

Jesus' Rising Popularity

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Mark 3:7-19

We live in a world where your every moment can be tracked, documented, and put on display. The wealthy and famous can't leave their homes without being bombarded by the intrusive presence of paparazzi pressing upon them and taking snapshots of their every movement. We know very little of the pressures and the pitfalls that such attention and popularity create. No one was outside my home snapping pictures or taking video as I drove to church this morning. It's probably safe to say the same is true for you. Jesus, on the other hand, was well acquainted with the intrusiveness of the crowds who followed Him as He ministered. But Jesus hadn't come to garner popular attention. He came to seek and save the lost. The growing popularity of Jesus also brought intense scrutiny. The religious leaders are watching Jesus' every move and listening to His every word. This is a collision that would ultimately lead Him to the cross. Let's turn our attention to our text for this morning. Mark, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, pens the following words:

Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the sea, and a great crowd followed, from Galilee and Judea and Jerusalem and Idumea and from beyond the Jordan and from around Tyre and Sidon. When the great crowd heard all that he was doing, they came to him. And he told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, lest they crush him, for he had healed many, so that all who had diseases pressed around him to touch him. And whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God." And he strictly ordered them not to make him known. And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons. He appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. Mark 3:7-19

Brothers and sisters, the grass withers, and the flower fades, but the Word of our God stands forever (Isaiah 40:8).

I. THE OVERWHELMING POPULARITY OF THE MASTER (v.7-8)

Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the sea, and a great crowd followed, from Galilee and Judea and Jerusalem and Idumea and from beyond the Jordan and from around Tyre and Sidon. When the great crowd heard all that he was doing, they came to him. Mark 3:7-8

Mark opens our text this morning by telling us that Jesus “withdrew” with His disciples to the sea. Opposition toward Jesus has risen quickly in the first three chapters of Mark’s gospel. The religious leaders have collided with Jesus over His authority to forgive sin (2:6-7), the fact that He keeps company with tax collectors and sinners (2:16), His refusal to fast according to their legalistic customs (2:18), and His seeming disregard for the Sabbath (2:24, 3:6). We ended last week with the Pharisees holding a counsel with the Herodians (supporters of Herod’s rule) where they began to plot how they might arrest and destroy Jesus. From this point forward the Pharisees will scrutinize Jesus’ every step and every word. The religious leaders of Jesus’ day perceived Him to be a threat to their power and authority. Jesus was quickly rising as an enemy of the state. And now they are looking for a reason, any reason, to take Him out. Let it be clear that Jesus didn’t withdraw out of fear. He never ran from the challenges that surrounded His ministry. Jesus withdrew, not because He was fearful, but because there was still much to accomplish before the cross (cf. John 7:6). For this reason, Jesus, along with His new followers, withdrew from the synagogue and headed to the sea.

Mark alone notes no less than eleven occasions on which Jesus retired from his work, in order to escape his enemies or to pray in solitude, for rest, or to teach His disciples (cf. 1:12; 3:7; 6:31, 46; 7:24, 31; 9:2; 10:1; 14:34). But even though Jesus had left the synagogue, He wasn’t able to escape the crowd. Mark tells us, “A great crowd followed Him.” The placement of the adjective “great” (πολύς) in verse 7 indicates that Mark is highlighting to the ever-growing popularity of Jesus. This is to be expected. When you teach with the authority that Jesus taught with, heal sickness and disease, cast out demons, and forgive sins, it’s difficult to keep your ministry under the radar. The news about Jesus was racing across Palestine like an uncontained prairie fire.

The crowd that is coming to Jesus is composed of people from Galilee, the southern region of Judea, the city of Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan (120 miles away), and from the Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon way up north on the Mediterranean Sea (several days journey). Both Jews and Gentiles have gathered from the North, East, and South, literally everywhere, to see and hear Jesus. Mark notes, “When the great crowd heard all that He was doing, they came to Him.” It’s interesting to note that the word “heard” is a present tense participle. A literal translation would be, “Constantly hearing about all He was doing, the great crowd came to Him.” As we’ve noted previously, we can be sure that some came out of curiosity, some came to be healed, some came under the influence of demons, but some undoubtedly came with heavy hearts that were hungry for the Savior.

