

Following Jesus

THE GOSPEL OF MARK

A DEVOTIONAL COMMENTARY

BY REV. DAVID EMERY

MARCH 1-7

Mark 3:1-6, Come To The Center: Jesus enters the synagogue, and everyone is watching him. The religious leaders are watching him closely. They are looking for a reason to take him down. The disciples are watching him too. They are still trying to understand who this man really is, and where all of this is going. And there is a man there with a withered hand, who has been living with it for a very long time. Jesus knows what is at stake here. He knows what they are hoping he will do, or not do. He can read the room. So he does something deliberate and bold. He calls the man forward. Jesus moves him to the center of the room. It is as if he is saying, Will you look at this man? Can you see his life, and what he has been living with? Do you even care?

Jesus puts him in the center to make this clear: this is a real person with a real need. This is not just an argument about religion or rules. This is a human being, and Jesus wants them to really see him, to see his life, his pain, and what he has been carrying. Jesus is not the one on trial here. They are. Then Jesus asks a simple question:

“Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?” It is not a complicated question. It gets to the heart of things. What is this day for? What kind of God does it point to? No one answers. The room goes quiet. The silence tells its own story. They care about the wrong things. They are more angry that Jesus has embarrassed them than they are moved by this man’s suffering. Before Jesus heals the man, Mark tells us how Jesus looks around the room. He is angry and grieved by the hardness he sees in their hearts. Anger and grief often sit side by side, especially when something is wrong and broken. This man is more than an object lesson here. Jesus cares about him. So he tells him to stretch out his hand. And the withered hand is healed. Jesus brings hope and life and grace to the center of the room.

Everything he touches that is withered lives again. But there is more going on here. The invitation does not stop with this man. It is there for everyone in the room, especially the Pharisees. They are standing just as close. Jesus is asking all of them to come to the center, to recognize what is withered, to open what has gone closed, to let healing happen in them too. But they refuse. Mark tells us they walk away. Mark does not tell this story so we can judge them. He tells it because he wants us to step forward too, to move toward the center of the room, into the story. What is withered in us? What has grown stiff, guarded, worn down, cold, or closed? Jesus does not bring us to the center to shame us. He brings us there to heal us. He does not want us to walk away. Will we stretch out our hand?

So this prayer: Jesus, bring us to the center and heal what is withered in us.

Mark 3:7-19, From Shoreline to Mountain: The scene begins at the shoreline. People have come from everywhere—Galilee, Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, and from Tyre and Sidon. They have heard about Jesus' teaching, and they have heard about his miracles. They come because they are sick, because their bodies are broken, because their lives have been narrowed by pain. They come because in their world there are few places left to go, if any. They come desperate for help, in a time when people who needed help were often pushed aside and forgotten. Sickness was physical, but it also carried social and spiritual stigma. Illness isolated people. Deformity marked them as unclean. Suffering carried shame.

You did something to deserve this. The sick were excluded, from community, from worship, from ordinary human touch. And so the scene is desperate and chaotic. Crowds press in from every direction. People reach for Jesus so aggressively that he has to get into a boat so he will not be crushed. Everyone is shouting at the same time. People are not waiting their turn. They have been waiting their whole lives. Jesus heals many. He touches those others have learned to avoid. He restores people whose lives have been shaped by rejection and loss. And on top of all this, unclean spirits shout at him—recognizing him, naming him, trying to stop him. Jesus is fighting against whatever destroys human life: sickness and spiritual bondage, the abuse of power, cold-hearted religion. The shouting spirits remind us that this work will always meet resistance.

Grace is not neutral. It threatens what keeps people trapped. And Jesus stands in the middle of it all. Mark does not say that everyone is healed. He says Jesus heals many. The pain does not simply disappear, because Jesus is doing more than easing symptoms. He is confronting what keeps breaking human life in the first place. This moment is not just about one healing, or even many healings. It is about the world Jesus has stepped into, a world that keeps producing more pain than any one person can absorb. The crowds do not thin out. For every body made whole, there are more still waiting. So he leaves the shoreline and goes up the mountain. What is happening below cannot rest on one body alone. The work of confronting sickness, exclusion, spiritual violence, and the misuse of power will require people. The kingdom

Jesus is bringing will need witnesses, hands and voices, lives shaped by his teaching, his example, and his presence. In Scripture, mountains are where clarity comes, where direction is given, where God calls people. And on this mountain, Jesus appoints twelve to be apostles, those who are sent. The word comes from *apostolos*: an authorized messenger, an envoy, one sent on behalf of another. These are not heroes or spiritual elites. They are ordinary people, with rough edges and mixed motives. One of them will betray him. All of them will fail him at some point. And still, Jesus calls them. Here we see something essential. In a world marked by suffering and division, Jesus does not only heal, he gathers people and sends them. He forms a community that belongs to him and places them back into the places of pain.

This is the church he leaves behind. And this is the world into which we are sent. Our world is desperate too. War and death. Children killed by violence. Refugees fleeing with nowhere to go, or nowhere that will take them. Political violence and fear. Economic insecurity. Deep division. State-sponsored cruelty. We watch immigrants turned into threats, neighbors reduced to talking points, entire communities treated as expendable. Many are sick or struggling, not only in body, but in spirit, worn down by anxiety, grief, and exhaustion. Pushed to the edges. Even vilified. This is not abstract. This is the shoreline now. Like those twelve, we belong to him. And like them, we are called and sent, not to escape the world, not to stand above it, but to step back into it. Jesus meets us there. He stands in the middle of it all. And he sends us with him, not as saviors or spectators, but as people shaped by his presence for the sake of the world.

So this prayer: Jesus, meet us at the shoreline, and make us yours to send.

Mark 3:20-35, Jesus and Family: There is a lot of drama in this scene. The pace is fast. One moment flows straight into the next. Miracles. Crowds. Demons. Opposition. Everywhere Jesus goes, people are pushing in on him. The crowds are so large now that Jesus and the disciples can't even find time to eat. There are needs everywhere. Cries for help. Desperation. Nothing is easy. You can imagine the disciples' heads spinning, wondering what they have gotten themselves into. And yet something has kept them there. They've seen what others are seeing too—Jesus' compassion, the authority of his teaching, his care for people and for life. His warmth. His smile. There is something unmistakably good about him. But not everyone sees it that way. Word reaches Jesus' family, and they grow concerned.

This has gone too far. Someone is going to get hurt. A rabbi teaching in synagogues is one thing, but this? Crowds. Conflict. Attention from powerful people? They decide they need to stop him before the whole thing gets out of hand. And then the opposition expands. Legal experts come down from Jerusalem. And they're not curious about him. They come to condemn him. They say Jesus is driving out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons. Satan himself. This isn't just a disagreement. It's an insult. Beelzebul is a mocking name, "Lord of the Flies," or "Lord of Dung." A way of saying that whatever power is at work in Jesus cannot be from God. It must be corrupt. Dangerous. Evil. Jesus doesn't take the bait. He lobs truth right back at them. He confronts them with a parable. If a house is divided, it won't last. And if Satan is fighting himself, his power is already falling apart.

Then Jesus shifts the image: no one breaks into a strong man's house without first tying him up. The point is clear. Evil isn't gaining ground, it's being confronted and undone. Then Jesus says something sobering. All sins can be forgiven. But calling the work of God evil, refusing to see what is plainly good as good, cuts us off from grace itself. Not because God refuses to forgive, but because we refuse to recognize God at work. And this is where it turns personal. Jesus' family is still there, standing outside the house, unable to get to him because of the crowd.

A message is passed along: Your mother and your brothers are looking for you. Jesus looks around at the people seated near him and says, "Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." He isn't rejecting his family. He's naming something new. A different kind of belonging. Belonging to Jesus isn't about family ties or having inside access. It isn't about being close enough to touch him or connected to the right people. It's about response—listening, trusting, and doing the will of God as best you can. And what does doing the will of God look like? In Mark, it looks like what Jesus is already doing—showing compassion, freeing people who are bound, telling the truth, and choosing love even when it disrupts the status quo.

This story also leaves us with a warning. The religious leaders see good happening—people being healed, lives being restored—and they call it evil. Not because it isn't life-giving, but because it makes them uncomfortable and challenges what they think they know about how God should work. That's where we need to pay close attention. God may be at work in ways that make us uncomfortable or don't match what we expect. And when we label that work as wrong, we don't just miss what God is doing—we can end up working against it. This happens more than we would like to think. Instead of helping God, we get in the way. The call here is humility—to stay attentive, to let the fruit speak, and to be careful we aren't opposing the very grace God is bringing into the world.

So this prayer: Jesus, help us recognize your grace and not resist it.

Mark 4:1–20, The Cost of Distraction: Jesus slows things down. Until now in Mark, he has been moving quickly from place to place. Here, he stops to teach. The crowd presses in so tightly that he gets into a boat. And we are invited to press in too. He begins with one word: "Listen." It is a word that appears more than once in this parable, and it raises a question for us as readers. Are we listening? Are we paying attention? In Mark, listening is never passive. Listening means receiving what Jesus says and allowing it to take root in how we live. Listening leads to action, we leave old patterns, change direction, and follow him. When we listen to Jesus, we give him space to interrupt our lives and reshape us.

What we pay attention to shapes who we are, whether we are aware of it or not. We are bombarded every day by news media, social media, political voices, and the constant noise of our culture. It presses in on us and forms us. In comparison, scripture and the teaching of Jesus often do not have the same level of access to our hearts and minds. Our attention is limited. Our lives are crowded. Distraction is constant. In this parable, distraction is not a small problem. It is spiritually dangerous. Shallow attention leads to shallow roots. Worry and competing voices choke what is trying to grow. Distraction keeps the word on the surface, where it cannot mature and grow. The deeper issue isn't always the noise itself, but what we may be missing, the life God desires to give us. God has so much life to give, and so often we simply miss it. Jesus tells a story about a farmer who scatters seed everywhere.

The seed is given generously, to all kinds of people and all kinds of soil. The question is not about the seed but about how it is received. What kind of soil are we? Worry, fear, and distraction make this difficult, yet Jesus tells us that when the seed is received deeply, life grows. Good things take root. Though Jesus does not name the fruit, we can imagine lives producing love, joy, peace, patience, and self-control as the word takes root. The disciples then ask why Jesus teaches in parables at all. Why not speak plainly? Why make it hard to understand? At first, Jesus' response sounds harsh, as if he does not want some people to understand. But what seems to be at stake is not exclusion, but the condition of the heart.

Parables require attention. They cannot be rushed or skimmed. They ask something of us. Those who are willing to listen deeply are drawn further into life with God. Those who remain on the surface hear the words but miss their life-giving depth. The parable does not prevent understanding so much as it reveals whether we are truly listening. This passage invites us to slow down and make room. To carve out some quiet space. To notice what has our attention and what is actually shaping us. And to ask, simply and honestly, Are we listening? Perhaps the prayer here is not for clarity, but for openness, maybe even for passionate desire, that God would help us receive the life God is already eager to give.

So this prayer: Lord, help us listen in ways that allow your word to take root in us.

Mark 4:21-32, Seeds Are Growing: Mark strings several parables together here. It would be easy to assume he is gathering a few "greatest hits" from Jesus' teaching. But by now, as we read Mark carefully, we know better. Mark is a skilled storyteller. He is shaping this moment with care. Everything belongs together.

Again and again, Mark presses the same invitation: open your eyes, open your ears. He wants us to see Jesus and hear him. He is drawing us into the story so that we, too, must decide what we will do with Jesus—whether we will listen, trust, and follow. The theme keeps returning: pay attention.

Each teaching offers a simple word.
Jesus says a light is not meant to be hidden.

God is not trying to conceal what God is doing. The question is whether we are willing to notice.

Jesus says the measure we use will be the measure we receive. The posture we bring matters. Openness creates room for more life. What we carry into listening shapes what we are able to receive. Jesus says a seed grows while the farmer sleeps.

God is at work beyond our effort and control. Growth happens quietly, even when we cannot see it or measure it. Jesus says the mustard seed starts small and becomes something that gives shelter.

The Kingdom of God does not begin loudly or impressively. It begins small, hidden, and patient—and it is real and growing.

Taken together, Mark is leading us to see that the Kingdom of God is already here. Seeds have been planted. God is already at work in ways we may not yet understand.

And then comes the question Mark leaves with us: Can you see it? Can you hear it? What if the answer is yes? If we can see and hear what God is doing, we become less anxious about outcomes. We stop trying to rush growth or force clarity. We learn to trust slow work. We become more attentive to small signs of life—quiet faithfulness, unseen love, ordinary moments where something real is taking root.

We grow more patient with ourselves and with others, trusting that becoming takes time. And we find ourselves joining Jesus, not managing the Kingdom, but participating in it—listening, following, tending what has been entrusted to us.

God is at work.
The Kingdom is here.
The seed is growing.
Can you see it?
Can you hear it?
Will you trust the hidden, patient work of God—and join Jesus in it?

So this prayer: Jesus, help us see what you are doing and trust your slow work.

Mark 4:35-41, Getting in the Boat: Christianity is dangerous—but not always in the same way. It is dangerous when it aligns itself with power and refuses to question itself. History shows how easily that combination turns faith into a weapon. When Christianity weds itself to power, it so often ends up hurting the poor, the immigrant, and the vulnerable, all while using religious language to justify the harm.

But Christianity is also dangerous in a very different way. Dangerous when it refuses to bless injustice. When it refuses to choose popularity over doing what is right, or being right over being kind. Dangerous when it stands with the poor, the hungry, the sick, the excluded, and those the world would rather forget. This kind of faith unsettles people in charge, because it threatens what works for them and calls attention to who gets hurt in the process.

Again and again, God goes to the edges before going to the center. God does not enter history through force or protection, but through vulnerability. A child. Born to parents with no status or leverage. Threatened by a king. Entering quietly and exposed, on the margins of power.

This same pattern shows up in the ministry of Jesus. In Mark 4:35–41, after drawing large crowds through teaching and healing, Jesus turns to his disciples and says, “Let us go to the other side.” The other side is not just farther away. It is unfamiliar territory—beyond what the disciples know and can control. It is a place where Jesus will meet someone everyone else has already written off.

On the way, a storm rises. The wind is strong. The waves crash. The disciples are afraid. They wake Jesus, who is asleep in the boat, and he asks them, “Why are you afraid?” It is a strange question, because fear makes sense. There are always reasons to be afraid: fear of change, fear of losing what feels familiar, fear of what it might cost to do the right thing. Fear always shows up when following Jesus takes us somewhere we did not plan to go.

Jesus silences the wind and the waves. But the heart of the story is not only that the storm is calmed. It is that Jesus led them into it. The crossing itself is the point.

The church cannot stay where it is comfortable. Christ calls his people into movement—into the boat, toward the other side, toward places and people that stretch us, challenge us, and ask something real of us.

Trust is not learned before the crossing. It is learned in the crossing.

The question is not whether storms will come. They will. The question is whether we will get in the boat at all—whether we will follow Jesus when the way forward feels risky, when we don’t feel ready, and when staying where we are would be easier.

Christianity is dangerous—not to those who are already hurting, but to anything that depends on us staying comfortable and content.

So this prayer: Jesus, give us the courage to get in the boat, and the faith to trust you when the winds rise.