



The Gospel of Mark

10-Week Study

for Small Groups and Personal Use

2020

LEADER'S GUIDE

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOKLET

This booklet has been produced to help you as a small group leader become familiar with the answers to the discussion questions. While the answers will contain background materials, point out significant areas, and draw out practical implications of the text, it is not meant to be used as a 'model answer' to the discussion questions. Even with the answers, deeper truths can be gleaned from the text as we rely on the Holy Spirit to illuminate our understanding.

Points to Note

- Before reading the answers to the questions, first attempt to answer the questions to the best of your ability.
- Next, familiarise yourself with the answers. Use it to guide your members to arrive at the answers themselves.
- These answers are not meant to be read out as a 'model answer' prior to rigorous discussion of the questions.
- The answers are not exhaustive. Feel free to look up the recommended reference materials or Resources (at the back of this booklet) in order to better understand the Gospel of Mark.

* Please note that this study is for **internal BRMC use only**.

PROPOSED STRUCTURE

Week 1	1:1-5 1:16-8:21	The Beginning of the Gospel The Gospel in Galilee: The Mighty Messiah 1:16-45 Typical activities of Jesus' ministry 2:1-3:6 Conflicts with religious authorities
Week 2		3:7-35 Jesus' authority and family 4:1-41 The Kingdom and its King
Week 3		5:1-43 The need for faith 6:1-56 The Kingdom and the Jews
Week 4		7:1-8:21 The Kingdom extended
Week 5	8:22-10:52	The Gospel on the road to Jerusalem The Suffering Messiah 8:22-33 Beginning of true spiritual vision 8:34-9:1 The Messiah must suffer 9:2-13 The Transfiguration 9:14-29 The boy with an unclean spirit 9:30-50 The Messiah must suffer and lessons on greatness
Week 6		10:1-31 Revolutionary values for disciples 10:32-45 Following the Messiah 10:46-52 True spiritual vision
Week 7	11:1-16:20	The Gospel in Jerusalem: The Glorious Messiah 11:1-25 Symbols of Fulfilment and Judgment
Week 8		11:26-12:44 Conflicts with religious authorities
Week 9		13:1-37 Signs of the Temple's destruction and the End 14:1-11 Anointing at Bethany 14:12-32 The Last Supper 14:33-42 Gethsemane
Week 10		14:43-52 The arrest of Jesus 14:53-72 The Jewish trial 15:1-20 The Roman trial 15:21-47 The Crucifixion, Death and Burial of Jesus 16:1-20 The Resurrection

SESSION 1: WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

Questions for Discussion

1. Refer to the Discussion Point at the bottom of this section. How was the term “gospel” used in the 1st century A.D. Roman Empire?

Ans: In the original Greek, the word for gospel, “euangelion,” simply means good news. It was often used in Roman propaganda to proclaim the birth or accession of the Roman Emperor as good news for the entire world. Roman Emperors frequently thought of themselves as offspring of gods.

2. Read Mark 1:1-3. What are the similarities and differences with the Priene Calendar inscription? What is the “gospel” according to Mark?

Ans: The phrasing and words used in the opening of the Gospel according to Mark echo the beginning of gospels of the Roman Empire, but with stark contrasts.

One is plural, needing frequent re-enactments; the other is singular, being the one true Gospel. One is connected with the might of this world; the other is connected with the might of heaven but chiefly displayed in the crucified Messiah. It is both the Gospel belonging to Jesus Christ and the Gospel preached by Jesus Christ. The good news centers upon the life and ministry of Jesus the Messiah. He is its center and primary content.

The quotation from Isaiah (vv2-3) and the sending of a messenger in the person of John the Baptist point to a Messiah long foretold by the OT prophecies, making way for a larger reality: God is performing His climactic act of redemption for Israel and this, in turn, will result in redemptive changes for the world.

So, the Gospel is not just any gospel, but one which is anchored in the ongoing story of God and Israel. The implication for us is that we are to interpret the OT expectation of the return of God as the public ministry of Jesus the Messiah. And so, the Gospel is rightly narrated through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ (as we shall see as we read on).

3. *If You Have Time ...*

There are five episodes of conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities narrated in 2:1-3:6. They are as follows:

2:2-12	Healing of the Paralytic
2:13-17	Call of Levi and the feast
2:18-22	Question on fasting
2:23-27	Plucking grain on the Sabbath
3:1-6	Healing on the Sabbath

Do you notice a pattern in the series of conflict? Explain.

Ans: A good pattern is proposed (by J. Kiilunen) where episode one corresponds to episode two on the theme of sin and sinners, with episode three explaining the main cause of offence felt by the religious leaders towards Jesus. Episodes four and five then intensify the conflict and throws the spotlight on the issue of the Sabbath.

The first two episodes show Jesus dealing with sin and sinners. In healing the paralytic, Jesus first declares his sins forgiven. Who can pronounce God's forgiveness but the priest and even then, only after certain rituals were performed in the Temple? In pronouncing forgiveness, Jesus not only arrogated to Himself the unique prerogative of God, but He was also announcing that the promised return of God to reign is at hand. The problem of sin that has plagued Israel throughout her history will finally be resolved by Jesus. And everyone who needs Jesus can receive this forgiveness, yes, even tax collectors and sinners. This is indeed good news, but good news that was somewhat hidden from view for the time being.

The third episode surmises the main cause of conflict. It has to do with whether or not the "new" has been ushered in through Jesus' ministry. Jesus is questioned directly and His answer is simple and direct. If the new has come, then the old ways must be done away with. The religious authorities were acquainted with the old ways, but the Kingdom of God will come through a new way.

The fourth and fifth episodes have to do with the hallowed tradition of the Sabbath. Now that the new has come, how will this tradition be treated? Instead of doing away with the tradition altogether, Jesus reinterprets it by going back to its original purpose - to sustain and renew life. Ironically, at the end of the last episode, a plot is hatched to kill the Lord of the Sabbath.

Discussion Point

"... since Providence... [has given] us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a saviour, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his epiphany ... since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the GOSPEL for the world that came by reason of him..." - The Priene Calendar Inscription (9 B.C), taken from Stanley Porter's *Hearing the Old Testament in the New Testament*, p 93.

Reflection Questions

4. What are some other "gospels" that our world may be presenting to us today?

5. Knowing that the Gospel refers primarily to the life and ministry of Jesus, what does it mean for you to be a messenger of the Gospel?

6. What are the escalating oppositions that you may face when you bear the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

Learning Point

The Gospel is not just a series of events concerning the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. The Gospel refers primarily to the life and ministry of Jesus and what it means for us.

SESSION 2: THE GOSPEL AND THE WORD?

Questions for Discussion

1. Mark 4:1-25 is laid out in an ABA'B' pattern.

A	4:1-9	Model parable
B	4:10-12	The concealing function of parables
A'	4:13-20	Explanation of the model parable
B'	4:21-25	The concealing and revealing functions of parables

Why did Jesus choose to use "seed" parables to explain the Kingdom of God? List three reasons if you can.

Ans: Three reasons come to mind. Firstly, Jesus ministered in a society that was largely agricultural, and images from farming would certainly capture the attention of His listeners. Secondly, the image of planting and harvesting is frequently used in the OT to convey God's creative and restorative work in the nation of Israel. This imagery is also used in Jewish discourses on the eschaton (ie. the end times) and the people would be familiar with it. Finally, the image of the seed conveys aptly the nature of the Kingdom. Just as a seed is hidden in the soil but will germinate to bring forth life and fruit, so also will the Kingdom be hidden at first, but its effect will be real and unstoppable.

2. In the Parable of the Sower, the "seed" represents the "word." How does the "word" relate to the presence of God's Kingdom, and how is it perceived by the various listeners?

Ans: The explanation of the Parable of the Sower begins with the all-important sentence that guides us to its meaning: it is about the sowing of the word. The soils are only part of the message. If this is missed, then this parable has lost its revolutionary effect. The focus should be on the proclamations and utterances of Jesus! They are linked to the arrival and presence of God's Kingdom!

Only by recognising the importance of "word" can the different responses symbolised by different soils become significant. Yet, the main point lies elsewhere. It is that the promised restorative word is given while obduracy (ie. hardness of heart is still at work. In fact, Jesus hints that the full measure of obduracy has yet to come. This being the case, the word given through Jesus' ministry could be easily dismissed by the unbelieving as an impotent word. But the point that Jesus gets at is that the word is now being sown through His

ministry, and what is deemed impotent is actually powerful beyond measure! The time that the Jews longed ardently for has indeed come, though it is not accompanied by an open blaze of glory. Therefore, faith is needed and the hearers are exhorted to listen attentively. The parable then speaks of the paradoxical timing of the Kingdom and the paradoxical nature of its revelation.

3. *If You Have Time...*

Read Mark 4:10-12 and 4:21-25. In these verses, Jesus sets up two sets of contrasts - insiders versus outsiders (4:10-12) and revelation versus concealment (4:21-25). Why did Jesus exclude some from understanding the parables?

Ans: In setting a contrast between insiders and outsiders, Jesus quotes from Isaiah 6:9-10 and in so doing, claims that the full force of the saying is fulfilled in His ministry. Jesus' ministry is eschatological, bringing to a climax not only the saving work of God but also the opposition of evil. This means that God's promised Kingdom is at work in the midst of obduracy (as seen in question 2) without destroying it just yet. It draws together the different threads of the biblical story which include both promises of salvation and messages of judgement.

And so, Jesus' words show intentionality. It is a divine intentionality connected with the words used by Isaiah on the stubborn nation just before her exile. The full force of this obduracy has yet to be unleashed, and Jesus' ministry does exactly that. Jesus' ministry will attract to itself rank stubbornness. It will bring about division among people, creating insiders and outsiders. Thus, fulfilling Scripture. All this is part of God's plan and the secret of the Kingdom. In 4:11, Jesus speaks of the "secret" of the Kingdom. This word "secret" in the original Greek does not refer to something mystifying, but rather, it refers to a secret which is accessible only through divine revelation. This "secret" then provides a divine perspective on the Kingdom, which seems to be given only to Jesus' disciples at this point in the Gospel according to Mark. For "outsiders" it remains only a parable.

From this perspective, we are then set to understand the paragraph in 4:21-25. It speaks of a lamp coming to illuminate. The lamp is another image for God's word in the OT (Ps 119:105) and it signifies the revelatory aspect of His word. Mark's audience will equate the lamp with Jesus since He is the teacher who explains the secret of the Kingdom. Jesus is the revelatory word that comes not to be hidden but to illuminate. Consequently, following the thread of 4:10-12, things which are hidden will be hidden only for a time, and serve the grand purpose of revelation later on.

Discussion Point

Read Isaiah 40:8 and 55:10-11. The “word” of God referred to by Jesus is one that endures forever and is unfailing. In effect, this word functions as the restorative word of God. Wherever the word is received, broken people and broken relationships are restored.

Reflection Questions

4. Those who are unbelieving and obdurate (ie. hardness of heart) in the Gospel of Mark often dismiss the word given through Jesus’ ministry as an impotent word. Hence, parables remain as parables for them, the kingdom remains concealed, and they are labelled as “outsiders” to the kingdom.

Are there people like that whom you know?

Are you in danger of becoming an “outsider” due to your unbelief and obduracy?

5. God’s Word is a “seed”: seemingly impotent but is actually powerful beyond measure. Are there areas in your life where faith in the “impotent seed” of God’s word is needed?

Learning Point

The promised restorative word is given while obduracy is still at work, and therefore, Jesus advises His audience to use all their senses of perception. Those who have opened their senses and their hearts to Jesus’ ministry will receive more insight while those who do not, whatever insight they may have received will be taken away from them.

SESSION 3: THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

Questions for Discussion

1. Mark 6:48 tells us that Jesus meant to pass by His disciples on the water. Read Exodus 33:12-23 and 1 Kings 19:11-18. What was the context of Moses' and Elijah's situations and how was God's "passing by" perceived by them? What was Jesus' intention in passing by His disciples on the water?

Ans: The phrase "to pass by" is used to denote a divine epiphany (ie. manifestation or revelation). The primary example comes from the story of Exodus 33:12-23 where God, through an epiphany, assures Moses that He will be with him through the colossal task of leading the nation into the Promised Land. Another example is found in 1 Kings 19:11-13 when God came to Elijah in a gentle wind. In all three cases, the difficulty of the task is highlighted and one cannot but realise that it can only be accomplished with divine presence.

In addition, in the OT and in Jewish tradition, the hour of dawn is closely associated with the coming of God's help as seen in the Exodus when God acted at the last watch (Ex 14:24; Ps 46:5; Is 17:14). All this provides the answer to Jesus' strange intention. His intention is to provide a divine epiphany for the disciples to encourage them amidst the uncertainty that they may face.

2. *If You Have Time...*

In Mark 6:51-52, the disciples were terrified because they had forgotten the loaves because their hearts were hardened. What was it about the feeding miracle that the disciples failed to understand?

Ans: Hardened hearts (ie. obduracy) in the Gospel according to Mark implies an inability to take in spiritual things. Such description was used of "outsiders" in Mark 4, but now the disciples are in danger of becoming outsiders. The deeper insights of the feeding miracle were not perceived by them - Jesus is the eschatological (ie. end-time) shepherd who leads His people to green pastures and feeds them. In this regard then, even though the disciples did not recognise Jesus as He walked upon the water, they are still to remember that the shepherd who commissioned them to cross the lake by themselves will not abandon them, come ghost or high water. Therefore, Jesus' delay in going to them may be understood as a deliberate lesson for His disciples to learn about faith. Although divine help seems to be

delayed, the disciples are not to lose heart for at the right moment, divine help will come like dawn overtaking the night.

3. Mark portrays exorcism and healing as key elements of Jesus' ministry and chapter 5 contains three healing miracles: the healing of the demon-possessed man (5:1-19), the healing of the woman with a menstrual disorder (5:25-34), and the healing of Jairus' daughter (5:20-24, 35-43). Read Digging Deeper (Week 3). What is the common thread that runs through these stories? Can you observe a pattern?

Ans: The common thread is the issue of ritual impurity. In all three cases, the afflicted ones (and Jairus on behalf of his daughter) approach Jesus. And we see an increasing intensity in their approach. In the first case, the demon-possessed man runs to Jesus. There is no indication why he does this, but we can infer that the demons in him might have something to do with it. If that is the case, then the man himself might not have had any faith in Jesus, to begin with. And yet, Jesus heals him by commanding the spirits to leave him.

In the second case, a woman with a menstrual disorder who had exhausted all her resources with many physicians, reaches out in faith and in humility to touch Jesus' clothing. She was aware that her actions would be socially unacceptable, but in faith, she acted. Such is the character of faith - it must be out in the open. And Jesus, sensing that healing power had gone out of Him, stopped and insisted to know who had touched Him. And in hearing her testimony, gives her a stamp of approval "your faith has healed you."

In the last case, Jairus approached Jesus to heal his dying daughter. This man was a synagogue ruler and highly regarded as one of the religious leaders. (Recall that the religious leaders had begun plotting to kill Jesus.) Given the conflict between the group of leaders and Jesus, it must have taken quite a bit of humility for Jairus to approach Jesus and ask for His help. And here, we see another characteristic of faith - it is partnered with humility. As the story progresses, we are told that Jairus receives news that while he and Jesus were on the way to his house, his daughter had died. The men from Jairus' household then do what was polite and customary, and advise Jairus not to trouble Jesus any further. An interesting observation to note at this point is that Jesus could have easily raised Jairus' daughter by a spoken word from where they were at the time. Instead, Jesus exhorts Jairus to have faith in Him, "Do not be afraid any longer, only believe." In the end, we are told that Jairus' faith in Jesus is vindicated.

In increasing intensity, these three stories convey the necessity of faith.

Discussion Point

Jesus' response to the disciples, translated in NIV as "It is I," are the same words used in the Old Testament for "I AM". The title "I AM" is used in the context of commissioning or comforting because it declares God's sovereignty. In Isaiah, "I AM" or the claim of God's sole supremacy is given to awaken faith in His people and comfort them during difficult undertakings. And so, they are often coupled with "fear not" or "take heart".

Reflection Questions

4. You may have had the experience of being terrified amidst the strong winds and choppy waters of life. You may even be experiencing these right now. Has God ever "passed by" you and revealed Himself to you? What is God saying to you from the story in Mark 6:45-53?

Learning Point

As we struggle in the strong winds and choppy waters in obedience to Jesus' commands, we must remember that He who commands us is present with us.

SESSION 4: THE GOSPEL AND ITS REACH

Questions for Discussion

1. Compare the feeding of the 5,000 (6:31-44) and the feeding of the 4,000 (8:1-10). What are some similarities and differences between the two stories?

Ans: The key elements in the story are similar: a large crowd in a remote place, Jesus' compassion, the multiplication of bread and fish, and the satisfaction of all those present at the end. The significant difference lies chiefly the numbers involved: 4,000 people instead of 5,000 men; 7 loaves instead of 5, and 7 baskets full of leftovers instead of 12.

2. Recall Jesus' treatment of ritual impurity, the declaration that all foods are clean, followed by the two healing miracles leading up to the feeding of the 4,000. What pattern can you observe? What is the underlying message?

Ans: Jesus declaring the purity code obsolete implies that Jews and Gentiles can share the same table, thereby tearing down the barriers that divide Jew and Gentile.

Following which, the first miraculous exorcism of the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter indicates that Gentiles can have the scraps from the children's table, then the healing of the deaf-mute Gentile man shows that Gentiles can also participate in the blessings of the Kingdom (ie. the deaf hear and the mute speak).

Finally, the feeding of the 4,000 provides the climax - these Gentiles do not have just scraps, they are also invited to participate at the table of the eschatological shepherd and are fed the same food and are all satisfied. Although not openly announced, the Kingdom is now seen to be also for the Gentiles.

3. *If You Have Time...*

Read Mark 7:14-23. Jesus explains that food does not affect the heart, which is the seat of personality in ancient thought. But rather, the heart of the matter is the heart. It is from the heart that impure thoughts and actions arise. What are the implications of this teaching in regards to a) how we should view rituals; and b) who can be received into God's Kingdom?

Ans: There are two implications that come through in Jesus' announcement that all foods are clean.

First, rituals must be put in their proper place to remind the community of a greater reality and not as an end in themselves. The purity code was given to serve as a concrete reminder of the holiness of God, and not a talisman to mask the evil of the heart. This is one criticism the prophets made repeatedly (ref Amos, Hosea). The One who is greater than the prophets has come and brings with Him the good news of the Kingdom that addresses the problem of the heart, to which the purity code served as a signpost. When the destination is reached, the signpost has served its function.

The second implication is that the Kingdom is now open to Gentiles as well. In Dig Deeper (Week 4), we discussed the adherence to the tradition as an indicator of loyalty. But what served as loyalty indicators also became effective boundary markers. And indeed, food was an especially effective boundary marker because eating together in ancient societies served also the function of social integration. And if food cannot make a person unclean, then laws governing pure and impure food are no longer necessary.

Consequently, Jews and Gentiles can come together to eat at the same table. This foreshadows the extension of the Kingdom to the Gentiles, as we will see in later chapters in the Gospel according to Mark.

Discussion Point

Note the progression of events between the two feeding miracles. First, the declaration of all food being clean breaks down the barriers that divide Jews and Gentiles. Second, the healing of the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter indicates that Gentiles can have the scraps from the children's table. Third, the healing of the deaf-mute Gentile man suggests that Gentiles are also beneficiaries of the blessings of the Kingdom.

Reflection Questions

4. In those days, the Jews thought that they were the sole beneficiaries of the Kingdom, and that the Gentiles were strictly "outsiders." Jesus, however, had a revolutionary message. Through His acts and His teachings, He demonstrated that the doors of the Kingdom were

open also to those “outsiders” whom the “insider” Jews thought belonged outside the Kingdom.

Who are the perceived “outsiders” of the kingdom in our society and in your social circle?

What is your role in being a messenger of the Gospel to these “outsiders” in your life?

Learning Point

There is a generosity and abundance to the Kingdom of God as seen in the large quantities of leftovers from the two feeding miracles. It is this generosity that clashes with the kingdom visions of the Pharisees and Herod, and so, Jesus’ warning is dire. The pure bread of the Kingdom must not be corrupted by the yeast of triumphalism and narrow-mindedness.

SESSION 5: THE GOSPEL PROGRAMME

Questions for Discussion

1. Read Mark 8:31-38. Jesus often referred to Himself with the title "Son of Man." Read Daniel 7:9-14. What was given to the "Son of Man"?

Ans: Dominion, glory, and a kingdom, and the privilege of being served by all peoples, nations, and languages. In the first century prior to the teachings of Jesus, the "Son of Man" figure was understood to be a supernatural figure who will usher in the kingdom of God. This is contrary to the Ezekiel rendering of the "Son of Man" as a descendent of human beings. The exalted "Son of Man," therefore, functions as king over the kingdom, and glory and privilege belong to Him.

2. Peter is called "satan" in Jesus' rebuke because the word "satan" is understood generically as the one who opposes. Who or what did Peter oppose?

Ans: Peter opposed God's program. In Peter's mind, the Messiah does not suffer. This is in accordance with the tradition. A Messiah who suffers and dies would be deemed a false claimant. And so, Peter thinks he should set his teacher straight. The disciple seeks to correct the Master. He gets the message of Jesus right, but he also gets it all wrong!

In God's perspective, as important as the Messiah may be, He serves the role of ushering in the Kingship of God. Being Messiah, then, is not about self-exaltation or fighting wars to free Israel. It is first and foremost about God's kingship. In opposing God's program, Peter has rejected God's kingship in this regard, and was therefore deserving of harsh rebuke.

3. *If You Have Time...*

Jesus said, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." In your own words, rephrase verses 35-38. What does it mean to follow Jesus?

Ans: As explained in our daily reading (Day 22), following Jesus means following the way of Jesus - the way of the cross. This passage explains more deeply what this implies. The way to true life is the way of the cross. The one who wishes to save his physical life by disassociating himself from Jesus would lose true life.

Conversely, the one who wishes to have true life must be willing to lose his physical life for the sake of the Gospel. 8:36-37 remind us that all the things of the world and its glory cannot measure up to the value of true life. If a person gains the whole world and loses true life, he loses everything. And if he discovers that he has made a big mistake by engaging in that transaction, there is no way back for him because he cannot regain his life by returning all that has been accrued to him. The way to true life, then, is the way of Jesus, ie. the way of the cross. And those who are ashamed of this will find themselves the shame of the Messiah on the final day.

Discussion Point

If the "Son of Man" figure is supposed to be so glorious, it is no wonder that Peter reacted against Jesus' teaching that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the religious leaders of Israel. Yet, Jesus insists that the programme that God has for the Son of Man and His kingdom involves suffering.

Reflection Questions

4. In God's kingdom programme, glory is found in self-giving to the point of suffering for another's benefit. As Christians, the knowledge of God's self-giving character drives our acts of charity and altruism. However, Jesus' command for us to deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow Him leaves no room for any other programme in our lives. Have you subconsciously excluded God's kingdom programme from certain areas of your lives?

Learning Point

Becoming disciples of the Son of Man involves re-visioning societal norms and one's values. Even today, statistics relating to the breakup of marriages, pictures of the poor starving for food and affection, and backstabbing and betrayals resulting from a desire for self-benefit are aplenty. In contrast, Jesus teaches that true greatness involves service and largeness of heart.

SESSION 6: THE GOSPEL AND ITS DEMANDS

Questions for Discussion

1. Read Mark 2:1-12, 23-28; 8:31-38; 9:12-18, 30-32; 10:45. List down what you have learnt about the Son of Man from these passages. How did Jesus slowly redefine his disciples' straightforward understanding of the glorious "Son of Man" as found in the book of Daniel?

Ans: Recall the five conflicts between Jesus and the religious leaders. In two of the five conflicts with the religious authorities, we see that the Son of Man has the power to forgive sins and is Lord over the Sabbath. From the passion predictions, we gain insight that it is the unique vocation of the Son of Man to suffer. In the final passage, we are told that the Son of Man's suffering is done for the purpose of service and ransom.

2. Read Mark 10:42-44. What does a proper understanding of the "Son of Man" title imply for Jesus' disciples?

Ans: Firstly, being the Son of Man is not about glory and pomp, but about service. Secondly, this service is not an end to more glory but a ransom for many. Lastly, the coming of the Son of Man signals the conclusion of God's program and so His coming to serve must then signal that the new fabric that will characterise the Kingdom is service. The Son of Man must suffer and die. This comes about not because of failure or a means to gain more glory. Instead, this suffering is part and parcel of His vocation: service for all and a ransom for many.

His disciples, likewise, must follow in His footsteps in service for all, as that is their vocation. This dovetails with the earlier lesson on greatness - service to others and largeness of heart. It is interesting to note that this is the last lesson Jesus teaches His disciples as they enter Jerusalem.

3. *If You Have Time...*

Read Mark 10:46-52 and 8:22-25. How does the healing of Bartimaeus and the healing of the blind man relate to the theme of spiritual vision? How does the theme of faith relate to spiritual vision?

Ans: There are only two accounts of Jesus healing the blind. The first is of the blind man in 8:22-25 and in 10:46-52 - of Bartimaeus. The two healing miracles form a frame for the readings of weeks 5 and 6. And the theme is that of the problem of spiritual blindness and its treatment. In the first healing of the blind man, Jesus used a two-stage process to heal, symbolising the state of the disciples' spiritual state. They saw, but only partially.

From then, we observe Jesus teaching the disciples about the Kingdom repeatedly, and they seem to fail repeatedly at grasping the principles of the Kingdom. The account of Bartimaeus' healing signifies the start of full spiritual vision, not just partial vision. Jesus' reply to Bartimaeus provides the answer - it is faith that will restore true spiritual vision. As a result of receiving spiritual and physical sight, Bartimaeus then follows Jesus "in the way".

Discussion Point

Some have interpreted Jesus' self-prediction that "after three days he will rise" (Mark 9:31; 10:34) as a model of Christian living - that temporary suffering is a means to gain more glory. However, according to Jesus, the Son of Man must suffer and die. This comes about not because of failure or a means to gain more glory. Instead, this suffering is part and parcel of His vocation: service for all and a ransom for many.

Reflection Questions

4. As followers of Christ, we are called to imitate Christ and therefore imitate His vocation of suffering and service. This is a general vocational call. At the same time, all of us are called to a specific vocation in terms of the places where we work and serve. How is God prompting you to live out your general vocation in the sphere of your specific vocation?

Learning Point

The coming of the Son of Man signals the conclusion of God's program and so His coming to serve must then signal that the new fabric that will characterise the Kingdom is service. His disciples, likewise, must follow in His footsteps in service for all, as that is their vocation.

SESSION 7: THE GOSPEL AND FAITH

Questions for Discussion

1. Read Mark 11:12-14, 20-26. The fig tree is mentioned just before the Temple scene and just after, and forms a frame with which the Temple scene should be understood. The fig tree is a symbol often used for the nation of Israel, and the Temple is the one institution that demonstrates Israel's unique identity as God's people.
Read the Discussion Point. What does the cursing of the fig tree imply for the Temple in regards to its "fruits", fulfilling its purpose, and its judgement?

Ans: The cursing of the fig tree because it was barren presents a symbolic picture of the Temple - it was equally barren. Instead of being a house of prayer for all nations, it was a den of robbers. Jesus' cursing of the fig tree and its subsequent withering symbolically expounds the fate awaiting this Temple - it is doomed. The King has entered the Temple, inspected it and rejected it. Just as the fig tree withers because it is cursed by Jesus, so will the Temple be destroyed (ie. removed to the sea).

2. In Jewish culture, faith is expressed in devotion to the Temple and its practices. Consequently, prayer is made in the Temple and forgiveness pronounced and received in the Temple through its rituals. In Jesus' reply to Peter, the Temple is likened to a mountain which is thrown into the sea. What do Jesus' words imply with regards to faith, prayer, and forgiveness?

Ans: Faith in the Temple is now pitted against faith in God. If the disciples have faith in God, the Temple and its institutions are no longer needed to mediate a relationship with the Almighty. Prayers will no longer need to be offered through the physical Temple, and forgiveness will no longer come through animal sacrifices in the physical Temple.

Instead, prayers made in faith will be heard through the new temple which is Christ (see Mark 14:58; cf. John 2:19-21), and forgiveness will come through prayer and by exercising forgiveness to others. Faith, therefore, is directed to God through Jesus, and includes the practical aspects of our everyday living.

Discussion Point

The fig tree is unique from other trees in that its fruits appear before the leaves. So it is not unreasonable for Jesus to expect to find fruit on the fig tree when the leaves have sprouted. However, this fig tree was said to have leaves but no fruit. In other words, it was barren.

Reflection Questions

3. Jesus rejected the empty and corrupted shell of the Temple, which no longer served its originally intended purpose, and distracted the people from faith in God Himself. Have you put your faith in any practices or spiritual habits which, being empty and corrupted shells, serve only to distract you from faith in God?
4. Read Mark 11:25 again in light of the passage on the fig tree and the Temple. Jesus ties forgiveness that is received through faith in God with acts of forgiving others. Are there any areas in your life where your actions still trail behind the faith that you profess?

Learning Point

Faith is the new badge of identity for God's people. This is in contrast to the old markers of identity such as the Temple or their Jewish ethnicity. What marks out God's people is no longer their devotion to the Temple, but a true faith in God that encompasses corresponding actions.

SESSION 8: THE GOSPEL AND LOVE

Questions for Discussion

1. Read Mark 12:28-34. One of the Scribes ask Jesus about the Greatest Commandment. In response, Jesus cites the Shema (12:29-30). In it, Israel's covenantal status is summed up, and adherence to it marks her out as the special people of God.
What was the point Jesus was trying to make in providing the two most important Commandments together? How is love for God related to love for the neighbour?

Ans: The commandment to love the neighbour is tied to the Greatest Commandment because love for God is worked out practically in love towards the neighbour. The commandment to love the neighbour speaks of the community of God's people, and the First Commandment tells of this community belonging to God.

2. Read the Discussion Point below. Jesus commented that the Scribe was "not far from the kingdom of God". What does the Scribe's answer tell you about the Kingdom of God?

Ans: The Kingdom of God is fundamentally about relationships. The most important commandment is about a relationship of love for God made concrete in love for neighbour. Therefore, the Kingdom of God is not just about an individual knowing and loving God. It is about a community within which the individual finds his place as a member, and from which love for God shines forth in a darkened world.

3. *If You Have Time...*

This week's bible readings is building up to the climactic moment of Jesus' ministry. The Gospel is coming to the fore. It is about God's promised return, and Jesus must therefore confront the city and her leaders. In doing so, certain issues must be tackled and taught. Match these issues with the corresponding episodes.

Ans:

- Jesus' identity - question of Jesus' authority (11:27-33), the Parable of the Tenants (12:1-12), question about the Son of David (12:35-37)
- Covenantal identity - question on the Greatest Commandment (12:28-34)
- Relationship between earthly powers and the Kingdom of God - question on taxes (12:13-17), story of the widow's mite (12:41-44)

- Eschaton and judgment - question on the resurrection (12:18-27), Jesus cleansing the Temple (11:12-25)

Discussion Point

The Kingdom of God is fundamentally about monotheism and election, which is surmised in the *Shema* (Hebrew for "Hear," the first word of Deut. 6:4), an important Jewish scripture testifying to the oneness of God's kingship. Those who enter the Kingdom are the authentic confessors of the *Shema*, which defines for them their fundamental belief and practice. Knowing how critical the *Shema* is, and understanding how the other commandments are secondary to it, including those which are connected to the Temple, places the scribe in a position to grasp fully Jesus' mission.

Reflection Questions

4. In your Christian life thus far, how have you been living out the Great Commandment, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength"?
5. Knowing that the Kingdom of God is fundamentally about relationships, as summarised in loving God and loving neighbours, how is God challenging you to love Him practically by loving your neighbours? What will Jesus' assessment of your life priorities be?

Learning Point

The One God and King whom we proclaim and worship elects for Himself a people to constitute His kingdom. The citizens of this kingdom live by its fundamental rule, which is to love the King through loving the King's people.

SESSION 9: THE EXTRAVAGANT GOSPEL

Questions for Discussion

1. Read Mark 14:3-9. The perfume is pure spikenard, an expensive item used usually for anointing specially honoured guests during special occasions and festivals. It is also used for anointing the body of the dead, particularly those held in high regard.

What was the woman's intention in breaking the jar of perfume instead of merely pouring it out? Read the Discussion Point. What was the onlookers' objection to the woman's action?

Ans: The woman's breaking of the entire jar meant there was no resealing anymore. It was intended to be used solely and entirely for Jesus. The onlookers objected to the extravagance of the woman's action since the money that could be gained from the sale of that perfume could be given to the poor.

2. Jesus praised the woman's action because her action mirrors two aspects of Jesus' identity and ministry. What are the two aspects and how does the woman's act mirror Jesus' identity and ministry?

Ans: Firstly, with regards to Jesus' identity, the woman's act recognises that Jesus is of higher regard than any other thing, as seen in her complete splurging of an expensive perfume upon Jesus without hesitation or reservation. Her act mirrors the giving up of the Son of Man (Jesus' identity) as a ransom for the undeserving many.

Secondly, her act points to her acceptance that Jesus' ministry must end in death as a part of His unique vocation. The loss of His life may mean loss of opportunities for many to be healed and delivered, but diseases and such problems will always be around - the moment for completing the redemptive plan of God is not.

