

Following Jesus

THE GOSPEL OF MARK

A DEVOTIONAL COMMENTARY

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Mark 7:1-23, Faithfulness and Compassion: The religious leaders begin to question Jesus, and this is the second time in Mark that they do so. There is nothing wrong with the questions they are asking. They notice that Jesus' disciples do not wash their hands before eating. Mark is writing to a non-Jewish audience, and also to Jews who no longer observe these laws, so he explains the practice for his readers. Jesus does not actually have a problem with handwashing or with religious practices.

What clearly troubles him is the belief that faithfulness to God, or what we might call holiness, is determined by keeping these laws. For Jesus, everything turns toward how we love our neighbors and how we show compassion to people who are in need. This is how we know whether a heart is turned toward God or not. The leaders seem more interested in these laws, traditions that developed over time, than in the actual welfare of people and their lives. Faithfulness becomes more about what laws you keep than how you treat others. And for Jesus, the true sign of a person's heart is compassion, and Jesus has a lot of it.

When Jesus quotes the prophets, he quotes Isaiah, but there are also hints of Amos, Jeremiah, and Malachi. Jesus is not dismissing the law and the prophets; he is embracing them. The prophets were relentless on this point: God rejects worship that keeps the rules while neglecting the immigrant, the orphan, and the vulnerable. That prophetic critique should unsettle us. It is hard to read Mark 7 and not notice how easily cruelty gets baptized as faithfulness. Today, many Christians speak openly, and sometimes proudly, even hatefully, about policies and practices that demean immigrants, separate families, or treat vulnerable people as problems to be managed rather than neighbors to be loved. There is a lot of debate about what makes someone a Christian and what does not.

We have all kinds of markers meant to signal that you belong, aligning with a particular politics, holding certain positions on issues, or practicing a kind of personal religion that claims to make us holy. But Mark keeps pressing the question Jesus raises here: what kind of people are we becoming? Do we look more like Jesus? Do we love like Jesus?

Jesus says it is not what goes into a person, what you eat, that defiles you, but what comes out of the heart. That teaching sets up what happens next in Mark, when Jesus crosses boundaries and expands the mission beyond Israel. How easy it is to do what these religious leaders did—to take the teachings of Jesus and turn them into new lines that divide, pushing out those who do not fit our particular brand. If cruelty toward the vulnerable is defended in the name of faith, then whatever that faith is, Jesus calls it unclean.

So this Prayer: Jesus, turn our hearts toward mercy, and expose the ways we use faith to excuse cruelty.

Mark 7:24–30, When Jesus Changes His Mind: What happens in the previous section of Mark sets the reader up for the expansion of Jesus' mission beyond Israel. Jesus has just sparred with religious leaders who questioned his faithfulness to God because his disciples did not observe traditional Jewish laws like ritual handwashing. Jesus responds with a sharp rebuke: faithfulness to God is not measured by boundary-keeping, but by compassion, especially toward those on the edges of life, the vulnerable, and yes, even immigrants. He echoes the prophets, who repeatedly insisted that love of God is hollow when it ignores love of neighbor.

Now Jesus takes his disciples deep into Gentile territory, leaving behind the familiar towns along the Sea of Galilee. He goes to Tyre, roughly thirty miles northwest, on the Mediterranean coast. Mark is signaling to his readers that the scope of Jesus' mission extends far beyond the boundaries we are comfortable setting. And then something strange happens. A woman approaches Jesus. She is Syrophenician, a Gentile. Her daughter is possessed by a demon, and she is desperate for help.

What follows is jarring. Jesus responds with words that sound like an insult: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." This was a familiar slur. Jews commonly referred to Gentiles as dogs. This does not sound like the Jesus we think we know. One way to read this story is as another example of Jesus pushing beyond boundaries and showing the persistence of true faith. The woman refuses to be dismissed.

Like the hemorrhaging woman who pushed through the crowd to touch Jesus, she presses past obstacles, ethnic, religious, social, to reach him. Her faith is humble but persistent. That reading matters. It reminds us that sometimes faith requires pushing through barriers, refusing to let others block us from the healing and mercy Jesus offers, or from the mercy we are called to offer others. But it's hard to get past the rawness here. And maybe we don't have to. Perhaps this story shows us, the persistence of the woman, and the humility of Jesus. Perhaps even Jesus, fully human, allows himself to be stretched by another person's faith. Maybe this is a moment where he is pushed, where he listens, where he responds, where the mission he embodies is widened in real time.

That may challenge our assumptions about a Jesus who arrives fully formed, never surprised, never moved, with nothing to learn. But I find this reading compelling. It makes Jesus more, not less, appealing to me. It presents a Savior who is confident yet open, authoritative yet responsive, strong enough to be taught by the faith of someone living on the margins. The woman replies, "Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Jesus calls it a good answer. The demon has already left her daughter.

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Mark 7:31-37, Opened Ears, Freed Tongues: Jesus' mission moves even further into Gentile territory. These were ordinary men, fishermen, laborers, who had most likely never traveled far beyond their small villages, except perhaps for pilgrimages to Jerusalem. It is doubtful that they had ever gone this many miles into regions that would have been unfamiliar to them: places filled with people considered strange, unclean, and even enemies. This mission would have exceeded anything they expected from Jesus or imagined discipleship would require of them. Jesus is expanding their hearts. To witness his compassion toward people they had been taught to avoid must have been startling.

These disciples may never have had any significant contact with Gentiles, let alone significant encounters marked by mercy and compassion. Mark tells us that as Jesus returns toward Galilee, he passes through the region of the Decapolis, the "Ten Cities." These were large, urban centers populated primarily by Greeks and Romans, with only small Jewish minorities. They were independently governed and shaped by the Hellenistic world, tracing their origins back to the conquests of Alexander the Great (331-333 B.C.E).

Today many of these cities lie in ruins, impressive remains, often destroyed by earthquakes, once home to populations ranging from 5,000 to as many as 100,000 people. What I love about this miracle story is the story behind it. Jesus is deliberately widening the disciples' vision of God's mission. As we have already seen throughout Mark, his vision is for all people. He will push his followers beyond the comfort zones of their religious practices and their racial identities. He will stretch them. Any attempt to confine God to our customs, our religious practices, our race, or our nation is far too small for this category-busting Jesus, who sees every person as *Imago Dei*, created in the image of God.

That is why the gospel must never be reduced to the boundaries of a single nation or people. The kingdom Jesus proclaims cannot be owned, protected, or prioritized by any one culture. And it is deeply troubling to see Christians claim allegiance to Jesus while endorsing nativist ways of thinking, ways that rank human worth, draw hard lines around national identities, and baptize xenophobia as faithfulness.

When the church confuses national identity with Christian identity, it does not defend the gospel; it distorts it. The good news becomes something to be guarded rather than shared, something that serves our own interests rather than reaching out to our world. History shows us the cost of rejecting the vision Jesus offered. For thousands of years, the land where he walked has been marked by cycles of conflict, violence, and grief, people locked in a bitter struggle with one another, unable or unwilling to embrace the way of reconciliation he embodied. Jesus did not come to sanctify borders or justify power.

He came to break down walls and to teach us a different way of being human together. This passage also shows us how visceral and physical Jesus is. He places his fingers in the man's ears. He spits and touches the man's tongue. This is an earthy, embodied Jesus who gets up close and personal with people. And don't miss what Mark is doing here. He wants Jesus to place his hands in our ears too, to open us to the word of God. He wants Jesus to touch our tongues, so that we might sing praises to this barrier-breaking God.

I am deeply thankful for this Jesus, because this is the only answer to a cruel and vicious world. Mark keeps pressing a single, unsettling question: Are we truly seeing who he is? That is why we walk slowly through this gospel, letting Mark shape not just our theology, but our vision of what can be.

So this prayer: Jesus, open our ears that we may hear you calling us to leave our safe world behind.

Mark 8:1-10, Hungry for More Jesus: This is the second time Jesus feeds a crowd in Mark's Gospel. Mark does not repeat himself by accident, and he does not expect us to rush past this simply because we think we have "heard it before." This feeding comes at the end of a long and demanding journey. Jesus has traveled far from home, through Tyre and Sidon, and across the Decapolis, the ten cities. He has crossed cultural, religious, and ethnic boundaries. He has healed Gentiles, found faith in unexpected places, opened ears, and freed tongues. And now, before the conflict sharpens and before the disciples' blindness becomes impossible to miss, Mark shows us Jesus doing something familiar: feeding the hungry.

The crowd has been with him for three days. That detail matters. These are not people passing through. They have followed Jesus out of the cities and into a deserted place. They are far from the ordinary rhythms of life, and they did not bring enough food to feed themselves. Jesus does not scold them for that. He does not spiritualize their hunger. He does not tell them they should have planned better. Mark tells us that Jesus has compassion on them, that word Greek word again, *splanchnizomai*, that deep, visceral compassion that rises from the gut.

He is moved by their need. He knows that if he sends them away hungry, they will not have the strength to make it home. Notice this: Jesus cares about bodies as well as souls. What is striking is how slow the disciples are to understand what Jesus can do. Same response. They ask the same question they asked before: "How can we feed all these people?" They want to send the crowd away.

But they have already seen Jesus feed thousands. They have watched him heal and restore people. They have crossed borders with him and witnessed mercy they never expected. And still, they cannot imagine abundance in a place like this. Mark wants us to notice that closeness to Jesus does not automatically lead to understanding. We can witness miracles and still remain confused about who Jesus is and what he is doing. So when I read a story like this, I ask myself where I am in it.

This time, I place myself in the crowd. Because I am hungry too. Hungry for meaning in a noisy world. Hungry for a faith shaped by compassion rather than fear. Hungry for a Jesus who cannot be confined to one people, one nation, or one way of thinking. Mark suggests that this hunger is not a problem to be solved. It is a condition of following Jesus. If you follow him long enough, he will lead you away from what is familiar and into places where you cannot feed yourself. He will take you out of the normal flow of life. And there, you will discover just how hungry you really are. As I read this story, I see Jesus for who he is, this compassionate, loving Savior, I want more of him. This is what I need, what my family needs, what our world needs.

So this prayer: Jesus, make me hungry for more, for your mercy, your truth, and your life.

Mark 8:11-26, Touch My Eyes Again: Immediately after Jesus feeds the four thousand, everything tightens. The Pharisees show up looking for a fight. They demand a sign from heaven. Not because they are open. Not because they are curious. But because they want leverage. Control. They want Jesus on their terms. Mark tells us that Jesus sighs deeply. Pause there. Jesus actually sighs. That sigh matters. Scripture doesn't give us many moments like this. It sounds like exhaustion. Like grief. Like the weariness of love that keeps being resisted, when grace is questioned, when compassion is tested, when mercy is treated with suspicion. I wonder how many times I've made him sigh. When I've demanded proof instead of trust. When I've tried to manage him instead of follow him.

When I've forgotten all he has already done for me, for us. That thought breaks my heart. Jesus refuses their demand. No sign will be given. And then he leaves. He gets back into the boat and crosses away from them. Who can blame him? Sometimes the most faithful thing Jesus does is refuse to play the game. The disciples are with him in the boat, and after all they have seen, they are worried and anxious when they realize they forgot to bring bread.

They have one loaf. That's it. And this after two miraculous feedings.

After watching abundance spill out in the wilderness for hungry people. After everyone was satisfied and baskets of leftovers were gathered up. And here they are, worried about what they don't have. Forgetting all of it. Jesus warns them about leaven, the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod. Power. Fear. Control. A kind of certainty that hardens the heart. They don't understand. They think he's talking about bread. Then come the questions. Sharp. Painful. Almost unbearable to read. "Do you still not perceive or understand?" "Are your hearts hardened?" "Having eyes, do you not see?" "Having ears, do you not hear?" This isn't anger. This is sorrow. This is disappointment. They are close to him. They travel with him. They eat with him. They serve alongside him. And still, they do not see. They are just as blind as the Pharisees. That should unsettle us.

It should shake us up. Closeness to Jesus does not guarantee clarity. You can sit in worship year after year and still be as confused as those disciples. Years of preaching, teaching, and serving, none of it protects us from misunderstanding who he is. Fear shrinks the imagination. Anxiety narrows faith. We start worrying about bread, about what we don't have, what we are lacking, instead of trusting the one who feeds us. Then Mark gives us a strange miracle, and it is no accident he places it here. This story interprets everything that comes before it and foreshadows everything that comes after it.

A blind man is brought to Jesus. Jesus spits on his eyes and lays his hands on him. This is not a distant Savior. This is a physical, visceral Jesus, up close and personal. The man begins to see, but not clearly. People look like trees, walking around. Partial sight. Blurry vision. Jesus does not say, "That's good enough." He does not move on. He touches the man again. Only then does he see clearly. This is the only healing in the Gospels that happens in stages. Mark is making the point: seeing Jesus clearly is going to take repeated touches on our eyes.

