



Temple Baptist Church
Wilmington, North Carolina
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The Gospel
Mark 1:1-15

Well, we're two weeks into a new year—the year of our Lord 2018! The year is still young and fresh.

The coming of a new year evokes a variety of reactions in people. Some look back at the previous year or years, and feel a sense of satisfaction over what they've accomplished or achieved. Others experience frustration or even melancholy over failures or losses.

For many people, the beginning of a new year is a time to take stock, to see where we stand and what we need to improve. Hence, the longstanding tradition of making New Year's resolutions—we promise that we're going to do this or that, or stop doing something that's harmful to ourselves or our relationships with others. Did you make any? Are you still keeping them? It's usually about this time of year that we've already blown it, and any thought of resolutions is to mourn the fact that despite our determination, we just somehow couldn't keep them, no matter how good our intentions.

We might even feel a little like Charlie Brown in Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* comic strip. In one strip years ago, Charlie Brown is feeling down about having so many faults, so he goes to Lucy for some psychiatric help. Charlie Brown asks, "How can I correct some of my faults?" Lucy responds, "You know why you have faults, Charlie Brown? It's because of your weaknesses! It's all those weaknesses that you have that cause your faults!" So Charlie Brown says, "Well, how can I cure my weaknesses?" And Lucy shouts, "You've got to get rid of those failings! It's those failings that are holding you back! . . ."

The world's way . . .

Now the world offers us plenty of advice like that. We know that something is wrong, incredibly wrong, not just on the surface, but way down deep in our being. So the world offers us pop-psychology and "*self-help*." The self-help section is usually one of the largest in most general bookstores, and interestingly enough, it's often located *right next to the religion section*. You can often find a self-help section in *Christian* bookstores as well. Multitudes of books, CDs, or DVDs tell us how to improve our attitude, relationships, outlook, looks, physical fitness, skills and abilities, and just about anything and everything else you could think of.

You heard about the fellow, didn't you, who said he went to a bookstore and asked the saleswoman, "Where's the self-help section?" She said that if she told him, it would defeat the purpose.¹

We know that our selves need help, but deep down, could it be that we also realize that it might be *more* help, or even a *different kind* of help than what we ourselves can give our selves?

Sometimes we think, "Well, I could do this, if only I were *motivated* enough." So we turn to the motivational speakers and gurus. They push and prod and encourage and try to move people

to “unlock their potential.” We hear this message from secular sources all around us. But we also sometimes hear it from TV preachers and mega church pastors!

Now human potential *is* incredible. Just look at all the marvelous inventions throughout history, even just over the past hundred years!

But humans also have the potential for incredible evil as well—just look at the history of the past hundred years!

Yet the books and CDs and DVDs and seminars are designed to *motivate* us, to bring out the best in us. They promise us grand improvement and answers to all our problems. I remember well a notice that ran some years ago in a community college continuing education bulletin in our state that read:

The Fundamental Laws of Prosperity and How to Apply Them to Your Business and Personal Life . . . Dr. Frances . . . will explain five crucial universal laws of prosperity and show you how they apply to your *financial, spiritual, mental, physical, and family life* . . . He will discuss each . . . and show how they apply to a happy and balanced life. Does it sound like this just might make a huge difference in your life? You bet it does—and if you attend this seminar, *your life will be changed forever*.

Yet we see deep inside that no matter how hard we try, no matter how great our motivation, no matter how many seminars we take, there’s still something lacking, still some basic change that needs to take place in us.

So the advocates of *self-esteem* and *self-acceptance* bend our ear, and say, “Well, you know, we are who we are; and really, that’s good. What you need to do is learn to accept who you are, to like yourself just as you are. Despite all your failings, you’re really a good person. I mean, so what if you’re morally and spiritually bankrupt, so long as you accept who you are?”

But if we stop and really, honestly take stock of ourselves, doesn’t that all ring sort of hollow?

So the moralists come along, and say, “Look, you know what your problem is. You’ve got to stop doing what you know is wrong, and start doing what you know is right. Just do it!” We hear that and say, “I know, but how do I just do it? It seems that the harder I try, the worse I do!”

Dealing with our dilemma . . .

These same kinds of answers to our dilemma have been around for centuries, just in different forms.

The pagan religions of Mark’s world also offered philosophy and self-help and self-acceptance as answers. Since they had fashioned their ideas of their gods after their own likeness, their concern was not with how they lived and behaved, but with simply keeping their gods happy so they would bless them. Morality had nothing to do with religion.

The opposite was true with the Jews. At their best, they believed and taught that since there is only one God, and He is just and righteous and pure, then His people should be just and righteous and pure as well. So the Jewish leaders and interpreters of the law laid down traditions for the people to follow to try to insure such a lifestyle. The problem was that much of it came to focus on the external acts rather than the attitudes of the heart and mind.

Apparently, some ancient Jews in the first century AD were feeling some frustration with all this. They had that nagging feeling deep inside that no matter how well they were doing on the outside, something was still terribly wrong. Something needed to be changed. Then came John the Baptist, **preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins** (Luke 3:3)² a baptism for

a change of mind and heart—what Sharyn Dowd in her commentary on Mark calls “a reversal of mindset.”³

It was obvious that John was a prophet like those of the Old Testament. He dressed like Elijah, and his ministry fulfilled various passages of the Old Testament prophets that told of one who would come to prepare the way for the Messiah. His message was that the Messiah was coming, the one mightier than he who would baptize with the Holy Spirit, and who would bring justice and judgment.

So the people, the common people, were flocking to him, listening to him, and being baptized. They knew there had to be something more than what the Sadducees and Pharisees were teaching. They weren't finding it in John, but he was pointing them to it.

Then one day Jesus came to be baptized by John—not because He needed to repent, but to identify with those who did. When He was baptized, Jesus **saw the heavens opening and the Spirit of God like a dove descending upon Him**. In the ancient world, this was a sign of divine favor. Jesus also heard a voice from heaven—God's voice—saying, **“You are My beloved Son; in You I am well-pleased”**—words from the Old Testament (Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1) about God's Son and chosen servant (1:10-11). Then the Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan for forty days.

Soon John was arrested, and Jesus began His public ministry in Galilee, **preaching the gospel of God** (1:14). Jesus' message was simple and straightforward: **“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”**

Now the prophets had told of how John would prepare the way for the Messiah. He had preached a baptism of repentance *because* the Messiah was coming.

But when Jesus was baptized by John, the Father declared from heaven that Jesus was His beloved Son, with whom He was pleased. He was the Messiah John was preparing the way for!

So when Jesus began His public ministry, He called people to repent and believe, not to prepare the way for the Messiah, but because in Him, the kingdom was near! God was doing something about the situation, just as He had promised through the prophets.

Because it was God's doing, people could be sure He would accomplish it. As Christian Beker has put it, they could believe it, and participate in it in joy and anticipation.⁴ Rather than trying to conquer their sin and change themselves in their own strength, they could trust God to do for them what they couldn't do themselves—that He would win the victory over evil, and they could share in that victory as they lived under His reign! To participate in that victory would require *repentance*, a reversal of mindset, a turning away from their own way to God and His ways. It would require *believing* this gospel, this *good news*, that in Jesus the Messiah God's kingdom has come near. It would require a radically different approach from trying to do things on their own or in their own power. Or as my seminary New Testament professor Dr. Malcolm Tolbert liked to put it: “Since the kingdom of God is at hand, the only appropriate response is to repent and believe!”

Repenting and believing . . .

Years ago, not long after JoAnn and I were married, we were traveling from our home in Columbus County to some kind of church meeting down in Brunswick County. We cut through the back roads over to NC Highway 130 going toward Shallotte. To get to the church where we were going, we were supposed to turn off of Highway 130 onto a side road. The church was a few miles down that road.

Well, as we drove, we kept looking, but somehow we never saw the road we were supposed

to take. We kept saying to one another, “I sure thought we’d be to that turn by now,” and “This is a lot farther than I remember it being.” By now it was getting dark. We were driving along, looking, and all of sudden, our headlights lit up a green sign that flashed at us, “Shallotte City Limits”!

I was so embarrassed! How could I have missed that turn? But I did! We were supposed to be at the church; we were going to miss participating in the meeting, unless . . . Well, what do *you* think we did?

Friends, listen to the gospel! *The gospel is that in Jesus Christ, the Kingdom of God that the prophets promised is here.* God’s rule has come in His Son! He came to live for us, to die for us, to rise from the dead for us, so that we might be saved, be forgiven of our sins, be set right with God, and share in His eternal kingdom when He returns in glory to bring it in its fullness in the resurrection and the new heavens and earth. He has done for us what we couldn’t do for ourselves. We can’t earn it, we can’t achieve it. We can only believe and receive it. This is the gospel of God, the good news of Jesus Christ that’s rooted in God’s activity and promises in the Old Testament, and brought to fulfillment in His Son!

And so, my friends, in the words of Jesus the Messiah: **“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel!”**

†MEG

¹ From www.preachingtoday.com Illustration of the Week in the *Leadership Journal* weekly e-newsletter.

² Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®.

³ Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Second Gospel* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2000), 10.

⁴ Dowd, 7, summarizing Christian Beker.