

Mark – The First Gospel

020 – The Meaning of the Christ – Mark 8:31-9:1

All outlines, audio recording of discussions, and works referenced may be accessed and viewed at <http://markthefirstgospel.blogspot.com/> .

First Thoughts

In the preceding passage, Peter has made the right confession: Jesus is the Christ. But as we continue reading, we see that Peter does not yet know what that means. He think he knows what it means, but it is not what Jesus wants his disciples and everyone else to understand.

The second half of the gospel now begins, and the message of what it really means to follow Jesus gets increasingly difficult.

The first sub-unit, 8:31-33, insists on the passion and resurrection as necessary components of Jesus' role as Messiah. In 8:34-9:1 the Markan Jesus explains the implications of his own passion for the definition of faithful discipleship: his followers must be prepared to take up their own crosses and lose their lives for the sake of Jesus and the gospel.¹

We need to walk between two extremes. The first is the temptation to soften Jesus' words. The second is to demand that all Christian journeys look just like Jesus'. We need to take the Markan context and audience and interpret within those settings. But we must not dismiss Jesus' message because our context is quite different from Mark's.

These central passages in Mark's gospel can also be seen paralleling the beginning of his gospel account. The gospel opened with a statement about Jesus as the Son of God. After a declaration about Jesus' identity, he confronts temptation and then goes about to proclaim the meaning of the kingdom of God. This is followed by calling of his disciples.

At the beginning of the second half, we have heard a declaration from Peter regarding Jesus' identity. Now we will see Mark referring to Jesus as "Son of Man" and facing a temptation from Peter.² Jesus will then begin to proclaim the meaning of the Christ. The words of 8:34-38 can be read as a second calling of Jesus' disciples.³

¹ *Reading Mark*, 8:31-9:29.

² *Feasting: Mark*, location 8648. "Mark's Gospel, of course, does not include a full narration of the temptation story as it appears in the other Synoptic Gospels. Perhaps Mark's version is embedded here instead— as Jesus faces down, not an archetype or a manifestation of his own inner demons, but a compatriot."

³ *Reading Mark*, 8:31-9:29. "This, then, is the second calling of disciples. In 1:16-20 and 2:13-14 Jesus had called, and the disciples had followed. Now the Markan Jesus calls (*proskalesamenos*, 8:34a) again. The stakes are higher now because the disciples and the audience must decide whether to continue to follow, not only a preacher and healer, but also a life-giver whose way leads to a shameful death."

Right Confession, Wrong Meaning

8:31 And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days^[4, 5] rise again. ³² And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." (ESV)

Comments

Jesus begins to explain the meaning of the Christ, immediately after he had commanded the disciples to remain silent about it.

It was not necessary that the people recognize that he is the Messiah until after he had fulfilled his messianic vocation through death and resurrection (Ch. 9:9; 13:9f.; 14:9; cf. Ch. 4:21-23). This is the only time in Mark that an injunction to silence is explained and it provides the key to all of the previous injunctions to silence. The necessity of the passion in obedience to the will of God accounts for the so-called secrecy phenomena in the Gospel. The "messianic secret" is God's intention to provide salvation through a suffering Savior who is identified with the people by his free decision to bear the burden of judgment upon human rebellion. The repeated injunctions to silence throughout the Gospel of Mark are an expression of Jesus' fidelity to the divine plan of salvation... The close association of Ch. 8:31-33 with the declaration of Ch. 8:29 indicates that confession in itself is insufficient to establish Christian faith. ⁶

Discussion

1. The key here is the phrase at v.32a, "And he said this plainly." Up until now Jesus has been hiding the meaning of the Christ. But now he opens up and speaks plainly about it. What changed?^{7 8 9}

⁴ *UBC: Mark*, notes for 8:31. "This is the literal meaning of the Greek phrase which can mean simply 'after a short time.' The parallels in Matt. 16:21 and Luke 9:22 use the phrase 'on the third day,' reflecting the Christian tradition that Jesus' resurrection took place on the third day after his crucifixion (e. g., 1 Cor. 15:4)."

⁵ *NICNT: Mark*, 8:31. "While there is some evidence that 'after three days' can be regarded in a Semitic context as equivalent to 'on the third day' (Gen. 42:17f.; 2 Chron. 10:5, 12), it is probable that Jesus' reference to three days was an indefinite expression for a short period of time."

⁶ *NICNT: Mark*, 8:31-33.

⁷ *UBC: Mark*, 8:31-9:1. "We must understand that in ancient Judaism there was no concept that the Messiah would suffer the sort of horrible fate that Jesus describes in 8:31. Thus Peter's response in 8:32 is in one sense fully understandable."

⁸ *UBC: Mark*, 8:31-9:1. "Mark wants us to realize that we have come into a new section of the narrative, for he signals this by the phrase in 8:32, He spoke plainly about this. That is, there is no more use of parable and coded speech; now Jesus declares himself plainly."

⁹ *NICNT: Mark*, V. The Journey to Jerusalem (8:31-10:52). "This openness is theologically significant within the larger context of Jesus' messianic self-revelation in the Gospel of Mark. It points beyond Jesus' hiddenness, which reaches its climax on the cross, to his revealed glory. In the cross and resurrection of Jesus the secret of the Kingdom is thoroughly veiled as well as gloriously revealed. Mark exposes this tension, which is inherent in the gospel, through the reaction of the disciples to Jesus' sober teaching throughout Chs. 8:31-10:52."

2. What is meant by “Son of Man?”^{10 11 12}
3. What is the meaning of the Christ, according to Jesus (and Mark’s interpretation of Jesus)?¹³
4. Why does Peter “rebuke” Jesus?^{14 15 16} Why is this a problem?¹⁷
5. Notice the setting for this pericope. What does Jesus see, and what prompts his response? Why does Jesus respond the way he does? (The word “rebuke” is used most frequently against demonic powers and influences.¹⁸)

¹⁰ *UBC: Mark, 8:31-9:1.* “Thus, for Mark, the term the Son of Man seems to be an ironic way of referring to Jesus as the one who appears as a mere man now in the eyes of many but will one day reappear vindicated by God as the Messiah and the Son of God.”

¹¹ *NICNT: Mark, 8:31.* “In a recent fresh examination of the total corpus of early Palestinian Aramaic, G. Vermès has offered conclusive evidence that the idiom sometimes functioned as a circumlocution for “I.” It occurs with this meaning primarily in sentences containing an allusion to humiliation, danger or death, although use of the idiom in reference to one’s self was sometimes dictated by humility or modesty... It indicates that it was not necessary that the disciples should have recognized in Jesus’ usage of “the son of man” any more than the circumlocution for “I.” The explicit reference to humiliation would account for the indirect idiom. Only in the light of Jesus’ subsequent teaching concerning the enthronement and judging function of the Son of Man (Chs. 8:38; 13:26; 14:62) was it possible to recognize an allusion to the mysterious figure of Dan. 7:13f. to whom God appointed celestial glory, dominion over all nations and an everlasting kingdom... [That said, however,] Mark clearly understands and intends the old biblical context of Son of Man as defined in the vision of Daniel 7.”

¹² *Feasting: Mark, location 8694.* “Contrary to the traditional interpretation, is he perhaps muting the confession itself, disavowing the very title or benediction? In verse 31, Jesus self-identifies as “Son of Man.” Is Mark’s Jesus telling us that the disciples are just as mistaken in *their* “guess” as to his identity (“You are the Christ!”) as the “people” are with theirs? Is Mark teaching us that Jesus will suffer and die, not as a divine agent but as a representative human?”

¹³ *Reading Mark, 8:31-9:29.* “In order to sustain the claim that Jesus was Israel’s promised Messiah, Christians had to find a way around the fact that no interpretive tradition prior to the resurrection had understood Scripture to predict a Messiah who had to suffer and die to fulfill his role as deliverer of Israel. ¶The Gospel of Mark makes that very claim: “It is necessary” (*dei*) for Jesus, who has just been correctly identified as the Messiah, to suffer many things; specifically, he must be rejected by the religious authorities, be killed, and rise after three days.”

¹⁴ *UBC: Mark, 8:31-9:1.* “This formal rejection of Jesus would have meant for Peter and the Twelve that Jesus’ mission was a failure. The reason why Peter takes Jesus in hand to rebuke him is Peter’s conviction that Jesus is the Christ means that God is with him and that he cannot fail.”

¹⁵ *NICNT: Mark, 8:31.* “Peter’s strong protest was not because he recognized a reference to Dan. 7 or realized the unspeakable incongruity between the transcendent majesty of the Son of Man and Jesus’ prophecy of suffering. It was rather the incongruity between “Messiah” (Ch. 8:29) and Jesus’ affirmation which accounts for his reaction.”

