

Repent and Believe (Mark 1:14-15)

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

The Shortest Words Can Mean So Much

The Apollo spacecraft that took men to the moon and back forty years ago had over a million parts. Any one of them that failed could have proven deadly. Sometimes the smallest things can make the biggest difference.

The same goes with words. No one remembers long speeches, but memorable lines from those speeches. And a speech doesn't have to be long to be impactful. Take the Gettysburg Address, which is perhaps the most famous speech in American history. It only lasted four minutes long, yet it does not perish from the earth any more than the union has to this point. Sometimes the most powerful messages are delivered in short form. So it is with the text we arrive at now - Mark 1:14-15, which one commentator writes is "the definitive moment in history," and I agree.

In the previous passage, 1:9-13, Mark tells of the baptism and temptation of Jesus, what I've referred to it as the inauguration of His earthly ministry. What comes after that, 1:14-20, which includes our focal text, sets the tone for the rest of the book.

When a President is inaugurated there is usually a lot of attention given to his first 100 days in office, because that is usually the time when he has the best chance of getting the most important items in his agenda enacted by Congress. Well, similarly, when Mark wrote this book and told us about the inauguration of Jesus' ministry, His baptism, followed by His temptation, in verses 14 and 15, and next week going through verse 20, he shares with us the absolute core of Jesus' ministry and of what it means to be one of Jesus' disciples.

The power of Jesus' ministry isn't limited by 100 days, but Mark, nevertheless, immediately follows the baptism and temptation with what are the most important items of the agenda of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Everything will flow out of these things. Let us start, then, with verses 14 and 15:

14 Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

Beloved, if this paragraph is indeed the heart of Jesus' ministry, the definitive moment in history, then it's clear, or at least I hope it will be clear by the end of the study, that the most important agenda items in Jesus' ministry are the kingdom of God and the gospel. If that is what Jesus' ministry is all about, then it surely is what our church needs to be about. It needs to be what each and every one of our lives is all about. This must be of the utmost importance to us.

If you are reading this for any reason whatsoever that cannot be reconciled with the advancement of the kingdom of God and the proclamation of the gospel, then beloved, I'm very happy you are reading - you need to be reading, you need to hear this - but you also need to examine just why you are bothering with this. We are called to be a body of followers of Jesus Christ who rise up in the power of Holy Spirit and proclaim the gospel of God with reckless abandon.

Does the message of Christ here, I wonder, resonate with you today? "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel." Does your life have anything in common with the heart of Jesus' ministry? Well, beloved, it better. It better if you call yourself a Christian, a disciple of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. So let us be crystal clear on this today. Let's make sure we understand the heart of Jesus' ministry, which is this: The gospel of God is not an offer. You must repent and believe.

The Transition

Before we get into these verses something Mark doesn't tell us needs to be noted, and that is the gap between verses 13 and 14. We've got to remember that these aren't biographies of Jesus' life which include every single detail. The Holy Spirit inspired the Gospel writers to explain exactly what God wanted to reveal, exactly what we need to know. There is a gap of about one year between the temptation of Christ and what we just read. Mark isn't the only Gospel writer to have a gap. Matthew and Luke join him in saying practically nothing about this particular time.

It is the Gospel of John where we learn about Jesus' ministry during a year in which He was pretty much in obscurity, but it's not as if there aren't some important things that happened during that time. It is in John 1 that we find Jesus meeting some of His disciples for the first time.

When we look at Mark 1:16-20 we'll see Him call disciples to ministry, but it's in John where He meets them for the first time. Jesus comes upon John the Baptist, standing with two of his disciples, John (who we know as the apostle John) and Andrew. John the Baptist would say to them, "Behold the Lamb of God!" and John and Andrew would, I believe, come to saving faith that point. Andrew would go get his brother, who I believe also came to saving faith here. Jesus would say to the brother, Simon, that now he would be Cephas, or Peter.

