

The Gospel of
MARK

The Gospel of
MARK
A Ransom for Many

J.C. Ryle

Introduction by Kevin Swanson

Edited by Joshua Schwisow



Generations
PASSING ON THE FAITH

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Introduction

The Gospel of Mark tells of the things Jesus did. Is there anything more wonderful in the world than that? The very Son of God comes to earth. God with us—walking with us and talking with us. Our children ask us, “what is God like?” Here is the answer. Listen to His words. Watch His every action. Look how He reacts to the father with a demon possessed child, to the rich young ruler, to the disciples who deny Him, to Bartimaeus the blind man. What is this Man saying as He hangs from the cross? “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” After His resurrection, He says, “Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature.”

Put simply, the Gospel is a compendium of stories of the things Jesus did when He came to earth and ministered among men. Chiefly, He died on the cross for our sins and rose again on the third day.

J.C. Ryle’s *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* are truly classic writings intended for the benefit of the church. His *Expository Thoughts on Mark* was first published in 1858. In the first preface to the series Ryle writes, “I indulge the hope that the work may be found suitable for use at family prayers. The supply of works adapted for this purpose has never yet been equal to the demand.” To which we say a hearty “Amen!” The Generations ministry has taken up the task of producing Family Bible Study Guides for English-speaking nations. While many Christian denominations have produced billions of dollars of resources for the use of Sunday schools, youth groups, women’s Bible studies, and the like, where are the resources for family worship? Where are the resources to encourage and enable families who engage day-to-day in the thing God has clearly commanded (Deut. 6:7; Eph. 6:4; Heb. 3:13)?

Too often, the traditions of men make the law of God of no effect. The wholesale delegation of education and discipleship in much of the Christian world has displaced God’s original intention for the continuity of the faith. Search as you may, you will not find youth ministries and Sunday schools in Scripture. The combined effect of the disintegration of the family initiated by the Industrial Revolution, compulsory attendance laws of the last century, and age-segregated classrooms produced the massive youth ministries of the last fifty years or so. Statisticians now tell us only one in twenty American born-again parents actually teach their children from the Word of God on a daily basis.

2 • The Gospel of Mark

This is why the faith dies out in many ecclesiastical neighborhoods. If one were to conduct a careful review of the historical Christian faith, he would find that, without a daily regimen of discipleship in the Word of God, there will be few real conversions and few disciples of Jesus Christ. According to recent surveys, Millennials are more than twice as likely to be “unaffiliated” (with a church) than their parents. Church attendance has dropped off 30%, between 2002 and 2020. The present apostasy in the western world is metastasizing especially among the younger generations.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. I would suggest a thorough study of all of the data from Scripture related to the discipleship of our children (Ex. 12:26–27; Deut. 6:7–9; Prov. 1–31; Eph. 6:4; 1 Thess. 2:11; 1 Tim. 3:4; etc.). What you will find is that God commissions parents to the job of this discipleship. Sadly, the traditions of men have eroded this commitment in the hearts and lives of millions of families over the last 200 years.

In 1893, R.L. Dabney, an old Presbyterian pastor, registered his concerns about this very issue to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church. His concern was that the Sunday schools (originally intended for unbelieving families), were displacing God’s “divinely appointed means of grace.”

“Your memorialists would represent to the General Assembly, that we have seen, with anxious concern, certain perversions and abuses which have silently crept into the Sabbath schools of our Church and country. The first of these perversions is an extensive wresting of these schools from their proper and legitimate scope as missionary measures for the children of neglectful and godless parents, into a substitute for the Christian family training of the children of parents professing godliness, by their own parents in their own homes. The good Robert Raikes, of Gloucester, England, is reputed to have invented such schools in the eighteenth century. His avowed purpose was to give Christian instruction, by this means, only to children of godless parents who received no Christian teaching in their homes. He sought his pupils in the streets, among such neglected children as were straying there on the Sabbath. “Had one proposed to him to do what is now so frequently done among us, viz.: to invade the homes of them professing godliness, and withdraw to his Sabbath school such children from the domestic tuition which their parents were giving them during the private hours of the holy day (which was then the universal custom of all Christian parents of decent repute), we presume that Raikes would have drawn back in astonishment and strong refusal. His

*missionary schools were never designed to invade, supersede, this divinely appointed means of grace.”**

No one is more equipped to apply the Word to their children than the father and mother who know them best and live with them from day to day. Indeed, the most powerful form of evangelism, or discipleship, is God’s recommended form. There is no more effective form of discipleship than that which involves a father taking the hand of his son or daughter, and saying, “Let me show you Jesus. Let me show you how to walk in the ways of the Lord by my daily words and living example.”

Covenantal faithfulness from generation to generation is God’s intended design for His people (Gen. 17:10–12; Deut. 6:7–9, 7:9; Ps. 78:4–6; the Book of Proverbs; Isa. 59:20–21; Ezek. 37:24–27; Mal. 2:15; Acts 2:38–39; 1 Thess. 2:11; Eph. 6:4), and rebellion should be the exception, not the rule. Apostasy is the norm in Europe, Canada, and America, and what are we to make of the reports from conservative, evangelical denominations in our country that 88% of Christians’ children are leaving the faith? Could it be that we have neglected God’s appointed means by which children will carry on the faith of their fathers? Our abandonment of God’s designed means, and our displacement of it with other programs devised by men, will in the end produce meager results. Maximize on the means that God has designed, and we will be truly blessed. Ignore it and the faith will languish over the generations. May God bring about a true reformation that represents a fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy in our own generation!

“As for Me,” says the Lord, “this *is* My covenant with them: My Spirit who *is* upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your descendants, nor from the mouth of your descendants’ descendants,” says the Lord, “from this time and forevermore.” (Isaiah 59:21)

Using the Study Guide

This Family Bible Study Guide is adapted from J.C. Ryle’s original commentary, *Expository Thoughts on Mark* (1857). To present Ryle’s classic as part of our Family Bible Study Series, we have at points abridged Ryle’s commentary. Additionally, in a few places we have lightly edited Ryle’s text in order to generalize it for modern

* R.L. Dabney, *Discussions*, Vol. 5, (Sprinkle Publications, 1980). “A Memorial and Overture of the Synod of Texas to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, to meet in Macon, GA,” p. 336.

readers. For example, where Ryle refers to matters current in his homeland (the United Kingdom) or comments directed to the Church of England, we have provided a more general equivalent. Even with these changes, Ryle's original comments remain largely unchanged. For this edition of *Expository Thoughts on Mark*, we have used the New King James Version (NKJV) for the Scripture quotations.

The following guidelines are suggested for the benefit of the families using this study manual:

1. Obtain a copy of the study guide for each child who can read. Encourage the children to write their own notes in the study guide. It is possible that some children under eight or nine years of age may have a hard time understanding the material contained in these lessons. Younger children are able to comprehend the Bible stories, but sometimes they have a hard time understanding the teaching behind it. Still, it is never harmful for younger children to be present when difficult material is shared. One never knows what children hear and what they will comprehend. My recommendation is that families aim high in family worship, whether in reading material or in music. This is how parents encourage maturation in the child's learning and discernment. Of course, this should not preclude the occasional use of simple stories and songs for the younger ones.

