

November 27, 2016

Suffering Servant, Sovereign Lord *The Power of Unbelief*

Mark 6:1 – 29

We are looking at three stories here in Mark 6 this morning which are all connected by a common theme. That theme is the power of unbelief. We've just had some great teaching on the power of belief in the previous chapter with the stories of Jairus and the woman with the issue of blood. But here Mark points us deliberately to the darkside as it were of belief – unbelief. Belief is powerful. Faith can move mountains. Eternal life comes through faith. But unbelief can have massive force and consequence. In the gospels, Jesus is said to have been amazed at two things. He was amazed at the faith of the centurion who begged Him to heal his servant. And here He is equally amazed, 'He marveled' Mark says, at the unbelief that confronted Him in His hometown.

We often think of the force of faith, but have you considered the force of unbelief? It was unbelief that plunged the world from paradise to ruination. It was unbelief that brought a killing flood on the whole world in the days of Noah. It was unbelief that caused the generation that saw the salvation of Israel out of Egypt to wander and die in the wilderness and never cross over into the promised land. It was unbelief that brought God's judgement time after time in the Old Testament to God's people. And it was unbelief that nailed Jesus to the cross and doomed Judas to suicide and everlasting punishment. Yes the Bible has a lot to say about faith and believing, but it also has a lot to say about unbelief.

We all know John 3:16, but do we know what follows? **16** *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.* It is unbelief that activates the judgment of God. It was unbelief that drove humanity from paradise. It was unbelief that broke the world apart in Noah's day and brought judgment on the world through water. It is unbelief that will condemn a soul to eternal hell. And what we see in this passage, perhaps more than anywhere else in the gospels, is the staggering power of unbelief in the lives of men.

So this morning we want to look at what this unbelief is, how it works in the hearts of men, and what can we do about our own unbelief. And just like the three points of this sermon, Mark helpfully gives us three stories to work that out. The first story of course is the story of Jesus in His hometown. **1** *He went away from there and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him.* 'There' was the city of Capernaum. Jesus had been by the Sea of Galilee in the city where He had healed the woman and the child, and now He is in His hometown of Nazareth. I looked it up on Google and it told me that Nazareth is about 30 miles west of Capernaum and since there is light traffic on the road it should only take me about an hour and three minutes. But I'm sure it took Jesus just a bit longer.

2 And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, "Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands? 3 Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. What Mark doesn't say here but is implied by the way he records this account is the fact that when Jesus came to Nazareth, there were no large crowds waiting to see Him as there were in so many other places. Apparently Jesus had to wait for the Sabbath for an opportunity to preach. There were no pressing throngs, bringing their sick and demon-possessed friends to get them healed in Nazareth. In fact it is almost as if Jesus had to seek out a few sick people to heal here.

This says a lot about the state of their unbelief. To the people of Nazareth He was nothing special. He was just a hometown boy, the carpenter's son. And the way Mark puts this, we know it was meant to be a derogatory remark. Isn't He just a common laborer like us? He's nothing special. We know His family, we know His brothers and sisters. And furthermore, it was an insult to describe any Jewish man as the son of his mother. The fact that they referred to Him as Mary's son was just this side of calling Him illegitimate. On the one hand they were confounded by the wisdom with which He spoke, and by the tales of healing and casting out of demons they had heard; and on the other by His very appearance as ordinary and common. They couldn't reconcile this man that had grown from a boy in front of their eyes with anyone remotely qualified to be the Messiah.

And they were offended by Him. The word is *skandalon* from which we get scandalized. They were scandalized by Him. Who does He think He is? Preaching at us, lecturing to us, telling us to repent. He's never even been to seminary. He's a carpenter's kid for crying out loud! And yet, and yet...they are also somehow attracted to Him. The word is '*astonished*'. They were astonished at Him. They thought they knew Him, and they couldn't reconcile His words with their idea of who He was. Jesus always has this reaction of opposites, acceptance and rejection, attraction and repulsion. J.P. Meiers, an historian, once wrote of Jesus, '*What is beyond dispute is that Jesus of Nazareth is one of those perennial questions in history with which mankind is never quite done. In a ministry of two or three years, He attracted and infuriated His contemporaries, mesmerized and alienated the ancient world, unleashed a movement that has done the same ever since, and so changed the course of history forever.*'¹

We all begin in a state of unbelief. No one is born believing in Jesus. There are no believers from the womb apart from perhaps John the Baptist. But we are not meant to stay in our unbelief. The gospel will offend us before it wins us. Jesus will offend us. He will offend our sensibilities. He will challenge our beliefs. He will press us on the issues. But it is an offense, a challenge, a pressing that is meant to break through that hard shell of unbelief and bring us to faith. There is an incredible attraction in the gospel message while at the same time an infuriating element that offends us to the core. The promise of perfect love and acceptance and the hope of eternal joy comes right alongside the message that we are incorrigible sinners, enemies of God, doomed to destruction, without any good in us to recommend us to mercy.

1 (New York Times, 21 December 1986)

Jesus offended His hometown people by His very ordinariness. He grew up there in Nazareth. He had interacted with the people there for 30 years. He had probably built furniture for many in Nazareth; He most likely knew everyone in the synagogue that day. They had no doubt heard something of His ministry. They probably knew people who knew people who had been healed through His ministry. They heard His message; they were astonished at His perception and the evident power of God at work in Him; but they would not allow the obvious power and authority and divine wisdom coming from Jesus to change their fundamental opinion of who He was. In commenting on this passage, John Calvin remarked that *"It is not mere ignorance that hinders men, but that, of their own accord, they search after grounds of offense, to prevent them from following the path to which God invites."*²

The nature of unbelief is that it will embrace anything but the truth. The only possible answer to their questions: *"Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands?"* is divine empowerment. But unbelief tends to obscure the obvious. Things that should have been plain to these people suddenly become obscure and difficult because they thought they knew the messenger. And it was the familiarity and ordinariness of Jesus that entrenched these people in their unbelief. *4 And Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household."* The fact that there didn't seem to be anything special about Jesus, the fact that they could only see the ordinariness of a homegrown boy, worked to strengthen their unbelief.

The ordinariness of Jesus can work to obscure the gospel of grace in our unbelief because it presses on our pride. I think of the story of Naaman in 2 Kings who was a leper. Naaman was a pagan, a Syrian general and a leper, and he heard there might be a cure by the God of Israel. So he packed up his money and presents and went to see if he could get cured. But when he came to Elisha, the prophet of God, Elisha wouldn't even open the door to him but told him to go wash in the Jordan River. And Naaman was offended. He had expected some great ceremony Elisha would perform to cure him, and now he was being told to go wash himself in the muddy Jordan. And he rejected that offer of help. But he had a wise servant who said, *"My father, it is a great word the prophet has spoken to you, will you not do it?"*³

Naaman was offended by the ordinariness of the solution. He told his servant *"Behold, I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call upon the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper."*⁴ He had also brought ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten changes of clothing so that he could pay for his cure. Now he's being told there will be no ceremony and that he can contribute nothing to the cure, just go wash in the muddy little Jordan River. All his gold and silver and high rank won't do anything to save him. What he has to do is what anyone else could do, wash in the river. His pride was offended to the core. You see the gospel offends the part of our soul that says we have something to contribute to our salvation. It kills the idea that there is some good in us that recommends us to God.

² Calvin's Commentaries, Vol. 32: Matthew, Mark and Luke, Part II, tr. by John King, [1847-50], at sacred-texts.com

³ 2 Kings 5:13 ESV

⁴ 2 Kings 5:11 ESV

It is only the offense of Jesus that opens the door to grace. Otherwise we think we somehow deserve salvation. It is only when our hearts are challenged and our natural pride is offended that we can hear the message of the gospel and respond. You see, the gospel will offend everyone somehow. Good people are offended by the fact that bad people can end up in heaven. Religious pluralists are offended by the fact that there is only one way to God, not many different paths. Successful people are offended by the fact that failures get into the kingdom. But let the gospel work its offense in your soul. Let it obliterate any thought that you somehow merit salvation. Let it humble you by showing you your status before God.

And let it work repentance in your soul because Jesus tells us in Matthew 11 that "*Blessed is the one who is not offended by Me*".⁵ In other words, the blessing of the gospel comes to those who let the offense work in their soul but who do not hold on to the offense. If you have never wrestled with the offense of Jesus, I'm not sure you really understand the gospel. There is an offense that comes with the gospel, but you must not hold on to it, because Jesus is saying that the only way His blessing comes into your life is if you do not hold on to the offense. The problem in Nazareth was that they held on: *5 And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them.* Unbelief will prevent the blessing of God from coming into your life.

Mark is not saying that Jesus was unable to do mighty works in Nazareth as if God were somehow limited in His power by our unbelief. What he is telling us is that the rejection of the people of Nazareth was so complete that it literally shut these people off from God. Miracles wouldn't help these people. More preaching wouldn't help. They've heard the word and rejected it, and mighty works would only work to confirm them in their unbelief. *6 And he marveled because of their unbelief. And he went about among the villages teaching.* Here their unbelief worked to cause them to lose the Messiah, their only hope of salvation.

The second story about unbelief is the story of the commissioning of the twelve. *7 And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. 8 He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff--no bread, no bag, no money in their belts-- 9 but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. 10 And he said to them, "Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there. 11 And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." 12 So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. 13 And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.*

Mark is making a deliberate connection here between the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve disciples who were commissioned and sent out to preach by Jesus. In this we are supposed to see the judgment of God on unbelieving Israel. Jesus chooses twelve men, fishermen, tax collectors, sinners, to bring a judging word on the twelve tribes who have rejected Him. These guys are outside the corrupt religious system that characterized Judaism at the time. They are the people despised by the religious crowd.

5 Matthew 11:6 ESV

The Jews were very religious, but through the opposition and actions and words of the scribes and Pharisees to the Lord of life we understand that at the foundation of their religion they were unbelieving. And it is to these people the twelve are sent. They are sent with the message of the gospel, 'Repent and believe', and with authority over the unclean spirits and the power to heal. And if you think about it, you couldn't put together a stronger group of preachers than we see in these three stories. We've got Jesus Himself, His twelve apostles taught directly by Him, and John the Baptist in the next story. That is a pretty powerful group of preachers. And yet, the common theme here is rejection. They rejected Jesus in Nazareth. Herod ultimately rejects John the Baptist, and here the Lord indicates that there will be some cities that reject these disciples.

And what is terrifying is the judgment pronounced against those who reject the message of the gospel: *And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.*" What Jesus says is that if people reject you, that really means they are rejecting Me. To reject the messengers is to reject not only the message but the one from whom the message comes. And that is a fearful place. In the parallel passage of this story in Matthew 10, Matthew adds that Jesus said, *"It will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town"*.⁶ In Acts 18, Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia and the text says that Paul was in Corinth solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. And when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his garments and said to them, *"Your blood be on your heads."*

What Mark is telling us, and what the Bible confirms in so many places, is the fact that there is a point people reach in their unbelief and resistance to the gospel that God simply doesn't speak to them anymore. I don't think there can be any more terrifying place for us to be than in a place where we cannot hear God anymore. Shaking the dust off the feet is a symbolic indication that you have done all that can be done in a situation and you no longer bear responsibility for it. Jesus was telling His disciples that they were to preach the gospel to everyone. Where they were received with joy, they should stay and teach. But where their message was rejected, they had no further responsibility. Shaking the dust off their feet was, in effect, saying that those who rejected God's truth would not be allowed to hinder the furtherance of the gospel.

Dick Lucas, pastor of St Helens church in England, tells the story of John Wesley coming to preach in that church during his ministry in the Great Awakening. And the warden of St Helens coming up to him after a marvelous gospel message of repentance and salvation and saying, 'Sir, you will preach here no more' and the doors of St Helens was shut up to the gospel for 50 years.

One of the implications here is that God grants everyone opportunity to hear and respond to the gospel. And there are those who embrace Jesus with joy. But there are those whose unbelief is such that they will not receive the message of the gospel and they then lose the opportunity. In the first story, unbelief causes them to lose their Messiah. In this story, unbelief means they lose the opportunity for repentance and the gospel is taken elsewhere.

6 Matthew 10:15 ESV

It is the story of Esau who despised his birthright and of whom the writer of Hebrews reminds us: *For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.*⁷ Literally it says 'He found no place for repentance'. The opportunity had come and gone. That is why the Bible tells us over and over, '*Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion*'.⁸

The last story here is perhaps the most tragic. It's not tragic because John loses his head, although that is sad. It is tragic because Herod loses his soul. Mark tells us that King Herod heard about all that Jesus and His disciples were doing and while many attributed His ministry to Elijah and the prophets of old, Herod was sure that John the Baptist had come back to haunt him. *But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."*¹⁷ *For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her.* ¹⁸ *For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."*

This was no doubt a projection of his deepest anxiety, his greatest terror, his greatest fear. He knew that John shouldn't have even been in prison because Mark tells us that the only reason John was there was because Herod's wife hated him. But Herod protected John from his wife who wanted him dead and he even gives testimony that he was a righteous and godly man so he knew he had imprisoned John unjustly. He kept him a prisoner for over a year and apparently listened to him frequently. He also knows that he had John executed during a bizarre, lecherous, wicked party to satisfy his own pride and the vengeance of his wife. And so he projects his worst fear. This must be John back from the dead. Herod knew he had done wrong and was suffering the pangs of conscience as a result.

Verse 20 tells us the source of his tortured conscience: *Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.* On the one hand there was something in the message of John the Baptist that attracted Herod – 'He heard him gladly'. On the other there was something about the message that repulsed him. Mark says that he was 'greatly perplexed'. Some translations say he was puzzled. Neither word give us a good indication of what was really going on in his heart. If we just took those words at face value, we might suppose that Herod didn't understand the message. But that couldn't have been the case. John was pretty specific – 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife'. That is fairly unambiguous. Everyone knew this was an unlawful relationship. Herodias was not only his brother's wife, she was also his niece. And John made no bones about the fact that this was sinful.

When Mark says that Herod was greatly perplexed, he uses the Greek word *aporeo*. The word it comes from, *poreo* is a word that means to get on the road and make progress, to march forward on a journey. When you put an 'a' in front of the word, a-poreo, it negates the meaning, and so you have a word that means to be paralyzed by indecision, to waver indecisively, like at a crossroads. 'Which way do I go?'

7 Hebrews 12:17 ESV

8 Hebrews 3:7-8 ESV

It is indicative of someone who wants to get going but is afraid to pull the trigger. That is exactly where Herod is. He is attracted and repelled. He knows that he needs to get on the road John is calling him to get on, but he's afraid to go. To get on that road would bring him into right relationship with God, but at the same time to get on the road meant great personal loss. And so Herod remains at the crossroads, day after day, gladly listening to John and protecting John but keeping him in prison; attracted by the message and yet afraid of the implications.

21 *But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee.* Into every life, there will come an opportunity. I like the NASB here when it says, 'a strategic day came'. It was opportune for Herodias, but it was strategic for Herod. No doubt Herodias had been scheming how to do away with this thorn in her side. And Herod had been dithering over which road to choose. And God, in His providence, brings it to a head on a certain day. Into every life there will come a day, appointed by God, when you must choose which road to get on, and your eternity will be determined by your choice. It is a deeply ironic statement by Mark here because the window of opportunity opened for Herodias, but it closed forever for Herod. He could never listen to John's message of repentance again, and when Jesus Himself came before Herod to be judged, He never spoke a word to him. His opportunity came and went and Herod was lost.

Unbelief is powerful. Unbelief caused a nation to reject its Savior, its Messiah. Unbelief shut the doors of the gospel to those who rejected His messengers. And unbelief will condemn a soul to hell. And what Mark is telling us is don't let unbelief define your response to the gospel. Don't let the offense of the gospel harden your heart against the liberating truth of who Jesus is. Don't let the offense of the gospel merely wound your pride. Let the offense kill it properly. The gospel is meant to give a mortal wound to the pride in each of us that will keep us out of the kingdom. At its heart, the gospel is an offense because it says to us, "You're a sinner. And you need a Savior. You've sinned against God and His word and you are deserving of death". Billy Graham once said, *"I can preach anything else, and it's called popular. It pleases the ear. But when I come to the heart of Christianity, when I come to the cross and the blood and the resurrection, that is the stumbling block. That's the thing people do not want to hear."*⁹

But that is the incredibly good news that we need. Jesus calls us to repentance, and welcomes us into His Kingdom if we turn from the sin of rejecting Him, and acknowledge Him as Lord and Savior and receive His forgiveness. You go from death to life, from darkness to light, from blindness to sight, from hell to heaven, from tragedy to bliss, this is the gospel. And as great as the power of unbelief can be, the power of the risen Savior is greater still. Unbelief nailed Him to a cross but in that very act of dying, He paid the penalty for all the sins of all who would only believe.

9 <https://billygraham.org/decision-magazine/march-2016/why-does-the-cross-offend-people/>

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for the promise of life and joy in the gospel. Have mercy on us and don't let us remain hardened in our unbelief. Let the offense of the cross do its work in our souls. Lord, I pray that You'll deliver those who even here today have been guilty of rejecting Jesus; those who stand with the crucifiers, the executioners, in rejecting the only hope of forgiveness, salvation, escape from judgment and eternal joy in heaven. Holy Spirit do that transforming work in hearts that makes sinners into saints, and make the gospel come alive, we pray in the precious name of Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen.