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SERVING OTHERS AS YOU WALK WITH THE MASTER SERVANT

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COMMENTARY

MARK

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Warren W. Wiersbe

FOREWORD BY KEN BAUGH

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transforming lives together

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To

Gale and Millie Baldrige

*longtime friends from seminary days whose ministry exemplifies true
servanthood (Hebrews 6:10)*

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The Big Idea

An Introduction to *Be Diligent* by Ken Baugh

The Princess Bride is one of my favorite movies because it exemplifies true love. As the story begins, young Wesley is the servant of a beautiful girl named Buttercup. Of course, Wesley is madly in love with Buttercup and is eager to please her in every way. When she asks him to do mundane tasks with a demanding and condescending tone in her voice he simply responds, “as you wish.” As the story continues, Wesley wins Buttercup’s heart with his servant attitude and gentle spirit. I know, that’s mush, but there’s a lot of action in the movie too: a voyage through the sea of insanity, a death-defying journey through the fire swamp, sword fights between good guys and bad guys, betrayal, kidnapping, torture, even Rodents of Unusual Size. This movie’s got it all, all the things that make up a good fairy tale. But what I like most about it (in addition to all the action) is the fact that the boy wins the girl’s heart through loving acts of service.

As a senior pastor, I have often wondered about the best way to win the hearts of people to Christ. Is it through great worship services, solid Bible teaching, relevant programs, or the bold proclamation of the gospel? Of course, all these elements play a role in winning people’s hearts to Christ, but I can’t help but wonder if we’re missing something, because there are lots of churches that provide all these things, yet statistically, church attendance in America is declining, and more and more people are turning to alternate forms of spirituality rather than the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Could it be, at least in part, that people are turning away from Jesus and His church because we as His followers have neglected to develop the one character trait that Jesus modeled for us over and over again? Could it be that the reason people flocked to Jesus was because He personified this all-important character trait? Could it be that this particular trait is the one that really gets people's attention, because when it is lived out, it is so countercultural that people can't help but notice and attribute its presence to something supernatural?

What is this character trait? Servanthood. I believe that servanthood is the character trait that wins the hearts of people who are looking for a faith that is real. And John Mark, the guy who wrote the gospel of Mark, believed that too. Let me explain.

Throughout Mark's gospel, we discover the true character of Jesus Christ as a servant. Where Matthew wrote to a Jewish audience and painted Christ as the long-awaited Messiah who came through David's line and fulfilled the promises of the Old Testament prophets, Mark wrote to a Roman audience who had little interest in a Jewish Messiah but a lot of interest in the story of this servant named Jesus. There is no genealogy in Mark's gospel because a servant's lineage is of little consequence. There is no mention of Jesus' birth when kings came to worship Him and brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, because kings from afar don't pay homage to servants. In Mark's gospel, there is no mention of Jesus' noble rights as the King of Kings.

Instead, Mark's focus is on the character of this man named Jesus. Mark affirms that Jesus is most certainly the Messiah (Mark 8:29), God's Son (Mark 1:10–11), the one and only God-man, fully human and fully divine, performing miracles that only God could perform. To emphasize Jesus' deity, Mark records that Jesus cast out demons (1:21–28), healed the sick (1:32–34), made the lepers clean (1:40–45), made a paralyzed man walk (2:1–12), calmed a storm at sea (4:35–41), brought a young girl back from the dead (5:35–43), fed five thousand people with a small amount of food (6:32–44), and walked on water (6:45–51).

But instead of painting a portrait of the Christ as the King, Mark paints a portrait of the Christ as a suffering servant (Mark 8:31) who came to win the hearts and ransom the lives of people through His loving act of service as He gave His life on the cross to pay the price for their sin. In fact, Mark records Jesus' own summation of His earthly purpose: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45 NIV). Here we see three characteristics of servanthood that Jesus modeled for us and will live out through us as we devote ourselves to His service.

The three characteristics of a servant that draw people to Jesus:

1. A willingness to help others first. Jesus as a servant said, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served" (Mark 10:45 NIV). To be selfless is to look to meet the needs of others before meeting your own. As you read through Mark's gospel, watch for evidence of Jesus' selfless lifestyle, and identify ways that you can serve others in the same way.

2. A willingness to meet others' practical needs. Jesus as a servant came "to serve," and He did so by being aware of the practical, everyday needs of the people around Him: their need for food, for comfort, for encouragement and guidance. As God in human flesh, Jesus was able to meet people's practical needs in miraculous ways that we cannot, but there certainly are things that we can be aware of and respond to. As you read through Mark's gospel, look for practical ways that Jesus met people's everyday needs, and then identify ways that you can serve others in a similar manner.

3. A willingness to give sacrificially to others. Jesus as a servant came to give His life for others. We know that Jesus sacrificed His life as a sin offering for all who would believe in Him; it was the greatest sacrificial act of service in the history of humanity. Maybe the greatest sacrificial act that we can bestow on another person is to take the chance to share the gospel with them. To risk their rejection, their ridicule, even abuse, because we are willing to sacrifice ourselves

for their eternal destiny.

Jesus was the suffering Servant, and He modeled for us the most important way to win people's hearts for Him: through loving acts of service. I pray that as you study Mark's gospel, you will look for ways to emulate the greatest Servant who ever lived, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Dr. Wiersbe's commentaries have been a source of guidance and strength to me over the many years that I have been a pastor. His unique style is not overly academic, but theologically sound. He explains the deep truths of Scripture in a way that everyone can understand and apply. Whether you're a Bible scholar or a brand-new believer in Christ, you will benefit, as I have, from Warren's insights. With your Bible in one hand and Dr. Wiersbe's commentary in the other, you will be able to accurately unpack the deep truths of God's Word and learn how to apply them to your life.

Drink deeply, my friend, of the truths of God's Word, for in them you will find Jesus Christ, and there is freedom, peace, assurance, and joy.

—Ken Baugh
Pastor of Coast Hills Community Church
Aliso Viejo, California

A Word from the Author

The gospel of Mark is just the book for busy people who want to use every opportunity to serve God. It presents our Lord “on the move,” meeting the physical and spiritual needs of all kinds of people. Mark depicts Him as God’s suffering Servant who came, not to be ministered to, but to minister—even to the extent of giving His life for us on the cross.

Our world is filled with hurting people who need our ministry. Jesus left His church on earth so that we might continue the ministry He started. However, I fear that in the church today, we have too many spectators and not enough participants, too many celebrities and not enough servants.

This was the first of my “BE” books to be written on a word processor, and this would have been very difficult for me were it not for the able assistance of my neighbor, Scott Florell, who is a computer expert. At the time, Scott was a busy student at the University of Nebraska, but he took time to teach me and help me understand and solve my computer problems. This is but one of many ways in which Scott has enriched our lives, and I want to register my appreciation here.

If our time together studying Mark’s gospel in this volume encourages you to be diligent in your own ministry to others, then the time has not been wasted. May our Lord enable all of us to be servants for His glory!

—Warren W. Wiersbe

A SUGGESTED OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF MARK

Theme: Jesus Christ the Servant Key verse: Mark 10:45

I. The Presentation of the Servant (Mark 1:1–13)

II. The Servant's Ministry in Galilee (Mark 1:14—9:50)

[1. Period of popularity \(Mark 1:14—6:29\)](#)

[2. Period of withdrawal \(Mark 6:30—9:32\)](#)

[3. Period of completion \(Mark 9:33–50\)](#)

III. The Servant's Journey to Jerusalem (Mark 10)

IV. The Servant's Ministry in Jerusalem (Mark 11—16)

[1. Public teaching and controversy \(Mark 11:1—12:44\)](#)

[2. Private teaching and ministry \(Mark 13:1—14:31\)](#)

[3. Arrest, trial, and crucifixion \(Mark 14:32—15:47\)](#)

[4. Resurrection and ascension \(Mark 16\)](#)

Chapter One

God's Servant Is Here!

[\(Mark 1\)](#)

The gospel is neither a discussion nor a debate,” said Dr. Paul S. Rees. “It is an announcement!”

Mark wasted no time giving that announcement, for it is found in the opening words of his book. Matthew, who wrote primarily for the Jews, opened his book with a genealogy. After all, he had to prove to his readers that Jesus Christ is indeed the rightful Heir to David's throne.

Since Luke focused mainly on the sympathetic ministry of the Son of Man, he devoted the early chapters of his book to a record of the Savior's birth. Luke emphasized Christ's humanity, for he knew that his Greek readers would identify with the perfect Babe who grew up to be the perfect Man.

John's gospel begins with a statement about eternity. Why? Because John wrote to prove to the whole world that Jesus Christ of Nazareth is the Son of God (John 20:31). The *subject* of John's gospel is the deity of Christ, but the *object* of his gospel is to encourage his readers to believe on this Savior and receive the gift of eternal life.

Where does Mark's gospel fit in? Mark wrote for the Romans, and his theme is *Jesus Christ the Servant*. If we had to pick a “key verse” in this gospel, it would be Mark 10:45—“For even the Son of man came not to be ministered

unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

The fact that Mark wrote with the Romans in mind helps us understand his style and approach. The emphasis in this gospel is on *activity*. Mark describes Jesus as He busily moves from place to place and meets the physical and spiritual needs of all kinds of people. One of Mark’s favorite words is “straightway,” meaning “immediately.” He uses it forty-one times. Mark does not record many of our Lord’s sermons because his emphasis is on what Jesus did rather than what Jesus said. He reveals Jesus as God’s Servant, sent to minister to suffering people and to die for the sins of the world. Mark gives us no account of our Lord’s birth, nor does he record a genealogy, unnecessary in regard to a servant.

In this opening chapter, Mark shares three important facts about God’s Servant.

1. THE SERVANT’S IDENTITY (1:1–11)

How does Mark identify this Servant? He records the testimonies of several dependable witnesses to assure us that Jesus is all that He claims to be.

John Mark, the author of the book, is the first witness (v. 1). He states boldly that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. It is likely that Mark was an eyewitness of some of the events that he wrote about. He lived in Jerusalem with his mother, Mary, and their home was a meeting place for believers in the city (Acts 12:1–19). Several scholars believe that Mark was the young man described in Mark 14:51–52. Since Peter called Mark “my son” (1 Peter 5:13), it is probable that it was Peter who led Mark to faith in Jesus Christ. Church tradition states that Mark was “Peter’s interpreter,” so that the gospel of Mark reflects the personal experiences and witness of Simon Peter.

The word *gospel* simply means “the good news.” To the Romans, Mark’s special target audience, *gospel* meant “joyful news about the emperor.” The

“gospel of Jesus Christ” is the good news that God’s Son has come into the world and died for our sins. It is the good news that our sins can be forgiven, that we can belong to the family of God and one day go to live with God in heaven. It is the announcement of victory over sin, death, and hell (1 Cor. 15:1–8, 51–52; Gal. 1:1–9).

The second witness is that of the prophets (vv. 2–3). Mark cites two quotations from the Old Testament prophets, Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 (note also Ex. 23:20). The words *messenger* and *voice* refer to John the Baptist, the prophet God sent to prepare the way for His Son (Matt. 3; Luke 3:1–18; John 1:19–34). In ancient times, before a king visited any part of his realm, a messenger was sent before him to prepare the way. This included both repairing the roads and preparing the people. By calling the nation to repentance, John the Baptist prepared the way for the Lord Jesus Christ. Isaiah and Malachi join voices in declaring that Jesus Christ is the Lord, Jehovah God.

John the Baptist is the next witness (vv. 4–8). Jesus called him the greatest of the prophets (Matt. 11:1–15). In his dress, manner of life, and message of repentance, John identified with Elijah (2 Kings 1:8; Mal. 4:5; Matt. 17:10–13; and note Luke 1:13–17). The “wilderness” where John ministered is the rugged wasteland along the western shore of the Dead Sea. John was telling the people symbolically that they were in a “spiritual wilderness” far worse than the physical wilderness that their ancestors had endured for forty years. John called the people to leave their spiritual wilderness, trust their “Joshua” (Jesus), and enter into their inheritance.

John was careful to magnify Jesus and not himself (see John 3:25–30). John would baptize repentant sinners in water, but “the coming One” would baptize them with the Spirit (Acts 1:4–5). This did not mean that John’s baptism was unauthorized (see Matt. 21:23–27), or that water baptism would one day be replaced by Spirit baptism (see Matt. 28:19–20). Rather, John’s message and baptism were *preparation* so that the people would be ready to meet and trust the

Messiah, Jesus Christ. Our Lord's apostles were no doubt baptized by John (see John 4:1–2; Acts 1:21–26).

The Father and the Holy Spirit are Mark's final witnesses to the identity of God's Servant (vv. 9–11). When Jesus was baptized, the Spirit came on Him as a dove, and the Father spoke from heaven and identified His beloved Son. The people who were there did not hear the voice or see the dove, but Jesus and John did (see John 1:29–34). The word *beloved* not only declares affection, but it also carries the meaning of “the only one.” The Father's announcement from heaven reminds us of Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1.

You will want to note these references in Mark's gospel to Jesus Christ as the Son of God: Mark 1:1, 11; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7; 12:1–11; 13:32; 14:61–62; and 15:39. Mark did not write his book about just any Jewish servant. He wrote his book about the very Son of God who came from heaven to die for the sins of the world.

Yes, Jesus is the Servant—but He is a most unusual Servant. After all, it is the servant who prepares the way for others and announces their arrival. But *others* prepared the way for Jesus and announced that He had come! Even heaven itself took note of Him! This Servant is God the Son.

2. THE SERVANT'S AUTHORITY (1:12–28)

We expect a servant to be *under* authority and to *take* orders, but God's Servant *exercises* authority and *gives* orders—even to demons—and His orders are obeyed. In this section, Mark describes three scenes that reveal our Lord's authority as the Servant of God.

(1) His temptation (vv. 12–13). Mark does not give as full an account of the temptation as do Matthew (4:1–11) and Luke (4:1–13), but Mark adds some vivid details that the others omit. The Spirit “driveth him” into the wilderness. Mark used this strong word eleven times to describe the casting out of demons.

The New American Standard Version has it *impelled*, and the New International Version translates it *sent*. It does not suggest that our Lord was either unwilling or afraid to face Satan. Rather, it is Mark's way of showing the intensity of the experience. No time was spent basking in the glory of the heavenly voice or the presence of the heavenly dove. The Servant had a task to perform and He immediately went to do it.

In concise form, Mark presents us with two symbolic pictures. Our Lord's forty *days* in the wilderness remind us of Israel's forty *years* in the wilderness. Israel failed when they were tested, but our Lord succeeded victoriously. Having triumphed over the enemy, Jesus could now go forth and call a new people who would enter into their spiritual inheritance. Since the name *Jesus* is the Greek form of "Joshua," we can see the parallel.

The second picture is that of the "last Adam" (1 Cor. 15:45). The first Adam was tested in a beautiful Garden and failed, but Jesus was tempted in a dangerous wilderness and won the victory. Adam lost his "dominion" over creation because of his sin (Gen. 1:28; Ps. 8), but in Christ, that dominion has been restored for all who trust Him (Heb. 2:6–8). Jesus was with the wild beasts and they did not harm Him. He gave a demonstration of that future time of peace and righteousness, when the Lord shall return and establish His kingdom (Isa. 11:9; 35:9). Indeed, He is a Servant with authority!

