

The Beginning... (Mark 1:1)

Notes from a sermon preached by Pastor Matt Privett at Covenant Baptist Church

Setting the Table

Mark's Gospel is the shortest of the four, and while his is one of what are called the "synoptic gospels" (along with Matthew and Luke), his Gospel is also unique in that it, more than any of the others, focuses almost exclusively on the public ministry of Jesus Christ. Matthew and Luke record birth narratives and couple of childhood events. John includes a masterful prologue which proclaims Jesus the Word made flesh who was in the beginning and who created all. Mark is straight-forward.

Günther Zuntz was a German classical scholar who was an expert in the literature of the Roman Empire, but not necessarily the literature of Christianity. When he read Mark for the first time he said, "something very important was being put forward here with a superior purpose and concentration throughout the book. . . . The style and content of the story arouse a feeling of otherness, a feeling that this is not history like other histories, not a biography like other biographies, but a development of the actions, sayings, and suffering of a higher being on his way through this anxious world of human beings and demons." [France, *Mark*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, 6-7]

Zuntz is right. Something very important is happening in Mark. There is a superior purpose and concentration throughout the book. There is a feeling of otherness. This is not just any history. This is a book about a Man, written by a follower of that Man who believes that Man to be the Son of God and still alive and worthy of worship and unconditional allegiance.

Jesus Christ is who He said He was. Jesus Christ is who Mark says He is, and we find out in verse 1 who Mark says Jesus is: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

The Beginning

We usually like to take credit for the things we do, but none of the Gospel writers actually identify themselves by name. One reason might have been fear of persecution, but what is clear is that they didn't feel the need for their names to be in there. This isn't, after all, the Gospel ABOUT Mark. This is the Gospel -- Good News -- about Jesus Christ as told by Mark.

Church tradition dating back to the early 100s attributes the book to Mark and internal evidence suggests there is no good reason to doubt that. The author knew Hebrew and Aramaic, along with Greek, of course, and Mark fits that bill because Acts 12:12 indicates he had his home in Jerusalem.

Mark translates several Aramaic sayings into Greek, which indicates that those he was writing to, or for, were predominately Gentiles. These Gentiles, however, appear to have been familiar with many titles for Jesus, indicating that this was a church outside of Israel. Furthermore, several "Latinisms" in the book point to an audience familiar with the Roman government. Church tradition also indicates that Mark served with Peter and was with him in Rome when he wrote this book.

As for Mark himself, we know a few things about him. He was called John Mark. He was from Jerusalem. His mother's name was Mary (Acts 12:12). He was a cousin of Barnabas (Col 4:10). He started on a missionary journey with Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13:5, but left in Acts 13:13. He then traveled with Peter to Rome (1 Pet 5:13).

It has been speculated that, just as John refers to himself in his Gospel obscurely (the disciple whom Jesus loved, the other disciple), Mark does the same. The possibility arises in Mark 14:51-52 when Jesus is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane: "A young man was following Him, wearing nothing but a linen sheet over his naked body; and they seized him. But he pulled free of the linen sheet and escaped naked." The inclusion of this tidbit seems a little strange, but some believe that this is

Mark's way of referring to himself - that he was the naked young man and that perhaps his house was the location of the upper room for the Lord's Supper, and that maybe he had followed Jesus and the disciples to the Garden. All speculation, but interesting to think about.

The bottom line is that Mark is Christian Scripture. It is the word of God. What, then, did Mark seek to accomplish in writing his Gospel?

Mark, being in Rome and writing to a predominately Gentile audience, certainly would have been familiar with the pluralism that also permeates the world in the 21st century. It is increasingly challenging to proclaim an exclusive Savior. I contend that the Gospel of Mark has a thesis statement and we find it in verse 1. Dr. Stephen Wellum writes in the Southern Baptist Journal of Theology on Mark, "What characterizes our society, and sadly the church, is a profound biblical illiteracy, which opens the door to serious confusion regarding the identity and utter importance of our Lord" (SBJT, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 2).

Mark knew the utter importance of the Lord, so he wrote a historical account of the gospel to proclaim his thesis: JESUS CHRIST IS THE SON OF GOD AND THAT IS GOOD NEWS! And then he proceeds to back up the claim with evidence - miracles, healings, exorcisms, teaching, and of course, the cross. And right near the end of the book Mark restates his thesis, after all of the evidence has been laid out, through the Roman centurion who had helped put Jesus to death, who said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

The Gospel of Jesus Christ

This is "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ." Unfortunately many in the church, much less the world, live in that aforementioned confusion about what the gospel is and is not. Before we embark on this study we need to talk about it. There are many facets to the answer the question.

First, the gospel is narrative. A narrative is the telling of a story. Many movies are narratives. They tell stories. Mark's Gospel is the telling of the story of the ministry of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who came to give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

Second, the gospel is historical fact. Unlike movies such as "Saving Private Ryan," which is only inspired by actual events, Mark did not have to take dramatic license the way Hollywood writers and producers might do. The miracles really happened. The cross and the resurrection really happened. The historical evidence is on the side of the Bible. Those disciples would not have died for something they knew to be a lie. The good news about Jesus Christ is rooted not in religious mythology, but in the facts of history.

Third, the gospel is a property. The word "of," noting possession, is associated with the gospel over and over again in the New Testament.

The gospel is the property of God. Mark 1:14, which we will be looking at in the next few weeks, says that "Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God." Paul says in Romans 1:1 that he is set apart for the gospel of God. In Romans 15:16 Paul describes himself as ministering as a priest the gospel of God. And there are several other uses of the phrase "the gospel of God" that show the ownership of the gospel that is not only invested in the Trinity at large, but God the Father in particular.

The gospel is the property of Jesus Christ. Mark 1:1 is the only verse that uses the phrase "gospel of Jesus Christ," but there are many that say "gospel of Christ," omitting the word "Jesus." The gospel of Jesus Christ is indeed the good news about Jesus Christ, but that is only part of the story. Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, also has ownership in the plan of salvation dating back before the foundation of the world. It was before the foundation of the world, according to Ephesians 1:4, when the Father chose those He would become holy and blameless before Him. God the Son, Jesus Christ, has an active role in that as well, because the next verse speaks to our adoption as sons through Jesus Christ. So the gospel isn't just good news about Christ, but it is something of which Jesus Christ Himself takes ownership.

The gospel is the property of Paul. The phrase “my gospel” is unique in Scripture to the apostle Paul. He uses it three times. In Romans 2:16, according to Paul’s gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus. In Romans 16:25, according to Paul’s gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, God is able to establish you in the faith. In 2 Timothy 2:8, we are to remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descendant of David, according to Paul’s gospel. Paul took ownership of the gospel when he was not only saved by God, by grace through faith in Christ, but even more so when he was set apart by God to be an apostle, an ambassador of the faith to Jews, but especially to Gentiles. Paul’s gospel was his good news about Christ to the world.

Finally, the gospel is the property of God, Jesus, and Paul... but it is also the property of all who believe it and proclaim it. Just as the apostle Paul, we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. If you believe this message, I pray you have taken ownership of the gospel in this way, not only that you believe it, but that you carry that out in your life... that you live it and proclaim it to the rest of your world. Do you own the gospel?

Fourth, the gospel is a Person. Take a moment to read Galatians 1:3-9. The gospel message some of the Galatians were deserting is summed up in the fact that Jesus gave Himself for our sins. The gospel IS Jesus Christ, and when you depart from Him, from that simple message, you proclaim no gospel at all. In 1 John 2:1, John says that if we sin, which we all do by the way, we have an Advocate, Jesus Christ the righteous. There is no other Advocate. There is no other answer to your sin problem. The gospel is Jesus and only Jesus. He is the only one who is righteous, and His righteousness is what you need to stand before God.

