

# ***Walk His Way: Discipleship Lessons from Mark's Gospel***

## **Students Guide**



**13 online adult Sunday school lessons**

---

**Acacia Resources, a division of Baptist Center for Ethics**  
4219 Hillsboro Road, Suite 210  
Nashville, Tennessee 37215  
(615) 383-3192 phone  
(615) 383-0915 fax  
[www.acaciaresources.com](http://www.acaciaresources.com)

© Baptist Center for Ethics 2004

All rights reserved. This publication may be reproduced only in the quantities previously purchased via downloads from the Web site of the Baptist Center for Ethics. Contact [info@ethicsdaily.com](mailto:info@ethicsdaily.com) for more information.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the New Revised Standard Version (RSV) of the Bible © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA.

The Baptist Center for Ethics is a free-standing network of trained ethicists, ministers and educators, providing resources and services to congregations, clergy and educational institutions. Acacia Resources is BCE's publishing imprint.

### **About Acacia Resources**

The biblical witness singles out acacia wood for its uniqueness. The only wood mentioned in the building of the ark of the covenant, the tabernacle and the altar is acacia. Acacia wood is listed with other precious objects—gold, silver, fragrant incense, onyx stones—given to honor God.

Today's acacia tree is known for its value, diversity and durability. Some acacia trees have fragrant flowers used in making perfume. The seeds are edible. The bark is rich in tannin, a substance used in tanning, dyes, inks and pharmaceuticals. Furniture, oars, tools and gunstocks are made of the hard lumber from the acacia tree.

Some 1,200 species of acacia trees and shrubs exist throughout much of the world, including Africa, Australia and North America. The acacia species is tough enough to survive the semiarid regions of Africa where its roots sink deep to capture the rare water which runs quickly into the soil.

The name *acacia* symbolically ties BCE's publishing initiative to our biblical heritage. The acacia tree represents the wise value attached to educational resources, the diversity of needs within churches and the durability demanded for growing healthy Christians, whether they are singles, couples with children or senior adults.

Acacia Resources will guide Christians and draw them godward, as the ark of acacia wood guided the people of Israel in their journey and represented the presence of God in their midst.

For more information about Acacia Resources, call 615-383-3192 or visit our Web site at [www.acaciaresources.com](http://www.acaciaresources.com).

# Table of Contents

## Preface

The Commitment of Exclusive Fellowship	4
The Power of Inclusive Fellowship	8
Practicing a Sabbath That Reshapes Culture	12
Refocused on the Family	15
What Can We Become?	20
Garbage In, Garbage Out?	24
What God Wants	28
Serving Others	31
The Marriage Test	36
Living Justly	39
True Worship	43
Loving Neighbors	47
Authentic Generosity	51

A *Walk His Way* Leaders Guide is also available from Acacia Resources ([www.acaciaresources.com](http://www.acaciaresources.com)).

# Preface

If we believe what we read on some bookstore shelves, Christian discipleship is merely a matter of following some fairly straightforward steps. In a few short weeks, it seems, we can become certified disciples, complete with a T-shirt and jewelry that herald to the rest of the world the news that we've "arrived."

Discipleship is not, of course, that simple. To be fair, some good resources exist to help us in the process. The best ones deal honestly with discipleship's demands and reflect Jesus' teaching that discipleship requires much from us, including a radical commitment and a whole new way of living.

They also remind us that discipleship is not a singular event but continuing and deliberate actions. It is a journey rather than a destination. More often than not in our discipleship efforts, instead of moving in a straight and purposeful line, we meander and occasionally veer off course.

In contrast to much in our culture that is easily accessible and immediately visible, discipleship works from the inside out, not the other way around. We can't fast-forward our way through it, and others may not notice much difference in us for a while.

Changing long-held attitudes, rearranging priorities, redefining relationships like family and neighbor—most of the time turning them completely upside down—all of these things take time.

Much stands in the way of our discipleship, a lot of it in the form of what we have. We so value individual freedom that we are often tempted to define discipleship in our own, rather than Jesus', terms.

Some things that we possess also have hold of us—wealth, prestige, status—and lure us away from total commitment. Jesus said that we must be willing to give up our right to all of this, to self-centered living, if we want to follow him.

Discipleship involves more than doing what Jesus said, however. It also includes living as Jesus lived. The way we treat people, especially those on society's fringes, is a pretty good indicator of our commitment to Christ. Jesus caused a lot of religious tongues to wag

when he sought as his disciples those who had not first “cleaned up” religiously.

That’s because Jesus saw potential where no one else could. Our genuine discipleship does too.

In that reality we should find great hope as individuals, families, churches and communities as we try to affect positive change in our world. We can set ourselves and the world right as far as God is concerned, Jesus said, by living a certain way. And then he showed us how, not through rituals and rules, but through love.

In Mark’s account of some of the events in Jesus’ life that teach discipleship, the message of Jesus is clear:

- Welcome, don’t shun, sinners. And who isn’t one?
- Place people’s needs ahead of religious observances that oppress them. People are more important than rules.
- Concern yourself most about what God intends. Doing the will of God changes everything.
- Live confidently within the kingdom of God. In spite of how things look or seem, its success is certain.
- Remember that what alienates you from God comes not from an external source, but from inside. It shows up in the form of attitudes and actions that tear down rather than build up Christian community.
- Forget about me-first living. There’s no place for it in God’s kingdom. Self-centered ambition and discipleship are incompatible.
- Learn to serve, and accept each person as a child of God, Christ’s brother or sister, and your own.
- Enter into and nurture relationships as God originally intended them, and take these relationships seriously. God does.
- Acquire and consume only what you need, and give generously to help those who don’t have enough to survive. Avoid

carelessness and wastefulness that create suffering for others. Work for justice that eliminates the root causes of conditions that victimize people.

- Learn to worship God, and open the doors of worship houses to everyone.
- Love God without reservation, and love others as much as you love yourself.

Becoming a disciple is not something we accomplish only by reading a book or taking a class, though both can be helpful. Much of it we learn as we live our lives in relationship with God and others, modeling Christ’s love.

Jesus’ words and actions as recorded in Mark’s gospel can guide us as we do.

*Written by Jan Turrentine, managing editor for Acacia Resources, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.*

# The Commitment of Exclusive Followership

**Mark 1:14-20**

**Theme: Discipleship begins with followership.**

## Introduction

Milvian Bridge was one of the hinge moments in Christian history. It changed everything.

Having invaded Italy in 312, General Constantine was camped outside Rome, preparing to fight Maxentius for control of the Roman Empire. Constantine's army was fatigued and uncertain about its prospects for victory against the favored army of Maxentius.

In the night darkness and doubt, Constantine had a vision. He saw a cross in the sky with the words "In This Sign, Conquer." He interpreted the vision as a blessing from the Christian God against the Roman gods. He shared his vision with his army, rallying his troops. The next day, Constantine defeated Maxentius in the battle at the Milvian Bridge.

Vision and victory led to Constantine's conversion from paganism to Christianity. The emperor's religion became the army's religion. Over time, Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire.

With military force, he defeated rivals and politically unified the Roman Empire. With the Christian church, Constantine consolidated his control and extended it over the competing religions of that day. He transformed a minority faith into

a majority one. He switched the cross, which was the Roman method of execution, from being a hated symbol to the heart of the faith.

Prior to Constantine, the church kept its distance from the state, which was often a source of persecution for Christians. With Constantine, the church and state created an unholy alliance which held for centuries. The Protestant Reformation contributed to the breakdown of this alliance. But in colonial America, the unity of church and state broke apart with Baptist leadership advocating for church-state separation.

Yet, ironically, many Baptists and other Christians today favor a return to a kind of Constantinian arrangement where state and church are wed. They advocate a government which advances a conservative Christianity and a conservative Christianity which legitimizes secular political parties.

The story of Constantine's conversion stands at the polar opposite from the story of Jesus' call to conversion and illustrates a twisted understanding of discipleship. After all, what kind of conversion is it that Constantine had? Did he really convert to faith in Jesus Christ or did he use Christianity as a tool for political power? Did making Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire contribute to an authentic faith or water down the Christian way?

## The Biblical Witness

At the very beginning of The Gospel According to Mark, we find two cousins who articulated very similar messages. One was John the Baptist, known as "the baptizer." The other was his younger cousin, named Jesus. Both preached repentance and called for commitment.

## Repent and Believe

### Mark 1:14-15

*<sup>14</sup>Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, <sup>15</sup>and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”*

John the baptizer preached a message about “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (v 4). Responding to his urgent cry, people throughout the region confessed their sins and were baptized. He also announced that another, more powerful, unnamed messenger was coming.

John’s arrest attested to the stoutness of his message. Though John had sharply criticized King Herod for marrying his own brother’s wife, Herod feared John’s popularity and refused to act against him until he was manipulated by his daughter and wife. He promised his daughter, Herodias, whatever she wanted. She strangely asked for the head of John the baptizer. Afraid of looking weak in his own court, the king kept his word. The imprisoned John was beheaded. His head was given to Herodias on a platter. She, in turn, gave it to her mother.

While the chronology is imprecise, Jesus began preaching in Galilee after John’s arrest.

Jesus offered a direct, fourfold message: (1) the divine hour was now; (2) God’s kingdom was approaching; (3) hearers should turn back from a wrong way; and (4) hearers should give their life to the gospel or good news.

As heir of the Jewish tradition, Jesus knew about the preaching of the Hebrew prophets and their reception

among the powerful. He probably knew that Isaiah had defined God’s kingdom in terms of justice and righteousness, peace, joy and healing (Isa 9:1-11). He saw the kingdom in tangible terms, not some abstract, far off idea. Jesus likely anticipated the consequences of his preaching.

Jesus’ call to “repent” meant to turn away from a false way and to turn toward a new way. His call to “believe,” on the other hand, related to a way of living, not simply a way of thinking or a set of doctrines, as faith is now mistakenly defined. For Jesus, belief was a total commitment to God’s kingdom that one made in deed and word.

The centrality of Jesus’ message to “repent and believe” reappeared in the preaching of the early church (Acts 11:17-18, 20:21 and Heb 6:1).

In the Roman world, the word “gospel” (v 15, RSV) referred to a public announcement. The gospel was announced when a war was won or a political statement was made. The gospel was a public matter, not a private one.

## Jesus Walked the Sea Shore

### Mark 1:16

*<sup>16</sup>As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen.*

After 40 days in the wilderness (v 13), Jesus entered the region of Galilee. He walked along the shore of a lake which measures today some 8 miles wide and 13 miles long.

According to New Testament scholar Wayne Stacy, political and religious diversity surrounded the Sea of Galilee. One of King Herod’s sons, Philip, governed the land to the east

of the lake, where nonobservant Jews and pagans lived. Another son, Antipas, ruled the western side, which included strict Jews to the north and more inclusive Jews to the south. Like Herod, Philip and Antipas collaborated with the Roman Empire, which upset more observant Jews and mattered little to other Jews and pagans.

Jesus operated out of Capernaum, where Simon and Andrew lived (v 29) and which was under Antipas' control. Capernaum was home to the observant Jews, who hated the Romans and opposed Roman collaborators, which may be one reason for John the baptizer's arrest. But Capernaum was also only a mile from Philip's territory, perhaps affording Jesus maneuvering room.

### **Follow Me Mark 1:17-20**

*17And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." 18And immediately they left their nets and followed him. 19As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. 20Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.*

In some ways, Jesus' call to Simon and Andrew and to James and John resembled another biblical story about a call to followship. The prophet Elijah called Elisha from his work. Elisha was plowing when Elijah came by and called him to follow. Elisha obeyed and followed.

Jesus similarly was walking the sea shore and called two set of brothers, both of whom were fishermen.

When Jesus said, "Come ye after me" (v 17, KJV), he meant action. He did not say "affirm a set of theological

propositions," or "embrace a political agenda." Jesus said, "Follow."

With little clarity about the road ahead, the brothers responded by turning from their vocation, from one set of commitments, to another. They went behind Jesus, pursuing his way.

Despite the stereotypical understanding in church circles about these brothers, they did not appear as impoverished men or as simpletons. Simon and Andrew lived in a house in Capernaum. Simon was or had been married (v 30). James and John worked with their father, Zebedee, who had "hired men" working in his fishing company (v 20). Jesus called to discipleship working adults, those who surely had mature life experiences.

### **Followship Today**

The Constantinian tradition adds a thick layer across authentic Christian faith. Faith gets submerged beneath our national culture, whether we are Americans, Germans, South Africans or Koreans. Too often, we define our faith through cultural assumptions, political ideologies or national commitments. We simply lack a healthy sense of distance between our loyalty to Christ and our loyalty to country.

One of the most distorted forms of Christianity places the state at the center of worship, which is what both Constantine and Hitler's Germany did. We wrap the flag around the cross. We make exclusive claims about God being on our nation's side against other nations. We want our secular leaders to be spiritual leaders.

A healthy antidote to this distortion is a commitment to the separation of church and state. Church-state separation does not mean that Christians disengage from society or that biblical values are irrelevant to public policy. Quite the contrary, church-state separation requires that we engage society, providing a Christian witness which critiques the government and calls it to higher standards. It means we advance the politics of Jesus, instead of some political agenda which claims to be the Christian agenda.

Church-state separation also provides another defense against false faith. It keeps us from identifying faith with national culture. Some Americans identify themselves as Christians because they see America as a Christian nation. These citizens may never attend church or adhere to Christian teachings, yet they claim to be followers of Christ without committing to the lordship of Christ. The same may be said of other nationalities.

So, what else does followship mean today?

Followship begins with the centrality of Jesus Christ. As the fullest revelation of God, Jesus provides the way, the door, the light, to followers. Jesus teaches us why we should follow and how we should live.

As such, followship is an ongoing experience. As the brothers walked after Jesus, we, too, follow him as pilgrims. We do not know all. We do not necessarily grasp fully the consequences of discipleship. We may not even be sure where we are going. We follow in trust and learn on the way. We seek to emulate his way.

One verse from an old B. B. McKinney hymn gives us some pointers: "Wherever He leads I'll go... I'll follow my Christ who loves me so, Wherever He leads I'll go."

McKinney's hymn suggests that redeeming love motivates discipleship and moves us to pursue the divine will. Unfortunately, some hymns and other emphases intend to privatize, individualize and spiritualize what it means to follow Jesus. Yet the biblical ideas of "kingdom" and "gospel" have profound public, social and practical applications.

If the centrality of Christian faith is Jesus Christ, then surely staying close to the Gospels is mandated. Bible reading is at the heart of authentic discipleship. Studying the Sermon on the Mount is vital to vibrant followship.

Followship also involves community; after all, Jesus created a diverse community of followers, as the next lesson will explore. Followship in the context for community keeps us from being "Lone Rangers," providing necessary correctives and much needed encouragement. Followship is forged in the community of faith seeking to live out its understanding of the good news.

At the very heart of Christian faith is the belief that we turn toward Jesus Christ and follow him.

In the words of Martin Luther, "God does not want hearers and repeaters of words, but doers and followers who exercise themselves in the faith that worketh by love."

