repent; that is, that they must turn from their trusting in their dead ceremonial and religious works, turn from seeing their attendance upon the teaching of the Pharisees as that which made them acceptable with God. They must change their mind and turn from this false gospel. The teaching of the Pharisees was the teaching of a works righteousness. John was calling them to come out to the Wilderness, go "outside the camp" and show by their being baptized that they understood that they must have a better righteousness in their life than their own. They were saying that they knew must come to love God and keep His commandments with their heart, and show forth their sincerity in their actions, having been forgiven by faith in the Christ who was coming. They were saying that they would pursue righteousness by doing righteous deeds which were in accordance with the Scriptures and not men's traditions. John calls this "bearing fruits worthy of repentance."

Why is baptism put in the place of faith in this context? It was because baptism was the public confession of faith in the word which John preached. By being baptized, the one who was being baptized was moving beyond the ceremony of circumcision which was the sign and seal of the Old Covenant, and moving directly toward the Christ who would be the fulfillment of the law and the Prophets. He

would baptize those who believed in Him with the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This would circumcise the heart so that the believer in Christ would die to sin and live to righteousness. All these truths are contained in the words, "Repent and be baptized for the remission of sins." Once Jesus had been revealed to Israel as God's salvation, then Peter preaches, "Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of sins." It could easily have been said, as it would be later when the gospel became more clearly understood theologically, "Repent and believe in Jesus Christ for the remission of sins." It is the baptism which Christ underwent in His sufferings that saves our souls from sin; not the ceremony that is performed over the believer. Christ pays the debt we owe to God for our sins. Christ renders the obedience to the law necessary for God to justify ungodly ones, as we once were before we were saved.

The 3rd way that John's preaching prepared the way for the Lord was his lifestyle and his humility. (Verses 6-8)

"Now John was clothed with camel's hair and with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey." This rustic lifestyle of John's was something that people certainly must have taken notice of. What a contrast to their scribes and Pharisees! The Lord Jesus says of them that, "they did all their works to be seen by men." "They made their phylacteries broad and enlarged the borders of their garments." "They loved the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, and greetings in the marketplaces and to be called by men, 'Rabbi', 'Rabbi'." John cut through all of that spiritual formalism and show. His whole dress and demeanor said, "Let's get down to the basics, once again." "Let's have some real dealings with God who made us, and who made heaven and earth, and this wilderness that we are standing in." "Let's really deal with our sins by repentance, and not just pretend that we know God." The reality of finding and knowing God is not necessarily found by going to the temple or going to church, or being blessed by a priest. It is found in having real dealings with God. You don't have to become someone that you are not, to be a Christian. You do not have to try to be spiritual in your dress and in the clothing that you wear, to be truly spiritual. And you don't have to have to have a South Beach diet, or associate with someone who will teach it to you to make progress in holiness. John's diet was very simple. He ate locusts and wild honey. I do admire his simplicity and his courage; don't you? But the lesson is very simple as well. In order to find repentance and to grow in faith, you don't need more of earthly goods and foods. Perhaps you might need less. It is not wrong to be rich and increased in goods. But if you attain this, you need to understand that it may become a hindrance to the development of true spirituality in your life.

But John did not expect everyone who came out to be baptized to become like him; an ascetic prophet. He did not lash everyone verbally for their materialism. Instead he taught self-denial and humility at a very basic level. It started with his having a right view of himself and his own ministry. He didn't say, "Follow me and I will show you how to live and to be truly spiritual. 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." And, "I indeed baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." He knew what the people who were coming to him truly needed. They needed the One who was mightier than he was. They needed Christ. They needed the power of Christ to give them grace and strength to fulfill their intention to repent, and to go on to keep the commandments of God. No man, no earthly teacher, has that mighty power. But Christ does. John could baptize them with water. They could show forth their profession of faith in the Messiah who was about to come to them. But it would take a spiritual baptism from Christ to really see these things come about in their lives.

John was a humble man. He saw himself as unworthy of the Christ who was coming. He said that he was not even worthy to be his slave; the one who would stoop down to untie the sandal strap of the earthly master. He preached Christ as the great One; the heavenly Master. At one point in his ministry, some men 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!" And John was so humble, so self-effacing, he said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven." "He must increase." "I must decrease." This was John's attitude toward himself. Let us ask ourselves in closing if this is our attitude toward ourselves and toward the Lord this morning? Do I see myself as being unworthy to loose the sandal strap of my Master Jesus Christ? It is interesting, is it not, that even though John had this humble and lowly attitude of himself, that the Lord Jesus says of him, after Herod put him in prison; "What did you go out to see?" "A reed shaken by the wind?" "But what did you go out to see?" "A man clothed in soft garments?" "Indeed those who wear soft garments are in king's houses." "But what did you go out to see?" "A prophet?" "Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet." "For this is he of whom it is written, 'Behold I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You.'" "Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." Jesus is saying; in effect, "The kingdom that I have come to bring men into, by my baptism with the Holy Spirit, will bring greater light and power and life to fulfill God's purpose than even that which was given to the greatest of the Old testament prophets." We who live in the New Testament times have been given the greater fullness of the blessings of the Spirit, than anyone living before Christ came and died. Ought not this truth, be an incentive to us, to have a greater sense of unworthiness, a greater humility being found in us, that we who believe in Christ have been given such a great privilege?