(2) His preaching (vv. 14–22). If ever a man spoke God's truth with authority, it was Jesus Christ (see Matt. 7:28–29). It has been said that the scribes spoke *from* authorities but that Jesus spoke *with* authority. Mark was not recording here the beginning of our Lord's ministry, since He had already ministered in other places (John 1:35—4:4). He is telling us why Jesus left Judea and came to Galilee: Herod had arrested John the Baptist, and wisdom dictated that Jesus relocate. By the way, it was during this journey that Jesus talked with the Samaritan woman (John 4:1–45).

Our Lord's message was the gospel of the kingdom of God, or "the gospel of

God” as some texts read. No doubt most of the Jews read “political revolution” into the phrase “kingdom of God,” but that was not what Jesus had in mind at all. His kingdom has to do with His reign in the lives of His people; it is a spiritual realm and not a political organization. The only way to enter God’s kingdom is by believing the good news and being born again (John 3:1–7).

The gospel is called “the gospel of God” because it comes from God and brings us to God. It is “the gospel of the kingdom” because faith in the Savior brings you into His kingdom. It is the “gospel of Jesus Christ” because He is the heart of it; without His life, death, and resurrection, there would be no good news. Paul called it “the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24) because there can be no salvation apart from grace (Eph. 2:8–9). There is only one gospel (Gal. 1:1–9), and it centers in what Jesus Christ did for us on the cross (1 Cor. 15:1–11).

Jesus preached that people should repent (change their minds) and believe (see Acts 20:21). Repentance alone is not enough to save us, even though God expects believers to turn from their sins. We must also put positive faith in Jesus Christ and believe His promise of salvation. Repentance without faith could become remorse, and remorse can destroy people who carry a burden of guilt (see Matt. 27:3–5; 2 Cor. 7:8–10).

Because Jesus preached with authority, He was able to call men from their regular occupations and make them His disciples. Who else could interrupt four fishermen at their work and challenge them to leave their nets and follow Him? Several months before, Jesus had already met Peter, Andrew, James, and John, and they had come to trust Him (see John 1:35–49). This was not their initial call to faith and salvation; it was an initial call to discipleship. The fact that Zebedee had hired servants suggests that his fishing business was successful and that he was a man of means. It also assures us that James and John did not mistreat their father when they heeded Christ’s call. With the help of his servants, Zebedee could still manage the business.

Jesus did not invent the term “fishers of men.” In that day, it was a common description of philosophers and other teachers who “captured men’s minds” through teaching and persuasion. They would “bait the hook” with their teachings and “catch” disciples. It is likely that as many as seven of our Lord’s disciples were fishermen (John 21:1–3). Surely the good qualities of successful fishermen would make for success in the difficult ministry of winning lost souls: courage, the ability to work together, patience, energy, stamina, faith, and tenacity. Professional fishermen simply could not afford to be quitters or complainers!

Jesus ministered not only in the open air but also in the synagogues. The Jewish synagogues developed during the nation’s exile when the people were in Babylon after the temple had been destroyed. Wherever there were ten Jewish men above the age of twelve, a synagogue could be organized. The synagogue was not a place of sacrifice—that was done at the temple—but of reading the Scriptures, praying, and worshipping God. The services were led, not by priests, but by laymen, and the ministry was supervised by a board of elders that was presided over by a “ruler” (Mark 5:22). It was customary to ask visiting rabbis to read the Scriptures and teach, which explains why Jesus had such freedom to minister in the synagogues. The apostle Paul also took advantage of this privilege (Acts 13:14–16; 14:1; 17:1–4).

Our Lord had set up His headquarters in Capernaum, possibly in or near the home of Peter and Andrew (Mark 1:29). You may see the remains of a Capernaum synagogue when you visit the Holy Land today, but it is not the one in which Jesus worshipped. The people assembled for services on the Sabbath as well as on Mondays and Thursdays. Being a faithful Jew, Jesus honored the Sabbath by going to the synagogue, and when He taught the Word, the people were astonished at His authority.

You will discover as you read Mark’s gospel that he delights in recording the emotional responses of people. The congregation in the synagogue was

“astonished” at His teaching and “amazed” at His healing powers (Mark 1:27; also note 2:12; 5:20, 42; 6:2, 51; 7:37; 10:26; 11:18). You even find Mark recording our Lord’s amazement at the unbelief of the people in Nazareth (Mark 6:6). There is certainly nothing monotonous about this narrative!

(3) His command (vv. 23–28). We wonder how many synagogue services that man had attended without revealing that he was demonized. It took the presence of the Son of God to expose the demon, and Jesus not only exposed him, but He also commanded him to keep quiet about His identity and to depart from the man. The Savior did not want, nor did He need, the assistance of Satan and his army to tell people who He was (see Acts 16:16–24).

The demon certainly knew exactly who Jesus was (see Acts 19:13–17) and that he had nothing in common with Him. The demon’s use of plural pronouns shows how closely he was identified with the man through whom he was speaking. The demon clearly identified Christ’s humanity (“Jesus of Nazareth”) as well as His deity (“the Holy One of God”). He also confessed great fear that Jesus might judge him and send him to the pit. There are people today just like this demonized man: in a religious meeting, able to tell who Jesus is, and even trembling with fear of judgment—yet lost (see James 2:19).

“Hold thy peace!” literally means “Be muzzled!” Jesus would use the same words when stilling the storm (Mark 4:39). The demon tried one last convulsive attack, but then had to submit to the authority of God’s Servant and come out of the man. The people in the synagogue were amazed and afraid. They realized that something new had appeared on the scene—a new doctrine and a new power. Our Lord’s *words and works* must always go together (John 3:2). The people kept on talking about both, and the fame of Jesus began to spread. Our Lord did not encourage this kind of public excitement lest it create problems with both the Jews and the Romans. The Jews would want to follow Him only because of His power to heal them, and the Romans would think He was a Jewish insurrectionist trying to overthrow the government. This explains why

Jesus so often told people to keep quiet (Mark 1:44; 3:12; 5:43; 7:36–37; 8:26, 30; 9:9). The fact that they did not obey created problems for Him.

3. THE SERVANT'S SYMPATHY (1:29–45)

Two miracles of healing are described in this section, both of which reveal the compassion of the Savior for those in need. In fact, so great was His love for the needy that the Savior ministered to great crowds of people after the Sabbath had ended, when it was lawful for them to come for help. It would appear that God's Servant was at the beck and call of all kinds of people, including demoniacs and lepers, and He lovingly ministered to them all.

Jesus and the four disciples left the synagogue and went to Peter and Andrew's house for their Sabbath meal. Perhaps Peter was a bit apologetic because his wife had to care for her sick mother and was unable to entertain them in the usual manner. We do not know about the other disciples, but we do know that Peter was a married man (Mark 1:30).

Peter and Andrew not only brought their friends James and John home with them from the service, but they also brought the Lord home. That is a good example for us to follow: Don't leave Jesus at the church—take Him home with you and let Him share your blessings and your burdens. What a privilege it was for Peter and his family to have the very Son of God as a guest in their humble home. Before long, the Guest became the Host, just as one day the Passenger in Peter's boat would become the Captain (Luke 5:1–11).

By faith, the men told Jesus about the sick woman, no doubt expecting Him to heal her. That is exactly what He did! The fever left her immediately, and she was able to go to the kitchen and serve the Sabbath meal. If you have ever had a bad fever, then you know how painful and uncomfortable it is. You also know that after the fever leaves you, it takes time for you to regain your strength. But not so in this case! She was able to serve the Lord immediately. And isn't

service to our Lord one of the best ways to thank Him for all He has done for us?

What was the result of this miracle? When the Sabbath ended at sundown, the whole city showed up at Peter's door! They brought their sick and afflicted, and the Lord (who was no doubt weary) healed them all. The Greek verb indicates that they "kept on bringing" people to Him, so that He must have gone to sleep at a very late hour. Note in Mark 1:32 the clear distinction made between the diseased and the demonized. While Satan can cause physical affliction, not all sickness is caused by demonic power.

Late hours did not keep Jesus from His appointed meeting with His Father early the next morning. Read Isaiah 50:4 for a prophetic description of God's righteous Servant as He meets the Father morning by morning. What an example for us to follow! It is no surprise that Jesus had such authority and power when His prayer life was so disciplined (see Mark 6:46; 9:28–29; 14:32–38).

However, the crowds wanted to see Jesus again, not to hear His word, but to experience His healing and see Him perform miracles. Peter was surprised that Jesus did not hasten to meet the crowds but instead left for other towns where He might preach the gospel. Peter did not realize the shallowness of the crowds, their unbelief, and their lack of appetite for the Word of God. Jesus said it was more important for Him to preach the gospel in other places than to stay there and heal the sick. He did not permit popular acclaim to change His priorities.

Perhaps we can understand our Lord's concern for a feverish woman, but that He would meet *and touch* a leper is somewhat beyond our understanding. Lepers were supposed to keep their distance and warn everyone that they were coming, lest others would be defiled (Lev. 13:45–46). This man knew that Jesus was *able* to heal him, but he was not sure the Master was *willing* to heal him. Lost sinners today have the same unnecessary concern, for God has made it abundantly clear that He is not willing that sinners perish (2 Peter 3:9) and that He is willing that all men be saved (1 Tim. 2:4).

When you read the "tests" for leprosy described in Leviticus 13, you can see

how the disease is a picture of sin. Like sin, leprosy is deeper than the skin (Lev. 13:3); it spreads (Lev. 13:5–8); it defiles and isolates (Lev. 13:44–46); and it renders things fit only for the fire (Lev. 13:47–59). Anyone who has never trusted the Savior is spiritually in worse shape than this man was physically.

Jesus had compassion on the man (note Mark 6:34; 8:2; 9:22) and healed him. He did it with His touch and with His word. No doubt this was the first loving touch this leper had felt in a long time. As with the fever, so with the leprosy: It was gone instantly!

For reasons already stated, Jesus commanded the man not to tell everybody. He was to go to the priests and follow the instructions given in Leviticus 14, so that he might be declared clean and received back into the social and religious life of the community. However, the man disobeyed orders. Jesus told this man to keep quiet, and yet he told everybody. Jesus commands us to tell everybody—and we keep quiet! The crowds that came to get help from Jesus created a serious problem for Him and probably hindered Him from teaching the Word as He intended to (Mark 1:38).

The ceremony described in Leviticus 14 presents a beautiful picture in type of the work of redemption. The two birds represent two different aspects of our Lord's ministry: His incarnation and death (the bird put into the jar and then killed), and His resurrection and ascension (the bird stained with the blood and then set free). The blood was applied to the man's right ear (God's Word), right thumb (God's work), and right great toe (God's walk). Then the oil was put on the blood, symbolizing the Holy Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit cannot come on human flesh until first the blood has been applied.

We should learn some important spiritual lessons from this chapter. To begin with, if the Son of God came as a servant, then being a servant is the highest of all callings. We are never more like the Lord Jesus than when we are serving others. Second, God shares His authority with His servants. Only those who are *under* authority have the right to *exercise* authority. Finally, if you are

going to be a servant, be sure you have compassion, because people will come to you for help and rarely ask if it is convenient!

Yet, what a privilege it is to follow in the steps of Jesus Christ and meet the needs of others by being one of God's compassionate servants.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What about Jesus' life shows you His servant spirit?
2. Why might the pagan Romans have struggled to accept that Jesus was the Son of God?
3. What does Mark tell us in chapter 1 about Jesus' identity? What evidence does he give to support this claim?
4. How did Jesus' baptism reflect His role as a servant?
5. List some ways in which Jesus' temptation reveals His servanthood.

6. What does a person's sense of authority reveal about his capacity to be a servant?
7. When Jesus expressed His authority over demons, what did the people watching learn about Him? How is this important for us?
8. When Jesus healed the people around Him of their illnesses, what did they learn of His servanthood? How is this important for us?
9. In what ways can we be servants like Jesus?
10. What role does compassion play in servanthood?

Chapter Three

The Servant, the Crowds, and the Kingdom (Mark 3:13—4:34) No matter where He went, God's Servant was thronged by excited crowds (Mark 3:7–9, 20, 32; 4:1). Had Jesus been a “celebrity” and not a servant, He would have catered to the crowds and tried to please them (see Matt. 11:7–15). Instead, He withdrew from the crowds and began to minister especially to His disciples. Jesus knew that most of the people who pushed to get near Him were shallow and insincere, but His disciples did not know this. Lest they take all of this “success” seriously, Jesus had to teach these men the truth

about the crowds and the kingdom. In this section, we see our Lord's three responses to the pressure of the crowd.

1. HE FOUNDED A NEW NATION (3:13–19) The number of the disciples is significant because there were twelve tribes in the nation of Israel. In Genesis, God started with Jacob's twelve sons, and in Exodus, He built them into a mighty nation. Israel was chosen to bring the Messiah into the world so that through Him all the nations of the earth could be blessed (Gen. 12:1–3). However, the nation of Israel was now spiritually decayed and ready to reject her own Messiah. God had to establish “a holy nation, a peculiar [purchased] people” (1 Peter 2:9), and the twelve apostles were the nucleus of this new “spiritual” nation (Matt. 21:43).

Jesus spent all night in prayer before choosing these twelve men (Luke 6:12). When He selected them, He had three purposes in mind: (1) training them by personal example and teaching, (2) sending them out to preach the gospel, and (3) giving them authority to heal and cast out demons (see Mark 1:14–15, 38–39; 6:7–13). These twelve men would thus be able to continue His work when He returned to the Father, and they would also be able to train others to carry on the ministry after them (2 Tim. 2:2).

In the New Testament, you will find three other lists of the names of the twelve disciples: Matthew 10:2–4; Luke 6:14–16; and Acts 1:13. Luke tells us that Jesus gave them the special name “apostles.” A “disciple” is one who learns by doing; our modern equivalent might be an “apprentice.” An “apostle” is one who is sent on official service with a commission. Jesus had many disciples but only twelve apostles, His special “ambassadors.”

When you compare the lists, it appears that the names are arranged in pairs: Peter and Andrew; James and John; Philip and Bartholomew (Nathanael [John 1:45]); Thomas and Matthew (Levi); James, the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus (Judas, son of James, not Iscariot [John 14:22]); Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot. Since Jesus sent His apostles out two by two, this was a logical way to list them (Mark 6:7).

Simon's name was changed to Peter, "the rock" (John 1:40–42), and Levi's was changed to Matthew, "the gift of God." James and John were given the nicknames, "Boanerges—the sons of thunder." We commonly think of John as the apostle of love, but he certainly did not begin with that kind of reputation, nor did James his brother (Mark 9:38–41; 10:35–39; Luke 9:54–55). It is encouraging to see what Jesus was able to do with such a diversified group of unlikely candidates for Christian service. There is still hope for us!

Mark defined the Hebrew word *Boanerges* because he was writing for Roman readers. In his gospel you will find several of these "special notes for Gentiles" (Mark 5:41; 7:11, 34; 11:9; 14:36; 15:22, 34). The word *Canaanite* in Mark 3:18 has nothing to do with national or racial origin. It is the Hebrew word *cananaean*, which comes from a word that means "to be jealous, to be zealous." The Zealots were a group of Jewish extremists organized to overthrow Rome, and they used every means available to advance their cause. The historian Josephus called them "daggersmen." It would be interesting to know how Simon the Zealot responded when he first met Matthew, a former employee of Rome.

