

The Heart of Mark's Gospel

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Introduction

Each of the four Gospels contains an emphasis on the cost of discipleship. Matthew describes Jesus as the rejected Messiah of Israel who encourages his disciples on how to respond to similar rejection as they are sent out amidst hostility (10:1-42). Luke emphasizes costly discipleship in his Travelogue (9:51-19:44) which describes Jesus' rejection on his way to Jerusalem where he will die. In the Last Discourse, John's gospel underscores persecution by the world (15:18-16:4) as Jesus prepares the disciples for what they will encounter in their ministries after his departure from the earth and before his return. But Mark's gospel appears to have the heaviest stress on the cost of discipleship. He writes "a community under duress, a duress that may well have given rise to questions about who Jesus really was and the nature of the kingdom that he had come to inaugurate."¹ He "wants to help his readers understand who Jesus is and what real discipleship involves."² He presents Jesus as the Son of God, the suffering Son of Man, and urges his readers likewise "to take up the cross." This emphasis, found primarily in 8:27-10:45, is rightly called by scholars the "heart of Mark's gospel." I will briefly examine below this section of Scripture in more detail.³

Interestingly, Mark's stress on costly discipleship is situated between two accounts in which Jesus restores sight to some blind men (8:22-26; 10:46-52).⁴ This *inclusio* obviously serves to illustrate the myopic plight of Christ's disciples.⁵ They see, but in a sense, are also blind themselves, and thus need to have their sight restored by Jesus. This section contains three predictions of Christ's passion (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). All three

¹ R. A. Guelich, "Gospel of Mark," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (eds. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall: Downer's Grove, IL: IVP, 1992), 524.

² Donald A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Leicester: Apollos, 1992), 101.

³ This brief literary analysis and exposition may not necessarily say anything that has not been said before, but is designed primarily to aid pastors and laymen in their study of Mark for the SBC's January Bible Study.

forecasts tell not only of his death, but also his resurrection. These predictions are followed by the failure of the disciples to understand just what Christ is saying (8:32-33; 9:32-34; 10:35-41). Consequently, Jesus uses these opportunities to teach on the cost of discipleship (8:34-9:1; 9:35-37; 10:42-45).⁶ He explains what real discipleship entails when he says, “If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me” (8:34).

Christ’s First Passion Prediction—8:31

Christ’s first passion prediction (8:31) immediately follows Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ (8:29). Mark arranged these statements in this manner to show just what type of Messiah Jesus is. He is one that will suffer, be rejected by the chief priests and scribes, and be put to death—hardly the kind of Messiah that Peter and the other disciples were expecting. After Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Messiah (8:29), the Lord warns the disciples not to tell others about him. Why would Jesus do this? The answer to the latter question is found in 8:31—the disciples “were not yet ready to proclaim Jesus as the Christ” because he first had to suffer and die.⁷ They did not yet understand that these events had to come to pass.⁸

The Disciples’ Misunderstanding—8:32-33

After Jesus made his first passion prediction, Peter rebukes Jesus (8:32), trying to prevent him from suffering and going to the cross, which Christ earlier had said was a necessity. The idea of a suffering Christ obviously did not fit in well with Peter’s concept of whom the Messiah should be. In response, Jesus strongly rebukes Peter (8:33) saying, “Get behind me, Satan!” He was telling Peter to get out of his way and stop tempting him. Satan was, in essence, working through Peter trying to thwart Christ’s destiny and divine mission to die for the sins of humanity.

⁴ Further, the first healing in 8:22-26 is a stubborn one (cf. 8:23) and does not take on the first try; on the other hand, the healing in 10:46-52 is instantaneous (cf. 10:52). From a literary point of view this detail illustrates that “curing the stubborn spiritual blindness of the disciples will also take a second touch” (David E. Garland, “Mark,” *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* [ed. Clinton E. Arnold; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002], 254).

⁵ Guelich, “Mark,” *DJG*, 516-17.

