

## **Mark Sermon Series Review and How Religion Can Help Or Hurt**

This morning I will be wrapping up the sporadic series of sermons on the Gospel of Mark that I have been doing for almost the past year. I have been using Ched Myers' *Binding the Strongman* for the majority of my sermon prep, and today I would like to do an overview of what was discussed, as well as examine Jesus' scathing indictment of the Pharisees and the religious system. Hopefully this serves well to remind us that this faith we profess can help or harm, depending how we use it. So to begin here is a short refresher on the sermons we have discussed.

### **Sermon 1: Introduction**

For our first sermon we looked at the first chapter of Mark, to set the tone of the sermon series. We discussed the following points, amongst other things

- The gospel of Mark invites us into the story
  - It is not a scene by scene historical recounting of the life of Jesus. The gospel of Mark uses narrative flourishes, words that help us recall other biblical stories, and a raw portrayal of the disciples to connect this story to our own lives.
- The gospel of Mark is subversive, with political motivations
  - The term "Good News" is used to contrast the good news of the Caesar's of the time, which was always about wartime victories. Mark's portrayal of Jesus regularly challenges the established order.
- Discipleship is a difficult to grasp, and nuanced concept
  - What we are called to give up, and even what we are called to do seems to differ from person to person, and there are a variety of understandings. Mark's gospel seems to highlight the willingness of the disciples.

### **Sermon 2: Discipleship Pt. 1 Disdain for Jesus' Dinner Party**

The second sermon we did looked at the story where Jesus ate with sinners. We looked at the following things in this sermon

- Background information about the Pharisees and food rules

- We spent a significant amount of time doing some background study into what the Pharisees were like, and why Jesus' dinner guests upset them.

Following our background information we had two points of application

- Discipleship is not a hierarchy
  - While people had to rely on the Pharisees for religious practice and guidance and come to them, Jesus went to the people on the fringes. Discipleship is not hierarchy, because it is for everyone.
- Discipleship is people first
  - We often look at discipleship from a results driven perspective. Jesus shows that the starting point is always just meeting people where they are at. Change can happen, but trying to change people is not the beginning point.

### **Sermon 3: Healing Mark's Gospel**

- How interpretations of miraculous healing have contributed to ableism
  - Based on the story of the Pharisees using the man with the withered hand as a trap, and other healing narratives we discussed how healing narratives intersect with ableism. The Pharisees use the man with the withered hand as a prop. The disciples treat a blind man as if he is not there. People are excluded and ostracized for their illness or disability. And even the idea that people MUST be healed is an example of how we view people with disease, chronic illness, or disabilities as less than.
- Healing as inclusion into the community
  - We can participate in the same attitude of healing as Jesus by bringing people back into community. We can do this by make an accessible, equitable world, free from stigma and prejudice towards those with a disability or illness.

### **Sermon 4: Demons in Mark's Gospel**

When discussing the stories about demons in Mark's gospel we found that

- Demons were a vehicle used to talk about bigger concepts at the time
  - Demons are no longer part of our day to day understanding of the world, but at the time the idea of demons was used to make sense of and discuss bigger topics
- In healing the Gerasene demoniac Jesus models going to those on the fringes
  - The Gerasene Demoniac was treated poorly, being isolated, chained up, and disregarded. This is not unlike the treatment people with mental illnesses, or supposed demonic possession endured. Jesus calls us to liberation and compassion in these circumstances.

### **Sermon 5: Sower and the Seed**

I did a discussion on the Sower and the seed, a classic biblical parable.

- Jesus used his surroundings to meet people where they were at
- The world envisioned in this parable, is one where people are free from servitude and poverty

### **Sermon 6: The Highs and Lows of Discipleship**

We looked at how Mark wrote chapters 8 and 9 of the gospel in a way that highlights the rollercoaster ride of life. Peter has a great epiphany, followed by a strong rebuke, followed again by a miraculous experience. Also known as the transfiguration.

- Discipleship is a bumpy, difficult ride
- Discipleship involves some level of sacrifice, but understanding what that is can be difficult
- We can be inspired by past disciples

### **Sermon 7: Jesus, Food and Sabbath**

And finally, we talked about Jesus, food and Sabbath last week.