If you consult a harmony of the Gospels, you will see that between Mark 3:19 and 20, Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7) and participated in the events described in Luke 7:1–8:3. Mark's gospel does not include that famous sermon because his emphasis is on what Jesus did rather than what Jesus said.

2. HE ESTABLISHED A NEW FAMILY (3:20–21, 31–35) Our Lord’s friends were sure that Jesus was confused, and possibly deranged! The great crowds they saw following Him, and the amazing reports they heard about Him, convinced them that He desperately needed help. He simply was not living a normal life, so His friends came to Capernaum to “take charge of him.” Then his mother and “brethren” (Mark 6:3) traveled thirty miles from Nazareth to plead with Him to come home and get some rest, but even they were unable to get near Him. This is the only place in the gospel of Mark where Mary is seen, and her venture was a failure.

History reveals that God’s servants are usually misjudged by their contemporaries, and often misunderstood by their families. D. L. Moody was called “Crazy Moody” by many people in Chicago, and even the great apostle Paul was called mad (Acts 26:24–25). Emily Dickinson wrote: Much madness is divinest sense To a discerning eye; Much sense the starkest madness.

’Tis the majority In this, as all, prevails.

Assent, and you are sane; Demur—you’re straightway dangerous, And handled with a chain.

Our Lord was not being rude to His family when He remained in the house and did not try to see them. He knew that their motives were right but their purpose was definitely wrong. If Jesus had yielded to His family, He would have played right into the hands of the opposition. The religious leaders would have said, “See, He agreed with His family—He needs help! Don’t take Jesus of Nazareth too seriously.” Instead of giving in, He used this crisis as an opportunity to teach a spiritual lesson: His “family” is made up of all those who do the will of God. Our Lord’s half-brothers were not believers (John 7:1–5), and Jesus felt closer to the believing publicans and sinners than He did to James,

Joses, Judah, and Simon, His half-brothers.

Our Lord was not suggesting that believers ignore or abandon their families in order to serve God, but only that they put God's will above everything else in life. Our love for God should be so great that our love for family would seem like hatred in comparison (Luke 14:26). Certainly it is God's will that we care for our families and provide for them (see 1 Tim. 5:8), but we must not permit even our dearest loved ones to influence us away from the will of God. When you consider the importance of the family in the Jewish society, you can imagine how radical Christ's words must have sounded to those who heard them.

How does one enter into the family of God? By means of a new birth, a spiritual birth from above (John 3:1–7; 1 Peter 1:22–25). When the sinner trusts Jesus Christ as Savior, he experiences this new birth and enters into God's family. He shares God's divine nature (2 Peter 1:3–4) and can call God "Father" (Rom. 8:15–16). This spiritual birth is not something that we accomplish for ourselves, nor can others do it for us (John 1:11–13). It is God's work of grace; all we can do is believe and receive (Eph. 2:8–9).

3. HE ANNOUNCED A NEW KINGDOM (3:22–30; 4:1–34) The crowds hoped that Jesus would deliver the nation and defeat Rome. Instead, He called twelve ordinary men and founded a "new nation," a spiritual nation whose citizens had their names written down in heaven (Luke 10:20; Phil. 3:20). The crowds wanted Jesus to behave like a loyal Jew and honor His family, but Jesus established a "new family" made up of all those who trusted Him and did the will of God. The crowds also expected Him to restore the kingdom and bring back Israel's lost glory, but His response was to announce a new kingdom, a spiritual kingdom.

"Kingdom" is a key word in this section (Mark 3:24; 4:11, 26, 30). John the

Baptist had announced that the arrival of the King was near, and he had warned the people to prepare to meet Him (Mark 1:1–8). Jesus took up John’s message and preached the good news of the kingdom and the necessity for sinners to repent and believe (Mark 1:14–15). But what is this kingdom like? If the Lord was not going to restore Israel and set up a political kingdom, what kind of kingdom was He planning to establish?

At this point, Mark introduced a new word—*parables* (see Mark 3:23; 4:2, 10–11, 13, 33–34). Jesus explained the kingdom, not by giving a lecture on theology, but by painting pictures that captured the attention of the people and forced them to use their imaginations and think. Our English word *parable* comes from two Greek words that mean “to cast alongside” (*para*—alongside; *ballo*—to throw or cast). A parable is a story or figure placed alongside a teaching to help us understand its meaning. It is much more than “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning,” and it certainly is not an “illustration” such as a preacher would use in a sermon. A true parable gets the listener deeply involved and compels that listener to make a personal decision about God’s truth and his or her life. So penetrating and personal are parables that, after they heard several of them, the religious leaders wanted to kill the Lord Jesus! (See Matt. 21:45–46.) A parable begins innocently as a *picture* that arrests our attention and arouses our interest. But as we study the picture, it becomes a *mirror* in which we suddenly see ourselves. If we continue to look by faith, the mirror becomes a *window* through which we see God and His truth. How we respond to that truth will determine what further truth God will teach us.

Why did Jesus teach in parables? His disciples asked Him that very question (Mark 4:10–12; see Matt. 13:10–17). A careful study of His reply reveals that Jesus used parables both to hide the truth and to reveal it. The crowd did not judge the parables; the parables judged the crowd. The careless listener, who thought he knew everything, would hear only a story that he did not really understand, and the result in his life would be judgment (see Matt. 11:25–30).

The sincere listener, with a desire to know God's truth, would ponder the parable, confess his ignorance, submit to the Lord, and then begin to understand the spiritual lesson Jesus wanted to teach.

Jesus placed a great deal of importance on the *hearing of the Word of God*. In one form or another, the word *hear* is used thirteen times in Mark 4:1–34. Obviously, our Lord was speaking, not about physical hearing, but about hearing with spiritual discernment. To “hear” the Word of God means to understand it and obey it (see James 1:22–25).

Our Lord gave several parables to help the people (and that included His disciples) understand the nature of His kingdom.

The strong man (3:22–30). Jesus healed a demoniac who was both blind and dumb (Matt. 12:22–24), and the scribes and Pharisees used this miracle as an opportunity to attack Him. The crowd was saying, “Perhaps this Man is indeed the Son of David, the Messiah.” But the religious leaders said, “No, He is in league with Beelzebub! It is Satan's power that is at work in Him, not God's power.”

“Beelzebub” (or “Beelzebul”) is a name for the Devil, and it means “master of the house.” Jesus picked up on this meaning and gave a parable about a strong man guarding his house. To plunder the house, one must first overcome the strong man.

Jesus exposed both their bad theology and their faulty logic. If it was by the power of Satan that He had cast out the demon, then Satan was actually fighting against himself! This meant that Satan's house and kingdom were divided and therefore on the verge of collapse. Satan had been guarding that man carefully because the Devil does not want to lose any of his territory. The fact that Jesus delivered the man was proof that He was stronger than Satan and that Satan could not stop Him.

Jesus did much more than answer their false accusation. He went on to explain the seriousness of what they had said. After all, our words reveal what is

hidden in our hearts (Matt. 12:35), and what is in our hearts determines our character, conduct, and destiny. We sometimes say, “Talk is cheap!” But in reality, what we say can be very costly. Jesus warned the Jewish religious leaders that they were in danger of committing an eternal and unforgivable sin (Matt. 12:32).

When you ask people, “What is the unpardonable sin?” they usually reply, “It is blaspheming the Holy Spirit” or “It is the sin of attributing to the Devil the works of the Holy Spirit.” Historically speaking, these statements are true, but they do not really answer the question. How do we *today* blaspheme the Spirit of God? What miracles is the Holy Spirit performing *today* that might be carelessly or even deliberately attributed to Satan? Must a person see a miracle in order to commit this terrible sin?

Jesus made it clear that God would forgive *all* sin and *all* blasphemy, *including blasphemy against the very Son of God Himself* (Matt. 12:32)! Does this mean that God the Son is less important than the Holy Spirit? Why would a sin against God the Son be forgivable and yet a sin against the Holy Spirit be unforgivable?

The answer lies in the nature of God and in His patient dealings with the nation of Israel. God the Father sent John the Baptist to prepare the nation for the coming of their Messiah. Many of the common people responded to John’s call and repented (Matt. 21:32), but the religious leaders *permitted* John to be arrested and eventually killed. God the Son came as promised and called the nation to trust Him, but those same religious leaders *asked for* Jesus to be killed. On the cross, our Lord prayed, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

The Holy Spirit came at Pentecost and demonstrated God’s power in many convicting ways. How did those same religious leaders respond? By arresting the apostles, ordering them to keep silent, and then *killing Stephen themselves!* Stephen told them what their sin was: “Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost”

(Acts 7:51). They had sinned against the Father and the Son, but had been graciously forgiven. When they sinned against the Holy Spirit, they had reached “the end of the line,” and there could be no more forgiveness.

People today cannot commit the “unpardonable sin” in the same way the Jewish religious leaders did when Jesus was ministering on earth. The only sin today that God cannot forgive is rejection of His Son (John 3:16–21, 31). When the Spirit of God convicts the sinner and reveals the Savior, the sinner may resist the Spirit and reject the witness of the Word of God, but that does not mean he has forfeited all his opportunities to be saved. If he will repent and believe, God can still forgive him. Even if the sinner so hardens his heart that he seems to be insensitive to the pleadings of God, so long as there is life, there is hope. Only God knows if and when any “deadline” has been crossed. You and I must never despair of any sinner (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9).

The sower and the soils (4:1–20). This parable helped the disciples understand why Jesus was not impressed by the large crowds that followed Him. He knew that most of them would never produce fruit from changed lives, because the Word He was teaching them was like seed falling into poor soil.

The seed represents God’s Word (Luke 8:11), and the sower is the servant of God who shares that Word with others (see 1 Cor. 3:5–9). The human heart is like soil: It must be prepared to receive the seed before that seed can take root and produce a harvest. Like seed, the Word is alive and able to produce spiritual fruit, but the seed must be planted and cultivated before that harvest will come. As in that day, so today, there are four kinds of hearts, and they respond to God’s message in four different ways.

1. *The hard heart (Mark 4:4, 15)* resists the Word of God and makes it easy for Satan (the birds) to snatch it away. Soil becomes hard when too many feet tread on it. Those who recklessly “open their hearts” to all kinds of people and influences are in danger of developing hard hearts (see Prov. 4:23). Hard hearts must be “plowed up” before they can receive the seed, and this can be a painful

experience (Jer. 4:3; Hos. 10:12).

2. *The shallow heart* (vv. 5–6, 16–17) is like thin soil on a rock, very typical to Palestine. Since there is no depth, whatever is planted cannot last because it has no roots. This represents the “emotional hearer” who joyfully accepts God’s Word but does not really understand the price that must be paid to become a genuine Christian. There may be great enthusiasm for several days or weeks, but when persecution and difficulties begin, the enthusiasm wanes and the joy disappears. It is easy for fallen human nature to counterfeit “religious feelings” and give a professed Christian a feeling of false confidence.

3. *The crowded heart* (vv. 7, 18–19) pictures the person who receives the Word but does not truly repent and remove the “weeds” out of his or her heart. This hearer has too many different kinds of “seeds” growing in the soil—worldly cares, a desire for riches, a lust for things—and the good seed of the Word has no room in which to grow. To change the image, this person wants to walk the “broad way” and the “narrow way” at the same time (Matt. 7:13–14) and it cannot be done.

4. *The fruitful heart* (vv. 8, 20) pictures the true believer, because fruit—a changed life—is the evidence of true salvation (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 5:19–23). The other three hearts produced no fruit, so we conclude that they belong to persons who have never been born again. Not all true believers are equally as productive, but from every genuine Christian’s life, there will be some evidence of spiritual fruit.

Each of the three fruitless hearts is influenced by a different enemy: the hard heart—the Devil himself snatches the seed; the shallow heart—the flesh counterfeits religious feelings; the crowded heart—the things of the world smother the growth and prevent a harvest. These are the three great enemies of the Christian: the world, the flesh, and the Devil (Eph. 2:1–3).

The lamp (4:21–25). In this parable, our Lord used a common object (a lamp) in a familiar scene (a home). The lamp was a clay dish filled with oil, with

a wick put into the oil. In order to give light, the lamp had to “use itself up,” and the oil had to be replenished. If the lamp was not lit, or if it was covered up, it did the home no good.

The apostles were like that lamp: They were called to shed God’s light and reveal His truth. But they could not “give out” without first “taking in”; hence the admonition of Mark 4:24–25. The more we hear the Word of God, the better we are able to share it with others. The moment we think that we know it all, what we think we know will be taken from us. We must take heed *what* we hear (Mark 4:24) as well as take heed *how* we hear (Luke 8:18). Our spiritual hearing determines how much we have to give to others. There is no sense trying to “cover things up” because God will one day reveal all things.

The seed growing (4:26–34). The first parable reminds us that we cannot make the seed grow; in fact, we cannot even explain *how* it grows. There is a mystery to the growth of the seed and the development of the harvest. It takes a good deal of faith to be a farmer, and also a good deal of patience. In the parable of the sower and the soils, the Lord suggested that much of the seed scattered would fall on unproductive soil. This fact could discourage His workers, so in this parable He reassured them “in due season we shall reap, if we faint not” (Gal. 6:9).

The second parable gave the disciples both warning and encouragement. The encouragement was that, from very small beginnings, the kingdom would eventually grow in size and in influence. While a mustard seed is not the smallest seed in the world, it was probably the smallest seed that the Jews sowed in their gardens. It was a traditional symbol of that which is tiny. Our Lord began with twelve apostles. Later, there were as many as five hundred believers (1 Cor. 15:6). Peter won three thousand at Pentecost, and throughout the book of Acts, that number steadily increased (Acts 4:4; 5:14; 6:1, 7). In spite of the sins and weaknesses of the church, the message has been carried to other nations, and one day, saints from *every* nation shall worship before His throne (Rev. 5:9).

But the growth of the seed is only one part of the story; we must also account for the birds in the branches. In the parable of the sower and soils, the birds stood for Satan, who snatches the seed (Mark 4:15). If we are to be consistent in our interpretation, we must take this into consideration, for both parables were taught on the same day. The growth of the kingdom will not result in the conversion of the world. In fact, some of the growth will give opportunity for Satan to get in and go to work! There was Judas in the disciple band, and Ananias and Sapphira were in fellowship with the Jerusalem church (Acts 5:1–11). Simon Magus was part of the church in Samaria (Acts 8:9–24), and Satan’s ministers boldly invaded the Corinthian church (2 Cor. 11:13–15). The bigger the net, the greater the possibility of catching both good and bad fish (Matt. 13:47–50).

Through faith in Jesus Christ, we become citizens of the heavenly nation, children in God’s family, and subjects of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. What a privilege it is to know the Lord Jesus Christ!

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. List some of the differences between being a celebrity and being a servant.
2. What do you think made the disciples respond to Jesus and walk away from their lives?

3. If becoming a Christian is like becoming a part of a new family, what responsibilities go along with that?
4. The Jews of Jesus' day thought that He was coming to set up a political kingdom. Describe the kind of kingdom that Jesus came to set up instead.
5. Name some reasons that the religious leaders of Jesus' day were so threatened by His popularity.
6. Why were parables a powerful way for Jesus to teach?
7. To which of the seeds/hearts in the parable of the sower would you compare your faith? Are you more of a hard heart, a shallow heart, a crowded heart, or a fruitful heart? What makes you think that?
8. List some ways that our lives are like the oil lamp in Jesus' parable in Mark 4:21.
9. Describe a time when you saw something happen that you believe was Satan moving against the work of Christ.
10. How do you think Jesus would invite someone, in today's language, to join

God's family?

