

Discovering Jesus, Part I: Who Is This Jesus We're Following?

Today there are at least 45,000 self-help books in print. Twenty years ago, all the self-help books in any bookstore fit on one shelf. Today, every section of the store overflows with self-help books. Here are some of the recent titles:

- *How to Make People Like You in 90 Seconds or Less*
- *59 Seconds: Change Your Life in Under a Minute* (Why does it always have to be measured in seconds?)
- *The 4-Hour Chef: The Simple Path to Cooking Like a Pro* (What's next, "The 4-Hour Brain Surgeon"? Would you go to that doctor?)
- *How to Think More About Sex* (Seriously, that's the REAL title!)ⁱ

Wouldn't you like to meet some of the authors of these books? I wonder if you'd really like the guy who says he can "make you like him" in 90 seconds? Or I wonder what the food tastes like that's cooked by the guy who says he can teach you to "cook like a pro" in four hours? I mean, who are these people?

In the Bible, we actually meet and get to know the authors. The second book of the New Testament is written by a man named Mark, actually John Mark. He was the son of a Jewish mother and a Roman father. John was his Jewish name and Mark his Latin or surname (Acts 12:12). John Mark probably became a Christian when he was a young boy or a teenager - through the ministry of the apostle Peter. The early church leaders like Eusebius said that Mark's writing reflected the views of Simon Peter.

But he was certainly also reflecting his own views and experiences. It was this John Mark, who as a young adult was invited to accompany Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. Can you imagine what an honor that was? But, as some of you also know, young John Mark blew the opportunity. Halfway through, he quit and ran home to momma. Before you roll your eyes, did you ever do anything stupid when you were young? Did you ever pass up any "golden opportunities" because you didn't want to miss someone's party?

Mark did eventually grow up and he obviously was forgiven by Paul, because late in his life Paul said that John Mark was, "...helpful to me in my ministry." (II Tim. 4:11) So, Mark's gospel has a very distinct flavor. Matthew's gospel emphasizes Jesus' words, His sermons, His royal pedigree. Mark emphasizes Jesus' actions, His Servanthood. Why? Because Mark was keenly aware, as was Peter, of what Jesus had done for them. He loved them. He led them. He taught them, yes, but what these men remembered most was that He died in their place so that their stupid mistakes could be forgiven. Does anybody here need a Savior like that? Then this is the handbook for you! Today we need to see three important facts that Mark discloses to us about Jesus. First, he shows us...

I. His Servant Identity

Matthew and Luke show us Jesus' royal identity, the proof that He was in the lineage of King David, by listing His genealogy. Matthew was writing to a Jewish audience and it was important for them to understand that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah. But Mark is writing to a Roman audience. The Romans didn't really care if Jesus was Jewish or Arab or Polish. They lived very busy lives, like us. They were pressured by finances and politics and rumors of wars – just like us. And just like us, they were most interested in finding someone who could help them untangle the rat's nest of confusing issues and twisted ethics that their everyday lives had become consumed with – just like us. Mark presented to the Romans not just a King, but a Servant King. By the end of the first chapter, Jesus has driven an evil spirit out of a man, healed everyone in town who was sick and even healed a man with an incurable disease, leprosy. When the man came and asked Jesus to heal him, the Scripture says:

Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured. (Mark 1:41-42)

"Immediately" is one of Mark's favorite words. He uses it 41 times in this book. What does the word "immediately" emphasize? It emphasizes action! Not just action, but decisive, quick, effective action. So, in answering the question, "Who is this Jesus that we're following?" What kind of description is Mark giving us? It's not a genealogy of who His ancestors are. No, it's a record of His actions – what He's accomplished.

If you're looking for someone to fix your car, are you more interested in the mechanic's ancestors or a list of his satisfied customers? You want to hear from a dozen customers who say, "I came in with a problem and he fixed it and he fixed it immediately!"

Mark is speaking to you on behalf of himself and the apostle Peter. He's saying, "Look, we both came to Jesus with some big problems in our lives. Both of us had messed up and messed up big. And Jesus served us by fixing our problems. And He did it the first time we asked. He did it immediately. That's who this guy is. He's a fixer." Secondly, we see in Mark chapter one...

II. His Servant Authority

From where does a servant get his or her authority? (Pause) If you were working late one night and the cleaning man came in and said, "You need to leave now so that I can clean your office," what would you say? In your better moments you might ask, "And by whose authority are you telling me this?" (We won't explore what you might say in your weaker moments!)

But then, what if he said, "Well, my dad told me to say that." And you might say, "Your dad? Who cares what your dad says! Look, I've got a lot of work to do. Go clean somewhere else." But then, what if the cleaning man says, "Well, I think you should care what my dad says because my dad is the owner of this business." Now, you'd say, "Just give me a minute and I'll be right out of your way!" A servant gets his authority from his relationship with a higher authority.

The Romans don't give two hoots about Jesus' Jewish lineage, but, as Romans, they DO care, they DO understand a chain of command. In Mark 1, verse 1, Mark says:

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (Mk.1:1)

First, Mark gives the chain of command. "Jesus... the Son of God."

Next, he gives verification of this statement through prophecies, predictions that Jesus would come and do exactly what He did. First, he quotes Jewish prophets who predicted how the ministry of Christ would all begin:

It is written in Isaiah the prophet:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way" - "a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" (Mk. 1:2-3)

Then, immediately, he begins to describe the acts of John the Baptist that fulfilled those prophecies. John baptizing Jesus was a proof of Jesus' authority.

Thirdly, Mark describes the miraculous voice that dozens if not hundreds of people heard when Jesus came up out of the water. It was the voice of God saying:

...You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." (Mk. 1:11)

Finally, Mark gives a two-sentence passing comment about Jesus being tempted and a couple of paragraphs about how He chose His disciples and then WHAM!!! He's right into the description of His miraculous acts. Nothing about His parents, nothing about His childhood, nothing about growing up in Nazareth. Some of that will come later, but not now. Mark has a very important issue he's dying to get to. He wants all these Romans to understand, "This is a Servant who has come to clean up the mess you've made of things! And by what authority is He doing this? He's the son of the owner! He has the authority and the power to clean things up. But you've got to let Him fix it His way." Mark says of John the Baptist:

And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (Mark 1:7, 8)

What does that mean, "I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit"? Well, go back to verse 4. There Mark says:

And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Mark 1:4)

What have you been trying to do about "the mess" in your life? Have you been trying to clean it up yourself? Have you read a couple of the 45,000 self-help books and now you think you know how to "fix" your marriage, or "fix" your teenager, or "fix" your family? Put down the self-help books and step away from the bookstore! Think about it! If any of those books actually brought about a long-term "fix," do you think there would be 45,000 of them????!!

Instead, listen to John Mark. Listen to Peter. They know about messed-up relationships and messed-up job opportunities. What are they trying to say? They're saying this, "The first move in cleaning up a mess is to repent." Repent means, "change your mind," stop thinking you can fix this yourself. You can't! Stop thinking that. Repent.

Step two: Confess your sins. Admit that you've played a role in causing the mess. It might be minor or it might be major, but you contributed something!

Step three: Ask for forgiveness. The other person may or may not grant you forgiveness, but that's God's problem. You just ask. And then comes glorious, miraculous step four. Both John Mark and Peter personally experienced this incredible step four: You will be baptized, washed, drenched, overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit Himself. Repent, confess, ask to be forgiven, be overwhelmed! This is not self-help. This is help that heals. This is help from Above. It is provided by the Servant of God, Jesus Christ because He alone has the power to save.

Lastly, we need to see through Mark's eyes, Jesus'...

III. His Servant Sympathy

The English word "sympathy" is derived from the Greek word *sympathaeia* which means, "to share the feelings of another." That word doesn't appear in this first chapter, but the reality certainly does. Jesus is motivated to take action on behalf of the demon-possessed and the sick and the hopeless people living under a death sentence for one reason - (He was) "*filled with compassion...*" (v. 41). He "shared the feelings" of the demon-possessed, the sick and the hopeless.

Do you believe that Jesus shares your feelings today? He doesn't just understand what you're feeling, like being able to describe what you're feeling because He recognizes your symptoms. No, He actually feels what you feel. How is that possible?

Emotionally healthy people are capable of feeling what someone else is feeling. If you've ever teared-up while watching a movie, you know what I'm talking about. The events on the screen aren't even real, but you "feel" what the actors are portraying. That's healthy. In fact, when you "feel what someone else feels," you are acting like God. This is a character trait of God. In Ps. 142, David says to God: (Ps. 142:3)

When my spirit grows faint within me, it is you who know my way.

But some psychologists today are beginning to believe that some people are actually suffering from something they call, "Empathy Deficit Disorder." Douglas LaBier, director of the Center for Adult Development in Washington, D.C. believes anyone can teach themselves to be less empathic and many do it as a self-preservation reaction to a world of hurt, disease and lost hope. ⁱⁱ They CHOSE to stop feeling.

But God warns us NOT to do that! In warning His Disciples about the Pharisees, Jesus said to them:

Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? (Mark 8:17-18)

Jesus saw and experienced more heartbreak in three years than most of us will experience in a lifetime. Still, He never hardened His heart. He rejoiced at weddings and He wept at funerals. He "felt what others felt." Even when He was in excruciating pain on the cross, He looked down and saw His mother in pain and instructed one of His disciples to care for her.

Do you understand how unique this is among all the world's religions? All the other religions of the world worship a distant God, a God who is completely separated from people. Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, even the Jews, believe in a God who is far, far off! A God who is powerful and righteous and all-knowing, but not one

that “feels what we feel.” Only Christianity has a God like that! The writer of Hebrews describes the uniqueness of our God this way:

But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels... Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity... For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (Heb. 2:9, 14, 17-18)

If you were hurting because some hard thing had happened in your life, what kind of a person would you most like to be with you? Wouldn't it be someone who'd been through what you were currently going through? In this church there are followers of Jesus who are doing just that. Several women who have experienced the pain of the death of a child have established ministries to reach out to other parents who have experienced that same loss. People who have survived the agony of divorce are leading our Divorce Recovery ministry. Adults who have survived being a teenager (which can really be a pain these days), are volunteering to just BE with our students, letting them know, “Hey, you're gonna survive this!”

If you're looking for a key verse that sums up Mark's whole message about Jesus, I think it would be Mark 10: 45. Beginning at verse 43, Jesus says:

...whoever wants to become great... must be your servant... For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10: 43, 45)

So, how can you call yourself a genuine follower of Jesus Christ, if you aren't serving in some ministry? And may I suggest you do what Jesus did: He served in places where He KNEW what it felt like to live there. You do that and you'll see God heal your old hurt and transform it from a weakness into a strength.

Who is this Jesus? He's the One who came to fix our problems. Have you asked Him to fix yours? You're not a follower of Jesus until you repent, confess, ask to be forgiven and then receive the Holy Spirit. He's the fixer. He's also the Servant with authority from His Father. At one point, God said, “*This is my Son... Listen to Him.*” (Mark 9: 7) Lastly, He is the only God who became like one of us. He feels what we feel. This week, may you find an opportunity to tell someone who you're following and then serve him at his point of need. Let's pray...

ⁱ Boris Kachka, “The Power of Positive Publishing: How Self-Help Ate America,” New York Magazine (1-6-13)

ⁱⁱ Amanda Robb, “Empathy deficit disorder – do you suffer from it?” The Oprah Magazine (April 2008)