⁶ Information in this paragraph on the structure and use of Mark’s *inclusio* found in Guelich, “Mark,” *DJG*, 516-17; and James A. Brooks, *Mark*. NAC (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1991), 136.

⁷ Brooks, *Mark*, 136.

⁸ Many scholars correctly recognize that the word “must” (dei=), found in 8:31, often conveys a sense of divine necessity. This nuance surely seems to be the one meant in reference to Christ’s suffering and death.

Christ's Correction—8:34-9:1

Peter's misunderstanding provided Jesus with the opportunity to correct and teach the disciples. This teaching, however, was also meant for others besides the disciples because v. 34 states that Christ "summoned the crowd with the disciples." Jesus then said, "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me." This was a sober invitation to follow Jesus and be his disciple. To "deny yourself" is to reject your will as the master of your life. In the first century, to "take up the cross" meant forcing a condemned man to carry the horizontal part of the cross on which he would eventually die.⁹ This image was a startling one because "only criminals and slaves were crucified and carried crosses to the place of execution."¹⁰ Jesus' exhortation to "take up the cross" was a summons to martyrdom; he was inviting his disciples to die with him. Unfortunately, in our day we have cheapened the impact of Christ's words to mean "self-sacrifice" rather than dying with him. But Jesus made it clear that in order for one to save his life, i.e. in heaven, he must lose it while on earth for Christ and the gospel (8:35). On account of Christ the believer must be willing to pay any price, give up anything dear, endure rejection, and suffer. Further, the soul is worth much more than anything that the world might offer (8:36-37). If one is ashamed of Christ and his words, and denies him, e.g. in time of persecution,¹¹ then Jesus, when he returns, will also deny those who did not really take up the cross in discipleship (8:38). After just talking about dying, Christ further says that some standing by would not die before they saw the kingdom of God after it "has come" (ε0ληλυκει=an, perfect tense) with power (9:1). Since some of Christ's disciples witnessed the Transfiguration, his words likely refer to that event.¹² Jesus' words seem to focus, not strictly upon the arrival of the

⁹ Brooks (*Mark*, 137) and many other scholars correctly recognize this fact.

¹⁰ Garland, "Mark," 256.

¹¹ Brooks (*Mark*, 138) rightly recognizes, "In the first century being ashamed of Jesus and his words had particular reference to denying him in time of persecution."

¹² The same words in the other Synoptic Gospels are also immediately followed by that event. For fuller discussions of Jesus' words in Mark 9:1 see the various commentaries, e.g. those by Brooks and France. Further, though not a part of Christ's correction per se, one might ask, "Where do the accounts of the Transfiguration (9:2-10), the disciple's question about Elijah (9:11-13), and the exorcising of a demon from a deaf and mute boy (9:14-29) fit into the context of Christ's discussion on discipleship?" The following remarks should help to answer the latter question. First, although Jesus had to suffer, the Transfiguration indicates that this was not his ultimate destiny. Second, the disciple's question about Elijah is prompted by his appearance on the mount and the uncertainty that still exists amongst the disciples about who Jesus is. Third, the exorcism provides insight into the nature of faith in discipleship. Explanations used in this summary are drawn from Brooks, *Mark*, 141, 144, 146.

kingdom of God, but rather upon “the point at which its presence, already a reality, is (a) visible and (b) displayed” in power.¹³

Christ’s Second Passion Prediction—9:31

Jesus’ second prediction of his passion occurs in 9:31. He again reminds his disciples that he is a suffering Messiah. This passion prediction differs from the first one in that it speaks of Christ, the Son of Man, being “handed over (paradi/dwmi) into the hands of men.”¹⁴

The Disciples’ Misunderstanding—9:32-34

The disciples again misunderstood Christ’s statement; further, they were afraid to ask him about it (9:32). Why? Maybe they were frightened because he had now spoken not once, but twice, of his suffering and death. Perhaps they reasoned from Jesus’ words that whatever was going to occur to him would also happen to them. Maybe the disciples began to grasp slightly what it meant to be a disciple of Jesus—and it scared them.¹⁵ However, that the disciples had still grossly misunderstood Christ’s words is evident from the fact that they were arguing about who was the greatest amongst them (9:34b), even though Jesus had earlier spoken about losing one’s life for the gospel. The disciples kept silent when Christ asked them what they were discussing (9:33-34a); evidently, they did not want him to know.

Christ’s Correction—9:35-37

Jesus taught that worldly values are reversed in his kingdom. To address the self-seeking attitudes and discord of the disciples, he made clear the paradox of the Gospel—that one must be a servant to be first in his kingdom (9:35). Jesus symbolically used a child to illustrate that disciples are to receive and care for any outcasts or persons of lowly status; when they do so, they “receive” Jesus and act as he himself would do (9:36-37). The meaning of Jesus’ symbolic illustration is lost if we do not recognize the lowly place that children occupied in antiquity.¹⁶ Unlike today, no romantic idea of children was present in the first century; children in Mark’s day had “no power, status, or rights”; they were not looked upon as “full persons and were regarded as somewhat

¹³ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*. NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 344.

¹⁴ A search of the LXX reveals that paradi/dwmi frequently means to “hand over” to persons and/or things of hostility or destruction. For example, the term is used in the LXX to refer to the ill-fate of the Suffering Servant (cf. Isaiah 53:6, 12) and the prophets (cf. Jeremiah 26:24 [33:24, LXX]; 38:16; 39:17 [46:17, LXX]).

¹⁵ As Brooks (*Mark*, 149) suggests.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 150.

akin to property.”¹⁷ So, to put the lid on the disciples’ yearnings to be great, Jesus taught in these verses that greatness in God’s kingdom comes through ministry and service, not through human rank, prestige, or position.

Christ’s Third Passion Prediction—10:33-34

Christ’s third and most detailed statement of his passion occurs in 10:33-34. Unlike the other two predictions, this time Jesus explicitly spoke of being handed over to the Gentiles, and mocked, spit upon, flogged, and killed. Further, Mark mentioned for the first time that Jesus was “going up to Jerusalem,” where all of these things would take place.

The Disciples’ Misunderstanding—10:35-41

The disciples may have an idea at this point that events are coming to a climax in Jesus’ life and ministry, but they still badly misunderstand. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, ask Jesus to do for them whatever they ask (10:35). Christ asks them what they want him to do (10:36). Their reply is that they want him to arrange for one of them to sit on his right and one on his left when he is in glory (10:37). In other words, James and John recognized that “Jesus is destined for great power and ask for special distinction in his messianic kingdom.”¹⁸ In Jewish thought to “sit on the right” of a king was a place of the greatest importance; to “sit on the left” was the second greatest place (cf. 1 Kings 2:19; Psalm 110:1; etc.).¹⁹ Jesus tells them that they do not really know what they are asking; he then asks them, “Are you are able to drink the cup I drink, or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with” (10:38)? The terms “cup” and “baptism” are metaphors that Jesus uses to signify his coming suffering and death. The “cup” refers to the “cup of suffering from divine judgment” (Psalm 75:8; Isaiah 51:17, 22; Jeremiah 25:15, 28; 49:12), while “baptism” pictures being “submerged in suffering (Psalm 42:7; 69:1).”²⁰ James and John quickly respond that they were able to drink from Christ’s cup and undergo his baptism (10:39). Their careless reply shows that they still misunderstand what discipleship means. Jesus foretells that they indeed would share his suffering (10:39). Further, he replies that places of honor are not his to grant; they are given to those for whom they have been prepared (10:40). Jesus probably meant that the

¹⁷ Garland, “Mark,” 260.

¹⁸ Garland, “Mark,” 265.

¹⁹ Brooks, *Mark*, 167-68. Citing Tacitus *Hist.* 2.59 Garland (“Mark,” 265) says, “When Vitellius accepted the title of emperor in A. D. 68, he praised his generals and ‘placed them on either side of his curule chair.’”