Chapter Four

The Servant Conquers!

(Mark 4:35—5:43)

God's Servant, Jesus Christ, is the Master of every situation and the Conqueror of every enemy. If we trust Him and follow His orders, we need never be afraid. *Victory* is the major theme that binds this long section together. Mark recorded four miracles that Jesus performed, and each miracle announces even to us today the defeat of an enemy.

1. VICTORY OVER DANGER (4:35–41)

“The same day” refers to the day on which Jesus gave the “parables of the kingdom.” He had been teaching His disciples the Word, and now He would give them a practical test to see how much they had really learned. After all, the hearing of God's Word is intended to produce faith (Rom. 10:17), and faith must always be tested. It is not enough for us merely to learn a lesson or be able to repeat a teaching. We must also be able to practice that lesson by faith, and that is one reason why God permits trials to come to our lives.

Did Jesus know that the storm was coming? Of course He did! The storm was a part of that day's curriculum. It would help the disciples understand a lesson that they did not even know they needed to learn: Jesus can be trusted in the storms of life. Many people have the idea that storms come to their lives only

when they have disobeyed God, but this is not always the case. Jonah ended up in a storm because of his disobedience, but the disciples got into a storm because of their *obedience* to the Lord.

The geographic location of the Sea of Galilee is such that sudden violent storms are not unusual. While crossing this very sea one summer afternoon, I asked an Israeli tour guide if he had ever been in such a storm. “I certainly have!” he replied, throwing up his hands and shaking his head. “And I never want to be in one like it again!”

The storm described here must have been especially fierce if it frightened experienced fishermen like the disciples. There were at least three good reasons why none of the men in the ship should have been disturbed, even though the situation appeared to be threatening.

To begin with, they had His promise that they were going to the other side (Mark 4:35). His commandments are always His enablements, and nothing can hinder the working out of His plans. He did not promise an easy trip, but He did promise a guaranteed arrival at their destination.

Second, the Lord Himself was with them, so what was there to fear? They had already seen His power demonstrated in His miracles, so they should have had complete confidence that He could handle the situation. For some reason, the disciples did not yet understand that He was indeed the Master of every situation.

Finally, they could see that Jesus was perfectly at peace, even in the midst of the storm. This fact alone should have encouraged them. Jesus was in God’s will and knew that the Father would care for Him, so He took a nap. Jonah slept during a storm because he had a false sense of security, even though he was running from God. Jesus slept in the storm because He was truly secure in God’s will. “I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep for thou, LORD, only makest me dwell in safety” (Ps. 4:8).

How often in the trials of life we are prone to imitate the faithless disciples and cry out, “Lord, don’t You care?” Of course, He cares! He arose and rebuked the storm, and immediately there was a great calm. But Jesus did not stop with the calming of the elements, for the greatest danger was not the wind or the waves, it was the unbelief in the hearts of the disciples. Our greatest problems are within us, not around us. This explains why Jesus gently rebuked them and called them “men of little faith.” They had heard Him teach the Word and had even seen Him perform miracles, and yet they still had no faith. It was their unbelief that caused their fear, and their fear made them question whether Jesus really cared. We must beware of “an evil heart of unbelief” (Heb. 3:12).

This was only one of many lessons Jesus would teach His disciples in the familiar environs of the Sea of Galilee, and each lesson would reveal some wonderful new truth about the Lord Jesus. They already knew that He had the authority to forgive sins, to cast out demons, and to heal diseases. Now they discovered that He even had authority over the wind and the sea. This meant that they had no reason ever again to be afraid, for their Lord was in constant control of every situation.

2. VICTORY OVER DEMONS (5:1–20)

When Jesus and the disciples landed on the other side, they encountered two demoniacs, one of whom was especially vocal (see Matt. 8:28). This entire scene seems very unreal to us who live in so-called “modern civilization,” but it would not be unreal in many mission fields. In fact, some Bible teachers believe that demon possession is becoming even more prevalent in today’s “modern society.”

We see in this scene three different forces at work: Satan, society, and the Savior. These same three forces are still at work in our world, trying to control the lives of people.

First, we see what *Satan* can do to people. Satan is a thief whose ultimate purpose is to destroy (John 10:10; and see Rev. 9:11). We are not told how the demons entered these men and took control, but possibly it was the result of their yielding to sin. Demons are “unclean spirits” and can easily get a foothold in the lives of people who cultivate sinful practices.

Because they yielded to Satan, the thief, these two men lost everything! They lost their homes and the fellowship of their families and friends. They lost their decency as they ran around in the tombs naked. They lost their self-control and lived like wild animals, screaming, cutting themselves, and frightening the citizens. They lost their peace and their purpose for living, and they would have remained in that plight had Jesus not come through a storm to rescue them.

Never underestimate the destructive power of Satan. He is our enemy and would destroy all of us if he could. Like a roaring lion, he seeks to devour us (1 Peter 5:8–9). It is Satan who is at work in the lives of unbelievers, making them “children of disobedience” (Eph. 2:1–3). The two men in the Gerasene graveyard were no doubt extreme examples of what Satan can do to people, but what they reveal is enough to make us want to resist Satan and have nothing to do with him.

The second force at work on these men was *society*, but society was not able to accomplish very much. About all that society can do for problem people is to isolate them, put them under guard and, if necessary, bind them (Luke 8:29). Often these men were chained, but the demons gave them strength to break the chains. Even the attempts to tame these men had failed. With all of its wonderful scientific achievements, society still cannot cope with the problems caused by Satan and sin. While we thank God that society does offer a limited amount of restraint and protection, we must confess that society cannot permanently solve these problems and deliver Satan’s terrorized victims.

This brings us to the third force, that of the *Savior*. What did Jesus Christ do for these men? To begin with, He graciously came to them in love, and even

went through a storm to do it. Some think that the storm itself may have been satanic in origin, since Jesus used the same words to calm the sea as He did to cast out demons (compare Mark 1:25 and 4:39). Perhaps Satan was trying to destroy Jesus, or at least prevent Him from coming to the men who needed Him. But nothing could stop the Lord from coming to that graveyard and bringing deliverance to those men.

Not only did Jesus come to them, but He spoke to them and permitted them to speak to Him. The citizens of that area avoided the two demoniacs, but Jesus treated them with love and respect. He came “to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10).

It is interesting to note that, as the demons spoke through the man, they confessed what they really believed. Demons have faith and even tremble because of what they believe (James 2:19), but neither their faith nor their fear can save them. Demons believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that He has authority over them. They believe in the reality of judgment and that one day they will be cast into hell (see Matt. 8:29). This is more than many religious people believe today!

Nowhere does the Bible explain either the psychology or the physiology of demon possession. The man who spoke to Jesus was under the control of a *legion* of demons, and a Roman legion could consist of as many as six thousand men! It is frightening to think of the horrors this man experienced day and night as thousands of unclean spirits tormented him. No doubt the other demonized man experienced his share of agony too.

Satan tried to destroy these men, but Jesus came to deliver them. By the power of His word, He cast out the demons and set the men free. Demons even believe in prayer, for they begged Jesus not to send them into the abyss, the place of torment (Mark 5:7; Luke 8:31). It is encouraging to note that the demons did not know what Jesus planned to do. This suggests that Satan can know God’s plans only if God reveals them. In fact, there is no evidence in

Scripture that Satan can read the mind of a believer, let alone the mind of God.

Mark 5 tells of three requests: (1) The demons requested that Jesus send them into the pigs (Mark 5:12); (2) the citizens requested that Jesus leave the area (Mark 5:17); and (3) one of the former demoniacs requested that Jesus allow him to follow Him (Mark 5:18). Our Lord granted the first two requests but not the third one.

Did Jesus have the right to destroy two thousand pigs and possibly put their owners out of business? If these men were Jews, then they had no right to be raising and selling unclean pigs anyway. However, this was Gentile territory, so the owners were probably Gentiles.

Certainly, Jesus was free to send the demons wherever He desired—into the abyss, into the swine, or to any other place that He chose. Then why send them into the swine? For one thing, by doing it that way, Jesus gave proof to all the spectators that a miracle of deliverance had really taken place. The destruction of the pigs also gave assurance to the two men that the unclean spirits were actually gone. But more than anything else, the drowning of the two thousand swine was a vivid object lesson to this Christ-rejecting crowd that, to Satan, a pig is as good as a man! In fact, Satan will make a man into a pig! The Lord was warning the citizens against the powers of sin and Satan. It was a dramatic sermon before their very eyes: “The wages of sin is death!”

The swineherds did not want to be blamed for the loss of the pigs, so they immediately ran to tell the owners what had happened. When the owners arrived at the scene, they were afraid as they beheld the dramatic changes that had taken place in the two men. Instead of running around naked, the men were clothed, seated, and in their right minds. They were new creatures (2 Cor. 5:17)!

Why would the owners ask Jesus to leave? Why not ask Him to stay and perform similar cures for others who were also in need? The owners had one main interest—business—and they were afraid that if Jesus remained any longer, He would do even more “damage” to the local economy! Our Lord does not stay

where He is not wanted, so He left. What an opportunity these people missed!

Why did Jesus not permit the healed demoniac to follow Him? The man's request was certainly motivated by love for the Lord Jesus, and what a testimony he had! But Jesus knew that the man's place was in his own home, with his loved ones, where he could bear witness to the Savior. After all, effective Christian living must begin at home, where people know us the best. If we honor God there, then we can consider offering ourselves for service elsewhere. This man became one of the earliest missionaries to the Gentiles. Jesus had to leave, but the man remained and bore faithful witness to the grace and power of Jesus Christ. We trust that many of those Gentiles believed on the Savior through his witness.

3. VICTORY OVER DISEASE (5:21–34)

One crowd sighed with relief as they saw Jesus leave, but another crowd was waiting to welcome Him when He returned home to Capernaum. In that latter crowd stood two people who were especially anxious to see Him—Jairus, a man with a dying daughter; and an anonymous woman suffering from an incurable disease. It was Jairus who approached Jesus first, but it was the woman who was first helped, so we shall begin with her.

The contrast between these two needy people is striking and reveals the wideness of Christ's love and mercy. Jairus was an important synagogue officer, and the woman was an anonymous "nobody," yet Jesus welcomed and helped both of them. Jairus was about to lose a daughter who had given him twelve years of happiness (Mark 5:42), and the woman was about to lose an affliction that had brought her twelve years of sorrow. Being a synagogue officer, Jairus was no doubt wealthy, but his wealth could not save his dying daughter. The woman was already bankrupt! She had given the doctors all of her money, and yet none of them could cure her. Both Jairus and the poor woman found the

answers to their needs at the feet of Jesus (Mark 5:22, 33).

The woman had a hemorrhage that was apparently incurable and was slowly destroying her. One can only imagine the pain and emotional pressure that sapped her strength day after day. When you consider her many disappointments with the doctors and the poverty it brought her, you wonder how she endured as long as she did. But there was one added burden: According to the law, she was ceremonially unclean, which greatly restricted both her religious and her social life (Lev. 15:19ff.). What a burden she carried!

However, she let nothing stand in her way as she pushed through the crowd and came to Jesus. She could have used any number of excuses to convince herself to stay away from Him. She might have said, "I'm not important enough to ask Jesus for help!" or "Look, He's going with Jairus, so I won't bother Him now." She could have argued that nothing else had helped her, so why try again? Or she might have concluded that it was not right to come to Jesus as a last resort, after visiting all those physicians. However, she laid aside all arguments and excuses and came by faith to Jesus.

What kind of faith did she have? It was weak, timid, and perhaps somewhat superstitious. She kept saying to herself that she had to touch His clothes in order to be healed (see Mark 3:10; 6:56). She had heard reports of others being healed by Jesus (Mark 5:27), so she made this one great attempt to get through to the Savior. She was not disappointed: Jesus honored her faith, weak as it was, and healed her body.

There is a good lesson here for all of us. Not everybody has the same degree of faith, but Jesus responds to faith no matter how feeble it might be. When we believe, He shares His power with us and something happens in our lives. There were many others in that crowd who were close to Jesus and even pressing against Him, but they experienced no miracles. Why? Because they did not have faith. It is one thing to throng Him and quite something else to trust Him.

The woman planned to slip away and get lost in the crowd, but Jesus turned

and stopped her. Tenderly, He elicited from her a wonderful testimony of what the Lord had done for her. Why did Jesus deal with her publicly? Why did He not simply permit her to remain anonymous and go her way?

For one thing, He did it for her own sake. He wanted to be to her something more than a healer: He wanted to be her Savior and Friend as well. He wanted her to look into His face, feel His tenderness, and hear His loving words of assurance. By the time He finished speaking to her, she experienced something more than physical healing. He called her “daughter” and sent her on her way with a benediction of peace (Mark 5:34). To “be made whole” meant much more than receiving mere physical healing. Jesus had given her spiritual healing as well!

He dealt with her publicly not only for her sake, but also for the sake of Jairus. His daughter was close to death, and he needed all the encouragement he could get. It was bad enough that the crowd was impeding their progress, but now this woman had to interfere and stop Jesus! When one of Jairus’s friends arrived and announced that the girl had died, no doubt Jairus felt that the end had come. The Lord’s words to the woman about faith and peace must have encouraged Jairus as much as they encouraged her.

Finally, Jesus dealt with her publicly that she might have the opportunity to share her testimony and glorify the Lord. “Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, whom he hath redeemed from the hand of the enemy.... He sent his word, and healed them.... Oh, that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men!” (Ps. 107:2, 20–21). No doubt some people in that crowd heard her words and trusted in the Savior, and when she arrived home, she already knew what it meant to witness for Christ.

4. VICTORY OVER DEATH (5:35–43)

It was not easy for Jairus to come to Jesus publicly and ask for His help. The

religious leaders who were opposed to Jesus would certainly not approve, nor would some of the other synagogue leaders. The things that Jesus had done and taught in the synagogues had aroused the anger of the scribes and Pharisees, some of whom were probably Jairus's friends. But Jairus was desperate, as many people are when they come to Jesus. He would rather lose his friends and save his beloved daughter.

It is beautiful to watch Jesus deal with Jairus and lead him to joyful victory. Throughout this entire event, it was our Lord's *words* that made the difference. Consider the three statements that He made.

(1) The word of faith (v. 36). At this point, Jairus had to believe either his friend or the Lord Jesus. No doubt all of his being responded with convulsive sorrow when he heard that his beloved daughter was dead. But Jesus assured him, "Be not afraid, go on believing" (literal translation). In other words, "You had a certain amount of faith when you came to Me, and your faith was helped when you saw what I did for that woman. Don't quit! Keep on believing!"

It was easier for Jairus to trust the Lord while his daughter was still alive, and while Jesus was still walking with him to his house. But when Jesus stopped to heal the woman, and when the friend came with the bad news, Jairus just about lost his faith. Let's not be too hard on him. We have probably given way to doubts when circumstances and feelings have overwhelmed us. Sometimes God has delayed, and we have wondered why. That is when we need that special "word of faith" from the Lord, and we receive it as we spend time in His Word.

(2) The word of hope (v. 39). When Jesus and Jairus arrived at the house, they saw and heard the professional Jewish mourners who were always summoned when a death occurred. It was traditional for them to wail loudly, to weep, and to lead the family and friends in lamentation. The presence of the mourners in the home is proof that the girl was actually dead, for the family would not have called them if there had been even the slightest hope that the girl was still alive.

