

**On the move  
with Jesus  
in  
MARK  
(chapters 9-12)**

**A unique, verse-by-verse,  
life-application commentary  
by Terran Williams**

## You may own a Bible, but does your Bible own you?

- It's not enough to own a Bible. Our Bible should own us. After all, it is the main way God speaks to us.
- Did you know that God put every verse in the Bible so that our minds could be totally renewed, so that our lives could be deeply changed, and so that our calling could be fulfilled? (See 2 Timothy 3:16-17 if you're not persuaded.) That's why reading the whole Bible again and again is one of the most important things we can do.
- Sometimes, however, the Bible is hard to understand. That's why commentaries are so useful. Most commentaries help you understand the *technical* meaning of each verse. These commentaries do a little of that too, but more than that, they focus on the meaning of each verse *for our lives now*.

## What's unique about this commentary?

- Most importantly, it helps you to find *the meaning for your life now* in every single verse of the Gospel of Mark.
- It is written with 21<sup>st</sup> century everyday people in mind.
- It builds on the scholarship of brilliant theologians and commentaries, but doesn't focus on the exhausting technicalities that fill most commentaries.
- It comes with a Group Guide so that you can explore Mark along with others.

## A suggested approach to going through Mark

- Make time every day. Allocate as much time as you need to really hear from God for your life. Read until you are full – don't just *snack* on the Bible, rather enjoy a *solid meal*.
- Take your time as you go through Mark, starting at chapter one. It doesn't matter if it takes you a whole year – or five – to get through the entire Bible, just as long as you're *steadily* moving through it.
- Trust God to speak to you every time you read the Bible. Expect to receive just what you need for each day. Invite the Holy Spirit to be your primary teacher as you read.
- Keep two questions in your mind as you read: 1) What do these verses mean? 2) What do they mean for my life now? ***If you can't find solid answers to either of these two important questions then refer to this commentary.***
- Carry into your day what you sense God saying to you. Perhaps write down the main things you sense God telling you each day. Pray to God about what he has just said to you. Make any needed adjustments in your heart and life as God reveals more and more of his Word, will and ways to you.

## Main sources used

Special thanks to (and warm commendations of) ...

- The *Today's New International Version Bible (the updated version of the NIV)*
- Michael Eaton's *Preaching through the Bible: Mark*
- Tom Wright's *Mark for Everyone*
- Donald Guthrie's *New Bible Commentary: Third Edition*
- David Guzik's online commentary ([www.enduringword.com](http://www.enduringword.com))
- John Stott's *The Incomparable Christ*

## About the Gospel of Mark

God has given us four windows into the earthly life of Jesus. They are the Gospels. Each author captures a different aspect of Jesus. Mark's Gospel is the shortest, and was also the one written first. It appears that the Gospels of Luke and Matthew used Mark as a major source in the writing of their own Gospels.

“Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). That means that though Mark describes the life of Jesus 2000 years ago, his character and wisdom and power are still available to us. His earthly disciples knew him physically, but we get to know Jesus with the help of the Spirit. Though we don't know everything we'd like to know about Jesus' life on earth, God made sure that we'd have enough information about him so that, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we too can say that we “know” Jesus.

The Gospel is written by Mark. Mark was the son of a widow named Mary whose home was used by the earliest Christians (see Acts 12:12). Mark was friends with the apostle Peter, from whom he no doubt drew most of his information. He wrote it fairly soon after the events described, probably in the AD50s.

One thing that sticks out in the Gospel of Mark is its pace. Again and again, the word “immediately” is used (40 times in fact!). We see Jesus packing a whole bunch of travel, ministry and teaching into short periods of time. Jesus is a man on the move. That's why this commentary is titled *On the move with Jesus in Mark*.

## Outline of the Gospel of Mark

*1:1-20 - The beginning of Jesus' ministry*

*1:21-3:6 - Jesus' authority begins to arouse opposition*

*3:7-6:13 - Jesus withdraws to teach his disciples*

*6:14-8:26 - A further outreach with even greater rejection*

*8:27-10:52 - Jesus teaches his disciples while travelling to Jerusalem*

*11:1-15:47 - Entry into Jerusalem and the events that lead to his death*

*16:1-8 - Jesus rises from the dead*

*16:9-20 - A later addition to the Gospel*

## Experiencing Jesus in blue, green, red and orange

There are four main ways that God seems to speak to us through the Gospels.

1) In some parts of Mark, God highlights to us the wonderful and awesome uniqueness of Christ as Lord and Saviour. When we read these sections, we realize that we certainly can't imitate him in these regards. All we can do is bow down in humility, trust and surrender. Insights based on these parts are colour-coded blue.

2) In other parts of this Gospel, God reveals aspects of Jesus' character and ministry that we can imitate. We can literally be inspired to follow his example. And amazingly, we have the Spirit of Christ in us making it possible to actually do just that. Insights based on these parts are colour-coded green.

3) In yet other parts of this book, God reveals to us pure wisdom through the recorded teachings of Jesus to his disciples, and to the crowds, and to us. Insights based on these parts are colour-coded red.

4) Lastly, the Gospels at times allow us to see Christ through the eyes of people, whether friends or foes. By looking at how these people responded to Christ, we can learn both how and how not to respond to Jesus ourselves. Insights based on these parts are colour-coded orange.

**Colour-code summary:** the four main ways God speaks to us through the Gospels...

*Blue* = something about Jesus' uniqueness and Lordship that shows he is worthy of our devotion, trust and surrender

*Green* = something about Jesus' character or ministry that we can imitate

*Red* = something Jesus taught that we can understand or apply to our lives

*Orange* = insights we can apply based on the way various people responded to him

## Mark Chapter Nine

**Colour-code summary:** the four main ways God speaks to us through the Gospels...

*Blue* = something about Jesus' uniqueness and Lordship that shows he is worthy of our devotion, trust and surrender

*Green* = something about Jesus' character or ministry that we can imitate

*Red* = something Jesus taught that we can understand or apply to our lives

*Orange* = insights we can apply based on the way various people responded to him

(9:1 is connected to 8:27-38 so I have included it there.)

### GLIMPING CHRIST'S GLORY (9:2-13)

#### *The Transfiguration*

2 After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. 3 His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.

- **Believe and then you'll see, not the other way around.**
  - Not long before this, the Pharisees had asked for a sign (8:11) but Jesus refused to give them one. Similarly, today many people say, "When I see Jesus or some powerful sign that he is real, I will believe." These people usually never get their sign.
  - But compare the Pharisees with the disciples. In Mark 8:29 Peter spoke on their behalf, saying, "We believe you're the Messiah Jesus." And now just six days later, Jesus gives Peter, James and John a powerful experience of himself as the divine Messiah. It's as if he's saying, "Believe and then you'll see, not the other way around."
  - Today, millions of Christians have the same testimony: "As I began to believe that Jesus is real, I began to experience his presence, his answers to prayer and his workings of power in and around my life. I believed, and *then* I saw."
  - Let me include a fascinating thought here: Since Jesus was the divine Son of God this moment wasn't really a miracle, as much as it was a pause-moment in an ongoing miracle. The ongoing miracle was that Jesus managed to hide his glory during his time on earth. At the transfiguration he merely paused that miracle and let his glory show.
- **Sometimes Christ reveals himself in an unusually powerful way to those who have an unusually great call on their lives to serve him.**
  - Why did Jesus take only Peter, James and John with him? Probably because they would become the main leaders of the church into the future (see Galatians 2:9). They would all carry huge

responsibility into the future, and would all experience great suffering.

- Later Peter would speak of this encounter as a key point in his life, one that strengthened his faith and invigorated his call (see 2 Peter 1:16-18).
- Still today, whenever a Christian experiences Christ powerfully in a time of prayer or worship, it would be wise for this person to say to themselves, “To whom much is given, much is required. And since Christ has given me a great revelation of himself, he must have in mind some great future responsibilities.”
- However, we mustn’t make a rule of this. There are many Christian leaders who carry great responsibility and yet cannot point to any major encounters with Christ. They simply rely on the deep assurance of faith, and the gentle presence of Christ in their lives.

4 And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

- **Jesus is both the continuation and the fulfilment of what God had been doing in ancient Israel (as recorded in the Old Testament).**
  - Amazingly, the three disciples see Elijah and Moses with Jesus. This is obviously a powerful indicator that life after death is a reality. Despite the fact that Moses had lived on earth 1400 years before and Elijah 900 years before, they are still alive!
  - Of all the famous people of the Old Testament why did God choose to send Elijah and Moses?
    - There seem to be several answers:
      - 1) Moses, Elijah and Jesus are the only people in the Bible who fasted for 40 days.
      - 2) Moses and Elijah both met with God powerfully on a mountaintop in their lives. Interestingly, Moses encountered God on the mountain after waiting six days (Exodus 24:15) – this is probably why Mark mentions that the disciples encountered Christ “six days later” (9:2).
      - 3) Although Moses had died, his body was never found so there was a sense among the Israelites that God had removed him from the earth. Elijah had literally been taken from the earth.
    - But there are two greater reasons:
      - 1) Moses had given the law to the people of God and Elijah had been the first in a long line of prophets. Jesus often summarized the Old Testament as “the law and the prophets” (Matthew 5:17). In other words, Jesus was both the continuation and the fulfilment of the Old Testament Scriptures and what God had been doing up until then.
      - 2) Moses had prophesied that “another prophet like myself” would one day come (Deuteronomy 18:15) and the last two

verse of the Old Testament spoke of how a type of Elijah would one day prepare the world for the Messiah's coming (Malachi 4:5). In other words, God is drawing attention to how Jesus is the fulfilment of the expectations related to Moses and Elijah.

- Today, we can put our trust in Jesus because we know that he is both the continuation and, more importantly, the fulfilment of centuries of ancient Israel's history as recorded in the Old Testament. He is the real thing!

5 Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." 6 (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

- **The transfiguration of Jesus really happened; this is not a story.**
  - Many have said, "How do we know this really took place?" Other than the fact that we have no good reason to believe that Mark made it up, we have strong evidence:
    - 1) Peter in 2 Peter 1:16-18 retold the same event.
    - 2) The inclusion of these verses (5 and 6) shows that it really happened. Let me explain. Usually when a story is made up, there are no clumsy or incidental details. Yet these verses tell of how Peter, bewildered and frightened, makes such an absurd statement on such a great occasion. This shows that it most likely happened. If it had been a fabrication, these verses wouldn't have been included.

7 Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

- **God insists that we listen to Jesus.**
  - In this verse God speaks similar words to the words he spoke to Jesus at his baptism (see 1:11 and commentary), only this time he's addressing the disciples.
  - And this time, God includes the command: "Listen to him!" This is most likely an echo of Deuteronomy 18:15 when Moses prophesied that one day God would send "the Prophet", and instructed that the people of God "must listen" to that prophet!
  - Although Moses, Elijah and Jesus were there, God didn't tell the disciples to listen to Moses or to Elijah. Instead he insisted that they listen to Jesus, his Son. In that moment he was putting Jesus' words over and above all of the Old Testament law and prophets. That is why Hebrews 1:1,2 says, "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son."
  - Today, many people say, "I believe in God but I'm not so sure about Jesus." The Christian answer to that question is, "We

believe in God, and that's why we believe in Jesus. We believe that God has made it very clear to us that we must believe in Jesus. It's precisely because we believe in God that we submit our lives to Jesus!"

8 Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. 9 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. 10 They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what "rising from the dead" meant.

- **Mountaintop encounters with Christ are only part of the Christian life, not the goal.**
  - The powerful mountaintop encounter with Christ in his glory was short-lived. It wasn't long before it was over, and they were "coming down the mountain" (v9). But as wonderful as the dramatic encounter with Christ was, they still had something even more important: Jesus was still with them.
  - Today, Christians often make the same mistake Peter made in verse 5: when we have a powerful encounter of Christ we feel we've arrived and we try set up camp, refusing to move on from this wonderful experience. But we see that mountaintop encounters with Christ are not the goal of our journey at all. They are merely part of the journey. We need to be ready to leave our mountaintop glory moments and "go back down" to the real world of people and challenges and opportunities. Although we no longer have the electric joy of the mountaintop we have something even better: we still have Jesus with us, and he is ready to lead us on as we do his work and spread his word.
- **You can shout this from the rooftops now: "Jesus is alive and he lives in me!"**
  - Jesus told them to keep quite about how powerful and glorious Jesus was. (See the second point of commentary under Mark 8:27-30 to understand why.) But he then told them that eventually they could go public – when Christ was resurrected (v9)!
  - Since Jesus has already resurrected, this means that all of his instructions to the disciples to keep quiet about his identity as the Messiah and Son of God no longer apply to us. We can go public with it! There is no good reason to keep news this good a secret any longer. We can sing and shout from the rooftops, "Jesus is alive and he lives in me!"

11 And they asked him, "Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?" 12 Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things. Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer

much and be rejected? 13 But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him.”

- **Suffering is a normal part of the Christian life.**
  - The encounter perplexed the disciples.
  - Firstly, they still couldn't get their heads around what Jesus meant by the Son of Man being “risen from the dead” (v9). Jesus answers that question by saying that “the Son of Man must suffer and be rejected”. In other words, resurrection is only possible if there is death. Jesus was saying to them, “You can only make sense of my rising from the dead if you get your head around the fact that I will first be killed.”
  - Secondly, having just seen Elijah and remembering the promise of Malachi 4:5-6, they were wondering when Elijah was coming again. Jesus' answer is firstly that Malachi's prophecy is true – someone like Elijah will come before the Messiah and will restore all things (v12). Secondly, he says that Elijah has already come and has suffered too – and of course he is referring to John the Baptist who “restored” the preaching of the prophets and the expectation of the Messiah, and suffered for doing it.
  - Notice that he keeps on emphasising that on the path to resurrection is death, and on the path of obedience and restoration is suffering. His point to them and us is this: “Suffering is normal for a Christian who seeks to advance Christ's kingdom.”

## FACING GREATER CHALLENGES (9:14-29)

### *Jesus heals a boy possessed by an evil spirit*

14 When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. 15 As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

16 “What are you arguing with them about?” he asked.

17 A man in the crowd answered, “Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. 18 Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.”

19 “You unbelieving generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.”

- **Being heavenly minded should make you of more earthly good, not less.**
  - Peter, James and John had just experienced Christ transfiguring before their very eyes. They must still have been on “a spiritual high”. But then Jesus takes them down the mountain, smack-bang into a very challenging situation.
  - Notice the challenge. The teachers of the law are arguing with the other nine disciples (v14). A father is deeply disappointed with the disciples and, no doubt, with God for not healing his boy (v17,18). The little boy is still demonized and endangered (v17,18). And the disciples are defeated and powerless in the face of this all (v18). No wonder Jesus says of it all, “you unbelieving generation” (v19). He is not simply addressing the disciples, whose faith was lacking as they sought to set the boy free, but the whole situation: disputing teachers of the law, distracted father, demonized boy and defeated disciples. Jesus is saying that behind all of this conflict and disappointment is a simple failure to trust God and take him at his word. No doubt this gives us insight into the condition of fallen humanity too – our real problem is an inability and an unwillingness to trust God.
  - But the main point here is that Jesus will often give us mountaintop encounters of himself (as happened in verses 2-7), only to follow them up with greater practical challenges. After all, surely an increased revelation of Christ should make us able to deal with increased challenges. Jesus certainly thinks so.
  - Some people say that the more heavenly minded we become, the less earthly good we are, but Jesus tried to teach his disciples in this situation that the more heavenly minded you become, the *greater* earthly good you are. And the way he does this is to line up a great earthly challenge immediately after a great heavenly encounter. He still does the same today.

20 So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

21 Jesus asked the boy’s father, “How long has he been like this?”

“From childhood,” he answered. 22 “It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”

23 “ ‘If you can?’ ” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.”

24 Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”

25 When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. “You deaf and mute spirit,” he said, “I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.”

26 The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, “He’s dead.” 27 But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

- **No challenge is too great to face, if you trust in Christ’s power and promise.**
  - The nine disciples had lacked the faith to set this boy free. But Jesus was not lacking at all in his power to heal.
  - Satan tried to intimidate Jesus by this powerful display (v20) and by the sheer length of time of this possession (v21). But Jesus refuses to be intimidated.
  - The father’s faith had dwindled because of the disciples’ inability to heal the boy. Today we face the same challenge: often our previous faith-failures seek to undermine future faith opportunities. It’s as though our faith is wounded.
  - But notice how Jesus is committed to restoring our faith. He does this firstly by helping us own up to our lack of it (this is seen in how he said, “If you can?” (v23)) and by re-affirming the promise that “everything is possible for him who believes” (v23). Spurgeon writes a similar insight of these verses, “‘Help my unbelief’ is something a man can only say by faith. While men have no faith, they are unconscious of their unbelief; but, as soon as they get a little faith, then they begin to be conscious of the greatness of their unbelief.”
  - When we are struggling to trust in Christ as we face a great challenge, we have a model prayer to pray, “I believe, help me overcome my unbelief” (v24). It appears that Christ answers this request of the man, and restores his faith immediately, because it is not long before the boy is set free and healed (v25-27).
  - Today, the crunch issue in how we respond to the great challenges that Christ brings our way is whether we have faith in God or not. All things are possible, which in the context means “no challenge is too great to face”, if we believe in Christ’s power and promise.

28 After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?”

29 He replied, “This kind can come out only by prayer.”

- **Come to terms with your current level of faith and spiritual authority.**
  - Why is it that the disciples had failed to deal with the challenge but Jesus had not?
  - We have already seen that Jesus had given them the authority to cast out demons (Mark 3:14-15). And Jesus had made it clear that

the reason the disciples had failed was their lack of faith (see verse 19). So Jesus was saying that the authority he gave them was only effective if exercised in sufficient faith.

- Another interesting thing to keep in mind is that there are different degrees of demonic power. And that although a little faith is needed to deal with most demons, this was a demon that needed greater levels of faith and authority to deal with.
- Similarly today, there are many challenges we face that require small amounts of faith to deal with, whereas there are some challenges that require far more faith to deal with. We need to come to terms with our current level of faith and authority. We may currently have the levels of faith and spiritual authority to powerfully deal with smaller challenges, but not with bigger ones. We shouldn't let this discourage us. After two years of intensive ministry opportunities even the disciples had only reached a certain level of faith and authority.
- **Grow your level of faith and spiritual authority through prayer.**
  - Warren Wiersbe, commenting on these verses, writes, "The authority that Jesus had given them was effective only if exercised by faith, but faith must be cultivated through spiritual discipline and devotion."
  - It's not enough to merely come to terms with our current level of faith and spiritual authority. We need to be intentional about growing it to another level. But what's the key to doing this?
  - The answer is prayer. Jesus is saying to us through these verses, "If you want to effectively deal with greater challenges, then you need greater levels of faith and spiritual authority. And if you want greater levels of faith and spiritual authority, you need to give yourself to prayer."
  - Notice that Jesus faced this challenge not with prayer at all – we see that he merely commanded the demon (v25). But we must remember that he had been on the mountain praying to his father days before. In other words, it's not prayer at the moment of facing the challenge that's needed, but prayer before the moment arises that is needed. Today, as disciples of Jesus, we need to learn to consistently pursue Christ in prayer. This is the only way to increase our ability to effectively face greater challenges with the resources of heaven.
  - In Acts 4:31 we see that it's not just personal prayer, but corporate prayer that increases our faith and spiritual authority for the challenges ahead.
- **Jesus is the hero, worthy of our whole-hearted wonder, joy and trust.**
  - Marshall Morgan shows how powerfully Jesus deals with the challenge. "He found disputing scribes, a devastated father, a demon-possessed boy, and defeated disciples ... He silenced the scribes, He comforted the father, He healed the boy, He instructed the disciples." In a desperate situation, Jesus was the hero of the day.

- Still today, Jesus is able to intervene powerfully and comprehensively in any challenge we face. We have every reason to seek out his company in the secret place of prayer, and to be ready to trust him whole-heartedly in whatever challenge we face. We'd do well to join those who, when seeing him, are overwhelmed with wonder and joyfully run to greet him (v15).

## CHRIST'S OFFER OF GREATNESS (9:30-50)

### *Jesus predicts his death a second time*

30 They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, 31 because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered over to human hands. He will be killed, and after three days he will rise." 32 But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.

- **If you refuse to have your wrong assumptions challenged by the Scriptures, it can be very difficult for God to teach you new things.**
  - Just a week before, Jesus told them he would die and rise from the dead (see 8:31). Then, as in this time, the disciples couldn't accept or understand what he was saying. This is because now that they realised Jesus was the Messiah, they couldn't imagine how he could die. In their minds the Messiah would triumph over all his enemies. The problem was that they had some wrong assumptions, assumptions that needed to be challenged by prophecies such as Isaiah 53, which clearly predicted that the Messiah would suffer, be rejected, die and be raised again.
  - Isn't it amazing how our wrong assumptions prevent us from accepting or understanding the messages that Jesus is repeatedly attempting to get through to us? That's why we need to be ready to re-evaluate all our assumptions about God, Jesus, faith and life in the light of the Scriptures. If we hold onto the wrong assumptions, and if we fail to humbly open ourselves to the clear teaching of the Bible, it can stand in the way of God teaching us new things.

33 They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" 34 But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

35 Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."

- **Invite Jesus to correct your sinful attitudes and wrong assumptions.**
  - Once Jesus told the disciples that he was the Messiah, they began to fantasize about how Jesus would quickly take over Israel and

drive back the Romans, no doubt. And they fantasized about their particular role in this imagined political kingdom. The twelve were wondering, “Perhaps I will be his chief-assistant?” These thoughts soon brimmed over into conversation, and then an argument broke out amongst the disciples as they jostled amongst themselves for the honour.

- Since the theme of greatness had emerged, Jesus needed to help the disciples rethink and understand what true greatness is. He took the opportunity to do some teaching. William Barclay comments on the fact that Jesus sat down (v35): “This is important, because by sitting down Jesus showed that he was going to teach. When a Rabbi was teaching as a Rabbi, as a master teaches his scholars and disciples, when he was really making a pronouncement, he sat to teach. Jesus deliberately took up the position of a Rabbi teaching his pupils before he spoke.”
- Still today, we as disciples of Jesus can expect Christ to identify some wrong attitudes and assumptions in our lives. And he wants to “sit down” with us and start bringing the necessary correction. We humbly need to be ready to receive whatever correction he wants to bring to our lives.

35 Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.”
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- **Jesus offers you true greatness.**
  - It’s not wrong to want to be great. In fact we see Jesus offering greatness to the disciples and to us. Just look at those words, “Anyone who wants to be first ...”
  - Ambition in itself is not wrong. It’s the motive behind the ambition that must be challenged. Also, what we’re so ambitious about needs to be evaluated.
  - In the coming verses, Jesus helps us to rethink what true greatness is. And it turns out that the disciples’ understanding of greatness – and our cultural understanding of greatness – is all wrong! So prepare for some correction and re-education.
- **True greatness will involve a readiness to be humiliated in some way.**
  - Of the phrase “must be the last of all” Michael Eaton writes the following: “In some way God will work in that person’s life and he will find himself being made to be ‘the last of all’. Paul said he suffered ‘the loss of all things’ (Philippians 3:8). He had been deprived of everything that could make him boast. True greatness will involve refusal to boast in anything that men and women are generally proud of.”
  - Today, most people that are powerfully used by God speak of the different ways in which God stripped them down, and very often caused them to take a knock in terms of social standing. As long as it’s our passion to be praised and “to climb the social ladder of status”, then we cannot be great in Christ’s kingdom.

- True greatness will involve a readiness to serve others.
  - Of the phrase “servant of all” David Guzik writes, “The question at hand was ‘Who would be the greatest?’ Jesus could have answered the question, ‘Hey dummies – I’m the greatest.’ But Jesus does not put the focus on Himself. For an example of greatness, Jesus puts forth the servant. In the worldly idea of power, the great man is distinguished by how many people serve him. In ancient China, for example, it was fashionable for wealthy men to grow their fingernails so long that their hands were unusable for basic tasks. This was to demonstrate that they did not need to do anything for themselves; there was always a servant there to wait on them. The world may think of this as greatness, but God does not. Jesus declared that true greatness is shown not by how many serve you, but by how many you serve.”
  - Today, until we realize that we exist in order to bless others, we aren’t ready to pursue greatness, because we will be motivated by inferior desires such as the hunger for praise and power. William Barclay writes, “It was not that Jesus abolished ambition. Rather he recreated and sublimated ambition. For the ambition to rule he substituted the ambition to serve. For the ambition to have things done for us he substituted the ambition to do things for others.”

36 He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, 37 “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”

- True greatness involves a readiness to embrace powerless people.
  - Jesus taught his disciples using an object lesson. He affectionately took a little child in his arms, treating him / her with dignity and worth. This was unlike the culture of the day, where people generally ignored the children. The weakest people of that society were the children. They were regarded more as property than as individuals. They were to be seen, but not heard. But Jesus demonstrates how to care for children, and for all the people who are marginalized, ignored, neglected or looked down upon.
  - We need to be ready to embrace those in our world who are weak, overlooked and looked down upon. This is true greatness! Eaton comments, “No one is great who chooses only the high and mighty for his friends. No church is great that wants only the high and mighty as its members.”
  - Verse 37 adds yet another perspective. Eugene Peterson in *The Message* paraphrases it like this, “Whoever embraces one of these children as I do embraces me, and far more than me – God who sent me.” Every time we as Christ-followers seek to reflect Christ’s character (that is what is implied by “in my name”) by caringly relating to someone who is overlooked, we are receiving

Christ and God more fully into our lives! Said another way, as we express Christ's grace to the powerless people of our day we experience more of Christ's grace in our own lives.

*Whoever is not against us is for us*

38 "Teacher," said John, "we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."

39 "Do not stop him," Jesus said. "No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, 40 for whoever is not against us is for us. 41 Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly be rewarded.

- True greatness requires that you overcome your tendencies to rivalry, control and exclusiveness.
  - Jesus was speaking about treating the powerless ones with great care (v36, 37). This must have pressed a button in John who had recently treated a man poorly, a man who had relatively less "power" and "position" than himself. The man had been ministering on his own, whereas John had the powerful advantage of ministering in a team, with Jesus, and even carrying the title of "apostle".
  - Who could the man of verse 38 be? T Clarke suggests he was "either one of John the Baptist's disciples, who, at his master's command, had believed in Jesus, or one of the seventy, whom Christ had sent out, Luke 10:1-7, who, after he had fulfilled his commission, had retired from accompanying the other disciples; but as he still held fast his faith in Christ, and walked in good conscience, the influence of his master still continued with him, so that he could cast out demons as well as the other disciples".
  - Notice John's attitude towards this man. He sought to control him (telling him to stop). He was exclusive (emphasizing that he was not one of them, the Twelve). Possibly he was jealous, since the man was having great success in driving out demons when not so long before, the disciples had failed (see 9:28).
  - But Jesus challenged his attempts to control others, to exclude others and to engage in rivalry with others. After all, these attitudes were all the results of a distorted hunger for power and greatness.
  - Notice Jesus' reasons for telling the disciples to not stop the man. He may have been a friend (v39), he was not in any way resisting them (v40), and, if his work was genuine – as Jesus suggested it was – he would be rewarded (v41).
  - Yet another thought: this was a practice run for the disciples. There would come a day when they would lead the Jerusalem church, and other Christian leaders who were not part of them,

such as Paul, would begin to rise up and be used by God in other parts of the world. Jesus was coaching them in advance not to try control, exclude or compete with others that God would use. We'd be wise to take the same counsel today. Although God may be using us, and our church, we are but a tiny part of what God is doing in the world. Rivalry, control and exclusiveness can be greatly damaging and must be repented of.

## BECOMING GODLY (9:42-50)

### *Causing to stumble*

42 “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea.

- **Rather die than spiritually damage people who are of lower social standing than you.**
  - Jesus was still holding a little child in his arms (v36), and here it suggests that this child also believed in him. He had been speaking about how important it is to cherish, protect, care for and welcome powerless, overlooked people in the world. Here Jesus added the phrase “those who believe in me” to show that he is especially concerned with how Christians treat other Christians who are of lower social standing than themselves. After all, if we can't treat fellow-Christians of lower social standing with dignity and care, then we will never be able to treat people of lower standing out in the world with dignity and care.
  - In verse 37 Jesus *encourages* us to welcome the overlooked people of less social power than ourselves. Now in this verse he *warns* us to be very careful about not causing them to stumble. By this he means that we must be very careful not to lead them into sin, or do any spiritual damage to them. And his warning is vivid: rather drown, facing a premature and painful death, than spiritually damage one of these “little ones”.
  - Today, we need to be highly alert to those who are of lower social standing than ourselves, especially within our church, and do all we can to help them spiritually, and take great measure not to damage them spiritually. It seems that the best gift we can give them is not merely to try not to cause them to stumble, but better yet, by helping them grow spiritually, we should seek to teach them to walk.
  - One more application to us: In every church there are people of lower social standing, people who have relatively less social “power” than others. In many churches this includes the children, struggling single parents, the aged, the handicapped, and the poor / unemployed. In light of Christ's teaching in verse 37, and here in

verse 42, it is a great honour to be involved in ministering to these people!

43-44 If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. 45-46 And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. 47 And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell,

- **Be ready to make regular sacrifices in your quest for godliness, obedience and spiritual growth.**
  - *What do the hand, foot and eye that cause us to stumble represent?* In verse 42 Jesus introduced the idea of causing others to stumble. He told us to take radical measures not to cause others to stumble, but here he tells us to take radical measures not to allow ourselves to stumble either.
  - By “stumble” he refers to that which hinders godliness, obedience and spiritual growth. Obviously bad things and temptation cause us to stumble, but notice that Jesus refers to good things, such as hands, feet and eyes. These are good things in themselves, but sometimes it’s good, natural things that become the biggest hindrances to godliness, obedience and growth in our lives.
  - Today, our natural desires for sleep, for touch, for food, for rest, for pleasure, for acknowledgement and recognition, for comfort, for convenience are examples. These desires are not bad in themselves. But we can easily see that if we allow them to dominate our lives, they will soon hinder our godliness, obedience and spiritual growth.
  - *What does it mean to “cut it off” and to “enter life maimed”?* Today one of the great misconceptions about real spirituality is this: we think that the goal of spiritual growth is total self-fulfilment, where our deepest desires are satisfied. But Jesus says it’s not true at all. Real spirituality requires lots of routine sacrifices, little and big. Following Jesus will mean that we may need to cut away good, natural things from our lives, simply because our goal is not fulfilment but obedience and godliness. This is what Jesus means by “entering life maimed”. On the path of obedience we will often need to defy and neglect our desires for things like sleep, touch, food, rest, pleasure, recognition, comfort and convenience! We may need to end some unhelpful relationships. We may need to downscale our earthly ambitions, moving into a smaller house, or buying a cheaper car. We may need to get rid of the television set, or seriously curtail our exposure to it. We may need to deny ourselves internet access, if for example pornography is a temptation. We may need to leave great dinners / parties considerably earlier to secure better

devotional times with Christ the following morning. We may need to leave those careers or places of work that make it extremely difficult to make any progress spiritually.

- **Let your fear of punishment and your desire to experience God's kingly power at work in you, motivate you to make these sacrifices.**
  - Jesus motivates why we need to make regular sacrifices in our quest for godliness, obedience and spiritual growth. In verse 47 he says that it's the way to "enter the kingdom of God" rather than to be "thrown into hell".
  - *What does "enter the kingdom" mean?* Given the context, it does not mean "take the first steps of becoming a Christian". Jesus was speaking to believers, to his disciples. Eaton says that the word "enter" here is used in the sense of "experience". In other words, "enter the kingdom" means to "experience the kingdom". Eaton paraphrases this to mean, "experience the blessings of God's kingly power working in your life". So the first motivation for making regular sacrifices in our quest for godliness and obedience is that it's the only way to experience the blessings of God's kingly power working in our lives!
  - *What does it mean to be thrown into hell?* Let Eaton answer this too: "In *this* passage, being thrown into hell refers to the salvation through fire (as Paul describes it in 1 Corinthians 3:15) where the punishing, purifying fire of God seriously deprives the believer of his reward if he has lived a rebellious, inconsistent life". God has rewards for us in this life, and in the next – and the surest way to lose them is to refuse to give ourselves to a serious quest for godliness and obedience, and to the required sacrifices that come on this quest.

48 where

“ ‘their worm does not die,  
and the fire is not quenched.’ [a quote from Isaiah 66:24]

49 Everyone will be salted with fire.

- **Rather turn from all disobedience and compromise now than experience the unrelenting purifying punishment of God later.**
  - In the previous verses Jesus mentioned "hell" three times. Now he tells us a little more about what hell is. The literal word used for "hell" in these verses in the original language is Gehenna, which is the name of the valley that was the rubbish dump of Jerusalem. The dump was marked both by rotting material (which explains the mention of worms) and by fires which people sparked in order to destroy the rubbish. In the first century Gehenna was often used to describe both the destruction of lives that wandered off God's path, as well as the eternal punishment of hell after death.

- Jesus is vividly warning us disciples that we are in danger of ruin and destruction if we drift off his path, and give in to the temptations, compromises and distractions that come our way.
- In this passage, however, Jesus is not speaking about eternal punishment. Eaton refers to Eerdman's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* and says that in effect the use of "undying" worm and "unquenchable" flame does not refer necessarily to the *eternal* duration of punishment, but to the *steady, unrelenting* punishment of God until such time as the punishment is complete.
- Further evidence that these verses do not speak about the eternal punishment of someone, but rather about the temporary purifying punishment of the disobedient believer is seen in verse 49, which says that "everyone will be salted with fire". Salt speaks of purification. And "everyone" here refers to "every believer". In other words, to the degree that there is disobedience and compromise in our lives as disciples, God will deal with us firmly until such time as we are purified. This purification can happen while we are alive, and it also happens when we die and stand before the judgment seat of Christ, where (if there is still compromise and sin in our lives) we experience "salvation through fire" (1 Corinthians 3:15). Best we clean up our act now!

50 "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other."

- Pursue a transformed character, being very careful not to allow your godly character to erode.
  - Jesus changes the theme slightly, but picks up on the mention of salt (v49). Now he speaks of having salt in ourselves. This refers to the quality of our character and godliness. To the degree that we refuse compromise and disobedience, and pursue godliness and obedience, to that degree we are salty. Jesus says "salt is good" which is another way of saying, "Pursue saltiness with everything you have." Dangerously, through carelessness, we can lose our *saltiness* (the erosion of godly character), which is difficult to regain. (One way to regain it is to "be salted by the fire" of God's purifying punishment (v49).) But Jesus says to us, "have salt in yourselves". And, of course, to the degree that our characters are transformed to that degree we will have "peace with each other". It turns out that personal godliness is key to our relationships.

## Mark Chapter Ten

Colour-code summary: the four main ways God speaks to us through the Gospels...

*Blue* = something about Jesus' uniqueness and Lordship that shows he is worthy of our devotion, trust and surrender

*Green* = something about Jesus' character or ministry that we can imitate

*Red* = something Jesus taught that we can understand or apply to our lives  
*Orange* = insights we can apply based on the way various people responded to him

## MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE (10:1-12)

1 Jesus then left that place and went into the region of Judea and across the Jordan. Again crowds of people came to him, and as was his custom, he taught them.

2 Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

3 “What did Moses command you?” he replied.

4 They said, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.”

5 “It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,” Jesus replied.

- **A major reason people get divorced is that their hearts are hard.**
  - From Mark 10:1 onwards, Jesus moved his ministry from Galilee in the north to Judea in the south. (The city of Jerusalem was in the province of Judea.)
  - There was a popular debate amongst Jews at the time. There were two schools of thought about divorce in the sight of God. The most popular school of thought was that a man could divorce his wife for any reason at all – even if he found a more attractive woman than his wife, or if she burnt the food, for example. The second school of thought was that only sexual unfaithfulness warranted a divorce. The Pharisees wanted Jesus’ opinion, asking him: “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” (Matthew 19:3 adds the words “for any reason”).
  - In response, Jesus pointed them to the Scriptures, asking them what Moses had commanded (the first five books were written by Moses). In response, they quoted Deuteronomy 24:1, where Moses permitted a man to divorce his wife, provided he gave her a certificate of divorce.
  - Notice that Jesus didn’t ask them what Moses permitted, but rather what he *commanded*. We will see in verse 6-9 what he commanded, but for now Jesus comments on Deuteronomy 24:1. In verse 5, this is effectively what Jesus said, “Divorce was not at all what God or Moses wanted, but because it was so common (with people’s hearts being so hard) Moses allowed it, but did his best to protect the rejected woman by insisting that she get a certificate of divorce.” It seems that men were simply “kicking their wives out” without the dignity of a certificate, without any bother of setting her free to carry on with her life in any way.

