

Following Jesus

THE GOSPEL OF MARK

A DEVOTIONAL COMMENTARY

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WEEK 5: MARCH 22-28

Mark 9:1–13, A Classroom of Grace: Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain. And there, his appearance changes. Glory breaks through the ordinary. His clothes become dazzling white. Moses and Elijah appear with him. That detail matters. Moses represents the Law. Elijah represents the Prophets. Together they stand for the whole story of Israel. And they are not correcting Jesus. They are not instructing him. They are bearing witness to him. The Law and the Prophets are pointing in one direction and saying, This is the one. This moment comes at a precise place in Mark's Gospel. Just before this, Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ. He gets the answer right. And then he gets the meaning wrong. When Jesus begins to speak about suffering, rejection, and death, Peter pushes back.

He tries to redirect him. He tells Jesus to rethink the plan. And Jesus responds with words that must have cut deep: "Get behind me, Satan." That rebuke would still have been ringing in Peter's ears when Jesus led him up the mountain. The whole thing must have been disorienting. How could it not be? Mark doesn't tell us what Jesus says to Moses and Elijah. Luke does. They are talking about his departure—his death and resurrection in Jerusalem. Even here, even in this moment of unveiled glory, the cross is still ahead. The path is clear. He will suffer. And he will rise. Suffering and resurrection are not opposites. They belong together. Peter, terrified and unsure what to do, starts talking. "Let's build something," he says. Instead of receiving the moment, he tries to manage it. He tries to contain what cannot be contained. When you don't know what to say, it's often best to say nothing. Peter simply cannot comprehend what he is seeing. Then the cloud descends. A voice speaks. "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him." This moment is for the disciples—but it is also for Jesus. Yes, he is the Son of God.

But he is human too. And how hard it must have been to be so misunderstood, especially by those closest to him. To hear the Father say, This is my Son, whom I love, must have been comfort. Confirmation. A reminder that he was walking the right road—even though that road led to suffering. This mountain is a classroom of grace. Peter is still stumbling. The disciples are still confused. They are still trying to fit Jesus into categories that make sense to them. And Jesus keeps teaching them anyway. They fail test after test—and still he brings them with him. Still he invites them closer. He does not give up on them. And they don't give up either. Confused and unsure of what lies ahead, with storm clouds already forming, they keep following. They keep taking the next step. Maybe that's what faith looks like. Less certainty. More trust.

So this prayer: Jesus, help us trust you and keep following, even when we don't understand.

Mark 9:14-29, Misery in the Valley: What a scene. And what a shift. We come down from the mountain of glory, Jesus radiant in dazzling white, Moses and Elijah bearing witness, and we step straight into the valley. The mood changes immediately. At the foot of the mountain, pain is waiting. The disciples are arguing with the religious authorities. A crowd has gathered, pressing in. Watching. Staring. It feels less like compassion and more like curiosity, like people slowing down at an accident. And in the middle of it all stands a father and his son. The boy has suffered his whole life. A spirit throws him to the ground, convulses him, pure helpless misery and pain. Today we might describe this as epilepsy or another condition they didn't yet understand. They didn't have our language or our medical knowledge. They only knew what they could see. They lived in a world they believed was haunted by demons. Whatever we call it, the suffering is real. Day after day, a father watches his child suffer. The helplessness. The exhaustion.

The ache that never really goes away. And surrounding this pain are religious people arguing. How often that still happens. Theology debated. Positions defended. While suffering people stand right there, unnoticed. Unhelped. Pushed to the side. Maybe the disciples couldn't drive out the demon. But they could have been kind. When we don't know what to do, when there is no solution, it is always right to offer compassion. Then Jesus arrives. And he punches them hard. "Faithless generation." It sounds harsh. But his frustration is not aimed at the father or the boy. It's aimed at a religious culture more interested in arguments and signs than mercy. They still don't get it. This mission has always been about compassion. Mark paints the scene vividly. The boy falls to the ground. He convulses. It looks like death. Notice that the father and son are the only ones who receive Jesus' empathy. When Jesus says, "All things are possible for one who believes," the father speaks. This nameless man does what the disciples cannot. He tells the truth. "I believe. Help my unbelief."

No posturing. No certainty. Just need. Just honesty. Faith stripped bare. Isn't that what faith really looks like? Not confidence without doubt. But trust that brings doubt along with it. Faith that shows up empty-handed and asks for help. Jesus is moved with compassion, the gut-level, visceral kind we see again and again in Mark. He speaks sharply to the spirit and drives it out. The boy lies still. He looks dead. But he isn't. Jesus takes him by the hand, the same way he once took a little dead girl by the hand, and lifts him up. Life returns. And Jesus gives the boy back to his father. Later, the disciples ask the question we would ask: Why couldn't we do this? Jesus answers simply. This kind comes out only through prayer. Not technique. Not authority. Not argument. Prayer. Dependence. The posture of the father. In a world full of suffering, anyone who dares to follow Jesus will need to learn that prayer. "I believe. Help my unbelief."