That was their first meeting with Jesus. Mark would describe another meeting that we see in verses 16-20. More happened during this year gap. Jesus went to the wedding in Cana and performed His first public miracle. Then, He went to Capernaum, and then to Jerusalem for the Passover, where He would run the moneychangers out of the temple, applying a Messianic promise to Himself, saying, "Zeal for Your house will consume Me!" He would see the dead religion of Jerusalem first hand. Jesus would then be approached by Nicodemus, a teacher of that dead religion in Israel, and tell him that He needs to be born from above to see the kingdom of God. After that, Jesus went with His disciples into northeast portions of Judea where He remained for a few months. John the Baptist was out there.

But in John 4 it is around the time that John the Baptist was taken into custody, and so Jesus withdraws from Judea and goes north toward Galilee. Jesus knows that things are beginning to heat up, but His hour has not yet come. His confrontation with the leaders is still in the future. So He leaves that area and goes north. On the way He passes through Samaria and has the encounter with the woman at the well. Then He gets to Galilee. Quite a year in the ministry of Jesus in between Mark 1:13 and Mark 1:14.

So Mark writes, "Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee."

That term "Now after" marks that a transition is taking place from what he had just written about. The inauguration of Jesus' ministry, the baptism and temptation -- that section is over. What we read now is what happened "after John had been taken into custody." Mark doesn't go into details here about how the ministry of John the Baptist, and indeed his life, came to an end. That'll come in chapter 6, but it's worth a quick review.

By that time Jesus had become well known, even to King Herod Antipas. John the Baptist had been killed and Herod feared that Jesus was John risen from the grave. He had put John to death at the request of his wife, Herodias, who had been the wife of Herod's brother. John the Baptist had preached against the sexual immorality of Herod, had called for his repentance, and had been arrested as a result. Herodias hated him so much that she had him beheaded when she saw an opportunity.

Mark's point in chapter one isn't in the details of that so much as it is about the fact that Jesus' ministry doesn't really rise to prominence until John's ministry ends. The phrase "taken into custody" is significant, however, because it's better rendered "handed over" or "delivered," and that's a significant phrase in Mark. He's saying, literally, that John the Baptist was "handed over."

First, it's a passive verb. John was handed over. Someone did the handing over. And the way Mark phrases this, not outright telling us who did the handing over, is a not so subtle way to infer that it was God who did the handing over. God was sovereign in appointing John the Baptist to his position before he was even conceived, filling him with the Holy Spirit while he was still in the womb. And here God is, just as sovereign in the end of John's ministry and life, because it fulfilled the purpose of making the path straight for Jesus Christ, the Son of God. God's control over John being handed

over is reinforced by the fact that the phrase “handed over” or “delivered” is used many with regards to Jesus Himself, including ten times in Mark 14 and 15.

To go back to our study of Mark 1:2-8, I guess we can say that John’s handing over and his death was thoroughly Christocentric as well!

And so Jesus came into Galilee, his home province, which is significant in its own right. You would think that Jesus would want to make the biggest impact on Israel possible, so He would be in Jerusalem. But no, He goes home to Galilee. He’d been born in Bethlehem of Judea, but had grown up in Nazareth of Galilee.

Galilee was the most populated part of Israel in that time. It was removed from Jerusalem and the dead establishment religion that permeated there. So Jesus enjoyed great visibility and popularity in Galilee. The Pharisees and scribes and others in Jerusalem were so inoculated by their cultural form of Judaism that when they heard the real truth, the word of God, they revolted against it and sought to quash it.

It’s the same way much of the southeast has been inoculated on a cultural form of Christianity, so much so that very many think they are saved, but their faith in their faith, their faith is in their tradition. In actuality revolt when they hear the word of God preached. Churches split, people become bitter. Jesus didn’t spend so much time amongst the dead religiosity, but went to where the people responded to the fresh, true, real preaching of God’s word. That is the transition we see in verse 14.

The Tone

Note that Jesus did not come into Galilee with a new book out. He didn’t come with a group study that was popular. He didn’t come to promote how Galileans could have health and wealth. He came PREACHING. Jesus came preaching. Jesus came with an authoritative declaration of truth.

He did not come with some suggestions for how Israel could be better, or how they could get from under the thumb of the Roman Empire. He came with an authoritative declaration of truth... a proclamation, an announcement, a heralding.

There is not enough proclaiming going on amongst Christians and in churches today. I’m not trying to pick on a Christian radio network, but by and large we as Christians have our fill of that which purports itself to be “positive and encouraging.” There is too much syrupy sentimentalism in the pulpits of America’s churches this morning and not enough truth. There is too much ambiguity. Too much human cleverness clouding out the message of Scripture.

Jesus’ preaching was anything but ambiguous sentimentalism. He came with a proclamation... an authoritative proclamation. And the word “preaching” here is in the present tense, which means that this was not something Jesus did once, but something He was doing continuously. It’s a constant theme in Mark.

In 1:4 John the Baptist is preaching. In 1:7 he’s preaching again. In 1:14 it is Jesus who is preaching. And in 1:38-39, it’ll be Jesus setting out to preach in other towns because, as He puts it to His disciples, “that is what I came for.” Jesus was always preaching. Always proclaiming, just as the church has been commanded to do. That’s the tone of His ministry.

The Triumph

The triumph is that Jesus was always preaching “the gospel of God.”

Gospel means “good news” and Jesus came preaching the good news of God. It is the message of salvation and forgiveness of sins. It is the message of God’s grace. There is no more triumphant message than that.

Jesus came preaching THE gospel of God. It is an exclusive message. There's a definite article in front of it, both in Greek and in English. It's THE gospel. Not A gospel. Not one of many gospels. Not one of several options. THE gospel.

The gospel is not an offer, but a proclamation. It's the gospel OF GOD. God is the source of this gospel. He thought it up in eternity past. He brought it to pass. He provided for it in His Son. He did it! So no substitute for the gospel of God will provide for salvation. No man-made alteration or special effort will work.

Jesus came preaching one thing - the gospel of God. That's it. That's the triumph.

The Timing

Jesus came into Galilee preaching the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand."

"The time is fulfilled." It reminds us of what Paul writes both in Ephesians and Galatians.

In Ephesians 1:9-10 Paul writes, "He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to the kind intention which He (God the Father) purposed in Him (Jesus Christ) with a view to the administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth."

All of history was waiting for the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The fullness of the times is all things being summed up in Christ, both in heaven and on earth, and it began here with Jesus' earthly ministry.

In Galatians 4:4-5, Paul writes, "But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons."

God, from eternity past, as looking to this time... this time when His only begotten Son would fulfill perfect righteousness on earth, that those who believe in Him might, through the Father's will, become His adopted children. This is exactly what is meant when it's said that Mark 1:14-15 is the definitive moment in all of history. It was. God, in the Person of Jesus, had inaugurated the final phase of human history, the dawn of salvation. The time was at hand.

Mark used the Greek word *καιρος* (kairos), meaning "time" or "appointed time." If he had wanted to just talk about a clock counting down to a certain time he would've used the word *κρονος* (chronos), from which we get the English word "chronology" or "chronological," describing a sequence of events. But no, this is more than a countdown. This is the *καιρος*. This is the appointed time.

There is urgency in His preaching. This is Jesus announcing, proclaiming, heralding, that the definitive moment in history had arrived. This is not another Jonah or Isaiah, not another Old Testament prophet. That time is fulfilled. That time is complete. This is the time, the appointed time. It is the kingdom of God and it is at hand.

Mark links the coming of Jesus to the Old Testament promises of an everlasting kingdom with God as its ruler. He is, in effect, saying that Jesus is that ruler. Jesus is God. Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that is good news!

We wait for the day when the kingdom will fully and finally come when Christ fulfills His promise to return. Meanwhile, Mark records Jesus as saying "the kingdom of God is at hand," or more literally, it "has come near." John the Baptist's ministry cleared the path. Now Mark recognized that the coming of Christ was the flashpoint for the events of the end. Mark is saying, "Jesus is here and now we have the beginning of the glorious end." God is keeping His promises which date back to the Garden of Eden in this Son of God from Nazareth in Galilee. The hour of God's most glorious display of power had drawn near, was at hand, in the coming of Jesus Christ. And the beautiful thing about it is we now await that hour's completion.

There is coming a day when Jesus Christ Himself will return to earth and, as I understand it, reign on earth for 1,000 years, and then there will be a new heaven and a new earth with the Triune God reigning as King for all eternity. Creation is pointing to that, groaning for that. But by the time all of that commences it will be too late to change your spiritual condition. Therefore, as we await that hour, the consummation of the kingdom, we would do well to heed Jesus' commands, His terms, in verse 15.

The Terms

Jesus came to Galilee preaching good news, but the consummation of the kingdom of God will not be good news for everybody. There are terms upon which the blessings of the kingdom of God are bestowed. Jesus proclaimed, "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel."

The Son of God is here restating a theme that saturates the Old Testament. God's blessings provoke human obligations. The kingdom of God coming is the greatest divine blessing of all time.

It isn't only salvation for each and every person who believes in the Son of God, but it is a restoring of all things, the entire creation. It is the reverse of the curse and the making right of all things under the kingship of God Almighty. And the grace God shows us guilty sinners demands a human response. We are under obligation to trust God, and that trust includes an implicit requirement to obey.

"Repent and believe in the gospel."

Repent and believe. The two fundamental parts of God's salvation from the Garden of Eden until the day the kingdom is come in all its glory in the Person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus' proclamation is not given in the form of a request. He isn't saying "Please!" He isn't asking your permission. He's telling you in no uncertain terms that He, the Son of God, is commanding you to repent and believe in the gospel. These are imperatives, requirements, orders.

We must repent. To repent is to change. To change one's mind. To turn from something. And in the context of fallen creatures we are to repent from sin.

Preachers and prophets have been calling on men to repent since Genesis. Noah did it. Nathan did it. Elijah did it. Isaiah did it. John the Baptist did it. Jesus did it. Peter would call men to repentance on the day of Pentecost. On Mars Hill Paul would call on all men everywhere to repent.

We are fallen creatures living in a fallen creation. We are dead in our trespasses and sins. There is none of us who is righteous. None of us who does good. None of us who understands. None of us who even seeks after God. We are vile, rotten, nasty, stinky, infected sinners, rebels against God. We deserve to be thrown into the lake of fire for all eternity.

You say, "Pastor, I'm not that bad. I'm a pretty good person." No. No, you're really not. James says, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all."

Tell me, have you ever stumbled in anything? Ever? Then you need to repent! You need a Savior! You need saving help from the One who did keep the whole Law, the One who did not stumble in one point, any point, ever. You need help from the One who died on the cross to absorb the wrath of God for all sin, for all time, for all who will ever believe.

You... Yes you, beloved, need to repent and believe in the gospel.

Our goal cannot be to be good people. Our goal cannot be to be better than most. Our goal cannot be to be spiritual. Our goal is not to be people of faith. We do not and cannot have faith in faith. It is politically correct to be a person of faith, but faith doesn't save unless that faith is in the right Person.

The faith of biblical Christianity is in a Person, an object - the gospel of Jesus Christ. You need not only intellectually accept that the facts of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus are true. You need not only assent that there is only one God. Satan and his demons believe that, and shudder. No, you need to believe IN Jesus. You need to trust in Jesus. Respond with an acceptance, a commitment, to Him and to everything He tells you to do.

Mark records Jesus as simply saying here, "Believe in the gospel." He doesn't go into details right here about the commitment that entails, but he will as the book continues. These two verses, then, serve as a reference point for the entire Gospel of Mark, in which Jesus will show through His teaching and by His example what it means to be His disciple, His follower... what it means to truly believe in Him.

That is something missing from too many sermons today, too many Bible studies, too many churches.

There are many today who want divorce repentance from faith, but they do so at their own peril and to the detriment of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Repentance and belief, repentance and faith are inextricably linked, two sides of the same coin. Turning from sin in repentance and turning to God in faith are the same movement.

If I face one side of this room and then face the other side of the room, I have turned from one to the other in one action. You can't believe in the gospel without repenting of sin. You can't turn to Jesus Christ in faith without turning from sin in repentance. Repentance is in itself an act of faith.

Jerry Bridges writes that, "The gospel, applied to our hearts every day, frees us to be brutally honest with ourselves and with God."

We need to be honest with ourselves. All too often we want to repent from the consequences of sin, but not the sin itself. That, you might say, is the sinfulness of sin, but true faith is antithetical to that ungodly notion.

Do a word study on repentance in the New Testament and you'll find that the Christ-like attitude toward sin is a violent attitude which includes amputation, starvation, murder, and fighting. It's a matter of crucifying your own flesh. It's a matter of it being better to enter heaven with one arm than to go into the lake of fire with both. We need to get violent with our own sin if we want to say we really trust Jesus Christ. If we don't get violent with sin it's almost always because we don't want to eliminate something from our lives that we still love.

Are you ready to trust Jesus Christ enough, beloved, to get violent with the sin in your life? Do you believe in the gospel enough to really repent? To really turn your back the love of self and the love of this world and really, I mean really, believe in the gospel.

We can sing "The Solid Rock" all we want to, but are we prepared to really repent of how comfortable the shifting sand makes us feel and stand on Christ and Christ alone?

And let's just reiterate one very important thing: Know right now, beloved... I've said this before but it bears repeating in this age of confusion: The gospel of God is not an offer for you to accept or reject.

This isn't "Let's Make a Deal." Jesus isn't holding out His hands like a salesman and asking you to take up His offer of salvation. He's not the stereotypical used car salesman asking, "What do I need to do to get you into this jalopy today?" It's not like going to Wal-Mart and debating whether or not to buy a pair of jeans they offer, or something, and walking away and being alright.

The gospel is not an offer, but a proclamation which you are responsible for. A command to obey. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is saying, "This is the way it is. You'd do well to obey."

Let us be clear about that this in this study because there's only one gospel. Theology matters. What you believe matters. What your neighbor or co-worker or spouse or child or friend believes matters. We do them a disservice, a grievous and

unloving disservice, and we disobey God when we take up the attitude of, “You believe about God what you believe about God and I’ll believe what I believe and it’ll all work out in the end.” None of us is really willing, probably, to admit that’s what we believe, but it is too often how we live.

May it never be! The gospel is an exclusive gospel. What you need to believe is very simple, clear, and forthright. The gospel of God saves and any other gospel is no gospel at all, but the broad way to destruction.

Mark wrote in a time and place where pluralism ran rampant, much as it does today. You could worship as many gods as you wanted to pretty much, in a time and place where confusion about who the Son of God really was needed to be clarified.

Be clear, beloved, that there is one and only gospel. Only one God to worship. One, and only One, unique, only begotten Son of God: Jesus Christ. This gospel, and obedience to God that it demands, was something that John the Baptist, whom Jesus said was the greatest man ever born of a woman, went to jail for, and eventually had his head chopped off for. The gospel wasn’t something to be politically correct about to John, or to Jesus. Nor can we afford to be ambiguous. Do you believe this gospel? Do you trust in the Lamb of God, the Son of God?

Repent and believe!

Concluding Thoughts

The time was fulfilled when Jesus walked this earth. He is the Son of God. He is the only One who can save you. And the hour has come near when God will judge each and every one of us.

Those who have not repented, those who do not believe in the gospel, are already condemned according to Jesus’ own words in John 3:18, and will spend eternity in the lake of fire. But those who do repent of their sins, who do humble themselves before God, and do trust in the Lord Jesus Christ will find His grace and be saved and live forever with Him.

If we are not clear on the gospel we will never be motivated to get outside of our comfort zone and obediently proclaim what Jesus proclaimed, what He told us to proclaim. If we are not clear on the gospel we run a great risk individually, and collectively as a church, of being spiritually anemic and eventually just dying off. And if we are not clear on the gospel we run the risk of never truly repenting and never truly believing and the one day it being too late.

So, beloved, I implore you by the mercies of God, know the gospel, believe the gospel, love the gospel, obey the gospel, and proclaim the gospel.

The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel!