

Mark's gospel is all about answering the question: "Who is Jesus?" And while Mark tells us the answer right away, he spends the rest of the book showing us why the answer he gives is the *only possible answer*. And the way he does this is by showing us *what Jesus does*. Jesus' activity reveals Jesus' *identity*. And so as we look at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, we see Jesus "proclaiming the gospel of God." This means that in order to understand *who Jesus is*, we need to know *what the gospel is*. And that will be the focus of the sermon today: what is this gospel that Jesus preaches? But before we get there, I want to set the stage for just a minute.

In verse 14, we have two major changes that move us out of the prologue into the first act of Mark's drama. The *shift in main characters* began last week, as our attention moved from John the Baptizer to Jesus. But here in vs. 14, the door of that transition slams shut, as John is arrested and disappears from the scene. Although we want to know what happens to John (and we do find out in ch. 6), all of our attention is now directed to Jesus.

And as we look to Jesus, we see that the second change is a *change of location*. We go with Jesus *out* of the wilderness *into* Galilee, the northern region of Palestine. As part of the promised land, Galilee was conquered under Joshua, and was originally part of the inheritance of Jacob's sons Zebulun and Naphtali. Galilee had been invaded and resettled by the Assyrians hundreds of years before Jesus, and had come to be known as "Galilee of the Gentiles".

In Jesus' day, you wouldn't look to Galilee to find pure Jewishness. At best you would find a blend of Jew and Gentile, and at worst, you would ask like Nathanael, if *anything* good could come from there! Isaiah calls it the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, where the people walk in darkness. And yet this is where Mark begins the story of Jesus' ministry – out on the fringes, among the often faithless northerners, not down among the faithful south, not in David's territory. And it is *there* that Isaiah went on to prophesy about, that those people in darkness would see a great light, and unto them a son would be born who would sit on David's throne, having the government on his shoulders, and extending David's kingdom without end. Mark doesn't quote Isaiah at this point, but his whole gospel is built on Isaiah's prophecy.

So when John is arrested and the wilderness ministry is over, Mark picks up the story of Jesus' ministry *in Galilee*. That's the end of the prologue and the beginning of scene one, which will take us into chapter 8. Scene two records Jesus' ministry *on the way to Jerusalem*, from chapter 8 to chapter 10, and scene three is all about what happens *in Jerusalem*, chapters 11-16.

That's the big picture overview, but zooming back in to our text today, I want us to focus on Jesus' ministry of proclaiming the gospel. These verses present Jesus as a *prophet*, someone who

ministers through *words* and sometimes through strange and powerful *actions*. His message is about the arrival of the kingdom of God, but while he does call men to follow him, he isn't raising an army like a king. This is another one of Mark's ironies: A huge, grand kingdom announcement is followed not by a mighty march on Jerusalem, but by a trip to the seashore to round up some working-class fishermen.

And as we listen to Jesus' preaching, we might be surprised at how he speaks of what Mark calls "the gospel of God." While we only have a one-sentence summary of his message, we do see three important aspects to his preaching: first, we feel the *urgency* of His proclamation: the time is fulfilled!, then we hear the *content* of the gospel, which is the announcement of the *arrival of the kingdom* of God, and finally we hear the *call to respond* to the gospel with repentance and faith. And so those three aspects of Jesus' proclamation are urgency, kingdom, and response. That's the gospel that Jesus preaches.

Let's look closer at *urgency*. When Jesus says that the time is fulfilled, He isn't primarily making the point that God's cosmic countdown has made it to zero. That's how westerners tend to think of time, because watches and clocks have taught us to interact with time differently than most of history and even much of the world still today. This makes it tricky to explain, but we need to understand this so that we can proclaim the gospel like Jesus.

We might capture what Jesus means a little bit better with how we use the phrase "This is our time.", referring not so much to a *moment* as a *season*. But not a cyclical season, not something that *regularly* occurs like fall or winter, but something triggered by particular events that bring about a specific situation. Think about the Cajun Navy: I'm sure many of them go long stretches wondering why they even *have* a boat, because there are easier ways to throw money away. But when a hurricane hits, they think: "This is our time." Their course of action suddenly becomes clear, priorities get rearranged, and the way they were living before that didn't make sense *then* suddenly makes sense *now*. And so the urgency is not so much "act *quickly*" as it is "act *appropriately*" in light of the new situation. Importance, not immediacy!

And so we want our evangelism to be *urgent*, just like Jesus' was, but urgency is not panic. When we don't understand this, we try to force a sense of panic on people, and our evangelism becomes *manipulation* instead of *proclamation*. Now, there may also be a time and place, like at a deathbed, where the situation means that you need to call for a decision *quickly*, but ordinarily, evangelism isn't a time bomb situation. This doesn't mean we present the gospel with a take-it-or-leave-it attitude, but it *does* mean that we trust our sovereign God to work through *persuasion* rather than scaring people into the kingdom.

Gospel urgency means impressing on people the fact that the world situation has changed: Jesus is now king, and they need to act accordingly!

And that gets us to the *second* aspect of the gospel of God: **the arrival of the kingdom of God**. John prepared the way, and now Jesus is here, walking in those straight paths. The good news of the kingdom is that God has sent His beloved Son to be in charge of everything. The gospel in its simplest form is this: Jesus is Lord. Or as Jesus preached it before He accomplished His mission: the kingdom of God is at hand!

And this is where we need to distinguish between two senses or uses of the word *gospel*: many of us, when we hear the word “gospel”, we think of a message about how someone gets saved, about sin and the cross and repentance and faith. And that’s not wrong, because that is *part* of the gospel; more properly, that is what it looks like to *respond* to the gospel. But if we take the part for the whole, if all we ever mean by gospel is my personal heart transformation, then our gospel is far too small, far too weak, and it doesn’t capture the message that Jesus preached. No, the gospel is about *everything*, because Jesus is king of everything. As Abraham Kuyper famously said, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry “Mine!”. The gospel covers everything.

Here’s why that matters so much: when we make the mistake of shrinking the gospel, then we struggle to see how most of our lives relate to the gospel. Being a disciple becomes a matter of having a quiet time, rather than something that affects every moment of every day. Sharing the gospel becomes a guilt-trip, because we think that this means buttonholing people and walking them down the Romans road, and we don’t do that very often. Things like art or music or homemaking or education are seen as getting in the way of the gospel – don’t build a beautiful church building, share the gospel! Don’t spend hours learning to sing challenging Psalms, share the gospel! Don’t waste time studying deep theology, share the gospel! Can’t wait to finish up at the office or the job site so I can go do ministry!

The person who talks and thinks like that is well-intentioned, but they don’t understand the gospel! They’ve confused calling people to respond to the gospel with the gospel itself, which is like confusing a *marriage* with a *wedding*, or a coronation with the work of actually ruling a kingdom. But the gospel is about the rule of God in the person of Jesus Christ, and the gospel is lived out through discipleship, which is following Jesus in every area of life, not just things like Bible reading, prayer, or evangelism.

But of course, the third aspect is *responding* to the gospel, which *does* include individual conversion. More than that, yes, but not less than that! Just because we've spent so much time misunderstanding the gospel in one ditch doesn't mean we should spend time in the other ditch to make up for it! The gospel demands a response, and the right response is clear: repent and believe the gospel. Every aspect of your life where you've been living as if you were king instead of God, repent of that, and turn it over to Jesus.

That's really what repentance is: turning, changing direction. Confession is *part* of repentance, where we ask for forgiveness for heading in the wrong direction, for climbing up on the throne as if we belonged there, but if you never actually *turn around*, if you never *climb off the throne and bow* to the true king, it doesn't matter how many times you say you're sorry! Responding to the gospel means more than just hearing an announcement about a new king. It means *changing your life* in submission to that king. And we'll see some pretty dramatic instances of that next time when Jesus turn the lives of some Galilean fishermen upside down.

And so if we are going to evangelize like Jesus, our evangelism must be *transformative*. It has to *change* people, not at the level of outward behavior, but at the heart. Living an evangelical life means living an entire 24/7 life shaped by the gospel, but simply modeling a well-behaved moral life for people is not enough. It is entirely possible to live an upright life characterized by family values, to stay married, to love your children, to give generously to good works, to volunteer your time to alleviate the suffering of others, *all without hearing and believing* that the time has been fulfilled and the kingdom of God has drawn near through Jesus.

Because this is possible, the gospel *must be preached in words*, not just modeled in deeds. And those words must explain who Jesus is and what it means to follow Him. Not every evangelical is called to be an evangelist, but every evangelical must actively support the work of evangelism, so that the gospel continues to be publicly proclaimed in a way that transforms hearts, not just modeled in a way that might influence some people to rearrange the furniture.

And so maybe your outreach starts with living a kingdom life of hospitality and welcome to your neighbors, without any tracts or Bibles or Jesus films being involved. That's a fine *start*, but if it's not part of a process that leads to your neighbors hearing a call to repent and put their trust in Jesus, then it isn't the gospel of God that's being proclaimed, and it isn't Jesus' kingdom that's drawing near. The gospel that Jesus preached is an urgent announcement that God's kingdom has arrived, and that everyone everywhere must repent and believe in response to that good news. And if Jesus is your king, then that's your gospel, too.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*