*Written by Robert Parham, executive director, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.*

# The Power of Inclusive Fellowship

**Mark 2:13-17**

**Theme: Discipleship involves fellowship with those on the fringes of society.**

## Introduction

“A fanatic is a man that does what he thinks the Lord would do if He knew the facts of the case,” according to the late Finley Peter Dunne, an editor of *Collier's Magazine* whose style in addressing contemporary issues compared to that of Will Rogers.

Moral arrogance on the part of those who claim to speak for God makes the gospel seem like bad news. By contrast, Jesus' courageously inclusive attitude embraced those rejected by religious leaders whose theological correctness was nauseating and repugnant.

The expansive fellowship Jesus offered Levi, known as Matthew, was a classic example. It proved to be a giant leap beyond social taboos and prescribed theological boundaries when Jesus invited Levi to “follow” him. The scribes and Pharisees could not imagine enjoying the company of such a man.

Many within the Baptist community expend a great deal of energy on efforts to shut out persons with whom there are peripheral theological differences. For example, the Baptist World Alliance was wounded by both the rhetoric and plans of Southern Baptist leaders who wanted to defund and disassociate. A quick review of recent news events conveys the image of a morally arrogant culture that is bent on

excluding those who are characterized more by cultural diversity than religious differences. It seems that doctrinal purists care little about good will.

Jesus was well acquainted with such a climate. He treated Gentiles and Samaritans, prostitutes, lepers, tax collectors, women and children all as persons of worth and accorded them a refreshing level of respect.

The inclusive fellowship Jesus offered was characterized by two very distinct components. One was acceptance. No stipulations. Hardened by years of alienation, transformation became not only possible but real when persons understood that they were accepted. Such acceptance was life changing. We should not confuse acceptance with approval. Jesus fully accepted Levi without approving of his graft or greed.

Christ-like fellowship also offered an unusual kind of empowerment. It involved purpose. Nothing gives people dignity and value like entrusting them with a task essential to a great cause. Potential is released. Enthusiasm is born. Hope becomes palpable. That is why the call of Levi to discipleship and the immediate aftermath of His call are instructive for us.

## Levi's Call

**Mark 2:13-14**

*<sup>13</sup>Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. <sup>14</sup>As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him.*

It is no surprise that Jesus is about to clash with leaders of the religious establishment. Soon to transpire will be a

second confrontation with the Pharisees. Mark records five encounters that end in unambiguous conflict. Religion, as interpreted by self-proclaimed authorities, stood in direct contrast with God who had revealed himself in Jesus Christ. Such conflict, combined with the increasing lack of welcome by the synagogue, finds Jesus walking by the sea. Surely the open-air environment was more invigorating than the stuffy atmosphere of Jewish legalism.

Although opposed by the orthodox leaders of religious life, Jesus was quite popular with common people because he attached uncommon value to every person. Jesus taught those who followed him while walking and talking. Every moment with Christ was a teachable moment. Jesus' popular appeal was a catalyst for envy on the part of the Pharisees. To expand on a well-known proverb, religious authority corrupts and absolute religious authority corrupts absolutely. An object of envy can never be viewed objectively. Undeterred and in typical rabbinical style, Jesus taught those who were interested enough to walk with him.

While walking along, Jesus encountered the tax collector, Levi, who would soon be dubbed Matthew, meaning "gift of God." Perhaps Jesus himself changed Levi's name just as he had done with Simon who became Peter. The change of name would reflect hopes, aspirations and potential. The invitation "Follow me" was more than a summons to stroll along. The term was more technical, meaning "to enroll" or "to serve as an apprentice."

Tax collectors were territorial. Levi worked for the Roman government in the area of Capernaum. He was probably appointed by the puppet king, Herod Antipas, who ruled over the district of Galilee. He was the son of Herod the Great. Philip, another son of Herod the Great, ruled over the territories to the east. Transporting goods westward meant

that Capernaum would be the first stop at which import and export taxes were collected.

The conversion and call of Levi were quite shocking. As a tax collector, probably receiving dues from those who were moving goods and merchandise to or through Capernaum, Levi was likely charging a rate higher than the government required in order to line his own pockets. Like his contemporary, Zacchaeus, he was motivated by graft and greed. He was the man everyone loved to hate. Extorting his fellow Jews while working for a foreign power, Levi found it impossible to have genuine friends. More than likely, Levi only had the friends money could buy. He was rich and lonely. Operating the tollbooth on the road that stretched from Damascus to the coastal plains of the Mediterranean, Levi had plenty of opportunities to exploit the unwitting public.

He quickly seized the invitation to follow Christ. Perhaps years of loneliness had prepared Levi for the moment of decision. Jesus wanted the man no one else wanted.

### **Sick Religion** **Mark 2:15**

*<sup>15</sup>And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples – for there were many who followed him.*

It is likely that Levi used his connections to finance a dinner honoring Jesus. Mark observed that many tax collectors and "sinners" were following Christ. Sinners were common people, people of the land, who had violated the Mosaic law. However, a sinner did not have to be a moral law-breaker; a sinner could have simply trespassed the ceremonial law.

Jesus was followed, not only by moral derelicts, but also by those who were morally acceptable yet had offended the ceremonial rituals. Perhaps a “sinner” had never murdered or committed adultery. Such a person, however, might have compromised hand-washing procedures or broken Sabbath work rules.

Pharisees, who were fanatically devoted to keeping the entire law, could not possibly imagine the Jewish Messiah enjoying table fellowship with social scum like tax collectors and sinners. It was tantamount to embracing theological compromise and moral contamination. This was more than a slippery slope.

One must not forget that the scribes and Pharisees depict a religion gone bad, a faith turned sour. Pharisees had emerged in the second century B.C. They claimed spiritual kinship with the Hasidim who had successfully inspired the Maccabean revolt. Now they were pledged to separate themselves from anyone who was not fully committed to upholding not only the Law of Moses but also their interpretation of the law.

Authentic faith loses its vitality whenever the desire to control and dominate others is expressed. This dynamic has played itself out in many ways over the last twenty-one centuries. Only the names and places have changed. An us/them mindset weakens genuine faith.

The Pharisees possessed a disproportionate influence in public life and in the synagogues. Becoming part of a faith community in which Gentiles, tax collectors and sinners were treated as co-equal family members was preposterous to them.

## **A Question Begging an Answer**

### **Mark 2:16**

*<sup>16</sup>When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”*

To the legalistic religionist, this was a scene of horror and revulsion. The inclusive nature of Jesus’ fellowship was disgusting to the doctrinal purists.

“Why is he eating with tax collectors and sinners?” was more than an undercurrent of discussion. It was a question that screamed for a public response.

Why would Jesus enjoy the company of those who ignored the synagogue; trespassed the moral and ceremonial laws and cooperated with the oppressive, pagan foreigners? To be sure, Jesus must have enjoyed the social interaction with all of Matthew’s guests. It would be interesting to imagine the content of those conversations around the table. Realizing their full acceptance, did they come clean with their extortion? Did they share the essence of their loneliness and broken dreams?

The scribes and Pharisees were jealously promoting the kind of legalism that encouraged hypocrisy. When a disproportionate emphasis is placed on rules instead of relationships, people feign compliance, look for loopholes and make their own interpretations the standards by which others are judged.

Don’t forget that many of Matthew’s guests, societal discards, were “following” Christ. Sharing a meal with those who had been marginalized by their own culture went well beyond creating good will. It was empowering to know that

Jesus was eager to explore their potential involvement in his mission. Never before had they experienced such newness of life.

### **Answering with a Proverb**

#### **Mark 2:17**

*<sup>17</sup>When Jesus heard this, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”*

When the Pharisees and teachers of the law voiced criticism against Jesus to his disciples, Jesus responded with a powerful proverb: Healthy people do not need a doctor, only those who are sick. Jesus was clear about his mission. He had not come for those whose relationship with God had been deemed righteous.

Herschel Hobbs in *An Exposition of the Gospel of Mark* shares the observation of A.B. Bruce who noted that tax collectors and sinners would not be found in synagogues. However, Jesus seeks and includes such persons in his redemptive mission. What a fellowship!

### **Fellowship Today**

Why did Jesus revel in the company of tax collectors and sinners and yet find himself and his mission incompatible with leaders of the religious establishment? Jesus accepted anyone who was humble enough to admit their need of God. Measuring up to their own legalistic standards, the Pharisees became haughty and felt no need of God.

Further, the legalistic religion of Jesus' day had made its leaders mean-spirited. The same dynamic is characteristic of our world. Jesus was kind when others were mean. Samuel Johnson noted, “Kindness is in our power when

fondness is not.” It is the power of kindness that gives the gospel such an appealing flavor.

Have you ever looked at others who shared the same doctor's waiting room? Did you ever think to yourself, “I wonder why he is here? What could possibly be her problem?” It becomes obvious that everyone who waits to see a doctor has a need for medical intervention. Those who never see a doctor either have no need for one or live with fear or misconceptions; or perhaps, they live in denial.

Self-righteousness obscures our need of the Great Physician. Being honest with ourselves can be quite painful. For tax collectors and sinners, such honest introspection becomes a prelude to fellowship with Christ in his saving mission.

*Written by Gary P. Burton, pastor, Pintlala Baptist Church, Hope Hull, Ala.*

# Practicing a Sabbath That Reshapes Culture

**Mark 2:23-28**

**Theme: Discipleship prioritizes human need over religious legalism.**

## Introduction

Where is the line between what you do out of faith convictions and what you do out of cultural conditioning? And how much of your religious conviction is shaped more by cultural conditioning than by faith?

As a newly minted fourth grader, a vivid impression of this distinction was stamped on my mind on a summer Sunday afternoon. My family had just moved from a small Oklahoma town to a suburb of Oklahoma City, and we had visited the First Baptist Church the first Sunday after we arrived, even before all the boxes were unpacked.

That afternoon, the pastor stopped by our house for an unannounced visit. My father was in the attic, storing household items that would not fit elsewhere. My mother and father both blushed with embarrassment that the preacher's first visit had found us working on Sunday. Not the way to indicate you're true believers when you lived in the Bible Belt in the 1970s.

Even as a child, I found it odd that my parents would make such a fuss over this Baptist faux pas, because it was obvious to anyone with eyes that we had just moved in and there was a lot of work to do. And besides, we had made it

to Sunday school and worship on our first Sunday in town. Surely that had to count for something.

The story seems almost quaint in today's culture in which we play soccer games, attend concerts, go to movies, mow the grass, shop for groceries and more on Sundays. But it illustrates the profound influence religious culture once held on our behavior in a way that constricted and embarrassed more than it enlightened.

Other examples are not as benign. Texas author Jan Jarboe Russell recently told a conference of Baptist communicators about her memories of growing up in the home of a Baptist minister of music. She especially recalled the episode during her junior year in high school when the deacons of her all-white East Texas Baptist church debated at length whether to allow African-Americans to be admitted as members, even though none had applied to do so.

The discussion was loud, lively and long, she recalled. Men stood to quote Scripture in their declarations that whites were superior to blacks. One woman attempted to counter this rhetoric and was told to sit down and be quiet because she didn't have a vote. Culture not only invaded religion; culture reshaped religion into something evil and dehumanizing.

## The Biblical Witness

This text draws from a larger section of Mark's Gospel portraying Jesus as pushing the envelope of his religious and societal culture. He had thrown out evil spirits and healed scores of people physically, all inciting the interest and anger of the religious legalists of the day. Jesus had endured their inquisition and now walked on the Jewish Sabbath with his disciples.

## A Grain of Truth

### Mark 2:23-24

*<sup>23</sup>One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. <sup>24</sup>The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?”*

As Jesus and his disciples walked through a field on the Sabbath, the disciples picked some heads of grain to eat. This was no violation of the law of God as recorded in Deuteronomy 23:25. The Jewish law allowed picking grain by hand when passing through a neighbor's fields, although the law forbade taking a sickle to a neighbor's grain.

But that was not all the law. Within what we know today as the Ten Commandments, God told Moses the people should not do work on the Sabbath, because on the seventh day of creation, God rested. Through the centuries, the Jewish leaders had parsed the word “work” to its finest possible meaning. Strict interpretations had been given about the extent of movement allowed on the Jewish day of rest, down to the number of steps one could walk.

Ironically, the fact that Jesus and his disciples were walking through the field on the Sabbath might have been enough on its own to draw a citation from the morality police. Although the text does not say how far they were walking, we can extrapolate that if they were walking long enough to grow hungry, they had gone farther than the law allowed.

Mark's account leads us to see the Pharisees' stated objection relating to the harvesting of the grain on the Sabbath—an action of work. It does not report the Pharisees objecting to the work of walking.

One of the peculiar marks of religious legalists is the battles they choose to fight. I heard recently of a woman who worked for a legalistic Christian institution. Unwisely, she began an extramarital affair. That did not get her fired. When she and her husband divorced, however, she was fired. Interesting are the sins we overlook and the ones we single out for prosecution. Often, these choices say more about us than about those we accuse.

Religious legalists almost always miss the big picture. The blinders they wear prescribe a narrow focus and prohibit seeing life in context. This is the theme of Victor Hugo's insightful story turned Broadway musical, “Les Miserables.” The protagonist, Jean Valjean, spends most of his life on the run all because of stealing some bread as an impoverished young man. Even as Valjean embarks on a life of helping others, he is pursued by a lawman who cannot forgive the small sins of the past.

Thus it was with the religious authorities of Jesus' day. As he would say at another time, they strained at things in others' eyes while ignoring the planks in their own eyes. There was a grain of truth to their perspective, but not clear vision.

Given the context in which Jesus and the disciples knew they lived, why did they choose to walk through a field on the Sabbath and pluck grain as they went? Were they merely careless? Not likely. Had they already experienced in Jesus a freedom from the law, a restoration of understanding the original intent of God's law? How had they learned in such a relatively short time to place human need in higher precedence over religious legalism?

Years ago in Oklahoma, my parents weren't so concerned about the fact that we needed to work on unpacking on Sunday afternoon as about the fact that the preacher found

us unpacking. They were concerned about appearances. Jesus and his disciples, it seems, were not concerned about appearances.

## **A Grain of History**

### **Mark 2:25-26**

*<sup>25</sup>And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? <sup>26</sup>He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions."*

In response to the accusers, Jesus sets the matter in historical context. He cites the incident recorded in 1 Samuel 21, where David and his men ate the consecrated bread of the Presence when there was no other food to eat along their journey.

Instructions for how this holy bread is to be handled are recorded in Leviticus 24:5-9. It is designated as a holy offering to the Lord and is only to be eaten by the sons of Aaron.

Why does Jesus cite this reference in defense of his behavior? Perhaps because it was a story the devout Pharisees would have immediately known. Perhaps because David was held in such high regard that his actions could be a "trump" card. Perhaps because Jesus once again was drawing the historical line from David to himself, a foreshadowing of what was to come. Perhaps because Jesus knew the only way to fight legalists is with a dose of their own legalism.

In a sense, Jesus was attempting to "out-Torah" the Torah-quoters. But as some of us have learned over the last two decades, logic has nothing to do with winning a battle with

legalists. Too often, those who claim to believe the Bible the most will not be swayed by arguments from the Bible that disrupt their dogmatic ideas.

And indeed, the Bible-thumpers who were out to get Jesus were not deterred by this biblical thump on the head.

## **A Grain of Pain**

### **Mark 2:27-28**

*<sup>27</sup>Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; <sup>28</sup>so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."*

Jesus' final defense no doubt served as a continuing irritant to the Pharisees, like a grain of sand stuck between the toes. He already had claimed the authority to forgive sins (Mk 2:7-10), and now he claimed to be Lord of the Sabbath.

Suddenly, the defense of the violation becomes more troublesome than the violation itself. The legalism that could not abide Jesus' actions could abide his declarations of deity even less. For Jesus to claim to be Lord of the Sabbath not only was a declaration of deity, it was a declaration of superiority to the man-made interpretations of the law the Pharisees so loved.

A mark of legalism in any system or culture is to love enforcing the law more than one loves the purpose for which the law was given. Legalism makes checklists and draws tight boundaries to enforce compliance. Thus, compliance becomes the end-all, and the heart of the law is forgotten.

Jesus told the Pharisees they had things backward: People were not made to be subservient to the Sabbath; rather, the Sabbath was made to serve the needs of people. The focus of the law, and the focus of Jesus' ministry, was on

empowering people to live life to the fullest, not to reduce life to the lowest common denominator of uniform behavior.

This is precisely why Jesus could claim to be Lord of the Sabbath. Recall that he announced his mission to set the captive free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. This did not require dispensing with the law. Instead, it allowed him to bring renewed meaning to the law.

Think of times you have struggled to learn a new computer software program. You may read the manual all you want, even be able to recite the manual's instructions by heart. But until you work with the program and begin to understand why it works the way it does, you will not have mastered it.

### **Practicing Sabbath Today**

How were the disciples able to act so boldly when they knew they were being scrutinized by the Pharisees? How were they able to be so "freed up" to know that God cares about human need more than religious legalism?

The difference was that they knew not only the letter of the law but the author of the law as well. They were able to prioritize human need over religious legalism because they were more in tune with the person of Christ than the policy of the religious police.

The gospel is about relationship more than law. That's not to say there aren't boundaries or shouldn't be boundaries. However, when we come to know the author of the law, we understand more fully the meaning of the law. Jesus is indeed Lord of the Sabbath. Let us follow Jesus.

*Written by Mark Wingfield, associate pastor, Wilshire Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas.*

## **Refocused on the Family**

**Mark 3:31-35**

**Theme: Discipleship is about doing the will of God.**

### **Introduction**

Watching "Meet the Parents," I laughed as much as with any film I have seen in some time. Robert De Niro and Ben Stiller entertain us with the interaction of a loving father meeting his daughter's new romantic interest for the first time. The movie depicts in lighthearted fashion the truly difficult task of defining family, particularly when facing the challenge of letting someone new inside the family circle.

De Niro, playing the overprotective father, describes for Stiller's character the importance of the "Byrnes Family Circle of Trust." He sets the rules and administers the tests for entrance to the family circle. The prospective son-in-law often fails miserably to meet the standard for entrance into that circle.

Christians often speak of their "church family." The idea that followers of Jesus constitute a "family of God" is as old as the times of New Testament writing. Who belongs in this Christian family circle? What are the "family rules" for entrance inside the circle? How does this Christian family compare to our biological family? To which family does our highest allegiance belong?

Twenty-six years ago I came to Zebulon Baptist Church as its youth minister. I am still here, now serving as senior

pastor. Among the members when I first arrived was a bright and intuitive young person who has since left Zebulon for education at Wake Forest, seminary, graduate school and service as a wonderful pastor. We have enjoyed a friendship that has grown from the original relationship of youth minister to young person to that of being colleagues in ministry today.

This friend has always been willing to ask good questions. In his earliest days of ministry preparation, he sensed that Baptist literature and programming invariably focused on family relationships. It seemed to him that the highest goal of our discipleship ministry was to get home and family relationships working well. Dismayed at the lack of appreciation for the unmarried and at the unwillingness to recognize that Jesus demanded a discipleship that in some cases might disrupt the family, he once asked what some might find an irreverent question: “Just when did Baptists make the family the fourth person of the Trinity?”

Mark 3:31-35 offers us a text to investigate that may help define the Christian family circle in Jesus’ terms. It may also prove to be an important corrective for the instances when we are imbalanced in emphasizing family relationships over the demands of discipleship.

## **The Biblical Witness**

Let’s begin our look at the text by setting the scene. Mark describes the calling of the twelve disciples in Mark 3:13-19a. Then he quickly concludes, “Then he went home.”

It is in this setting that crowds went to the home, so large that they found it difficult to eat. In verse 21 Mark writes, “When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’”

Scribes who went to this house to hear him believed Jesus was possessed by Beelzebub.

It is no wonder that with friends calling him crazy and scribes accusing him of being possessed, Mary might have said to her other children, “Come with me. Your brother, Jesus, is in trouble. He needs us. We are his family.”

With this background, we understand just what was at stake when Mary and the siblings arrived at the crowded home where Jesus was teaching inside. They were on a mission to rescue a loved one. This was a family thing. Surely we can relate to their concern.

## **A Natural Request**

### **Mark 3:31-32**

*<sup>31</sup>Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. <sup>32</sup>A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.”*

The crowds surrounding Jesus explain why the family was forced to stand outside. Multitudes were there to hear him speak, to witness and be blessed by his healing ministry. The family may have been concerned about his safety and his well-being, but they at least had to admit that Jesus was really drawing a crowd.

It may have been Mary or it may have been one of the brothers or sisters who sent word to those at the doorway: “Go tell Jesus that we are here. Ask him to come outside to speak with us. We are his family.”

Messengers relayed the news to Jesus on the inside. The crowd surrounding Jesus placed high priority on family relationships. Anyone would have understood Jesus say-

ing, “Excuse me for a minute. My family is outside and wants to speak with me. I must go.”

## **An Unexpected Response**

### **Mark 3:33**

<sup>33</sup> *And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?”*

For some reason Jesus did not do the expected thing. He asked a strange question, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” The family’s anxiety surely rose when they heard that Jesus seemed to have forgotten about them.

Our own sensibilities are shocked when we hear our sinless Jesus respond in such a way that seems very close to disrespect toward his mother and family. Why couldn’t Jesus be a good son, take a minute and go see his worried mother?

What an interesting scene to picture! On the outside of a home, a huge crowd overflowed out the door. The family of Jesus stood at the edge of the crowd. They heard that their son and brother seemed unwilling to heed their request to come to them.

## **Looking Through Several Windows**

### **Mark 3:34-35**

<sup>34</sup> *And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! <sup>35</sup>Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”*

On the inside of the home sat persons who were following Jesus. They included his newly named disciples, those hungry for every new word flowing from the mouth of this extraordinary teacher and those hurting for just one healing touch.

Jesus looked them over and spoke words as inclusive as any I have ever heard: “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

Let’s analyze this text by looking through several windows. First, let’s try to make sense about how this text instructs us concerning family relationships. The text does not indicate that Jesus never went out to meet his mother and siblings. He used the request of his family to break away from the house to come outside and meet them as a teaching moment. There is no need to conclude that his response indicates disrespect or disregard for his family.

What we can conclude is that Jesus did not allow family to interfere with his call to minister. The audience before him was like family to him. He was called to minister to them and to teach them. Even the anxious concern of a mother did not deter him from continuing his ministry among those who crowded the residence.

Other stories in the gospels are in harmony with this passage. At twelve years of age, Jesus focused on the business of his heavenly parent more than on the concern of anxious earthly parents. His teaching about the kingdom of God demanded immediate response, even if important family matters went unattended. A new bride or a deceased father awaiting burial was not a sufficient reason for delaying response to follow Jesus. For Jesus, nothing was more important or more immediate than the demands of God’s kingdom.

Next, let’s look at this text to see what it tells us about the family of God. The shared experience of following Jesus and obeying the will of God creates a sense of family. There is no evidence that Jesus failed to appreciate his

earthly family. At the cross he was mindful of the needs of his mother. But Jesus also introduced the idea that we can experience family outside the boundaries of mother and father and sister and brother relationships.

Why should Jesus rush from the crowded house to see his mother and brothers and sisters when he was already at home with family? Those persons hungry for his teaching and open to his ministry were family to him. Jesus clearly stated the criterion for being inside God's family circle when he said, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

A final window for viewing this text looks from the perspective of inclusion. Often, family ties foster intimacy within the family to the exclusion of those outside the family. But Jesus uses a broad brush to paint a picture of those included in his family. "Whoever" is an inclusive word. Even the intentional inclusion of "sisters" in his statement indicates the breadth of the family Jesus identified in this passage.

The family of God is for men and women, brothers and sisters. It is not defined by race or ethnicity, age or gender, position or economic standing. Jesus included anyone who does the will of God in his faith family. And no other family ties were stronger than his ties to that family.

### **Discipleship and Family Today**

My most serious study of the Gospel of Mark came in a seminary class taught by Dr. Donald Cook. I can go back in my mind and see Dr. Cook seated on the stool behind the lectern with his Greek text open to Mark. I can hear him remind us, "Mark is the roughest gospel. He does not mind offending his readers as he tells his story."

Indeed, many are offended by a story in which Jesus has even the slightest appearance of rudeness toward his family. But Mark is not governed by concern for our sensibilities. This text makes a strong point about discipleship, a point we need to understand.

Much of evangelical Christianity today seems focused on making us better persons, with cleaner lives and stronger families. Listen to the rhetoric of many Christians in the public forum and you might conclude that those who always put their families first demonstrate the highest form of discipleship.

Without a doubt, Christian faith should make our lives better and our families stronger. But the Christian life involves much more than strengthening family life. It is about a willingness to obey God, to follow Jesus and to be about the work of the kingdom of God. A kinship develops for all those who share this commitment. Relationships in the family of God introduce a sisterhood and brotherhood like nothing else we can experience. This common faith and shared journey of discipleship break down barriers, and surprisingly wonderful family relationships form.

I know that with my words I claim to put God first. But when I sense the urging of the Spirit to travel on a mission trip, I am likely to check my son's sports schedule or my daughter's schedule of band concerts before I make a commitment. If someone asks about a new ministry opportunity, I admit I take into account what is best for my wife and children as I search for direction. Most of you would tell me that is okay, even right to balance the demands of family and discipleship. But can we honestly say that Jesus advocates that balance when we read this text?

What we can conclude is that discipleship is demanding. The call to follow and obey is never watered down in the gospels. Jesus is forever willing to ask for our complete allegiance and total commitment. I do not believe that obedience to the Lord will lead us to behave in ways that destroy or weaken our families. But I do believe that placing family concerns ahead of the demands of discipleship will weaken us spiritually.

We can also conclude that there is a marvelous blessing for us if we truly commit to following Jesus. A new family awaits us: brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers and children to embrace. As I read this text over and over again, I do not sense it is asking me to love or enjoy my wife and children any less. But it is asking me to obey God and in that obedience enjoy a new family with relationships no less wonderful.

Too often we simply lack the faith to believe that the church can provide us with this depth of relationship. I have been blessed to share many years of ministry with one congregation. The members of my church are indeed brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers to me. This past Christmas holiday season seven of our members died. I think about bedside prayers and the quiet vigils preceding their deaths. I think about ministry to their earthly families and to our church family at the funerals. I think about the honest tears of grief and joy that welled in my eyes at the end of the days they were buried.

Jesus is right. I have journeyed with my church family for a long time. We have tried to obey the will of God. Sometimes we have failed. Sometimes, by God's grace at work in us, we have succeeded. And, the journey has made us a family. We are all inside the circle.

Nothing may seem more risky than to take following Jesus so seriously that you make this your ultimate concern and highest priority. Nothing will seem more difficult than to imagine placing the demands of discipleship above concern for your own family. But Jesus urges you on. His words about family in this unusual text call for your trust and obedience.

Dare to believe that this will open up a new faith family to you with a depth of relationship that is amazing to experience. Pray that your church will be a family of fellow disciples who seek to obey God, open to all and willing to embrace one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

*Written by Jack Glasgow, senior pastor, Zebulon Baptist Church, Zebulon, N.C.*

## What Can We Become?

**Mark 4:30-32**

**Theme: Discipleship is about the potential of the insignificant becoming significant.**

### Introduction

As I write this, a presidential election campaign is underway. Voters have been bombarded with information about those who wish to serve as president for the next four years.

One thing I have noticed in most presidential races, whether in the primaries or in the general election, is how candidates like to talk about humble beginnings. They announce their intention to run in front of factories, public school buildings and childhood homes. Their stump speeches reference lessons they learned from working parents and first jobs.

The irony is that most of the candidates who speak this way do so from positions of power as senior elected officials and with personal wealth and resources far surpassing those of the average American voter. Yet, we expect, and almost demand, that the candidates show us they are just like us. But we also celebrate with the candidate that he or she has made the American dream come true. We even highlight this possibility for any “common” person when we tell our children that they can grow up to be president of the United States.

We are usually not satisfied with electing a candidate who is still just like us. We want one who has taken his or her

insignificant beginnings and made something big out of life. In this we have hope that the candidate can create conditions that will allow us to succeed as well. We relish the “rags to riches” success story and hope it will be our story, too.

This intrigues me because our expectations for our lives of faith are much lower. We seem to relegate the seemingly insignificant producing something great only to the realm of politics.

We forget the story of the kingdom of God as we have seen it break into our world. We forget the lesson of St. Francis of Assisi and his rag-tag band of followers, whose faith and lifestyle continue to inspire millions to simplicity. We forget the lesson of Mother Teresa, her life among the poor and her worldwide inspiration for compassion. We forget the lesson of Clarence Jordan, who took his Ph.D. to a Georgia farm, inspiring a community that served as the soil that produced Habitat for Humanity.

We especially do not recognize that God can take our lives, no matter how we may judge them, and produce something incredible.

Turn now to the teaching of Jesus and discover his expectation for what God can do.

### The Biblical Witness

The triple tradition of Matthew 13:31-32, Mark 4:30-32 and Luke 13:18-19 attests to the parable of the mustard seed. The parable is also found in the extra-biblical Gospel of Thomas 20. Each version of the parable highlights something slightly different, based on the desire of the Gospel writer to address his particular community and the issues of faith that needed to be addressed.

Most scholars consider the Marcan version of the parable as the one closest to Jesus' own words.

Part of the background of the parable is certainly found in Hebrew scripture. Daniel 4 and Ezekiel 17 and 31 contain references to birds that come and nest in tall trees. In Hebrew scripture references, the trees refer to kingdoms and kings and highlight their sovereignty. As those listening to Jesus heard him begin his parable, they would no doubt think of the great cedars described in Ezekiel 17:23.

But then Jesus threw his listeners a curve as he spoke not about a great cedar, but about a bush that has come from a lowly mustard seed. Herein lies the message for the church about the kingdom of God, its nature and its potential. The listener must then apply the lesson to his or her own discipleship.

### **What Can I Say?**

#### **Mark 4:30**

*<sup>30</sup>He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?"*

Jesus began his parable in an interactive way, directly from his reputation as a rabbi, for this was a common form of rabbinical teaching. In asking the question, Jesus affirmed the difficulty of getting a handle on the concept of the kingdom of God as he understood it. It would not be hard to master the concept if there were any human parallels to God's kingdom as far as its character and purpose are concerned.

As the listeners considered the kingdoms of which they were aware (primarily Rome), they likely thought of power, wealth and the desire to form everyone in the kingdom into

the same mold. Human kingdoms were far from Jesus' understanding of the kingdom of God.

For the kingdom of God to accomplish what it wills, it is essential that Jesus' followers understand the kingdom and be working for what it stands for and what it may accomplish. The sad life of Judas offers an example. Many interpreters view his betrayal of Jesus not as a selfish act to obtain some money. Instead, they see his actions as an attempt to move Jesus into taking a different approach to the kingdom by forcing him to exhibit his power, and therefore, establish the type of kingdom many expected from the Messiah.

### **It's Like This**

#### **Mark 4:31**

*<sup>31</sup>It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth;*

Here comes the first of four shocking characteristics of the kingdom of God. The kingdom begins as a mustard seed. In popular understanding, Jesus could have chosen no better metaphor to emphasize apparent insignificance. Matthew and Mark both highlight this shocking characteristic by the parenthetical comments about the small size of the mustard seed.

In Matthew 17:20, Jesus used the small size of mustard seed to encourage faith. While the mustard seed is not the smallest of all seeds, Jesus was playing to popular understanding. His meaning was not lost on those who heard him. The kingdom of God is something people will hardly notice in its beginning, Jesus said. His own life and ministry reflect that truth, including his humble beginnings in a stable, no formal rabbinical training, and the fact that he only numbered the Twelve, not an army, among his following.

A second shocking characteristic is the intentionality of this being the way the kingdom begins. This mustard seed is “sown”; it is not wild, and therefore, just happens to find soil in which to grow. Some mustard seeds were wild, while others were of a more cultivated type. In fact, the smallest of the mustard seeds of the day was the cultivated black mustard seed.

It was important that Jesus affirm this intentionality, or else the growth of the kingdom would have been seen as happenstance and not something to provide encouragement for future discipleship. What happens in the kingdom should be seen as a miracle. Note also that Jesus makes no apology for the smallness of the kingdom of God in his day. Instead, there is a call to what will be the marvelous results.

### **What It Can Become**

#### **Mark 4:32**

*<sup>31</sup>yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”*

The third shocking characteristic of the kingdom of God is what it becomes. The emphasis here is not the process of growth but the result of the growth. In Mark, the mustard seed grows into the largest of all shrubs. The size is certainly shocking, that something so insignificant in its beginning could claim to be the largest of anything. This is certainly the primary point of contrast. It is also noteworthy that in Luke the resulting plant is the largest of all trees and in Matthew the largest shrub then becomes the largest tree.

If Mark contains the original wording of Jesus, then it is important to note that the result of growth is a shrub and not a tree. The fundamental character of the kingdom of God is

different from that which had always been expected (i.e., the Old Testament images of kingdoms as great trees).

The fourth shocking characteristic has to do with what the shrub accomplishes. The natural result of the growth of the shrub would be that it provides its own leaves for food and produces seed to provide future growth of its own kind. But the shrub also provides support and shade for the birds of the air.

The parable of the mustard seed and its growth into the largest of shrubs is not complete without the picture of the birds coming to nest. The addition of the birds highlights the surprising size of the plant and its strength. The purpose of the plant moves beyond the basic to its inclusion of, and support for, something outside of itself.

### **The Potential of Faithful Discipleship**

What can we say about the way we should approach our discipleship based upon the characteristics of the kingdom that Jesus shared with us in the parable of the mustard seed?

First, Jesus was concerned neither with the apparent success of what was transpiring in the kingdom in the present nor in the size of the task ahead. For our discipleship, this means that our understanding of what is successful is not a valid measure. The parable even seems to relish in the humility of the beginnings of the kingdom. In our discipleship, we can never offer the excuse of not having the necessary resources or abilities to do what God has called us to do.

In addition, we cannot judge the work of God in the world in the same way we judge our actions. Like the difference in kingdoms of the day and the kingdom of God, there is a

foundational difference in the way the kingdom of God is structured, develops and produces results.

Second, Jesus indicated that growth in the kingdom was a certainty and would most likely be seen as miraculous. We are often hampered by our own expectations. We cannot see how something great can possibly develop. Consequently, we live our lives with little result. There is something faithful to the ministry of Jesus in approaching our life of faith with the expectation that God will do something that we can only explain by God's presence and involvement.

Third, our discipleship is not just about ourselves. It is fairly easy for a church to plan and implement ministries that bring direct benefit to its members. Likewise, when being involved in a ministry brings personal benefits to us, we are more likely to be enthusiastic. But what about those ministry opportunities that benefit only those outside, and seem to take a lot of effort for what seems a little result? Well, Jesus says that part of the reason for the kingdom is for those outside (the birds). In fact, those outside to whom we minister really complete the picture of the kingdom.

A number of years ago, some men in my church began a ministry of large projects such as replacing roofs, building ramps, replacing floors and building Habitat for Humanity homes. The same small core of people has been involved all along. At times, it has been frustrating to have a church full of men and only a handful be dedicated to this task. But signs indicate that the seemingly insignificant number involved is about to increase.

Another man, inspired by Baptist Men's day testimonies, wants to head a household chore and repair ministry for the homebound and senior adults of our church. This ministry will focus on doing tasks that may take only a little time and

some knowledge but often go undone in the homes of the homebound. With this new volunteer in place, the number of men involved in hands-on ministry will likely grow.

The tasks will become more manageable as far as time commitment and skills needed. The faithfulness of the first group of men, even when the tasks seemed almost hopeless and unmanageable, inspired another person to venture in a new direction. The amount of ministry will no doubt increase and the kingdom will get a little bigger—in God's own time and in God's way.

*Written by Wayne Hager, pastor, Calvary Baptist Church, Mount Airy, N.C.*

## Garbage In, Garbage Out?

**Mark 7:14-23**

**Theme: Discipleship involves an inward journey toward authentic piety.**

### Introduction

At his high school reunion, my friend Eddie had a unique opportunity to be both prophet and witness to the gospel. His best friend had returned for the event after having moved and cut ties with most everyone. The reason for his distance, both physical and emotional, was simple. He had announced he was a homosexual and knew that this would alienate many if not all of his former classmates.

When he entered the room, the conversation stopped and everyone looked uncomfortably at their shoes. It was at this moment that Eddie stood, walked to his friend and embraced him in front of everyone.

After the two talked at length and caught up, Eddie was approached by another member of the class who accosted him, asking and accusing all at once. “You say you’re a Christian. You know he’s gay. How could you embrace him?”

My friend gave a powerful reply. “Why shouldn’t I embrace him? You came to this reunion with the woman you live with who is the mother of your children, but you have never married. I embraced you.”

Jesus’ conflict with the religious authorities of his day was in many ways similar to my friend Eddie’s experience.

Religious people are expected to stay away from those the “righteous” have declared the impure and marginalized of society. They fear that external association will lead to inner impurity. This concern for external righteousness often blinds each of us to the evil present in our own hearts.

### The Biblical Witness

#### Disciples Convert From Inside Out

**Mark 7:14-15**

*<sup>14</sup>Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: <sup>15</sup>there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”*

When the seventh chapter of Mark opens, we find Jesus engaged in a dispute with Pharisees and teachers of the law about the eating habits of his disciples. They apparently were not washing their hands prior to eating, in accordance with Jewish custom. The importance of this omission was not hygiene. The people of the gospels had little understanding of germs or the need for sanitation. Rather, the issue was one of tradition. To be clean did not mean washed with soap, but rather that one had observed the appropriate rituals to ensure that God’s commands were followed.

For the Jewish people, being ritually clean was always a precarious state. Purity was not permanent and impurity was highly transferable. To use a modern analogy, if you have a bottle of sewage and you add a drop of soda to it, you have a bottle of sewage. On the other hand, if you have a bottle of soda and add a drop of sewage to it, you have a bottle of sewage. The corrupting influence of ritual impurity was a fast-spreading epidemic in the world.

What would Jesus say to these religious leaders whose focus was on external displays of righteousness? Would he castigate his disciples for their failure to maintain the façade of purity? Would he join with the religious leaders and scold his followers for thumbing their noses at the traditions of their people?

In a totally unexpected move, Jesus spoke to the crowd in verses 14 and 15 in a way that completely upset the general religious climate of his day. He suggested that rather than impurity working its way into a person, purity is the more powerful force and works from the inside out.

Rules and laws function by controlling external behaviors. They do not change the attitudes behind actions but constrain people to act in certain ways. Commandments function on the basis that controlling a person's behavior is most important; if the underlying attitudes are changed, that is an added benefit.

Conversion suggests that the path to God is not found by following rules. Instead, righteousness is found when a person's heart and attitudes change. Those transformed to righteousness then live rightly not because of external pressures but because of internal belief.

Jesus wanted the crowd to understand that a person's actions do not change their heart but instead reveal their heart. It is a dramatically different way of understanding righteousness.

### **The Missing Verse**

#### **Mark 7:16**

*<sup>16</sup>If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.*

Some translations include verse 16, but many (NRSV included) omit it. The decision not to include this verse is

based on a variety of reasons. Most importantly, this verse does not appear in the earliest existing copies of the gospel. The phrase also appears in other places in the gospel, which suggests that it may have been added by scribes who had different passages in mind as they copied the text. Finally, from a purely practical standpoint, its omission or inclusion does nothing to change the meaning or advance the argument of the text. For these reasons, most modern translations skip from verse 15 to verse 17.

### **A Parable?**

#### **Mark 7:17**

*<sup>17</sup>When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable.*

It may surprise us that Jesus considered his short saying about what comes out of a person revealing their heart a parable. It is not a story as we expect parables to be. Contrary to our expectations, parable was a broad category of sayings in Jesus' world. A parable could be anything from an aphorism to an extended story. The Hebrew and Greek terms that we translate "parable" can be used to describe any sort of figurative language.

Typically, Jesus' use of parable as a teaching tool was to take a common conception of how things are or ought to be and then turn it on its ear by recasting a new vision of reality. The parabolic nature of Jesus' saying is found both in the figurative language and in the upsetting of conventional wisdom on the issue of purity.

We take this passage of course as imminently understandable. Explanation seems superfluous. It seems strange to us that the disciples would ask Jesus anything about the parable. For the time, however, it was an astounding challenge to the accepted world proposed by the Jewish religious leaders. That the issue of hand washing should

create such controversy seems odd in our day. It raises an interesting question that would provoke important discussions in the modern Christian communities if pursued. What are the modern equivalents of hand washing in the church?

### **Pork Anyone?**

#### **Mark 7:18-19**

*<sup>18</sup>He said to them, "Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, <sup>19</sup>since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.)*

Throughout the gospel of Mark, the disciples are portrayed as obstinate, difficult and uncomprehending. What strikes us as obvious they peer at with unseeing eyes. In fairness to them, they lived on the opposite side of the cross. We have the advantage of the resurrection as we interpret Jesus. But it is also a reminder that close association with Jesus is not the same thing as understanding Jesus.

Jesus' further explanation expands the parabolic saying by describing, in what some would consider embarrassing detail, the course of food through the body. The unclean foods when eaten go through the digestive system and exit without coming into contact with the heart. If that is their course, how can they affect a person's heart?

Mark adds a parenthetical interpretation in case the slow disciples who read his work missed the point. All foods are okay. While the church of our age lives with this as a decided issue, when the gospel was written this would have been a vexing problem. Jewish Christians wanted new converts to become Jews first. They would then be responsible for keeping Jewish purity codes. Other Christians

argued that to follow Christ did not require becoming a Jew first. Mark weighs in decisively on the issue.

### **Personal Responsibility**

#### **Mark 7:20-23**

*<sup>20</sup>And he said, "It is what comes out of a person that defiles. <sup>21</sup>For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, <sup>22</sup>adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. <sup>23</sup>All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."*

In our therapeutic age, we have moved away from most concepts of personal responsibility. When we examine a person's actions, we judge them not on their behaviors but the circumstances that produce them. We believe that people are by nature benign, but that controlling parents, bullying peers and troubling circumstances create abnormalities of behavior.

Jesus seems to call that into question. Our evil is our own, not forced onto us by those around us, he maintains. Ultimately it is the choice of our hearts to follow evil intentions. The list Jesus used of examples of evil from within is similar in form to a stoic list of vices. It is not a particularly comforting list. While few of us are murderers, thieves or adulterers, all of us are present somewhere in the list. Who is not guilty of envy, greed or deceit? And if you still read comfortably, convinced you are not included, then your self-confidence in your purity is a mistaken pride or pure folly (the last two items in the list).

We are left, of course, all of us in the list, which means that each of us has evil present in our heart. There are no rationalizations we can apply or external causes we can blame. Evil is in our heart, and it can be controlled not by

external ritual but by an internal struggle toward righteousness.

### **Living Inside-Out Today**

A few years ago, I went to a religious convention with a church member. At the appointed lunch hour, we left the convention hall to find food. As we walked on the urban street, we came to a place with a placard out front announcing the menu. It looked good to me, so I suggested we try it.

I was surprised when she said, “I can’t eat there.” Tables were available. The place seemed nice. It did not make sense. Then she finished her statement, “They have a bar.” To be a true disciple for her meant avoiding the appearance of impropriety. Her Christian belief consisted of a list of rules. Her attitude was precisely the one Jesus addressed in Mark 7.

The relevance of Jesus’ parable for the modern church is not found in questions of hand washing or even in choice of diet. The challenge for us is to identify the false systems of righteousness we have constructed that move us away from the conversion of our heart. Perhaps the following questions can help us in our struggle.

Who have the “righteous” proclaimed unclean today? Are there groups of people the church has declared unclean? Do we fail to reach out into those communities with the gospel for fear that association with them will make us impure? Jesus was branded by the “righteous” Pharisees as a drunk because he associated with sinners and tax collectors. Who has been left standing outside the fellowship of the gospel over our concerns for the appearance of righteousness?

What do we add to the gospel’s demand for righteous living? Churches and Christians have often added to the scriptural demands for righteousness. We have created rules of Christian decorum that reflect our own culture more than they reflect the radical demands of discipleship. Over what issue in our church would Jesus declare, “It’s not \_\_\_\_\_ that matters, but what is in your heart.”

Righteousness comes not from the rules, laws and traditions around us, but from hearts that have been converted. The struggle for righteousness is not a question of religious rules controlling our behavior but having a righteous heart that creates our actions. True disciples do not follow the rules—they follow their hearts.

*Written by Bob Fox, pastor, Faith Baptist Church, Georgetown, Ky.*

## What God Wants

**Mark 8:34-38**

**Theme: Discipleship is about the denial of self for the kingdom of God.**

### Introduction

Take a “joy ride of lavish living” and uncover “the incredible indulgences that come with it.” That’s the premise—and the promise—of VH1’s “Fabulous Life Of” television series.

