

The Danger of Unbelief

The Gospel of Mark: Mighty and Mild / Mark 6:1-6

Introduction:

Over the past few weeks, we have seen several stories woven together by Mark with the design of having his readers ask and answer the question, “Who then is this?” Two weeks ago, we looked at the story of Jesus calming the storm and raging sea with a simple command. This display of miraculous power was followed by Jesus subduing a man no one could control and a legion of demons having to beg Jesus to be cast into a herd of pigs instead of being sent out of the country. We noticed a similar response of fear by both the disciples, and the people of the city to this display of power and authority. Yet, while the disciples simply asked the question, “Who then is this,” the people the city begged Jesus to leave them. Last week, Pastor Adam helped us consider the stories of Jesus healing a woman with a discharge of blood and raising Jairus’ daughter from the dead. As we were looking at those stories, did you notice how both included fear as well? The woman fell down “in fear and trembling” before Jesus as she told Him the truth and received peace. Jairus was told, in Mark 5:36, “Do not fear, only believe?” As Pastor Adam helped us to see, the question expands in this set of stories as we saw Jesus’ power of sin and the effects of sin on humanity like disease, shame, separation from God, and death. It moves beyond simply answering the question of who Jesus is to include a question calling for our response. How will we live in light of who Jesus is? Will our fear cause us to ask Him to leave or will we trust In His power to redeem and restore us to a right relationship with God? You see, the stories we have seen unequivocally reveal Jesus to be God in the flesh, as we see His power and authority over every realm of life. In calming the storm, He shows power and authority over creation. In casting out the legion of demons, He displays His power and authority over the spiritual realm. And in healing disease, declaring peace, and raising Jairus’ daughter from the dead, He declares power and authority over everything that plagues the human experience. This makes those two questions that much more important to answer. Who Then is Jesus? And how will you live in light of that? Our passage today closes this section by revealing the danger of missing the truth of who Jesus is and not responding properly to what we have seen and heard. In the flow of Mark’s narrative, this section contrasts the response of unbelief with the responses of belief we have seen so our hearts continue to be moved to truly believe and fully embrace Jesus. Consider this story with me through the problem presented and its surprising resolution. The problem of our story is found in verses 1-3, where Mark shows us how,

The Background of Jesus Causes Stumbling

On the heels of these astonishing examples of Jesus’ power and authority, along with examples of saving faith, Mark introduces a different response to teaching and mighty works of Jesus. And he focuses our attention on what caused this response. Notice how Mark keeps the previous stories on our mind, in verse 1, as he moves into the next scene, “He went away from there and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him.” Mark tells us that Jesus went from Jairus’ house and came to his hometown. In doing this, he keeps the power and authority of Jesus in view, so we feel the surprise and foolishness of the responses we see to Jesus in this story. While not mentioned, we know his hometown is Nazareth because we see Jesus come from there in Mark 1:9 and referred to as “Jesus of Nazareth” in Mark 1:24. We should note the insignificance of Nazareth again that we saw when studying Mark 1:9-13. Several commentators point out how Nazareth is not even mentioned in the Old Testament, nor in any inter-testament literature or rabbinic literature. The apostle John records Nathanael, one of Jesus Disciples, saying “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” in John 1:46. This insignificance is important because Jesus coming from there is one of the reasons for their stumbling. We also see that His disciples followed Him to Nazareth. This detail shows the people of Nazareth would have seen some responding to Jesus’ authority by following Him. Look at what happens next in verses 2-3, “And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, ‘Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him?’”

How are such mighty works done by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?’ And they took offense at him.” As was His custom, Jesus taught on the Sabbath, in the synagogue. Note how those who heard Him teach were astonished. At first, it looks like a familiar response to Jesus’ teaching as this is the same word use in Mark chapter 1:22. However this instance has a different nuance to it as they don’t marvel at His authority but question how it was possible for Him to be saying and doing these things. They start by questioning where His insight and power comes from. Note how they call Jesus “this man.” They don’t even acknowledge Him by name. What we know they don’t deny His wisdom and power. Notice they fully acknowledge what they have heard and seen. The question isn’t whether He is wise and doing mighty works, the question is how it is possible for Him to do it. Once again, we see people hearing and seeing the glory of God on display through Jesus but failing to have eyes to truly see and ears to truly hear. Verse 3 reveals why they are stumbling. They focus on His pedigree, His background. Each remark is likely intended as an insult. He is a carpenter. Look at the vocation He grew up in. How could someone from that trade have this wisdom and power? He is the son of Mary. It was customary in Jewish culture to relate sons with their father and rare to relate them to their mother, often only coming as a negative connotation. Perhaps this is a reference to the scandal surrounding Mary at His birth. They also point to Jesus’ brothers and sisters as having been with them. Do you see the stumbling blocks? They know His family. They know His trade. They know His status. How can this man be anything with the pedigree He comes from? Now, focus in on the end of verse 3, “And they took offense at him.” This puts our attention on the main point of this story, the climax of the problem. Those who heard Jesus teach in Nazareth didn’t just question the validity of His wisdom and authority, they took offense at Him. The word for offense is where we get our English word “scandalize.” Its root means “a stumbling block” and the verb form here means “to cause to stumble.” It is used eight times by Mark in his gospel, each time referring to things that keep people from faith and following Jesus. So, the idea is how their struggle with Jesus actually causes them to stumble and reject Him. Notice, it isn’t that these people struggle a little, but they reject the clear evidence of God. And they do stumble like this because of His humble background. He didn’t come how they expected. He wasn’t who they expected the Messiah to be. What we see in the gospel is how stumbling only grows once they see Him hanging on the cross. The truth that God took on flesh to walk among His people, lived a humble life, and died on a criminals cross for their sin will always be a hard pill for most to swallow. It flies in the face of the world’s wisdom as we see how easy it is to reject someone from such a humble background. It offends our pride to hear that the God of ultimate power and authority would lower Himself like this and give His life for others. This is the truth Paul proclaims in 1 Corinthians 1:23-24, as he says, “we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” Don’t miss this church, the message of the gospel that we proclaim, the person and work of Jesus, will always be a stumbling block and foolishness to those who don’t believe. As we see those from Jesus’ hometown stumble over the humble background of Jesus, we are reminded of the grace of God at work in those who believe. And we should thank God for that grace. The rest of our story provides the resolution and trailing action to show the danger of unbelief. In verses 4-6, Mark shows us a shocking thing the unbelief in Nazareth does, how,

The Unbelief in Nazareth Hinders Grace

These verses are challenging to think through, causing some to develop poor theological understandings of the connection between faith and healing. A helpful interpretive principle to keep in mind is being slow to make narrative normative. This means that when studying narrative passages (passages that teach in story), we understand they are describing what happened, not necessarily establishing doctrinal teaching. Therefore, just because we see something happen at one point, doesn’t necessarily mean that is the normal way God operates. We need further teaching to say that for certain. Keeping that principle in mind helps us avoid that pitfall.

Look at verses 4-6 with me, “And Jesus said to them, ‘A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household.’ And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. And he marveled because of their unbelief.” Stop there. In verse 4, Jesus gives a wisdom saying, or proverb, from His day and applies it to 3 groups of people, each more personal in connection to Him. Those in His hometown, those among His relatives, and those of His own family. The point is that Jesus acknowledges that it is not unusual to experience this rejection among those closest to God’s chosen instrument. One reason is because God usually chooses the least expected to carry out His plans, so we know He is the one working. Verse 5 is the challenging verse to understand. We are told Jesus “could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them.” Does this mean Jesus was unable to do it, or a refused to do it? Was He limited by God and the Spirit from doing any miracles, or did He limit himself? We aren’t really given sufficient evidence to conclude one way or the other. We do know their unbelief plays a part because verse 6 says “he marveled at their unbelief.” We also know He was able to heal some, so His power was not completely removed. Tim Keller helps to point out what is likely going on here, saying, “Jesus’ miracles were not ‘magic tricks’ designed to prove how powerful he was, but ‘signs of the kingdom’ to show how his redemptive power operates. His miracles always healed and restored and delivered people in ways that revealed how we are to find him by faith and have our lives transformed by him.... He ‘could’ not do a deed that would not redeem” (Keller, “Mark,” 62). The healing and miraculous power of God never operates without purpose. God doesn’t heal arbitrarily, rather He is always intentional in dispensing His grace for the glory of His name. He heals to help our belief. Also, as we saw earlier, the unbelief we see in this story is not a lack of faith but being offended by Jesus Christ and rejecting His person and work because of that offence. Understanding that helps us to avoid developing a word of faith theology from these verses. Word of Faith teaching wrongly says your lack of healing is because you don’t have enough faith. That is a dangerous teaching and fails to rightly handle God’s word. And that it is not what is going on here. These verses are describing how the people in Jesus’ hometown stumbled and rejected Jesus, thus hindering the grace of God being poured out on them at this time. As Keller rightly said, the goal of Christ’s miracles was to redeem and transform people. This unbelief is a failure to trust in the person and work of Jesus as the Christ which leads to rejection of Him, not a wrestling with believing in His power to heal or perform miracles. The danger we need to see is how not believing in Christ and rejecting Him will ultimately hinder God’s grace in your life and eventually lead to the absence of it for all of eternity. Notice how Mark wants our focus to land there from verse 6. Read it with me slowly to feel the weight of it, “And he marveled because of their unbelief.” Let that sink in church, “he marveled because of their unbelief.” The term Mark uses for marveled here is used throughout his gospel exclusively for people marveling at Jesus or the works He has done. In fact, all the gospels use it almost exclusively to refer to people marveling at Jesus and the works of God. The only other place it is used in the gospel to refer to Jesus’ marveling is in Luke 7:9 where Jesus marvels at a centurion’s faith as he believed Jesus could hear from afar with just a word from His mouth. This should cause us to pause because the Son of God is marveling here at the depths of their unbelief. These are people that should have believed. They had spent the most time around Him. They had heard or seen the wisdom and power of Jesus repeatedly up to this point. Yet, despite all this, they did not believe, and Jesus marveled at it. I believe this marveling is designed to have us marvel as well. It reminds us of the mystery of the kingdom of God, how those with plenty of opportunities to believe fail to do so, while people you wouldn’t suspect, like the woman of discharged blood, demon-possessed man of the Gerasene, and eventually the Roman centurion in Mark 15 turn and believe. You see unbelief doesn’t come because we fail to see God working in this world, it is clear from all of creation that God is at work, unbelief comes because sinful human hearts refuse to accept the truth that God humbled Himself, took on the form of a servant, became obedient to the point of death, rose victoriously over death, and only requires trust in His work for salvation. Continue in verse 6, “And he went about among the villages teaching.”

Their unbelief and rejection lead to Jesus leaving and teaching elsewhere. This is the last time we see Jesus in Nazareth in the gospel records. Think on the sadness of what their unbelief caused and how it hindered God's grace from being poured out on them. And there is no record of a church in Nazareth until Constantine built one there in A.D. 325. This passage leads us to feel the danger of unbelief and consider two questions in response. First,

1) Are You Offended by the Gospel?

Church, think of how simple the gospel message is. Christ humbled himself by coming and dying in our place on the cross. Through this act, He canceled the debt of sin for us so we might be reconciled to God through simply trusting in His death and resurrect. Has the simplicity of the gospel caused you to stumble over the truth and fail to respond rightly? For many in this room that answer is no because you are here to worship Jesus as your Lord and Savior, but I would be foolish to believe there aren't some that still struggle to trust in that simple truth. Maybe that is you, and the passage is calling you to see the humble Christ, know that humility led Him to the cross to die for your sin, and have the truth of the gospel move your heart to trust in Him. Perhaps there are some in this room whose struggle is clinging to the simplicity of the gospel. Your offense comes through a lack of trust that it is really enough to save you. You find yourself tempted to add something to it, thinking you need to do more good works to be accepted by God. Cling to the truth that we are saved and reconciled by Christ alone, through faith alone, for the glory of God alone. Yes, good works are a response to that salvation, but we must remember they add nothing to it. Could the offense to the gospel for you come in the form of having a hard time seeing God's grace extending to the worst of sinners? Maybe you fail to share the gospel with some people, or even pray for them, because you can't imagine them receiving forgiveness for what they have done. They are so vile and corrupted that they don't deserve it. Yet, the gospel reminds us that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And regardless of what that sin is, anyone can turn to Christ and receive forgiveness. If there is anything causing you to be offended by the gospel, ask Jesus Christ to remove that from you and receive His grace today. The second question this passage leads us to consider is,

2) Do You Really See the Glory of God in Christ?

The ultimate problem in Nazareth was their failure to truly see the glory of God in Jesus Christ. This caused them to be mildly astonished but reject the truth of who He is. Over the past few weeks, have you really seen the glory of God in Christ as we have studied these stories? If so, how has it effected your heart? Maybe you have grown up in the church but are rarely truly astonished by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Does it still cause your heart to sing? When you think of all He has done, are you still amazed by His grace and mercy? Are you astounded by His humility? Are you still swept up in worship when you think on these things? Every week that we come to worship, we should plead with God to help our hearts see and feel the truth of Jesus Christ, because we need His grace to have these things continually convict us, strengthen our faith, and take our eyes off this world. That is our greatest need, and that is God's greatest blessing.

Conclusion:

As the worship team is coming to lead us in a time of response, where are you in regard to each of those questions? How is God leading you to respond? Do you need to pray for saving grace? Should you check your heart and its response to the gospel message? Do you need to desire Jesus Christ more than you have been? Whatever it may be, lean into His grace for you today. Feel the freedom to come and kneel to cry out to Him if the Spirit leads, sing to encourage your heart and others around you, or come receive prayer from our team of people ready to pray with you and for you. You will find them worshipping in the front rows or at the bottom of the stairs in the back with lanyards on. Let's pray as we move into this time of responding and receiving God's grace in it.