So this prayer: Jesus, we come to you with what little faith we have.

Mark 9:30-37, Jesus Redefines Greatness: This is the second time in Mark's Gospel that Jesus tells his disciples he is going to suffer and die. As they pass quietly through Galilee, Jesus keeps his movements hidden because he wants to focus on them. This moment is not about crowds or miracles. It is about instruction. About formation. Jesus is trying to help his disciples understand what kind of Messiah he is, and what following him will cost. They struggle to grasp it. Not because they are slow or stubborn, but because they have been formed by a different story. All their lives they have been taught that the Messiah would come wielding power like other kings. He would raise an army, drive out the Romans, restore Israel's glory, and return political control to God's people. That vision had been reinforced for generations by culture, religion, and religious leadership alike. So it is no surprise that Jesus' words about suffering and death sound wrong to them. Jesus is a different kind of rabbi with a different vision of God's kingdom. And the same tension exists for us. We, too, have been formed, by twentieth-century American culture and evangelicalism. I say that without scorn. That formation has emphasized Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior, which is true, but often at the expense of the communal, embodied vision Jesus has for his people.

The church becomes a place to get souls into heaven, while this world is devalued and avoided. We separate ourselves from the world instead of immersing ourselves fully in it, as Jesus himself did. And now the challenge is even greater. We are being formed every day by voices that demand our attention, news cycles, social media, outrage, fear. We are always plugged in. Meanwhile, our time with Jesus and his community is limited comparatively. How hard it must be for him to get through to us, to work his way past the religion that dominates our culture and the noise of our American culture and and political ideology. The disciples had hours with Jesus every day, and they still didn't understand. We get jut a little bit of Jesus here and there. So they get it very wrong. On the road they argue about who is the greatest. Mark tells us they fall silent when Jesus asks them about it, embarrassed, exposed. They are chasing status while Jesus is talking about suffering. They are measuring greatness while he is redefining it.

Jesus sits down and teaches them. The greatest, he says, are not those who rise to the top, but those who take the lowest place. The first must become last. The path of the kingdom is the path of service. That should challenge us, especially in a time when Christians seek to be ok to use political power to advance the cause of Christ. To wield the very power Jesus refused, and the very power that would eventually kill him. The kingdom does not move forward by domination or control. It advances by humility and servanthood. Then Jesus takes a child in his arms. In a world where children had no status, no power, no voice, Jesus places one at the center. This is what greatness looks like. Welcome the least. Receive the vulnerable. Serve without leverage. The kingdom of God comes low.

So this prayer: Jesus, teach us to walk the low road with you.

Mark 9:39-50, Releasing Our Control: After Jesus places a child in their midst, his teaching does not soften. It sharpens. What follows can feel scattered, short sayings, strong warnings, vivid images, but they are held together by one central concern: how power is used, and who gets protected. John speaks up and tells Jesus that they tried to stop someone casting out demons because “he was not following us.” That phrase matters. Not not following you, but us. This is no longer confusion about Jesus’ mission. This is boundary anxiety. Control. The instinct to decide who belongs and who does not. It is hard not to hear ourselves in this. We, too, are quick to draw lines and decide who belongs. We want to protect what feels familiar and stop anything that does not look like us. We confuse being right with being faithful. And too often, the people most affected are the ones with the least power. Jesus rejects this outright. “Do not stop him,” he says. The kingdom is not ours to manage. Faithfulness is not limited to our inner circle. Jesus widens the frame instead of tightening it. Whoever is not against us is for us. Even a cup of water matters. Even small, unseen acts of faithfulness matter in God’s work. He is not rebuking misunderstanding here.

He is rebuking possessiveness. Jesus is forming a community that trusts God to work beyond its control. No credentials required. No official authorization. No monopoly on grace. That alone should challenge us. Then the tone turns severe. Jesus begins speaking about “little ones,” and the language becomes graphic. Causing one of them to stumble, he says, is no small thing. Better to lose a hand, a foot, an eye, than to use your life in a way that harms the vulnerable. These are not instructions for self-mutilation. They are warnings about responsibility. The severity matches the concern. Jesus is not talking about private morality in the abstract. He is talking about real people, those with less power, less voice, less protection. The ones who are easily wounded by arrogance, exclusion, or careless faith. This is what greatness looks like now: guarding the vulnerable, not asserting status. Power, in the kingdom of God, is always dangerous in the wrong hands, especially religious hands. Then Jesus speaks of fire and salt. Fire that purifies. Salt that preserves. Life with God will cost something. It will sting. It will demand honesty and restraint. But salt only works when it remains salt. When it loses its distinctiveness, it becomes useless. And what is that distinctiveness? “Have salt in yourselves,” Jesus says, “and be at peace with one another.” Peace. Not uniformity. Not control. Not dominance. Peace rooted in humility. Peace that resists the urge to draw hard lines around who belongs. Peace that takes responsibility for how our lives shape others. This is not a checklist of commands. It is a way of being in the world. A warning and an invitation. Jesus is forming a people who do not grasp for power, who do not police God’s work, who do not harm the small in the name of being right. The kingdom does not advance through force, fear, or exclusion. It grows through faithfulness that is willing to be small. Through communities that would rather lose influence than lose their soul. The way of Jesus is still the low way. And it still asks us who we are willing to protect, and what we are willing to give up to do it.

So this prayer: Jesus, free us from our need for control.

Mark 10:1-16, Grace for Families: At first glance, this passage appears to contain two separate teachings, one about divorce and another about children. But Mark places them together on purpose. Both teachings are about people, not abstract issues. In both sections, Jesus turns his attention toward those with the least power and least status in that culture: women and children. In the ancient world, women had little agency in marriage. A husband could divorce his wife with few consequences, leaving her economically and socially vulnerable. Children fared no better. They were largely invisible, considered insignificant until they became useful adults. When Jesus speaks into both of these realities, he is not simply offering moral instruction. He is exposing injustice. He is naming how power has been misused and how the vulnerable have been harmed. Jesus' words about divorce are often read as rigid or condemning, but they are aimed squarely at hardness of heart, particularly the hardness of heart that allows one person to discard another without regard for the damage being done. Remarkably, Jesus even acknowledges that a woman could divorce her husband, something that would have sounded shocking to his hearers. In doing so, he affirms women as full persons, capable of making decisions about their own lives, not property. That alone would have unsettled the religious assumptions of the day. Immediately after this, Jesus welcomes children, blesses them, and rebukes those who tried to keep them away. The connection matters. Divorce does not happen in isolation. Children feel its weight. While many children of divorced families survive and even thrive, it is still a significant hardship. Jesus' concern here is not abstract theology or legal debate, but real people and real wounds.

This passage calls the church to something better than condemnation. Divorce is a painful reality, never imagined at the altar, never entered lightly, and sometimes tragically necessary. Rather than wielding Jesus' words as a weapon, the church should be a place of support, healing, and encouragement for struggling families. The deeper warning in this text is against hardness of heart, toward women denied agency, toward those trapped in painful marriages, and toward families carrying grief that is not always visible. Jesus also reminds us that marriage is more than just a contract. It is a covenant, between two people and before God. That truth should deepen our care for people who are hurting, not weaken our compassion. When this passage is taught without tenderness, it misses Jesus entirely and becomes a source of great pain. When Jesus names adultery here, he is not condemning every divorced person but exposing the use of religious permission to excuse unfaithfulness and harm. Adultery in this passage is covenantal, the breaking of trust and responsibility, and his words confront hardness of heart, not those already wounded by a broken marriage. If you are divorced, this passage is not meant to name you as a failure, but to name the harm that divorce brings and the grace Jesus offers in the midst of it. Handled rightly, Mark 10 calls us to protect the vulnerable, to soften our hearts, and to reflect the grace of the One who sees those the world overlooks and welcomes them fully into the kingdom of God.

So this prayer: Jesus, give us hearts that are faithful, gentle, and shaped by your love.

Mark 10:17-22, Eternal Life Now: When the man asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" he is not primarily asking about life after death. That is how our modern ears tend to hear the phrase, but that is not how a first-century Jewish listener would have understood it. The phrase Jesus hears—*zōē aiōnios*—literally means "the life of the age." It is not simply about how long life lasts, but about the kind of life it is. It is life shaped by God's reign, life lived under the rule and presence of God. In Jewish thought, "eternal life" pointed toward the age to come, the long-awaited Messianic age when God would make things right, restore justice, and dwell fully with his people. But Jesus consistently taught that this life of the coming age was already breaking into the present, not just something out in the future. The kingdom of God was not merely ahead; it was at hand. Eternal life, then, begins now, the moment one steps into relationship with God and surrenders to God's reign. That helps us see what is really going on between this man and Jesus. He's much more anxious about the life he is living in the present than what will happen to him when he dies. He is wealthy. He is morally serious. He has kept the commandments. And yet he knows something is missing. Jesus' presence only intensifies that awareness. He sees something in Jesus that exposes his restlessness and dissatisfaction. Mark tells us plainly, "Jesus looked at him and loved him." That detail matters. Jesus loves those on the margins, but he also loves those at the center. He loves the poor and the powerful. And he loves this man enough to tell him the truth, about what really matters and about what he is missing. The rich man is not a villain. He is not careless or cynical.