2. In order that our children learn the major themes and the general flow of the Gospel of Mark, each chapter has been assigned a two- or three-word summary. I suggest that the family learn these summaries together. As a parent asks the question, "What are the themes of Mark chapters 1 through 10?" the family will together recite the themes from memory:

"Chapter 1. . . Jesus Preaches"

"Chapter 2. . . Paralytic Healed"

"Chapter 3. . . Twelve Apostles"

And so on, through chapter 10.

By the end of this study, the family should have memorized each theme for every chapter of Mark's Gospel. These summary titles do not always encompass everything contained in the chapter, but they serve as memory devices to help remember where prominent events and themes are found in the Gospel.

3. Also, we recommend maintaining a regular order to family worship. I (Kevin) would suggest something like the following—this is the pattern that our family has found most edifying.

Singing. We open with the singing of hymns, psalms, and simple choruses. This is a good way to call everybody together and get them involved from the outset.

Scripture. We read the Scripture together. Sometimes we ask each child that can read to participate by reading several verses or one verse at a time. We find that if each person reads one verse at a time around the circle, the children are more likely to pay attention for the length of the chapter (or there will be a long pause as it comes around to their turn to read!). Some families may wish to split the chapter in two, including the exposition provided in the study guide. Also, we will include the review of a Psalm or a Proverb (at the same time we work through other books of the Bible). The Psalms and Proverbs are basic to our day-to-day life in Christ.

Memory Work. Work as a family on memory verses or catechism questions. Our family memorizes Scripture together, parents included. Each person recites the verse or passage, and then we repeat it in unison. For an excellent resource for Scripture memorization, take a look at the Scripture Memory Catechism produced by Generations titled *Teach Me the Faith*.

Bible Story. When our children were young, we would also read an adapted Bible Story aloud, or we would ask an older child to read it to them.

Extra Reading. We have also taken advantage of this time while the family is together to read the best Christian books ever written. We use the study guides provided by Generations' Christian Discipleship Curriculum. These might include books like John Bunyan's *Pilgrims Progress*, Augustine's *Confessions*, Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, or John G. Paton's autobiography.

Prayer. The father should lead in prayer but allow for other family members to pray as well. As I pray, I like to tie in various lessons we have learned from reading the Word. When there is obvious sin in the home and where the Word has convicted us, I want to confess these sins at this time for the family. Also, it is important to draw in other parts of the Lord's Prayer—including praise, petition, thanksgiving, and confession. The church's prayer request list also provides us opportunities to bear the burdens of others.

4. As much as possible, I recommend that families conduct worship at least once per day. This is the Hebrews 3:13 principle. For those who have never established the discipline of regular family worship, I encourage them to begin with a small, manageable chunk of time. Consistency is the priority. A consistent ten-minute worship time each time is better than thirty minutes, two or three times per week.

At a bare minimum, families should read the Word together, produce at least one application for the family, and close in prayer.

5. Endeavor to retain an enthusiasm for God and a rich appreciation for the deep truths of His Word during this time. If those leading the worship are not into it, you can assume the others will follow suit. Fathers should make this a matter of fervent prayer. It is easy to lose a sense for the importance of this time in the Word. May God help you to remember that this is the very lifeblood of the Christian family! This is what sustains spiritual life, even as bread and water sustains physical life. Would you deny bread and water to your children day after day, and week after week? A true disciple of Jesus Christ will come back to Him again and again, crying out, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!” (John 6:68).

As we hear God’s Word, let us remember that this is God speaking directly to us. In fact, Jesus comes to us as the very Word of God. His Word is ultimate in power, authority, grace, and truth. By the spoken Word, He created the world. By His Word, He called Lazarus out of the grave and the dead responded, immediately. His Word is living, active, and powerful. Just read these words and listen to them, and you will feel its power. On the mount of transfiguration, the Father has but one thing to tell us, “This is my beloved Son. Hear Him.” Indeed, our Lord Jesus is the final and the ultimate revelation of God to man. And so, Jesus speaks to our family in these words contained in the Gospel of Mark. As we receive this personal communication from God, we find ourselves growing into the likeness of Christ Himself.

May the Holy Spirit attend as you hear His voice speaking through the Gospel of Mark.

Kevin Swanson and Joshua Schwisow

November, AD 2024

PART 1

Jesus Preaches

Scripture Reading:

Mark 1:1-8

Key Verse:

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel.” (Mark 1:15)

What does this passage teach us?

The Gospel of Mark, which we now begin, is in some respects unlike the other three Gospels. It tells us nothing about the birth and early life of our Lord Jesus Christ. It contains comparatively few of His sayings and discourses. Of all the four inspired histories of our Lord’s earthly ministry, this is by far the shortest.

But we must not allow these differences to make us undervalue Mark’s Gospel. It is a Gospel singularly full of precious facts about the Lord Jesus, narrated in a simple, terse, pithy, and condensed style. If it tells us few of our Lord’s *sayings*, it is eminently rich in its catalog of His *doings*. It often contains minute historical detail of deep interest, which are wholly omitted in Matthew, Luke and John. In short, it is no mere abridged copy of Matthew, as some have rashly asserted, but the independent narrative of an independent witness, who was inspired to write a history of our Lord’s *works*, rather than of His *words*. Let us read it with holy reverence. Like all the rest of Scripture, every word of Mark is “given by inspiration of God,” and every word is “profitable.”

Let us observe, in these verses, ***what a full declaration we have of the dignity of our Lord Jesus Christ’s person.*** The very first sentence speaks of Him as “the Son of God.” These words, “the Son of God,” conveyed far more to Jewish minds than they do to ours. They were nothing less than an assertion of our Lord’s divinity. They were a declaration that Jesus was Himself very God, and “equal with God” (John 5:18).

There is a beautiful fitness in placing this truth in the very beginning of a Gospel. *The divinity of Christ is the citadel and keep of Christianity.* Here lies the infinite value of the atoning sacrifice He made upon the cross. Here lies the peculiar merit of His atoning death for sinners. That death was not the death of a mere man, like ourselves, but of one who is “over all, *the* eternally blessed God” (Rom. 9:5). We need not wonder that the sufferings of one person were a sufficient propitiation for the sin of a world, when we remember that He who suffered was the “Son of God.”

Let believers cling to this doctrine with jealous watchfulness. With it, they stand upon a rock. Without it, they have nothing solid beneath their feet. Our hearts are weak. Our sins are many. We need a Redeemer who is able to save to the uttermost and deliver from the wrath to come. We have such a Redeemer in Jesus Christ. He is “the mighty God” (Isa. 9:6).

Let us observe, in the second place, *how the beginning of the Gospel was a fulfillment of Scripture.* John the Baptist began his ministry, “as it is written in the Prophets.” There was nothing unforeseen and suddenly contrived in the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. In the very beginning of Genesis, we find it predicted that “the seed of the woman should bruise the serpent’s head” (Gen. 3:15). All through the Old Testament we find the same event foretold with constantly increasing clearness. It was a promise often renewed to patriarchs, and repeated by prophets, that a Deliverer and Redeemer should one day come. His birth, His character, His life, His death, His resurrection, His forerunner, were all prophesied of, long before He came. Redemption was worked out and accomplished in every step, just “as it was written.”

We should always read the Old Testament with a desire to find something in it about Jesus Christ. We study this portion of the Bible with little profit, if we can see in it nothing but Moses, and David, and Samuel, and the prophets. Let us search the books of the Old Testament more closely. It was said by Him whose words can never pass away, “these [Scriptures] are they which testify of Me” (John 5:39).

Let us observe, in the third place, *how great were the effects which the ministry of John the Baptist produced for a time on the Jewish nation.* We are told that, “Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.”

The fact here recorded is one that is much overlooked. We are apt to lose sight of him who went before the face of our Lord, and to see nothing but the Lord

Himself. We forget the morning star in the full blaze of the Sun. And yet it is clear that John's preaching arrested the attention of the whole Jewish people and created an excitement all over Israel. It aroused the nation from its slumbers, and prepared it for the ministry of our Lord, when He appeared. Jesus Himself says, "He was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light" (John 5:35).

We ought to remark here how little dependence is to be placed on what is called "popularity." If ever there was one who was a popular minister for a season, John the Baptist was that man. Yet of all the crowds who came to his baptism, and heard his preaching, how few, it may be feared, were converted! Some, we may hope, like Andrew, were guided by John to Christ. But the vast majority, in all probability, died in their sins. Let us remember this whenever we see a crowded church. A great congregation no doubt is a pleasing sight. But the thought should often come across our minds, "How many of these people will reach heaven at last?" It is not enough to hear and admire popular preachers. It is no proof of our conversion that we always worship in a place where there is a crowd. Let us take care that we hear the voice of Christ Himself and follow Him.

Let us observe, in the last place, *what clear doctrine characterized John the Baptist's preaching.* He exalted *Christ*—"There comes One after me who is mightier than I." He spoke plainly of the *Holy Spirit*—"He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

These truths had never been so plainly proclaimed before by mortal man. More important truths than these are not to be found in the whole system of Christianity at this day. The principal work of every faithful minister of the Gospel, is to set the Lord Jesus fully before His people, and to show them His fullness and His power to save. The next great work He has to do, is to set before them the work of the Holy Spirit, and the need of being born again, and inwardly baptized by His grace. These two mighty truths appear to have been frequently on the lips of John the Baptist. It would be well for the Church and the world, if there were more ministers like him.

Let us ask ourselves, as we leave the passage, "How much we know by practical experience of the truths which John preached?" What do we think of Christ? Have we felt our need of Him, and fled to Him for peace? Is He King over our hearts, and all things to our souls? What do we think of the Holy Spirit? Has He wrought a saving work in our hearts? Has He renewed and changed them? Has

He made us partakers of the Divine nature? Life or death depend on our answer to these questions. “Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His” (Rom. 8:9).

Questions:

1. What is the theme of chapter 1?
2. What are some unique characteristics of Mark’s Gospel?
3. What did John preach?

Family Application Questions:

1. Why is it so important to believe that our Lord is divine? What would happen to the Christian faith if we denied that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God?
2. John the Baptist directs us to Jesus and to the Holy Spirit. Have we received the message John preached? Have we found in Jesus Christ our salvation?

PART 2

Jesus Preaches

Scripture Reading:

Mark 1:9-20

Key Verse:

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel.” (Mark 1:15)

What does this passage teach us?

This passage is singularly full of matter. It is a striking instance of that brevity of style, which is the peculiar characteristic of Mark’s Gospel. The baptism of our

Lord, His temptation in the wilderness, the commencement of His preaching, and the calling of His first disciples are related here in eleven verses.

Let us notice, in the first place, ***the voice from heaven which was heard at our Lord's baptism.*** We read, "Then a voice came from heaven, 'You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.'" That voice was the voice of God the Father. It declared the wondrous and ineffable love which has existed between the Father and the Son from all eternity. "The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand" (John 3:35). It proclaimed the Father's full and complete approbation of Christ's mission to seek and save the lost. It announced the Father's acceptance of the Son as the Mediator, Substitute, and Surety of the new covenant.

There is a rich mine of comfort, in these words, for all Christ's believing members. In themselves, and in their own doings, they see nothing to please God. They are daily sensible of weakness, shortcoming, and imperfection in all their ways. But let them recollect that the Father regards them as members of His beloved Son Jesus Christ. He sees no spot in them (Song of Sol. 4:7). He beholds them as "in Christ," clothed in His righteousness, and invested with His merit. They are "accepted in the Beloved," and when the holy eye of God looks at them, He is "well pleased."

Let us notice, in the second place, ***the nature of Christ's preaching.*** We read that he came saying, "Repent, and believe in the Gospel." This is that old sermon which all the faithful witnesses of God have continually preached, from the very beginning of the world. From Noah down to the present day the substance of their address has been always the same: "Repent and believe."

The apostle Paul told the Ephesian elders, when he left them for the last time, that the substance of his teaching among them had been "repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21). He had the best of precedents for such teaching. The great Head of the Church had given him a pattern. Repentance and faith were the foundation stones of Christ's ministry. Repentance and faith must always be the main subjects of every faithful minister's instruction.

We need not wonder at this, if we consider the necessities of human nature. All of us are by nature born in sin and children of wrath, and all need to repent, be converted, and born again, if we would see the kingdom of God. All of us are by nature guilty and condemned before God, and all must flee to the hope set before

us in the Gospel, and believe in it, if we would be saved. All of us, once penitent, need daily stirring up to deeper repentance. All of us, though believing, need constant exhortation to increased faith.

Let us ask ourselves what we know of this repentance and faith. Have we felt our sins, and forsaken them? Have we laid hold on Christ, and believed? We may reach heaven without learning, or riches, or health, or worldly greatness. But we shall never reach heaven, if we die impenitent and unbelieving. A new heart, and a lively faith in a Redeemer, are absolutely needful to salvation. May we never rest until we know them by experience, and can call them our own! With them all true Christianity begins in the soul. In the exercise of them consists the life of religion.

Let us notice, in the third place, *the occupation of those who were first called to be Christ's disciples*. We read that our Lord called Simon and Andrew, when they were "casting a net into the sea," and James and John while they were "mending their nets." It is clear, from these words, that the first followers of our Lord were not the great of this world. They were men who had neither riches, nor rank, nor power. But the kingdom of Christ is not dependent on such things as these. His cause advances in the world, "not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of hosts" (Zech. 4:6). The words of Paul will always be found true—"Not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty" (1 Cor. 1:26-27). The Church which began with a few fishermen, and yet overspread half the world, must have been founded by God.

We must beware of giving way to the common notion, that there is anything disgraceful in being poor, and in working with our own hands. The Bible contains many instances of special privileges conferred on working men. *Moses* was keeping sheep when God appeared to him in the burning bush. *Gideon* was threshing wheat, when the angel brought him a message from heaven. *Elisha* was ploughing, when Elijah called him to be prophet in his stead. The *apostles* were fishing, when Jesus called them to follow Him. It is disgraceful to be covetous, or proud, or a cheat, or a gambler, or a drunkard, or a glutton, or unclean. But it is no disgrace to be poor. *The laborer who serves Christ faithfully is far more honorable in God's eyes, than the nobleman who serves sin.*

Let us notice, in the last place, *the office to which our Lord called His first disciples*. We read that He said, “Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” The meaning of this expression is clear and unmistakable. The disciples were to become fishers for souls. They were to labor to draw men out of darkness into light, and from the power of Satan to God. They were to strive to bring men into the net of Christ’s Church, so that they might be saved alive, and not perish everlastingly.