- Sabbath is connected to food, especially to food justice
- We participate in the miracle of the feeding of 5000 by trying to end food scarcity

Thank you for embarking with me on this journey into Mark's gospel for the past year. It has been a joy to learn and study together. It is strange, but I have some sermons that are my favourites, that I feel excited about, and several of those happened during this study of Mark's gospel. Looking at healing, demons, and Sabbath law got me fired up and engaged. So thank you for listening. When I look at the various sermons we have gone through, I think they overall tie into the theme of today's sermon. That faith and religion can heal, but they can also harm. Interpretations of scripture have been used to inspire liberation, justice, compassion, and personal growth. In the same way interpretations of scripture have been used to inspire hypocrisy, slavery, patriarchy, racism, ableism, and countless divisions. How we use scripture is important. Often we intentionally or unintentionally cause harm. BUT more importantly the life of Jesus, and the scripture we read can bring healing to this world. It is our choice how we use it.

This brings us to the second reading from our service today. Where Jesus addresses the Pharisees about a multitude of issues. Jesus observes the Pharisaic tradition of cleanliness habits, and their insistence on others following the same oral traditions. Jesus uses this example of outward cleanliness as a metaphor for their hypocrisy. They are good at looking clean and together, but inside, they are often unjust. Jesus then points to their oral tradition, which they regard as highly as scripture. Jesus notes how it is possible that in following oral tradition, they might abandon the commands of the scriptures. Ched Meyers notes that the practice of Korban, that is willing ones estate to the temple, is not well known outside of this reference. It appears Jesus is using this example to show them that following one rule, can easily leave us at odds with another. In this case, Jesus says that following through with willing an estate to the temple, could easily leave an elderly person vulnerable, and without necessary financial support.

Jesus raises the question, "What is the point of scripture, or oral tradition, if it causes more harm than good". Jesus believed in more than following rules and tradition. Not because those things are bad, but because strict adherence to laws can be contradictory. Instead Jesus

continually advocates for a just and peaceful world. Jesus fights for the liberation of the oppressed. Ched Meyers sums up how the Jesus way, differs from the Pharisaic way:

“Against the dominant group boundaries Mark offers a counter vision in which a new, morally defined community upholds the radical demands of scriptural tradition, which condemns profiteering and defends the welfare of the weakest members of society” (Meyers, 223)

We have looked at what I think are a lot of interesting themes in the Gospel of Mark. In each of these small sections and themes, it is apparent that Jesus wants to look out for the most vulnerable. Jesus is more concerned with helping those in need, than with purity culture, passing out gospel tracks, or creating great programming. Jesus life, teachings, and resurrection forces us to ask, why do we do this if it doesn't help others?

Why adhere to the Sabbath, if it leaves people hungry, if it restricts the healing of others?

What is the point of a faith community, if it excludes certain people? If it prevents those on the margins of society from experiencing the goodness of Jesus?

Why believe in healing, if it makes us view people with illnesses and disabilities as less than? If we aren't willing to make an accessible world, how can we claim to care about everyone?

How is it helpful to believe in spiritual powers, if it only causes us to in a sense chain up those who struggle with afflictions? To lock people away, because they don't fit in.

That is the negative that we can take. Jesus never advocates for selfishness, or abandoning the whole idea of faith and religion. He raises questions, and asks others to look seriously at how their actions affect those around them. Even the well meaning, religious, or “biblical” actions. Here are some ways I think Jesus' helps us to live positively. Ways that Jesus used his faith to help, and not to harm.

Jesus ate dinner with those the world saw as sinners. This can remind us to tear down walls of judgement. To love everyone, even if they are on the fringes. Not to try and convert them, but because every human is worthy of love and inclusion. Our faith can help us to be more inclusive, even when it is hard or scary.

Jesus healed those with afflictions, bringing them back into community. This reminds us to create a world where all are accepted. An accessible world, where people are not stigmatized because they have an illness or a disability. We can avoid the pitfalls of the ancient near east. Making a world where someone doesn't need a miracle to be involved in the faith community.

Jesus went to those who were possessed by demons. He freed them from their chains. There are those that our world wants to lock away. People who suffer from mental illness. People who experience homelessness. People who have been convicted of crimes. These are all people that our culture wants to hide in the wilderness. Jesus motivates us to go to them. To free them from bondage.

The faith that we have is beautiful. Our faith can help us become the beacons of love that God created us to be. Our faith has been misused, and twisted to justify a lot of hatred and division. This is not new. Jesus was regularly at odds with how faith was being practiced. He forced people to ponder, "Why are we doing this, if it is hurtful?". May we continue to be introspective and self aware. Analyzing the ways that power, exclusion, and injustice creep into our faith practices. May we continue to be empowered by Jesus to love better. Jesus inspires us to be inclusive, compassionate and just. To be a community that stands in solidarity with the people who are the most vulnerable. Amen.