

# Mark – The First Gospel

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023 – You're Not One of Us – Mark 9:30-50

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

## First Thoughts

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*What follows is a collection of teaching material on the nature of discipleship that is held together by an inclusion that provides a paradoxical solution to their argument: "Whoever wants to be first will be last" (9:35) and "Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first" (10:31). This, of course, parallels the paradox of saving life by losing it (8:34- 9:1).<sup>1</sup>*

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This section begins the second unit of Jesus' teachings that begin with a prediction of his death and resurrection. (The first unit begins at 8:31.) The first unit contains Peter's misunderstanding and rebuke of Jesus, Jesus' rebuke of Peter, and then a section of teaching about what following him means. The second unit does not include any response to Jesus' prediction ("they were afraid to ask him" v.32b), but there is rebuke, followed by a lengthy teaching section on what following him means. The Evangelist (Mark) has structured both of these in a similar literary form to highlight the meaning of discipleship in light of Jesus' death and resurrection. A third unit following this pattern begins at 10:32.

In the teaching section that follows, the material appears to be taken from a variety of times and places. What ties all the pieces together are catchwords and phrases that transition one teaching passage to the next.<sup>2</sup>

v.37 "my name" → v.38 "your name"  
v.37 "one such child" → v.42 "one of these little ones"  
v.42 "to sin [stumble / skandalizō]" → v.43, 45, 47 "to sin"  
v.48 "fire" → v.49 "fire"  
v.49 "salt" → v.50 "salt"

The entire section is structured via *inclusio*:

v.33, 34 "discussed" and "argued" → v.50 "be at peace"

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<sup>1</sup> *Reading Mark*, 9:30-10:31.

<sup>2</sup> *NICNT: Mark*, 9:33-37.

## Prediction of Death and Resurrection

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*9:30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know,<sup>31</sup> for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.”<sup>32</sup> But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him. (ESV)*

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Jesus continues on his way to Jerusalem, passing through Galilee. There are no more crowds in the narrative. Mark writes that Jesus specifically wanted to avoid them. Crowds will return into the narrative once Jesus reaches Judea (10:1).

In the first prediction unit, Jesus used the word “must” to explain that it was part of the divine plan for him to suffer, die, and rise again. In this prediction unit, it is now assumed that Jesus will die and rise. What is found is “be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him” (v.31b).

“To deliver up” or “hand over” is an important concept in the context of lawsuits and in the Jewish theology of martyrdom. More than simply the coming of an individual into another’s power, the term connotes the actual fulfilment of God’s will as expressed in Scripture. Particularly in martyrdom, God is the one who permits (or hinders) the handing over in fulfilment of his deeper purposes. “Into the hands of men” reinforces the concept of abandonment, as is evident in Jer. 33 (M.T. 26):24 where the full phrase occurs: “given over into the hands of the people to be put to death.”<sup>3</sup>

The Son of Humanity is handed over into human hands. This we will do to the Holy One in whom God is well pleased, to whom God instructed his disciples to listen on the mount of transfiguration. We will do what we please. We will kill him, but that does not defeat the purposes of God, who will raise Jesus up.<sup>4</sup>

The disciples did not understand what Jesus was trying to teach.

The message Mark wanted to communicate with these details of the reactions of the disciples was not that Jesus chose especially stupid disciples but, rather, that the gulf between Jesus and the Twelve shown here is the gulf that separates mere human ideas about what the kingdom of God is and how it might come (of which ancient Jewish messianic expectation is only one example) from the divinely chosen way.<sup>5</sup>

They were afraid to ask for clarification.

If the master must die, what is going to happen to them, his disciples? The disciples are afraid to ask. They would rather live in fear than learn more from Jesus. Here is where we must compare their theology to our own...

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<sup>3</sup> NICNT: Mark, 9:31.

<sup>4</sup> Feasting: Mark, locations 9598-9600.

<sup>5</sup> UBC: Mark, 9:30-32.

We live without the fear of the disciples, for we know that God raised Jesus from the dead, do we not? Our clearest understanding of Jesus is that he is the Christ, the Messiah, and the One who has saved and is saving us as well as the world. This being so, what is there to fear? If our redemption is complete, why should we be anxious...?

They had mistakenly believed that their following Jesus would set them up well in the world with power and privilege. Thus Jesus' words to them in Galilee challenged their expectations and caused them to be anxious about a future that was not in their control. This is also our challenge...

Even though Christianity spread and grew by the blood of the saints, it became, over time, a religion of the powerful. Perhaps this is why the church as we now know it is not living as though death has been defeated. In this wealthy and powerful country, where millions suffer hunger and homelessness, the church seems to be more intent on saving its life rather than risking its life to follow a living Lord...

Perhaps our fear is not of persecution, but of having to make further and more rigorous sacrifices, to give up the privileges that pretend to secure our future...

If we know that people are suffering here in America and abroad, yet do not devote ourselves to serving others because we are afraid for the future, we live as though God did not raise Jesus from the dead. Historically this question was the source of fear for the disciples; it is also a source of fear for us.<sup>6</sup>

## First Will Be Last

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*<sup>33</sup> And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" <sup>34</sup> But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. <sup>35</sup> And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." <sup>36</sup> And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup> "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."*

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"The way" is more than just a literal journey from point A to B. We might note that the earliest followers of Jesus were known as followers of "The Way."

We should ask, "On the way to where?" On the surface, their argument occurs on the way through Galilee to a house in Capernaum. However, knowing the structure of this Gospel, we know that Jesus and his disciples are traveling the way of discipleship, on the way to Jerusalem and the cross. The evangelist's community is on a similar journey.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, locations 9534-9536, 9539-9541, 9545-9547, 9548-9551, 9552-9554, 9558-9560.

<sup>7</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, locations 9860-9862.

This (and similar passages) is often used to admonish Christians who want to be great to become a servant first; i.e., *servant-leadership*. Is Jesus teaching about Christian leadership, and/or about how one is to truly be great?

Jesus predicts that those who are now concerned about being first will in the future be the last and the servants of all (9:35). Gundry correctly notes that the Markan Jesus does not say, “Whoever wants to be first *must* be last,” but rather, “Whoever wants to be first *will* be last” (Gundry 1993, 509). By casting this formula for greatness as a prediction rather than as an imperative, the evangelist remains consistent with the emphasis on the priority of grace that pervades this Gospel and prepares for the announcement in 10:27 that the salvation human beings cannot achieve is “possible for God.”<sup>8</sup>

The narrative seems to take a bit of a random turn as Jesus takes a child and talks about “receiving” him or not. What has this to do with the question of greatness and discipleship?

The child is set before the Twelve as an example of discipleship, and the fact that the same Aramaic word means “child” and “servant” lends to his presence the character of a dramatized play on the affirmation in verse 35. The disciples are to identify themselves with children and become “the little ones” who have no basis for pretensions to greatness. The statement that to receive a little child is equivalent to receiving Jesus (verse 37a) must, therefore, be interpreted of the disciples.<sup>9</sup>

To welcome one of these little children means, in context, to treat honorably other disciples, taking the role of servant toward them. The child is not used as an example of humility (as is the case in 10:13-16), for the issue in verse 37 is not imitation of the child but the treatment of these little children.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, this marginal status conferred on children a certain mystery. They were thought to be closer to the gods than adults, and sometimes even their casual utterances were regarded as omens. (The best-known instance of this belief occurs in Augustine’s account of his conversion, *Conf.* 8.12.) ¶This cultural context enables the evangelist to portray Jesus as identifying with those diminutive non-persons who nevertheless are in a mysterious way the bearers of the divine presence when they are welcomed in his name.<sup>11</sup>

Too frequently we serve God as if we were supernannies. First, like the disciples, we desire to be in charge, to have the authority, power, recognition, honor, and prestige. We are willing to serve, but only from a position of power. We are willing to minister, as long as we are in charge and serving in our comfort zone. We viewers identify with the supernanny, but not with the children. The oppressed and suffering in our world are in some respects like children, in that they are extremely vulnerable and are usually struggling for survival.<sup>12</sup>

What does “receives one such child in my name” look like?

Our commitment to Christ is best evidenced not by talking about Jesus or God but by welcoming children. Welcoming the most vulnerable members of our society is itself sacrificial, demanding, and sometimes

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<sup>8</sup> *Reading Mark*, 9:30-10:31.