Because seeing clearly takes time. It costs us certainty. It requires trust. It means letting go of control and allowing Jesus to keep working on us. And here is the good news. Jesus never gives up on us. He stays with us. He keeps working on us. He keeps working on us. We want certainty. Jesus offers relationship. We want quick clarity. Jesus works patiently. We want a Jesus who fits inside our politics. But he is far too big for that. And he keeps asking, quietly and persistently: Do you want to see?

So this prayer: Jesus, touch our eyes again, and give us the courage to see you as you truly are.

Mark 8:27-9:1, The Center of the Gospel: This is a critical moment in Mark's Gospel, the narrative and theological center of the book. The question Jesus asks here, and the answer Peter gives, sit at the center of the Gospel for an important reason. It is the question that has been hanging in the air from the very beginning. It is the question on everyone's mind: those who follow Jesus, those who oppose him, and even those of us who read this Gospel centuries later. There has been a driving question underneath everything: Who is this man? Jesus teaches with authority. He heals the sick. He casts out demons. He feeds crowds. Who is he? People are amazed by him. And they are confused by him. Even the disciples, the ones closest to him, don't fully get it. The stories pile up, one on top of another. Jesus keeps moving from place to place, town to town, moment to moment.

There is urgency here. He is on a mission. And then, in chapter 8, he stops. He stops moving. He turns to his disciples. And he asks out loud the question everyone has been asking all along: "Who do people say that I am?" Mark could have started here, but he doesn't. He does not give us the answer at the beginning, even though he could.

Instead, we watch what Jesus does. We listen to what he teaches. We see how he treats people. Mark paints the picture first. Only now does Jesus ask the question directly: What are people saying about me? And then he makes it personal. "But who do you say that I am?" This is the question. Peter speaks up first. "You are the Christ." The anointed one. The one God has chosen to lead, to deliver, to save.

This is the first correct confession in Mark's Gospel. Not from a demon. Not from the narrator. But from one of the disciples. Peter gets it right. Mark has been building to this moment. Everything has been moving toward it. But this is not the center of the Gospel yet. Because the center is not just getting the right answer. It's what Jesus says next. Immediately, Jesus tells them what Christ actually means. And it is not what they were expecting.

The Son of Man must suffer. He must be rejected. He must be killed. And after three days, rise again. He will not seize power. He will not destroy his enemies. He will not rule with a sword like David. Instead, he will give himself away, for all people. He will not avoid suffering. He will walk straight into it. Jesus says this three times in Mark's Gospel because it is so hard to grasp. And every time, the disciples still get it wrong. Peter certainly does. He is so disturbed by this that he actually scolds Jesus. No. That's not how it's supposed to work. Peter tries to correct him.

And that's when Jesus speaks some of the harshest words he ever speaks to a disciple: "Get behind me, Satan." He says this because Peter's thinking is completely opposed to why Jesus came. At every step, Jesus has been tempted to abandon the path of suffering, to choose comfort over sacrifice. Peter's confession was right. But he still got it wrong. Then Jesus turns to them, and to anyone who wants to follow him, and says they must take up their cross. He came to serve.

And those who follow him must become servants too. Jesus is correcting a deeply human desire. We want power over others. We want glory without suffering. We want to build our own little kingdoms. And that temptation is not just personal. It is communal. It is a temptation the church faces in every age, and especially in our own.

There is a powerful pull to remake Jesus in the image of our political ideology. To believe that the way forward is to seize influence, to wield the power of the state, to force people to live a certain way. But that is more than just wrong. It is completely contrary to the gospel. Jesus does not advance his kingdom by coercion. He does not rule by domination. The way of Christ is not the way of nationalism, control, or fear. It is the way of the cross. When the church reaches for power instead of service, when it seeks to rule rather than to love, it is repeating Peter's mistake, confessing Jesus with our lips while resisting the path he actually chose. And Jesus says his kingdom is different. It is a kingdom of love. Of service. Of sacrifice. That is a hard word.

Those who try to save their lives, who grasp for power, will lose them. But those who let go, who serve, who give themselves away, will find life. Jesus is the Christ. But not the one we want to control. Not the one who bows to our hunger for power or wealth. And that is why this moment stands at the center of Mark's Gospel. It defines who Jesus is, and what it means to follow him. Before this moment, Jesus is mostly acting, showing who he is. After this moment, he is mostly teaching, showing what discipleship costs. Everything turns here. This is the center.

So this prayer: Jesus, free your church from the desire for power and form us as servants shaped by your cross.