“The child is not dead but sleeps!” were our Lord’s words of hope to Jairus and his wife. To the believer, death is only sleep, for the body rests until the moment of resurrection (1 Thess. 4:13–18). The spirit does not sleep, for in death, the spirit of the believer leaves the body (James 2:26) and goes to be with Christ (Phil. 1:20–23). It is the body that sleeps, awaiting the return of the Lord and the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:51–58). This truth is a great encouragement to all of us who have had Christian loved ones and friends depart in death. It is His word of hope to us.

(3) The word of love and power (v. 41). Unbelief laughs at God’s Word, but faith lays hold of it and experiences the power of God. Jesus did not make a spectacle of this miracle. He was sensitive to the feelings of the parents and grieved by the scornful attitude of the mourners. *Talitha cumi* is Aramaic for “Little girl, get up!” Jesus added, “I say unto thee” (with the emphasis on the *I*), because it was by His authority that her spirit returned to her body (Luke 8:55). The words were not some magic formula that anybody might use to raise the dead.

The girl not only came back to life, but was also healed of her sickness, for she was able to get out of bed and walk around. Always the loving Physician, Jesus instructed the astounded parents to give her some food lest she have a relapse. Divine miracles never replace common sense human care, otherwise we are tempting God.

As with previous miracles, Jesus told the witnesses to keep quiet (Mark 1:44; 3:12). Perhaps the word got out from the mourners that the girl had been “in a coma” and had not actually been dead. According to them, there had not been a miracle after all! However, there had been witnesses to the miracle. The law required only two or three witnesses for confirmation of truth (Deut. 17:6; 19:15), but for this miracle there were *five* witnesses! We have reason to conclude that Jairus and his wife became believers in Jesus Christ, though there is no further mention of them in the gospel record. All her life, the daughter was

a witness to the power of Jesus Christ.

Yes, God's Servant is the conqueror over danger, demons, disease, and death. This series of miracles illustrates how Jesus met and helped all kinds of people, from His own disciples to a pair of demoniacs, and it assures us that He is able to help us today.

This does not mean that God *always* must rescue His people from danger (see Acts 12) or heal every affliction (see 2 Cor. 12:1–10), but it does mean that He holds the ultimate authority and that we need never fear. We are “more than conquerors through him that loved us” (Rom. 8:37).

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How can you explain the fact that the disciples saw Jesus do miracles and heard Him teach, yet were surprised that He could still the storm?
2. Why are we often amazed when we pray for something and God answers?
3. Discuss some reasons why difficult circumstances cause us to doubt God's care for us.
4. If we had an easy life, with no trials, do you think our faith would blossom

more? What leads you to think that?

5. Wiersbe notes that Satan took away everything from the men controlled by demons: their jobs, their family, their friends. In what situations do you see Satan doing that today?
6. Discuss the courage and faith you think was involved for the sick woman to push through the crowd and believe Jesus could heal her. What was she risking?
7. If you had been Jairus, standing and waiting for Jesus to come and see about your daughter, how would witnessing this woman's healing have affected you?
8. What kind of faith did it take for Jairus to keep believing Jesus could make a difference even after he heard that his daughter was dead? Why?
9. As Jesus traveled through crowds of needy people, how do you think He decided whom to respond to?
10. For what do you need courage and faith?

Chapter Five

Will Anyone Trust God's Servant?

(Mark 6)

Charles Darwin said that *belief* was “the most complete of all distinctions between man and the lower animals.” If this observation is true, it suggests that lack of faith on man's part puts him on the same level as the animals! Agnostic orator Col. Robert Ingersoll took a different point of view, for he once described a believer as “a songless bird in a cage.” You would probably agree that his words better describe an *unbeliever*!

One of the central themes in this section of Mark's gospel is the unbelief of people who came into contact with God's Servant. All of these people had every reason to trust Jesus Christ, yet all of them failed to do so, including His own disciples! As you study this chapter, keep in mind the solemn admonition of Hebrews 3:12: “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God.” God takes unbelief seriously, and so should we.

THE UNBELIEF OF HIS ACQUAINTANCES (6:1–6)

Jesus returned to Nazareth, where a year before He had been rejected by the people and evicted from the synagogue (Luke 4:16–30). It was certainly an act of grace on His part to give the people another opportunity to hear His Word,

believe, and be saved, and yet their hearts were still hard. This time, they did not evict Him: they simply did not take Him seriously.

Our Lord's reputation had once again preceded Him, so He was permitted to teach in the synagogue. Keep in mind that He was ministering to people who knew Him well, because Nazareth was His "hometown." However, these acquaintances had no spiritual perception at all. In fact, Jesus reminded them of what He had told them at that first dramatic visit, that a prophet is without honor in his own country and among his own people (Mark 6:4; Luke 4:24; John 4:44).

Two things astonished these people: His mighty works and His wonderful wisdom. Actually, Jesus did not do any mighty works while He was there, so the people must have been referring to the reports they had heard about His miracles (see Mark 1:28, 45; 3:7–8; 5:20–21). In fact, their unbelief hindered Jesus from having a greater ministry among them.

What was their problem? Why were they unable to trust Him and experience the wonders of His power and grace as had others? *They thought that they really knew Him.* After all, He had been their neighbor for nearly thirty years, they had seen Him at work in the carpenter's shop, and He appeared to be just another Nazarene. He was a "commoner," and the people saw no reason to commit themselves to Him!

"Familiarity breeds contempt" is a well-known maxim that goes all the way back to Publius the Syrian, who lived in 2 BC. Aesop wrote a fable to illustrate it. In Aesop's fable, a fox had never before seen a lion, and when he first met the king of the beasts, the fox was nearly frightened to death. At their second meeting, the fox was not frightened quite as much; and the third time he met the lion, the fox went up and chatted with him! "And so it is," Aesop concluded, "that familiarity makes even the most frightening things seem quite harmless."

The maxim, however, must be taken with a grain of salt. For example, can you imagine a loving husband and wife thinking less of each other because they know each other so well? Or two dear friends starting to despise each other

because their friendship has deepened over the years? Phillips Brooks said it best: “Familiarity breeds contempt, only with contemptible things or among contemptible people.” The contempt shown by the Nazarenes said nothing about Jesus Christ, but it said a great deal about them!

A tourist, eager to see everything in the art gallery, fled from picture to picture, scarcely noticing what was in the frames. “I didn’t see anything very special here,” he said to one of the guards as he left. “Sir,” the guard replied, “it is not the pictures that are on trial here—it is the visitors.”

A carpenter was a respected artisan in that day, but nobody expected a carpenter to do miracles or teach profound truths in the synagogue. Where did He get all this power and wisdom? From God or from Satan (see Mark 3:22)? And why did His brothers and sisters not possess this same power and wisdom? Even more, why did His brothers and sisters not believe in Him? The people who called Him “the son of Mary” were actually insulting Him, because in that day you identified a man by calling him the son of his father, not the son of his mother.

The people of Nazareth were “offended at him,” which literally means “they stumbled over him.” The Greek word gives us our English word *scandalize*. Kenneth Wuest wrote in his book *Wuest’s Word Studies* (Eerdmans), “They could not explain Him, so they rejected Him.” Jesus was certainly a “stone of stumbling” to them because of their unbelief (Isa. 8:14; Rom. 9:32–33; 1 Peter 2:8).

Twice in the gospel record you find Jesus marveling. As this passage reveals, He marveled at the unbelief of the Jews, and He marveled at the great faith of a Roman centurion, a Gentile (Luke 7:9). Instead of remaining at Nazareth, Jesus departed and made another circuit of the towns and villages in Galilee. His heart was broken as He saw the desperate plight of the people (Matt. 9:35–38), so He decided to send out His disciples to minister with His authority and power.

THE UNBELIEF OF HIS ENEMIES (6:7–29)

When the Lord originally called the twelve apostles, His purpose was to teach and train them so that they might assist Him and eventually be able to take His place when He returned to the Father (Mark 3:13–15). Before sending them out, He reaffirmed their authority to heal and to cast out demons (Mark 6:7), and He gave them some pointed instructions (see Matt. 10 for a more detailed account of this sermon).

He told them to take what they already owned and not go out and buy special equipment for their itinerant travels. They were not to be loaded down with extra baggage. (You cannot miss the note of urgency in this “commissioning sermon.”) Jesus wanted them to be adequately supplied, but not to the point of ceasing to live by faith. The word *bag* means “a beggar’s bag.” They were definitely not to beg for either food or money.

As they ministered from place to place, they would encounter both hospitality and hostility, both friends and enemies. He cautioned them to stay at one house in each community and not to “pick and choose” when it came to their food and accommodations. After all, they were there to be profitable servants, not pampered guests. If a house or a village did not receive them, they had His permission to declare God’s judgment on those people. It was customary for the Jews to shake the dust off their feet whenever they left Gentile territory, but for Jews to do this to their fellow Jews would be something new (Luke 10:10–11; Acts 13:51).

The word translated “send” in Mark 6:7 is *apostello* in the Greek and gives us our English word *apostle*. It means “to send someone with a special commission to represent another and to accomplish his work.” Jesus gave these twelve men both the apostolic authority and the divine ability to do the job He sent them to do. They were not “on their own”; they represented Him in all that they did and said.

We noted before (Mark 3:16–19) that a comparison of the lists of the apostles’ names reveals that the names are given in several pairs: Peter and Andrew, James and John, Philip and Bartholomew, *etc.* Jesus sent them out in pairs because it is always easier and safer for servants to travel and work together. “Two are better than one” (Eccl. 4:9), and the law, as previously observed, required two witnesses to verify a matter (Deut. 17:6; 19:15; 2 Cor. 13:1). They would not only help each other; they would also learn from each other.

The men went out and did what Jesus told them to do. It is remarkable that a band of ordinary men could go out in this way to represent Almighty God, and that they could demonstrate their authority by performing miracles. God’s commandments always include His enablements (2 Cor. 3:5–6). They proclaimed the good news of the kingdom, called on sinners to repent, and healed many who were sick (Mark 6:12–13; Luke 9:6).

The reports of Christ’s ministry, augmented by that of His disciples (Luke 9:7), even reached into the palace of Herod Antipas. Mark called him “King,” which is what Herod wanted to be called, but in reality, godless Herod was only a tetrarch, the ruler of a fourth part of the nation. When Herod the Great died, the Romans divided his territory among his three sons, and Antipas was made tetrarch of Perea and Galilee.

Herod Antipas had married the daughter of King Aretas IV and then had divorced her so he could marry Herodias, the wife of his half-brother, Herod Philip. It was a wicked alliance that was contrary to the law of Moses (Lev. 18:16; 20:21), and the fearless John the Baptist had denounced the king for his sins. When Herod heard about the wonderful works of Jesus, he was sure that John the Baptist had come back from the dead to haunt him and condemn him! Herod’s conscience was bothering him, but he was unwilling to face his sins honestly and repent.

At this point, Mark shifted into a flashback to explain how John the Baptist

had been cruelly and unjustly arrested and slain. Even in this brief account, we sense the tension in the palace, for Herod feared John, privately listened to him preach, and was in a state of perplexity over what he should do. “Queen” Herodias, on the other hand, hated John, wanted to kill him, and patiently waited for the most convenient time. In their evil character and lawless deeds, these two remind us of Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kings 18—21).

The “strategic day” came (Mark 6:21 NASB) for Herodias to put her plan into action: the celebration of Herod’s birthday. Royal feasts were extravagant both in their display of wealth and in their provision for pleasure. The Jews would not have permitted a woman to dance before a group of men, and most Gentile mothers would have forbidden a daughter to do what the daughter of Herodias did. (History informs us that the girl’s name was Salome.) But the girl was a part of the mother’s plan to get rid of John the Baptist, and Salome played her part well.

When Herod heard the girl’s macabre request, he was “greatly distressed” (see Mark 14:34, where the same verb is used of Jesus), but he had to be true to his promise or lose face before a group of influential people. The word *oath* in Mark 6:26 is actually in the plural—“for his many oaths’ sake”—because Herod had repeatedly declared his desire to reward the girl for her performance. This was one way he had of impressing his guests, but it backfired. Herod had not been courageous enough to obey John’s word, but now he had to obey his own word! The result was the death of an innocent man.

It is remarkable that there is no evidence that any of the Jewish leaders did anything to rescue John the Baptist after he had been arrested. The common people considered John a prophet sent from God, but the religious leaders did not obey John’s message (Mark 11:27–33). John’s death was the first of three notable violent deaths in the history of Israel. The other two are the crucifixion of Christ and the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7). For the significance of these

events, review the comments on Mark 3:22–30. Herod had feared that John’s messages would stir up a revolt among the people, something he wanted to avoid. Also, he wanted to please his wife, even though it meant the murdering of a godly man.

John’s disciples were permitted to take the body of their leader and bury it, and then they went to tell Jesus what had happened (Matt. 14:12). No doubt the report of John’s death deeply stirred our Lord, for He knew that one day His own life would be laid down.

We meet Herod Antipas one more time in the Gospels, when he “tried” Jesus and hoped to see the Lord perform a miracle (Luke 23:6–12). Jesus would not even speak to this adulterer and murderer, let alone please him by doing a miracle! Jesus called Herod a “fox” (Luke 13:31–35), an apt description of this crafty man. In AD 39, Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:1), nephew of Herod Antipas, denounced his uncle to the Roman emperor, and Antipas was deposed and sent into exile. “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36).

THE UNBELIEF OF HIS DISCIPLES (6:30–56)

Jesus took His disciples to a secluded place so that they might rest after their labors. He wanted to discuss their ministry with them and prepare them for their next mission. As Vance Havner has said, “If you don’t come apart and rest, you will come apart.” Even God’s Servant-Son needed time to rest, fellowship with His friends, and find renewal from the Father.

Another factor was the growing opposition of both the political and the religious leaders. Herod’s murder of John the Baptist was evidence enough that the “climate” was now changing and that Jesus and His disciples had to be careful. In the next chapter, we shall encounter the hostility of the Jewish religious leaders, and, of course, the political enthusiasm of the crowds was

always a problem (John 6:15ff.). The best thing to do was to get away.

But the overzealous crowds would not leave Him alone. They followed Him to the area near Bethsaida, hoping to see Him perform some miraculous cures (Luke 9:10–11; John 6:1ff.). In spite of the interruption to His plans, the Lord welcomed them, taught them the Word, and healed those who were afflicted. Having experienced interruptions many times in my own life and ministry, I marvel at His patience and grace! What an example for us to follow!

Mark recorded two miracles that Jesus performed.

(1) The feeding of the five thousand (vv. 33–44). Jesus sent the twelve apostles out to minister because He had compassion on the needy multitudes (Matt. 9:36–38). This time, the needy multitudes came to them—and the disciples wanted to send them away! As yet, they had not learned to look at life through the eyes of their Master. To them, the crowds were a problem, perhaps even a nuisance, but to Jesus, they were as sheep without a shepherd.

When D. L. Moody was building his great Sunday school in Chicago, children came to him from everywhere. They often passed by other churches and Sunday schools to be with Mr. Moody. When asked why he walked so far to attend Moody's Sunday school, one boy replied, "Because they love a fella over there!" The children could tell the difference.