Moses and God were not saying that divorce was fine, just that if you must get divorced then do so in the least damaging way.

- But the main point Jesus makes is that divorce happens because people's hearts are hard. For example, hardness of heart is what causes one spouse to neglect, stop loving or abuse the other. And it is hardness of heart which causes the wounded spouse to refuse to forgive, or to insist on revenge.
- Another related thought: Jesus is implying that in his kingdom it is possible to have a change of heart, which enables husbands and wives to stay together rather than end their marriage. (Ephesians 5:21-33 explains just how Christ's coming makes this new softness of heart a reality in marriage.) Moses permitted divorce because the heavenly resources to keep hearts soft were *not* available in the old order of things. But Jesus does not permit it because the heavenly resources to keep hearts soft *are* available in the new order of the kingdom! That's why Christian married couples should very intentionally send their roots down deep into Christ's grace and keep their hearts soft and tender towards God and one another. This is the best way to avoid divorce.

6 "But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.' 7 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, 8 and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. 9 Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

- **Since marriage is a living union of two people, divorce is a kind of amputation.**
  - In verse 3 Jesus asked them what Moses commanded them regarding marriage and divorce? They then quoted Deuteronomy 24:1, written by Moses where he *permits* divorce. After briefly commenting on why Moses permitted it, he then answered his own question by quoting a combination of Genesis 1:27 ("at the beginning of creation God made them male and female") and Genesis 2:24 ("For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh").
  - Notice how Jesus shifts the conversation from divorce to marriage. In other words, we will never understand the nature of divorce until we understand the nature of marriage. So what do we learn about the nature of marriage according to Christ?
  - 1) *Marriage is originally God's idea.* This is implied by "in the beginning". It's his institution, and therefore he's the one who has the authority to say both what it is, and how it is to work.
  - 2) *Marriage is between a man and a woman,* where maleness and femaleness come together to complete the image of God (v6).
  - 3) *Marriage creates a bond greater than even the blood-bond between parents and child.* This is why a man needs to leave his

own parents (v7). It's a way of saying that one's own spouse should be more valuable and cherished than even one's parents.

- 4) *Marriage is the union of two people into one new entity.* This entity is more than a legal contract or partnership between two people. It's the deepest bonding humans can experience, so much so that they are now together described as "one flesh" (v8), which is another way of saying "a new human being". Jesus hammers home this same point with his powerful words, "so they are no longer two but one". Marriage is becoming one with another person, not just sexually, but also emotionally, spiritually, financially, in terms of identity and in other ways too.
- 5) *Marriage is God joining a man and a woman (v9).* God himself appears to be the "glue" that makes this one-flesh union.
- In verse 9, Jesus makes his main point: "What God has joined together, let man not separate." He is saying that when you understand the profound one-ness of marriage, where two people becoming a living union, you understand why divorce is like cutting a person in two. Divorce, far from being a mere legal procedure, is an amputation!

10 When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. 11 He answered, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. 12 And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery."

- **Divorce may be legal, but it's still wrong.**
  - In light of marriage being a profound union of two people, we cannot merely dispose of a spouse, even though it is legal to do so, and think we got away with it. To divorce and remarry, which can also be read restated as 'to divorce in order to remarry' may be legal, but it's not right in the sight of God. It might not be a crime in our country, but it's a sin in God's eyes. It is wrong. Remarriage is a form of adultery, because a legal divorce certificate cannot sufficiently separate two people who were joined in marriage into a living union. The certificate may say we're divorced, but the union is still a reality in God's eyes.
  - Why did Jesus not just say verse 11 and 12 publicly to the Pharisees? The reason is that he was in Judea near the Jordan (see verse 1). This is exactly where John the baptizer used to speak out against the way Herod murdered his wife, and remarried Herodias, who had divorced her previous husband (see 6:17,18). In other words, the Pharisees were trying to trap him (notice how verse 2 above says they were testing him). Jesus could see the trap and therefore didn't directly speak out against it, but made his point just as well anyway in verse 9.
  - Sadly, then as now, married people would dispose of their spouses for whatever reason, and move on and marry another. More tragically, many people, then and now, would divorce their

partner because they found someone they deemed better. They would divorce in order to remarry. In that culture, if a woman was divorced she became almost worthless in society. She was seen as “used goods” and would often resort to prostitution as a means of survival. So divorce was even more cruel then than it is now.

- Eaton adds some pastoral comment to these verses, “Mark is obviously allowing generalization in his account of Christ’s teaching. Matthew adds an exception (namely adultery) to his account (see Matthew 5:32, 19:9). And Paul will accept that sometimes (rightly or wrongly) separation takes place (1 Corinthians 7:10,11,15). And it must be remembered that divorce is not an eternal sin (see Mark 3:28,29) – it can be forgiven, just like other sins.”

## CHILDREN (10:13-16)

### *The little children and Jesus*

13 People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. 14 When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 15 Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” 16 And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.

- **Warmly accept and love children, and minister to them spiritually.**
  - Despite Jesus’ recent teaching on welcoming children (9:36,37), it seems the disciples still discriminated against them (v13). There are many kinds of discrimination: on the basis of class, race, education, tribe and age. Discrimination against children is an example of “age-ism”.
  - But Jesus is angered by discrimination (v13). He loves all people, and he especially loves those who are weak, powerless and overlooked. He longs to have contact with them (v14). That is why Christians should also be ready to warmly accept and bless children. Jesus displayed warmth, affirmation and affection to children, and so should we.
  - But Jesus also ministered to them spiritually. The Greek word that is used to describe how people *brought* children to Jesus (v13) can be understood as a form of dedicating their children to God, and seeking God’s blessing on their little lives. Verse 16 tells us that Jesus did just that – he fervently *blessed* them.
  - Today, as parents, we would be wise to dedicate our children to Christ and seek his blessing on their lives. And in our churches, we would be wise to do all we can to see the children’s ministry prosper. Spurgeon comments on this verse, “Will you be very angry if I say that a boy is more worth saving than a man? It is

infinite mercy on God's part to save those who are seventy; for what good can they now do with the end of their lives? But these dear boys and girls – there is something to be made out of them. If now they yield themselves to Christ they may have a long, happy, and holy day before them in which they may serve God with all their hearts. Who knows what glory God may have of them? Heathen lands may call them blessed. Whole nations may be enlightened by them."

- **Receive Christ's care and grace with child-like faith.**
  - Jesus said that the "kingdom belongs to such as these (referring to children)" (v14) and "anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (v15). This applies both to receiving salvation, and to the nature of the Christian life.
  - Regarding salvation, little children know how to receive. In the same way, we are not saved by *earning* but through simple *receiving*. We don't receive salvation by coming to Christ with our offering of good works, education, knowledge and whatever – but by coming to Christ empty-handed, ready to receive his undeserved grace.
  - Regarding the nature of the Christian life (in these verses Jesus is speaking to people who are already disciples), to "enter the kingdom" means simply "to experience the kingly power of God in and through our lives". The secret of the Christian life is to remain dependent on and receptive to Christ's grace. Said another way, it is learning to receive his love and care with child-like faith. And not only do we need to receive from Jesus, but we need to be ready to *be received by* Jesus and taken up into his arms like the little children of this story.

## HOW TO EXPERIENCE THE BLESSINGS OF THE KINGDOM (10:17-31)

### *The rich and the kingdom of God*

17 As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

18 "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone.

- **Jesus is more "good" than you ever dreamed, and you are more sinful than you ever realized.**
  - A rich man who was a young ruler (according to Luke and Matthew) came to Jesus with apparent humility. On his knees he expressed deep admiration for Jesus by calling him "good". In response Jesus asked him, "Why do you call me good?" and then stated that "no one is good – except God alone." On the face of

it, it might seem that Jesus is suggesting that he isn't good. He certainly wasn't denying his goodness. Rather he was challenging the young man to reflect on who he, Jesus, really was. Moments later Jesus reveals (v21) to the man his true identity, telling him plainly to "come, follow me". Jesus wanted the man to think about his own so-called goodness – and he did this by making the radical claim "no one is good"! Matthew 19:16,17 includes the added detail that the man was asking what it meant to do and be good. Jesus was saying that none of us are truly "good", since our sinfulness has corrupted us. Interestingly we have no example in ancient Jewish literature of any Rabbi being called "good" – Jesus alone received this description in this incident.

- Here we have an example of a man who assumed he knew who Jesus was, and that he knew who he was. But as the story unfolds, we see that he doesn't really know who Jesus is nor who he really is. Today, many people have the same problem. As the man would discover, Jesus is far more "good" than we ever dreamed, and we are far more sinful than we ever imagined.
- **Inheritance is something over and above initial salvation.**
  - We can easily misinterpret what the man was asking Jesus here. The man wanted to know what he had to do to inherit eternal life. Eaton comments on this, "The word 'inherit' must signal to us that it's not simply a question about coming to initial salvation – or as is called elsewhere 'justification'. This question is not parallel to Acts 16:30 where the jailer asks Paul, 'What must I do to be saved?' It's enquiring about 'inheriting' which is something over and above initial salvation. It's about living for God in such a way that one reaps the blessings of eternal life". This is what Paul seems to speak about in Galatians 6:8: "The one who sows to please the Spirit from the Spirit reaps eternal life." The man was not referring to "getting into heaven" but rather to receiving all God had for him.
  - This phrase "inheriting eternal life" is used interchangeably with "entering the kingdom" in verse 23 and "entering life" (see Matthew 19:17). These phrases are not about initial salvation, but rather about experiencing God's kingly power in our lives.

19 You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honour your father and mother.'" 20 "Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."

21 Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

- There are two things that can hinder you from reaping the blessings of eternal life as a Christian: 1) self-righteousness and 2) idolatry.
  - In response to the question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus revealed the man’s heart condition in two ways:
  - 1) *He revealed the man’s self-righteousness (v19-20).* Immediately before this encounter with the rich man, Jesus taught that to experience God’s kingly power, people need to come to God empty-handed and with child-like faith (see 10:13-16). In contrast to this, this man confidently asserted that he faultlessly kept the commandments Jesus listed since he was a boy. Instead of coming empty-handed and owning up to his failures, he came confident of his own goodness – even though Jesus had just asserted that “no one is good” (v18). Instead the man should have said, “To be honest, I’ve tried to keep these commandments, but I’ve failed. I’m a sinner, and I need help.” Today, we must be careful of coming to Christ with self-righteousness in our hearts. He will reveal it soon enough. The irony is that Christ does not see a person who comes to him clinging to his own sense of goodness and wealth as having much, but rather as lacking greatly. We see this in the way he tells the man that he lacks (v21).
  - 2) *He revealed the man’s idolatry (v21).* Fascinatingly, Jesus only listed the commandments that had to do with how we treat other people (commands 5-9) and not those that refer to how we relate to God – namely loving God and refusing idols – and to the tenth commandment about not coveting. Hearing Jesus list some of the ten commandments (of Exodus 20), the man should have wondered why he never mentioned the others before confidently asserting his goodness. The instruction Jesus then gave to the man in verse 21 – to surrender his wealth – revealed the man’s inability to really love God first, and showed up his idolatry and covetousness. Today, we may appear to be moral people in how we relate to others, but we may still be idolatrous as revealed by the way we fail to put our trust in God, placing it in other things, such as money. Like the little children of 10:13-16 we’re meant to cling to Christ for our security, and not to false gods like money, as this man did.
  - Today, Christ still looks intently at us with love (notice how Jesus “looked at him and loved him”) and notices those things in our hearts, such as self-righteousness and idolatry that seriously undermine our experience of the kingdom.
  
- There are two things that can help you to reap the blessings of eternal life as a Christian: 1) do whatever Christ tells you to and 2) join his ministry team.
  - In answer to the question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus called the man to a level of godliness over and above the law of Moses. Nowhere in the law of Moses are we ever told to sell what we have, give it to the poor, and to trust in heavenly treasure instead. Later on, the apostles, particularly Paul, made it

very clear that the Christian is called to a level of godliness far above the law of Moses, to a radical obedience to the Spirit (see Galatians 5:18,22,23 for example). Today, we need to realize that the way for us as Christians to experience God's kingly power and to inherit the blessings of eternal life is to be radically obedient to Jesus and his Spirit. Paul restates the same teaching of Jesus in Galatians 6:8: "The one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life."

- On this note, do all Christians have to sell everything and give the proceeds to the poor? The answer is: only if Christ tells you to, as he did this man. But certainly Christ does not command all Christians to do this (see 1 Timothy 6:17-19).
- Jesus also told the man to follow him, which was basically an invitation to join his ministry team (v21). Today, although not all Christians are called to give up their wealth, all Christians are called to follow him (see Mark 8:34). Joining Christ's ministry team in this world is one of the ways we can experience the blessings of his kingdom and power.

22 At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. 23 Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"

24 The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God."

- **Wealthy people usually opt to trust in their wealth rather than in Christ, and this causes them to forfeit God's blessing!**
  - Jesus revealed the man's idolatry. The man trusted in his wealth, and loved his wealth more than God. Jesus had hoped that the man would let his idol go and follow him, but sadly he did not.
  - In this instance, Jesus is not speaking about receiving salvation. He is speaking about experiencing God's kingly power and the blessings that come with eternal life (see the second commentary point under 10:17,18).
  - Jesus' point is powerful: it's not uncommon for wealthy people to trust in their wealth idolatrously, making it almost impossible for them to experience the blessings of God's kingly power!
  - Jesus makes this point by overstating it: "it's easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich person to experience kingdom blessings". It's like saying, "it's easier to bottle the entire ocean than what it is for a person who trusts in their own wealth to experience the kingdom of heaven". This shocking truth should amaze us, as it did the disciples (v24)!
  - 1 Timothy 6:9-10 comments on the high cost of wealth-idolatry: "Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap, and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin

and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.” No wonder the man went away sad (v22).

26 The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?”

27 Jesus looked at them and said, “With human beings this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”

- **God alone can set a wealthy person free from the idolatrous hold of their wealth.**
  - Christ taught that wealthy people usually idolatrously trust in their wealth rather than in God, and therefore forfeit the blessings of the kingdom. This shocked the disciples – as it should shock us. Instead of walking away from Christ like the rich man did, we should cling to Christ in desperation of his help and grace.
  - When the disciples ask, “Who then can be saved?” they don’t mean it in the way we commonly understand the word “saved”. Eaton writes, “‘Saved’ in this verse obviously refers to final salvation, the time when those who have been initially saved are given their final rewards. This is confirmed by the fact that reward is obviously the topic of 10:27-31.” In other words, the disciples are asking, “If wealthy people are so radically prone to idolatry, will any of them receive any reward at all from God?”
  - Jesus answers their question by, in effect, saying, “Without God’s help, no one can break free from their idolatry, but with God’s help it certainly is possible!”
  - Today, wealthy people (and if you’re not sure if this applies to you see [www.globalrichlist.com](http://www.globalrichlist.com)) would be wise to cling to Christ in utter desperation, making this their prayer: “Christ, I surrender my wealth to you. I trust in you, not it. I serve you, not it. I find my identity in you, not it. Break its hold on my life. I cling to you rather.” Christ is able to set people free from the idolatrous hold of money – as we see in people like Zaccheus, Joseph of Arimathea and Barnabas – but it is nothing less than his powerful grace that makes this possible! Wonderfully, 1 Timothy 6:17-19 tells us that even wealthy people, if radically touched and guided by Christ’s grace, can experience heavenly reward!

28 Then Peter spoke up, “We have left everything to follow you!”

29 “Truly I tell you,” Jesus replied, “no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel 30 will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. 31 But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

- **The rewards of sacrificially following Jesus make it more than worth it.**
  - The disciples must have been relieved that they had already had the idolatrous grip of wealth broken in their lives, as evidenced even by the way many were willing to leave their family business to travel with Jesus (see 1:18,20). All this talk of reward and inheriting the blessings of eternal life had made them wonder what the reward was for the sacrifices of leaving home, brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, children and fields to follow Jesus and be on his itinerant ministry team.
  - Jesus told them that the rewards would come both in this life (here called “the present age”) and in the next (here called “the age to come”).
  - Today still, Christ promises that if we pay a price to live for him and the Gospel, and join his ministry team, the rewards are well worth it. In this life, for every relationship lost (and for many who are called by Christ to relocate or travel, this is a painful reality) there will be far more rich and rewarding relationships that await us. And although we may no longer own our own homes and fields, we will have access to homes and fields all over the place. This clearly refers to the hospitality of Christians in other parts of the world that partner with us on the mission. Notice that he doesn’t promise wealth, although he certainly has the power to bring that to us too. Ask any Christian who ministers itinerantly or who has relocated in obedience to Christ and they will tell you of Christ’s ability to keep this promise. But despite this wonderful promise of multiplied relational and hospitality opportunities, we must come to terms with the inevitable resistance and persecutions that will also come our way.
  - But the rewards are also out of this world, so to speak. Jesus tells the disciples that they will experience eternal life. This doesn’t mean that they will go to heaven, but that they will receive great reward and honour in eternity. The Gospel of Matthew (in Matthew 19:28 adds that they will be greatly honoured in the next life). This is why Jesus speaks of the first being last, and visa versa (v31). In this life the rich young ruler was first, but in the next he would be last. However, in this life the disciples were far less in terms of status than the rich man, but Jesus assured them that in the next life they would be greater.

## THE CROSS AND GREATNESS (10:32-45)

*Jesus predicts his death a third time*

32 They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. 33 “We are going up to Jerusalem,” he said, “and the Son of Man will

be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, 34 who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.”

- **The main mission of Jesus was to be crucified.**
  - Jesus moved with determination towards the cross. The disciples knew that Jesus was a wanted man, and that Jerusalem was a dangerous place for him. Yet, with great courage, Jesus still led the way. No wonder his followers were astonished and afraid (v32). He made it clear to his disciples that in Jerusalem there awaited him the humiliation of being handed over to the Gentiles (the Roman authorities) and the great shame of being mocked, spit upon, flogged and killed. But he also knew that resurrection followed (v34). Hebrews 12:2 says that Jesus, for the joy before him, endured the cross. What was the joy that would result from the cross? Verse 45 tells us: the liberation of the world.
  - The cross was not just one of the things that would mark the life and ministry of Jesus. Mark is letting us know that it is the main thing he came to do. The cross was and is central to the mission of Jesus! The cross is the ultimate reason that Jesus came to this earth (see verse 45).
  - This is the third time, since Mark chapter 8, that Jesus has made it clear that the cross awaits him. Yet, amazingly, the disciples seem almost deaf to what he’s saying. We will see this in the next few verses.

#### *The request of James and John*

35 Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. “Teacher,” they said, “we want you to do for us whatever we ask.”

36 “What do you want me to do for you?” he asked.

37 They replied, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.”

38 “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said. “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?”

39 “We can,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, 40 but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.”

- **Greatness in Christ’s kingdom involves suffering, and a determination to find and follow God’s unique will for our lives.**
  - There are ideas in our heads, and attitudes in our heart that are plain wrong – and sometimes it takes Jesus a long time of hammering away at them before they are dealt with. This is the

case with the disciples. In 9:33-34 they had (also incidentally straight after Jesus told them about the cross) argued about who was the greatest, and Jesus had spent some time trying to transform their thinking about greatness, using a child as an object lesson (9:35-37). But, just a chapter later, the same thing comes up again. Here James and John, wrongly assuming that Jesus is about to set up a political kingdom in Jerusalem, asked to be number one and two in his kingdom (v37). They wanted the highest positions of power and honour next to him. But, of course, Jesus was not setting up an earthly kingdom, so he let them know that they didn't know what they were asking (v38).

- Jesus responded to their request for great positions of honour by letting them know two things:
- *1) Greatness will involve some suffering.* Jesus referred to his coming suffering with two metaphors: drinking the cup of suffering and being baptized. In the Jewish mind, the cup of suffering was the cup of God's wrath (as the prophet Jeremiah had said). Jesus was hinting that the time would come for him to experience God's wrath against sin. This is exactly what Jesus did on the cross: though he was sinless, he experienced the punishment that our sins deserved. In the Jewish mind, baptism sometimes referred to being overwhelmed by danger and distress (Psalm 69:2). Jesus asked James and John whether they were willing and able to face intense suffering (v38). They said they were. Of course, they didn't realise just how intense that suffering would be. But, in response, Jesus basically said, "So be it" (v39). Interestingly, this is exactly what happened: James was the first Christian martyr (see Acts 12:1-2), and John, though he would outlive the other disciples, would miraculously survive "baptism" in a pot of boiling oil (as a reliable ancient source in church history tells us) and great persecution and imprisonment.
- *2) Greatness comes from letting God decide what he wants to do with our lives.* In verse 40, Jesus said that God pre-ordains who gets what positions of honour in Christ's kingdom. That's why the best we can do for our lives is not to covet the honour that Christ gives others in his kingdom, but to, without comparing ourselves to anyone else, find and follow God's will for our lives. We need to find contentment in that.

41 When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. 42 Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 43 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

- **Greatness in Christ's kingdom is not measured by how many people serve you, but by how many you serve.**
  - In verse 42, Jesus reveals his distaste for power-hungry, dictatorial, domineering, authoritarian leadership styles. He refers to the Roman form of military and political power. Jesus doesn't have a problem with leadership, but with power-motivated forms of leadership. Today, if anyone (whether in the work place, government, family or church) seeks greatness through the ability to dominate others – then beware, Christ's judgment rests on you.
  - In verses 43 and 44, Jesus makes it clear that his disciples must never pursue power-motivated leadership, but rather servant-hearted leadership. It's not how many people that serve you that counts, but rather how many people you are ready to serve. And servanthood is not *the way to greatness* (as though there comes a time when we graduate beyond servanthood). Rather, it *is greatness!*
  - In verse 45, Jesus refers to his cross as a demonstration of radical servanthood. The cross, after all, was not Jesus' attempt to dominate people but rather to liberate people. The cross is Jesus' radical judgment on power-motivated leadership. The cross seeks to debunk the world's assumptions about power. The cross sends this message to the world, "Repent of power-hungry leadership. Embrace servant-hearted leadership. Don't think that the followers exist for the benefit of the leaders. No, the leaders exist for the benefit of the followers."
  
- **On the cross, Jesus paid the price for your sin, so that you can be liberated from bondage to sin and death!**
  - "Many" (v45) here is the Hebrew way of saying "everyone". The ransom is for everyone. "Ransom" here refers to the price paid to set a slave or a prisoner free. Humanity, being under the power and guilt of sin, is a slave to sin's power and sin's guilt. Not only that, we are "under God's wrath", doomed to collide into God on Judgment Day, where we will experience the full brunt of his holy and fierce judgment. On top of that, our sin has separated us from the life of God, and we are in the grip of spiritual death. And, despite our education, our technology, our religion, our morality, we cannot save ourselves from this desperate situation. We are slaves of sin and death!
  - But Jesus, the sinless Saviour, is the only one who has the ability to set us free. And that is what he accomplished on the cross. The ransom price was his very own life. The result: freedom and liberation from slavery are available to us, all because of the cross of Christ!
  - Interestingly, in verse 44, Jesus speaks of being a slave to all, and in verse 45, he speaks of how he sets us free from slavery. It seems that the cross sets us free from sin's power, guilt and penalty, and sets us free to serve others.

- Another interesting insight: Jesus has made it clear that greatness is not determined by how many serve you, but rather by how many you serve. No one has self-sacrificially served more people in history than Jesus did through his death on the cross. That is one more reason that he is the greatest of all!
- Where did Jesus get this insight into the liberating power of the cross? Probably, it came from his knowledge of Isaiah 53, a clear and well-known description of how the coming Messiah would die on behalf of sinners and earn their peace, healing, forgiveness, victory and life.
- The use of the phrase “give his life as a ransom for many” comes out of Isaiah 53. Isaiah 53:12 speaks of how the Messiah would “pour out his life unto death” and “bear the sin of many”. It would be good for us to meditate on Isaiah 53 – it’s full of multi-faceted insights both into the nature of Christ’s sacrifice and the wonderful liberty we experience as a result!

### THE PRAYER OF FAITH (10:46-52)

#### *Blind Bartimaeus receives his sight*

46 Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (which means “son of Timaeus”), was sitting by the roadside begging. 47 When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

48 Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

49 Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.”

So they called to the blind man, “Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling you.” 50 Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.

51 “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked him. The blind man said, “Rabbi, I want to see.”

52 “Go,” said Jesus, “your faith has healed you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.

- **Make sure your requests to Jesus are full of faith.**
  - We can learn how to pray effectively by pondering the example of this unsuspecting man, Bartimaeus. Jesus is the one who liberated him, and answered his request – but Jesus said it was Bartimaeus’ faith (v52) that was the most important aspect of his request. So, *looking at his example, how are we meant to pray with faith?*

- 1) *Let faith make your prayer intense.* Jesus was passing by – the blind man had less than a minute to act. Today, we must be careful not to miss God’s appointed moments of prayer. We should also notice the intensity of this man’s movements towards Christ. Despite the discouragements of the disciples, he shouted louder and louder. Spurgeon, in view of this story, writes, “Take the gates of heaven and shake them with thy vehemence, as though thou wouldst pull them up post and bar and all. Stand at Mercy’s door, and take no denial. Knock, and knock, and knock again, as though thou wouldst shake the very spheres, but what thou wouldst obtain an answer to thy cries. Cold prayers never win God’s ear. Draw thy bow with thy full strength, if thou wouldst send thy arrow up so high as heaven.”
- 2) *Let faith make your prayer persevering.* Notice how this man shouted out to Jesus, and when it apparently fell on deaf ears, he shouted out again and again. We must learn to pray perseveringly, and not give up too quickly. From this story we see that sometimes Jesus seems to keep on walking by at the sound of our first prayer, and waits for persevering prayer before he answers.
- 3) *Let faith make your prayer focussed on Jesus.* Though this man was physically blind, it seems that he was not spiritually blind. Apart from the demons, and the disciples, in Mark’s Gospel he is the first man to name Jesus as “the Son of David” (which is code for Messiah). We cannot pray with much faith if we fail to see how powerful Jesus is. And notice also that he calls him “Rabbi”. Interestingly the Greek tense here implies great humility in the man – it’s as though he’s calling Jesus “lord” and “master”. Similarly, we cannot pray with much faith till we recognize Jesus’ authority over us.
- 4) *Let faith make your prayer mercy-orientated.* Fascinatingly, in the previous story Jesus asked his disciples the same question he asked the man, “What do you want me to do for you?” (see verses 36 and 51). Let’s compare the answers: the disciples asked for greatness and honour (v37) but the blind man asked for mercy (v48) and sight (v51). Jesus never answered the disciples’ request because their prayer was prideful, whereas the blind man asking for mercy was humble. Today, still we mustn’t approach Christ from a position of strength and with a proud spirit, but rather from a position of weakness, and with a humble appeal to his undeserved mercy and compassion.
- 4) *Let faith make your prayer specific.* One of the surest ways to not pray with faith is to not be specific. Vague and non-specific prayer is not faithful prayer, it’s not the type of prayer that reaches the ear of God or evokes a response from him. It requires no faith to ask God for something general, because there would be no way of measuring whether the prayer is answered. But when we ask for something specific – as the blind man did (v51) – then that requires faith. In your next time of prayer, imagine Christ

asking you, “What do you want me to do for you?” How will you answer?

- 5) *Let faith make your prayer life-changing.* Think of the difference Jesus made in the life of this man. He started out sitting, begging, blind, rebuked and miserable. But by the end of the story he was walking (after he “jumped to his feet”, no longer begging; after he “threw aside his cloak” (laid out for begging)), seeing, called by Jesus and joyful. Similarly, when we pray with faith, Christ’s intervention is dramatic, regardless of whether he intervenes immediately or gradually. Notice how Jesus told him to “go” his own way. But he chooses to follow Jesus along the road, or better translated, “the way”. “The way” was the early name for Christianity and it seems that Mark draws attention to how this man became a Christian, a follower of Jesus. (The fact that Mark knows the man’s name – Bartimaeus – indicates that he probably became a well-known Christian in later years.) In the same way, when we pray with faith we must make sure that we don’t just “go” our own way and carry on as before. Rather we should take Christ’s intervention in our lives as an invitation to more wholeheartedly follow him along “the way”.

## Mark Chapter Eleven

**Colour-code summary:** the four main ways God speaks to us through the Gospels...

*Blue* = something about Jesus’ uniqueness and Lordship that shows he is worthy of our devotion, trust and surrender

*Green* = something about Jesus’ character or ministry that we can imitate

*Red* = something Jesus taught that we can understand or apply to our lives

*Orange* = insights we can apply based on the way various people responded to him

### JESUS ARRIVES IN JERUSALEM (11:1-11)

**Countdown:** At this point Jesus has six days to live. It’s Sunday today and he will be crucified on Friday.

#### *Jesus comes to Jerusalem as king*

1 As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, 2 saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. 3 If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.’”

4 They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, 5 some people standing there asked, “What are you doing, untying that colt?” 6 They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the

people let them go. 7 When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it.

- **Find your significance in the service of Christ.**
  - Although it's doubtful that Mark meant us to see this, the colt serves as a picture of the life of someone in Christ's service. Just think about the colt, and as you do, notice the parallels with the life of a Christian: The colt was oblivious to what was happening in the world. It was apparently insignificant in the bigger scheme of things, but then Jesus sovereignly chose it for a purpose. Amazingly, it was given the dignity of being needed by the Lord (v3). It turned out to be amazingly significant. It didn't generate its own purpose and destiny, but fitted into what Christ was doing in the world. It first had to be untied and set free before it could be brought to Jesus. And it didn't come to Jesus on its own – Jesus sent a team of disciples (there were two of them) to set it free, and bring it to Jesus. And not only did they bring it to Jesus, they also equipped it (by throwing their cloaks over it) for the task at hand – the task of serving Jesus. Before it could serve Jesus properly it needed to be ready to serve him. And when it did serve Jesus, it served Jesus with humility (it was covered up with cloaks, and although it drew much attention to Jesus, it didn't draw much attention to itself). And its destiny was this: to partner with Christ in what he was doing in the world, to “carry” Christ forward in his kingdom-advancement, to carry his wonderful presence and character into the world.

7 When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. 8 Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. 9 Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted,

“Hosanna!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” [*Psalm 118:25,26*]

10 “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!”

“Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

11 Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

- **Jesus is the humble Messiah-king.**
  - In verses 2-3 we see that Jesus took great care to get a colt. Either he had pre-arranged the use of it, or he knew by supernatural means its whereabouts and what it would take to get that colt. The colt was to be used by Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem. The question is, why was Jesus so intent on riding into Jerusalem on a colt?

- The answer certainly lies in the ancient prophesy about the coming Messiah in Zechariah 9:9: “Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See your king comes to you righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”
- The word “Hosanna” means two things: “God saves us” and “Praise God”. The phrase, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” is a quote from Psalm 118, which is a Psalm full of prophetic echoes of the coming Messiah (Psalm 118:22). The phrase simply means, “Welcome to all who come in the name of the Lord!”
- Amazingly, Jesus chose not a mighty war-horse to enter into Jerusalem – but rather a young donkey! Jesus had made it clear that his kingdom turned the values of the world upside-down. In his kingdom greatness is the readiness to serve, the readiness to humble oneself. But unfortunately the disciples were still expecting Christ to set up a political kingdom based in Jerusalem. We see this in the spreading of branches across the road. Two hundred years before Judas Maccabeus, the great conquering king, received a welcome like this as he entered Jerusalem. By this stage, it seems the disciples had become outspoken about their belief that Jesus was the Messiah. We see this in the refrain, “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!” They, and the crowds, were shouting aloud that they believed Jesus was the Messiah who would continue David’s kingdom.
- Verse 11 tells us that Jesus arrived late, and that he took a good look at the city and the temple (he was going to the temple and was to “judge” it the following day – no doubt in fulfilment of Malachi 3:1-3). He didn’t act immediately, but rather pondered these things before acting (see verse 15). We can learn from him to think carefully before responding. Since the city was packed with thousands of visitors (it was Passover) he and the disciples stayed in the neighbouring village of Bethany by night (see verse 19), and spent their days in Jerusalem. It was Sunday night, and he would return to the village every night until Wednesday night.

### CHRIST’S JUDGMENT ON FRUITLESSNESS (11:12-19)

*Jesus curses a fig tree and clears the temple courts*

12 The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. 13 Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. 14 Then he said to the tree, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard him say it.

**Countdown:** At this point Jesus has five days to live. It’s Monday today and Jesus will be crucified on Friday.

- **Outward show of religion without vital inner substance is under Christ's curse.**
  - Verses 12-14 speak of the cursing of the fig tree. Verses 15-17 speak of the judgment of the temple. And verses 20-21 speak of the cursing of the fig tree. What is Mark trying to say? He “sandwiches” the judgment of the temple with the cursing of the fig tree. This means that the cursing of the fig tree is an acted out parable of the judgment of the temple.
  - What was the fig tree guilty of? In reality, the fig tree did nothing wrong since “it wasn't the season for figs”. But Jesus uses it as a metaphoric parable of the guilt of people: all its leaves gave the impression that it was full of fruit, but in reality it had no fruit on it at all. Similarly, the temple, and for that matter the whole religion of Jerusalem, gave the outward impressions of fruitful relationship with God, and fruitful service of him – but in reality it had no fruit at all! This reminds us of 2 Timothy 3:5 which speaks of the sinful human tendency to have “a form of religion” but to have no inner reality.
  - Today, we, as individual Christians and as churches, are also in danger when we project an impression of godliness and fruitfulness, but don't really bear the fruit of changed lives. Outward religion without inner substance is under Christ's curse.

15 On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, 16 and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. 17 And as he taught them, he said, “Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’ [Isaiah 56:7]? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’ [Jeremiah 7:11]”

18 The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.

19 When evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

- **Christ does not tolerate it when Christians and churches lose their outward-focused sense of mission and generosity, and turn inward, becoming self-serving, exclusivist and judgmental.**
  - Theologians have grappled with the question, “Why did Jesus overturn the tables and drive out the sellers and buyers?” The most common answer is, “He was furious with the commercialization of the faith.” And, no doubt he was, and is. But theologians like Tom Wright have recently argued for a deeper meaning: it was symbolic of his judgment on the temple and all it stood for. This is my view too. Let me explain.

- The temple was always meant to be “a house of prayer for the nations” (Isaiah 56:7). This means that Israel was meant to be a shining light to all the nations of the world, and that all people everywhere were meant to be able to access the true and living God, Yahweh, through it. But sadly, the Jews, instead of living with an outward-focused generosity towards others, turned inwards on itself, in judgmental, exclusive, narrow religion. The temple was meant to call Israel to shine forth and serve the whole world, but instead it caused them to look down on the world with a smug attitude of superiority. What does Jesus mean by the quoting of Jeremiah 7:11, where the temple is described as a den (or cave) of robbers? The word “robber” is better translated “brigand” which refers not to the profiteering as much as to the many ultra-orthodox Jews who were bent on violence against Rome (there were many such groups in Israel at the time). Jesus was saying, instead of being ready to enlighten, the Jews were ready to condemn the world – even with violence, and sadly the temple was the “hide-out” of such people.
- Why did Jesus overturn the tables? We need to understand that the main purpose of the temple was its sacrificial system, which was meant to attain forgiveness for those who brought sacrifices. But people coming from far couldn’t bring animals for sacrifice, so would buy them at the temple. Tom Wright writes, “By stopping the entire process (of the sacrificial system), even for a short but deeply symbolic moment, Jesus was saying more powerfully than words can express: the temple is under God’s judgment. Its reason for existing is being taken away.” And, of course, the moment Jesus was sacrificed on the cross, the need for animal sacrifices (which merely served as a symbolic foreshadowing of his great sacrifice for sins) would come to an end.
- What do we learn from this? That Jesus is in judgment on us and our churches when instead of living with an outward-focus of mission, ready to bear fruit by serving and enlightening others, we turn inward and live fruitless, self-serving, exclusivist and judgmental lives. The church is in danger of this very thing. And Christ will not tolerate it. And not only that, but whenever any institution (such as a court of law, government, bank or palace etc) which was meant to exist for the benefit of others, becomes corrupt, unjust, self-serving and power-hungry, we can be sure that it too is under Christ’s judgment.

### THREE BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE PRAYER (11:20-26)

20 In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. 21 Peter remembered and said to Jesus, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!”

22 “Have faith in God,” Jesus answered.

**Countdown:** At this point Jesus has four days to live. It's **Tuesday** today and Jesus will be crucified on Friday.

- **Hold on to the faithfulness of God.**
  - We have already seen that the withering of the fig tree was primarily a symbol of Christ's judgment on the temple. But Jesus gave it a second meaning in verses 22-24: it's a picture of what faith-filled prayer can do. After all, Jesus through simple faith and prayer withered the fig tree.
  - Eaton challenges the common translation of verse 22. "Have faith in God" should rather be translated "Hold on to the faithfulness of God" he says. Not that it changes the meaning much, it just changes our understanding of what faith is. He writes, "Faith is not working up some quality in ourselves. Faith is seeing that God is faithful ... that he will keep his word."
  - *The first barrier to effective prayer is a failure to discern or hold on to the faithfulness of God.*

23 "Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and do not doubt in your heart but believe that what you say will happen, it will be done for you. 24 Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

- **Give yourself to faith-filled prayer.**
  - A mountain was symbolic of a great obstacle that a person faced. So Jesus is telling us here how to overcome some serious obstacles. The key is praying within the limits of our assurance.
  - The key word is "if" in verse 23. It explains that the prayer that gets answered by God is the prayer that comes from a heart that doesn't doubt (v23) and believes that what is asked for in prayer has been received (v24). The question is, "How do you get to such a state of heart, a state of faith and assurance?" The answer lies in verse 22, "Hold on to the faithfulness of God". Assurance is something that comes from discerning the promise of God. Until we discern the will of God in a situation, we can't overcome our doubt. Assurance is not something self-generated. It flows out of a revelation of God's power, promise and will. This is why the popular misinterpretation of this verse – namely "name it and claim it", which suggests Jesus was giving us a technique to have whatever we want whenever we want – is plain absurd.
  - *The second barrier to effective prayer is our failure to pray within the limits of our assurance.*

25-26 And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

- **Get rid of all bitterness in your heart.**
  - In verses 22-24, Jesus taught on prayer. And he suggested that unbelief and doubt are the major obstacles to prayer that moves the arm of God. Then he listed another major obstacle to prayer: unforgiveness. *The third barrier to effective prayer is a failure to identify unforgiveness in ourselves and/or a refusal to forgive others.* It's a major block to our relationship with God, and our prayer-life. It chokes up all spiritual vitality and faith.
  - But Jesus also mentions another problem with unforgiveness: it blocks off the flow of forgiveness from God to us. Is Jesus here suggesting that a forgiven Christian can lose their forgiveness / salvation if they fail to forgive? Absolutely not. Is Jesus suggesting that a person who has not forgiven others cannot receive forgiveness / salvation from God? Again, no. Most likely, he speaks of the experience of the Father's forgiveness and grace in our lives. He's simply saying, "If you do not *extend* the Father's grace and forgiveness to others, then you will not be able to *experience* the Father's grace and forgiveness yourself." So we best seek God to help us identify grudges and bitterness in our lives. And we need to forgive the moment we become aware that we are holding a grudge against another.

#### WHO DOES JESUS THINK HE IS? (11:27-12:12)

##### *The authority of Jesus questioned*

27 They arrived again in Jerusalem, and while Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him. 28 "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you authority to do this?"

29 Jesus replied, "I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. 30 John's baptism—was it from heaven, or of human origin? Tell me!"

31 They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' 32 But if we say, 'Of human origin' . . . ." (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.)

33 So they answered Jesus, "We don't know."

Jesus said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

- **Honestly search for the truth and be ready to recognize those with genuine God-given authority.**
  - The day before Jesus had brought the temple business to a halt for a short while. The questions the religious authorities were

asking were, “Who do you think you are? What gives you the right to do something like that?”

- Jesus answers in code. He answers a question with a question (v29,30) which essentially could be paraphrased as, “When John the baptizer was calling people to repent in preparation for the Messiah, and he was baptizing them, was he acting on his own authority, or was God really telling him to do that?”
- In so doing, Jesus was suggesting that the basis of his authority was the same as that of John’s. And more than that, he was cryptically suggesting that he was the Messiah that John spoke of.
- The real problem with the men asking the question is that they weren’t interested in the truth at all – it’s clear from 11:18 that they were looking for a way to kill him. They were simply trying to trap him into saying something that could get him arrested.
- Jesus’ answer to their question masterfully revealed both their hardness of heart and their fear of the people. The same hardness of heart that caused them to ignore John the baptizer’s message was what caused them to ignore anything Jesus might say (v31). They weren’t interested in the truth, only their religious power (which Jesus was threatening). But their desire to be liked by the crowds (who generally esteemed John as someone sent by God) made them too scared to undermine John’s ministry.
- Like these religious authorities, we’re all in danger of writing off those who God may genuinely be using, because we’re more interested in preserving our power, holding our position and saving face. Our quest should always be to find the truth, and to recognize those with genuine spiritual authority. Position and authority in churches and religious organizations does not immediately equate to spiritual authority, which the Holy Spirit alone can give to a person.

## Mark Chapter Twelve

**Colour-code summary:** the four main ways God speaks to us through the Gospels...

*Blue* = something about Jesus’ uniqueness and Lordship that shows he is worthy of our devotion, trust and surrender

*Green* = something about Jesus’ character or ministry that we can imitate

*Red* = something Jesus taught that we can understand or apply to our lives

*Orange* = insights we can apply based on the way various people responded to him

### Continuation of ‘WHO DOES JESUS THINK HE IS? (11:27-12:12)’

#### *The parable of the tenants*

1 Jesus then began to speak to them in parables: “A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to

another place. 2 At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. 3 But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. 4 Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. 5 He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed.

6 “He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’

7 “But the tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ 8 So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

9 “What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.

10 Haven’t you read this passage of Scripture:

“ ‘The stone the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone;

11 the Lord has done this,  
and it is marvelous in our eyes’ [*Psalm 118:22,23*]?”

12 Then the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away.

- **There is no one like Jesus!**

- We need to keep in mind that Jesus was still answering the religious authorities who had, in 11:28, basically asked the question, “Who do you think you are?” His first answer was indirect (11:29-30). But he gives a second answer – this time in the form of a parable. So who is Jesus, according to this parable?
- 1) *Jesus is in the line of the prophets.* The parable is easy enough to discern. The nation Israel is the vineyard (which was a well-known metaphor for Israel, especially with passages such as Isaiah 5:1-7). The man who planted the vineyard is God himself. The farmers are the political and religious authorities who oversee the nation. The servants sent to collect the fruit are the prophets of old who were rejected. Jesus is the son. But the first thing to notice is that Jesus was saying that he was in the line of the prophets, one of the servants sent by God to the nation of Israel. After all, he was the great prophet promised by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15.
- 2) *Jesus is the unique Son of God (v6).* Jesus is in a category of his own. He is greater than all the prophets of old. He is God’s own son, the one who is the co-heir of everything that belongs to God. He is the rightful heir of the nation of Israel, and the whole world.

- 3) *Jesus was destined to die (v8)*. Jesus uses the parable to expose the real motives of the people asking him the question. He knew and they knew that it was a matter of time before he'd be killed. They wanted him dead because his claims and popularity were threatening their so-called "leadership" of the nation. They refused to let go of their prestige and power. Ironically this parable motivated them even more to kill him (v12).
- 4) *Jesus' murder is what finally caused God to execute judgment on the corrupt authorities (v9)*. In AD 70 the city of Jerusalem, and its temple, were destroyed by Rome. This certainly was a fulfilment of God's threat of executed judgment in verse 9.
- 5) *Though the religious leaders tried to get rid of him, ultimately and wonderfully, he would come out on top (v10,11)*. Jesus changes his picture from the vineyard with the authorities as the farmers, to a building with the authorities as the builders. When Jesus came into Jerusalem just two days previously, the crowds had shouted verses from Psalm 118, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" Here he quotes verses 22-23 of the same Psalm. Paraphrased this quote says, "Though the builders (ie the authorities) rejected the stone, it turned out to be the most important stone in the building, the stone that holds the whole building together. The Lord would ultimately cause this stone to come out on top, and everyone will get to see it with their own eyes." And this is what happened. Though Jesus was crucified, he rose again from the dead, ascended to the right hand of God, and had been advancing his kingdom on the earth through his Word, his Spirit and his church, and ultimately everyone will acknowledge him, even if they once rejected him.
- Wow, there is no one like Jesus! No other person in history even comes close to him in terms of his uniqueness!

### JESUS, TAKING TRICKY THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS (12:13-34)

#### *Paying the imperial tax to Caesar*

13 Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. 14 They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? 15 Should we pay or shouldn't we?"

But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." 16 They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied.

17 Then Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

And they were amazed at him.

- It is possible and necessary to give allegiance to both government and to God.
  - As in 3:6, the Pharisees and the Herodians (who usually were against each other) here partnered together in their attempts to take Jesus down. This time they tried to flatter him (reminding him of his “integrity” and his courage). They tried to trap him into saying something that would turn either the Jews or the Romans against him. They did this by asking whether they should pay the tax that Caesar demanded from all non-Roman citizens in his empire, including the Jews. Of course this was a sore point for the Jews who hated Caesar for this demand. Besides, the law of Moses said that the only rightful ruler of Israel was to be a Jew. So, to support Caesar’s claim to be king over Israel was to go against the law of Moses, and to potentially turn the Jews against him. However, if Jesus said it was wrong to pay Caesar his tax, then they would simply tell Pontius Pilate (ruler over Judea, and present at that time in Jerusalem) that Jesus was a rebellious revolutionary – and Jesus would be in trouble.
  - But Jesus brilliantly answers in a way that evades the trap. On one side of the coin was an image of Caesar, with the words “Augustus Tiberius, son of the divine Augustus” (Caesar claimed to be the son of God) and the other side the words, “High Priest” (Caesar was the leader of the Roman cult). The irony is that Jesus himself is both Son of God and God’s High Priest (as the book of Hebrews would later explain).
  - By saying, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s” Jesus was saying at least two things: 1) He was basically saying, “Yes, pay the tax” but in a creative way: “Since it has his face on it, it must belong to him, so give it to him.” Because of this statement Christians have come to understand that they need to give loyalty to their government, as Romans 13:1-7 would later say. 2) He was also hinting at revolution (but not a military one). Let me explain. Two hundred years before, Judas Maccabeus led the revolution against foreign powers and their slogan was: “Give back to the pagans what they deserve”. Wright says that Jesus’ words “could be taken as a coded revolutionary slogan; after all, the kingdom of God is all about the true God becoming king of the world, demoting the petty princelings who style themselves sons of God, high priests or whatever”.
  - By saying, “Give to God what is God’s” he is making them and us go away and think, “What does he mean by that?” Perhaps he meant that in the same way that Caesar claimed to be the Son of God and the High Priest, and therefore deserved allegiance – so he Jesus was the Son of God and High Priest, and therefore deserved their allegiance – the only difference being that Caesar wasn’t really what he claimed, whereas he was? Perhaps he meant that in the same way that the coin had Caesar’s image on it, and

therefore was to given to Caesar, so we as humans have God's image on us, and therefore should surrender ourselves to God.

- In a nutshell, Jesus was saying that it is possible and necessary to give allegiance to both our government and to God. (Acts 3:29 makes it clear however that our allegiance to God is the *higher* of the two.)

#### *Marriage at the resurrection*

18 Then the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. 19 "Teacher," they said, "Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. 20 Now there were seven brothers. The first one married and died without leaving any children. 21 The second one married the widow, but he also died, leaving no child. It was the same with the third. 22 In fact, none of the seven left any children. Last of all, the woman died too. 23 At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?"

24 Jesus replied, "Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? 25 When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. 26 Now about the dead rising—have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the account of the burning bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob' [Exodus 3:6]? 27 He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!"

