

The Kingdom of God is Near

Mark 1:1-20

Key Verse: 1:15

“‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!’”

Today we begin Mark’s gospel study. Mark was not among the twelve apostles. However, it seems that as a young teenager, Mark was around Jesus during his earthly ministry. Later, Mark became a helper for Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey (Ac 13:5). But in the middle of the mission, he deserted them and went back home to Jerusalem (Ac 13:13). Mark did not want to serve, but to be served. Mark did not want to give his life, but to save his life. However, Mark changed completely under Peter’s shepherding (1 Pe 5:13). Mark became a true disciple of Jesus. He wrote this gospel which reveals most excellently the servant life of Jesus. His key verse is 10:45, which says, “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.”

One young man was moved by the phrase, “to serve my country,” when he joined the army. He felt ready to give his life in the noble cause. But in the battlefield, when his commander said “do this,” and “do that,” he did not like the reality of serving. In fact, he hated it. In our fallen nature, we are all like this. We need to be changed. Jesus who changed Mark can change each of us into life-giving servants of God.

Look at verse 1. “The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” As Genesis tells us of the beginning of all things, that we may know our Creator God, Mark’s gospel tells us the beginning of the gospel, that we may know Jesus Christ. To maintain the purity of our faith, we must always come back to the beginning of the gospel, to Jesus himself. What did Jesus think? What did Jesus say? What did Jesus do? As we study Mark’s gospel we want to learn straight from Jesus, so that we may build our faith on the person and work of Christ.

“Gospel” means “good news.” Good news fills us with joy and strength, while bad news can rot our bones. We all want good news. We all need good news. What is the good news? It is about Jesus Christ the Son of God. “Jesus” means “Savior.” Jesus came to save us from our sins (Mt 1:21). “Christ” means “God’s anointed,” “God’s anointed king.” Jesus is our Savior King. Moreover, Jesus is the Son of God who reveals God’s holy character. The gospel is the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Let’s see how the gospel began.

First, the gospel began with prophecy (2-3).

Look at verses 2-3. “It is written in Isaiah the prophet: ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way’—‘a voice of one calling in the desert, “Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.””

Though Mark mentions only Isaiah, this verse is actually a quotation of both Malachi and Isaiah. Perhaps Mark credits Isaiah since he was preeminent among messianic prophets. Malachi was the last Old Testament prophet. He wrote in about 430 B.C. He proclaimed the Messiah’s coming. But first, God would send “his messenger” ahead of

the Messiah (Mal 3:1). John the Baptist was God's messenger. Isaiah wrote in about 700 B.C. He foretold that God's messenger would live in the desert and preach repentance. Two prophets from different time periods foretold—centuries in advance, and in agreement—that God's messenger would prepare the way for the Messiah. John precisely fulfilled these prophecies. Only God can do this. The gospel is not a man-made story. The gospel is the truth from God, and it is trustworthy.

Second, prepare for the Lord through repentance (4-8).

Isaiah had said that God's messenger would "Prepare the way for the Lord." The Lord is God Almighty, the Judge of all the earth. No one can come into the Lord's presence in a casual manner, without preparation. To receive the Lord we must prepare. How? We must repent of our sins (4). To repent is to acknowledge sin before God and to ask forgiveness. First-class repentance is willing, and it is done with godly sorrow, recognizing the pain we have caused God and others. Second-class repentance may be done without emotional contents, simply as a matter of principle. Third-class repentance is most reluctant, simply to avoid punishment. Sometimes, our hearts are too hard to repent. Then, we must ask God for a spirit of repentance. God will help us to repent.

What hinders repentance? One hindrance is self-righteousness. This is refusing to acknowledge one's own sin. This began with Adam. When God asked if he had eaten the forbidden fruit, Adam said, "The woman you put here with me..." (Gen 3:12). He blamed the woman and even God. Some modern psychology fosters this mentality. Husbands and wives blame each other instead of saying, "I was wrong. I am sorry." Brothers and sisters do the same. Students blame parents and teachers. But we must remember that gospel work begins in our lives only when we repent of our own sins.

A second hindrance to repentance is indulgence in entertainment. Many people are too occupied with modern culture to repent. To struggle against this, some young people in our church decided to go on a "mental diet," or a "media fast," forsaking the internet, television and movies in order to prepare their hearts to meet Jesus in this Easter season. To really repent, we must listen to God's word and pray. This is why we write Bible testimonies, spending quality time.

When we repent, the Lord forgives our sins. We can be right with God and have true peace. This week, one senior member of our church was hospitalized, and may have leukemia. On hearing the diagnosis, he repented before God for all his sins. Specifically, he repented for writing romantic poetry about his days as a revolutionary freedom fighter, instead of writing for the glory of God. He decided to live as a Bible teacher and prayer servant for his family members and neighbors for the rest of his life. It was sincere repentance. God gave him peace and joy. His diagnosis has not changed, but he looks like the happiest man in the world. Repentance is really good for us.

The response to John's preaching was phenomenal. Look at verse 5. "The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River." This

teaches us that people want to repent. They want to find a solution to their sin problem. When they hear God's voice through a devoted servant like John, they are willing to repent.

John's message continues. Look at verses 7-8. "And this was his message: 'After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'" John's message was all about Jesus. At the time, John was greatly respected as a servant of God. But he said, "I am nothing. Jesus is everything." To clarify this, John explained that his water baptism was merely a first step to come to God; it could not solve the sin problem. We need forgiveness and we need to be changed in the inner person. Only Jesus can do this. Jesus' baptism with the Holy Spirit solves our sin problem from the root. Through the work of the Holy Spirit we die to sin and rise with Christ (Ro 6:4). In the Spirit, we can live a new life in the holiness of God and bear good fruit (Gal 5:22). The Spirit gives us a burning passion for God's mission. The Spirit gives us real meaning of life in our souls. This is good news for all people no matter who they may be.

Third, God anointed Jesus as Christ (9-13).

Verse 9 says, "At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." Jesus did not need to repent. Still, Jesus was baptized. There is more to baptism than repentance. Baptism is also a decision of commitment. Jesus was baptized to commit himself to God's purpose. It was a conscious decision to take up his cross of mission. Jesus recognized the work of God through John. Jesus stepped into God's history and took his place in it. Jesus' basic attitude was humble and obedient.

Look at verse 10. "As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove." God, breaking through the darkness of the world, anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit. This is why Jesus is the "Christ," "God's anointed One." Jesus' anointing is unique. Jesus was without sin. Jesus could receive the Holy Spirit without an atoning sacrifice. Jesus could live in absolute obedience to the Holy Spirit all the days of his life. Jesus could receive the Holy Spirit without limit. The Spirit was Jesus' source of power and love. Jesus can baptize with the Holy Spirit. Jesus grants the Holy Spirit to those who repent and believe him.

Look at verse 11. "And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'" God spoke to Jesus from heaven. God said, "You are my Son." God confirmed Jesus' identity as the Son of God. God said, "...whom I love." Jesus treasured God's love confession in his heart. Jesus lived in assurance that he was God's beloved Son all the days of his life. Jesus always called God, "Father." Jesus shares this love relationship with all who repent and believe.

What did God do with his dear Son, Jesus? Look at verse 12. "At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan." God is not like human parents who spoil their children. God gave Jesus a hard and painful task. God sent him into the lonely desert to confront the enemy Satan. Jesus' mission

as the Christ was to defeat Satan in spiritual combat. Jesus was tempted for forty days. Satan coaxed Jesus to take an easy way. But Jesus overcame Satan's scheme by holding on to the word of God. Jesus determined to give his life as a ransom for our sins.

Moreover, by facing Satan in the flesh, Jesus won a spiritual victory for all mankind as the Second Adam. Jesus was tempted in every way, just as we are. Yet Jesus won the victory over Satan (Heb 2:14-15). It was a turning point in the spiritual war in the world. Since then, God's King Jesus continues to confront and defeat Satan.

Fourth, Jesus proclaims the kingdom of God (14-15).

Through John's imprisonment (14), the world seemed to be dark. But Jesus did not think so. To Jesus, it was time to begin kingdom work. Let's read verse 15. "'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!'" The kingdom of God is where God reigns. God reigns through his King Jesus. Jesus brings God's kingdom to men's hearts. All we need to do is repent and believe the good news. Jesus brings God's kingdom to the world. Through Jesus, God's kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven.

Politically speaking, America is a democratic republic which has no king. The "will of the people" rules our land. But this may not always be desirable. If men are corrupt, they may "will" to please their sinful nature, even when it damages society. Through sinful men's rebellion, the devil can reign (Eph 2:2). This is why public education is such an important matter to us. Many of our forefathers wanted American children to not only know the Bible, but to be genuine Christians. In 1798, Benjamin Rush, called "the father of public schools" wrote in his work, *Essays, Literary, Moral, and Philosophical*: "I know there is an objection among many people to teaching children doctrines of any kind, because they are liable to be converted. But let us not be wiser than our Maker. If moral precepts alone could have reformed mankind, the mission of the Son of God into all the world would have been unnecessary. The perfect morality of the gospel rests upon the doctrine which, though often controverted has never been refuted: I mean the vicarious life and death of the Son of God." Obviously he wanted Christ to reign in the hearts of children so they would become trustworthy adults who would "will" what is holy and godly and truly good for America.

Many have said America is in a culture war. More fundamentally it is a conflict between kingdoms. We pray for America to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. This happens when we repent and believe the good news. This happens when our nation repents and honors Jesus as King. The time is now. We must seize the opportunity while we have it.

When World War II broke out, John Stott was at Cambridge. He had just become a Christian a few years earlier and had heard God's call to preach the gospel as a full-time mission. He obtained exemption from military service in order to study the Bible, theology, and so on, in preparation to be ordained. John's father was a distinguished doctor who served with honor on the front lines in France. He thought John should join the war effort first, and study later. John's decision to put Jesus first deeply disappointed him. Some thought John was trying to dodge military service.

But John believed that preaching the kingdom of God was the best way to serve Christ and to serve his country. Since his impact on Biblical Christianity in the world has been tremendous indeed. (See: John Stott: The Making of a Leader: A Biography, The Early Years, by Timothy Dudley-Smith, Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999.) At this time in the United States, we are at war in many ways. There seem to be many things for us to do to serve our country. But most of all, we are in a spiritual war. We need Jesus' reign in the hearts of our young people more than anything else. For this, we must repent, believe and share the good news as of first importance.

Fifth, Jesus calls the first disciples (16-20).

As God's King, Jesus went about establishing the kingdom. Yet his way of doing so may be surprising. Jesus called four fishermen, saying, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (16). They were Simon, Andrew, James and John. They were working men. They were ordinary men. They were men who could learn. Jesus would make them fishers of men. Through them Jesus would advance his kingdom. Jesus didn't recruit mass numbers of people, but only a handful. Yet he wanted them to be truly committed to his work. When Jesus saw James and John with their father Zebedee in the boat, carrying out the family business, he did not hesitate to call them. Verse 20 says, "Without delay he called them." Jesus was serious about raising them as spiritual leaders. It was the most urgent and important task to Jesus. When these men heard Jesus' call, they followed him "at once." They left everything behind. They didn't calculate. They knew Jesus called them to something great, and they followed him eagerly.

Today we learned how the gospel of Jesus Christ began. Jesus proclaimed, "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" When we repent and believe, Jesus reigns in our hearts, and in our nation. Let's share this good news with others.