From a human perspective, it appears as if Jesus' ministry is wildly successful. His ratings seem to be off the chart; the swelling crowds can't seem to get enough. People are literally coming out of the woodwork to see the man who heals diseases, casts out demons, and speaks with authority. But, as we've noted before, growing crowds weren't a sign of success for Jesus. Jesus' primary mission was to seek and save the lost (cf. Luke 19:10) and He wasn't about to let anyone or anything divert Him from his mission – even the growing attention of the crowd. Unfortunately, that's not always the case for us. We are often seduced by attention and popularity. The people pleaser in all of us craves attention. As a matter of fact, we often allow the attention of others to dictate our actions. The problem is that attention from others comes and goes. The result is that we oftentimes end up living like a circus clown, trying to garner the approval of others. Friends, your commitment to your master, Jesus Christ, and His mission must be greater than your desire to be liked and approved of. Jesus' popularity is soaring, but His focus on preaching the gospel remains singular.

II. THE PRESSING NEEDS OF THE MULTITUDES (v.9-12)

And he told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, lest they crush him, for he had healed many, so that all who had diseases pressed around him to touch him. And whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God." And he strictly ordered them not to make him known.

Jesus, seeing the swelling crowd, tells His followers to have a boat ready for Him. The crowd had gotten so large that there was a literal concern that He might be crushed. The word "crushed" is the Greek word *θλίβω*. It means to "squeeze" or "compress". It was used of pressing grapes to collect their juice. When Jesus began to heal people, those with diseases "pressed" around (literally: threw themselves upon) Jesus. Crowds can be a dangerous. Perhaps you've seen video or even been in a line yourself when uncontrollable crowds rush into retail stores as the doors open to a treasure trove of Black Friday sale items. The picture in our text is of a pushing, shoving, clamoring mob of people eager to touch or throw themselves against Jesus in hopes of being healed. The crowd is an interesting paradox. Jesus is fully aware of the misery present in its numbers before Him, but the commotion of the crowd is not a response of faith. They are merely spectators at a show – fans, not followers. As a result of the mobbing crowd, Jesus is forced to retreat to a small boat just off the shoreline.

But it's not just the sick and diseased in attendance. Among the crowd were those who were demon possessed. Mark describes them in verse 11 as "the spirits, the unclean ones."¹ Notice what they are doing. Mark says, "And whenever the unclean spirits saw Him..." The Greek word used here is *θεωπέω*. It means to be a "spectator," to "gaze on," "contemplate," "behold," or "view with interest and attention." The idea that Mark wants us to get here is that the unclean spirits carefully and continually watched Jesus.

¹ Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, Accordance electronic ed. (2004), paragraph 1334.

Jesus was watched by His enemies and you will be too. Christians, let us never forget that we live under a microscope. J.C. Ryle says, “Christ’s people must not expect to fare better than their Master. They are always watched by an ill-natured and spiteful world. Their conduct is always scanned with a keen and jealous eye. Their ways are noted and diligently observed. They are marked men. They can do nothing without the world noticing it. Their dress, their expenditure, their employment of time, their conduct in all the relations of life are all rigidly and closely marked. Their adversaries wait for their halting, and if at anytime they fall into error, the ungodly rejoice. It is good for all Christians to remember that wherever we go and whatever we do, we, like our Master, are always being watched.”²

Knowing that others are watching us should make us eager to avoid even the appearance of evil (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:22). What Paul is saying, is if our actions are questionable in any way, if they could even be thought of as resembling sin, don’t do it. Not only must we abstain from evil, but we must also abstain from giving the appearance of evil because that destroys our testimony of Christ. It shows that since Christians can compromise with sin, it must not be that serious. We need to be careful to be salt and light to the lost world and not a stumbling block to the gospel.

The tense of the verbs as it pertains to the unclean spirits are all in the imperfect. This means that the action taking place is repetitive. In other words, the unclean spirits repeatedly watch Jesus, repeatedly fall down before Him, and repeatedly cry out, “You are the Son of God.” These spirits know more about Jesus than the men and women in the crowd. It’s interesting to note that other than God the Father (cf. 1:11), the demons are the only other party so far in Mark’s Gospel to confess Jesus’ divine Sonship.³ They recognize Jesus for who He is – the Son of God. But they have no interest in worshipping Him. They hate Him and the redemptive mission he had come to accomplish.

Look at how Jesus responds. Mark writes, “[Jesus] strictly ordered them not to make Him known.” This is interesting. The scene here is of a massive crowd listening to Jesus teach and watching Him heal diseases and cast out demons, but He quiets the demons when they rightly reveal that He is the Son of God. You would think that Jesus would capitalize on this moment to solidify His identity, but that’s not the case. Instead, He silences the unclean spirits and rejects their testimony of His deity. Jesus never courted popularity. When the crowds came, He wanted them to learn of Him from His own lips, not from the servants of Satan.⁴ Do you often think your life is busy? Jesus’ moments, minutes, and days were filled with the needs of others. Jesus was the divine Son of God, but He was also a real man. We call that the hypostatic union – fully God and fully man in one

² J.C. Ryle, *Mark: Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 2012), 35.

³ James R. Edwards, *PNTC: The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 104.

⁴ Herschel H. Hobbs, *An Exposition of the Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), 58.

person. In His humanity Jesus grew tired and weary just like we do. He was pulled from every direction. We'll see how Jesus intentionally dealt with that here in just a moment.

III. THE CLEAR COMMUNICATION OF THE MISSION (v.13-15)

And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons.

Before Jesus communicates the mission manifesto for His disciples, He gives us a model for the business of life. Jesus knew what it was like to be crazy busy. How did he deal with the demands of ministry? We see three clear things here in verses 13-14.

A. HE GOT AWAY

Though Jesus came to save men, at times he needed to get away from them. In His humanity, He needed to remove Himself from all the activity and noise. The Southern Baptist Evangelist Vannce Havener used to say, "If we don't follow Christ's example to come apart, we may indeed, just come apart!" Donald Whitney has a chapter in His book *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* entitled "Silence and Solitude." This is a discipline that many, myself included, struggle with. We get swept up in the hustle bustle. The problem is, when we get swept up, Jesus often gets swept out. If Jesus needed to retreat to the mountain, we must not think we are stronger, more capable, and less needy. We need to schedule margin in our lives so we can get away and behold Christ. Find a place that is free of distractions and be with Jesus. Go walk in the park; sit in a church sanctuary; find a trail, get up early before all the commotion starts; stay awake when everyone else is asleep. Discipline yourself to get away.

B. HE PRAYED

Look at verse 13. Mark writes, "And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him." Though Mark doesn't mention it, Luke, the physician, who had a knack for details, tells us that prior to the selection of His disciples, Jesus went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God (Luke 6:12). We see Jesus slipping away often to commune with His Father.

Every mountaineer is familiar with the majestic Weisshorn Mountain in the Swiss Alpines. Its pinnacle surges an impressive 14,783 feet above sea level. The Weisshorn is considered by mountaineers to be the most beautiful mountain in the Swiss Alps. But it's beauty mixed with danger. The elevation pitch, technical routing, and fierce whipping winds make summiting this peak a difficult task.

The 19th century Scottish theologian George Adam Smith wrote about once climbing the Weisshorn with a guide. It was a stormy day and they were making their climb on the sheltered side of the peak. When they reached the summit, they were filled with exhilaration. In the moment, George forgot about the fierce winds, leaped up, and was nearly blown over the edge to the glacier below! His guide grabbed hold of him and exclaimed: “On your knees, sir! You are safe here only on your knees!” The decision Jesus was getting ready to make in the selection of His disciples was huge – so much so that He continued all night in prayer. Oh that we would be a people characterized by our prayerfulness. Our master models this for us here in verse 13.

C. HE SHARED THE LOAD

Jesus knew that the clock was ticking on His earthly ministry. He couldn’t reach the multitudes on His own. He needed to select an inner circle of disciples that He could teach and train to minister alongside Him now and to carry on the work after his departure. Look at the text. Mark notes that Jesus “called to Him those whom he desired”. The force of the text here is that Jesus did the selecting. The disciples did not decide on their own to follow Jesus, as if they were doing Him a favor. Rather, His sovereign call superseded their wills. What is immediately revealed here is the direction Jesus’ evangelistic ministry would take.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus didn’t capitalize on His opportunities to enlist a mighty army of believers to take the world by storm? Surely the Son of God could have adopted a more enticing program of mass recruitment. Is it not rather disappointing that One with all the powers of the universe at His command would live and die to save the world, yet in the end have only a few ragged disciples to show for His labors?⁵ Jesus’ concern wasn’t to develop programs to reach the multitudes, but to develop disciples whom the multitudes would follow. Jesus could have chosen to preach the gospel with the stars. He could have chosen that the rocks cry out, but Jesus had a much different strategy. Men were to be His method of reaching the world with the gospel. You’re a part of that method and mission.

Notice the job description of the disciples that Jesus is getting ready to select. In verse 14 Mark writes, “And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons.” The word “appointed” isn’t the best translation of the Greek word (ποιέω), which literally means to “make”. When we think about the word “appointed” we think about selecting or choosing something or someone that already exists. But when you make something you bring what doesn’t already exist into existence. Jesus “made” the twelve! How cool is that! It’s possible that Mark intends to recall the opening line of Genesis, “In the beginning, God made / created the heavens and the earth”

⁵ Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 1972), 34-35.

Genesis 1:1. Friends, understand this: discipleship doesn't consist of what the disciples can do for Jesus, but in what Jesus can make of His disciples.⁶

You'll note that the following phrase "(whom He also names apostles)" is in parenthesis. The reason for that parenthetical indication is to point out that some manuscripts do not contain these words while others do. This shouldn't present us with any reason for concern. Again, Luke contains the same words that are not in question. Luke tells us, "And when day came, he called His disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles" (Luke 6:13). There may also be some allusion back to the creation account here. You'll remember that Adam named the animals in Genesis 2:19. In biblical times, the right to name belonged to a superior, maker, or master. Jesus is again demonstrating His authority as He determines and calls His disciples.

The word "apostle" comes from the Greek word (ἀποστέλλω), which means to send forth a "messenger," or "agent." In its most literal sense it means "the sent one". By the way, if you are a believer, you are a "sent one". Are you carrying the mail? The call and commission of Jesus' disciples is representative of every one of His followers. All of our personal ministries will look a bit different, yet the responsibility and privilege to proclaim the good news has been placed on every believer without exception.

There are two specific reasons given that Jesus chose His twelve disciples. First, in verse 14, "So that they might be with Him." This should be the pattern of every disciple. This is the principle of association. Friends, you become like those you spend time with. Second, also in verse 14, "[That] He might send them out to preach". The disciples were to be Jesus' ambassadors. There is a deliberate order here. The disciples were to be with Jesus before they were sent into the world. They were to "come" and then to "go". Discipleship is a relationship before it's a task. It's a "who" before it's a "what." If you reverse that order you'll see everything Jesus has called you to as duty and it will soon cease to bring you any delight.

Jesus equipped His disciples with two indispensable things as they were sent out. First, He gave them a *message*. They were to be His heralds. These men were sent out to declare the message of their king. Second, He gave them *power*. We don't possess the same authenticating power that was granted to the apostles, but we should never forget the power of the message we proclaim. Paul reminds us, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" Romans 1:16. Jesus told the nucleolus of believers at Pentecost, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" Acts 1:8. The mission was to come and be with Jesus and then to be sent out to the multitudes.

⁶ James R. Edwards, *PNTC: The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 112.

IV. THE STRATEGIC SELECTION OF TWELVE ORDINARY MEN (v.16-19)

He appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

1. Simon (Peter) - The name "Peter" means "a rock". Jesus gave him the name Peter after he had answered Jesus' question, "Who do people say that I am?" Peter replied, "You are the Christ the Son of the living God". Jesus went on to say, "Upon this rock I will build my church" (cf. Matt. 16:16-18). This is the same Peter who was often put his foot in his mouth. He said, "Never will they crucify you, Lord! Never will you wash my feet!" This is the same Peter who cut off the servant's ear to prevent Jesus' arrest. This is the same Peter who denies Christ with cursing. But he's also the first to go into the tomb. He's the first to jump out of the boat when he sees Jesus on the shore. He loves Jesus! It was Peter that said, "You know that I love you, Lord!"

2 & 3. James and John (Son of Zebedee) – These fellas are brothers, cousins of Jesus since their mom was Mary's sister. Jesus called them the name of "Boanerges" which means, "sons of thunder." This name was reflective of the time when Jesus and His disciples were traveling through Samaria and the people there would not give Jesus and His group a place to stay and James and John asked Jesus if they should call down fire from heaven and destroy the people. Because of their zeal for God, the name "sons of thunder" was appropriate for these guys. James was the first martyr after the resurrection of Christ. Over time James and John were transformed to be more like Jesus Christ. In fact, John, who lived to a ripe old age, is now known as being "the disciple of love" because of his emphasis on the love of God in his three epistles that bear his name.

4. Andrew - Andrew was an evangelist. He brought his brother Simon to Jesus. When Jesus fed the 5,000, He told the disciples to feed the people rather than send them away. Andrew noted, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?" Andrew brought to Jesus what he had in order to minister to the people. Jesus used what he brought and multiplied the loaves and fish to feed the people. This is a picture of what all ministry for Christ should be. It's interesting to note that His name means "manly".

5. Philip - He also was an evangelist and brought his brother Nathaniel to Jesus. John records it for us, "Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." John 1:45–46

6. Bartholomew – We don't know much about this guy.

7. Matthew – Matthew is the Jewish tax collector who is also called Levi. His name means “gift of God”. He threw the first Christian party in history and invited his lost friends in order to get them around Jesus.

8. Thomas – We often think of Thomas as the “doubter”. He tended to see the dark side of things. It was Thomas who said, “Let’s go and die with Jesus” John 11:16.

9. James the Less (Son of Alphaeus) – We don't know much about this guy. He is the author of the Epistle of James.

10. Thaddaeus – His name means “courageous”. He asked Jesus why He wasn’t manifesting Himself to the world as the Messiah.

11. Simon (the Cananaean) – Simon, known as a zealot, came from an extremist nationalist group determined to free the Jews from Rome’s rule. Some zealots carried little daggers around and would assassinate Roman soldiers.

12. Judas Iscariot – Out of the list of disciples, Judas is the only one with the infamous title branded on his life, “who betrayed Him.”

Suffice it to say, this group of disciples was an incredibly diverse group. Not one of them was a pastor or theologian. They were ordinary men. We know there was a fisherman and a tax collector among them, but no other vocation is given. It is interesting to note that later Peter and John, before the Sanhedrin were referred to as ordinary, unschooled men. But there was one thing that was clearly evident about this small band of followers. They had been with Jesus (cf. Acts 4:13). Listen. If Jesus can use a rag tag team like this to turn the world upside down, can’t He use you and me? And He will, if we fully surrender to Him.

ENCOURAGEMENT FOR US ORDINARY FOLKS

By picking the men that Jesus picked to be His disciples, it is obvious that He wanted to show that He can use regular people in great ways, if they simply allow Him to work through their life. With perhaps the exception of Judas Iscariot, Jesus could not have picked any men whom the world would think would be least likely to be great leaders and statesmen for His church. When we read the stories about these twelve men and how they are so slow to catch on and understand His purpose, it is encouraging to us because we are all often slow to understand God’s ways. If you are ever tempted to think that you’re less useable to God because you’re ordinary, look at the disciples Jesus chose. What was true about these men is that they were willing to follow. Jesus took their willingness to follow and forged it into a mighty force for the kingdom of God.

But we are reminded by Paul, “The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God” 1 Corinthians 1:25–29.

CLOSING BENEDICTION

As we bring our corporate worship to a close this morning, hear this benediction from the Apostle Paul, “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” 2 Corinthians 13:14. And all God’s people said, “Amen!” Go in peace!