



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

Introducing the Gospel of Mark

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Introduction

1. Comparatively ignored until the 1800's, the gospel of Mark has become perhaps the most popular gospel in the years since. In his study of Jesus' lifestyle in Mark, Thomas Olbricht illustrated the point: "A man of twenty-eight sat in my office on Wednesday. . . . He had never read the Bible. On Tuesday night he started reading the Gospel of Mark. He got so involved he read it through non-stop. As he sat in my office he could hardly restrain his excitement. He had found the Gospel dramatic and compelling in a manner he had not anticipated"¹
2. As the most concise gospel,² Mark's account has particular appeal in our fast-paced world.

Body

- I. Two Traits of All the Gospels.³
 - A. The gospels are *biographical*, but are not biographies in the modern sense.
 1. Although the parallels are not exact, the gospels most closely resemble ancient Greco-Roman biographies (or lives-*bios*).⁴
 2. An important difference is that all the gospels present themselves as anonymous works.
 - B. The books report things about Jesus' life that really did happen, but they do not try to cover his entire life, or present a comprehensive view of it in sequence from birth to death.
 1. John 20.30-31 and 21.25 give us insight into what they intend (cf. Luke 1.1-4).
 - a) The writings are selective; a corollary to this is that they tended to stress things or say things in a way that emphasized certain themes or theological points of emphasis.
 - b) They never indicate an intention to report events in chronological order.
 - c) Following John and Luke, we infer that all the writers intended to present the materials they thought would best help their readers come to (or strengthen) faith in Jesus.
 2. We can illustrate their nature and purpose with the modern documentary: to present true information about a person in a topical as opposed to a chronological arrangement.
 3. The gospels are *historical*, but not necessarily *chronological*.
- II. Authorship of Mark.
 - A. Like Matthew, Luke, and John, this writing does not name its author.
 - B. Widespread evidence from early church writers is that Peter passed on reports of Jesus' words and deeds to his associate, John Mark (cf. 1 Peter 5.14).

1. The earliest reports are from Papias (ca. AD 120-130) in fragments preserved by Eusebius of Caesarea (260-340) (others are also significant).⁵
 2. "Papias states that he received oral tradition from John the elder and apostle, and he passes on the following regarding Mark:
 - a) "he was the writer for Peter;
 - b) "he wrote down accurately as much as he could remember of Peter's words, which the latter had adapted to the needs of the moment;
 - c) "he was not an eyewitness of Jesus, nor a disciple (but see note on Mark 14:52);
 - d) "and it was his desire not to omit or misrepresent anything."
 3. "Papias concluded that the Gospel of Mark gains its apostolic and reliable character from its Petrine origin (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.15.1-2; *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.14-16)."⁶
- C. Internal evidence supports the Patristic testimony, as a comparison of Peter's sermon to the Gentile Cornelius with the outline of Mark illustrates (Acts 10.34-43).
1. Jesus' story began with the preaching of John the Baptist (Acts 10.37; Mark 1.2-8).
 2. At the appropriate time, God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power (Acts 10.38; Mark 1.9-11).
 3. Equipped with the Spirit's power, Jesus went about doing good and healing all who had been oppressed by the devil (Acts 10.38; Mark 1.14-10.42).
 4. Despite his exemplary character and all the good he did, Jesus was put to death by crucifixion (Acts 10.39; Mark 11-15).
 5. Death was not the end of his story, however; God raised him from the dead on the third day (Acts 10.40; Mark 16.1-8).
 6. Following his resurrection, Jesus appeared to chosen witnesses (Acts 10.41; Mark 16.9-14).
 7. Those witnesses, including Peter, were commissioned to preach to the people and testify that Jesus was the one through whom forgiveness will be granted, just as the prophets had said would happen (Acts 10.43; Mark 16.15-20).

III. Mark's Purpose.

- A. Like Matthew (unlike Luke 1.1-4; John 20.30-31), Mark lacks a purpose statement; we must infer it from the themes he emphasized.⁷
- B. Three features are immediately obvious.
 1. The comparative lack of longer teaching narratives (cf. Matthew 5-7; John 6) makes Mark more *action-oriented* with a greater focus on Jesus' deeds than his teaching.
 2. The relative brevity of the book serves to accentuate Mark's emphasis on the *passion narrative*; beginning with the triumphal entry (11.1), 251/673 verses (37.2%) of the book report Jesus' last week, death, burial, and resurrection (and the post-resurrection narratives are shorter than in any of the other three).⁸
 3. This fits with Mark's emphasis throughout on Jesus' suffering, seen in particular in the threefold repetition of his predictions about his suffering (8.31-33; 9.30-32; 10.32-34).
- C. Mark's purpose is evident in his major themes.⁹
 1. Mark especially wants to showcase Jesus as the *suffering* Son of God (cf. Mark 10.45).
 2. He also emphasizes the importance and nature of following Jesus, i.e., of *discipleship*.
 - a) "Mark also shows that Christians must walk the same road as Jesus—the way of humility, of suffering, and even, should it be necessary, of death. Mark wants to impress

on his readers the famous words of the Lord: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me' (8:34)."

IV. Structure: Outlining the Development of Mark's Purpose.¹⁰

- A. A fast-paced narrative punctuated by occasional transitional paragraphs.
- B. Part 1: The nature and character of the man Jesus with particular focus on his miracles (1.1-8.26).
 - 1. Preliminaries to the ministry (1.1-13).
 - Transitional statement (1.14-15).
 - 2. The Galilean Ministry (1.16-8.26).
 - a) Phase 1 - typical deeds and controversies (1.16-3.6).
 - Transitional statement (3.7-12).
 - b) Phase 2 - focus on the kingdom (3.13-5.43).
 - Transitional statement (6.1-6).
 - c) Phase 3 - Jesus' amazing feats of power meet with increasing opposition (6.7-8.26).
- C. Part 2: The significance of Jesus' character for discipleship, with particular focus on his nature as the suffering Son of God (8.27-16.8 [20]).
 - 1. The way of glory and suffering (8.27-10.52).
 - a) Climax of the book (and transition to Part 2): "You are the Christ" (8.27-30).
 - b) Three repetitions of a sequence of statements related to Mark's central purpose (8.31-38; 9.30-37; 10.32-45).
 - (1) Jesus predicts his betrayal, death, and resurrection.
 - (2) The disciples misunderstand.
 - (3) Jesus teaches about the cost of discipleship.
 - 2. Final ministry in Jerusalem: confronted by Jewish parties and authorities (11.1-13.37).
 - 3. The passion and empty-tomb narratives (14.1-16.8 [20]).

V. Important Characteristics of Mark.

- A. Fast-moving, action-oriented narrative with vivid descriptions.
 - 1. The book as a whole is characterized by rapidly shifting scenes with Jesus on the move, healing, exorcising demons, confronting opponents, and instructing the disciples.
 - 2. Mark used certain words (and grammatical constructions) that keep the story moving.
 - a) Mark's favorite word: "and" (1100 times; 97 per every 1000 words).
 - b) He also used "immediately" 42 (11 in chapter 1) of the 54 times used in all the gospels (Matthew-6; Luke-3; John-3) and 59 times in the entire New Testament.
 - 3. Proportionately more miracles and less extended teaching than in the other three gospels.
 - a) Both Matthew and Mark report 18 miracles, and Luke records 19.¹¹ But recall that Mark only has 673 verses compared to Matthew's 1068 and Luke's 1149.
 - b) Pages in my ESV: Mark-22; compared to Matthew-35; Luke-38; and John-27.
- B. Candor about the failings of Jesus' disciples in contrast to the exaltation of Christ.
 - 1. The disciples are prominent and a pattern for all followers, but they often misunderstand and fail; the focus seems to be on the example of Jesus in contrast to the disciples.
 - a) Hard-hearted (6.52).
 - b) Spiritually weak (14.32-35).
 - c) Slow to comprehend (8.14-21).
 - d) Self-centered (10.35-45).
 - 2. We do see similar failings in Matthew, Luke, and John, but they are accentuated in Mark.

VI. Five Important Themes.¹²

- A. Jesus seeks to correct messianic expectations and misunderstandings (1.25, 34, 44; 3.12; 4.10–12; 5.18–19, 43; 8.30; 9.9).
- B. Jesus is man (3.5; 4.38; 6.6; 7.34; 8.12, 33; 10.14; 11.12; 14.33–42).¹³
- C. Jesus is the Son of God (1.11; 3.11; 5.7; 8.38; 9.7; 12.6–8; 13.32; 14.36, 61; 15.39).
- D. Jesus is the Son of Man who must suffer (8.31; 10.45; 14.21, 36).
- E. Jesus calls his followers to imitate his humble service, self-denial, and suffering (8.34–38; 9.35–37; 10.35–45).

VII. Taking Particular Note of Discipleship.

- A. Under the heading of “Theme,” Hans Bayer writes, “The ultimate purpose and theme of Mark is *to present and defend Jesus’ universal call to discipleship*. Mark returns often to this theme, and as the narrative unfolds he categorizes his main audience as either followers or opponents of Jesus. The outline (pp. 1891–1892) demonstrates that Mark’s central effort in presenting and supporting this call is *to narrate the identity and teaching of Jesus*. This fact implies that discipleship for Mark is essentially a relationship with Jesus, not merely following a certain code of conduct. Fellowship with Jesus marks the heart of the disciple’s life, and this fellowship includes trusting him, confessing him, taking note of his conduct, following his teaching, and being shaped by a relationship to him. Discipleship also means being prepared to face the kind of rejection that Jesus faced.”¹⁴
- B. This radically different outlook from what is common in our world requires a shift in perspective, priorities, and commitment—making Mark potentially uncomfortable to study.

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Endnotes

¹ Thomas H. Olbricht, *The Power to Be: The Lifestyle of Jesus from Mark’s Gospel* (Austin, TX: Journey Books, 1979), 5.

² Mark includes 673 verses compared to Matthew-1068; Luke-1149; John-878.

³ Adapted from David Anguish, *Getting Acquainted with the Bible: Its Makeup, Purpose, and Story* (Searcy, AR: CarChlex Books, 2019), 17–18.

⁴ See the discussion of the genre of the gospels in D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 112–115.

⁵ For an introduction to Papias and the text of his fragments from the different sources, see Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 722–773.

⁶ Hans F. Bayer, “Introduction to the Gospel According to Mark,” *The ESV Study Bible*, ed. Lane T. Dennis (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1889.

⁷ See Carson and Moo, 157.

⁸ Martin Kähler called Mark “a passion narrative with an extended introduction” (Carson and Moo, 185).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 186.

¹⁰ The following is adapted from Carson and Moo, 169–172. See also the outline in Bayer, 1891–1892.

¹¹ From a chart listing 33 miracles in Marsha A. Ellis Smith, *Holman Book of Charts, Maps, and Reconstructions* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1993), 95.

¹² See Bayer, 1890.

¹³ “Of the four Gospels, Mark presents the most human and down-to-earth portrait of Jesus” (Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: A Survey of Jesus and the Gospels*, 1st ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007], 194).

¹⁴ Bayer, 1890.