

Read Mark 1

and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” Mark 1:15

Basketball is a game of timing. Whether on a fast break or running your offense in the half-court, you need a strong sense of timing as you move the ball around. Many times I’ve seen a teammate open, but I hesitated to make the pass. And then when I finally decide to go for it, it’s too late and the opposing team steals the ball and has a great opportunity to score. Hesitation has led to turnover and lost games, but when I see the opening and react according, good things happen.

Timing is not only important in basketball, but in salvation. Jesus declared to people that there was no need to wait or hesitate. He had come and fulfilled what they had all been waiting for. Once people have an understanding of the gospel, that is the moment to repent and believe. There are people I have shared Jesus with, who fully knew they needed Him, and yet hesitated to repent and turn from their sins. Perhaps they thought there was plenty more time, or honestly weren’t sure they wanted to give up the old life. When it comes to salvation, there is no time like today! **If you’ve never said yes to Jesus, stop waiting and start walking with Him today. And when you share the gospel with others, look for the open opportunities to share with the co-worker or waitress and take them. Waiting can give the Devil an opportunity to kill the moment and establish new excuses. What has God told you it's time for, but you are delaying your obedience to Him?**

Read Mark 2

But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic—“I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.” Mark 2:10-11

The work required to create a dictionary really boggles my mind. Think about the task it must have been to compile an early English dictionary; not only did it need to encompass an entire language, but to do so with correct spelling and definitions that didn’t simply reuse the word. And before the days of word processors and moveable type, consider the pain of inserting a new or forgotten word! Despite all the early challenges and continual work of creating our current dictionary, the value of knowing a word’s true definition cannot be overstated when attempting to communicate clear ideas.

For this paralyzed man, it's not hard to imagine how he remembered this day. He suddenly found himself empowered and repaired for life! But Jesus says He performed this amazing miracle in order to prove that He could truly “forgive sins”. In fact, only Jesus has the authority to define sin, forgive sin, and move us past sin. Just as the dictionary is our authority for defining words, Jesus is the only true authority when it comes to sin. In order to move past sin and be forgiven of sin, you must willingly live under the authority of Jesus. **Have you accepted Jesus' definition of sin, or are you trying to redefine right and wrong? Have you asked Jesus to forgive your sins? If so, let Him move you past them. This crippled man wasn't simply healed, but he was healed to move forward. So stop hanging out in forgiveness, and start moving forward in effectiveness.**

Read Mark 3

And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. Mark 3:13

Dodgeball was not my most glorious moment as a kid (I hesitate to admit this as our church prepares for regular dodgeball games). The first part of our dodgeball games was waiting for me to be last pick. Everyone knew I was terrible, and so I was chosen accordingly...until quiz bowl came up. Suddenly the worst became first, quickly chosen by my classmates when it came to academic competitions. While I clearly remained the same exact same person, it was clear where my strengths were.

At first glance, Jesus appears to be somewhat exclusive choosing “those whom he desired.” There are some who teach that God only chooses a select few, and this could perhaps verify that claim. Undoubtedly, Jesus here is choosing some at the exclusion of others when calling the 12 disciples. But, Luke tells us Jesus spent the night in prayer before making this important decision. He knew that not everyone wanting to be part of His inner circle was well-equipped to do so. **Jesus knows where we fit best, but sometimes we get jealous of those who seem to be celebrated or credited in certain ministry roles. The reality is, every role in the Kingdom of God is of great importance. That means in your church, in your home, and in your work, God made you for a purpose. Do you know your purpose? If not, pray and ask God to reveal the specific calling He has on your life. Learn to thrive in your purpose for His glory and your joy, and when it’s a challenge, pray!**

Read Mark 4

And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. Mark 4:15-17

My hitting in church softball has remained consistently unspectacular. Despite increased workouts and more time in the batting cages, I failed to make a significant improvement during games. So last season I decided it must be the bat! Trading in my normal light-weight bat, I tried out the beautiful heavy-weight our best hitters were using. And after just a few games...I realized it wasn't the bat. Even though I'd seen guys my size crush with the bigger bat, I just didn't have the ability. Same bat, different results.

Like that bat, how is it that we can take the same exact gospel and in different hands it produces different results? Jesus reminds us in Mark 4 that you can share the message of the gospel the exact same way every time, and get many different results. We may begin to wonder what our problem is, but we must remember we are not responsible for people's response. **The problem isn't with the seed, but the ground. Satan, persecution, and worldly concerns are always attempting to counter the salvation message. Christians are called to share with people, but we are not called to save people. That's God's work. So share the gospel faithfully and leave the results to God. Learn from the gospel efforts of others, but don't compare yourself to others. As my seminary president use to say, “You only fail in your witness when you fail to witness.”**

Read Mark 5

But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the ruler of the synagogue, “Do not fear, only believe.” Mark 5:36

Why is it when people don't know what's going on, they always go negative? In school, when no one

knew exactly how tough the test would be, everyone presumed the worst and brought each other down. When a new boss takes over the workplace, we worry that they may not be as friendly as the last one or they may even clean house and hire on some new people. As I've grown up, I realize that my perception of a situation is often colored by the perspective of others. How about I just take each moment as it comes, looking for the potential good that can be found in every circumstance?

Jesus has been slightly delayed in meeting the request of Jairus, and now the man's daughter is reported dead, and his prayer need expired. The people around Jairus are bringing him down, only seeing negative outcomes. But Jesus says, "Do not fear, only believe." Bad news is never more powerful than a good God! He's aware of the requests and needs of our life before we even know them or voice them to Him. He's already prepared and working to meet needs and overcome bad news. **Where does fear weaken your faith? Do you find yourself infected by the frantic worry of others? There are times that we face difficult circumstances in our church, but I can't allow others' doubts to overwhelm my faith. Find prayer partners who will lift up your requests and your spirits as they encourage you from their own testimonies. Do not fear the circumstance or the defeated words of those around you. Only believe that God knows what's up, knows what you need, and He is working for good in the lives of those who seek it. Where are you displaying fear instead of faith?**

Read Mark 6

So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. Mark 6:12

Marching is one of the first lessons you learn in basic training. A variety of commands allow 50 soldiers to all move as one, giving up all control to the drill sergeants. At first, it seems silly to spend so much time on marching, until I realized they were teaching us to operate as a unit even in this simple act. And it doesn't take long for the drill sergeants to start proving their power. One of their favorite moves was to march us directly at a building and as we drew closer they remained silent. And as late as they possibly could, a loud "About Face!" would be called to spare us from a painful end.

Repentance is a spiritual "About Face!" In fact, so much of what Jesus taught was really contrary to how the Jewish people had been thinking about faith. The Jewish religion was a family and societal expectation. Identifying as a Jew meant you were going to the synagogue and taking part in various rituals and submitting to human expectations. But what did Jesus' disciples call upon the people to do? Not to attend church or double down on their rituals. They proclaimed that people should repent. That's what salvation is; recognition of the deadly path of sin and trading it for the new path in Christ. **Are you calling people to religious expectations of better behavior and church attendance, or to giving up sin? The reality is you can't have repentance of sin without life change, and you can't have life change without repentance of sin. So challenge people not to follow church expectations, but to repent of the old life and follow Jesus!**

Read Mark 7

You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men." Mark 7:8

In 1995 Major League Baseball knew it had a problem. The NFL, NBA, and various other choices were drawing away younger fans and the baseball commissioner felt they needed to make a change. Unfortunately for him, baseball fans are traditionalists who don't like their sport messed with. Despite the objections, to add more excitement to the season, more teams were allowed into the playoffs to compete for a championship. There was general outrage that second-tier teams would now have a

chance they hadn't earned. But after several years of the new format, it accomplished exactly what MLB hoped, providing relevance to more fans through the season. Though a long-standing tradition was broken, the majority of fans would now agree it was for the best.

Tradition can be a hard barrier to overcome. Not so much because the traditional solutions work so well, but due to our comfort level with the status quo. Jesus warned the Pharisees that they had elevated human tradition over God's commands, which is often a danger in the church. We can elevate a certain type of worship or Bible translation, while missing the spirit and truth that God really demands in our worship. We're challenged to constantly look fresh at our faith to ensure we have not traded truth for tradition. **Jesus challenges us to examine whether we allow personal convictions to dethrone biblical commands. Are the do's and don'ts of your life established by God's Word or the words of men? Be careful not to answer that one too quickly. Many of my previously held convictions have been changed as I realized they were based on comfortable tradition instead of biblical truth.**

Read Mark 8

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." Mark 8:38

David and I were sort of friends. He was part of the popular crowd at school, which was not my social designation in Jr. High. So we rarely talked at school, but over one particular summer we hung out a lot. He didn't live far from me, and early in our break he called and asked if I wanted to come over. Several times a week we were playing basketball or hiking in the woods around his house. And then as summer gave way to school, the phone calls stopped. At school, David barely acknowledged me. It felt like he was ashamed and didn't want anyone to know he had been hanging out with me over the summer.

That's how we treat Jesus sometimes. We have a great time with Jesus and His people at church, youth group, and on mission trips. But then we get back around our non-Christian friends and we disguise that part of our lives. We would never say we're ashamed of Jesus, but that's what our silence is saying. What will our friends think? Isn't faith something that should be kept personal and quiet? Every time we bury the name of Jesus, we fail to remember all that He's done for us. In addition, we also prevent those around us from hearing the Good News of the gospel, endangering their souls to Hell. **Are you ashamed of Jesus? The words you answer to that question mean little in comparison to your daily conversations with others, where you go, and the priorities you allow to govern your life. Would we want Jesus to show the same indifference towards us one day before the Father when it's all on the line?**

Read Mark 9

For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Mark 9:6

Hospital visits were scary moments for me early in ministry. It wasn't the ailments or the environment itself, but my feelings of absolute helplessness. What comfort could I bring a person I barely knew? Or what could I say to the good church friend going through an incredibly trying diagnosis? As a pastor, I presumed everyone was looking to me for some answer as to why they were enduring such hardships. But over time I realized that these people didn't need answers or theology from me; they just needed

someone to be there.

Peter wasn't a guy to leave situations unresolved. So when he saw the divinity of Jesus on full display, it would have been fine for him to have fallen into reverent silence. Instead, he thought it was necessary to speak, suggesting that altars be built. But the voice of God calls down to say, "Your main job isn't to speak. It's to listen." In spite of what you may think, it's not absolutely necessary for you to always talk. Even when I pray, the words I use can become a distraction as I search for the right phrases to activate the power of God. The reality is, you and I can simply admit to the Lord that we're stressed, scared, or completely at a loss for words. He's big enough to handle that. **Look for your opportunities to be an encouragement to others, not by what you say, but simply by making yourself available. And when you come before God, don't put too much thought into what you will say. Listen to the Holy Spirit, and respond with honesty and transparency. Words are like money; it's good to save some for later.**

Read Mark 10

For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Mark 10:45

We share a facility with a people-group from Myanmar known as the Karen. In celebration of our sixth anniversary of cooperation, they invited myself as pastor and many of our church leadership to a special service. We were gifted special worship outfits specially made and ordered from their homeland. Then to begin the service, each of us were escorted in and given special seating while their congregation lavished praise and thanks on us. It was so humbling, with each expression of thanks followed by yet another even more undeserved than the last.

I've often equated that day with the Karen people to how Peter must have felt here. He has acknowledged that Jesus is the Son of God, and the Messiah is now washing His feet? How could Jesus perform such generous acts to people like us? Simply put, it was His mission. Jesus gained many followers, but didn't demand to be served by them. He came to serve through the gift of his life, death, and resurrection. Of all the people who deserve to be served, Jesus was at the top of the list and yet He sets the example for us. **So I ask: How well are you looking like Jesus on this one? Are you frustrated by those who don't serve you (spouse, children, etc)? Do you evaluate how much more you're doing for others than they do for you? I know I have issues in this area myself. But if Jesus, who deserved to be served, could humble Himself and serve, so can I. Let us look to honor Jesus today in this very important area of obedience.**

Read Mark 11

Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. Mark 11:24

Children make a lot of demands they can't back up. As children begin developing their speech skills, they don't understand all the nuances of how their words sound. So instead of asking for something they want, it often comes out as a demand. When our children made the mistake of demanding a toy or snack, my wife would lovingly respond, "What do you say?" It was important for us to see our children learn to respectfully ask instead of demand. We loved them and were willing to do anything they needed and to bless them as we could. Because of our love for them, demands were never necessary.

God is always open for the ask. When Jesus guaranteed whatever we ask in prayer, He's pointing to the mindset more than the request. For instance, if I pray for a million dollars, but I neither need or could handle it, there's little reason to expect it. In that instance, it's not a real ask, but a selfish demand. There are times my children have asked for a snack, but were disappointed to receive crackers and cheese instead of Skittles. Did this mean I didn't answer their request? No, but rather indicates I knew they asked wrongly. **So for us to ask and believe we will receive from the Lord, means that we have come before Him recognizing His authority to answer or not. It also means we recognize that He always has our best interest at heart, and when a request goes unfilled we ask two simple questions. First, did I ask or demand of the Lord? Secondly, has God already met this need in some other way that I simply need to stop and examine for a moment? Like when God showed I didn't need more money for that bill, but to handle my current money better. God knows what you need. Don't make demands...simply ask Him.**

Read Mark 12

He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong.” Mark 12:27

Sneaking unapproved snacks and treats was a specialty of mine as a kid. One afternoon, I saw an unattended can of grape soda in our living room and I was all over it. But it wasn't grape soda. It wasn't even diet grape soda, which would have been disappointing but doable. Instead, it was filled with the cigarette ashes of my babysitter. I'm literally wincing as I recollect the ash pouring into my mouth and gagging me. The experience kept me away from strange cans of opened soda forever, fearing my expectation will be “quite wrong!”

Sometimes you're not just wrong, but “quite wrong!” Jesus finds himself once again dealing with the Sadducees, a group of Jewish leaders who didn't believe in the resurrection. In their efforts to disprove the possibility of eternal life, they created more elaborate and complicated hypotheticals. Jesus finally identifies their major issue: they don't know the power of God. They have placed higher emphasis on their own opinion than on the scriptures. The idea of a resurrection wasn't merely a NT idea, but one made clear in the OT as well (perhaps nowhere more clearly than in Job 19:25-27). **When a church disregards biblical standards for leadership or marriage, it isn't slightly wrong. It is quite wrong. When we choose to remain out of line with the standards of God's Word, we deny the power of God and unreasonably hope for the best. Are you allowing the words of the living God regularly into your life? If not, you are risking grave error and denying that it truly has power for your life.**

Read Mark 13

And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations. Mark 13:10

Is it possible for us to speed the return of Jesus? There seems to be some debate on this, which may be a deeper theological discussion than be accomplished in a devotional paragraph. But Jesus says that before He can return, the gospel must be proclaimed to all nations. What exactly counts as a “proclamation” is somewhat unclear. Perhaps it could be actual missionaries, or the continuing influence of evangelistic efforts through the internet. But in some way, the gospel will be available to every nation prior to Jesus' return.

Jesus statement here backs up the truth of John 3:16. The declaration that salvation was given not just for the Jewish people, but for all people was a difficult truth for some people to embrace. God has created all people, and He clearly desires salvation for all people and not just a select few. **So if we**

increase or decrease missionary appointments, can we affect the date of Jesus return? It may appear so by our eyes, but God's sovereignty allows that He already knows what we will do and when the return will be. The larger lesson is this: Jesus wants the nations to know! The gospel is not for a select few, so whether you go across the ocean or the street, your efforts to spread the gospel bring us closer to the moment of Christ's return. What more motivation could we need?

Read Mark 14

The value of a five dollar bill varies. When I walk down to the local convenience store, \$5 for a candy bar would be a price I'm unwilling to pay. Not because I don't want the candy, or I'm unwilling to pay for it, but it's simply not worth that price. Now, if I walked out of that convenience store and someone offered me their car for \$5, I'd buy it in a heartbeat. I'd probably be arrested soon after for having purchase stolen goods, but otherwise \$5 seems like a good price for a car. The value of \$5 is somewhat relative to the object for sale.

This entire chapter speaks to me in a similar fashion: how much is following Jesus worth? The disciples don't find Jesus' call to be alert and pray worth more than a potential nap. And Peter doesn't consider his allegiance to Jesus to be worth his life. And yet, the chapter opens with the beautiful picture of a woman who gives an incredibly costly gift to Jesus in hopes of His acceptance and forgiveness. Jesus doesn't save us based on what He might get from us in return. Instead, He gave us the most valuable gift ever...His own life for our salvation. **And instead of earning it, He asks us to honor it. What is Jesus worth to you? What are you willing to give up to follow Jesus? Are you willing to set your desires aside and take up His first? Are you willing to sacrifice your standing and potentially your own life to honor His sacrifice for you? Salvation is an incredibly costly gift and should serve as a reminder to us to value it highly by our life lived in honor of Jesus.**

Read Mark 15

Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also reviled him. Mark 15:32

A young American engineer accepted a two year assignment to Ireland, though it placed him far from Tennessee and his long-time girlfriend. They decided together that he would accept the job to help earn enough to get married and afford a house. After a few weeks, and despite his constant letters, the girlfriend expressed doubts regarding his faithfulness amid the beautiful Irish women. He admitted being tempted, but promised to remain hers. She soon sent him a harmonica, which he promised to practice up on. At the end of the two years, the young man returned to Tennessee where his girlfriend and family met him at the airport. As he rushed to embrace her, the girlfriend held up a hand and said, "Before any serious huggin' and kissin' gets started, let me hear you play that harmonica!" The young man's constant letters, affirmations, and rush home hadn't been enough proof. She still needed ONE MORE!

These Pharisees and scribes had seen no shortage of the works Jesus could do. But they were always operating in a refusal of belief. Sure Jesus healed a man's crippled hand, but he did it on the Sabbath so the miracle was dismissed. And now standing before the cross, they say if only he would come down, they would believe. Incredibly, they probably wouldn't have. Their unbelief always called for ONE MORE proof as if none had been given prior. And sometimes I treat Jesus the same way: "Jesus, I know you love me and I remember how you took care of me that last time, but can I see it one more time?" Asking Jesus to come through isn't a faithless act, but we must remember who He is. **Jesus**

hasn't failed to prove His love and salvation for us. Where are you struggling to trust Jesus? It's ok to admit the struggle and simply be honest with Jesus. Circumstances may appear desperate, but Jesus never is. He's always in control and capable of doing the work we need. Don't believe simply because of what He's done, but on who He is!

Read Mark 16

And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by accompanying signs. Mark 16:20

Businesses want to get into China. The NBA has been capitalizing on Chinese interest in professional basketball by even modifying team jerseys to represent aspects of the Chinese New Year. And Nike founder Phil Knight said that his American company would be foolish to ignore China as a potential market for their products. "You're talking about a nation with 2 billion feet", says Knight. So while it can be tempting for companies to remain content with their market share, the reality is that brands that fail to expand generally constrict and die (see British Knights, LA Gear, Starter).

While Christians are called to contentment in many areas of our life, the reach of the gospel isn't one of them. The resurrection of Jesus was such a life-changing and compelling message, the disciples refused to simply keep it amongst themselves. They recognized it was a message for everyone and they "went out and preached everywhere." McDonalds, at the ballpark, across the back fence...everywhere! **As Christians we cannot allow the preaching of the gospel to be limited to pastors and churches. It must be done everywhere by everyone who knows the life-giving gospel of Jesus. So where have you been feeling the need to share the gospel? In what situation are you feeling the Holy Spirit prompting you to be more vocal? Pray for boldness, pray for readiness, and let's take the gospel everywhere because it's needed by everyone!**