

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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God's Servant in Mark's Gospel: Mark 6

Today we continue with our series on the Gospel of Mark. This morning it is chapter 6 which we consider.

Before looking into today's chapter, it is important to remind ourselves of some general features of Mark's Gospel. Mark presents Jesus as the Servant compared with Jesus as King in Matthew, as the Son of Man in Luke and as the Son of God in John. Mark's is the shortest of the four Gospels as things move quickly, in keeping with the constant action of a servant and the frequent use of words such as "straightway" and "immediately". Unlike the other Gospels, there is no earthly or heavenly genealogy in Mark because the test of a servant is not his background but his ability actually to do the job well. Chapter 1 introduces Jesus, emphasising that, though a Servant, He is the Son of God.

Mark's Gospel contains far more miracles than parables, more actions than words, in keeping with this presentation of Jesus as a Servant. Last week in chapter 5 we considered three of those miracles, demonstrating the power of Jesus over demons, disease and death. Our chapter today, chapter 6, contains further miracles in the second half but deals with a range of other matters in the first half. There are seven sections in this chapter. These are

1. Jesus in His home area of Nazareth (verses 1-6);
2. The twelve disciples sent out to preach (verses 7-13);
3. King Herod's reaction to Jesus and details of Herod's murder of John the Baptist (verses 14-29);
4. The twelve disciples report back to Jesus (verses 30 and 31);
5. The feeding of the 5,000 (verses 32-44);
6. Jesus walks on the water (verses 45-52);
7. Jesus heals in the land of Gennesaret (verses 53-56).

Clearly it won't be possible to do justice to the chapter in the time available to us but I would like to touch on each of those seven sections and in particular to point to something of what each teaches of Jesus the perfect Servant and to see, where relevant, what we Christians, as His servants, can learn from Him.

1. Jesus in His home area of Nazareth (verses 1-6)

The first six verses record the Lord's return to Nazareth where He was brought up. The locals knew of His humble origins and could not accept that the astonishing things which He taught in the synagogue demonstrated that Jesus had divine origins and was not just a working class man. They had been favoured with His presence but they had no faith to see beyond His outward appearance. Parts of verses 5 and 6 record that Jesus "could there do no mighty work, save that he laid his hands upon a few sick folk, and healed them. And he marvelled because of their unbelief." It wasn't that Jesus had no capability to do mighty works. The emphasis is on the need for faith which was completely lacking in those who lived at Nazareth. Jesus left Nazareth and the Gospels do not indicate that He ever returned there. A solemn warning to those who reject Jesus!

2. The twelve disciples sent out to preach (verses 7-13)

The second section of our chapter is verses 7-13. Verse 7 says "And he called unto him the twelve, and began to send them forth by two and two."

This is an important point in time. Up to this point, Jesus Himself had preached. Now He was sending out others who could pass on His message. These men had first spent time with Jesus, had seen His actions as the perfect Servant, had been taught by Him, for example through the parables contained in chapter 4, and had seen His power displayed in the mighty miracles. Now they as His servants were to go out in the service of heaven. In verses 8-12 Jesus gives them instructions as to how to go about their service, not relying on natural support, not risking upsetting anyone by moving lodgings, and looking for faith in the hearers.

Here is some guidance for us as the Lord's servants today. Before extensive outward service we must spend time with Jesus, studying His word to learn about the truth contained in Him. As Jesus sent out His disciples, so we need to allow Him to direct our service for Him. Jesus emphasises the value of fellowship in service by sending out the

disciples in twos. Jesus could do all by Himself; we need the support of our fellow-believers. The resources for our service are not our own wealth or status. And we must be discerning, wise and thoughtful in all that we do.

3. King Herod's reaction to Jesus and details of Herod's murder of John the Baptist (verses 14-29)

Section three covers verses 14-29. Let me read verses 14-18. "And king Herod heard of him; (for his name was spread abroad:) and he said, That John the Baptist was risen from the dead, and therefore mighty works do shew forth themselves in him. Others said, That it is Elias. And others said, That it is a prophet, or as one of the prophets. But when Herod heard thereof, he said, It is John, whom I beheaded: he is risen from the dead. For Herod himself had sent forth and laid upon John, and bound him in prison for Herodias' sake, his brother Philip's wife: for he had married her. For John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife." The remainder of the verses in this section fill in details of Herod's murder of John the Baptist.

This section takes up a considerable proportion of the chapter, around a quarter of it. Why should such emphasis be given to this matter? I can only suggest that a possible answer is found in the position of these verses. The disciples had just been sent out in their service for Jesus. I suggest that these verses indicate the nature of the audience to whom they will preach. John the Baptist had not flinched from sticking to the truth and consistently telling Herod that he was breaking Old Testament law in taking his brother's wife. Ultimately Herod was responsible for the murder of John as these verses in this section set out. Herod placed more importance on keeping face with those who had heard his foolish promise to a young girl than to adhering to God's requirements. Now Herod's conscience was troubling him as he recalled all this.

