

October 2, 2016

## **Suffering Servant, Sovereign Lord** ***The Kingdom of God is at Hand***

**Mark 1:14 – 45**

If you never read the other gospels, you might get the sense that verse 14 follows directly on the heels of verse 13. But if you do read the other accounts of Jesus' life, you realize that Mark is giving us just a summary. Actually, at least several months, perhaps even a year, has gone by since the baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan and His subsequent temptation in the wilderness. After the wilderness experience, Jesus had gone back to Galilee to attend a wedding; and then He went up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover where John records that He cleansed the temple. And then He travels back north again through Samaria, where He has that conversation with the woman at the well. And several months at least have gone by, of which Mark tells us nothing. So now we're back again in Galilee, alongside the sea of Galilee. John the Baptist, has been imprisoned; his job is done. The reason for his being here has been eclipsed, and it is time for Jesus, the Suffering Servant and Sovereign Lord to begin His ministry. And He comes preaching or proclaiming the gospel of God.

This is a long section of Scripture to handle, but I think you can break it down into three sections and talk about the message; the messengers; and the mission. First we'll look at the message: **14** *Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."* Much is made of the miracles of Jesus, and rightly so. Everywhere he went blind people regained their sight; lame people were made whole; sick people were healed; and dead people came back to life. This was spectacular and unprecedented. Thousands came out to see Him precisely because this stuff was happening. But that was not the main focus of His ministry. His main focus was on preaching the gospel – the good news. The outstanding characteristic of His ministry was seen in His proclamation of the good news of God.

Verse 21 tells us the first thing that happens in Capernaum was that He goes into the synagogue and preaches. He doesn't go in right away and organize a healing crusade. What He does is He goes in and preaches. And it was the preaching that astonished the people. Yes, they were impressed when He cast the demon out of the guy in the service, but what impressed them was His speaking, *"What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him."* When Peter and the others go out to find Him in verse 36, His response to them was *"Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out."* And Mark concludes by saying, *And He went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.* His testimony before Pilate, at the end of His earthly ministry was equally so: *'For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world--to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to My voice.'*

The reason I am stressing this is firstly because the text is stressing it; and secondly because we have a tendency to get caught up in the spectacular activity and miss the message of Jesus. What was the message? What was Jesus preaching? Well, Mark doesn't give us many details, He just says Jesus was preaching the gospel, the good news of God, saying "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.*" Now we understand from the New Testament Scriptures, the gospel is the good news of what God has done in history to save His people through the death, burial and resurrection of His Son. But what would a first century Jew say the good news was? After all, this was before Jesus went to the cross. What was their understanding of the gospel?

What Jesus was proclaiming and preaching was something the Old Testament had been anticipating for hundreds of years, and has now arrived. You see in Genesis 1 and 2 we see a world God had created perfect and harmonious in every respect. It was good. It was very good. But into this perfectly ordered world, a new thought came creeping in. And that thought was, 'I can be like God. I can be my own lord'. We had a perfect Sovereign Lord who created us and loved us and cared for us, but we wanted to be our own sovereign lord. We chose our own way and not His. And as a result, the whole history of mankind has been one of selfish, destructive desires that have ruined the perfect creation of God. But the promise running through the Old Testament, beginning with chapter 3 of Genesis, was that one day, the seed of the woman would crush the head of Satan and bring everything back to perfection under the rule and reign of the rightful King in His kingdom. And Jesus was saying now is the time.

The narrative the Old Testament tells all the way through about this kingdom of God would be very familiar to these 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews. They knew the story of the loss of perfection, the rebellion of man, the self-centered, suicidal desire to be his own master and the ruin that brings. They knew the story about the rule of God, the dominion of God, the sovereignty of God and the establishment of His kingdom. They were very familiar with the narrative of a paradise lost and a promise of paradise regained, and the prediction of the Promised One to come who would restore all things.

And Jesus comes into history at this point and says, *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.*' In other words, the promised One is here, and His promised kingdom has come. Luke records that when He stood up in the synagogue to read in His hometown of Nazareth, He read to them from the prophet Isaiah, and His commentary on that was '*Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing*'.<sup>1</sup> There was an awareness by Jesus that history was at a turning point; and that awareness had to do with who He was, and His coming into the world at this particular point. In other words, history had been moving all the time toward precisely this point, and all of the Old Testament is fulfilled in Him.

This was the good news, and this was the message Jesus was preaching. The promises of the Old Testament; the promises of the Messiah; the promises of the kingdom and salvation are being fulfilled. The King has arrived and with Him, the Kingdom. Wherever the King is, the Kingdom is. And the message also said that the way into the Kingdom was to repent and believe in the message.

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1 Luke 4:21 ESV

How do you get into the Kingdom? Repent and believe in the gospel. When Jesus begins His public ministry, the first words out of His mouth are that you need to turn around, to change your mind and your heart and your ways, and believe in the One who is bringing in the Kingdom of God. His message was that there is something radically wrong in you that needs to change, to repent, and to believe in the gospel, to embrace Christ and the promise of God that is being offered in the gospel. It is the good news of the rule and reign of the God who created everything that finds its expression in this message of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

The second thing we see is this message of the gospel is then entrusted to some messengers. *16 Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. 17 And Jesus said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men." 18 And immediately they left their nets and followed Him. 19 And going on a little farther, He saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. 20 And immediately He called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed Him.*

Here we have the calling of four of these messengers, two sets of brothers, Simon, (later renamed Peter) and Andrew, and then James and John the sons of Zebedee. We know Jesus eventually calls eight more guys to follow Him, but here we only learn of these four. From John's gospel we know that Simon Peter and Andrew had already met Jesus, and it was Andrew who found his brother Simon and said, 'We have found the Messiah'. So to some extent, these guys already knew something about Jesus and were excited about the prospect of the Messiah, yet they were not quite followers. No doubt they had had some conversations about this guy, and had perhaps speculated on who He really was. But here they are, back in Galilee, working hard at their occupation, and here comes Jesus, and this time He gives them a clear invitation to follow Him.

In and of itself, this was highly unusual in that day. Teachers or rabbis did not go around calling disciples to follow them. Always it was those wanting to be disciples who went after the teacher. If you were serious about God and wanted to learn about His law, you looked around at the available pool of rabbis and picked one to follow. Rabbis never looked for disciples. But here, consistent with the topsy-turvy nature of kingdom life, Jesus deliberately goes to where Peter and Andrew and James and John were busily engaged in their profession, and says, 'Follow Me'. And immediately they leave their nets and leave their poor old dad in the boat and begin following Jesus. And I think Mark is trying to tell us something about the nature of following Jesus here.

One of the things that comes through is the sovereign nature of the call of God. That is, it is He who chooses us, not the other way around. If you have been here for any length of time you will have heard this over and over again. Our coming to faith in Jesus is dependent not on our ability or power but on His. Over and over the Bible makes it clear that it is God who chose us before the foundation of the world to one day in time come to faith in Christ. At some point in every believer's life, God breaks into his world and calls him to follow Jesus. No one who comes to faith in Jesus ever pats himself on the back for his choice.

There is always a deep and humble realization that unless God had effectively called me, I would never have come to Him. As C.H. Spurgeon writes in his autobiography: *'I believe the doctrine of election, because I am quite certain that, if God had not chosen me, I should never have chosen Him; and I am sure He chose me before I was born, or else He never would have chosen me afterwards; and He must have elected me for reasons unknown to me, for I never could find any reason in myself why He should have looked upon me with special love.'* Or as Aslan the Lion puts it to Jill in C.S. Lewis' tale of Narnia, *The Silver Chair*: "You would not have called to me unless I had been calling to you."

The second thing about this that comes through here is the radical nature of the call. When Jesus calls someone to follow Him, He calls them in an extreme way. He calls them to abandon their own pursuits in favor of His. He calls them to abandon their own life goals in favor of His. It is a calling to replace your desires with His. His will becomes your will. His purpose becomes your purpose. What He loves, you love. What He hates, you hate. Later on in Mark we'll hear Jesus say, *'If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me'*.<sup>2</sup> In other words, 'Drop everything to follow Me. Drop your family business boys. Drop your way of life'. As David Platt puts it, *'Jesus...is not one dish on the buffet line of spirituality from which we can pick and choose the elements that best suit our taste'*.<sup>3</sup>

The call to follow Jesus comes with a cost. Jesus essentially invited these guys to leave behind their profession, possessions, ambitions, family, security, everything familiar and comfortable, to follow Him. That is not necessarily an invitation to which people eagerly respond. The natural state of things is to protect yourself, promote yourself, preserve yourself, entertain yourself, comfort yourself. And here comes Jesus saying, 'Forget about that. Follow Me to the cross'. And these guys paid the price to follow Him. According to the Bible and church tradition, James was beheaded, Andrew was crucified in Greece, Peter was crucified upside down in Rome and John spent the last years of his life in exile.

But this is the thing about following Jesus. The thing that looks like loss is really gain. The thing that looks like losing is really winning. It is the upside-down nature of the kingdom of God. I would bet everything I have that if you could have asked these guys as they were dying, 'Was it worth it?' They would have said, 'Oh yes, it was worth it all to follow Jesus'. With Jesus, these guys found something worth losing their lives over. Late in life Peter wrote these words to hurting, suffering believers in Asia Minor, *'To you who believe, Jesus Christ is precious'*.<sup>4</sup> There is a sense in which if that is not true of us, I'm not sure we can really call ourselves His followers. In commenting on this verse in 1 Peter, John Piper wrote: *'[Peter] is saying that if you are a believer, if you are saved, for you Christ is precious. If you do not feel his preciousness, if you do not desire him like a baby desires milk, examine the roots of your faith and see if they are sucking up life from the precious blood of Christ and the promises of God, or if they are simply curled around the dry rocks of habit, tradition, custom, form, peer pressure. Is Christ an allurements to your affections, or just duty to be performed?'*<sup>5</sup>

2 Mark 8:34 ESV

3 David Platt, *What Did Jesus Really Mean When He Said Follow Me?*, (Tyndale House, Carol Stream, Ill., 2013), vi-vii.

4 1 Peter 2:7 NASB

5 <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/how-much-is-jesus-worth>

Following Jesus, really following Him, means that for us He is precious. And that is incredibly important because the final thing about this call is that it is a call to service. You see, followers of Jesus gladly, willingly leave behind the things this world calls precious because they have found a far greater treasure in Jesus. And the more we follow Him, the more we want to follow Him. The more we know Him and taste of His goodness, the more we love and enjoy and value Him above everything. And the more that happens, the more we want others to love and enjoy and value Him too. Jesus didn't just say 'Follow Me.' He said *"Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men."*

In other words, to be a follower of Jesus means that you will be calling others to follow Him too. If that is not happening, then you might want to question your call. It was C.H. Spurgeon who once said, *"I think I may say to every person whom I am addressing, If you are yourself saved, the work is but half done until you are employed to bring others to Christ. You are as yet but half formed in the image of your Lord. You have not attained to the full development of the Christ-life in you unless you have commenced in some feeble way to tell others of the grace of God; and I trust that you will find no rest to the sole of your foot till you have been the means of leading many to that blessed Saviour who is your confidence and your hope? Let us ask Him to give us grace to go a-fishing, and so to cast our nets that we may take a great multitude of fishes. Oh, that the Holy Ghost may raise up from among us some master-fishers, who shall sail their boats in many a sea, and surround great shoals of fish!"*<sup>6</sup>

The message, the messengers and that brings us to the mission. The apostle John, who was with the Lord from the beginning, tells us exactly what the mission was: *The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.*<sup>7</sup> Jesus came into the world to undo all the evil Satan brought into the world from the beginning. He came to destroy the works of the devil. The word 'destroy' here means to 'loose, to unravel, to unbind, to dissolve'. Humanity is pictured here as being bound up in satanic chains which Jesus comes to break. Morally we are wrapped in the chains of sin; every attitude and motive of our hearts are toward sin; physically we are subject to sickness, disease and death, the inevitable products of sin; and spiritually we are blinded by the god of this age to the truth of the gospel. In other words, Jesus came into the world to destroy sin and its effects. And from the beginning of His ministry, we see Jesus preaching and speaking and healing with power and authority to break those sin-chains and set people free.

This is the message He proclaimed in His hometown of Nazareth in Luke 4 before He leaves there to go into Galilee: *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because he has anointed Me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*<sup>8</sup> And this is exactly what Mark highlights in this section. Jesus comes into the synagogue there in Capernaum and begins preaching the gospel. And right away He is confronted by one of Satan's minions who had possessed some guy in the congregation: *And he cried out, "What have You to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are...the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him.*

<sup>6</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, Sermon #1906, *How to Become Fishers of Men*

<sup>7</sup> 1 John 3:8 ESV

<sup>8</sup> Luke 4:18-19 ESV

You notice that there isn't a lot of mumbo jumbo or wand waving or abracadabra nonsense here. Essentially Jesus says, 'Shut up and get out!' And the demon does. That is kingdom authority. The King has come. The demons know it; the principalities and powers of this age know it; Satan knows it; they all know it and they all must obey the King. With this demonstration, Jesus marches into enemy occupied territory and declares His sovereignty and victory and triumph over the devil and all his works, proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor. In other words, the kingdom of God has come. This is what they had been waiting for and praying for and hoping for. They were astonished and amazed saying, *"What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him."*

And He was not only exercising kingdom authority over the demons, He also began healing those who were sick. He healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law and the word about Him got out and Mark says, *'That evening at sundown they brought to Him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. And the whole city was gathered together at the door. And He healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons.* You see the prophecy in Isaiah of the One who would come to bring in the Kingdom of God said that this one would bring good news, free the captives and heal the sick. J.R.R. Tolkien borrowed this idea in the *Return of the King* and when he wrote: *The hands of the king are healing hands and thus shall the rightful king be known.*<sup>9</sup> And when John the Baptist sent his disciples to Jesus to ask if He was the One who is to come, Jesus told them: *Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them.*<sup>10</sup>

You see, this is the mission - to announce the coming of the kingdom of God, calling people to repent and believe in this Sovereign Lord who has come to destroy the works of the devil. And the things Jesus did were all to authenticate just who He was and with what authority He was doing them. In other words, what He did was meant to point to who He was and why He had come. You need to understand that Jesus did not come into the world merely to engage in power encounters with disease and demons and death. Having demons cast out and diseases instantly healed, and lepers made whole are signs to us that the Kingdom of God has come, the power of sin has been broken, and the restoration of all things has begun. You see, our biggest problem is not demon possession or disease. Our biggest problem is the sin that has us bound and headed for an eternity without God.

And Mark illustrates this beautifully in this last section here with the leper. *And a leper came to Him, imploring Him, and kneeling said to Him, "If you will, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, He stretched out His hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean." And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. 43 And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once, and said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them.' But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to Him from every quarter.*

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<sup>9</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, (Harper Collins, New York, 2004), 1072.

<sup>10</sup> Luke 7:22

There is a lot to be said here in this section, but I just want to concentrate on a couple of things. Leprosy was a terrible disease to have. There was not only the physical pain and suffering of the disease, but there was the absolute social ostracism of the individual. If you contracted leprosy back in these times, you really would have been better off dead. In fact the rabbis of Jesus day said it was easier to raise the dead than heal a leper. There really was no hope for you. Lepers were required to stay far away from people, living outside civilization and the normal comforts of life. Family members of lepers would leave food and other necessities in certain locations for them to come and collect when no one was around. If they came near anyone at all, they had to shout, 'Unclean. Unclean' so that people would know to avoid them. Physically, emotionally, spiritually, it was a horrible affliction.

And yet here, against all social and religious taboos, this leper comes to Jesus, falls on his knees and says, *"If you will, you can make me clean."* No doubt he has heard that there is a man who is healing people. So he makes his way to where Jesus is and begs for healing. Apparently there was no doubt in his mind that Jesus *could* heal him. The only question was *would* He heal him? Why would Jesus not be willing? The only thing I can imagine is that this guy had heard that Jesus had been healing lots of people, and then He kind of disappears. Mark records that Peter and the others had to go looking for Jesus, and when they find Him they say 'Everybody's looking for You', meaning, 'There are a lot of sick people looking to be healed', no doubt. And Jesus' response is curious to say the least. 'Let's go somewhere else then'. *'Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.'* Jesus makes it clear that His priority is preaching the good news, not necessarily healing everyone.

So the leper says, 'If you are willing'. And Jesus says 'I am' and He does what no one in that world would ever think of doing, He touches the leper and says, 'Be clean'. And in this remarkable scene, we see the essence of the gospel. Here is a leper, full of leprosy, as Luke says in his version of the story; exiled to the uninhabited wasteland of the earth; cut off from normal human affection and interaction; without hope and without a future; throwing himself down at Jesus' feet and pleading for healing; and receiving the cleansing touch of the Savior. And he is restored back to life as it were; restored back to his family and friends and community. And Jesus is the one who then is exiled as it were. Mark records that because this man couldn't help telling people about this man who healed him, *Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places.* In other words, Jesus traded places with the leper.

And that is exactly what Jesus did on the cross for all of us sin-sick lepers. We are the ones living in alienation and isolation from God our Creator. We were the one who were unclean. And the only way we could be brought in to God was that God would send His Son to take our place. He was forsaken so that we might be accepted. He was cast out that we might be taken in. He was wounded so that we might be made whole. *"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."*

*Our gracious God and heavenly Father,*

*Thank You for this gospel of the kingdom that brings salvation. Thank You that You did not spare Your only Son so that You might spare us. He took all our sorrows so that we might be all joy. He was cast out that we might be brought in. He was wounded that we might be healed. He was forsaken that we might be accepted. I pray You would grant faith and repentance for those here this morning who have heard but not yet responded to this glorious gospel. Enlarge our hearts and warm our affections for Christ until He becomes precious; until our highest ambition is to follow Him and make much of Him in the world we pray, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord we pray, Amen.*