Different segments profile individuals or groups of “fabulous” people, show viewers just why they are so fabulous and suggest that others can live the fabulous life too. How?

For starters, pay a personal trainer at a rate of \$7,500 per week. Then rent a Dassault Falcon 2000 airplane for \$5,000 an hour to whisk you away to your favorite coffee shop, either across town or across the country.

Can you keep up?

That’s the question E! Network’s “It’s Good to Be” show asks viewers as it profiles, in similar fashion, “the lifestyles of the filthy rich and famous.”

Can you throw yourself five separate birthday parties, each in a different city, at a cost of \$75,000 each? Can you regularly pay \$1,000 for a spray-on tanning treatment? Can you spend \$1,600 a month on haircuts, buy \$17,000 suits and take \$200,000 vacations?

You could if you were this actor, or that singer, or this athlete, or some other wealthy socialite. If you can keep up, then it must be great to be you, the show suggests. If you can’t, well, then maybe you and your life aren’t so great after all.

Who doesn’t want a fabulous life? And who doesn’t want to believe that it’s great to be who they are? The message we most consistently receive, however, tells us that the fabulous life comes with a hefty monetary price tag attached and it’s good to be you only if your incomprehensible wealth enables you to affirm and gratify yourself at every turn.

It’s all about who we are, what we have and how much more we can get, if we believe the messages our culture sends. Even many Christians take the bait and try to justify self-indulgence. “I work hard. I deserve this,” they think.

The problem lies not in what we have but in whose agenda we follow—ours or God’s. With discipleship comes self-denial, a strange concept in contemporary culture. It means giving up the right to self-centered living and accepting and adopting God’s agenda in place of our own.

Both God and ego are three-letter words, author and professor Calvin Miller asserts, and both require our attention. Whichever one receives it ultimately tells the world what kind of person we are. We never find out who we are until we let go of ego, he says, and self-denial is the route that takes us there.

Self-denial is neither comfortable nor popular, but Jesus said it is necessary if we want to follow him.

### The Biblical Witness

As a young child sitting in church thumbing through the Bible, I knew those words printed in red were important. They really stood out, and for good reason. We were supposed to pay attention to them. After all, Jesus said them.

None are more important than those in Mark 8:34. Here Jesus gets at the heart of what it takes, and what it means, to follow him.

He didn't throw this at his followers right away. He had been carefully preparing them for this moment. They already knew he was amazing; they had witnessed so many miracles. But did they really understand who he was?

"Who do people say that I am?" Jesus asked his disciples in Mark 8:27. He didn't ask them because he didn't know or even because he wanted necessarily to know what others were saying. After they answered, he more pointedly asked, "But who do you say that I am?" (v 29). He asked because he wanted them to come to the all-important conclusion for themselves. For them and for us, who we say Jesus is determines who we are, if we follow him.

Peter's declaration in verse 29, "You are the Messiah," indicated to Jesus that they were ready to hear the hard facts, difficult though they were to grasp. After all, the disciples were still probably struggling with the idea that their Messiah had come not as a king but as a commoner. Accepting the news that a cross, not a crown, would identify him required a huge paradigm shift.

At this point, Jesus "began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (v 31). Imagine the difficulty the disciples had in understanding how all of this could happen, given everything they had seen Jesus do.

He had cured people of horrible diseases and ailments. He had quieted the stormy sea with the sound of his voice. He had sent unclean spirits from a troubled man and returned him to clear thinking and rational behavior. He had restored life in a young girl who had died. He had fed thousands of people with little more than a handful of food. And much, much more.

How could it be possible for someone who could do all of this to suffer and die? And what did that mean for those who followed him?

Jesus spoke "quite openly" about all of this (v 32). The time was right to tell his followers exactly what discipleship involves. In a few short but powerful verses, Jesus offers his philosophy of life and death and challenges us to embrace it.

### **Here's What It Takes**

#### **Mark 8:34**

*<sup>34</sup>He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."*

In addition to his disciples, Jesus on this occasion "called the crowd" together. He was forthright and direct, telling people exactly what they could expect in following him. Using words like "deny" and "cross," he didn't exactly paint a rosy picture.

Some readers have historically interpreted Jesus' call to discipleship as being three-fold: deny self, take up the cross, follow. But many scholars believe Jesus' call involves two things: self-denial and absolute commitment, even to death. They see the third element, "follow," as the result when someone does the first two. When we give up our right to self-centered living and are wholeheartedly committed to God's

divine plan with no reservations, we become like Jesus and follow him.

Just as suffering was part of Jesus' messiahship, self-denial is part of our discipleship. It's not a matter of giving up certain things or becoming a human doormat. Instead, it means taking self out of life's center and giving that place to God and the divine plan.

Some have interpreted the concept of bearing one's cross to mean that Christians have unique burdens or problems. That's not what Jesus meant when he said we must take up our cross. The cross represented an unqualified commitment to death. That's what discipleship involves, and that's what Jesus requires.

Jesus chose the path to the cross because it was God's will. Following Jesus means following the example he set, pursuing the divine plan as it relates to every area of our lives—identity, attitudes, family and other relationships, worship, service, use of resources—who we are, what we do and what we have.

### **Gaining by Losing** **Mark 8:35-37**

*<sup>35</sup>For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. <sup>36</sup>For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup>Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?*

How can we lose something we save, and how can we save something we lose? To the finite mind, it's a puzzling paradox, but to Jesus it made perfect sense.

Jesus could unabashedly paint a realistic picture of discipleship with strokes of self-denial and cross-carrying

because he knew the whole story. Any temporary downside to following him has an eternal upside. Disadvantages are a matter of perception.

When Jesus used the word "life" here, he was talking about the person—who and what he or she really is.

Those who think they are saving their lives—retaining their identity—by choosing not to follow Jesus will actually lose all hope for eternal life in the long run. Nothing—not even gaining the whole world—can make up for losing one's soul.

Jesus offered the recipe not for despising and rejecting our lives but instead the only path to what life really is. The choice is perfectly clear: We can deny ourselves and follow Jesus, in the process gaining life, or we can make compromises that will result in moral and spiritual death.

### **No Regrets** **Mark 8:38**

*<sup>38</sup>Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."*

Jesus recognized that his followers would sometimes face pressure and temptation to deny their faith, and he warned of serious consequences: Our attitudes toward Jesus now determine his attitude toward us later.

Those who look upon his suffering, crucifixion and death with shame, and those who regret what he taught, can expect that he will be ashamed of them.

### **Self-Denial Today**

For nearly two years, filmmaker Diana Frank followed Tiffany Irene McCullough as a novice in a Catholic convent near St. Louis. McCullough was profiled by Bob Abernethy on the PBS program “Religion & Ethics Newsweekly.”

Her decision to become a nun was neither easy nor something to which she had aspired. She and her family struggled with the idea that entering the convent was like throwing away her life.

“I didn’t want to be a nun,” she said. “I mean, I had so many other things I wanted to be. I wanted to get married. I wanted to have kids. I wanted to be a normal person. You know, what everyone else does—what all my friends are doing: going to school, and having a career, and all that kind of stuff.”

Still, she said, she wanted to make a difference in the world. She felt a tug toward this particular faith commitment. “I knew it was something in me. You know, I just knew it was God saying, ‘I want this.’”

In a nutshell, that is what discipleship’s self-denial is all about: what God wants, as opposed to what we want. For most of us, it will not mean the way of the convent. But it will mean that same level of commitment: whatever God wants.

It’s not so much a matter of denying ourselves weekly trips to the mall or expensive vacations or lavish meals, although we may curtail such habits once we totally commit. It really is, as Tiffany McCullough said, being aware of God’s desires and placing those ahead of our own. In that process, we discover that self-gratification is incompatible with genuine discipleship.

*Written by Jan Turrentine, managing editor, Acacia Resources, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.*

## Serving Others

**Mark 9:33-37**

**Theme: Discipleship includes serving others.**

### Introduction

Among our family heirlooms is a photograph taken at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Pictured are my paternal grandmother, her siblings and her father and mother. The picture was taken at a funeral, and we believe it was her father’s funeral. But how could it have been taken at his funeral if he is in the picture? Well, family folklore has it that his picture was superimposed onto his family’s funeral portrait!

The whole family is dressed up in their best church/funeral clothes—black with white lace. They were pretty poor, living in the wrong area of town, and often getting up to no good. My grandmother, Liza Jane Boyce, left school at the age of ten and went into “service.” Fortunately for her, she was taken on by a Baptist deacon and his family and soon changed her allegiance to the Baptist church.

One of her brothers, Cliff Boyce, turned out to be quite a rascal and was often in trouble with the police. One day, on hearing that William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, was coming to town, he took his gang along to break up the meeting. However, he was converted on the spot and subsequently went on to a life of servanthood as a Salvation Army evangelist in England, Wales and Scotland.

Great Uncle Cliff's life, on hearing the gospel message, had been totally turned upside down. His dreams of increased criminal activity stopped, and his life as a servant of Christ began. He was cut out for life as a Salvation Army officer, as he had experienced the low life of violence and alcoholism, and so could empathize with "the least of these" (Matt 25:40) he met "on the way" (Mk 9:34).

It was on those same streets in East London where Booth had first started his ministry that my own life was turned upside down. As a tax collector, I had taken a debtor to court. In came the most decrepit man you have ever seen. Alcoholism had overtaken his life, and he told the court that all his money, furniture and food were gone. The judge adjourned the case and asked me to speak with the debtor. This I did, and contrary to good tax collecting procedures, I took him to his home, verified the situation and sought help for his wife and children, and for him in a detox unit.

That night I knew that God had turned my life upside down and was calling me into full-time service as a Christian worker—caring for those on the underside of life.

How has God spoken to you? Is God calling you to a life of serving others?

## **The Biblical Witness**

### **Arguing Again**

#### **Mark 9:33**

*<sup>33</sup>Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?"*

Jesus' disciples were with him on a tour of Galilee. They had experienced the mystical transfiguration, seen a mi-

raculous healing of a young man and heard Jesus explain to them once again that he was to die and, yet, would live again. And they just didn't get it!

Those closest to him then didn't get it, and many today still do not get it. Instead we spend our time debating and arguing on irrelevances. We want positions of greatness for our own benefit. Leaders ignore the fact that they are put in place to serve and often act like a spoiled celebrity crying out, "I am the greatest!"

As he did at other times following conversation about his suffering, death and resurrection, Jesus would take this opportunity to teach his followers about the real meaning of discipleship. But he first had to get at a lingering problem—their selfish ambition. Note that Jesus did not challenge them until they were inside the house.

You can imagine that after all that had happened, quite a crowd had surely gathered around and probably many people had heard the disciples' arguments. However, Jesus waited until they were in the privacy of the house before asking them what they were arguing about.

We can learn something here about how to conduct ourselves. We can hold back and learn to choose carefully what we say and how and when we say it so as not to cause a detriment to God's kingdom. Too many of our arguments as Christians today take place not in private but are aired through the media in sound bites, based on scant attention to the truth.

### **On the Way**

#### **Mark 9:34**

*<sup>34</sup>But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.*

The disciples obviously realized that their argument was quite inappropriate, because they had no response to Jesus' question. Though "they were silent," they spoke volumes.

When Jesus and his disciples traveled, their trips were much different from the trips we take today. Less luggage to carry, no traffic jams to delay them, no CD/DVD players to listen to and watch as they traveled along, and no privacy of a vehicle in which to chat with friends. It really was the open road!

They no doubt had regular times of meaningful discussion and interaction, trying to come to terms with all they were experiencing. Walking as they did from place to place gave them plenty of opportunities to piece together everything they were learning as Jesus' followers. But on this occasion, they were way out of line, and they knew it.

An old Scottish saying when people leave each other goes, "I'll see you on the way," or "I'll see you along the way." This is a beautiful way of emphasizing that life in itself is a journey, and that when departing from each other, we do not close down a relationship. While we may not know where God is taking us, we pray that our paths will cross again, and we will see each other along the way.

God has set us out "on the way" of life, and we need to be unfettered for the journey. We need to be able to jettison much of our baggage and be with people along the way, serving them, allowing them to turn our lives upside down. Arguing about "who is the greatest" prevents us from serving as Jesus did.

The argument over who is the greatest is nothing new. Now in the days of terrorism, chemical threats and accusations

of weapons of mass destruction, individuals, countries and leaders still demand to be recognized as great because of the weapons they control.

Small and poor countries are encouraged to go into debt and charged with impossible repayments. Despite valiant efforts, they remain poor.

In many countries, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has become devastating. The people of sub-Saharan Africa lack the resources to purchase medications and sustain health care facilities. Patients die and leave behind children who must care for themselves and younger siblings; often 10-year-old children act as heads of household. And we argue over "who is the greatest."

"Who is the greatest" blinds us to the needs of others, keeping us from answering God's call to us to serve "the least of these."

## **An Upside-Down World**

### **Mark 9:35**

*<sup>35</sup>He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."*

"The world wants the wealth to live in state, but you showed a new way to be great; like a servant you came and if we do the same we'll be turning the world upside down."

Patrick Appleford wrote the words of "O Lord All the World Belongs to You," a hymn popular in England in the 1970s. Wisely, he ended each verse with the words "turning the world upside down."

Jesus turned the world upside down by telling his disciples that "whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." It was a gravity-defying statement, and the

disciples were surely puzzled. Jesus' assertion turned all logic upside down.

What a difference we could make in God's world if we really explored how we in our lives and through our churches and mission agencies could turn logic upside down. Maybe we would start spending more of our church budgets outside than in. Our over-emphasis on our "journey inward" could be replaced by a greater prominence on the "journey outward."

### **A Child in Whose Name?**

#### **Mark 9:36-37**

<sup>36</sup>*Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup>"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."*

We cannot really understand or appreciate the full impact Jesus' action had on his disciples when he "took a little child ... in his arms" (v 36) because our culture values children so differently. At that point in history, children were essentially invisible. They were given little consideration in terms of personhood, and they certainly had no status.

Because Jesus, a teacher, had gathered a group of men together and was teaching them, no children should even have been within eyesight or earshot. But somehow, at least one was, and Jesus took this child into his arms.

What he said was equally startling. It was again a message that turned the disciples' thinking upside down. Their argument had been about who was the greatest. To show them how they could be great, Jesus used the most "insignificant" of all—a child.

The truly great ones in God's kingdom, Jesus said, are completely unconcerned about their own place or status and are willing to serve the least important. Further, he said, when we display concern and care for a child, we do so for him.

A child—about the farthest thing from Jesus or God that the disciples could imagine—was the very person Jesus chose to represent him. What a concept!

I wonder which child Jesus would pick up today?

Children in the wealthy third of the world are subjected to consumerism, ethical and moral challenges, educational pressures and varying family situations.

In much of the two-thirds world, 6-year-old children are sent out to work, exploited by poor pay and horrendous, hazardous working conditions.

In war-torn countries, children have been forced to become soldiers, expected to mutilate and kill any who stand in the way of their leader.

In Central Europe, young girls are lured into prostitution with the promise of a job, and then they are sold and passed on from country to country.

Who of us can see a child laborer, a child soldier or a child prostitute as greater than us?

Who of us would welcome such a child in his name?

### **Servanthood Today**

How revolutionary can you get? Author Tony Campolo has often said that the trouble with most Christians is that they

argue about the interpretation of God's word, and then do nothing about it anyway.

Mark 9:33-37 should contain a disclaimer: "Reading these verses could seriously change your life!" They will, if we heed them, turn our lives upside down in service. Remember, we are called to serve in a world that looks very different from God's perspective than from ours. We are called to a life of Christian discipleship and servanthood.

Some years ago, I was in Singapore attending a meeting of the Baptist World Alliance. Taking a taxi ride from the hotel to the meeting place, I struck up quite a conversation with the driver. That's not too difficult, as taxi drivers around the world are known for their conversations. This guy made conversation easy for me. He wanted to know what I was doing there, and upon finding out that I was a Christian, he began to pepper me with all kinds of questions.

*This is Christian witness made simple!* I thought. This guy was really keen to find out all he could about Christianity. I asked him if he ever went to church, and he said no. He was a Muslim. I asked him if he drove taxis as a full-time job, and he said yes, at night. In the daytime, he was a Muslim missionary.

His mission was to find homes for young former Christians who had been converted to Islam and were thrown out of their homes by their parents. "What do you do with Muslims who become Christian?" he asked. "Do you care for them like we care for young converts to Islam?"

This Muslim missionary taught me an important lesson, just as Jesus tried to show his disciples that it did not matter who was the greatest. What matters is that "whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and

whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me" (v 37).

What do you do when God challenges you, through the life, work and witness of someone you have met: an alcoholic debtor or a Muslim missionary, a child or a teenage prostitute, a taxi driver or a store clerk? Who have you met "on the way"?

God has called each of us to turn our world upside down.

I'll see you along the way!

*Written by Paul Montacute, a British citizen and director: Baptist World Aid, Baptist World Alliance, Falls Church, Va.*

## The Marriage Test

**Mark 10:2-12**

**Theme: Discipleship affects the marriage relationship.**

### Introduction

*The Dallas Morning News* recently reported a growing trend among married couples. Just as first-time home buyers often refer to their new homes as “starter homes,” sociologists have identified “starter marriages.” These occur when a man and woman fall in love during or after college, marry and then divorce after six months to three years, usually after the initial passions have faded.

In my pastoral ministry, I have noticed a recent upswing in believers who remarry after a short-lived first marriage. Some of these have come to terms with “who they really are” and wonder if their short-term spouse fits with this new picture. Data from the Barna research group seems to confirm what pastoral counselors and others have noticed anecdotally. The divorce rate among those who identify themselves as Christians is higher (27%) than among those who say they are not believers (24%).

Marriages can more closely resemble a maze than a highway through the journey of life. Too often, marriages survive long after both spouses have lost their desire to thrive.

Mark 10 addresses the issues of no-fault divorce in the context of God’s view of the marital relationship. In this

passage, Jesus’ answers to the marriage test are clear and forthcoming to Pharisees and disciples struggling with the realities of relationships.

### The Biblical Witness

#### The Riddle: Is “No-Fault” Divorce Possible?

**Mark 10:2-4**

*<sup>2</sup>Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” <sup>3</sup>He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” <sup>4</sup>They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.”*

In this passage, the Pharisees, the religious leadership of Jesus’ day, approached him with a question regarding marriage that was designed to trap him on two fronts. If he answered differently than the Mosaic law described, they could accuse him of transgressing their high standards. On the other hand, if Jesus answered incorrectly, he risked an encounter with the well-known adulterer and Roman tetrarch Herod Antipas.

John the Baptist’s troubles certainly overshadow this dialogue (Mk 6:14-29). The Pharisees had close ties with the Herodians, and their question was likely a veiled attempt to tattle on Jesus to the Roman magistrates.

The dialogue implies several things about understandings of the marriage contract at that time:

- Marriage was a business transaction more than a loving commitment between a man and a woman. Jewish customs called for an exchange of money and property between the families of brides and grooms. Marriages were often arranged based on public perception or financial benefit to the father of the bride.

- Moses allowed divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. The Pharisees used the rule to try to justify the practice of no-fault divorce initiated by men in their society. Women could be divorced for various reasons; even some rabbinic texts suggested that men could sever the relationship over burned food. Even though a few cases of no-fault divorce existed that were initiated by wives, husbands were generally in control of the marriage. If a woman was divorced, she would usually be forced to return to her family of origin, or even worse, live life on her own, perhaps never to marry again. As Jesus explained, the Pharisees only required a written certificate.

- Greco-Roman listeners were likely aware of several no-fault divorces without a certificate. Divorce could end by separation on the part of either party. In their culture, women more frequently opted out of marriage.

The concerns of Mark's Greco-Roman audience would have been many. What was Jesus' position on divorce? How do people handle relationships between believers and non-believers? What should believers do who are no longer married to spouses who committed actions necessitating an end to the relationship?

### **The Solution: Creation Changes Everything Mark 10:5-9**

*<sup>5</sup>But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. <sup>6</sup>But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.'  
<sup>7</sup>'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, <sup>8</sup>and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. <sup>9</sup>Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."*

In order to solve the Pharisees' riddle, Jesus pointed to the creation story from the book of Genesis. It is also associ-

ated with Moses, and for Jesus, has priority over the legal elements of marriage transactions.

The creation story changes the relationships between men and women. Those who are brought together in the holy covenant of marriage do not merely choose to come together. Even though society used marriages like a business transaction, Jesus said that God intends for this to be a spiritual agreement. God brings people together; men, especially, cannot end the relationship for just any reason they desire. For that matter, neither can women. Both husband and wife have equal rights and responsibilities in the marital vows. Both are now one flesh, equal in the sight of God, and joined under God's leadership.

Such an interpretation of the creation story validated the women followers of Jesus. He understood that they could not so easily be written off in the minds of the male-dominated society but now could see themselves as people of worth in the sight of God. With this freedom came responsibility, especially to women in the larger Greco-Roman world who were already tempted to walk out and leave behind their non-believer husbands. Jesus encouraged them to stick it out and remain faithful.

### **The Lesson: "No Fault" Divorce Has Consequences Mark 10:10-12**

*<sup>10</sup>Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. <sup>11</sup>He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; <sup>12</sup>and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."*

Away from the press of the crowd, Jesus took his disciples aside. Because the dialogue with the Pharisees was about no-fault divorces, he explained the consequences of such

actions. The issue “no-fault” was implied when he said, “Whoever divorces his wife (for no reason whatsoever) and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband (for no reason whatsoever) and marries another, she commits adultery.”

Such an interpretation fits with Jesus’ other statements in Matthew, when he clarified that egregious actions by one spouse against another is just cause for severing the ties. A certificate could not be the determining factor. Long-term separation that leads to divorce, a common practice among Greco-Roman households, could not be permitted either. Those who simply walk out face the consequences of sinful actions.

### **Marriage Today**

As professor David Garland notes, Mark’s Gospel does not provide much guidance to pastoral counselors in dealing with the victims or the instigators of divorce. Other scriptures address a holistic approach to healing, forgiveness and redemption (Lk 10:27; 15:1-31; 17:3-4).

In Mark, the guidelines for a disciple are clear. Marriages will be tested. By joining with Jesus’ community, marital values are redefined just like everything else. The first priority is to Jesus and his teachings (Mk 3:31-34). Believers are now part of a new faith family. Earthly relationships are lived under Christ’s lordship. Marriages are divine institutions that require faithfulness to one another and willingness to persevere through difficulties. “Finding oneself” or “wanting to go in a new direction” are invalid reasons for divorce as believers. Men should especially be reminded that women are not considered inferior in the faith family of Jesus. God created women equally in the divine image.

Believers who emphasize moral adherence to the law without considering matters of the heart ignore the more difficult issues that Jesus described. Jesus knew that it would be easy for the Pharisees to abide by the law. Adultery was shunned by society; punishment was swift and severe. People found it more difficult to establish good, healthy communication, determination and respect between spouses.

Modern believers who emphasize adolescent programs on sexual morality and purity should also include instruction in emotional stability, fidelity and service to members of the opposite sex. Christian couples who have done their best as single adults to avoid sexual temptation but fail to pay attention to other aspects of relationships may discover their marriage sputtering as they return from the honeymoon and find real life waiting.

Consider three Christian couples who faced the marriage test at the same time. Fred and Susan both came from Christian homes and were actively involved in their respective youth groups. They pledged to remain pure until they married, and both kept their vows to God. They met at a Baptist university, dated throughout their college years and were married soon thereafter in a Christian ceremony in front of church family and friends who supported them.

At the same time Fred and Susan were getting engaged, Sally and Robert met. They had both lost spouses to difficult illnesses and were seeking companionship in their senior adult years. Both attended church; both were active leaders in their congregations and had been faithful to their previous spouses. One day, they met for breakfast and knew immediately that they were meant to be together. They did not wait very long to be married.

The third couple, Sam and Margaret, met years ago. Both were Christians, but neither was actively involved in church. Both shared some Christian values but knew they could have lived more faithfully. They met at a military party, fell in love quickly, and soon Margaret was pregnant. They intended to marry one day, but admittedly, the pregnancy happened too soon. The young couple, however, weighed their options, sought counsel and decided to be married.

All three couples experienced tests and difficulties in their marriages. The first two found them soon after the marital vows were spoken. The third faced difficulties from the very beginning. All had the seeds of success and failure planted in their lives before they ever walked the aisle. Only one of them has passed the marriage test so far.

The first two ended in divorce because of problems in communication. Even though their lives prior to marriage had followed the letter of the law, they were unprepared to make the kind of faithful commitment that was necessary to work through issues and address deep-rooted problems. The third, however, overcame the initial hurdles. They are still married because they intentionally worked to overcome barriers and obstacles together.

Jesus knew that all marriages would be tested. Couples pass the test by viewing their relationship as a divine creation of God, worthy of intentionality and devotion to one another.

*Written by Bill Shiell, senior pastor, Southland Baptist Church, San Angelo, Texas.*

## Living Justly

**Mark 10:17-22**

**Theme: Discipleship may make wealthy Christians uncomfortable, especially if they value possessions more than following Jesus faithfully.**

### Introduction

We probably don't recognize the name Pietro de Bernardone, but we know the legacy of his son. Pietro was a wealthy, 12<sup>th</sup>-century Italian cloth merchant who also owned a lot of land. Like many fathers, he wanted his son to join the family business.

As a young man, the son, known as Francis, was regarded as worldly, proud and vain, although he was also kind and generous toward the poor. Eventually, though, he decided that he was too concerned with wealth and status. One day, the story goes, he took some fabric from the family's shop and sold it, giving the money he received to the poor.

His father was displeased then, but likely furious when several weeks later he discovered that Francis was begging for food in the streets of their town of Assisi, bringing disgrace upon the family. Pietro punished Francis by locking him in a dark cellar, giving him only bread and water to eat, hoping that he would come to his senses.

When he didn't, Pietro took him to the bishop, who told him that it had been wrong for him to steal, even though it was from his family and even though it was to help the poor. He

told Francis to return what he had taken from his family's shop.

Instead, Francis removed his clothes and placed them at his father's feet, signifying that he was abandoning his right to possessions, wealth and a privileged life. He was not so much turning his back on his father as he was on the lifestyle his father represented.

From that point on, Francis of Assisi lived simply so that he could focus solely on Christ and follow him. For him, it meant serving the sick, poor, outcasts and other marginalized people of society. That was what discipleship required of him, and that was how he lived justly.

The example of Francis of Assisi stands in stark contrast to the messages of our culture that tell us to acquire, consume and hoard all we can. Even churches obsess over budgets that often do more for those inside the walls than those on the outside.

What are we to make of Jesus' words to a wealthy man: "...go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Mk 10:21)?

Our commitment to true discipleship demands that we determine what this means for us. Our conclusions determine how then we shall live.

## **The Biblical Witness**

Following the amazing events surrounding the Transfiguration (Mk 9:2-13), Jesus, accompanied by his disciples and ever-growing crowds, continued to travel, heal and speak. Each encounter presented teachable moments, including

one that Jesus' disciples, with their limited understanding, tried to prevent.

"People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them" (10:13). Jesus was "indignant" (v 14) when he saw this, saying, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (vv 14-15).

Children, without power and status in this culture, had nothing of and on their own. Their entire existence, if they survived (as many as half did not reach the age of 5), depended upon the care they received from others. Their only choice was to trust that parents and other family members would meet their needs.

Jesus recognized this quality as not only admirable but imperative for true discipleship. Their complete poverty and dependence stands in marked contrast to the self-sufficiency of the man Jesus encountered next.

## **An Eager Learner Mark 10:17-18**

*<sup>17</sup>As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" <sup>18</sup>Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.*

Each of the Synoptic Gospels records an encounter between Jesus and a man who inquired about eternal life, and each includes distinct facts. From Matthew's account (Matt 19:16-22), we learn that he was young; Luke's account notes that he was a ruler (Lk 18:18-24). Mark's record, always pushing forward, notes simply that "a man ran up and knelt before" Jesus as he was again on the move.

Our tendency as we read this passage is to skip over the opening words of verse 17: “As he was setting out on a journey.” We tend to live our lives the same way. We are busy; we are eager to get on our way. Interruptions slow us down, distract us and keep us, we think, from our primary tasks.

“Interruptions” comprised much of Jesus’ ministry and resulted in some of his most touching personal encounters. Even though here he was obviously on his way somewhere else, he was neither too busy nor too absorbed in his other concerns to stop and talk with a man who was so intent on talking with him that he “ran” to meet him.

Both what the man did and what he said were somewhat unusual. He “knelt” before Jesus, which was not a customary thing to do, particularly if he was, as Luke’s account noted, a ruler. In an apparent gesture of humility and reverence, this man expressed his eagerness to learn from Jesus.

He then addressed Jesus as “Good Teacher,” something Mark’s readers would have understood to mean that he believed Jesus was the Son of God and therefore like God—morally good. Perhaps that is why Jesus responded to him the way he did: “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone” (v 18).

Each of the Synoptic Gospels records Jesus as replying this way, and none records any answer from the man. Jesus may have been affirming the man’s address of him, in effect, saying, “By calling me good, you are saying that you believe I am God’s Son.”

Jesus immediately moved toward answering the man’s question: “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (v 17).

Unlike many religious people who approached Jesus with questions meant to trap him, this man’s question seemed sincere. He went to the right source for help with something of eternal significance—the thing that mattered most.

## Head Knowledge

### Mark 10:19

*<sup>19</sup>You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’”*

Whether or not more conversation took place between Jesus and the man than is recorded here, Jesus seemed to know enough about him to engage him at just the right points and tailor his reply to meet the man’s needs. He knew that the man was religiously observant. Still, Jesus listed for him the last six commandments—those that deal with relationships to others—though in a different order and with one slight variation.

The commandments in Hebrew scripture appear as “Honor your father and your mother; ... You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; ...” (Ex 20:12a; 13-17a).

Jesus may have intentionally changed the order in which he restated the commandments to stress one or more of them. The more noticeable element of his restatement is his use of “defraud,” in place of the commandment about covetousness. Those who were wealthy had many opportunities to take advantage of those who were poor and lacked status.

Then as now, wealth translated into power and control, and Jesus warned against abusing people through positions

and privilege that wealth affords. It's more than just observing the letter of the law, Jesus said. It's about a complete change of heart.

### **Heart Transformation?**

#### **Mark 10:20-22**

*<sup>20</sup>He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." <sup>21</sup>Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." <sup>22</sup>When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.*

We can almost hear the disappointment in the man's voice. "I've done these things practically my entire life, but I'm still missing something deep inside. Surely there must be something else! Tell me what I need to do!"

He no doubt thought his spiritual condition was pretty good, compared with that of so many others. "I can't be far from the kingdom of God, can I? After all, I've followed the letter of the Law!"

Jesus looked at him with love and compassion, likely touched by the man's sincerity. He truly seemed to desire some type of deeper faith experience, and he had come to the one who could help where no one and nothing else could.

"You lack one thing," Jesus told him (v 21), yet he did not tell him what that one thing was. He did, however, tell him what he needed to do. Jesus knew that in that process, he would discover the one thing he lacked.

The thing that stood in this man's way, and ours, is whatever we are unwilling to give up. In order to follow him and enter the kingdom of heaven, Jesus said, we must be

willing to rid ourselves of anything and everything that would hold us back from complete commitment to him.

It also means relinquishing everything that gives us power and status over others. Only when we do this, Jesus said, will we inherit the kingdom of God. "You will have treasure in heaven," Jesus told the man, contrasting the fleeting nature and false security of wealth with the things God thinks are important.

Jesus' reply both "shocked" and grieved the man, "for he had many possessions" (v 22). He got an answer to his question, but it was not what he wanted to hear. The real question for him was, "Do I really trust Jesus enough to give up everything?"

His answer, at least on that day, was no. He could not acquire eternal life on his own terms, and Jesus' demands were too great. It's all or nothing, Jesus said.

Hearing that, he left Jesus' presence a most troubled and unhappy man. Jesus' discipleship requirements were difficult to follow in a culture that closely related wealth and religion and regarded prosperity as a sign of God's blessings. They are likewise difficult for many people to follow today. What we have—and consequently what we are unwilling to give up—can easily stand in the way of our discipleship.

### **Living Justly Today**

We cannot help but read this story through our own socio-economic lenses. Those who struggle financially, barely get by or simply choose to live on less may feel a certain affirmation for their circumstances. Those who are wealthy may be troubled by this story and wonder what it means for them and their faith.

The fact is that this story speaks to everyone, regardless of financial circumstances. Jesus was actually speaking about so much more than just money and possessions. He told a religiously observant man who happened to be wealthy that discipleship required radical followship, making Jesus' way the priority. For this man, wealth stood in the way. For us, it may be wealth, or it may be something else.

Like the man in this story, we must come face to face with "the one thing we lack." We must determine what blocks our total commitment to Christian discipleship and then decide if we are willing to give it up. If we are honest, we will admit that money and things quite possibly do get in our way.

External trappings can represent success, "the good life," safety and security for us, just as they no doubt did for this man. Our consumer culture conditions us to believe that we regularly need more and newer possessions in order to be happy and successful and prove our worth to others. When we constantly acquire and consume more than we need, however, we can both directly and indirectly prevent others from having things they need simply to survive.

Our carelessness and wastefulness of resources and possessions can likewise deprive others and even create suffering for them.

By giving up the hold that wealth, prestige and status have on us, we are free to develop relationships with the broader community that pursue justice for everyone.

Discipleship is all or nothing, Jesus said.

*Written by Jan Turrentine, managing editor, Acacia Resources, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.*

## True Worship

**Mark 11:15-19**

**Theme: Discipleship involves true worship.**

### Introduction

"You could smell him before you could see him," recalls William Willimon. "Just before service had begun, this man had shuffled into church. He looked as if he had come in from his home on the streets, which he had."

Ushers attempted to seat him toward the rear of the church, but the man insisted on being seated on the very front pew. As Willimon concluded the opening announcements, he asked if anyone else had any announcements. Someone did.

The ragamuffin on the first pew stood up, whirled around to face the congregation and loudly proclaimed, "The Lord is good, people! I have made mistakes; yes, I have. Took to drink. Lost everything. The Lord loves you! If he can love me, and he can, then he loves you." Thirty minutes later, the man concluded his announcement and sat down.

Willimon writes, "Our plans for the service were in shambles. My sermon had to be curtailed severely because of this unexpected testimony."

And yet, he wondered if this wild man shouting to his congregation about God's love might have been a messenger of God, perhaps even an angel. Although his speech and demeanor were an unwelcome intrusion on their traditional

order of service and their preferred choice of worshippers, maybe he was exactly the interruption the church needed. Just maybe this scruffy, unrestrained one on the outside of the church knew more about true worship than those on the inside.

The Gospel of Mark speaks to us as insiders who may have gradually lost sight of the real nature of worship, ones who have simply closed the doors of our hearts (and sometimes our churches) to God's presence and to worshippers different from ourselves.

Mark also painfully asserts that genuine worship can be corrupted by mercenary concerns. Probably at some point we all fall prey to marketing our church to a certain demographic, striving to support her buildings and programs by keeping big donors happy, avoiding possible backlash from racial, social and economic diversities, or more warmly welcoming new members who are well-to-do than those who may not be able to give as lavishly.

Mark calls each of us to examine our reasons for worship. Do we worship merely out of dry habit? Or out of enthusiasm and a sense of the Holy Other? And, are our intentions for worship in line with God's intentions? Are we a house of prayer for all people? Or a house of prayer for all people just like us?

## **The Biblical Witness**

### **Sacred, Not Secular**

#### **Mark 11:15-16**

*<sup>15</sup>Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those*

*who sold doves; <sup>16</sup>and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.*

Using the literary technique of intercalation, Mark sandwiches the story of the cleansing of the temple between the two parts of the story of the fig tree (Mk 11:12-14 and 11:20-25), all of which reflect the same theme. On the heels of Jesus' curse of the barren fig tree, a symbol of Israel (vv 12-14), Mark offers a second picture of Jesus' disgust at Israel's religious failure. The temple at Jerusalem, like the fig tree, appeared to thrive. Yet it, too, was fruitless. Jesus acted to turn Israel from her barren, secular passion to her productive, sacred intent.

The Israelites believed they could truly worship God only in Jerusalem. Consider Luke 1-2 with Zechariah, Simeon and Anna as well as Jesus' family who journeyed to Jerusalem as prime examples of the priority of the temple. The high priest and his aides held authority over the temple and its revenues. As Sadducees, they lived handsomely but never generously or kindly. (According to Josephus, following Jesus' death the leaders seized all the tithes for themselves and left the poorer priests to starve.)

Sadducees made provisions for the Jews to pay the annual temple tax, a tax commanded in Exodus 30:13-16. Moneychangers located throughout the Court of the Gentiles, a wide enclosure around the temple, exchanged unacceptable coins for acceptable ones. Coins minted in Tyre, the closest equivalent to the old Hebrew shekel, were acceptable. But any coins bearing the image of pagan deities and/or the emperor (e.g., Caesar) were unacceptable and in violation of the commandment against making any graven image.

Proper sacrifices and offerings in numerous animal stalls further clogged the Court, along with wine, oil and salt.

Merchants charged exorbitant prices, especially for tiny doves required for the purification of women, the cleansing of lepers and the offering of the poor. One scholar described the Court of the Gentiles as “an oriental bazaar and cattle mart.” Jesus, appalled by the gross insensitivity to the area designated for foreigners to worship and pray, cleared the Court of the Gentiles. The temple was to be God’s house, a sacred house of worship, a sanctuary wide open to Gentiles and Jews alike.

Jesus also demonstrated that He alone held authority over the temple, not the Sadducees. By refusing to allow people to carry anything through that section of the temple, others saw Him with the power to determine any activity there (Remember he had already asserted his authority over the Sabbath; see Mk 2:28.). And that activity would be sacred, not secular.

### **Prayer, Not Profit**

#### **Mark 11:17**

*<sup>17</sup>He was teaching and saying, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers.”*

Jesus warranted his drastic measures by quoting Isaiah’s admonition in Isaiah 56:7, “...for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” Later in Mark 11:24-25 the disciples would discover the “house of prayer” was not the only place where prayers could be said and heard.

When Jesus overturned the tables, he also overturned the established principle that the temple was restricted entirely to Jews. The temple was now for all people. Although the designation of the temple as a house of prayer is cited throughout the Old Testament, the phrase “for all the nations (peoples)” is unique to Isaiah 56:7 and Mark 11:17. And the word “nations” was the same word as “Gentiles.”

Jesus’ statement created a ripple effect, overwhelming Gentiles all the way to Rome. At last, they felt God’s full embrace of them as God’s people, too; they were no longer second-class worshippers. From now on, they would be able to celebrate the Feast of the Passover, the commemoration of God’s redemption.

Jesus’ words held additional significance: Not only would the temple be a place of prayer for all peoples, but it would reflect the attitude that people had nothing to achieve or offer God, dispelling the principle of legalism. Various levels of sacrifices quickly faded in light of true worship. The temple ground was level, the worshippers equal, regardless of race, socio-economic status or culture.

Knowing God’s intentions for the temple had been radically altered throughout the years by priestly authorities, Jesus repeated Jeremiah’s judgment on Israel: “Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?” (Jer 7:11). He rebuked Israel, saying they had done it again, engaging in false worship, using religious observances to cover up sinful practices and presuming God would protect the temple from destruction.

The phrase “den of robbers,” translated the same way in both texts, was explosive. Israel had done far more than defile the temple by stealing from those who came to worship—they had stolen the house of the Lord for their own criminal hideout. Profit, not prayer, motivated their worship.

### **Grace, Not Law**

#### **Mark 11:18-19**

*<sup>18</sup>And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his*

*teaching. <sup>19</sup>And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.*

The chief priests and scribes clearly heard Jesus' teaching as a direct attack on them. They knew Jesus was not rejecting the Jewish people, but rather the temple leaders and supporters. Their reaction was akin to that in Mark 3:6 following Jesus' healing on the Sabbath—they sought to destroy him. But this time their coalition would make the fateful decision leading to Jesus' arrest and crucifixion.

The chief priests and scribes waited to respond. Jesus' unparalleled popularity meant they needed time to determine the best way to destroy him without creating a major rebellion among the people. Their fear only underscored the importance of Jesus' truth: the law that had given Israel exclusivity was crumbling. God could be approached by Gentiles, not Jews alone. Grace, not law, was the new beginning, a new beginning the priests abhorred. Jesus' efforts on behalf of the Gentiles quickly led to his ensuing death.

Mark's viewpoint on law and grace is repeated in Paul's understanding. Paul recognized the cross as a seminal moment, the end of the law and the beginning of grace offered to all people. Jesus' abrupt departure from Jerusalem following the cleansing of the temple may have further dramatized the separation of law from grace.

The following passage, Mark 11:20-25, depicts the fulfillment of Jesus' curse of the fig tree in light of his break with the religious leaders of Israel. The fig tree had withered from its roots up, just as the temple had withered from its dry roots of worship.

## **Worship Today**

Several years ago, a church hired a growth expert to boost their membership. The first exercise involved members walking out to the parking lot and then imagining they were entering the church on a Sunday morning for the first time. Amazed and stymied, they realized there was no way for people to know how to get into the church.

How would a visitor know where the main entrance was, or the church office, or the nursery or even the restrooms? Unconsciously they had constructed a church around themselves, the insiders. One in the group spoke up, "I personally don't care for a bunch of tasteless signs stuck all over the place. I think they detract from the beauty of the building."

The pastor later responded, "See? We were busy protecting the beauty and sanctity of our church, but in doing so, we were making the church less accessible to those on the outside." Like the chief priests and scribes, his church strived to maintain the status quo, to remain comfortable and in control. How could anyone on the outside physically (and perhaps emotionally and spiritually) ever come inside?

What about your church? Does a warm welcome greet anyone and everyone who enters? Or is there an invisible Court of Gentiles, a palpable sense that unless one looks and lives the way the majority of the congregation looks and lives, the welcome mat is quietly folded up?

Are all members able to speak up, or are some kept at arm's length because they might offend more influential members?

Is your church missions-minded or self-serving?

Does confidence in God's will permeate your church or a jealous streak of other area churches?

Does anything keep your church from discovering her unique God-given purpose?

Perhaps the greatest question to ask about your church in light of Mark 11:15-19 is: "Do I sense the presence of God when I walk through the doors?" For where there is real worship, God's grace is abundant. Everyone is someone. And Christ is glorified.

In his prayer poem, "Heart, Hold Fast," Thomas H. Troeger invites us to true worship. Consider one verse as follows:

Church, bow low.

One faith know:

Center on Christ alone

On Christ alone

Christ alone.

Christ.

*Written by Ginny Bridges Ireland, freelance writer living near Winston-Salem, N.C.*

## Loving Neighbors

**Mark 12:28-34**

**Theme: Discipleship is about loving neighbors.**

### Introduction

David Watt is representative for Europe and the Middle East for Canadian Baptist Ministries, a Canadian Baptist denomination consisting of four Baptist conventions and unions across Canada. Throughout his travels, he has often witnessed the power of God's transforming love when faithful people take seriously the Great Commandment.

One of his stories concerns the Roma people, more commonly known as Gypsies, who are perhaps the most dispossessed and despised people group in Europe. Often treated with suspicion and discrimination, they are among the poorest of the poor. Watt relates a grace-filled story of Christian love of one's neighbors coming out of the country of Albania.

Members of the little Freedom Baptist Church in Tirana recently became aware that a small Roma boy in their city was extremely ill. His father, from a non-Christian background, had tried desperately but unsuccessfully to find help for his child, who eventually became paralyzed. Members of the church asked if they might be allowed to come to the hospital to pray for the child, which they were permitted to do. Wonderfully, the little boy recovered.

The church continued to minister to the family, enveloping them in unconditional love and acceptance. Eventually the

father and the mother came to faith in Jesus Christ. In the newfound joy of their faith, they in turn began to bring other Roma people into their church, which had so powerfully demonstrated a willingness to overcome centuries of ethnic animosity.

For the members of Freedom Baptist Church, loving God includes loving their neighbors.

## **The Biblical Witness**

We seem to have a propensity for rules and regulations. Obviously, a certain number of rules are necessary for us to live together in an orderly and civil manner, or we risk degenerating into chaos and even brutality. History reveals the devastating results when communities or nations suspend the basic rules of civil society.

When it comes to our faith lives, however, rules take on a more ambiguous tone. Throughout the record of Judaeo-Christian history, the Lord God continually spoke through human agents, notably the prophets, decrying the rigid observance of sacred rules and rituals without an accompanying compassion for one's fellow human beings.

