

## Mark 3:7-19, Jesus' Ministry Goes Viral

7 Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the sea, and a great crowd followed, from Galilee and Judea 8 and Jerusalem and Idumea and from beyond the Jordan and from around Tyre and Sidon. When the great crowd heard all that he was doing, they came to him. 9 And he told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, lest they crush him, 10 for he had healed many, so that all who had diseases pressed around him to touch him. 11 And whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God." 12 And he strictly ordered them not to make him known.

13 And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. 14 And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach 15 and have authority to cast out demons. 16 He appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); 17 James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); 18 Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Zealot, 19 and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

In our last lesson, we learned that God is good, that unregenerate men are wicked, and that conflict is the result. In this lesson we will learn, 1) Whatever the threats, dangers, obstacles, and disappointments, the Gospel will go forth as God gives opportunity; and 2) The church must preach the Gospel to all people brought into its orbit, leaving the business of conversion to the Holy Spirit.

### I. The Gospel Must Go Forth -

#### 1. In the Face of Threats and Opposition -

a. The Authorities - In the verses preceding our reading, the scribes and Pharisees progressed from observing Jesus, to challenging his teaching, to spying on him, to accusing and warning him, and finally, to plotting to execute him together with Herod's men. As the teachings of Jesus became known to them, the scribes and Pharisees began to see him as a threat to their authority and standing in the community, and increased their opposition accordingly. Matthew tells us that Jesus was aware of their scheming and withdrew from Capernaum. Rejected by the authorities in the synagogue, Jesus preached in the open air by the lakeshore, much as Whitfield and the Wesleys did when the Anglican church tried to quash their evangelism in the 1700s. "Seeing that his life is being threatened, Jesus sensibly departs. At a deeper level, this implies Jesus' withdrawing from the synagogue"<sup>(1)</sup> "Mark accentuates the fact that the soil of official Judaism has proven quite inhospitable, but despite the sternest opposition the good news is not hindered from travelling on its way with Jesus."<sup>(2)</sup>

Christ provokes opposition to this day. The church in China is a good example of this. Christianity in China prospered and expanded greatly after the death of Mao Zedong and the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. Then, about a year ago, the communist government decreed that all Christians in a certain province must take down any Christian religious displays from their walls in homes and in their place hang a picture of President Xi Jinping.<sup>(3)</sup> In many churches, government authorities removed and destroyed crosses and replaced them with a picture of Xi or a communist flag.<sup>(4)</sup> Modern Chinese communism is similar to the Roman government under which the Christian church was born in that people are allowed to worship whomever or whatever they wish as long as their highest allegiance is to the state. But Christ came to establish the Kingdom of God, which in the end destroys "every rule and every authority and power" that rivals it (1 Cor. 15:24). Truly Christ is the "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Rev. 19:16). Therefore he provokes opposition from all who do not acknowledge his crown rights and seek to establish their own authority. When the church is commanded by men in authority not to preach, it must respond, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

b. The Demons - Though Jesus defeated Satan in the wilderness (Mark 1:12-13), his minions continued to oppress the people of Galilee. True, the opposition offered in this passage seems somewhat passive, bowing in submission and crying aloud the divine Sonship of Jesus. But the demons must not be

understood as trying to assist Jesus in his mission. Their attempt to reveal his identity constitute an attempt to thwart his ministry. The time for the disclosure of Jesus' identity had not come, nor would that disclosure be made by the forces of darkness. Jesus must silence the enemy, and defeat and dispossess the forces of Satan, in order for the Gospel to go forward: "But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder his house" (Mark 3:27).

The church today does not need to conceal the true identity of Christ. Jesus was revealed to be the Son of God in suffering and death (Mark 15:39) and that is why we preach "Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23). But we continue to face demonic opposition in all its other forms. We must remember as we, the body of Christ, evangelize in our community that we "do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). Jesus has bestowed authority over them upon his church:

"The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" And he said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.

In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him'" (Luke 10:21-24).

In order to carry on the cosmic combat of Christ, we must be shod with spiritual armor and weaponry of his devising, and particularly we must be "praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication" (Eph. 6:18). There is a corporate prayer meeting which precedes the Adult Bible Study at 6:30. This meeting is vital to our success as a church.

2. In the Face of Unbelief - Some interpreters understand this text as an example Jesus' evangelistic success at this period of his ministry. The excitement, the thronging crowds pressing to be near Jesus, surely this is evidence of a great spiritual awakening! But the important question to consider is, why did the people come? Mark answers this question for us, even if passively. There is complete silence about preaching and response, because the people did not come for that.

The only other option, that there is no mention of preaching because Jesus didn't preach, does not rate. Jesus' miraculous acts always accompany his preaching. Even when the text is silent about the preaching of Jesus it must always be assumed. Several facts sustain this assumption:

a. Teaching Predominates in Jesus' Ministry - "Jesus is identified as 'teacher' in Mark more than any other title, and teaching describes his predominant activity"<sup>(5)</sup> If the number of times Jesus is addressed as "teacher" and the virtually synonymous term "rabbi" are combined, Jesus is identified sixteen times as a teacher in Mark's gospel (4:38; 5:35; 9:5; 9:17; 9:38; 10:17, 20; 10:35; 10:51; 11:21; 12:14, 19; 12:32; 13:1; 14:14; 14:45). When Jesus attracted crowds in Judea and beyond the Jordan in Mark 10:1 we are told, "again, as was his custom, he taught them".

b. Preaching is Noted by Jesus Himself as His Chief Purpose - In Mark 1:38, when Jesus was mobbed by the Capernaum crowd seeking miraculous healings, Jesus told his disciples, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out."

c. Miracles Confirm the Gospel Preached - "And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by accompanying signs" (Mark 16:20).