<sup>9</sup> *NICNT: Mark*, 9:36-37.

<sup>10</sup> *UBC: Mark*, 9:33-37.

<sup>11</sup> *Reading Mark*, 9:30-10:31.

<sup>12</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, locations 9738-9741.

dangerous. Of course, in doing so, Jesus gets in trouble, is arrested, and finally is killed. This is the service to which we are called, and it is this perilousness that made the disciples slow to learn, slow to grasp, slow to act, and afraid to ask Jesus.<sup>13</sup>

In church and community, in evangelical, Catholic, Orthodox, and progressive circles, we do not see servant leadership; we are instead engaged in bids for power and control. Granted many congregations have become expert in welcoming the least and the lost, but often these are the people to whom we minister, people who are outside the community of faith. Churches keep their hierarchical structures. Even in representative and congregational churches, they keep the same conflicts on the front burner, neither welcoming nor providing for the weaker members of the community. We seem, like the disciples, to be going from bad to worse.<sup>14</sup>

## We Want to Be In Control

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*<sup>38</sup> John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." <sup>39</sup> But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. <sup>40</sup> For the one who is not against us is for us. <sup>41</sup> For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.*

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"He can't use our logo! It's trademarked!" That's essentially the argument the disciples put forth to Jesus. They don't dispute the fact that demons are being expelled, or that this unnamed "someone" is doing so using Jesus' name. The problem is that he isn't part of the group that includes the disciples. He isn't literally following Jesus. Who is in and who is out when it comes to Jesus' community, and what identifies a person as belonging to one or the other?

The phrase "in your/my name" links this pronouncement story with the one that follows. The disciples, although unable to perform the most recent exorcism requested of them (9:14-29), nevertheless want to make sure that no one outside their group is allowed to cast out demons in Jesus' name... The use of "the name" makes it clear that the issue is not the ultimate status of "anonymous Christians" (non-Christians who perform acts of compassion); rather, the issue is the necessity of openness toward the ministry of Christian groups other than one's own. But in 9:41 the audience learns that anyone (even a non-Christian) who shows mercy toward members of the Christian community will be rewarded (cf. Matt 25:31-46).<sup>15</sup>

All disciples of Jesus need to be careful of who and what they want others to follow. If people can follow Jesus without adhering to my brand of it, it doesn't contribute to my increase in power and influence...

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<sup>13</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, locations 9754-9757.

<sup>14</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, locations 9781-9785.

<sup>15</sup> *Reading Mark*, 9:30-10:31.

Where Jesus had spoken of following *me*, now the disciples were speaking of following *us* (v. 38).<sup>16</sup>

Jesus opposed the narrow exclusivism of the Twelve with an open and generous spirit. The disciples' action was an abuse of their authority, for they had presumed to speak for Jesus where they had no competence.<sup>17</sup>

The phrase "my name" ties this section literarily to the previous, but it is the motif of not thinking about power and influence in the service of God that is more importantly in common.

The thrust of Jesus' answer in verses 39-41 is that anyone who claims to be a follower of Jesus must be received unless he or she gives reason to think otherwise. Mark 9:40 in particular gives the benefit of the doubt to the unknown follower.<sup>18</sup>

The fact that Jesus' power was active in the man, bringing release to men who had been enslaved to demonic possession, marks him as a believer. His action was an effective witness to the imminent Kingdom of God.<sup>19</sup>

There are no variations in "tribes" when it comes to following Christ. All who follow Christ are on the same team.

The sharp recognition of only two sides ("against us" and "for us") radicalizes the demand to welcome participation in the mission, even from unexpected quarters. If anyone is working for the cause to which Jesus and the Twelve are committed, he cannot work against it at the same time.<sup>20</sup>

The reference to the person who gives a drink of water to a disciple on the ground that he belongs to Jesus concretely illustrates the principle of verse 40 and indicates how wide is the range of participation in the mission which Jesus envisions. The offering of a cup of water to quench the biting thirst induced by the burning heat of the eastern sun is an act of hospitality (cf. verse 37) as well as an example of the humble service commended to the disciples in verse 35. It becomes a significant act when the drink is offered to a man *because he is a disciple and belongs to Jesus...* The reference to "his reward" carries no thought of deserving or of merit, for there is no way in which a cup of water may be conceived as *meriting* participation in the Kingdom. It serves rather to stress God's awareness of all who share in the extension of Jesus' work, and to emphasize that there are no distinctions between "trivial" and "important" tasks. There is only faith and obedience, shown in devotion to Jesus, and wherever these qualities exist they call forth the approval of God.<sup>21</sup>

What is important for true disciples of Jesus is not their pedigree, not their genealogy, not their connections, not even their personal familiarity with Jesus. What is important is their devotion to Jesus' devotion to God and to their conjoined service to humanity... ¶ This passage of Scripture makes it clear that what binds Christians together is not first and foremost our coordinated activities to advance

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<sup>16</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, locations 10063-10064.

<sup>17</sup> *NICNT: Mark*, 9:39-40.

<sup>18</sup> *UBC: Mark*, 9:38-41.

<sup>19</sup> *NICNT: Mark*, 9:38.

<sup>20</sup> *NICNT: Mark*, 9:39-40.

<sup>21</sup> *NICNT: Mark*, 9:41.

ourselves, such as our congregations or denominations, but rather our service to the world in the name of and at the command of God.<sup>22</sup>

Further, this text underscores the mandates against violence of Christian toward Christian, and of Christians toward persons from other religious traditions. Every time we strike back, and return evil for evil— even when we are violently attacked because we bear Christ’s name— we deny the gospel and make a mockery of the saving power of the cross.<sup>23</sup>

For many of us, commitment to Christ takes the shape of doing what the church does, and well it should, but this text should make us wary of positing direct correspondence between Christ and his church.

Faithful reading of Scripture holds a prophetic tension between following Christ and following church...

¶To acknowledge that God is at work outside of our faithfully discerned structures opens the door to ecclesiastical anarchy, the thought of which distresses my decently ordered heart. ¶Nevertheless, God’s work is messy and Jesus makes no apology for that reality. Those who hear God’s word must repent of all notions that we control it, and this includes those of us who hear it while preaching... Rather, we should acknowledge that God’s work does not stop at the walls of the church as we know it, nor does that work subsist entirely within the out-reach programs that we sponsor.<sup>24</sup>

## Literal, or Metaphor and Hyperbole?

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*42 “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. 43 And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. 45 And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. 47 And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 48 ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’ 49 For everyone will be salted with fire. 50 Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”*

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What is Mark trying to communicate by bringing together these various sayings of Jesus into once place?

(Where are the even-numbered verses? Early translations used manuscripts that included the phrase found in v.48 after vv.43, 45. Best manuscripts we have available today don’t include them.)

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<sup>22</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, locations 9930-9932, 9933-9934.

<sup>23</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, locations 9993-9995.

<sup>24</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, locations 10069-10071, 10075-10076, 10077-10078, 10081-10082.

First we need clarification on what is meant by “little ones.” Is it children, or does it refer to something broader? And what is the definition of “sin” as it pertains to this passage? Sin in a broad sense of all that is wrong, or something more specific?

The mention of little ones in 9:42 is a reference to Jesus’ followers and takes us back to verse 37, where Jesus refers to his followers under the symbol of “these little children.” The Greek reveals that this refers not to children but to believers; literally the phrase is “these little ones who believe in me.” The word translated here “to cause to sin” is literally “to cause to fall,” and it refers to someone causing another to fall into unbelief, serious sin, or false teaching.<sup>25</sup>

The stern warning has immediate relevance for those who had sought to prevent the exercise of faith in Jesus’ name, and corresponds in severity to the word addressed to Peter when he sought to turn Jesus from the path of obedience (Ch. 8:33). Verse 42 performs the same function as Ch. 8:33: it serves to expose a grievous misconception and by graphic language to impress the seriousness of the matter indelibly upon the disciples’ hearts.<sup>26</sup>

The word for “sin” continues to be “to stumble” (*skandalizo*) in the next set of verses. How are we to understand what appear to be extreme measures (self-mutilation)?

In these verses the focus shifts momentarily from causing others to fall to causing one’s own fall, and the sayings are full of the vivid language of Semitic speech. The hyperbole in the sayings should not be pressed literally, but the point is not to be lost that participation in the kingdom of God is worth any sacrifice. The parts of the body mentioned here are really symbols for various types of activity, for example, the hand that grasps for things it should not, the foot that goes where it ought not, or the eye that desires what it ought not.<sup>27</sup>

For example, “hand” conjures up images of one’s handiwork, that is, what one does or produces, or how one makes a living. Especially in a time of rampant unemployment, there are profound economic consequences to “cutting off” the hand that feeds you, and this admonition addresses the question of ethical issues regarding one’s work.<sup>28</sup>

What is designated “life” in verses 43 and 45 means specifically “life with God,” as the parallel with “the kingdom of God” in verse 47 indicates. In the related context of Ch. 10:17-31, this reality is qualified as “eternal life” (Ch. 10:17, 30)... “Feet” move us toward a destination, thus raising the ethical issue of whether our goals in life are in keeping with the goals of being citizens of God’s realm... The “eye” implies what attracts our attention. The moral implications of this stumbling are wide ranging.<sup>29</sup>

If Jesus did not intend his words to be taken literally, he most certainly intended that they be taken seriously. If it is not a matter of death or dismemberment, it surely is a matter of eternal life or eternal condemnation. Any consideration that waters down the severity of the choice does an injustice to the nature of the claims Jesus presents.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> UBC: Mark, 9:42-50.

<sup>26</sup> NICNT: Mark, 9:42.

<sup>27</sup> UBC: Mark, 9:42-50.

<sup>28</sup> Feasting: Mark, locations 10172-10174, 10181-10183, 10186.

<sup>29</sup> NICNT: Mark, 9:43-48.

<sup>30</sup> Feasting: Mark, locations 10275-10277.

Should we read the explanation about hell as meaning that it really is a literal, eternal place of torment?

“And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.”<sup>31</sup>

Mark’s explanatory gloss on hell or gehenna (or the valley of the sons of Hinnom) as a place of fire and suffering provides fuel for traditional depictions of hell used across the centuries by artists such as Hieronymus Bosch (*The Garden of Earthly Delights*) and by contemporary fear-based evangelists. The theme of hell as a place (literal or otherwise) where sinners experience the wrath of God’s judgment stands prominently in Christian theology across time: Jonathan Edwards’s sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” comes immediately to mind, as does Thomas Aquinas’s assertion that “the fire of hell is not called so metaphorically, not an imaginary fire, but a real corporeal fire...” ¶The theological challenge for church leaders today concerns the task of separating ancient cosmologies of a literal, physical hell from theological understandings about God and human nature.<sup>32</sup>

The passage ends with some statements regarding salt. How do these sayings relate to all the earlier contextual portions that have already come?

Perhaps the enigmatic sayings about saltiness (vv. 49– 50) relate to the opposite of causing another to stumble. Christians are called not only to refrain from actions that lead others to stray, but also to bring a distinctive flavor to the world. Being salty may not be popular. It is easier to conform to the crowd, but disciples seek to join in God’s transforming work. How are Christians making positive impacts? Is the church’s saltiness demonstrating God’s grace in a world needing good news?<sup>33</sup>

When all the impurities in our lives have been removed (burned off or salted), that is, all of the distractions, all of the lies and misplaced priorities, all of the greed and guilty pleasures, have been removed, what remains is peace. That is what Jesus wants for us: peace. The question persists, however: Are we willing to pay the price? Is peace worth the cost? Will we simply settle for a false and ultimately unsatisfying alternative?<sup>34</sup>

## Summary

The disciples follow Jesus because they hope that someday they will have power and influence in the world. Jesus tries to teach them that this is the wrong reason for following him. Being part of the kingdom of God means that thoughts of power and influence don’t even enter into the follower’s mind. Rather, the only thought is how to make the life of another human being a little better today.

The test of whether a person is inside or outside the kingdom of God boils down to how he or she cares for (or not) the hurting, the discouraged, the oppressed, the marginalized, and the less privileged around him or her. The only doctrines worth holding on to are those that lead the believer to more compassionate outlook and actions toward those who the world (and sometimes, the church) doesn’t consider to be worth much.

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<sup>31</sup> *ESV*, Isaiah 66:24.

<sup>32</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, locations 10125-10130, 10135-10137.

<sup>33</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, locations 10212-10216.

<sup>34</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, locations 10297-10300.