



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Following Jesus On His Way

Mark 10.17-52

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Christianity At Its Most Basic

At the most basic level, Christianity is about following Jesus.

- Mark established this theme in his gospel right after he introduced Jesus' kingdom preaching (Mark 1.14-15), immediately turning to Jesus' simple and direct call of his first disciples: "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men" (v. 17).
- The phrase the ESV translates "follow me" (δεῦτε ὀπίσω μου, *deute opisō mou*) can be literally translated, "come after me"; more often, Mark used ἀκολουθέω (*akolouthēō*), "to follow," either in citing Jesus or in his references to Jesus' call (1.18; 2.14-15; 3.7; 5.24; 6.1; 8.34; 9.38; 10.21, 28, 32, 52; 11.9; 14.13, 54; 15.41).
- Carrying on the tradition, though with a different word, right after telling the Corinthians to "do all to the glory of God," Paul told them to "Be imitators (μιμητής, *mimētēs*) of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 10.31; 11.1).

In addition to the use of the key words for following or imitation, this fundamental truth is presented in different ways, typically in the development of themes across several passages. Note, for example, three passages in the section of the book following Peter's climactic confession (Mark 8.27-30) where Jesus stressed the nature of his messiahship and the implications for following him (8.31-9.13; 9.32-37; 10.32-45).

Although it is often overlooked, Mark's use of the word "road" or "way" (ὁδός, *hodos*) as a means of developing his theme is also important.¹

- Mark used *hodos* 16 times (1.2-3; 2.23; 4.4, 15; 6.8; 8.3, 27; 9.33-34; 10.17, 32, 46, 52; 11.8; 12.14), beginning with his report that John was to prepare the *way* of the Lord (1.2-3).
- Some occurrences are incidental (e.g., in the parable of the soils, 4.4, 15), but as Mark's telling of Jesus' story reaches its climax, his use of *hodos* becomes more prominent (6.8; 8.27; 9.33-34; 10.17, 32, 46, 52; 11.8; 12.14), increasing in frequency as Jesus gets closer to the cross.
- The effect is to stress that the way of Jesus is the road to the cross and to invite all would-be followers to join him on that road (see 8.27-9.13). Three students of Mark bring out how he developed this idea: "Because 'the way of God' is a metaphor for following Jesus in the service of the rule of God, it becomes the setting where Jesus instructs his disciples on the expectations and the cost of following."²

Our text, which includes three episodes, is especially helpful for illustrating the theme.

A Survey of Mark 10.17-52

The first features *a man who wouldn't follow Jesus' way* (10.17-31).

As Jesus set out on his “journey” (*hodos*) (v. 17), a man approached to ask how to receive eternal life. Jesus turned his question back on him, asking about his faithfulness to the law's prohibitions against murder, adultery, stealing, false witness, and fraud, as well as the positive command to honor his parents. The man passed with room to spare—he had kept all these commands from his youth (vv. 19-20). But Jesus pressed deeper, singling out one thing the man lacked: he loved his possessions too much (vv. 21-22). When the man went away in sadness (v. 22 NIV), Jesus used his response as an object lesson to teach the disciples about the true nature of kingdom living. His teaching surprised them, but it also prompted another bold confession from Peter (vv. 23-31).

But Peter was not always consistent with his profession, as the second episode shows. Here we see *twelve men who struggled with the way's demand* (10.32-45).

The “road” (*hodos*) they were on is specified in verse 32: it is the road to Jerusalem and, as Jesus elaborated in vv. 32-34, it was the road to rejection and suffering. James and John are the first to show they have not yet grasped Jesus' point (vv. 35-40), asking for privilege and prestige over rejection and suffering. But the other ten, including Peter, show they have not grasped it either (v. 41). As in the previous episode, Jesus used their misunderstanding to teach them about true greatness and following (vv. 42-44), pointing to himself as the ultimate example (v. 45).

The third episode shows *a man who joyously walked Jesus' way* (v. 46-52).

Hodos appears twice in these verses (vv. 46, 52). As Jesus proceeds, the tension is mounting, evident in the fact that a great crowd was now following along with the disciples. Among them is a blind beggar named Bartimaeus (v. 46) who cried out to Jesus for mercy and was rebuked by the crowds (vv. 47-48). But Jesus stopped, called the man to him, engaged him in conversation, and made him well (the word for “made well” in v. 52 is *σώζω* [*sōzō*], often translated “save”). The text concludes, “And immediately he recovered his sight and followed (*akolouthēō*) him on the way (*hodos*)” (v. 52b).

Walking in Jesus' Way

As we consider these three episodes together—as they are presented in the text—we first notice two contrasts.

- First, the rich man, diligent keeper of the commandments, had everything going for him, but would not follow Jesus on his way. But the blind man, who had nothing going for him—and whose religion is described only in terms of crying out to Jesus for mercy—eagerly followed Jesus on the way to Jerusalem.
- Second, the twelve had both “left everything” (v. 28) and were still clinging to everything (vv. 35-37, 41-43).

When we study these stories in sequence and side-by-side, we also see some things about learning how to be disciples. First, the disciples were struggling. They wanted to follow, but, as noted above, were being pulled in two different directions.

Indeed, as Mark depicted it in our text, the two choices they faced appear on either side of the episode in which the disciples are the focus. The rich man represents the way of scrupulous command keeping that won't surrender completely to Jesus (vv. 17-31). The blind beggar, who illustrates the way that has nothing to trust in but Jesus, willingly surrenders, and therefore finds healing (vv. 46-52).

These choices are also evident in the section that focuses on the disciples (vv. 32-45). The episode begins with Jesus making clear what he and his way are about (vv. 32-34). Beginning with James and John—but not limited to them—the disciples illustrate what choosing the other option entails (vv. 35-44). The crux between the two choices is Jesus (v. 45).

As we reflect on these things, we can identify what Jesus aimed to teach about following him.

- The way he calls us to travel leads to the cross.
- It is a way that diligent commandment keeping will not, in itself, guarantee (cf. John 14.15; 1 John 5.2-3).
- To walk in that way, we must overcome the challenges presented by self-centered cares and worldly comforts.
- Finally, it is a way we will travel and from which we will benefit only when we let go and trust Jesus only.

Clinging to Christ and the Way of the Cross

The older I get, the more I find myself appreciating the sentiment expressed in the third verse of the hymn, "Rock of Ages."

Nothing in my hand I bring;
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress;
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Vile, I to the fountain fly:
Wash me, Savior, or I die (A. M. Toplady).

We may be tempted to think that song applies only to those who have never obeyed the gospel. But, I submit that it is one we need to hear, sing, and practice more the longer we serve.

You see, we are religious people, diligently so. But, like James, John, and the ten, we often struggle with our priorities. We need to remember that it was the blind beggar who had nothing to bring who was most committed to Jesus on his way. And we must remember that only his way of self-denying servanthood leads to life.

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Notes

¹ Of the 62 times *hodos* appears in the gospels, Mark used it 16 times in 673 verses; Matthew used it about as often, 22 times in 1068 verses. Both Luke (20/1149) and John (4/878) used it less frequently.

² David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark As Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, 2nd. ed (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 68. This statement is from a section (pp. 66-72) on the "Journey" theme in Mark.