He comes to Jesus sincerely, with his heart in his hands. At its core, his question is a question about fullness of life. How do I participate in the God-kind of life? How do I step fully into the kingdom Jesus is announcing? He has followed the rules, but rules have not given him the life he longs for. And by now he knows that his wealth, while it may offer security, has not satisfied his deepest hunger. We see the same reality around us today. Wealth may insulate us, but it does not make us whole. It may promise stability, but it cannot give meaning. You can have everything and still feel that something essential is missing. It helps explain why so many with so much still seem so unhappy, even self-destructive. We cannot know what the man expected Jesus to say, but we can be sure he did not expect to hear this: "You lack one thing. Go, sell what you own, give the money to the poor, and come, follow me." The words shock him, and they should unsettle us as well. Jesus is not condemning wealth outright, but he is naming its danger. Wealth can give the illusion that we have found the good life while displacing God at the center. It can promise comfort and still leave us empty, carrying us through life without ever touching its deeper meaning in God. Mark tells us the man walked away grieving, "for he had many possessions." It is a striking detail. We never hear from this man again.

He fades from the story and returns to his old life. Whether it was fear or attachment, he chooses comfort over the adventure of a life with Jesus. He wanted everything without surrendering anything, and in the end, he misses the very life he came seeking. Jesus was inviting him into a new and reordered life now, a life marked by dependence, generosity, and trust in God's love and goodness. The tragedy is not that the man might miss heaven someday. It is that he walks away from the fullness of life Jesus offered to him in the present. And that is where the story presses in on us. What are we clinging to that keeps us from fully entering the life God has for us in Christ? And if this conversation about wealth and possessions feels disturbing, good. This passage is meant to unsettle us. Because the discomfort itself may be an invitation, to notice what we still lack, and to listen for what love might be asking us to release.

So this prayer: Jesus, name what we cling to and free us to follow you.

Mark 10:23-31, Security Isn't Salvation: The disciples are present when the rich man walks away because he is unwilling to give up his wealth to follow Jesus. Mark does not tell us what they were thinking as this interaction unfolds, but it is not hard to imagine. We can picture them standing on the sidelines, wondering if Jesus might successfully recruit him as a disciple. This man would have been a great addition to the movement, someone with influence, resources, and social standing. Think of how much he could help the mission. And then he walks away. Perhaps the disciples felt disappointment, or even frustration. Maybe they wondered why Jesus had to be so extreme. Why did the demand have to be so total? Why not soften it just a little? Why not court this man instead of letting him go? After all, religious movements, then and now, often play up to people with power and wealth. We justify the compromise by telling ourselves it's for the greater good. The mission needs funding. The cause needs influence. But not Jesus. Jesus loves people, but he is not impressed by power or wealth.

And he is not willing to compromise his mission in order to fund it. While this is speculation, it reveals something true about Jesus: he will not be played by those who hold wealth or status. He refuses to reshape the kingdom to accommodate our attachments. When Jesus turns to the disciples, he completely overturns a deeply held assumption, then and now, that wealth is a sign of God's favor. He says it is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. The disciples are startled because this runs directly against everything they have been taught. And then Jesus presses the point with deliberate hyperbole: it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom. Jesus is not condemning wealth itself. He is naming its danger. Wealth and possessions tend to get in the way of life with God because of the comfort and security they provide. Jesus understands human nature.

It is extraordinarily difficult to let go of the things that make us feel safe. And wealth is not the only thing. Our racial identity, our political ideology, even our religion, these too can become sources of false security that keep us from fully following Jesus. Peter speaks up: "We have left everything to follow you." We don't know his motivation. Is he looking for affirmation? Is he simply stating a fact? And even then, how true is it really? They have left much behind, but they are still in the process of letting go. Like us, they are still holding on to things that get in the way of following Jesus fully. Jesus responds with a promise. Those who leave everything to follow him will receive so much more. This is not prosperity theology. This is not a transactional faith where we give to God so God will give back to us. This is about belonging to the new world God is bringing into being, a new family, a new community, a new way of life that is larger and richer than anything we leave behind. The disciples are left wondering how any of this can be true. And Jesus closes the conversation with a word of hope that still sustains us: What is impossible for human beings is possible with God.

So this prayer: Jesus, release us from the things we trust more than you.