

*Where we start . . .*

We live at a time when the media seems to be enamored with “talent” shows--programs where someone thinks they have what it takes to be the next “idol” or the most notable dancer or performer. What do you think it takes to come out on top in those kinds of competitions?

Do you think that there are similar dynamics that sometimes come into play when talk turns to “ministry”? Why or why not?

*What we read . . .*

We’re coming to the end of Mark and Jesus’ final words to His followers. Pay close attention to what He stresses as you read Mark 16:9-20.

From what you read, what can you say about the followers of Jesus that are in view here?

How do you understand the basic thrust of Jesus’ commission to these followers? What is it that He really wants for them?

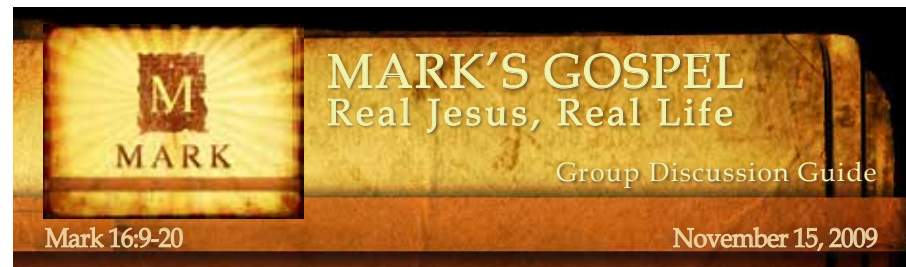
What is it that qualifies these followers to undertake the commission that Jesus extends to them?

How is that they will, ultimately, be able to live out this commission?

*Why this matters . . .*

In what ways do you think this commission is to be extended to all of Jesus’ followers?

What do you think hinders you, personally, from more fully embracing this commission in your own life?



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*Diving in . . .*

As we turn to the ending of Mark, we are faced with a couple of “academic” kinds of issues. First, there is the matter of the Longer Ending itself; are we to read 16:9-20 as belonging to this Gospel. As was made clear on Sunday morning, we do believe that this section belongs with the Gospel. So, yes, we embrace Mark 16:9-20 as Scripture. Then there is the issue of the “signs” that are mentioned. This will not be the text from which we teach about “spiritual gifts” or “signs;” but we will affirm that Jesus does intend to make Himself known in clear and powerful ways in and through the lives of His followers. Hopefully, any questions your people might have about these two particular issues will either be addressed in the Sunday message or can be discussed at another time without railroading the group discussion to one or the other of those issues. Because there really is something powerful to be seen and understood from this section.

What are we hoping to underscore? That Jesus intended (and intends!) to involve less than perfect and sometimes struggling followers in the extension of His own ministry into the world.

*Discussing . . .*

Nearly everyone is familiar with one or more of the “talent” shows that are current in the media. Perhaps “American Idol” is the favorite; some might enjoy “America’s Got Talent” or prefer “So You Think You Can Dance.” What is common to each of these shows is that someone will have to be seen to be better, more talented, more able, more gifted than the rest. Sadly, that kind of thinking sometimes works its way into the life of the church, as well. We can end up thinking that Jesus can only use and will only use those who are, in some way, a step above, a grade beyond, or who stand out from the crowd. We can end up thinking that since we don’t have that “spiritual star quality,” that there really isn’t much a part for us in the kingdom. But the ending of Mark paints a different picture.

As you work your way through the passage, it is clear that the followers of Jesus (for the most part) are pretty slow on the up take! Jesus has told them that He would rise from the dead. Jesus appears to Mary who tells His followers that He is alive. And then He appears to two others, again substantiating that all He had said about His death and subsequent resurrection was true. And, yet, still the disciples didn’t see it, didn’t believe. So, Jesus then shows up before them all . . . and they are convinced.

You might think that what is underscored here is the unbelief of the disciples. Certainly that is the background for the account. But what seems to be reiterated is Jesus’ ongoing efforts to draw His followers to faith. And, once He gets their hearts drawn into faith, He readily commissions them to participate in the ongoing spread of His own ministry.

How do these followers strike you? Well, they don’t seem to be the brightest bulbs, the sharpest bunch. They are slow to believe. But Jesus still intends to involve them!

And what does Jesus want to involve them in? His own ministry . . . with power. How amazing that He would entrust such marvelous ministry and such incredible power to a bunch of followers who seemed so . . . well . . . average! And that really seems to be the point.

These followers of Jesus are being invited to participate in Jesus’ ongoing ministry *not* because of something amazing about them. They are invited because it is what Jesus wants to do.

These followers of Jesus are being invited into opportunities to ministry in profound and powerful ways in the lives of others *not* because of something so amazing about them. They are invited because it is what Jesus wants to do.

We might not be able to fully unpack all the “signs” Jesus mentions here and how they all are to play out. We might not be able to fully resolve what it will mean to be a participant in such a ministry. But we can affirm that Jesus does intend to involve these “average” followers in anything but “average” living. He calls them to be extensions of His very own life and ministry into the world. And He continues to serve--with and through them--as they give themselves to this call.

The real challenge this leaves with us is: Why do we hold back from participating? What is it about ourselves that leads us to think we are under-qualified or ineligible or unfit for participating?

Seeing that Jesus insists that this kind of ministry and these kinds of signs “follow those who believe,” it would seem that the only limit to who gets to participate is whether or not someone is a “believer” in Jesus. This doesn’t mean that each and every believer will, every day or even throughout his or her life, see each and all of these signs. Collectively, these signs (plural) are intended to be seen as believers (plural) participate in Jesus’ ongoing ministry in the world.

But if that is the case, then, minimally, every believer should embrace the idea that Jesus does intend for him or her to be an active participant in what He is doing . . . and should expect that He will confirm His word in the ways that He deems best as we give ourselves to partnering with Him.

So, what are you waiting for?