Jesus Christ, God-become-human, embodied this biblical theme. One of the first recorded instances of Jesus' public ministry is his appearance in the synagogue of his hometown of Nazareth when he read a portion of Isaiah calling for redress for the poor, the captive, the blind and the oppressed (Lk 4:16ff).

## **The Question** **Mark 12:28**

<sup>28</sup>*One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?"*

Wherever and whenever he spoke, Jesus drew audiences of both the simple and the learned. In this account, a scribe approached Jesus with a question regarding rules, "Which of the commandments is the greatest?"

Scribes were professional people in the ancient world who not only could read and write (hence the designation of 'scribe') but who also could be trained in legal matters, functioning as clerks, legal counselors and judges. Well-trained scribes were acquainted with all kinds of law. In the New Testament, scribes are often associated with the Pharisees, who employed them; both are depicted in the Gospels as arguing with Jesus over the fine points of the law.

In contrast with the hostility and resistance of the religious leaders described earlier in this chapter, in this story we encounter a scribe who comes to Jesus with a simple question. Although we cannot deduce from the text whether the question was intended to trap Jesus as previous questions were, this one appears to be honest and straightforward. The scribe had obviously been impressed with Jesus' response to his previous challengers, acknowledging that "he answered them well."

Can we detect here a yearning to cut through the numerous and burdensome rules of Pharisaic Judaism to discover the heart and intent of faith?

## **The Priority of Love** **Mark 12:29-31**

<sup>29</sup> Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;’ <sup>30</sup>you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ <sup>31</sup>The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Jesus’ reply to the scribe’s earnest question contains no new or startling revelation. On the contrary, his response is a summation of the whole Law and the Prophets and a reminder of God’s consistent revelation. He answered the scribe by repeating the ancient Jewish confession—the *Shema*—“Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one,” followed by the call to love God completely and to love neighbor as self (Deut 6:4).

Once again, God in Christ reiterated God’s intention for humanity. It is at once both personal and communal. Jesus directed his answer to one individual—this was what God intended for him, the scribe. But Jesus used the ancient formula that was addressed to a people—this was what God intended for them, the whole people of God.

The essence of the commandment is a single-hearted devotion to the one God with all one’s being and an equally strong commitment to one’s neighbor. God’s principle demand is an attitude, a way of being and responding, that supersedes any other loyalty or tradition, even those that are based on religious devotion.

## **The Neighbor**

### **Mark 12:32-34**

<sup>32</sup>Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; <sup>33</sup>and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love

one’s neighbor as oneself,’ —this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”<sup>34</sup>When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

Although this story doesn’t depict neighbor as colorfully as the more familiar parable of The Good Samaritan, it too has a surprising twist. The scribe whom we meet here is an exception to the usual stereotype of scribe encountered in the Gospels. Instead of the hostile and confrontational questioner most often depicted, this scribe acknowledged the truth of what Jesus said; in turn, Jesus approved him. In both statements of approval, Mark used the same literary form: “seeing that he answered well,” referring to the scribe’s opinion of Jesus, and “seeing that he answered wisely,” referring to Jesus’ opinion of the scribe.

This encounter between the scribe and Jesus becomes in itself an illustration of the Great Commandment. By accepting the primacy of love of God and love of neighbor, Jesus and the scribe transcended political and religious hostility and therefore were able to treat each other as neighbor. According to The New Interpreter’s Bible, “The scribe recognizes Jesus as the Great Teacher; Jesus recognizes the scribe as a pilgrim moving toward the kingdom. Their lived out common devotion to God and neighbor silences the debate.”

## **Living the Great Commandment**

In two succinct sentences, Jesus reminded the scribe of what he surely had learned as a child in Temple school. It is the same lesson we first learn as young children in our Sunday schools. And yet, our dull heads and stony hearts need constant reminders of this lesson.

It appears to be a human trait that we find it so much easier to develop and follow rules and regulations than to grow loving hearts. While we can define and prescribe moral behavior, we can't mandate, legislate or enforce love.

In the scribe's acceptance of the truth of Jesus' teaching and his authority lies the challenge for us. As fellow pilgrims moving toward the kingdom, we can allow God's grace to transform our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh.

It certainly is not always easy to love others—especially the unlovable, those who are very different from us, those whom we have been conditioned to suspect. The strongest motivating factor for loving others flows out of gratitude for what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. Responding in grateful love to God's overwhelming love for us generates love for others. Love, not rules or religious observances, is to be the foundation for our relationship with God and with fellow human beings.

Loving our neighbor has the power to enrich our lives far beyond our own expectations. God has promised us, "If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday" (Isa 58:10).

Sociological research confirms what the people of God have been taught—namely, that when you care for your neighbor, you care for yourself. Writing in the *Washington Post*, columnist William Raspberry summarized the conclusions of a Harvard University study on the roots of inner-city crime, stating that "neighborliness—a willingness to help when help is needed and especially to look out for one another's children—has more to do with crime (or its relative absence) than income, race or family social status."

When we behave as neighbors should, the health of our whole communities, which includes ourselves, improves. As the Harvard study concluded, it is the quality of interpersonal relationships intersecting within the environment that determines behavioral, emotional and physical health. In Raspberry's words, "while government can impose order, only the community can establish peace."

God calls us to love our neighbor whatever she looks like, whatever he believes, however she behaves or wherever he lives. Our challenge is surely to determine how our own actions will reflect our fidelity to the Great Commandment. God has placed us in community for a purpose. How we live with each other depends in large measure on our response to God's call on our lives.

John Churchill, a member of the Baptist church in Port Williams, Nova Scotia, Canada, shares the following story. About thirty years ago, he heard an appeal at a denominational gathering for an Angolan refugee family who needed financial support to move to safety in South America. Ruefully, he says, he ignored the appeal at that time.

Years later, a family moved into the neighborhood, down the street from the Churchills. Joao Matwawana, the father of that family—the very family for whom the appeal had been made—had come to study at Acadia Divinity College. Matwawana subsequently earned a Master of Divinity degree and had an extraordinarily fruitful ministry in Atlantic Canada, including chaplaincy of a regional correctional institution and an interim ministry at the Port Williams United Baptist Church. As Churchill relates, "Joao became not only my neighbor but also my friend and my pastor."

Presently, Matwawana (appointed a Peace and Reconciliation Consultant for Canadian Baptist Ministries) and his

wife, Nora, are engaged in reconciliation ministry in their war-torn homeland of Angola, working in conjunction with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees.

Churchill, a professor of business at Acadia University, became part of a team traveling to Angola to offer their expertise in the reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts in that country. The next-door neighbor has truly become a global neighbor.

One way we prove our commitment to discipleship is through showing love to our neighbors, regardless of who they are or where they live.

*Written by Carol Anne Janzen, lecturer in Christian Education, Acadia Divinity College, Wolfville, Nova Scotia.*

## Authentic Generosity

**Mark 12:38-44**

**Theme: Discipleship may express itself authentically in acts of generosity.**

### Introduction

Our culture promotes what I often refer to as “goodwill giving.” We imagine ourselves to be exceptionally generous benefactors when we give only small amounts of what we have. It is not a bad thing but certainly not authentic generosity.

“Goodwill giving” involves going through our closets, bank accounts and lives looking for old, worn out items we will not miss. They are gifts that do not cost us anything and have the advantage of a tax break at the end of the year. We rarely give anything of real value, much less something we will notice when it is gone.

Although I’ve been unable to verify it, the following story purports to be true. It was approaching the holiday season when the phone rang at the Turkey Hotline. Someone had actually called the telephone number printed on the label of a frozen turkey for answers to questions about the proper preparation of the bird.

The caller asked the helpful operator, “I’ve had this turkey in the refrigerator for the past two years. Will it still taste good?” After hearing from the turkey expert that it probably was not a good idea to prepare it, the caller replied, “That’s okay. I’ll just give it to the church.”

Jesus teaches a radically different way of giving. It is not a giving out of excess but a giving of all. Discipleship demands an authentic generosity that is counterintuitive in a capitalistic system. We are taught to accumulate and own. Jesus teaches to give and trust.

For many Christians and consequently, the church, society's values of wealth and privilege have become our values. We cater to the rich and powerful while we rely on the faithful. We prefer to live off the scraps that fall from the table of the wealthy rather than ask for everything and risk getting nothing. Goodwill giving seems good enough for us, but is it good enough for God?

## The Biblical Witness

### Symptoms of a Deeper Problem

#### Mark 12:38-40

*<sup>38</sup>As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, <sup>39</sup>and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! <sup>40</sup>They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."*

On a recent trip to Brazil, I visited a class of students learning English. The town was small and isolated. It was not uncommon to see farmers coming into town on wagons pulled by horses. In many ways it was a journey back in time to another age.

After I introduced myself to the class of eager pupils and explained the mission project my group was doing, the teacher opened the floor for questions. Their object of interest was surprising given that we were the first English-

speaking visitors there since the 1970s. They wanted to know about Bill Gates.

The human condition both idolizes and envies those who have more than we do. It certainly was the issue that Jesus addressed as he taught in this passage. The scribes exulted in their positions and in the power and privilege these gave them. They dressed to set themselves apart. In the ancient world where most persons had subsistence lives, flowing robes were luxuries. One could not do menial labor in such clothing. The religious elite wanted to be easily recognized so they could enjoy the perks of their position. They were accustomed to being first in line and receiving the deference of their people.

Surprisingly, Jesus did not urge those who heard him to provide special privileges to religious leaders. Respect given to a person for their position is not Jesus' way. True disciples respect people for who they are as people created by God rather than for riches, position or titles.

Those who seek out positions of religious authority over others should receive particular examination, according to Jesus. The special privilege and position of leadership often attracted the social climbers rather than the spiritual.

This happens today as well. The word "parson" comes from the English tradition where the most educated member of the community was the minister. He was the most influential person in the community and became known as the chief "person" or "parson." Given this influence, the ministry became an attractive way to get ahead in society.

Since ministerial position can be a road to social authority, religious leaders ought to be under particular scrutiny to insure the purity of their motives.

Jesus' disciples, many of whom came from quite humble beginnings, were likely enamored with the spectacle upon entering Jerusalem. "Look at the buildings." "See those fine robes." "Listen to those flowery, educated prayers." They mistook ceremony and pomp for discipleship.

But the privilege of the few came at high cost to the rest of the faithful. Jesus pointed out that these celebrated religious parsons financed their high life on the backs of the faithful. They endlessly spoke of the need to give and then used the gifts for themselves.

Jesus condemned these hypocrites who used the religious generosity of the people to live extravagantly. The riches and perks they understood as rewards for their faithfulness were in reality symptoms of their lack of the transforming presence of God in their lives.

### **A Substantial Gift**

#### **Mark 12:41-42**

*<sup>41</sup>He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. <sup>42</sup>A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.*

Following his condemnation of the receivers of the offerings, Jesus went to the place where the offerings were given. The offering room for the temple was found in the court of women. This was the outer courtyard where anyone could go. The inner courts were only available to men. While the religious leaders would spend anyone's money, they would not let just anyone into the inner courts.

The religious leaders seemed to have taken classes in how to have a successful stewardship campaign. Not only did they place the offering collection so that all could give, they also designed collection boxes with trumpet-like openings.

This meant the more you gave, the louder the sound the offering made. Big givers made loud noises. Everyone could hear their "generosity."

The disciples, already overly impressed by the clothing and prayers of the religious leaders, more than likely stood with their mouths agape, awed by the big gifts that some brought. Truly, these were the righteous ones who deserved Jesus' praise, they thought to themselves.

Jesus' attention, however, was drawn to a widow who did her best to fade into the scenery. Slouching to the trumpet, her gift made two barely audible clings. Quickly, she faded back into the swirling mass of humanity from which she had come.

We know who the religious leaders will single out for praise. We know who those in line would identify as the big givers. We know who the disciples will admire. But who will Jesus identify as the significant giver?

### **Giving Everything**

#### **Mark 12:43-44**

*<sup>43</sup>Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. <sup>44</sup>For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."*

A powerful irony in this passage often goes unnoticed. Jesus condemned those who would receive the widow's offering. Jesus would next declare that the temple would soon be destroyed. Shouldn't Jesus have stopped the widow and told her to save her money? Surely he should have told her that she needed the money more than the

religious folks. Maybe Jesus should have even criticized her for funding this sham religion.

But Jesus commended the widow for her gift. His point is one that is typically missed during the annual stewardship campaign. When ministers ask for money, it is often with glossy photographs that demonstrate the need for the money and the good it can achieve. The approach operates on two levels—doing good and creating guilt. It appeals to our pride to feel as if the church needs us to accomplish its task. It works on our shame that if we fail to give, necessary good will go undone.

Jesus totally re-imagined the reason for giving. When we give, it is not to meet needs—as if God really needs anything. Our responsibility is to respond adequately to God’s gift of our lives. The only adequate response to that gift is everything. It did not matter that the institution was corrupt. The widow’s gift was pure and was praised.

We never hear again from the widow who gave everything. Her name is lost to us. When she gave everything, Jesus conspicuously did not promise her riches or blessings. He merely praised her for giving all to God who gave all to her. We can only speculate that her extravagance ended with her receiving what she most needed—grace.

## **Generosity Today**

I started giving my five-year-old an allowance to teach him the value of money. He would receive \$5 every two weeks. Shortly after he received his first allowance, he told me he wanted to take the bill with him to church. I, the ever-inquisitive parent, asked him why. One of his friends was collecting money for starving children and he wanted to give it to him.

Being the fine model of Christian generosity, I immediately counseled him to consider the gift. Five dollars was a lot of money. If he gave it away, it would be two weeks before he would get any more. Maybe he ought to consider only giving part of it. There might be something that he wanted to get for himself. My capitalist arguments trotted out, he looked at me strangely and told me he wanted to give *all* of it to feed the hungry children.

I then realized I had more in common with those flowing robe Pharisees than the widow whose gift I had often praised. Inside, I really questioned whether giving everything was the wisest choice.

My son could give like that widow because he trusted that his needs would be met. He was not worried about the five dollars because he knew that his next meal would be taken care of, a roof would be provided and clothes would be there. He was so confident that he did not need to provide for himself; he could afford to give everything.

I believe that my son’s gift exposed my own lack of faith. I could not be a generous giver because I lacked the trust that God would provide for me. In my calculus, I needed first to provide for myself and then give the leftovers.

The widow who stood at the offering box that day lived in complete and utter trust as she gave her two pennies. The challenge for us is to find the courage to join her and give our abundance, not our excess. Authentic generosity comes only from a deeply abiding faith.

*Written by Bob Fox, pastor, Faith Baptist Church, Georgetown, Ky.*

**Check out these other undated  
adult Bible study curricula from  
Acacia Resources!**



- *Courageous Churches*
- *Living Wisely, Living Well:  
Lessons from The Proverbs*
- *Doing the Will of God: Studies in  
Matthew*
- *Looking at Leadership: Lessons  
from 1 and 2 Kings*

To download a free sample lesson, visit our Web site at  
[www.ethicsdaily.com](http://www.ethicsdaily.com).