We ought to mark this expression well. It is full of instruction. It is the oldest name by which the ministerial office is described in the New Testament. It lies deeper down than the name of bishop, elder, or deacon. It is the first idea which should be before a minister’s mind. He is to be a “fisher” of souls.

Does the fisherman strive to catch fish? Does he use all means, and grieve if unsuccessful? The minister ought to do the same. Does the fisherman have patience? Does he toil on day after day, and wait, and work on in hope? Let the minister do the same. Happy is that man, in whom the fisherman’s skill, and diligence, and patience, are all combined!

Let us resolve to pray much for ministers. Their office is no light one if they do their duty. They need the help of many intercessions from all praying people. They have not only their own souls to care for, but the souls of others. No wonder that Paul cries, “Who is sufficient for these things?” (2 Cor. 2:16). If we never prayed for ministers before, let us begin to do it this day.

Questions:

1. What is the theme of chapter 1?
2. What does Mark record that Jesus was preaching?
3. What profession did the first disciples called come from?

Family Application Questions:

1. What do the words of God the Father at Jesus’ baptism mean for us? How does God the Father call us to respond to Jesus the Son?
2. What should faithful pastors and preachers aim for in their work? What did Jesus call the disciples to be?

PART 3

Jesus Preaches

Scripture Reading:

Mark 1:21-34

Key Verse:

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel.” (Mark 1:15)

What does this passage teach us?

These verses begin the long list of miracles which Mark’s Gospel contains. They tell us how our Lord cast out devils in Capernaum, and healed Peter’s wife’s mother of a fever.

We learn, in the first place, from these verses, ***the uselessness of a mere intellectual knowledge of religion***. Twice we are specially told that the unclean spirits know our Lord. In one place it says, “they knew Him.” In another, the devil cries out, “I know who You are—the Holy One of God!” They knew Christ, when scribes were ignorant of Him, and Pharisees would not acknowledge Him. And yet their knowledge was not unto salvation.

The mere belief of the facts and doctrines of Christianity will never save our souls. Such belief is no better than the belief of devils. They all believe and know that Jesus is the Christ. They believe that he will one day judge the world and cast them down to endless torment in hell. It is a solemn and sorrowful thought, that on these points some professing Christians have even less faith than the devil. There are some who doubt the reality of hell and the eternity of punishment. Such doubts as these find no place except in the hearts of self-willed men and women. There is no infidelity among devils. “Even the demons believe—and tremble” (Jas. 2:19).

Let us take heed that our faith be a faith of the heart as well as of the head. Let us see that our knowledge has a sanctifying influence on our affections and our lives. Let us not only know Christ but love Him, from a sense of actual benefit received from Him. Let us not only believe that He is the Son of God and the Savior of the world, but rejoice in Him, and cleave to Him with purpose of heart. Let us not only be acquainted with Him by the hearing of the ear, but by daily personal application to Him for mercy and grace. "The life of Christianity," says Luther, "consists in possessive pronouns." It is one thing to say "Christ is a Savior." It is quite another to say "He is my Savior and my Lord." The devil can say the first. The true Christian alone can say the second.

We learn, in the second place, ***to what remedy a Christian ought to resort first, in time of trouble.*** He ought to follow the example of the friends of Simon's mother-in-law. We read that she "lay sick with a fever, and they told Him about her at once."

There is no remedy like this. Means are to be used diligently, without question, in any time of need. Doctors are to be sent for, in sickness. Lawyers are to be consulted when property or character needs defense. The help of friends is to be sought. But still, after all, *the first thing to be done, is to cry to the Lord Jesus Christ for help.* None can relieve us so effectually as He can. None is so compassionate, and so willing to relieve.

Let us not only remember this rule but practice it too. We live in a world of sin and sorrow. The days of darkness in a man's life are many. It needs no prophet's eye to foresee that we shall all shed many a tear, and feel many a heart-wrench, before we die. Let us be armed with a formula against despair, before our troubles come. Let us know what to do, when sickness, or bereavement, or cross, or loss, or disappointment breaks in upon us like an armed man. Let us do as they did in Simon's house at Capernaum. Let us at once "tell Jesus."

We learn, in the last place, from these verses, ***what a complete and perfect cure the Lord Jesus makes, when He heals.*** He takes the sick woman by the hand, and lifts her up, and "immediately the fever left her." But this was not all. A greater miracle remained behind. At once we are told "she served them." That weakness and prostration of strength which, as a general rule, a fever leaves behind it, in her case was entirely removed. The fevered woman was not only made well in a moment, but in the same moment made strong and able to work.

We may see in this case a powerful picture of Christ's dealing with sin-sick souls. That blessed Savior not only gives mercy and forgiveness. He gives renewing grace as well. To as many as receive Him as their Physician, He gives power to become the sons of God. He cleanses them by His Spirit, when He washes them in His precious blood. Those whom He justifies, He also sanctifies. When He bestows an absolution, He also bestows a new heart. When He grants free forgiveness for the past, He also grants strength to "serve" Him for the time to come. The sin-sick soul is not merely cured, and then left to itself. It is also supplied with a new heart and a right spirit and enabled so to live as to please God.

There is comfort in this thought for all who feel a desire to serve Christ, but at present are afraid to begin. There are many in this state of mind. They fear that if they come forward boldly, and take up the cross, they shall eventually fall away. They fear that they shall not be able to persevere and shall bring discredit on their profession. Let them fear no longer. Let them know that Jesus is an Almighty Savior, who never forsakes those who once commit themselves to Him. Once raised by His mighty hand from the death of sin, and washed in His precious blood, they shall go on "serving Him" to their life's end. They shall have power to overcome the world, and crucify the flesh, and resist the devil. Only let them begin, and they shall go on. Jesus knows nothing of half-cured cases and half-finished work. Let them trust in Jesus and go forward. The pardoned soul shall always be enabled to serve Christ.

There is comfort here for all who are really serving Christ and are yet cast down by a sense of their own weakness. There are many in such case. They are oppressed by doubts and anxieties. They sometimes think they shall never reach heaven after all but be cast away in the wilderness. Let them fear no longer. Their strength shall be according to their day. The difficulties they now fear shall vanish out of their path. The lion in the way which they now dread, shall prove to be chained. The same gracious hand which first touched and healed, shall uphold, strengthen, and lead them to the last. The Lord Jesus will never lose one of His sheep. Those whom He loves and pardons, He loves unto the end. Though sometimes cast down, they shall never be cast away. The healed soul shall always go on "serving the Lord." *Grace shall always lead to glory!*

Questions:

1. What is the theme of chapter 1?

2. What truth did the demons know?
3. After Simon's mother-in-law was healed, what did she do?

Family Application Questions:

1. Why is not enough just to know facts about Jesus? How must our belief be different than that of the demons?
2. When we are in need of help, what is the first thing we should do?

PART 4

Jesus Preaches

Scripture Reading:

Mark 1:35-39

Key Verse:

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel.” (Mark 1:15)

What does this passage teach us?

Every fact in our Lord's life on earth, and every word which fell from His lips, ought to be deeply interesting to a true Christian. We see a fact and a saying in the passage we have just read, which deserve close attention.

We see, for one thing, *an example of our Lord Jesus Christ's habits about private prayer*. We are told, that “in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed.”

We shall find the same thing often recorded of our Lord in the Gospel history. When He was baptized, we are told that He was “praying” (Luke 3:21). When He was transfigured, we are told, that “as He prayed, the appearance of His

face was altered” (Luke 9:29). Before He chose the twelve apostles, we are told that He “continued all night in prayer to God” (Luke 6:12). When tempted in the garden of Gethsemane, He said, “Sit here, while I pray” (Mark 14:32). In short, our Lord prayed always, and did not faint. Sinless as He was, He set us an example of diligent communion with His Father. His Godhead did not render Him independent of the use of all means as a man. His very perfection was a perfection kept up through the exercise of prayer.

We ought to see in all this the immense importance of private devotion. If He who was “holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners,” thus prayed continually, how much more ought we who have many infirmities? If He found it needful to offer up supplications with strong crying and tears, how much more needful is it for us, who in many things daily offend?

What shall we say to those who never pray at all, in the face of such a passage as this? There are many such, it may be feared, in the list of baptized people—many who rise up in the morning without prayer, and without prayer lie down at night—many who never speak one word to God.

Are they Christians? It is impossible to say so. A praying Master, like Jesus, can have no prayerless servants. The Spirit of adoption will always make a man call upon God. To be prayerless is to be Christless, Godless, and in the high road to destruction.

What shall we say to those who pray, yet give but little time to their prayers? We are obliged to say that they show at present very little of the mind of Christ. Asking little, they must expect to have little. Seeking little, they cannot be surprised if they possess little. It will always be found that when prayers are few, grace, strength, peace, and hope are small.

We shall do well to watch our habits of prayer with a holy watchfulness. Here is the pulse of our Christianity. Here is the true test of our state before God. Here true religion begins in the soul, when it does begin. Here it decays and goes backward, when a man backslides from God. Let us walk in the steps of our blessed Master in this respect as well as in every other. Like Him, let us be diligent in our private devotion. Let us know what it is to “depart into solitary places and pray.”

We see, for another thing, in this passage, *a remarkable saying of our Lord as to the purpose for which He came into the world.* We find Him saying, “Let us

go into the next towns, that I may preach there also, because for this purpose I have come forth.”

The meaning of these words is plain and unmistakable. Our Lord declares that He came on earth to be a preacher and a teacher. He came to fulfill the prophetic office, to be the “prophet greater than Moses,” who had been so long foretold (Deut. 18:15). He left the glory which He had from all eternity with the Father, to do the work of an evangelist. He came down to earth to show to man the way of peace, to proclaim deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind. One principal part of His work on earth, was to go up and down and publish glad tidings, to offer healing to the brokenhearted, light to those who sat in darkness, and pardon to the chief of sinners. He says, “For this purpose I have come forth.”

We ought to observe here, *what infinite honor the Lord Jesus puts on the office of the preacher*. It is an office which the eternal Son of God Himself undertook. He might have spent his earthly ministry in instituting and keeping up ceremonies, like Aaron. He might have ruled and reigned as a king, like David. But He chose a different calling. Until the time when He died as a sacrifice for our sins, His daily, and almost hourly work was to preach. He says, “for this purpose I have come forth.”

By preaching, the Church of Christ was first gathered together and founded, and by preaching, it has ever been maintained in health and prosperity. By preaching, sinners are awakened. By preaching, inquirers are led on. By preaching, saints are built up. By preaching, Christianity is being carried to the unbelieving world. There are many now who sneer at missionaries, and mock at those who go out into the public places of our land, to preach to crowds in the open air. But such persons would do well to pause and consider calmly what they are doing. The very work which they ridicule is the work which turned the world upside down and cast paganism to the ground. Above all, it is the very work which Christ Himself undertook. The King of kings and Lord of lords Himself was once a preacher. For three long years He went to and fro proclaiming the Gospel. Sometimes we see Him in a house, sometimes on the mountainside, sometimes in a Jewish synagogue, sometimes in a boat on the sea. But the great work He took up was always one and the same. He came always preaching and teaching.

Let us leave the passage with a solemn resolution never to “despise prophecies” (1 Thess. 5:20). The minister we hear may not be highly gifted. The sermons that we

listen to may be weak and poor. But after all, preaching is God's grand ordinance for converting and saving souls. The faithful preacher of the Gospel is handling the very weapon which the Son of God was not ashamed to employ. This is the work of which Christ has said, "For this purpose I have come forth."

Questions:

1. What is the theme of chapter 1?
2. How did Christ begin his morning?
3. What did our Lord say His purpose was in coming to earth in this passage?

Family Application Questions:

1. What is your current habit of private prayer? How can we as a family encourage one another in this discipline?
2. Are the words of Jesus Christ important to us? If so, then the words of His preachers should be important to us. How are we doing in honoring those who preach the Word? How are we doing in receiving that Word and meditating on it?

PART 5

Jesus Preaches

Scripture Reading:

Mark 1:40-45

Key Verse:

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel." (Mark 1:15)

What does this passage teach us?

We read in these verses how our Lord Jesus Christ healed a leper. Of all our Lord's miracles of healing none were probably more marvelous than those performed on leprous people. Two cases only have been fully described in the Gospel history. Of these two, the case before us is one.

Let us try to realize, in the first place, *the dreadful nature of the disease which Jesus cured.*

Leprosy is a complaint of which we know little or nothing in northern climates. In Bible lands it is far more common. It is a disease which is *utterly incurable*. It is no mere skin disorder, as some ignorantly suppose. It is a radical disease of the whole man. It attacks, not merely the skin, but the blood, the flesh, and the bones, until the unhappy patient begins to lose his extremities, and to rot by inches. Let us remember beside this, that, among the Jews, the leper was reckoned unclean, and was cut off from the congregation of Israel and the ordinances of religion. He was obliged to dwell in a separate house. None might touch him or minister to him. Let us remember all this, and then we may have some idea of the remarkable wretchedness of a leprous person. To use the words of Aaron, when he interceded for Miriam, the leper was "as one dead, whose flesh is half consumed" (Num. 12:12).

But is there nothing like leprosy among ourselves? Yes! Indeed there is. There is a foul soul-disease which is ingrained into our very nature and cleaves to our bones and marrow with deadly force. That disease is the plague of sin. Like leprosy, it is a deep-seated disease infecting every part of our nature, heart, will, conscience, understanding, memory, and affections. Like leprosy, it makes us loathsome and abominable, unfit for the company of God, and unfit for the glory of heaven. Like leprosy, it is incurable by any earthly physician, and is slowly but surely dragging us down to the second death. And, worst of all, far worse than leprosy, it is a disease from which no mortal man is exempt. "We are all," in God's sight, "like an unclean thing" (Isa. 64:6).

Do we know these things? Have we found them out? Have we discovered our own sinfulness, guilt, and corruption? Happy indeed is that person who has been really taught to feel that he is a "miserable sinner," and that there is "no health in him!" Blessed indeed is he who has learned that he is a spiritual leper, and a bad, wicked, sinful creature! To know our disease is one step towards a cure. It is

the misery and the ruin of many souls that they never yet saw their sins and their need.

Let us learn, in the second place, from these verses, ***the wondrous and almighty power of the Lord Jesus Christ.***

We are told that the unhappy leper came to our Lord, “imploring Him, kneeling down,” and saying, “If You are willing, You can make me clean.” We are told that “Jesus, moved with compassion, stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘I am willing; be cleansed.’” At once the leper was cured. That very instant the deadly plague departed from the poor sufferer, and he was healed. It was but a word, and a touch, and there stands before our Lord, not a leper, but a sound and healthy man.

Who can conceive the greatness of the change in the feelings of this leper, when he found himself healed? The morning sun rose upon him, a miserable being, more dead than alive, his whole frame a mass of sores and corruption, his very existence a burden. The evening sun saw him full of hope and joy, free from pain, and fit for the society of his fellow men. Surely the change must have been like life from the dead.

Let us bless God that the Savior with whom we have to do is almighty. It is a cheering and comfortable thought that with Christ nothing is impossible. No heart-disease is so deep-seated, but He is able to cure it. No plague of soul is so virulent, but our Great Physician can heal it. Let us never despair of anyone’s salvation, so long as he lives. The worst of spiritual lepers may yet be cleansed. No cases of spiritual leprosy could be worse than those of Manasseh, Saul, and Zacchaeus, yet they were all cured. Jesus Christ made them whole. The chief of sinners may yet be brought near to God by the blood and Spirit of Christ. Men are not lost, because they are too bad to be saved, but because they will not come to Christ that He may save them.

Let us learn, in the last place, from these verses, that ***there is a time to be silent about the work of Christ, as well as a time to speak.***

This is a truth which is taught us in a remarkable way. We find our Lord strictly charging this man to tell no one of his cure, to “see that you say nothing to anyone.” We find this man in the warmth of his zeal disobeying this injunction, and “he went out and began to proclaim it freely” in every quarter. And we are told that the result was that Jesus “could no longer openly enter the city, but was outside in deserted places.”

There is a lesson in all this of deep importance, however difficult it may be to use it rightly. It is clear that there are times when our Lord would have us work for Him quietly and silently, rather than attract public attention by a noisy zeal. There is a zeal which is “not according to knowledge,” as well as a zeal which is righteous and praiseworthy. Everything is beautiful in its season. Our Master’s cause may on some occasions be more advanced by quietness and patience, than in any other way. We are not to “give that which is holy to dogs,” nor “cast pearls before swine.” By forgetfulness of this we may even do more harm than good.

The subject is a delicate and difficult one, without doubt. Unquestionably the majority of Christians are far more inclined to be silent about their glorious Master than to confess Him before men—and do not need the *bridle* so much as the *spur*. But still, it is undeniable that there is a time for all things; and to know the time should be one great aim of a Christian. There are good men who have more zeal than discretion, and even help the enemy of truth by unseasonable acts and words.

Let us all pray for the Spirit of wisdom and of a sound mind. Let us seek daily to know the path of duty and ask daily for discretion and good sense. Let us be bold as a lion in confessing Christ, and not be afraid to “speak of Him before princes,” if need be. But let us never forget that “wisdom brings success” (Eccl. 10:10), and let us beware of doing harm by an ill-directed zeal.

Questions:

1. What dreadful disease was the man healed from?
2. How do we observe Christ’s almighty power here?
3. Did the healed man obey Jesus’ command after he was healed?

Family Application Questions:

1. How is our sinful condition so much like leprosy?
2. We see Christ’s amazing power in this healing. What does this mean for us as we face significant challenges and besetting sins? How does this encourage us to go to the Lord Jesus?
3. How can we imitate Philip and invite others to learn about Jesus? What are some current opportunities we have to do this?

PART 6

Paralytic Healed

Scripture Reading:

Mark 2:1-12

Key Verse:

When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven you.”
(Mark 2:5)

What does this passage teach us?

This passage shows our Lord once more at Capernaum. Once more we find Him doing His accustomed work, preaching the Word, and healing those that were sick.

We see, in these verses, ***what great spiritual privileges some people enjoy, and yet make no use of them.***

This is a truth which is strikingly illustrated by the history of Capernaum. No city in Israel appears to have enjoyed so much of our Lord’s presence, during His earthly ministry, as did this city. It was the place where He dwelt, after He left Nazareth (Matt. 4:13). It was the place where many of His miracles were worked, and many of His sermons delivered. But nothing that Jesus said or did seems to have had any effect on the hearts of the inhabitants. They crowded to hear Him, as we read in this passage: “There was no longer room to receive them, not even near the door.” *They were amazed. They were astonished. They were filled with wonder at His mighty works. But they were not converted. They lived in the full noon-tide blaze of the Sun of Righteousness, and yet their hearts remained hard.* And they drew from our Lord the heaviest condemnation that He ever pronounced against any place, except Jerusalem—“And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades; for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say to you

that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you” (Matt. 11:23-24).

It is good for us all to mark well this case of Capernaum. We are all apt to suppose that it needs nothing but the powerful preaching of the Gospel to convert people’s souls, and that if the Gospel is only brought into a place everybody must believe. We forget the amazing power of unbelief, and the depth of man’s enmity against God. We forget that the Capernautes heard the most faultless preaching, and saw it confirmed by the most surprising miracles, and yet remained dead in trespasses and sins. We need reminding that the same Gospel, which is the savor of life to some, is the savor of death to others, and that the same fire which softens the wax will also harden the clay. Nothing, in fact, seems to harden man’s heart so much, as to hear the Gospel regularly, and yet deliberately prefer the service of sin and the world. Never was there a people so highly favored as the people of Capernaum, and never was there a people who appear to have become so hard. Let us beware of walking in their steps. We ought often to use the prayer of the litany, “From hardness of heart, good Lord, deliver us.”

We see, in the second place, from these verses, ***how great a blessing affliction may prove to a man’s soul.***

We are told that one paralyzed was brought to our Lord, at Capernaum, in order to be healed. Helpless and impotent, he was carried in his bed by four kind friends and let down into the midst of the place where Jesus was preaching. At once the object of the man’s desire was gained. The Great Physician of soul and body saw him and gave him speedy relief. He restored him to health and strength. He granted him the far greater blessing of forgiveness of sins. In short, the man who had been carried from his house that morning weak, dependent, and bowed down both in body and soul, returned to his own house rejoicing.

Who can doubt that to the end of his days this man would thank God for his paralysis? Without it he might probably have lived and died in ignorance, and never seen Christ at all. Without it, he might have kept his sheep on the green hills of Galilee all his life long, and never been brought to Christ, and never heard these blessed words, “your sins are forgiven you.” That paralysis was indeed a blessing. Who can tell but it was the beginning of eternal life to his soul?

How many in every age can testify that this paralyzed man’s experience has been their own! They have learned wisdom by affliction. Bereavements have proved mercies. Losses have proved real gains. Sicknesses have led them to the great

Physician of souls, sent them to the Bible, shut out the world, shown them their own foolishness, taught them to pray. Thousands can say like David, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes" (Ps. 119:71).

Let us beware of murmuring under affliction. We may be sure there is a needs-be for every cross, and a wise reason for every trial. Every sickness and sorrow is a gracious message from God, and is meant to call us nearer to Him. Let us pray that we may learn the lesson that each affliction is appointed to convey. Let us see that we "refuse not Him that speaks."

We see, in the last place, in these verses, ***the priestly power of forgiving sins, which is possessed by our Lord Jesus Christ.***

We read that our Lord said to the sick of the palsy "Son, your sins are forgiven you." He said these words with a meaning. He knew the hearts of the scribes by whom He was surrounded. He intended to show them that He laid claim to be the true High Priest, and to have the power of absolving sinners, though at present the claim was seldom put forward. But that He had the power He told them expressly. He says, "the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins." In saying, "your sins are forgiven," He had only exercised His rightful office.

Let us consider how great must be the authority of Him, who has the power to forgive sins! This is the thing that none can do but God. No angel in heaven, no man upon earth, no church in council, no minister of any denomination, can take away from the sinner's conscience the load of guilt, and give him peace with God. They may point to the fountain open for all sin. They may declare with authority whose sins God is willing to forgive. But they cannot absolve by their own authority. They cannot put away transgressions. This is the peculiar prerogative of God, and a prerogative which He has put in the hands of His Son Jesus Christ.

Let us think for a moment how great a blessing it is, that Jesus is our great High Priest, and that we know where to go for absolution! We must have a Priest and a sacrifice between ourselves and God. Conscience demands an atonement for our many sins. God's holiness makes it absolutely needful. Without an atoning Priest there can be no peace of soul. Jesus Christ is the very Priest that we need, mighty to forgive and pardon, tender-hearted and willing to save.

And now let us ask ourselves whether we have yet known the Lord Jesus as our High Priest? Have we applied to Him? Have we sought absolution? If not, we are yet in our sins. May we never rest until the Spirit witnesses with our spirit that

we have sat at the feet of Jesus and heard his voice, saying, “Son, your sins are forgiven you.”

Questions:

1. What are the themes of chapters 1-2?
2. How did many of the people of Capernaum neglect the opportunity they had for salvation?
3. How was the affliction of the paralytic ultimately a blessing God used?

Family Application Questions:

1. What would it look like for us to neglect the spiritual privileges we have? What are some of the privileges the Lord has blessed us with to receive spiritual things?
2. What have we learned through affliction? How has God been at work in the past and present in our lives to use suffering ultimately for good?

PART 7

Paralytic Healed

Scripture Reading:

Mark 2:13-22

Key Verse:

When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven you.”
(Mark 2:5)

What does this passage teach us?

The person who is called Levi, at the beginning of this passage, is the same person who is called Matthew in the first of the four Gospels. Let us not forget this. It is

no less than an apostle and an evangelist, whose early history is now before our eyes.

We learn from these verses ***the power of Christ to call men out from the world, and make them His disciples.*** We read that he said to Levi, when sitting at the tax office, “Follow Me.” And at once “he arose and followed Him.” From a tax-collector he became an apostle, and a writer of the first book in the New Testament, which is now known all over the world.

This is a truth of deep importance. Without a divine call no one can be saved. We are all so sunk in sin, and so wedded to the world, that we would never turn to God and seek salvation, unless He first called us by His grace. God must speak to our hearts by His Spirit, before we shall ever speak to Him.

When the Lord Jesus calls a sinner to be His servant, He acts as a *Sovereign*; but He acts with *infinite mercy*. He often chooses those who seem most unlikely to do His will, and furthest off from His kingdom. He draws them to Himself with almighty power, breaks the chains of old habits and customs, and makes them new creatures. As the magnet attracts the iron, and the south wind softens the frozen ground, so does Christ’s calling draw sinners out from the world and melt the hardest heart. “The voice of the Lord is mighty in operation.” Blessed are they, who, when they hear it, harden not their hearts!

We ought never to despair entirely of anyone’s salvation, when we read this passage of Scripture. He who called Levi, still lives and still works. The age of miracles is not yet past. The love of money is a powerful principle, but the call of Christ is more powerful. Let us not despair even about those who “sit at the tax office,” and enjoy abundance of this world’s good things. The voice which said to Levi, “Follow me,” may yet reach their hearts. We may yet see them arise, and take up their cross, and follow Christ. Let us hope continually and pray for others. Who can tell what God may be going to do for anyone around us? No one is too bad for Christ to call. Let us pray for all.

We learn, for another thing, from these verses, that ***one of Christ’s principal offices is that of a Physician.*** The scribes and Pharisees found fault with Him for eating and drinking with publicans and sinners. But “when Jesus heard *it*, He said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.””

The Lord Jesus did not come into the world, as some suppose, to be nothing more than a lawgiver, a king, a teacher, and an example. Had this been all the purpose

of His coming, there would have been small comfort for man. Diet-regimens and rules of health are all very well for the convalescent, but not suitable to the man laboring under a mortal disease. A teacher and an example might be sufficient for an unfallen being like Adam in the garden of Eden. But fallen sinners like ourselves need healing first, before we can value rules.

The Lord Jesus came into the world to be a physician as well as a teacher. He knew the necessities of human nature. He saw us all sick of a mortal disease, stricken with the plague of sin, and dying daily. He pitied us and came down to bring divine medicine for our relief. He came to give health and cure to the dying, to heal the brokenhearted, and to offer strength to the weak. No sin-sick soul is too far gone for Him. It is His glory to heal and restore to life the most desperate cases. For unfailing skill, for unwearied tenderness, for long experience of man's spiritual ailments, the Great Physician of souls stands alone. There is none like Him.

But what do we know ourselves of this special office of Christ? Have we ever felt our spiritual sickness and applied to him for relief? We are never right in the sight of God until we do. We know nothing aright in religion, if we think the sense of sin should keep us back from Christ. To feel our sins, and know our sickness is the beginning of real Christianity. To be sensible of our corruption and abhor our own transgressions, is the first symptom of spiritual health. Happy indeed are they who have found out their soul's disease! Let them know that Christ is the very Physician they require and let them apply to Him without delay.

We learn, in the last place, from these verses—that ***in religion it is worse than useless to attempt to mix things which essentially differ.*** “No one,” He tells the Pharisees, “sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment.” “No one puts new wine into old wineskins.”

These words, we must of course see, were a parable. They were spoken with a special reference to the question which the Pharisees had just raised—“Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?” Our Lord's reply evidently means, that to enforce fasting among His disciples would be inexpedient and unseasonable. His little flock was as yet young in grace, and weak in faith, knowledge, and experience. They must be led on softly, and not burdened at this early stage with requirements which they were not able to bear. Fasting, moreover, might, be suitable to the disciples of him who was only the Bridegroom's friend, who lived in the wilderness, preached the baptism

of repentance, was clothed in camel's hair, and ate locusts and wild honey. But fasting was not equally suitable to the disciples of Him, who was the Bridegroom Himself, brought glad tidings to sinners, and came living like other men. In short, to require fasting of his disciples at present, would be putting "new wine into old wineskins." It would be trying to mingle and amalgamate things that essentially differed.

The *principle* laid down in these two little parables is one of great importance. It is a kind of proverbial saying and admits of a *wide application*. Forgetfulness of it has frequently done great harm in the Church. The evils that have arisen from trying to sew the new patch on the old garment and put the new wine into old wineskins have neither been few nor small.

How was it with the *Galatian church*? It is recorded in Paul's epistle. Men wished in that church, to reconcile Judaism with Christianity, and to circumcise as well as baptize. They endeavored to keep alive the law of ceremonies and ordinances, and to place it side by side with the Gospel of Christ. In fact, they would gladly have put the "new wine into old wineskins." And in so doing, they greatly erred.

How is it with many professing Christians in the *present* day? We have only to look around us and see. There are thousands who are trying to reconcile the service of Christ—and the service of the world; to have the name of Christian—and yet live the life of the ungodly; to keep in with the servants of pleasure and sin—and yet be the followers of the crucified Jesus at the same time. In a word, they are trying to enjoy the "new wine," and yet to cling to the "old wineskins." They will find one day that they have attempted that which cannot be done!

Let us leave the passage in a spirit of serious self-inquiry. It is one which ought to raise great searchings of heart in the present day. Have we never read what the Scripture says? "No man can serve two masters." "You cannot serve God and mammon." Let us place side by side with these texts, the concluding words of our Lord in this passage, "New wine must be put into new wineskins."

Questions:

1. What are the themes of chapters 1-2?
2. What was Levi's profession before He followed Jesus?
3. How does Jesus identify Himself in this passage? What did He come to do?

Family Application Questions:

1. How does Levi's conversion show the amazing power of God to call sinners out of darkness into light? How does this give us hope as we pray for the salvation of those who seem "unlikely candidates" to be saved?
2. Jesus is the Great Physician. Where then are our souls experiencing sickness? Where do we need Jesus' healing hand upon us?

PART 8

Paralytic Healed

Scripture Reading:

Mark 2:23-28

Key Verse:

*When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven you."
(Mark 2:5)*

What does this passage teach us?

These verses set before us a remarkable scene in our Lord Jesus Christ's earthly ministry. We see our blessed Master and His disciples going "through the grainfields on the Sabbath day." We are told that, "as they went His disciples began to pluck the heads of grain." At once we hear the Pharisees accusing them to our Lord, as if they had committed some great moral offence. "Why do they do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" They received an answer full of deep wisdom, which all should study well, who desire to understand the subject of Sabbath observance.

We see from these verses, ***what extravagant importance is attached to trifles by those who are mere formalists in religion.***

The Pharisees were mere formalists, if there ever were any in the world. They seem to have thought exclusively of the outward part, the husk, the shell, and the

ceremonial of religion. They even added to these externals by traditions of their own. Their godliness was made up of washings, and fastings, and peculiarities in dress, and will-worship, while repentance, and faith, and holiness were comparatively overlooked.

The Pharisees would probably have found no fault, if the disciples had been guilty of some offence against the moral law. They would have winked at covetousness, or perjury, or extortions, or excess, because they were sins to which they themselves were inclined. But no sooner did they see an infringement on their man-made traditions about the right way of keeping the Sabbath, than they raised an outcry, and found fault.

Let us watch and pray, lest we fall into the error of the Pharisees. There are never lacking professors who walk in their steps. There are thousands at the present day who plainly think more of the mere outward ceremonial of religion than of its doctrines. They make more ado about keeping saints' days, and turning to the east in the creed, and bowing at the name of Jesus, than about repentance, or faith, or separation from the world. Against this spirit let us ever be on our guard. It can neither comfort, satisfy, nor save.

It ought to be a settled principle in our minds, that a man's soul is in a bad state, when he begins to regard man-made rites and ceremonies, as things of superior importance, and exalts them above the preaching of the Gospel. It is a symptom of spiritual disease. There is mischief within. It is too often the resource of an uneasy conscience. The first steps of apostasy from Protestantism to Romanism have often been in this direction. No wonder that Paul said to the Galatians, "You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain" (Gal. 4:10-11).

We see, in the second place, from these verses, *the value of a knowledge of holy Scripture.*

Our Lord replies to this accusation of the Pharisees by a reference to holy Scripture. He reminds His enemies of the conduct of David, when he "was in need and hungry." "Have you never read what David did?" They could not deny that the writer of the book of Psalms, and the man after God's own heart, was not likely to set a bad example. They knew in fact that he had not turned aside from God's commandment, all the days of his life, "except only in the matter of Uriah the Hittite" (1 Kin. 15:5). Yet what had David done? He had gone into the house of God, when pressed by hunger, and eaten "the showbread, which is not lawful

to eat except for the priests.” He had thus shown that some requirements of God’s laws might be relaxed in case of necessity. To this Scripture example our Lord refers his adversaries. They found nothing to reply to it. The sword of the Spirit was a weapon which they could not resist. They were silenced and put to shame.

Now the conduct of our Lord on this occasion ought to be a pattern to all His people. Our grand reason for our faith, and practice, should always be, “Thus it is written in the Bible.” “What says the Scripture?” We should endeavor to have the Word of God on our side in all debatable questions. We should seek to be able to give a scriptural answer for our behavior in all matters of dispute. We should refer our enemies to the Bible as our rule of conduct. We shall always find a plain text the most powerful argument we can use. In a world like this we must expect our opinions to be attacked, if we serve Christ, and we may be sure that nothing silences adversaries so soon as a quotation from Scripture.

Let us however remember, that if we are to use the Bible as our Lord did, we must know it well and be acquainted with its contents. We must read it diligently, humbly, perseveringly, prayerfully, or we shall never find its texts coming to our aid in time of need. To use the sword of the Spirit effectually, we must be familiar with it and have it often in our hands. There is no royal road to the knowledge of the Bible. It does not come to man by intuition. The book must be studied, pondered, prayed over, searched into, and not left always lying on a shelf, or carelessly looked at now and then. It is the students of the Bible, and they alone, who will find it a weapon ready in hand in the day of battle.

We see, in the last place, from these verses, the *true principle by which all questions about the observance of the sabbath ought to be decided*. “The Sabbath,” says our Lord, “was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.”

There is a mine of deep wisdom in those words. They deserve close attention, and the more so because they are not recorded in any Gospel but that of Mark. Let us see what they contain.

“The Sabbath was made for man.” God made it for Adam in Paradise and renewed it to Israel on Mount Sinai. It was made for all mankind, not for the Jew only, but for the whole family of Adam. It was made for man’s benefit and happiness. It was for the good of his body, the good of his mind, and the good of his soul. It was given to him as a benefit and a blessing, and not as a burden. This was the original institution.

But “man was not made for the Sabbath.” The observance of the day of God was never meant to be so enforced as to be an injury to his health, or to interfere with his necessary requirements. The original command to “keep holy the Sabbath day,” was not intended to be so interpreted as to do harm to his body or prevent acts of mercy to his fellow-creatures. This was the point that the Pharisees had forgotten or buried under their traditions.

There is nothing in all this to warrant the rash assertion of some, that our Lord has done away with the fourth commandment. On the contrary, He manifestly speaks of the Sabbath day as a privilege and a gift, and only regulates the extent to which its observance should be enforced. He shows that works of necessity and mercy may be done on the Sabbath day; but He says not a word to justify the notion that Christians need not “remember the day to keep it holy.”

Let us be jealous over our own conduct in the matter of observing the Sabbath. There is little danger of the day being kept too strictly in the present age. There is far more danger of its being profaned and forgotten entirely. Let us contend earnestly for its preservation among us in all its integrity. We may rest assured that our personal growth in grace is intimately bound up in the maintenance of a holy Sabbath.

Questions:

1. What are the themes of chapters 1-2?
2. In what way did the Pharisees have a wrong perspective on the Sabbath?
3. What event in Scripture did our Lord Jesus refer to when refuting the Pharisees?

Family Application Questions:

1. How should we set apart the Lord’s Day as a day of worship and rest? What should be our top priorities on that day?
2. In our particular church tradition, where do we risk over-emphasizing minor issues over the weightier issues of the law (justice, mercy, and faith, as our Lord says)?