

The Gospel of Mark – The Unexpected Messiah

Mark 8:1-21

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



Today begins Holy Week with the Triumphal Entry, where Jesus descended into Jerusalem via the Mount of Olives, and as he did, the crowd shouted, “Hosanna!” Hosanna literally means, “Save us!” The crowds knew that they needed a savior, but they misunderstood Jesus. **Jesus’ purpose in the Triumphal Entry is to show that he will not be the conquering Messiah they are expecting who will bring the armies of heaven to destroy Israel’s enemies. Rather, he is the Suffering Servant, who is coming to defeat a different enemy, the sinfulness of humankind, and bring messianic peace, as symbolized by the donkey.**¹ Jesus is the true Messiah, but the people struggled to see that.

That very struggle is one of the reasons Mark set out to write his Gospel. He desires all who read it to see Jesus clearly and then follow him accordingly. This struggle to see Jesus clearly is one we have encountered in our time through Mark, and we will see it once again as we look at the feeding of the four thousand. This is the second bread miracle. The first was the feeding of the five thousand. And just like that first bread miracle, the disciples still struggle to see Jesus clearly. Ironically, though, the feeding of the four thousand takes place in Gentile territory, with the majority of those present being Gentiles. And they seem to see Jesus clearly. Jesus’ very presence in this region and care for Gentiles is a strong theological statement that the gospel is for all people. So, what do we see in this passage? Jesus is here in Gentile territory, doing things in unexpected ways but doing the things that only the Messiah can do. We can have sympathy for the disciples as they misunderstand Jesus, even though it seems they should have known better. We’re all works in progress. Jesus doesn’t give up on them. And his character of compassion is made clear for us to see. Mark helps us to understand that Jesus’ compassion is not superficial or merely performative, it is genuine and real. So is his ability. He is God in flesh and fully capable. If we are willing to sit with the text, we will see Jesus for who he actually is, the Messiah. And, if we’re willing to let God search our hearts, we will find that we are a lot like the crowds at the triumphal entry or like the disciples in this moment. We know we need a savior, but we can easily misunderstand Jesus. So, we need to ask ourselves a question, **“Who or what is your functional savior?”**

¹ Grant R. Osborne, *Luke: Verse by Verse*, ed. Jeffrey Reimer, Elliot Ritzema, and Danielle Thevenaz, Awa Sarah, Osborne New Testament Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 453.

1. A compassionate God.

- a. **The context – Where are we now in Jesus’ ministry?**
 - i. **Following the controversy with the Pharisees over purity matters and the oral tradition in 7:1–23, Jesus embarks on a long and circuitous journey through Tyre (7:24), Sidon (7:31), and the Decapolis (7:31).** It is not immediately clear in either Mark or Matthew, both of whom record the venture, why Jesus embarks on this itineration among the Gentiles in what today is modern Lebanon and Syria. We can consider several clues, however, and draw at least a tentative conclusion from them. One clue comes from Jesus’ desire for secrecy in all three stories in this unit (7:24, 33, 36; 8:9–10). A second clue is the placement of the Gentile itineration immediately following the controversy with the Pharisees in 7:1–23. A third clue, perhaps, is the reference in 6:16 that Herod Antipas considered Jesus to be John the Baptizer returned to life. Combined, these clues suggest that Jesus and the disciples quit Galilee to escape the harassment of the Pharisees and perhaps also of Herod, who ruled Galilee and Perea and who had killed John.²
 - ii. **Crucial to remember – Jesus is preparing the disciples for life after the cross.**
 - 1. In the coming passages Jesus will predict his death and resurrection. As you can imagine, the disciples will be utterly confused by all of this. Again, it is really easy for us to pull the rug out from under them and expect them to know what Jesus meant.
 - 2. **We are still in the final year of Jesus’** → Chapters 6/7- 16 of Mark deal with the final year of Jesus’ ministry. That means the first 6 chapters cover two years and the last 10 chapters covers one year.
 - 3. **Most scholars look at this phase of Jesus’ ministry as the “leadership multiplication” phase.** – Jesus is actively handing off the values of the Kingdom for the disciples to take and then at Pentecost (Acts 2) begin multiplying through the power of the Holy Spirit.
 - iii. **This leadership handoff is not going to be smooth.** → If we were to judge the effectiveness of Jesus’ leadership development program ahead of Pentecost, we would be grading shaking our heads at him and considering him a failure.
 - 1. **Mark is setting the scene for the theme we shall look at in the next section, namely the failure of the disciples fully to understand what was going on. But this is hardly a matter of great blame.** Nothing like this had ever happened before; we can excuse them (and Mark is certainly happy to) for being a bit slow on the uptake. He seems to be emphasizing that the feedings, along with the healings, are ways in which Jesus’ identity, as the true **Messiah**, was being unveiled; but since no first-century Jews known to us were expecting a Messiah who would multiply loaves and fishes we can, once more, hardly blame them for that.³
 - 2. The values of Jesus and thus the values of the Kingdom are so unique that they were unexpected. **But, isn’t that what makes the gospel and life in Christ so intriguing and appealing? Something so foundationally different than what every other sphere of our world offers us?**

² James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 215.

³ Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 101.

3. It is all revealed in Jesus and his character. → So, what do we see? -

Compassion

b. What is compassion?

- i. **An ethical definition - An attitude or emotion that is altruistic in nature and therefore leads to selfless acts of beneficence on behalf of another.** Compassion presupposes such dispositions as sympathy and mercy. Christianity has long championed the cultivation of compassion as one of its core moral imperatives.⁴
 1. A helpful framework to distinguish between sympathy, empathy, and compassion.
 - a. **Sympathy (Head)** – A feeling of concern (involves understanding).
 - b. **Empathy (Heart)** – Helping someone feel understood. (I.e., In their shoes.)
 - c. **Compassion (Hands)** – Selfless acts that help another person.
 2. In Jesus, we see all of these working together. He understands what the crowd is facing (hunger), he feels for them (doesn't want them to go hungry), and moves to meet their need (multiplies bread).
 3. **We do this with people in our lives all the time.**
 - a. **Children** – We see their scrapped knee, and we don't want them to get an infection, so we are moved to clean and treat the wound.
 - b. **Relationships** – We see their frustration and understand their point of view. We don't want the relationship to be fractured, so we work to resolve and restore the conflict.
 4. Where this gets tough is in the more complicated issues of life.

c. What compassion is and isn't. → A guide to moral decision making.

- i. We've already defined what compassion is. That is, it is a willingness to understand a situation and be moved to help towards health. It can also be helpful to define what compassion is not.
- ii. **Compassion is not:**
 1. **Compassion and enablement are not the same thing.**
 - a. Compassion does not enable sin.
 - b. Compassion does not enable unhealthy or destructive patterns of behavior or thought.
 2. **Compassion does not make you complicit in sin.**
 - a. I.e., Extending compassion does not make you an accessory to someone's sin, rebellion, or destructive pattern.
 - i. If it was, the Bible is wrong to claim Jesus as sinless.
 - b. This was precisely the charge the religious leaders leveled on Jesus in the previous passage. → "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" → Translated why are you enabling sin?
 3. **Compassion is not to be used as an ultimatum to coerce someone into behavioral modification.**
 - a. Too often we see compassion as a tool to leverage some's behavior in a direction that we are more comfortable with. (This goes for both conservative and progressive perspectives.)

⁴ Stanley J. Grenz and Jay T. Smith, *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics*, The IVP Pocket Reference Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 22.

- i. I.e., “I’ll do this if you...”
- b. Compassion can lead to behavioral modification, but it does so through clarity, love, and genuine motives that lead to transformation of character.
- c. Compassion helps us to discern between an emotional issue and a practical issue.
 - i. Dr. Esau McCaulley says it this way, **“We need to be careful when we’re bringing logic weapons to emotional fights.”**⁵
 - ii. This is exactly what compassion does for us. And, it is precisely what we see in the subversive values of Jesus.

2. A Capable God.

- a. The miracles of Jesus are not just miracles for the sake of miracles. They give clarity about the person, nature, and character of Jesus.
 - i. **What we see in Jesus** → The Greek word for “compassion,” *splanchnizomai*, comes from *splanchnon*, meaning entrails or vital organs. In ancient animal sacrifice, the *splanchnon*—heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys—were eaten by priests and sacrificers before a sacrificial animal was offered on the altar. As a consequence of this practice, *splanchnizomai* takes on a metaphorical meaning of being moved deeply within, in the seat of emotions (Matt 9:36). **“ ‘I have compassion for these people’ ” expresses Jesus’ gut-wrenching emotion on behalf of the crowd. Equally importantly, in Mark this word is not used of people for whom one would naturally feel compassion (such as friends or compatriots), but for those far removed and even offensive: lepers (1:41), revolutionaries (6:34), Gentiles (8:2), and demon-possessed (9:22).**⁶
- b. **The subversive values of Jesus** → Compassion for the crowds - feeding of the 4,000.
 - i. Too often we look at the miraculous provision of Jesus as the definition of compassion. We say, look Jesus fed those who were hungry, and to have compassion simply means social action. We can’t get it twisted or confused, compassion includes action. But, it is not action for action sake. The miracles of Jesus were done to demonstrate that he is the legitimate Messiah, who was long promised, and offered the healing the humanity (as a whole) truly needed.
 - 1. He is a capable God not just for our physical needs, but for the deepest needs, spiritual and emotional.
 - ii. Jesus does not shy away from compassion and truth. This is a distinctive of his life and ministry that should routinely challenge us.
 - 1. He challenges and critiques the Pharisees for the heavy burdens that they have placed on those in Jewish society. They have reduced love for God to a cold set of moral obligations.
 - 2. He challenges and critiques the crowds for their lack of desire for obedience to God.
 - a. That is he never dismisses the sin of both the religious leaders or the common people he encounters.

⁵ Dr. Esau McCaulley via The Jude 3 Project - <https://youtu.be/xgPOzFck-ao?si=RuaJt2HESMkNtW1Y&t=3659>

⁶ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 230.

3. **Jesus also extends compassion by speaking to each group in terms that they understand and point them to the truth of what God really desires for them. Jesus is actively working to meet their needs and offer them the true help they need.**
 - a. **This is the whole gospel!** → That God loved sinful and rebellious humanity so much that he gave his one and only Son ... as a ransom for many ... that whoever would believe in him would not perish but have eternal life! (cf. Jn. 3:16 & Mk. 8:
- iii. Philosopher Christopher Watkin helpfully explains, **“Put at its simplest: making more of sin is good for society. As a matter of fact, it is also good for democracy, good for equality, good for resisting tyranny and imperialism, and good for finding meaning in life. Sin itself is not good. We would, it is safe to say, be better off without it. But an approach to society that does not shy away from the robust biblical doctrines of sin and judgment has much more of a fresh, truthful and, yes, positive vision to offer than one that fails to see what the Bible hides in plain sight.”**⁷
 1. In other words, “I need to be careful to not diminish what the Word of God has made plain and clear. And by doing so, I actually diminish the beauty of the life the Bible actually offers all of humanity.”
 2. Jesus’ actions were meant to clarify misconceptions about who he was, so that those looking at him might see him clearly, understand his great purposes, and follow him accordingly.
 - a. Graciously, the Bible gives us a portrait of the struggle of faith, sight, and understanding. We see characters that we can all relate to.

3. People Who Misunderstand

- a. **The truth and compassion of Jesus worked together to expose the functional saviors each group was holding to.**
 - i. We’ve said this before. → The Bible, as God’s authoritative Word, functions as a lens for us to see God clearly and as a mirror for us to see ourselves clearly.
 1. Lens – We gain clarity on God’s character, nature, and plan by seeing it over and over again in the Scriptures, and precisely through the person of Jesus.
 2. Mirror – We gain clarity on ourselves by seeing not just God’s character made clear, but the lives and stories of those in the Bible. Their faithfulness and unfaithfulness, successes and struggles, and convictions and doubts all should stand out to us and help us to see our own journeys reflected.
 - ii. What is a functional savior? → **Anything (person, object, or institution) that I look to in expectation that it can deliver my greatest good.**
 - iii. **The disciples** – “Don’t you remember?”
 1. **Functional savior** – political power (similar to the Jewish crowds) and to receive the prominence and position of being insiders to Jesus. → This is why James, John, and their mom had a conversation about who should be next to Jesus when he comes into his Kingdom. (cf. Mk. 10:35-45)

⁷ Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible’s Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2022), 110–111.

2. **v. 15** - The disciples are not chastised for not believing but for not *seeing* and *understanding*.⁸
3. The disciples mirror humanity-at-large, which is so stuck in its own world and cares that it is blind and deaf to God. The disciples are anxious about lack of bread, but Jesus is anxious about their lack of faith.⁹
- iv. **The crowds at the triumphal entry** – “Hosanna! ... Save us!”
 1. **Functional savior** – political power that would overthrow the Romans and make Israel top dog in the geopolitical sphere and would make life easier in every pragmatic way possible.
- v. **The Pharisees** – Unwilling to see.
 1. **Functional savior** – Legalism and perceived moral superiority.
 2. v. 14 - We have just seen the Pharisees’ unbelief. They demanded more signs, not because they were on the fence but because they were on the attack and trying to trap him. They were putting the Lord their God to the test, and they didn’t even see it.¹⁰
- b. **If only God can deliver my greatest good and the greatest good of those around me, how does it change the everyday things of my life?**
 - i. What does this look like when I wake up?
 - ii. What does this look like in the spaces of my relationships?
 - iii. What does this look like in the context of my work or school?
 - iv. What does this look like in my understanding and engagement with culture and politics?
 1. **Really tease these out and be honest. Why? Because we can be like the disciples, “close” to Jesus and still misunderstanding. And then, when God doesn’t do what we “think” he should, often our hearts grow hard.**
- c. If I have received truth and compassion from Christ, how does that inform my everyday interactions?
 - i. Compassion received should translate into compassion extended. That is what makes Christianity so attractive. Children of grace offering a non-anxious presence. → Don’t forget - Dr. Esau McCaulley says it this way, **“We need to be careful when we’re bringing logic weapons to emotional fights.”**¹¹
 1. How often are we bringing logic weapons to emotional fights with our friends, neighbors, and the culture at large?

⁸ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 240.

⁹ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 240.

¹⁰ Jason Meyer, *Mark for You*, ed. Carl Laferton, God’s Word for You (The Good Book Company, 2022), 116.

¹¹ Dr. Esau McCaulley via The Jude 3 Project - <https://youtu.be/xgPOzFck-ao?si=RuaJt2HESMkNtW1Y&t=3659>