- **Resurrection-life is a definite future reality.**
  - Who were the Sadducees? They were the wealthy, powerful priests who co-operated with the Romans. Though they believed in God, they were sceptical about things like angels, miracles and life after death. They didn't believe that there was an after-life, since they argued that the only trustworthy Scriptures were those in the "Book of Moses", which is the first five books of our Bible. They said that belief in the after-life was an idea introduced in later "dubious" (so they claimed) sections, in verses such as Isaiah 26:19 and Daniel 12:2,3.
  - In verses 19-23 they ask a far-fetched question that is designed to make the possibility of after-like look ridiculous. They pick up on the Jewish law that tells a younger brother to marry the childless wife of a dead older brother in order to carry on the older brother's name. They imagine a situation in heaven where one woman has married seven men: which one will she live with in heaven?
  - But Jesus refuted their question (he blatantly said that they "are in error" about their non-belief in an after-life) with four arguments:
    - 1) They don't know the Scriptures (v24);

2) The real reason is that they don't believe God has the power to raise people to life after they die (v24);

3) The resurrection-life, though similar in some ways, is very different to this one. After all, like the angels, we won't be able to (or need to) reproduce, so marriage relationships will not necessarily stop existing in heaven, but they will not be anything like we can imagine (v25). Notice that Jesus didn't say that we would be like the angels *in all regards* (such as being disembodied spirits). The very talk of "resurrection" makes it clear that we will be given new resurrection-bodies; and

4) They have not pondered Exodus 3:6 (in the Book of Moses), which refers to God's affirming that his relationship with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob continues in the present tense even long after their death. Eaton adds to this fourth point that Jesus was in fact referring to God's promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that had not been totally fulfilled in their lives, and therefore must be fulfilled in the next life, else God would be a liar. In other words, Jesus argued that the faithfulness of God to these three men necessitated that they live on forever.

- Jesus wanted them to know, as he wants us to know, that resurrection-life (receiving an eternal resurrection body in the new heavens and the earth) is a definite future reality – and that a lack of discerning the Bible's teaching, God's power, the changed nature of the after-life and the faithfulness of God is what undermines our belief in it. But the Bible is true! And God is powerful! And resurrection-life is unimaginably different! And God is faithful! So don't doubt its reality.

#### *The greatest commandment*

28 One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

29 "The most important one," answered Jesus ...

- **Some instructions in the Bible are more foundational than others.**
  - The man referred to the 613 laws of Moses when he asked, "of all of these, which is the most important?" He implies that some parts of the Bible are more basic and foundational than others, and therefore more important. But is he right? Jesus immediately agrees with him (v29). This is important for us. We certainly believe that all Scripture is God-breathed and necessary for Christian living (2 Timothy 3:16,17) but here we see that some Scriptures, some instructions in the Bible are more basic, foundational and therefore important than others.

- The challenge is for every believer who studies the Bible to discern the most basic instructions to the Christian life, upon which other smaller instructions find their place.

29 “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength’ [Deuteronomy 6:4,5]. 31 The second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ [Leviticus 19:18]. There is no commandment greater than these.”

- **God is one.**
  - That God is one (v29) is one of the most important descriptions about God. It tells us four things about him:
    - 1) *All of life is under God.* Before Judaism and Christianity most of the world was “polytheistic” in that they believed in many gods. Each god had his own region (eg Babylon and Egypt had different gods for example, and every town and house would have their very own gods) and area of focus (eg fertility, judgment, water, harvest etc). This led people to live very disintegrated lives. The claim that “the Lord is one” was a radical call to integrate one’s life under the leadership and care of one God.
    - 2) *None of God’s attributes contradict the rest.* Eaton writes, “We must be careful not to think of God as though there were bits and pieces in his nature. God is one. When he acts he does so with his whole being. There are no ‘parts’ to God. Yet it is possible to meditate on different aspects of God’s character. Every aspect holds together with every other aspect. For example, his omnipotence does not clash with his gentleness, nor his holiness with his grace, nor his love with his anger.”
    - 3) *Although there is three-ness in God (he consists of Father, Son and Spirit) he is still one God, not three gods.* Jesus is God. The Father is God. The Spirit is God. And yet God is one. But I cannot get into the matter of the Trinity here for this passage doesn’t deal with it.
    - 4) *There is no other God but him.* See verse 32, where the man asking Jesus this question makes it clear that this is implied by “God is one”.
- **The most important instruction for living out one’s faith is “love God” and “love each other”.**
  - Jesus quotes the famous prayer that Jews of that day (and of this day) would quote on a daily basis: the “Shema” of Deuteronomy 6:4-5. He says that this is the most basic and important of all 613 laws in the Mosaic covenant. We are called to love God with everything we have. Since he is one, and he is therefore Lord over every aspect of our being (ie our hearts, our soul, our mind, and our strength), we are to love him with all of ourselves. To love him comes out of a revelation of the fact that he is a wonderful

God who seeks to integrate our lives under his care and leadership. To love him means to worship him, to trust him, to surrender to him, to think on him, to depend on him, to obey him, to listen to him.

- Jesus then tags on a second command, which he says is intricately connected to the first one, and that is to “love your neighbour as yourself” (quoting Leviticus 19:18). Apparently, as we love God we are enabled to begin to really love others. Instead of living just for ourselves (which is the sinful tendency of everyone), we begin to live for others!
- Interestingly, although the Christian is not under the law of Moses (as the book of Galatians so powerfully reveals), Jesus made it clear that in his kingdom these two commands would continue. And without saying it directly, he suggested that somehow his kingdom-mission in the world would make it possible for us to become the kind of people who deeply love God and love others.
- Fascinatingly, Jesus waits till he is days away from his own crucifixion before he teaches this. There on the cross, he showed us for all time that he is the perfect embodiment of love. After all, it was love for God (that caused him to do God’s will no matter how much it cost him) and love for us (it was us he was seeking to “give his life as a ransom” for (see 10:45)).

32 “Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. 33 To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

34 When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

- In your quest for genuine spirituality, it is possible to be close but to miss the most important piece of the puzzle: faith in Jesus.
  - The man was in total agreement with Jesus’ answer to his question (v32,33). He acknowledged that the love-commands are more important than the countless ritual commands (v33).
  - But watch what Jesus did next. Instead of keeping the question at an intellectual, philosophical level, Jesus comments on the man’s life. (This ability of Jesus to move from the philosophical to the personal is exactly what stopped people from asking any more questions (v34).)
  - And listen to what he said, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” By saying this, he was affirming that the man was on the right track. The man realized that the transformation of our lives so that we more deeply love God and others is more important than the outward rituals of religion, and even the law of Moses.

- But Jesus was also saying that the man had a way to go. He brought in the subject of the kingdom of God. By kingdom of God, Jesus meant “the experience of God working powerfully in and through you”. And, of course, Jesus is suggesting that he himself is the king of the kingdom. It’s as if he was saying to the man, “You’re close – but you’re missing something. Even though you rightly understand that loving God and others is supremely important, it doesn’t mean you’re experiencing God working powerfully in your life yet.” And until the man realized that Jesus is the Messiah he would continue to miss it.
- Still today, there are many people that understand that true spirituality should make us love God and others more deeply, but fail to experience the powerful reality that makes this true of our own lives – and until we grasp who Jesus is, we will be close but still missing the most important piece of the puzzle. In Galatians 5, Paul affirmed this same truth and wrote, “All that really matters is faith [in Christ] expressing itself in love [towards others]”.
- **When having spiritual conversations, learn to respond to philosophical questions in a way that causes people to think about their state of heart.**
  - In 11:13-34 Jesus is asked three tricky theological questions: one about tax, one about life after death, and one about what’s most important in life. And he answers all of the questions both theologically and personally. By personally I mean that he ends up shining his searching spotlight onto the people asking the question. In response to the tax question his final words are, “Give to God what is God’s”. In response to the resurrection question he blatantly says, “You are in error”. In response to the “What’s most important...” question he says, “You’re nearly there, but not there yet”. Eventually, everyone stops asking questions. It seems that Jesus has the ability to, in tennis-speak, “hit the ball back at twice the speed”.
  - We can learn from him. When we’re having conversations of a theological, philosophical or spiritual nature, we should seek to “hit the ball back over the net” in a way that gets the person to consider where they are personally with regard to the subject at hand. In other words, refuse to keep the conversation purely theoretical. After all, Jesus is interested in people’s hearts not just their ideas.

*Whose son is the Messiah?*

35 While Jesus was teaching in the temple courts, he asked, “Why do the teachers of the law say that the Messiah is the son of David? 36 David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared:

“ ‘The Lord said to my Lord:

“Sit at my right hand

until I put your enemies  
under your feet.” ‘ [Psalm 110:1]  
37 David himself calls him ‘Lord.’ How then can he be his son?”  
The large crowd listened to him with delight.

- **Jesus is Lord, far greater than even the greatest king!**
  - When he arrived in Jerusalem, on the Tuesday before he died, Jesus had been asked lots of questions. The day before he had cleansed the temple, and the first question the religious authorities asked him was who he thought he was to do such a thing (11:28). Jesus had responded to this question with a question that subtly revealed who he claimed he was (11:29-33), and then a parable that again cryptically revealed who he was (12:1-12). They had tried to catch him out with other questions because they simply refused to accept that he was the Messiah (12:13-34). Once they were too afraid to ask any more questions, he came out and asked everyone a question, a riddle really, to help them re-think who the Messiah really was. That’s what was happening in these verses (12:35-37). So let’s look at the riddle.
  - The ancient Scriptures made it clear that the Messiah was to be a descendant of David (see Isaiah 9:7 and 2 Samuel 7:12,16). This caused people to assume that the Messiah would in some ways be junior to King David. After all, how can your descendant be superior to you? And it also caused them to assume that the Messiah would be a king like David, having a political, military kingdom set up in Jerusalem. But Jesus points out another Scripture which revealed that even David believed the Messiah would be superior to himself. The Scripture is Psalm 110:1, where the Lord (ie God) said to my (ie David’s) Lord (ie the Messiah)... Jesus makes the point: the Messiah is not junior to David, but senior! And David even worships him by calling him “my Lord”! Jesus is in effect saying, “It’s true that the Messiah is the son of David, but it’s also true that the Messiah is the Lord of David!” And of course he is speaking about himself.
  - Later, the disciples would quote Psalm 110:1 to speak of how Jesus, after he was raised from the dead, was also exalted to the right hand of God from where he now co-rules the entire universe, where he rules with unrivalled authority (see Acts 2:33-36, and notice that Peter describes Jesus as *both* Lord and Messiah). In Revelation 22:16 the words of Jesus would make the same point, but this time with no riddle: “I am the Root and the Offspring of David.” David was the greatest king who ever lived in the minds of the Jews – and here Jesus claimed to be even greater! And later as the disciples reflected on Psalm 110, which Jesus attributed to himself – they would come across Psalm 110:4 which speaks of him as a priest. And a whole book, the book of Hebrews, would be written on this theme: Jesus is not just King, but he is the Priest-King!

### *Warning against the teachers of the law*

38 As he taught, Jesus said, “Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, 39 and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at banquets. 40 They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.”

- **Beware of abusing your status as a “spiritual leader”.**
  - The teachers of the law were viewed as the “spiritual leaders” of the day. But they missed it completely – instead of existing for the benefit of their followers, they began to see their followers as existing for their own benefit. Instead of being motivated by the servant-hearted love that Jesus said is at the core of spiritual leadership (see 10:42-45), they were motivated by their desire for popularity, respect and honour (10:38,39). And devastatingly they benefited financially from the widows that came to them for help, rather than helping those widows (12:40). And despite the wickedness of their hearts, they still projected images of being right with God, as seen by their “lengthy prayers” (12:40). Although people still applauded these apparently godly men, Jesus announced God’s great displeasure and imminent severe punishment (v40).
  - If we are viewed as spiritual leaders, we must be careful not to abuse our status. Instead of being motivated by popularity, honour, respect and financial gain, we should be motivated by servant-hearted love.

### *The widow’s offering*

41 Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. 42 But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny.

43 Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. 44 They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”

- **Jesus sees not just what you give, but what you keep.**
  - In verses 38-40, Jesus had just condemned both religion as an outward show and the abuse and neglect of widows.
  - Although most people are impressed by outward appearances, Jesus is not. Verse 41 tells us he “watched” people giving money, but he was free from the tendency to be impressed by outward

show, and discerned the “heart” behind the act. He noticed that rich people were giving impressively, but what impressed him most was the person that gave most unimpressively – a widow who gave two coins. But why was Jesus so impressed? Because he was looking not so much at what people gave, as much as what they kept.

- Still today, we need to be generous. Jesus did not speak against the generosity of the rich people in this event. But we need to remember that Jesus is watching not just what we give, but also the heart with which we give, and what we keep for ourselves.