3. *If You Have Time...*

Read again Mark 14:9. It is significant that Jesus relates the gospel with the woman's action. What is it about the woman's action that must be remembered when the gospel is spread through all the world? Why is she left un-named?

Ans: The woman's action mirrors the Gospel which is equally extravagant for it speaks of the giving up of the Son of Man for the ransom of the undeserving many. The leaving out of her name is because the focus ought to be on the action and not the performer. She is famous only in so far as her action is significant to the Gospel.

Discussion Point

The Passover was an opportunity to remember the poor in the community and this helps us understand why the onlookers were somewhat shocked at the extravagance of what the woman did. To them, it was plainly wrong! Jesus' response that we would always have the poor with us does not disparage them but gives due priority to Himself as the Lord who is about to die on behalf of His people.

Reflection Questions

4. The woman's extravagant worship in response to the extravagant gospel was done in spite of overt opposition.
 - a. Do you truly appreciate the extravagance of God in saving the undeserving including yourself?
 - b. How are you responding to the extravagant gospel with extravagant worship?
 - c. In so doing, how have you made sense of any opposition that has come your way when you give yourself wholeheartedly to the worship of God in word and deed?

Learning Point

The Gospel preached by Jesus tells of God's extravagant act in giving Himself for the ransom of undeserving people. Our response to the extravagant Gospel should rightly be both the imitation of God's extravagant giving and a correspondingly extravagant worship of the generous God.

SESSION 10: THE PROMISE OF THE GOSPEL

Questions for Discussion

1. In the rabbi-pupil dynamic of Jesus' day, pupils decide who they want to learn from and explicitly seek the individual rabbis to be their teacher and Master. Read Mark 1:16-20 and 3:13-19. How did Jesus first call His disciples? How was Jesus' call different? What was the specific call that Jesus issued?

Ans: Jesus called Simon and Andrew saying, "follow Me". Jesus was the One who called, instead of the disciples seeking Him out. The specific call was to make fishers of men, and to be with Him that He might send them out to preach and to drive out demons.

2. Read Mark 14:32-42 and 14:66-72. Recall also the specific call that Jesus made when He first called Peter. When crunch time came, Jesus' most avid disciple, Peter, failed. How did Peter fail? Does this mean that Jesus' teaching was futile?

Ans: Peter failed to obey the command of Jesus to stay awake and pray. He also failed to discern that the crucial period of Jesus' life and ministry had come, and ended up denying Jesus three times.

More importantly, the call of Jesus was to be with Jesus and preach the Gospel. At the most trying time, Peter not only failed to preach the Gospel, he even denied Jesus three times. Yet Peter was restored and went on, as we see from other parts of the NT to serve and lead the early Church.

3. *If You Have Time...*

Read Mark 16:1-7. Peter was the most abject failure of a disciple aside from Judas Iscariot. Why then did Jesus single Peter out? What is the underlying message?

Ans: Peter is singled out precisely because he had failed miserably and vehemently denied Jesus. The message this sends out is that there is restoration even for those who have failed miserably.

Discussion Point

The failure of the disciples is only part of the story. Mark portrays Jesus as being patient with them, and putting up with all their obtuseness and cowardice. Indeed, the finale of the Gospel sounds the note that the risen Christ will once again shepherd them. So the failure of the disciples must not be understood on its own. It must be related to the theme of restoration, which is Mark's intention.

Reflection Questions

4. Think about the times when you have denied Jesus, either in literal ways when questioned about your faith or when prompted to make a stand for your belief, or in the subtle ways that you have entertained the powers of sin and self-centeredness instead of submitting to the Lordship of Christ. List the occasions here. How have you experienced God's grace in times of failure?
5. Reflect on the rhythm of the Christian life as enacted in our weekly worship service. As Christ extends unfailing grace to fallible disciples in the movement of "coming to them, restoring them, and re-commissioning them to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ," so also we re-experience God's grace every week when God gathers us by calling us to worship, restoring us when we confess our sins and failures in prayer, encountering us in the Word proclaimed and expounded, and then re-commissioning us to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ and sending us out into the world. Can you relate the elements in BRMC's worship service with this reality of God's grace?

Learning Point

Jesus' first disciples were fallible men, called only because of grace. This grace is not withdrawn even when they fail, as seen in the risen Messiah coming to them, gathering them, restoring them, and finally, re-commissioning them to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

RESOURCES

The following publications were acknowledged as resources by Foochow Methodist Church in their materials:

Mark, by Tan Kim Huat
Series: New Covenant Commentary Series
Publisher: Wipf and Stock
Date: 2015

Mark for Everyone, by N. T. Wright
Series: The New Testament for Everyone
Publisher: Westminster John Knox Press
Date: 2004

Mark: A 12-Week Study, by Dane C. Ortlund
Series: Knowing the Bible
Publisher: Crossway
Date: 2015