

Incomprehensible The Gospel of Mark

Spoiler Alert: Next week on Easter morning we're going to talk about the resurrection of Jesus. We are going to see how Jesus' resurrection changed everything for His disciples and how His resurrection can change everything for us.

Today, in preparation for next week (really in preparation for the rest of our lives), we are going to see from the gospel of Mark that ***what it means to follow Jesus is incomprehensible apart from His death and resurrection***. Before His death and resurrection, nobody understood Jesus; the crowds didn't and His disciples didn't. It wasn't until after the resurrection that people understood what it meant to follow Jesus.

Today we are going to examine some of the Scriptures that make this basic point. This message isn't mere a history lesson; it's not merely about how clueless ***they*** were. These Scriptures also warn and instruct us. If we lose sight of the fact that Jesus died for our sins and rose from the dead on the third day, our thinking about following Jesus will become distorted in any number of different ways. Following Jesus won't make any sense to us.

First we'll notice how before His death and resurrection nobody understood what it meant to follow Jesus. Then we'll talk about some implications for those of us who are living ***after*** Jesus' death and resurrection - how the converse is true (we can not only understand what it means to follow Jesus; that way of living is accessible and possible).

The first point is really an observation from many different texts in Mark's gospel. ***Jesus often obscured His identity from the crowds***. The way Jesus thought and acted was counterintuitive in many ways; He said and did just the opposite of what we would probably do.

Secrecy Commands. When you read through the gospel of Mark, you notice that sometimes Jesus healed someone or cast a demon out of someone and then commanded them to keep it a secret. Of course this wasn't always the case. Sometimes Jesus did public miracles that increased His fame; and on at least one occasion in Mark Jesus told a man delivered from demons to go report to his family what had happened. But Jesus often commanded silence/secrecy. Let's notice a few examples.

Mark 1:40–45 records Jesus healing a leprous man.

40 And a leper came to Jesus, beseeching Him and falling on his knees before Him, and saying, "If You are willing, You can make me clean." 41 Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, "I am willing; be cleansed."

Jesus was moved with compassion (His heart genuinely went out to this man in his desperate condition). In that day leprous people were ritually unclean and were required to keep their distance from everyone else. It was very bold and dramatic for Jesus to

stretch out His hand and touch this man and say, "I am willing; be cleansed." Like His heavenly Father, Jesus was very willing to give good gifts; He wasn't stingy or reluctant.

42 Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed. 43 And He sternly warned him and immediately sent him away, 44 and He said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."

Jesus told this man to fulfill the requirement of the Law by presenting himself to the priest and by bringing the required offering. This would be a testimony to the priest and the temple staff. But Jesus forcefully told this man not to tell anyone else: "See that you say nothing to anyone." Guess what?

45 But he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the news around, to such an extent that Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city, but stayed out in unpopulated areas; and they were coming to Him from everywhere.

This is probably what Jesus wanted to avoid, being mobbed by huge crowds everywhere He went. Because the man healed from his leprosy couldn't stay quiet, Jesus began staying in unpopulated areas.

Even then large crowds sought Him out. Mark 6 records that on one occasion 5,000 people were in a secluded place listening to Jesus' teaching. When it got late, instead of sending them to nearby villages to find food, Jesus multiplied the bread and fish. When the feeding of the 5,000 is recorded in John 6, John records how the crowd completely misinterpreted Jesus' mission and the type of Messiah He would become:

14 Therefore when the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, "This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world." 15 So Jesus, perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone.

Surely a king with that type of power could defeat the Romans and restore Israel to its rightful place of prominence among the nations! But Jesus didn't come to be that type of king. He would establish the Kingdom of God one heart at a time. This would require Him going to the cross and paying for the sins of the people. That type of king didn't fit into any of their categories. Perceiving that they were intending to take Him by force and make Him king, Jesus "withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone." Jesus was very aware that people misinterpreted His Kingdom and wanted to misappropriate His power.

Interestingly, those who had the clearest understanding of Jesus' power and identity were demons (evil or unclean spirits who inhabited people). People who were afflicted with demons came to Jesus (or were brought to Jesus) for deliverance. Mark 3 is representative of what commonly happened.