We will consider the crowds in more detail a little further on. For now, let us note that attracting large numbers of seekers should not be equated with successful evangelism. But let us also note that we should love those who respond even to the superficial benefits of religion and hold out the Gospel even to those who show little interest in it. "Crowds, then, are not to be sought as ends in themselves or used as measures of success; but neither are

they to be despised. Mark 3:7-12 suggests to leaders in the community of faith today that Christian words and deeds may have in them the ring of authority which attracts a crowd; yet if attracting a crowd is the goal, the word or deed is not authentically Christian. To the degree that we are like our Lord, we will respond to human needs as they are presented and at the same time maintain a kind of psychic distance from the crowd. Such distance frees us for genuine service by delivering us from false standards of success."<sup>(6)</sup>

## II. The Wind Blows Where it Wishes -

1. The Thronging Crowd - We have already noted that the crowd was not primarily drawn to Jesus in response to his preaching, but to his miraculous healings and exorcisms: "The crowd is not 'following' Jesus as disciples. Rather they are chasing after and tracking down Jesus. They seem to have a magical view of Jesus, believing if they just touch him they will be well"<sup>(7)</sup> Though the crowd as a whole seem self-absorbed in their felt needs, the Father drew some from among them to his Son in sincere faith and repentance. Note that some of the apostles were drawn from this same crowd to be appointed his witnesses and ambassadors (though one would betray him).

a. The Opportunity of Evangelism - The phrase "great crowd" is repeated to emphasize the great multitude of people who pursued Jesus. They came from all over, from Galilee and Judea in Palestine, and from the surrounding provinces in the north (Tyre and Sidon in Syrophenicia), the east (beyond Jordan in Perea), and the south (Idumea in the Negev), the west being bounded by the Mediterranean Sea. Most of these areas were Jewish, but Tyre and Sidon at least were Gentile. Billy Graham might have been envious at the size of the crowd assembled around Jesus. Mark does not mention it, but the people doubtless were treated to the teaching of Jesus, "as was his custom" (Mark 10:1), though it seems to have fallen on largely deaf ears.

b. The Danger of Evangelism - The crowd was unintentionally threatening and dangerous. Jesus saw the danger of being crushed by the crowds and commanded his disciples to ready a small boat, that he might let out onto the lake if necessary. The ESV describes the crowd as pressing around him, but the verb normally means "to fall upon."<sup>(8)</sup> Sometimes we must put our lives on the line for the Gospel, but we should not do so unnecessarily.

2. The Elect of God - We are not told of any remarkable results from this evangelistic campaign, but this should not be taken as evidence of a fruitless exercise. Taken in context, we should not read into this episode great success or great failure. The fact that the twelve are formally called and commissioned to preach in vv. 13-19 is evidence that the need arose for Jesus to train leaders and delegate authority to manage an expanding ministry. On the other hand, that the Parable of the Sower hovers near in the pages ahead warn us not to expect too much. There is great excitement, but how much root?

a. The Mountain - That Jesus ascends a mountain and calls to himself a new people is significant. The leadership of God's people Israel, formed into a nation of twelve confederated tribes on Mount Sinai, has rejected her Lord and King. Jesus will form a new people on a new mountain, with a nucleus of twelve hand-picked men. As Israel was elected out of the world, so is this new Israel was elected out of the crowd.

b. The Chosen Men - Included in this group are the two pairs of brothers we met previously (Simon and Andrew, James and John) and Matthew Levi. Names we encounter for the first time in Mark are Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, James Alphaeus, Thaddeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas. Here Mark looks forward to the cross, as he notes that Judas would betray Christ.

However meagre the results of our ministry may seem, we may be sure that if we are presenting faithfully the authentic message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, sticking to the method of word and sacrament prescribed by God, and implore the blessings of heaven upon our ministry, God will be empowering us and working through us to effectually call his elect. Ours is to faithfully preach and disciple; the results and the glory belong to God. "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth" (I Cor. 3:6). It is easy to get discouraged when there is but a trickle through the doors of the church every week. But the eye of faith should see that God accomplishing his through the body of Christ. "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (John 3:8).

## Notes

1. Flanigan, Patrick J. The Gospel of Mark Made Easy, p. 46.
2. Anderson, Hugh. The Gospel of Mark [The New Century Bible Commentary], p. 115.
3. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/november/china-christians-jesus-communist-president-xi-jinping-yugan.html>
4. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-09-25/crosses-burned-in-china-religion-crackdown/10301956>
5. Garland, David E. A Theology of Mark's Gospel, p. 158.
6. Williamson, Lamar Jr. Mark [Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching], p. 79.
7. Witherington, Ben III. The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary, p. 143.
8. Taylor, Vincent. The Gospel According to St. Mark [Thornapple Commentaries], p. 228).