The Lord's servants then and now go out to preach and serve in a world which does not place God or His Word as the topmost consideration. 2 Timothy 3:2-5 warns that "men shall be lovers of their own selves ... boasters, proud ... unholy ... despisers of those that are good ... lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God ..." These things applied to Herod and generally apply today. Men and women do have a conscience but as with Herod there is often the inclination to ignore the message of conscience and to give most attention to that which gratifies self. God does not take first place. That is the feature of the world in which the Lord's servants seek to serve Him.

4. The twelve disciples report back to Jesus (verses 30 and 31)

Let me now read verses 30 and 31 which comprise the fourth section of our chapter. "And the apostles gathered themselves together unto Jesus, and told him all things, both what they had done, and what they had taught. And he said unto them, Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while: for there were many coming and going, and they had no leisure so much as to eat."

I think that these are lovely verses! Having preached and served among those who generally would not have put God's things in first place, the disciples report back to Jesus and tell Him everything about their service. The Lord takes them apart with Himself into a place of quietness, away from all the hustle and bustle of service, to spend time alone with Him so that He can ensure that they are fed on what will build them up again for fresh service.

What a joy it is to talk to Jesus about our service for Him; to tell Him of all the encouragements and disappointments. Of course He already knows all about it but He wants us to keep reporting back. It is also essential to take time out in His presence, alone with Him to allow Him to feed us. Do you find, dear Christian, as I do, that the constant rush, the "coming and going" of verse 31, can result in this quality time with Jesus being minimised? Yet the Lord emphasises the need for this time, where He can speak to me to encourage me when I'm disappointed, if necessary to keep things in balance and remind me when I may be elated that He is the only source of success and generally to build me up. An important lesson for every servant of the Lord!

5. The feeding of the 5,000 (verses 32-44)

This brings us to the fifth section of the chapter, verses 32-44, dealing with the feeding of the 5,000 and I would like to read the whole of this section. "And they departed into a desert place by ship privately. And the people saw them departing, and many knew him, and ran afoot thither out of all cities, and outwent them, and came together unto him. And Jesus, when he came out, saw much people, and was moved with compassion toward them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd: and he began to teach them many things. And when the day was now far spent, his disciples came unto him, and said, This is a desert place, and now the time is far passed: Send them away, that they may go into the country round about, and into the villages, and buy themselves bread: for they have nothing to eat. He answered and said unto them, Give ye them to eat. And they say unto him, Shall we go and buy two hundred pennyworth of bread, and give them to eat? He saith unto them, How many loaves have ye? go and see. And when they knew, they say, Five, and two fishes. And he commanded them to make all sit down by companies upon the green grass. And they sat down in ranks, by hundreds, and by fifties. And when he had taken the five loaves and the two fishes, he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and brake the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before

them; and the two fishes divided he among them all. And they did all eat, and were filled. And they took up twelve baskets full of the fragments, and of the fishes. And they that did eat of the loaves were about five thousand men."

This is the only miracle recorded in all four of the Gospels and therefore has a special message for us. As mentioned at the beginning of this talk, each Gospel presents the Lord Jesus in a different aspect. It seems to me that, whichever aspect of the Lord is being presented, the Holy Spirit inspired each Gospel writer to include this miracle so as to emphasise that there is a super-abundance available then and now in Jesus.

I want to draw your attention first of all to verse 34. Jesus had been looking to take His disciples to a quiet place, to spend time alone with Him. On arrival, instead of quietness there was "much people." Was Jesus annoyed or did He ignore them and go elsewhere? Not a bit of it! This verse records the perfect action of the perfect Servant in that He "was moved with compassion toward them." If my service is not based on love to those whom I serve, I don't have the right to expect blessing. This love is not just some superficial feeling but a deep movement of my heart, as was the case with Jesus.

Based on that movement of love, Jesus then taught them. He provided for their spiritual needs before looking after their bodily needs. He did both, but the order is important. In the world around us, many are lost and don't know the Good Shepherd. The most urgent need is for men and women to be pointed to Jesus so that their souls can be eternally satisfied.

Then, the disciples made a natural but fundamental error. They and the crowd were in a desert place with no food available. Instead of recognising that the only hope of providing food in this place was Jesus, they urged the Lord to send the people away. In another Gospel, Peter the disciple is recorded as saying, "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life."

Dear fellow-believer, do we really fully comprehend that our Saviour Jesus is the only One who can save people from their sins and secure them a place in heaven? The same Peter is recorded in Acts 4:12 as saying "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." We can't send people away to anyone else because there is nobody else to help.

Then the disciples identify that all they had to feed this great crowd were five loaves and two fish. In the Bible, five often speaks of human weakness and limitation, for example the five fingers and five toes which we have. The fact that there were five loaves emphasises the inability of the disciples and others to meet the great need. But the key here is that the small number of loaves and fish were brought to Jesus, and He took them and He used them for such immense blessing.

Do you ever feel that the gifts which you have for the Lord's service are so small that they are not much use in the context of the great need around? I certainly feel that about myself. The key is to bring those gifts to Jesus and let Him take them and use them, sometimes in a way in which we could never imagine. I have no doubt that Jesus could have turned the stones in this desert place into bread, but Jesus chose to use what was brought to Him. It seems to me that this remains the pattern, that Jesus chooses to work through His servants and can use any gift fully placed into His hands.

Let us also notice that the service of the perfect Servant was an orderly one. The people were made to sit down in manageable groups. His service was not haphazard, rushing from one thing to another. It was undertaken with thought and care and I conclude that my service for the Lord should be similarly characterised. Note also that the presence of the Lord brings comfort; the people sat down on "the green grass." It reminds me of David's words in Psalm 23: "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures."

Having taken the loaves and fish, the first thing Jesus does is to look up to heaven and bless the loaves and fish. The perfect Servant draws attention away from Himself and points to heaven as the source of blessing. This is a salutary lesson for all servants of the Lord. Never should we seek to draw attention to ourselves. When there is blessing, it arises not from the servant but from God in heaven.

Finally, look at the extent of what Jesus provided from the small amount given to Him. Verse 42 tells us that all of this big crowd were filled. Not only that, but twelve baskets were filled with the scraps left over. In my job, arithmetic is important and I note in this miracle that the rules of arithmetic are broken. We start with something, take away more than we started with and are left with more than we started with! But in this miracle we are dealing with a Person who is not limited by anything. He can still provide unlimited blessing in any circumstances. This world is like a desert and has nothing to help men and women in the real needs of their souls but Jesus can give eternal life, something not limited by anything in this world, not even by death.

6. Jesus walks on the water (verses 45-52)

We move on to the sixth section of this chapter, verses 45 to 52. Mark introduces it by one of his typical phrases: "And straightway." A servant is always quickly on the move from one situation to another.

Here, Jesus, having dealt with the spiritual and physical needs of the people, sends them home. He instructs His disciples to get into the boat and go to the other side of Galilee. In the meantime, Jesus went into a mountain to pray. After the noteworthy miracle and despite having a very heavy day of teaching and activity, this perfect Servant found it essential to spend time in prayer. What an example to us! Communion with God in prayer is vital for servants of the Lord at all times. Remove the times in prayer and we don't have the power and direction in service. If Jesus as a Man and a Servant needed to spend time in prayer, how much more do I?

While Jesus was praying, the disciples were in the boat on the Sea of Galilee, struggling to row against the difficult wind. Seas in Scripture often speak of the world around us, never still, often causing difficulties. Like the disciples in the boat, Christians have been put in a separate place but are still subject to the problems and difficulties around and we often find it hard to move against these factors. Jesus demonstrated His control over natural elements, first of all by walking on the water and moving more quickly than the boat, despite the disciples' combined efforts at rowing. Then the wind ceased, surely not by coincidence but by the influence of Jesus when He came into the boat.

In our service and in our lives we as Christians are often subject to contrary and difficult situations. It is only when we call Jesus into those situations that we can find any peace. Battling against the problems in our own strength gets us nowhere. Jesus wants to come on board, directly alongside in the problem situation to uplift and help us with those lovely words from verse 50: "Be of good cheer: it is I; be not afraid."

One final little suggestion on this section. Verse 48 says that Jesus came on board in the problems of the fourth watch of the night, the hours just before dawn. 2 Peter 1:19 talks about "... a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts." Surely the second coming of Jesus is drawing near when He will come as the day star for His people. The Bible teaches that, as that day draws near, as it were in the fourth and final watch of the night, things in the world will get worse, and in these trying times Jesus wants to be on board and to cheer us and help us with His presence.

7. Jesus heals in the land of Gennesaret (verses 53-56)

The final section of our chapter, verses 53-56, takes place in the land of Gennesaret, which I understand is at the north west edge of the Sea of Galilee. These verses record that there was great excitement as Jesus arrived and He undertook much healing. Those who had the faith to touch even the hem of His garment were made well. Of course, the power for healing was not in the garment but in the One who wore it! At the beginning of chapter 6 in Nazareth, lack of faith caused Jesus to leave that area. At the end of the chapter, faith among those living in Gennesaret brought blessing to that area. Personal faith in Jesus is crucial!

One of the joys in preparing these talks is the pleasure gained in prayerful consideration of the particular Bible verses, especially when Jesus so clearly is the subject of the verses. Those listeners who are Christians, I trust that you will join me in trying the more to copy the example of the perfect Servant as we seek to serve God. If any listening do not know Jesus as their Saviour, I do urge you to put your faith in Him and only in Him. Jesus is not only the perfect Servant; He is also the great Saviour.

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