11 Whenever the unclean spirits saw Him, they would fall down before Him and shout, "You are the Son of God!" 12 And He earnestly warned them not to tell who He was.

It may be that the demons were trying to control Jesus by declaring that He was "the Son of God," since it was commonly believed that you could exercise power over someone if you knew his identity (EBC, *Mark*, p. 627). Or it may be that they spontaneously acknowledged Jesus as the Son of God when they found themselves in the presence of the One who had all power and authority. Whatever the case, Jesus commanded them to be silent and not tell who He was. Jesus didn't want demons doing evangelism for Him. They could make true statements about Jesus, but they would always misrepresent His heart and His mission.

Jesus also obscured His identity from the crowds by teaching in parables.

Teaching in Parables. In Mark 4 we have an extended discussion about the role of parables. In verse 1 we read that such a large crowd gathered that Jesus got into a boat in the water, sat down, and addressed the crowd on the shore. Mark records that Jesus "was teaching them many things in parables" (verse 2). Specifically Jesus taught the parable of the four soils, likening the human heart to four different types of soil. Jesus concluded his parable by saying, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear," implying that only some of them would understand and receive the message of the parable.

In verses 10 through 12 we read this:

10 As soon as He was alone, His followers, along with the twelve, began asking Him about the parables. 11 And He was saying to them, "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables, 12 so that while seeing, they may see and not perceive, and while hearing, they may hear and not understand, otherwise they might return and be forgiven."

Jesus explained things to His followers in private that He didn't explain to the crowds in public. His followers/disciples had been given "the mystery of the kingdom of God." A mystery referred to something that had been hidden for ages, such as the reality that the kingdom would include Jews **and** Gentiles or that the Messiah would be crucified. These things were taught in the Hebrew scriptures, but they weren't obvious. Jesus explained such mysteries to His disciples privately.

But the crowds primarily got parables which were stories that contained spiritual truths. Such parables revealed the spiritual condition of those who heard. On one occasion the chief priests and the Pharisees understood that Jesus was talking about them when He spoke about a landowner whose son was killed by those who were working his land (see Matthew 21:23-46). Instead of being filled with remorse, they began plotting how to seize Jesus and kill Him. They, along with most of the crowds Jesus addressed, fit Isaiah's description (Isaiah 6:9-10) of being spiritually blind and deaf. The parables revealed the condition of their hearts.

As an illustration, when I was a freshman in college I was in a Sunday school class that read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, (in C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*). I'm embarrassed to tell you that I read that entire book, loved the story, and had no idea that the lion Aslan was a Christ figure. I read the account of Aslan giving his life for Edmund who had betrayed his siblings and was then brought back to life; but it never occurred to me that this was a picture/parable of Christ. I wasn't at all antagonistic to the gospel; I was simply clueless. That story/parable revealed the condition of my heart. That was the function of parables in Jesus' day.

In a number of ways Jesus concealed the truth from the masses. Jesus had a very different method of teaching His disciples. We see this in passages such as Mark 9:30-32.

Jesus spoke to His disciples very plainly about His mission and identity. (Mark 9:30–32) Toward the end of His ministry Jesus began preparing His disciples for His crucifixion.

30 From there they went out and began to go through Galilee, and He did not want anyone to know about it. 31 For He was teaching His disciples and telling them, "The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later."

Jesus was very clear and detailed about what awaited Him in Jerusalem: He would be delivered into the hands of men who would kill Him; after three days He would rise. We would expect that it would be hard for the disciples to digest this news, but that they would "get it."

32 But they did not understand this statement, and they were afraid to ask Him.

There are all sorts of theories why the disciples didn't understand Jesus' statement. I think it was simply that they didn't have a category for a crucified Messiah. In the parallel passage in Luke 18:31–34 we read that "the disciples understood none of these things, and the meaning of this statement was hidden from them, and they did not comprehend the things that were said." Of course Jesus understood all of this; He even told them that He understood their lack of understanding. In John 16:12 we read where Jesus said, "I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all truth. . ."

As we'll see next week, the disciples were incredibly confused and demoralized after the crucifixion. It wasn't until ***after the resurrection*** that the disciples understood the statements Jesus made about dying and rising on the third day.

Another way to say it is that

What it means to follow Jesus is incomprehensible apart from the gospel. (1 Corinthians 15:1-5) Stated positively, when we understand the gospel, what it means to follow Christ is understandable, accessible, and possible. Twenty years after the resurrection, Paul wrote this in 1 Corinthians 15:

1 Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, 2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. 3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

The gospel “by which you are saved” includes the truth that Jesus died for our sins and was raised on the third day. A Christian isn’t merely someone who tries really hard to live a good, moral life. A Christian is someone who is convinced that Jesus died for his/her sin on the cross and then rose from the dead never to die again.

If you believe the gospel, you are born from above and following Jesus becomes a life-giving, interactive relationship with Jesus Himself who dwells in you through the Holy Spirit. This perspective is found throughout the rest of the New Testament (after the gospels). For those who believe the gospel, following Jesus is not only understandable; it is accessible and possible.

For example, in 1 Corinthians 2:16 Paul wrote, “But we have the mind of Christ.” The very Spirit of God who uniquely knows His mind dwells within those who believe; the Spirit who inspired the Scriptures teaches us so that we have the mind of Christ - we think about our lives and this world and relationships the way Jesus does.

In Philippians 4 Paul wrote, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Because he believed that Jesus was alive and dwelt within him (through the Spirit), Paul experienced the will and the power to do everything God wanted him to do. He had the capacity to do the will of God because He believed the gospel.

If we lose sight of the gospel, following Christ becomes overwhelming; His commands seem unreasonable and undoable. But if we believe the gospel and preach the gospel to ourselves day by day, following Jesus becomes a life-giving, interactive relationship with our risen Lord who dwells within us.

Let me give you an example of how this might look. Tim Keller tells the story of a young woman who began attending the church he pastored in NYC. She was not a believer who would come in a little late and leave a little early. That’s actually a common technique people use who are interested but don’t want to be buttonholed and pinned down by church people. One day Keller met her after church and introduced himself. She said, “I come in and out sometimes. I’m not sure I believe what you do, but I’m intrigued.” Keller asked her how she found out about Redeemer (where he’s a pastor). She told him her story.

She worked for a TV network in NYC. When she had worked there for only a short period of time she made “a really bad mistake” - a career ending kind of mistake. When she thought she’d be fired, her boss (who was well respected and who had a lot of

credibility with everyone else) went in and took the blame for what had happened. He said, "I didn't train her well. . . I didn't prep her well to do her job. If you have to be mad at somebody be mad at me, but don't fire her." When he did this he lost credibility and social capital. This woman was able to keep her job, so she went in to thank him. He kept saying, "Don't worry about it. . ." But she kept asking him why he would do what he did. She said, "I've had bosses in the past who've taken credit for **good** things I've done; but I've never had a boss take the **blame** for something I've done. . . I've never seen that before. . ." Finally he said, "You've forced me to say this, and I'm only going to say it once: I'm a Christian. And **my whole life is based on the man who took the blame for me**. And that tends to shape everything I do." She said, "Where do you go to church?"

I love this story because it describes a person who has been "shaped by the gospel" - whose thoughts, feelings, and actions are formed by the truth of the gospel. He embodied a Scripture like 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 which says that "14 For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; 15 and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf." He never would have done what he did if he were living for himself. But because he believed that Jesus died and rose again **on his behalf**, his thinking, speaking, and actions were transformed.

I'd like to invite you to do an exercise this week. We've provided a reading guide for this week which contains five Scriptures that mention (or allude to) the death and resurrection of Jesus. The questions basically prompt you to ask, "What if I really believed the gospel - that Jesus died and rose again on my behalf?" How would it shape the way I think and feel and speak and act? Let God surprise you with the beauty and power of the gospel.

Holy Week Reading Guide:

For each passage ask these questions:

What are some implications of the death and resurrection of Jesus for the way I think, feel, and act?

What is one specific situation in which I can apply the command or truth of this passage?

2 Corinthians 5:11-15 - living for "Him who died and rose again on [our] behalf"

Romans 6:1-11 - ". . . dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus"

Romans 8:1-17 - ". . . the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you. . ."

Colossians 3:1-4 ". . . if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above"

Philippians 3:17-21 - ". . . who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory. . ."