²⁰ Garland, “Mark,” 265.

granting of such honored positions is the prerogative of God the Father—he has reserved those places. Notice also the despicable behavior of the other ten disciples—when they got wind of James’ and John’s request, they became angry with them (10:41). No doubt they wanted positions of honor in Christ’s kingdom for themselves.

Christ’s Correction—10:42-45

Christ called his disciples together (10:41) and used this event to teach them lessons concerning service and humility. He discouraged the disciples’ aspirations to be like Gentile rulers who lorded over their subjects with their authority (10:42). Contary to the disciples’ way of thinking, Jesus taught that whoever wanted to be great in God’s kingdom had to be a “servant” (dia/konoj) to others and “slave” (dou=loj) of all (10:43-44). Servants engaged in the most menial of tasks. Slaves, on the other hand, had no legal, civil, or human rights—indeed, “the slave’s entire life was at the disposal of the master.”²¹ Jesus is the example *par excellence* of one who had such an attitude. He did not come to be served but to serve (10:45)—and indeed he did so ultimately by giving his life as “a ransom in the place of many” (lu/tron aOnti\ pollw=n).²² A “ransom” (lu/tron) is the “price of release” for something or someone held captive; this term was often used to describe the “ransom money paid for the manumission of slaves.”²³ Through his death on the cross Jesus has redeemed others from the bondage of sin and death. Christ’s death was a penal, substitutionary, atonement for the sins of people. His life, ministry, and death was characterized by humility, service, and suffering.

Conclusion

What can we say by way of application from the heart of Mark’s gospel? First, those who profess to be disciples of Jesus must die to themselves, i.e. take up their crosses.²⁴ To “take up the cross” means that believers

²¹ As Garland (“Mark,” 265) rightly points out. In support of this point Garland cites Plato, *Gorgias* 491E, where Callicles asks, “How can anyone be happy when he is the slave of all?” Further, he also quotes Seneca, *On Benefits* 3.19.1, where a slave is characterized as one who “does not have the right to refuse.”

²² The preposition aOnti\ is used here as substitutionary language: “in the place of.” See the discussion in Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 364-67.

²³ BDAG, 605.

²⁴ For a practical article about what it means “to take up one’s cross,” see the inspirational sermon immediately following this article that Walter Norvell preached in a previous Midwestern Baptist Seminary chapel service. Norvell’s sermon is placed here because it serves as a complementary follow-up to the present article.

will be concerned first and foremost with what God desires in their lives. They must reject their will as master in their lives and follow the Lord Jesus wholeheartedly. Christians must be obedient, willing to give up anything dear, pay any price, endure any rejection or humiliation, and suffer like Jesus did if they are to be his disciples.

Second, Christ's disciples must be characterized by humility and service. This distinction means that Christians will think of other people as better than themselves and their interests as more important than their own (cf. Phil 2:4). They should have neither personal agendas nor selfish ambitions. They should not insist on their own way. They should not seek to control or manipulate others for gain. To be sure, no room exists for megalomania or narcissism in the Christian life. Such behavior is not becoming for believers.

The message found in the "heart of Mark's gospel" challenges our hearts. For, such thinking as that described above runs entirely counter to the world's values, but is absolutely imperative if we want to have a lasting impact upon our society, present an effective, credible witness to the world, and follow the Lord Jesus the way he meant for us to do.

The words of one who was saved and greatly influenced by Christ serve as an appropriate end to this article.²⁵ The apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 2:5-8,

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (NASB).

²⁵ I realize that Philippians is a different genre and has a different context/occasion than does the Gospel of Mark; however, the principles of taking up the cross and being a servant to others are present in this passage. In Philippians Paul urges his readers to advance the gospel together. To persuade them to do so in unity he encourages them to follow the selfless example of Jesus, who was wholly obedient to death on the cross and a servant to others.