¹⁶ *Feasting: Mark, location 8708.* “I suspect that the horror Peter feels is deeper even than that. Jesus says that he will be rejected by the religious leaders, the very men (and their institutions) Peter has been taught to trust and in fact does trust. That Jesus, the “representative human,” will suffer at the hands of the religious and political authorities is a horrifying revelation about these institutions: about religious leaders, rolling over the poor, perverting the will and purpose of God in favor of their own purposes; and about the Roman Empire, allegedly guaranteeing the common good through its imposed peace that brought oppression through violence.”

¹⁷ *Reading Mark, 8:31-9:29.* “Peter, again representing the disciples as a group, rejects Jesus’ reinterpretation of Messiahship. He “rebukes” Jesus as arrogantly as he and his fellows “rebuke” the parents of the children in 10:13... The refusal to accept the necessity of the Messiah’s death is the program of Satan, Jesus’ cosmic opponent (1:13; 3:22- 27).”

¹⁸ *Reading Mark, 8:31-9:29.* “Jesus responds with a rebuke of his own, but in this Gospel when Jesus is the subject of the verb *epitimao* the object is the demonic (1:25; 3:12; 4:39; 9:25).”

6. What is the purpose of Jesus' rebuke of Peter?^{19 20}

The Meaning of the Christ

³⁴ And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶ For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? ³⁷ For what can a man give in return for his soul? ³⁸ For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

^{9:1} And he said to them, "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power." (ESV)

Rhetorical Structure

Rhetorically this pericope consists of a number of *proverbs* formed into parallel structures:

A: If anyone would come after me	Follow
B: Let him deny himself	Deny
B': Take up his cross	Deny
A': Follow Me	Follow

A: For whoever would save his life	Save?
B: Will lose it	Lose
B': But whoever loses his life (For my sake and the gospel's)	Lose?
A' Will save it	Save

A: What does it profit a man to gain the world	Gain?
B: And forfeit his soul	Loss
B': What can a man give	Loss?
A': In return for his soul	Gain

A: Whoever is ashamed of me	Ashamed (humans)
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¹⁹ NICNT: Mark, 8:32-33. "The presence of the other disciples, who undoubtedly shared Peter's conviction that Jesus was wrong, necessitated a sharp and open rebuke. Jesus called them to witness that he resolutely refused the temptation represented in Peter's words... Jesus, therefore, unmask the source of Peter's thought and commands him to return to his rank as a true disciple. His response to Jesus' solemn prophecy betrayed no higher level than that characteristic of unregenerate human nature. An inability to accept a suffering Savior involves the refusal of the will of God..."

²⁰ Feasting: Mark, location 8598. "In other words, Peter was encouraging Jesus to take another route to messiahship, one that was easier, more comfortable, and possibly less demanding. It is in that spirit that Jesus rebuked Peter, as a public witness to his steady faith in God's way and will for his life."

B: In this adulterous and sinful generation	Now
A': Of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed	Ashamed (Son of Man)
B': When he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels	Future

The set of four proverbs themselves fall into a rough structure:

Following Jesus means self-denial and cross	Cross (self-denial and shame)
Paradox of loss and salvation (life)	Paradox (cross is stumbling block) ²¹
Paradox of loss and gain (soul)	Paradox
Following Jesus is to not be ashamed (cross implied)	Cross

Discussion

7. How does the setting change? What significance does this give to this pericope?²²
8. Does the discussion of rhetoric (above) provide any insights into what Jesus (through Mark) wants to communicate?
9. The original audience were the Christians in Rome, who if not directly persecuted, were certainly not far from difficulties and hardship due to their confession of Jesus as Lord. How does this explain Mark's intent in including these proverbs?^{23 24 25 26} What are the hermeneutical temptations here?

²¹ *Reading Mark*, 8:31-9:29. "The language of shame in 8:38 contributes to the paradox; the shameful death by public crucifixion in this adulterous and sinful generation prevents the ultimate shame in the judgment."

²² *Reading Mark*, 8:31-9:29. "The deliberate inclusion of the crowd with the disciples in 8:34 is designed to emphasize that the definition of discipleship that follows applies to all would- be followers of Jesus."

²³ *NICNT: Mark*, 8:34-9:1. "Here he speaks beyond the historical situation in Jesus' ministry to a church harassed by persecution, their ranks decimated by the subtle as well as more overt pressures exerted against Christians in imperial Rome. Mark shows that this situation is quite normal."

²⁴ *Reading Mark*, 8:31-9:29. "For a Christian to deny herself, then, is to have the courage to claim her true identity- to be the person God says she is no matter what the cost. A Christian who tries to protect himself from persecution as a follower of Jesus denies Jesus, loses the ground and center of his life in the present, and forfeits life in the reign of God."

²⁵ *UBC: Mark*, 8:31-9:1. "Because of the passage of time and the frequent spiritualization of this passage, it is necessary to emphasize that the words must be taken literally if we are to read them as Mark intended. When Mark's first readers read these words, they could have understood them only as a warning that discipleship might mean execution, for in their time the cross was a well- known instrument of Roman execution used on runaway slaves, rebels, and other criminals of lower classes (see note). To be more precise, in Mark's time the cross was not just an indication of possible death for disciples, it was a warning of execution by the state authorities. Thus, in the same way that Jesus' ministry led him to a collision with both Jewish and Roman authorities, the disciples (and readers) are warned to be prepared for the same sort of trouble."

²⁶ *NICNT: Mark*, 8:34. "Jesus' words were a sober caution that the commitment for which he asked permitted no turning back, and if necessary, a willingness to submit to the cross in pursuance of the will of God. His followers must be prepared to die, for they share in the same veiledness that permits his own humiliation. The call to follow Jesus, which recapitulates the action in which self- denial and cross- bearing are to be manifested, provides a vivid reminder that suffering with the Messiah is the condition of glorification with him (Rom. 8:17)."

10. Those of us in much of the developed nations are not facing the kinds of hardships of Mark's audience. What relevance does this pericope have for us then?^{27 28} What are the hermeneutical temptations here?
11. Chapter 9, verse 1 reads almost like it doesn't belong. Yet it seems fairly clear that the audience of Jesus' statement is the same as the proverbs. It is followed by the narrative of the transfiguration. What did Jesus mean and intend by 9:1?^{29 30 31}
12. This pericope sounds almost Pauline... Can you think of some examples in Paul's writings that might have come from these sayings of Jesus?

Summary

- i. In other words, Peter had a prosperity gospel of his own, based upon worldly standards, not heavenly ones. He associated righteousness with power and privilege. He believed wealth and social status were synonymous with piety and sanctification. Unfortunately, Peter failed to see the inconsistency between his personal political theology and his personal social situation: if he were a true disciple, why was he poor? This is a very human error even today. Furthermore, Peter was selfish. He focus was on what might accrue to him as a disciple of Jesus when Jesus

²⁷ *Reading Mark*, 8:31-9:29. "The concept of self-denial in Mark must be interpreted in the context of the Gospel narrative as a whole. It does not mean adopting the posture of a doormat by abandoning all sense of self. It does not mean giving up certain pleasures or desires. It means, rather, abandoning all claims to self-definition and accepting and asserting God's program for and God's claim upon one's life (so Kristen Bentley)."

²⁸ *NICNT: Mark*, 8:34. "By calling the crowd Jesus indicates that the conditions for following him are relevant for all believers, and not for the disciples alone. This had important implications for the Christians in Rome and elsewhere. It indicated that the stringent demand for self-renunciation and cross-bearing extends not only to Church leaders but to all who confess that Jesus is the Messiah. It was the Lord's intention that those who follow him should not be detached observers of his passion, but men who grow in faith and understanding through participation in his sufferings. Only in following on the way to the cross is it possible to understand either the necessity of Jesus' humiliation or Jesus himself."

²⁹ *UBC: Mark*, 8:31-9:1. "The last verse of this passage (9:1) is one of the most difficult in Mark and has attracted a number of suggestions... The statement could be taken to mean that the new reign of God's righteousness over all the earth would be set up before Jesus' generation was over... An important clue to how they understood the saying is the fact that each of the Gospel writers follows it with the account of the transfiguration of Jesus before a small group of disciples (Mark 9:2-13; Matt. 17:1-13; Luke 9:28-36). This suggests that each of the gospel writers saw the prediction as fulfilled in the transfiguration and what it in turn signified and prefigured (see comments on 9:2-13), the resurrection of Jesus as Lord and Christ."

³⁰ *NICNT: Mark*, 9:1. "It has been shown that in the Gospel of Mark the Kingdom of God and the person of Jesus are so integrally bound together as to be inseparable. This has important bearing on Ch. 9:1. The concept of "the Kingdom of God come with power," like the concept of the Son of Man coming with glory (Ch. 8:38), has a strictly Christocentric orientation. It refers to an event which provides an open manifestation of Jesus' dignity... The immediate sequel to Jesus' solemn promise is the account of the transfiguration (Ch. 9:2-8). This indicates that Mark understood Jesus' statement to refer to this moment of transcendent glory conceived as an enthronement and an anticipation of the glory which is to come."

³¹ *Feasting: Mark*, location 8770. "Mark 9:1 contains the second prophecy "apparently unfulfilled ..., since, almost twenty centuries after the words were spoken, there is little sign of the Kingdom of God being established in the world." There have been many attempts to explain this passage. Some suggest that this prophecy refers to the transfiguration, or the resurrection, or Pentecost, and/ or the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Others propose that Jesus was mistaken about the time frame; still others argue that this saying belongs to the early church, not to Jesus.

- came into power. Peter possessed an insight about Jesus' true identity, but he failed to place his own hubris in check.³²
- ii. Peter had bought into the popular messianic expectation of the day: the complete religious, political, and military restoration of God's people. This restoration meant the political overthrow of Roman imperial powers. However, God had planned a different type of revolution, one in which ultimate victory comes through suffering, turning the standards of the world on its head.³³
 - iii. The true gospel is not about material gain or economic power or political power, but about the power to survive in a powerless situation. It is about the miniresurrections that sustain us through life until the final resurrection enables us to step from mortality into immortality.³⁴
 - iv. When it comes to people— human beings and their institutions, whether political or religious— Jesus has little if any power at all. Yes, he can invite people to follow him, but some will not. Even among those who do, Jesus has no power to create faith... For Mark, ironically, it is Jesus' weakness that proves his lasting strength. By means of the cross Mark tells us who Jesus is and what resurrection might mean.³⁵
 - v. True discipleship is defined not by what one might receive, but by what one is willing to give... The point of these two verses is that honor, glory, and financial success in this world are not indicators of blessedness or righteousness. Rather, true discipleship requires faithfully following Jesus in this world, regardless of the outcome.³⁶
 - vi. Mark 8:34-9:1 serves as evidence that the call to Christian discipleship is a call to follow Christ into the world rather than away from the world.³⁷
 - vii. This reflection began with an introduction to Tashi, a committed Christian who is trying to understand how the Christian faith, specifically the suffering of Jesus, is supposed to impact her life and the suffering she is forced to experience simply because she is a woman. Her voice is a challenge to congregations to engage in a critical theological self-examination, to see if in fact our devotion to Jesus and his suffering prevents us from seeing and responding to those who are suffering in our midst.³⁸
 - viii. Discipleship, says Jesus, is first and always a matter of following— not a matter of thinking or even of speaking. (Peter may have correctly understood and expressed Jesus' identity; but when he disputes the trajectory of the path they must follow, he earns some of the harshest words Jesus ever uttered.) It is an act of choice— compelling but not compelled. It is an act of faithful self-denial (*aparneisthai*): a way of dislocating oneself, displacing self-interest, knocking oneself off-center for the sake of the way.³⁹

³² *Feasting: Mark*, location 8551.

³³ *Feasting: Mark*, location 8559.

³⁴ *Feasting: Mark*, location 8566.

³⁵ *Feasting: Mark*, location 8681.

³⁶ *Feasting: Mark*, location 8742.

³⁷ *Feasting: Mark*, location 8794.

³⁸ *Feasting: Mark*, location 8812.

³⁹ *Feasting: Mark*, location 8833.

- ix. The implications of these few words are many and stark. On one hand, just because a person is a disciple of Jesus does not necessarily mean that person is a follower.⁴⁰
- x. What might these words mean for those of us who do not live in a context of persecution, where violent death is part and parcel of faithfulness? What are we to make of this text in terms of its parabolic consequence? Is Jesus teaching “many things” here (4:2)? Will the meaning of discipleship change as our context changes, here and there, now and then? In *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, Richard Rohr contends that for the first half of life each of us is busy about the business of self-created identity. We make a life and world, we craft an identity; we pour enormous time, energy, and resources into creating ourselves. There comes a time, however, of “necessary suffering” that causes us to realize how the life we have made for ourselves is insufficient and shallow. At that point, we can double back and try to replicate or save the life we have created—a futile exercise that leaves us exhausted and bitter. On the other hand, we can embrace the loss, take up the cross, let go of what is gone, and open our hands to receive the self God intended us to be from the beginning.⁴¹

⁴⁰ *Feasting: Mark*, location 8884.

⁴¹ *Feasting: Mark*, location 8913.