The disciples had two suggestions for solving the problem: either send the people away to find their own food, or raise enough money to buy a bit of bread for everybody. As far as the disciples were concerned, they were in the wrong place at the wrong time, and nothing could be done! With that kind of approach, they would have made ideal committee members! Someone has defined a committee as a group of people who individually can do nothing and collectively decide that nothing can be done.

Jesus looked at the situation, not as a problem, but as an opportunity to trust the Father and glorify His name. An effective leader is someone who sees potential in problems and is willing to act by faith. Acting on the basis of human

wisdom, His disciples saw the problem but not the potential. How many times God's people have complained, "If we only had enough money, we could do something!" Two hundred pence (denarii) would be the equivalent of a year's wages for the average laborer! The first step is not to measure *our* resources, but to determine God's will and trust Him to meet the need.

It was Andrew who found the lad with the lunch (John 6:8–9). The Lord had the people sit down in organized groups on the green grass (see Ps. 23:2; 78:19), quite a contrast to Herod's glittering sensual feast. Jesus took the little lunch, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to the disciples to distribute to the hungry people. The miracle took place in His hands, not in theirs, for whatever we give to Him, He can bless and multiply. We are not manufacturers; we are only distributors.

John tells us that Jesus used this miracle as the basis for a sermon on "the bread of life" (John 6:22ff.). After all, He did not perform miracles just to meet human needs, though that was important. He wanted each miracle to be a revelation of Himself, a sermon in action. For the most part, the people were amazed at the miracles, appreciated the help He gave them, but failed to get the spiritual message (John 12:37). They wanted the gift but not the Giver, the enjoyment of physical blessings but not the enrichment of spiritual blessings.

(2) The stilling of the storm (vv. 45–56). A number of miracles were involved in this event: Jesus walking on the water, Peter walking on the water (Mark did not record this; see Matt. 14:28–32), Jesus stilling the storm, and the boat arriving on shore the instant Jesus entered it (John 6:21). It was certainly a "night of wonders" for the Twelve!

Why did Jesus compel His disciples to leave? Because the crowd was getting restless, and there was danger they might start a popular uprising to make Jesus king (John 6:14–15). The Twelve were not ready to face this kind of test, because their ideas of the kingdom were still too national and political.

There was a second reason: He wanted to teach them a lesson on faith that would help prepare them for the work that lay ahead of them after He was gone.

The disciples had just completed a very successful mission, healing the sick and preaching the gospel. They had shared in the miraculous feeding of five thousand people. They were on a “spiritual high,” and this in itself was dangerous. It is good to be on the mountaintop if you don’t get careless and step off a cliff.

Spiritual blessings must be balanced with burdens and battles, otherwise, we may become pampered children instead of mature sons and daughters. On a previous occasion, Jesus had led His disciples into a storm following an exciting day of teaching (Mark 4:35–41). Now, after a time of miraculous ministry, He again led them into a storm. In the book of Acts, it is interesting to note that the “storm” of official persecution began after the disciples had won five thousand people to Christ (Acts 4:1–4). Perhaps while they were in confinement, the apostles recalled the storm that followed the feeding of the five thousand, and they must have encouraged themselves with the assurance that Jesus would come to them and see them through.

Each new experience of testing demands of us more faith and courage. In that first storm experience, the disciples had Jesus in the boat with them, but this time, He was on the mountain praying for them. He was teaching them to live by faith. (For that matter, even when He was in the ship with them, they were still afraid!) The scene illustrates the situation of God’s people today: We are in the midst of this stormy world, toiling and seemingly ready to sink, but He is in glory interceding for us. When the hour seems the darkest, He will come to us—and we will reach shore!

The waves that frightened the disciples (including the fishermen in the group) were only stairsteps to bring the Lord Jesus to them. He waited until their situation was so desperate that they could do nothing to help themselves. But why did He act as though He would pass them by? Because He wanted them to recognize Him, trust Him, and invite Him into the ship. They did not recognize Him, but instead screamed with fear because they thought He was a ghost!

Jesus reassured them with His word: “Take courage; it is I, do not be afraid” (Mark 6:50 NASB). At this point, Peter asked Jesus to let him walk on the water, but Mark omits this detail. Tradition says that Mark wrote as Peter’s spokesman, so perhaps Peter was reticent to include this experience lest it give people the wrong impression. It is easy to criticize Peter for sinking—but have you ever gotten out of the boat yourself?

The disciples had failed their test because they lacked spiritual insight and receptive hearts. The miracle of the loaves and fishes had made no lasting impression on them. After all, if Jesus could multiply food and feed thousands of people, then surely He could protect them in the storm. Even a disciple of Jesus Christ can develop a hard heart if he fails to respond to the spiritual lessons that must be learned in the course of life and ministry.

As you review these two miracles, you see that Jesus Christ brings *provision* and *protection*. “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.... I will fear no evil” (Ps. 23:1, 4). If we trust Him, we will always have sufficiency and security, no matter what the situation might be. The important thing is that we trust Him.

Mark closed this section on a positive note as he described the people who brought their sick for Jesus to heal. These people had faith and their faith was rewarded. This scene is in contrast to that in Nazareth, where very few were healed because the people lacked faith.

“And this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith” (1 John 5:4). Trust the Servant! He never fails.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How do you define what it means to believe in something or someone?
2. From what you remember about Jesus' life, what would have convinced you that He was truly the Son of God?
3. What dynamics of a "hometown" would have made it difficult for the people of Nazareth to take Jesus seriously?
4. What today tempts us to take for granted that we know everything we need to know about Jesus?
5. What do you think would have been the greatest difficulty in being a disciple of Jesus?
6. What do you think would have been the greatest joy in being a disciple of Jesus?
7. To what contemporary evil or notorious character would you compare the wife of Herod who requested John the Baptist's head on a platter? Explain.
8. Make a list of what Jesus taught about God's nature when He fed the five thousand hungry people with only a small lunch.

9. What kinds of things did Jesus teach the disciples about God's nature when He walked across the water to their boat during a storm?
10. What does Peter's experience of walking on water teach you about faith that is relevant to your life currently?

Chapter Seven

The Servant's Secrets

(Mark 8:27—9:50)

A secret has been defined as “something you tell one person at a time.” From time to time, Jesus shared special “secrets” with His disciples, and three of them are given here. Believers today need to understand and apply these spiritual secrets if their own lives are to be all that God wants them to be.

1. SUFFERING LEADS TO GLORY (8:27—9:13)

Jesus had been preparing His disciples for this private meeting at which He intended to reveal to them what would happen to Him at Jerusalem. He had given hints along the way, but now He would explain matters to them more fully. For the site, He selected Caesarea Philippi, a town about twenty-five miles north of Bethsaida, sitting at the foot of beautiful Mount Hermon. The town was named after Augustus Caesar and Herod Philip, and it contained a marble temple dedicated to Augustus. It was a place dedicated to the glory of Rome, and that glory is now gone, but the glory of Jesus Christ remains and will go on eternally.

Confession (8:27–30). If you were to go around asking your friends, “What do people say about me?” they would take it as an evidence of pride. What difference does it really make what people think or say about us? We are not that important! But what people believe and say about Jesus Christ *is* important, for

He is the Son of God and the only Savior of sinners.

Your confession concerning Jesus Christ is a matter of life or death (John 8:21, 24; 1 John 2:22–27; 4:1–3). The citizens of Caesarea Philippi would say, “Caesar is lord!” That confession might identify them as loyal Roman citizens, but it could never save them from their sins and from eternal hell. The only confession that saves us is “Jesus is Lord!” (1 Cor. 12:1–3) when it comes from a heart that truly believes in Him (Rom. 10:9–10).

It is remarkable the number of different opinions the people held about Jesus, though the same situation probably exists today. That some thought He was John the Baptist is especially perplexing, since John and Jesus had been seen publicly together. They were quite different in personality and ministry (Matt. 11:16–19), so it seems strange that the people would confuse them.

John the Baptist came “in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17), in a ministry of judgment, whereas Jesus came in a spirit of meekness and service. John performed no miracles (John 10:41), but Jesus was a miracle-worker. John even dressed like the prophet Elijah (2 Kings 1:8; Mark 1:6). How could the people confuse the two?

Some said that Jesus was one of the prophets, perhaps Jeremiah (Matt. 16:14). Jeremiah was “the weeping prophet,” and Jesus was a Man of Sorrows, so there is a definite parallel. Jeremiah called the people to true repentance from the heart, and so did Jesus. Both men were misunderstood and rejected by their own people, both condemned the false religious leaders and the hypocritical worship in the temple, and both were persecuted by those in authority.

In His words and His works, Jesus gave every evidence to the people that He was the Son of God, the Messiah, and yet they did not get the message. Instead of diligently seeking for the truth, the people listened to popular opinion and followed it, just as many people do today. They had opinions instead of convictions, and this is what led them astray. Elbert Hubbard defined public opinion as “the judgment of the incapable many, opposed to that of the

discerning few.” Thank God for the discerning few!

Peter’s confession was bold and uncompromising, just as ours should be: “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16). The word *Christ* means “the Anointed One, the promised Messiah.” Prophets, priests, and kings were all anointed when installed in their offices, and our Lord holds all three offices.

Why did Jesus warn them to keep quiet about Him? For one thing, the disciples themselves still had much to learn about Him and what it truly meant to follow Him. The religious leaders of the nation had already made up their minds about Him, and to proclaim Him as Messiah now would only upset God’s plans. The common people wanted to see His miracles, but they had little desire to submit to His message. To announce Him as Messiah might well result in a political uprising that would only do harm.

Confusion (8:31–38). Now that they had confessed their faith in Christ (but see John 6:66–71), the disciples were ready for the “secret” Jesus wanted to share with them: He was going with them to Jerusalem, where He would die on a cross. From this point on, Mark will focus on their journey to Jerusalem, and the emphasis will be on Jesus’ approaching death and resurrection (Mark 9:30–32; 10:32–34).

This announcement stunned the disciples. If He is indeed the Christ of God, as they had confessed, then why would He be rejected by the religious leaders? Why would these leaders crucify Him? Did not the Old Testament Scriptures promise that the Messiah would defeat all their enemies and establish a glorious kingdom for Israel? There was something wrong somewhere and the disciples were confused.

True to character, it was Peter who expressed their concern. One minute Peter was led by God to confess his faith in Jesus Christ (Matt. 16:17), and the next minute he was thinking like an unbelieving man and expressing the thoughts of Satan! This is a warning to us that when we argue with God’s Word,

we open the door for Satan's lies. Peter began rebuking his Master, and Mark used the same word that describes our Lord's rebuking of the demons (Mark 1:25; 3:12).

Peter's protest was born out of his ignorance of God's will and his deep love for his Lord. One minute Peter was a "rock," and the next minute he was a stumbling block! Dr. G. Campbell Morgan said, "The man who loves Jesus, but who shuns God's method, is a stumbling block to Him." Peter did not yet understand the relationship between suffering and glory. He would eventually learn this lesson and would even emphasize it in his first epistle (note 1 Peter 1:6–8; 4:13—5:10).

Note, however, that when Jesus rebuked Peter, He also "looked on his disciples," because they agreed with Peter's assessment of the situation! Steeped in Jewish traditional interpretation, they were unable to understand how their Messiah could ever suffer and die. To be sure, some of the prophets had written about the Messiah's sufferings, but much more had been written about the Messiah's glory. Some rabbis even taught that there would be *two* Messiahs, one who would suffer and one who would reign (see 1 Peter 1:10–12). No wonder the disciples were confused.

But the problem was more than theological; it was very practical. Jesus had called these men to follow Him, and they knew that whatever happened to Him would happen to them. If there was a cross in *His* future, there would be one in *their* future as well. That would be reason enough to disagree with Him! In spite of their devotion to Him, the disciples were still ignorant of the true relationship between the cross and the crown. They were following Satan's philosophy (glory without suffering) instead of God's philosophy (suffering transformed into glory). Which philosophy you accept will determine how you live and how you serve.

Mark 8:34 indicates that, though Jesus and His disciples had met in private, the crowds were not far away. Jesus summoned the people and taught them what

He taught His own disciples: *There is a price to pay for true discipleship*. He knew that the crowds were following Him only because of the miracles, and that most of the people were unwilling to pay the price to become true disciples.

Jesus laid down three conditions for true discipleship: (1) we must surrender ourselves completely to Him; (2) we must identify with Him in suffering and death; and (3) we must follow Him obediently, wherever He leads. If we live for ourselves, we will lose ourselves, but if we lose ourselves for His sake and the gospel's, we will find ourselves.

Denying self is not the same as self-denial. We practice self-denial when, for a good purpose, we occasionally give up things or activities. But we deny self when we surrender ourselves to Christ and determine to obey His will. This once-for-all dedication is followed by a daily "dying to self" as we take up the cross and follow Him. From the human point of view, we are losing ourselves, but from the divine perspective, we are finding ourselves. When we live for Christ, we become more like Him, and this brings out our own unique individuality.

But note the motivation for true discipleship: "for my sake and the gospel's" (Mark 8:35). To lose yourself is not an act of desperation; it is an act of devotion. But we do not stop there: Personal devotion should lead to practical duty, the sharing of the gospel with a lost world. "For my sake" could lead to selfish religious isolationism, so it must be balanced with "and the gospel's." Because we live for Him, we live for others.

Discipleship is a matter of profit and loss, a question of whether we will *waste* our lives or *invest* our lives. Note the severe warning Jesus gives us here: Once we have spent our lives, we cannot buy them back! Remember, He was instructing His *disciples*, men who had already confessed Him as the Son of God. He was not telling them how to be saved and go to heaven, but how to save their lives and make the most of their opportunities on earth. "Losing your soul" is the equivalent of wasting your life, missing the great opportunities God gives

you to make your life count. You may “gain the whole world” and be a success in the eyes of men, and yet have nothing to show for your life when you stand before God. If that happens, though you may own the whole world, it would not be a sufficient price to give to God to buy another chance at life.

Is there any reward for the person who is a true disciple? Yes, there is: He becomes more like Jesus Christ and one day shares in His glory. Satan promises you glory, but in the end, you receive suffering. God promises you suffering, but in the end, that suffering is transformed into glory. If we acknowledge Christ and live for Him, He will one day acknowledge us and share His glory with us.

Confirmation (9:1–8). It takes faith to accept and practice this lesson on discipleship, so six days later the Lord gave a dazzling proof that God indeed does transform suffering into glory. (Luke’s “about eight days” is inclusive of the day of the lesson and the day of the glory, Luke 9:28.) He took Peter, James, and John to the top of a mountain (it may have been Mount Hermon), and there He revealed His glory. This event was a vivid confirmation of His words as recorded in Mark 8:38, as well as a demonstration of the glory of the future kingdom (Mark 9:1; John 1:14; 2 Peter 1:12–21). The message was clear: first the suffering, then the glory.

Moses represented the law and Elijah the prophets, both of which find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ (Luke 24:25–27; Heb. 1:1–2). Moses had died and his body was buried, but Elijah had been raptured to heaven (2 Kings 2:11). When Jesus returns, He will raise the bodies of the saints who died and will rapture the living saints (1 Thess. 4:13–18). Jesus will one day establish His glorious kingdom and fulfill the many promises made through the prophets. Christ’s sufferings and death would not *prevent* God from establishing His kingdom; rather, by solving the sin problem in God’s world, the cross would help to make the kingdom possible.

The word *transfigured* describes a change on the outside that comes from the inside. It is the opposite of “masquerade,” which is an outward change that

does not come from within. Jesus allowed His glory to radiate through His whole being, and the mountaintop became a Holy of Holies! As you meditate on this event, keep in mind that He has shared this glory with us and promised us a glorious home forever (John 17:22–24). According to Romans 12:1–2 and 2 Corinthians 3:18, believers today can experience this same transfiguration glory.

The three disciples had gone to sleep while Jesus was praying (Luke 9:29, 32), a failure they would repeat in the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32–42). They almost missed seeing Moses and Elijah and Jesus in His glory! Peter's suggestion reflects again human thinking and not divine wisdom. How wonderful it would be to stay on the mountaintop and bask in His glory! But discipleship means denying self, taking up a cross, and following Him, and you cannot do that and selfishly stay on the mount of glory. There are needs to be met in the valley below. If we want to share the glory of Christ on the mountaintop, we must be willing to follow Him into the sufferings of the valley below.

The Father interrupted Peter's speech and focused their attention, not on the vision, but on the Word of God: "Hear him!" The memory of visions will fade, but the unchanging Word abides forever. The glorious vision was not an end in itself; it was God's way of confirming the Word (see 2 Peter 1:12–21). Discipleship is not built on spectacular visions but on the inspired, unchanging Word of God. Nor do we put Moses, Elijah, and Jesus on the same level, as Peter hinted. It is "Jesus only"—His Word, His will, His kingdom, and His glory.

The three men were not allowed to tell the other nine what they had seen on the mount. No doubt their explanation after His resurrection brought great encouragement to the believers who themselves would experience suffering and death for His sake.

Correction (9:11–13). The disciples now understood God's plan much better, but they were still confused about the coming of Elijah to prepare the way

for the Messiah. They knew the prophecies in Malachi 3:1 and 4:5–6, and that their teachers expected these prophecies to be fulfilled before the Messiah appeared (John 1:21). Had Elijah already come and they missed him, or was he yet to come? Perhaps the appearing of Elijah on the mount was the fulfillment of the prophecy.

Jesus made two facts clear. First, for those who had trusted in Him, this “Elijah” was John the Baptist, for John had indeed prepared the way before Him. John had denied that he was Elijah come from the dead (John 1:21, 25), but he did minister in the “spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:16–17). Second, there would be a future coming of Elijah, just as Malachi had predicted (Matt. 17:11), before the time of great tribulation. Some students connect this with Revelation 11:2–12. The nation did not accept John’s ministry. Had they received John, he would have served as the “Elijah” God sent, and they also would have received Jesus. Instead, they rejected both men and allowed them to be slain.

2. POWER COMES FROM FAITH (9:14–29)

The Christian life is “a land of hills and valleys” (Deut. 11:11). In one day, a disciple can move from the glory of heaven to the attacks of hell. When our Lord and His three friends returned to the other nine disciples, they found them involved in a dual problem: They were unable to deliver a boy from demonic control, and the scribes were debating with them and perhaps even taunting them because of their failure. As always, it was Jesus who stepped in to solve the problem.

The boy was both deaf and dumb (Mark 9:17, 25), and the demon was doing his best to destroy him. Imagine what it would be like for that father to try to care for the boy and protect him! Jesus had given His disciples authority to cast out demons (Mark 6:7, 13), and yet their ministry to the boy was ineffective. No wonder the Lord was grieved with them! How often He must be grieved with us

when we fail to use the spiritual resources He has graciously given to His people!

Since the disciples had failed, the desperate father was not even sure that Jesus could succeed; hence his statement, “If you can do anything” (Mark 9:22 NASB). However, the father was honest enough to admit his own unbelief and to ask the Lord to help him and his son. Jesus did cast out the demon and restore the boy to his father.

The main lesson of this miracle is the power of faith to overcome the enemy (Mark 9:19, 23–24; and see Matt. 17:20). Why had the nine disciples failed? Because they had been careless in their personal spiritual walk and had neglected prayer and fasting (Mark 9:29). The authority that Jesus had given them was effective only if exercised by faith, but faith must be cultivated through spiritual discipline and devotion. It may be that the absence of their Lord, or His taking the three disciples with Him and leaving them behind, had dampened their spiritual fervor and diminished their faith. Not only did their failure embarrass them, but it also robbed the Lord of glory and gave the enemy opportunity to criticize. It is our faith in Him that glorifies God (Rom. 4:20).

3. SERVICE LEADS TO HONOR (9:30–50)

Jesus was still leading His disciples to Jerusalem, and as they went, He reminded them of what would happen to Him there. Note that He also reminded them of His resurrection, but they were unable to understand what He was saying (see Matt. 17:9). They were “exceedingly sorry” (“deeply grieved,” Matt. 17:23 NASB).

However, they were not grieved enough to set aside their personal dispute over which of them was the greatest! After they heard what Jesus had said about His own suffering and death, you would think they would have forgotten their own selfish plans and concentrated on Him. Perhaps the fact that Peter, James, and John had gone on the mount with Jesus had added some fuel to the fires of

competition.

To teach them (and us) a lesson on honor, Jesus set a child before them and explained that the way to be first is to be last, and the way to be last is to be the servant of all. The unspoiled child is an example of submission and humility. A child knows he is a child and acts like a child, and that is his secret of attracting love and care. The child who tries to impress us by acting like an adult does not get the same attention.

True humility means knowing yourself, accepting yourself, being yourself—your *best* self—and giving of yourself for others. The world’s philosophy is that you are “great” if others are working for you, but Christ’s message is that greatness comes from our serving others. Since the words *child* and *servant* are the same in the Aramaic language, it is easy to see why Jesus connected the two. If we have the heart of a child, we will have little difficulty being servants, and if we have the attitude of servants, we will welcome the children as the representatives of Jesus Christ and the Father.

At this point, John felt it necessary to defend the disciples (Mark 9:38–41) by pointing out their zeal. Imagine telling a man to stop casting out demons when the nine disciples had failed to deliver the deaf and dumb boy from Satan’s power! To use the name of Jesus is the same as working under His authority, so the men had no right to stop the man. “To his own master he standeth or falleth” (Rom. 14:4).

Mark 9:40 should be compared with Matthew 12:30: “He that is not with me is against me.” Both statements declare the impossibility of neutrality when it comes to our relationship with Jesus Christ. Since we cannot be neutral, if we are not for Him, we must be against Him; if we are not against Him, we must be for Him. The anonymous exorcist was bringing glory to His name, so he had to be *for* the Savior and not against Him.

But it is not necessary to perform great miracles to prove our love for Christ. When we lovingly receive a child or compassionately share a cup of cold water,

we are giving evidence that we have the humble heart of a servant. After all, we are serving Christ, and that is the highest service in the world (Matt. 25:31–46).

Jesus did not treat John’s statement lightly; in fact, He went on to explain the danger of causing others to stumble and therefore stop serving the Lord (Mark 9:42–50). “These little ones” refers to all God’s children who follow Christ and seek to serve Him. The way believers treat others in the family of God is a serious thing, and God wants us to “have peace one with another” (Mark 9:50). The disciples did not get along with each other, nor did they get along with other believers!

This solemn message about hell carries a warning to all of us to deal drastically with sin. Whatever in our lives makes us stumble, and therefore causes others to stumble, must be removed as if by surgery. The hand, foot, and eye would be considered valuable parts of the body, yet they must be removed if they are causing sin. Of course, the Lord is not commanding literal physical surgery, since He had already made it clear that sin comes from the heart (Mark 7:20–23). What He is teaching is that sin is to the inner person what a cancerous tumor is to the body, and it must be dealt with drastically.

Some people are shocked to hear from the lips of Jesus such frightening words about hell (see Isa. 66:24). Jesus believed in a place called hell, a place of eternal torment and righteous punishment (see Luke 16:19ff.). After an army chaplain told his men that he did not believe in hell, some of them suggested that his services were not needed. After all, if there is no hell, then why worry about death? But if there is a hell, then the chaplain was leading them astray! Either way, they would be better off without him!

The word translated “hell” is *gehenna*. It comes from a Hebrew phrase “the valley [*ge*] of Hinnon,” referring to an actual valley outside Jerusalem where wicked King Ahaz worshipped Molech, the fire god, and even sacrificed his children in the fire (2 Chron. 28:1–3; Jer. 7:31; 32:35).

Some manuscripts do not have Isaiah 66:24 quoted in Mark 9:44 and 46, but

the statement is quoted in verse 48, and that one verse is sufficient. Hell is not temporary; it is forever (see Rev. 20:10). How essential it is for sinners to trust Jesus Christ and be delivered from eternal hell, and how important it is for believers to get the message out to a lost world!

“But isn’t that too great a sacrifice to ask from us?” someone might argue. “To deal that drastically with sin would cost us too much!” In Mark 9:49–50, Jesus used the concept of “living sacrifices” to illustrate His point (see Rom. 12:1–2). The sacrifice ends up on the altar and is consumed by the fire. Would you rather endure the fires of hell as a lost sinner or the purifying fires of God as a sacrifice for His glory? Remember, Satan promises you glory now, but the pain comes later. Jesus calls us to suffering now, and then we will enjoy the glory.

The Jews were not allowed to put leaven or honey on their sacrifices, but they were required to use salt (Lev. 2:11, 13). Salt speaks of purity and preservation. It was used in Old Testament days in the establishing of covenants. The disciples were God’s salt (Matt. 5:13), but they were in danger of losing their flavor and becoming worthless. Our salt today is purified and does not lose its taste, but the salt of that day contained impurities and could lose its flavor. Once you have lost that precious Christian character, how will you restore it?

Instead of rebuking others, the disciples should have been examining their own hearts! It is easy to lose our “saltiness” and become useless to God. Christians will experience the fire of trials and persecutions (1 Peter 1:6–7; 4:12) and they need to stand together, no matter who is the greatest! Commitment and character are the essentials if we are to glorify Him and have peace with each other.

The three lessons Jesus taught in this section are basic to Christian living today. If we are yielded to Him, then suffering will lead to glory, faith will produce power, and our sacrificial service will lead to honor. In spite of his impetuosity and occasional mistakes, Peter got the message and wrote: “But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus,

after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you. To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever” (1 Peter 5:10–11).

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. If you had been allowed to sit in on one of Jesus’ private sessions with His disciples, what questions would you ask Him?
2. Why do you think many people failed to understand that Jesus was God’s Son, even when they witnessed His miracles?
3. If you had been among the disciples when Jesus told them of His impending death, what kinds of thoughts would have run through your mind?
4. What was the relationship in Jesus’ life between “suffering” and “glory”?
5. Wiersbe says that Jesus knew the crowds were following Him just because of His miracles. What better motivation for following Him did He want them to have? Why would that have been better?

6. What is the cost of being a disciple of Jesus?
7. Describe a mountaintop experience you have had that made you feel, like Peter, as if you just wanted to stay in that place and never leave.
8. Read Mark 9:24 and describe a time when you came to God with a need as this father came to Jesus. What was the result of your petition?
9. Jesus used a child to teach a lesson on humility. Why do we so often try to avoid being as humble and vulnerable as a child? What can help us change in that regard?

Chapter Eight

The Servant's Paradoxes

[\(Mark 10\)](#)

As a master Teacher, our Lord used many different approaches in sharing God's Word: symbols, miracles, types, parables, proverbs, and paradoxes. A paradox is a statement that seems to contradict itself and yet expresses a valid truth or principle. "When I am weak, then am I strong" is a paradox (2 Cor. 12:10; also see 2 Cor. 6:8–10). There are times when the best way to state a truth is by means of paradox, and this chapter describes our Lord doing just that. He could have preached long sermons, but instead, He gave us these five important lessons that can be expressed in five succinct, paradoxical statements.

1. TWO SHALL BE ONE (10:1–12) Jesus completed His ministry in Galilee, left Capernaum, and came to the Trans-Jordan area, still on His way to the city of Jerusalem (Mark 10:32). This district was ruled by Herod Antipas, which may explain why the Pharisees tried to trap Him by asking a question about divorce. After all, John the Baptist had been slain because he preached against Herod's adulterous marriage (Mark 6:14–29).

But there was more than politics involved in their trick question, because divorce was a very controversial subject among the Jewish rabbis. No matter

what answer Jesus gave, He would be sure to displease somebody, and this might give opportunity to arrest Him. The verbs indicate that the Pharisees “kept asking him,” as though they hoped to provoke Him to say something incriminating.

In that day there were two conflicting views on divorce, and which view you espoused depended on how you interpreted the phrase “some uncleanness” in Deuteronomy 24:1–4. The followers of Rabbi Hillel were quite lenient in their interpretation and permitted a man to divorce his wife for any reason, even the burning of his food. But the school of Rabbi Shammai was much more strict and taught that the critical words “some uncleanness” referred only to premarital sin. If a newly married husband discovered that his wife was not a virgin, then he could put her away.

As He usually did, Jesus ignored the current debates and focused attention on the Word of God, in this case, the law of Moses in Deuteronomy 24:1–4. As you study this passage, it is important to note two facts. First, it was *the man* who divorced the wife, not the wife who divorced the husband, for women did not have this right in Israel. (Roman women did have the right of divorce.) Second, the official “bill of divorcement” was given to the wife to declare her status and to assure any prospective husband that she was indeed free to remarry. Apart from the giving of this document, the only other requirement was that the woman not return to her first husband if her second husband divorced her. Among the Jews, the question was not, “May a divorced woman marry again?” because remarriage was permitted and even expected. The big question was, “What are the legal grounds for a man to divorce his wife?”

The law of Moses did not give adultery as grounds for divorce, for, in Israel, the adulterer and adulteress were stoned to death (Deut. 22:22; Lev. 20:10; also see John 8:1–11). Whatever Moses meant by “some uncleanness” in Deuteronomy 24:1, it could not have been adultery.

Jesus explained that Moses gave the divorce law because of the sinfulness of

the human heart. The law protected the wife by restraining the husband from impulsively divorcing her and abusing her like an unwanted piece of furniture, instead of treating her like a human being. Without a bill of divorcement, a woman could easily become a social outcast and be treated like a harlot. No man would want to marry her, and she would be left defenseless and destitute.

By giving this commandment to Israel, God was not putting His approval on divorce or even encouraging it. Rather, He was seeking to restrain it and make it more difficult for men to dismiss their wives. He put sufficient regulations around divorce so that the wives would not become victims of their husbands' whims.

The Lord then took them back beyond Moses to the record of the original creation (Gen. 1:27; 2:21–25). After all, in the beginning, it was *God* who established marriage, and He has the right to make the rules. According to Scripture, marriage is between a man and a woman, not two men or two women, and the relationship is sacred and permanent. It is the most intimate union in the human race, for the two become one flesh. This is not true of a father and son or a mother and daughter, but it is true of a man and wife.

While the spiritual element is vitally important in marriage, the emphasis here is that marriage is a *physical* union: the two become one *flesh*, not one spirit. Since marriage is a physical union, only a physical cause can break it—either death (Rom. 7:1–3) or fornication (Matt. 5:32; 19:9). Mark did not include the “exception clause” found in Matthew, but neither did he say that death breaks the marriage union.

Privately, the Lord further explained the matter to His questioning disciples, who by now were convinced that it was a dangerous thing to get married. To remarry after divorce, *other than one granted on the grounds of fornication*, would make the person guilty of committing adultery, and this is a serious thing. Note that Jesus included the women in His warning, which certainly elevated their status in society and gave them equality of responsibility with the men. The

rabbis would not have gone this far.

Mark 10:9 warns us that *man* cannot separate those who have been united in marriage, *but God can*. Since He established marriage, He has the right to lay down the rules. A divorce may be legal according to our laws and yet not be right in the eyes of God. He expects married people to practice commitment to each other (Mark 10:7) and to remain true to each other. Too many people view divorce as “an easy way out,” and do not take seriously their vows of commitment to each other and to the Lord.

2. ADULTS SHALL BE AS CHILDREN (10:13–16) First marriage, then children; the sequence is logical. Unlike many “moderns” today, the Jews of that day looked on children as a blessing and not a burden, a rich treasure from God and not a liability (Ps. 127—128). To be without children brought a couple both sorrow and disgrace.

It was customary for parents to bring their children to the rabbis for a blessing, and so it was reasonable that they would bring the little ones to Jesus. Some were infants in arms (Luke 18:15), while others were young children able to walk, and He welcomed them all.

Why would the disciples rebuke the people and try to keep the children away from Jesus? (See Matt. 15:23 and Mark 6:36 for other instances of the disciples’ seeming hardness of heart.) They probably thought they were doing Him a favor by helping Him protect His time and conserve His strength. In other words, *they did not consider the children to be important!* Their attitude was strange, because Jesus had already taught them to receive the children in His name and to be careful not to cause any of them to stumble (Mark 9:36ff.). Once again, they forgot what He had taught them.

The phrase “much displeased” is too tame. Our Lord actually became

indignant as He openly rebuked His disciples for standing in the way. Then He announced that the children were better kingdom examples than were the adults. We tell the children to behave like adults, but Jesus tells the adults to model themselves after the children!

In what ways are children a pattern? In their humble dependence on others, their receptivity, their acceptance of themselves and their position in life. Of course, Jesus was speaking about an unspoiled child, not one who was trying to act like an adult. A child enjoys much but can explain very little. Children live by faith. By faith they accept their lot, trusting others to care for them and see them through.

We enter God's kingdom by faith, like little children: helpless, unable to save ourselves, totally dependent on the mercy and grace of God. We enjoy God's kingdom by faith, believing that the Father loves us and will care for our daily needs. What does a child do when he or she has a hurt or a problem? Take it to Father and Mother! What an example for us to follow in our relationship with our heavenly Father! Yes, God wants us to be childlike, but not childish!

There is no suggestion here that Jesus baptized these children, for Jesus did not even baptize adults (John 4:1–2). If the disciples had been accustomed to baptizing infants, they certainly would not have turned the people away. Jesus took these precious little ones in His loving arms and blessed them—and what a blessing that must have been!

3. THE FIRST SHALL BE LAST (10:17–31) Of all the people who ever came to the feet of Jesus, this man is the only one who went away worse than he came. And yet he had so much in his favor! He was a young man (Matt. 19:22) with great potential. He was respected by others, for he held some ruling office, perhaps in a local court (Luke 18:18). Certainly he had manners and morals, and there

was enough desire in his heart for spiritual things that he ran up to Jesus and bowed at His feet. In every way, he was an ideal young man, and when Jesus beheld him, He loved him.

With all of his fine qualities, the young man was very superficial in his views of spiritual things. He certainly had a shallow view of salvation, for he thought that he could *do something* to earn or merit eternal life. This was a common belief in that day among the Jews (John 6:28), and it is very common today. Most unsaved people think that God will one day add up their good works and their bad works, and if their good works exceed their bad works, they will get into heaven.

Behind this good-works approach to salvation is a superficial view of sin, man, the Bible, Jesus Christ, and salvation. Sin is rebellion against the holy God. It is not simply an action; it is an inward attitude that exalts man and defies God. Did this young man actually think that he could do a few religious works and settle his account with the holy God?

The young man had a superficial view of Jesus Christ. He called Him “Good Master” (Teacher), but we get the impression that he was trying to flatter the Lord, for the Jewish rabbis did not allow the word *good* to be applied to them. Only God was good, and the word must be reserved for Him alone. Jesus was not denying that He was God; rather, He was affirming it. He just wanted to be sure that the young man really knew what he was saying and that he was willing to accept the responsibilities involved.

This explains why Jesus pointed the young man to the law of Moses: He wanted him to see himself as a sinner bowed before the holy God. We cannot be saved from sin by keeping the law (Gal. 2:16–21; Eph. 2:8–10). The law is a mirror that shows us how dirty we are, but the mirror cannot wash us. One purpose of the law is to bring the sinner to Christ (Gal. 3:24), which is what it did in this man’s case. The law can bring the sinner to Christ, but the law cannot make the sinner like Christ. Only grace can do that.

The young ruler did not see himself as a condemned sinner before God. He had a superficial view of the law of God, for he measured obedience only by external actions and not by inward attitudes. As far as his actions were concerned, he was blameless (see Phil. 3:6), but his inward attitudes were not blameless, because he was covetous. He may have kept some of the commandments, but the last commandment caught him: “Thou shalt not covet!” Covetousness is a terrible sin; it is subtle and difficult to detect, and yet it can cause a person to break all the other commandments. “For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil” (1 Tim. 6:10 NASB). Looking at this young man, you would conclude that he had everything, but Jesus said that one thing was lacking: *a living faith in God*. Money was his god: He trusted it, worshipped it, and got his fulfillment from it. His morality and good manners only concealed a covetous heart.

Our Lord’s directions in Mark 10:21 are not to be applied to everyone who wants to become a disciple, because Jesus was addressing the specific needs of the rich young ruler. The man was rich, so Jesus told him to liquidate his estate and give the money to the poor. The man was a ruler, so Jesus told him to take up a cross and follow Him, which would be a humbling experience. Jesus offered this man the gift of eternal life, but he turned it down. It is difficult to receive a gift when your fist is clenched around money and the things money can buy. The Greek word translated “grieved” gives the picture of storm clouds gathering. The man walked out of the sunshine and into a storm! He wanted to get salvation on his terms, and he was disappointed.

The disciples were shocked at the Lord’s declaration about wealth, because most Jews thought that the possession of great wealth was the evidence of God’s special blessing. Many people today still cling to this error, in spite of the message of Job, the example of Christ and the apostles, and the clear teaching of the New Testament. In the case of this young man, his wealth *robbed him of*

God's greatest blessing, eternal life. Today, wealth continues to make rich people poor and the first last (see 1 Cor. 1:26–31).

Money is a marvelous servant but a terrible master. If you possess money, be grateful and use it for God's glory; but if money possesses you, beware! It is good to have the things that money can buy, provided you don't lose the things that money cannot buy. The deceitfulness of riches had so choked the soil of this young man's heart that he was unable to receive the good seed of the Word and be saved (Matt. 13:22). What a bitter harvest he would reap one day!

However, Peter's response indicated that there were a few problems in his own heart. "What then will there be for us?" (Matt. 19:27 NASB). This statement reveals a rather commercial view of the Christian life: "We have given up everything for the Lord; now, what will we get in return?" Contrast Peter's words with those of the three Hebrew men in Daniel 3:16–18, and with Peter's later testimony in Acts 3:6. He certainly came a long way from "What will I get?" to "What I have, I will give!"

Jesus assured His disciples that no one who follows Him will ever lose what is really important, either in this life or in the life to come. God will reward each one. However, we must be sure our motives are right: "For my sake and the gospel's" (see Mark 8:35). The well-known Christian industrialist of the twentieth century, R. G. LeTourneau, used to say, "If you give because it pays, it won't pay!" If we sacrifice only to get a reward, that reward will never come.

Note that Jesus also promised "persecutions." He had already told His disciples what both the Jews and Gentiles would do to Him in Jerusalem, and now He informed them that they would have their share of persecution. God balances blessings with battles, developing mature sons and daughters.

To the general public, the rich ruler stood first and the poor disciples stood last. But God saw things from the perspective of eternity—and the first became last while the last became first! Those who are first in their own eyes will be last

in God's eyes, but those who are last in their own eyes will be rewarded as first! What an encouragement for true disciples!

4. SERVANTS SHALL BE RULERS (10:32–45) The destination was still Jerusalem, and Jesus was still leading the way. As Mark wrote his account of the Savior's journey to Calvary, he must have meditated much on the great "Servant Songs" in Isaiah 42—53. "For the Lord GOD will help me; therefore shall I not be confounded: therefore have I set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be ashamed" (Isa. 50:7). We cannot but admire the courage of God's Servant as He made His way to Calvary, and we should adore Him all the more because He did it for us.

We must try to understand the bewilderment and fear of His followers, for this was a difficult experience for them and not at all what they had planned or expected. Each new announcement of His death only added to their perplexity. In the first two announcements (Mark 8:31; 9:31), Jesus had told them *what* would occur, but now He told them *where* His passion will take place—in the Holy City of Jerusalem! In this third announcement, He also included the part that the Gentiles would play in His trial and death, and for the fourth time, He promised that He would rise again (note Mark 9:9). He told His disciples the truth, but they were in no condition to understand it.

In the light of our Lord's announcement of His death, we are embarrassed and ashamed to read of James and John asking for thrones. How could they and their mother (Matt. 20:20–21) be so callous and selfish? Peter had responded to the first announcement by arguing with Jesus; after the second announcement, the disciples responded by arguing among themselves over who was the greatest (Mark 9:30–34). These men seemed blind to the meaning of the cross.

Actually, Salome and her two sons were claiming the promise Jesus had

given that, in the future kingdom, the disciples would sit on twelve thrones with the Lord Jesus. (See Matt. 19:28. Since Mark was writing especially for the Gentiles, he did not include this promise.) It took a great deal of faith on their part to claim the promise, especially since Jesus had just reminded them of His impending death. The three of them were in agreement (Matt. 18:19), and they had His Word to encourage them, so there was no reason why Jesus should not grant their request.

Except for one thing: They were praying selfishly, and God does not answer selfish prayers (James 4:2–3). If He does, it is only that He might discipline us and teach us how to pray in His will (Ps. 106:15; 1 John 5:14–15). James, John, and Salome did not realize that *it costs something to get answers to prayer*. For Jesus to grant their request, He would have to suffer and die. Why should He pay such a great price just so they could enjoy free thrones? Is that the way to glorify God?

Jesus compared His approaching suffering and death to the drinking of a cup (Mark 14:32–36) and the experiencing of a baptism (Luke 12:50; also see Ps. 41:7; 69:2, 15). It would be a devastating experience—and yet James and John said they were able to go through it with Jesus! Little did they realize what they were saying, for in later years they would indeed have their share of the baptism and the cup. James would be the first of the disciples to be martyred (Acts 12:1–2), and John would experience great persecution.

Because their prayer was motivated by earthly wisdom, not heavenly wisdom, James and John aroused the anger of the other disciples and brought disunity to the group (see James 3:13–4:1). No doubt the men were unhappy because they had not thought of asking first! Once again, Jesus tried to teach them what it means to be an “important person” in the kingdom of God (see Mark 9:33–37).

Like many people today, the disciples were making the mistake of following the wrong examples. Instead of modeling themselves after Jesus, they were

admiring the glory and authority of the Roman rulers, men who loved position and authority. While there is nothing wrong with aspiring to greatness, we must be careful how we define “greatness” and why we want to achieve it. Jesus said, “Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all” (Mark 10:43–44 NASB).

God’s pattern in Scripture is that a person must first be a servant before God promotes him or her to be a ruler. This was true of Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Timothy, and even our Lord Himself (Phil. 2:1–11). Unless we know how to obey orders, we do not have the right to give orders. Before a person exercises authority, he or she must know what it means to be under authority. If Jesus Christ followed this pattern in accomplishing the great work of redemption, then surely there is no other pattern for us to follow.

5. THE POOR BECOME RICH (10:46–52) A large crowd of Passover pilgrims followed Jesus and His disciples to Jericho, about eighteen miles from Jerusalem. There were actually two cities named Jericho: the old city in ruins, and the new city a mile away, where Herod the Great and his successors built a lavish winter palace. This may help explain the seeming contradiction between Mark 10:46 and Luke 18:35.

There were two blind beggars sitting by the road (Matt. 20:30), one of whom was named Bartimaeus. Both Mark and Luke focused attention on him since he was the more vocal of the two. The beggars heard that Jesus of Nazareth, the Healer, was passing by; they did their best to get His attention so that they might receive His merciful help and be healed.

At first, the crowd tried to silence them, but when Jesus stopped and called for the men, the crowd encouraged them! Desperate people do not permit the

crowd to keep them from Jesus (see Mark 5:25–34). Bartimaeus threw off his garment so it would not trip him, and he hastened to the Master. No doubt some of the pilgrims or disciples helped him.

“What do you want Me to do for you?” seems like a strange question to ask a blind man. (It was the same question He had asked James, John, and Salome, Mark 10:36.) But Jesus wanted to give the man opportunity to express himself and give evidence of his own faith. What did he really believe Jesus *could* do for him?

When Bartimaeus called Jesus “Lord,” he used the title *Rabboni*, meaning “my Master.” The only other person in the Gospels who used it was Mary (John 20:16). The beggar had twice called him “Son of David,” a national messianic title, but “Rabboni” was an expression of personal faith.

Matthew tells us that Jesus was moved with compassion and touched their eyes (Matt. 20:34), and immediately they were healed. Out of gratitude to Jesus, the men joined the pilgrim band and started toward Jerusalem, following Jesus. This is the last healing miracle recorded in Mark, and it certainly fits into Mark’s “Servant” theme. We see Jesus Christ, God’s Suffering Servant, on His way to the cross, and yet He stops to serve two blind beggars! What love, what mercy, and what grace!

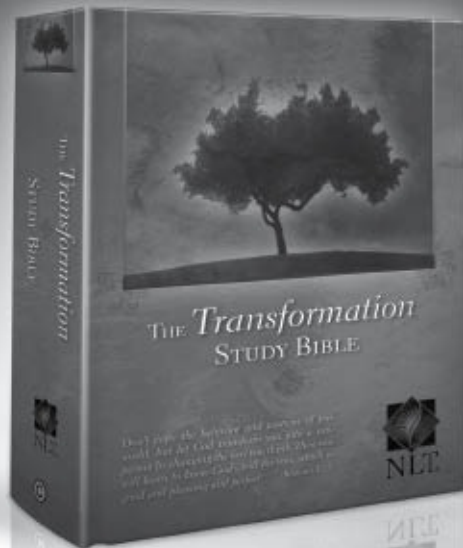
QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How would you describe our current society’s view of divorce?

2. How did Jesus' mention of the wife in His directive on divorce elevate the status of women in that society?
3. What have the children in your life taught you about following God?
4. In Jesus' day, not to have children was a shame and a curse, and to have them was a blessing. How does that compare with our view of children today?
5. Wiersbe says that the young ruler from Mark 10 "measured obedience only by external actions and not by inward attitudes." Give some examples of measuring obedience by inward attitudes.
6. What is the most important lesson you've learned about money and its priority in your life?
7. In hindsight, it seems implausible that, in the face of Christ's servant leadership, the disciples could squabble over who would be the most important. From what you know of human nature, though, how do you imagine it happened?
8. Why does a person with a servant heart make the best leader?

9. If Jesus asked you the question that He asked Bartimaeus, “What do you want Me to do for you?” what would you answer?

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