Finally, the gospel is a proclamation. Often times you might hear someone say that we need to get out there in the world, tell people about Jesus, and offer them the gospel. That’s the right heart, but the wrong facts. The gospel is not an offer. The gospel is not optional.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is not like playing “Deal or No Deal,” where we get to accept or reject the banker’s offers. You don’t want to keep what is in your own briefcase because it is nothing but sin and death. There is no consolation prize. There is only God judging the secrets of men (and the things that aren’t secret as well) through Jesus Christ. We must not believe for one minute that we or anyone else will be okay if they reject the gospel. It’s not an offer we get control over.

The gospel is a proclamation, a proclamation of truth and a proclamation that affects change. On January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued an Executive Order known as the “Emancipation Proclamation,” which declared slaves in Confederate states to be free. The Proclamation had the effect of changing the status of people from slave to free. The Proclamation did not request that slaveowners free the slaves. The Proclamation did the freeing.

Likewise, the gospel of Jesus Christ is a proclamation that, for those it affects, declares spiritual slaves to be freed from sin. The gospel has the effect of changing you from a slave of sin to one who is free in Christ Jesus. The gospel doesn’t ask for permission. The gospel does the freeing, and just like the Emancipation Proclamation freed the slaves, but it took the end of the Civil War for the country to see tangible results, so too does the gospel free sinners, yet we wait for either our physical death or the Christ to return and make all things right.

The gospel is a proclamation through which God effectively saves sinners. And it is a statement of truth with an imbedded command to obey in light of that truth.

- a. Do you believe in the gospel?*
- b. Does that belief show itself through repentance, turning, from sin and obeying the commands of Christ?*
- c. Do you believe the truth and obey in light of that truth?*

The gospel demands that you repent of your sins and believe in Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God.

The Son of God

The main point of Mark's Gospel is that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that is good news. Everything that comes after 1:1 serves to back up this main point. It's not just a theological reality that we need to believe in order to have right beliefs, it is absolutely necessary that Jesus be the Son of God if we are to be saved from our sins.

Perfect righteousness is God's requirement for all mankind. It's a non-negotiable requirement. The problem is there is none who is righteous. No not one. The result if nothing changes is, according to Scripture, eternity in the lake of fire. Without a suitable mediator we would all be condemned to Hell, separated from the blessings of Christ, for eternity.

Praise God that He saw fit to, out of His great love and mercy, send His Son into the world to literally bridge the gap between God and men on a cross. Jesus was, is, and always will be perfect... without sin. Whereas there is nothing man, nor any collection of men, can do to save any one person or any group of persons from the wrath of God, God Himself stepped in via the Person and work of His own Son, Jesus.

No wonder Mark saw fit to write a book proving this wonderful fact. Jesus Christ is the Son of God. It's a statement so simple, yet so full, and it's a reality that we will literally see woven through every facet of Mark's gospel.

Conclusion

Beloved, if Mark is consumed with the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, then we are going to be challenged to be consumed with the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. We who believe that cannot and must not succumb to the temptation to think that the gospel is something for unbelievers.

The gospel is for you. The grace must be amazing.

If you are a Christian, consider what the Bible says you were before Christ. You were helpless. You were ungodly. You were a sinner. You were an enemy of God. You were dead in your trespasses and sins, which means not only that you couldn't understand the things of God, but that you couldn't help but sin. But then there's the gospel of Jesus Christ. The grace really is amazing.

If you are reading this and, in your spiritual mirror, can't look yourself in the eye, then I implore you today to repent of your sins (that means to turn away from them) and turn to Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Believe in Him. Trust Him. Turn your life completely over to Him. And please feel free to contact the pastor (church phone is 937-454-1500, email is pastormatt@covenantbaptistdayton.org) today for any guidance and prayer you may need regarding this.

To God be the glory!