

Why is Jesus Worth Following?

Mark 1:21-39

Pastor Tom

May 5, 2019

He had a magnetic personality and captivated audiences when he spoke. He founded a community that emphasized love and racial equality. It grew under his leadership and many came to his People's Temple in San Francisco, California. People loved the fellowship, care and genuine concern others showed for them.

Yet, he talked a lot about the threat of government. He mixed his political views in with his messages. They resonated with the people numbering nearly 3000. Some said it was even 5000. But he finally got to the point where he believed they needed to separate from every day society and build their own community.

So they bought a parcel of land in Guyana on the north coast of South America. There they built a village called Jonestown, named after its founder, Jim Jones. It was a remote piece of land not accessible by road. You either had to hike in through the jungle or fly in to an air strip. Jim Jones convinced nearly a thousand people to sell everything they had and join him in this new community in Guyana. This was 1978.

A California congressman named Leo Ryan took notice of this. He wondered why nearly 1000 people left San Francisco to go to this community. So he flew down there to see what was going on along with a journalist and a cameraman. While there, some residents of Jonestown approached him asking if they could leave with him. They wanted to get out but felt threatened by Jones and his cronies. Eventually, the congressman and his staff prepared to leave with 15 people.

Jones was furious. He did not like anyone challenging his authority or rejecting him. So he sent trusted lieutenants to the airstrip. They blocked the plane from taking off with a tractor and wagon. Then they started shooting. They killed the congressman, journalist and cameraman and some of the people. The rest fled to the jungle.

When Jones heard what happened, he decided it was time to end his great experiment. He commanded everyone to end their lives. They mixed cyanide with the Kool-Aid™ instant drink mix and over 900 died. Jones took the easy way out and shot himself.

The incident shocked the world. Some of the Jonestown community survived. They returned to the United States stunned and shunned. How could they follow such a madman? Yet it has happened again and again. Someone with a strong personality convinces or manipulates people to follow and give their lives to them.

This incident along with others causes much skepticism about following religious leaders. There have been too many stories of crazy people like Jones leading others astray. Some people see little difference between Jones and Jesus or at least the followers of Jim Jones and Jesus. They believe the followers make a foolish mistake for believing all the leaders truth claims. Others may recognize a significant difference between Jones and Jesus. Yet they still hesitate to follow Jesus because they're not sure if He's really trustworthy. Is Jesus worth following? Is He worth reorientation of our entire lives towards Him?

That's the question we're going to ask for the next few weeks in our messages. "Why is Jesus worth following?" The answers will come from the Gospel of Mark. If you've never read Mark, you are in for an action packed account of Jesus' life. Mark completely skips the nativity and Christmas story. He wants to get right to the action so his gospel starts with the ministry of John the Baptist. And in only 13 verses, John's ministry is done and Mark gets right to Jesus. Mark uses the word "immediately" multiple times through the Gospel to keep it moving. It seems he cannot wait to unfold all he has collected about Jesus.

We believe Mark met Jesus and was present during his ministry. In fact, we believe he was in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus was arrested. In Mark 14:52, he talks about a young man who was not one of the 12 disciples. Those who came to arrest Jesus grabbed the young man. But instead his clothes tore and he left them behind. So he ran away naked. Maybe, out of a little embarrassment, Mark does not identify himself by name. But he does reveal his presence there. Church tradition tells us that Mark became a close associate of Peter. So he got a lot of the material for his gospel from Peter himself. His work is now preserved in the New Testament Gospel of Mark.

Today, we're going to see Jesus in action in 3 brief scenes that will give some answers to the question "Why is Jesus worth following?" Then we'll think about how we can respond to Him.

First Scene – Mark 1:21-28

²¹ And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. ²² And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. ²³ And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, ²⁴ "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God." ²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" ²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷ And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, "What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." ²⁸ And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.

Jesus enters a synagogue or Jewish house of worship on the Sabbath or Jewish holy day. There he begins to teach. Apparently, synagogues had a local rabbi. But others could teach from the Scriptures. So Jesus starts teaching and those in attendance immediately notice something different. They were used to scribes who taught by reading the Scriptures and then reported some famous rabbi's interpretation. But Jesus talks about the Scriptures and give His own interpretations.

Mark tells us there was a man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue. What was he doing there? Did he regularly attend synagogue? It seems unlikely. Why would an unclean spirit lead the person possessed into a place to worship the holy or clean God? We don't know. But the spirit cannot remain silent.

So he cries out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" Who is "us"? The text tells us there is "an" or one unclean spirit in this man. So is "us" the man and the unclean spirit? Maybe. But the spirit doesn't really care about the man. He just the uses the man for his purposes. In a sense, the spirit is already destroying the man. So I agree with those who conclude "us" refers to all unclean spirits or demons. Jesus' presence causes demonic hordes to quake in fear. Then the unclean spirit shouts "I know who you are – the Holy One of God." Some think the unclean spirit tries to get control or authority over Jesus by revealing His identity. Or it may simply display reverence and respect.

But whatever its intent, Jesus suddenly shuts the unclean spirit down. "Be silent, and come out of him." Jesus uses pretty strong language to basically tell the spirit to shut up. He does not want unclean spirits testifying to His identity or mission. They're untrustworthy and would try to manipulate the situation to their advantage. Not only does Jesus silence the spirit. He commands it to leave the man. The unclean spirit obeys Jesus! It convulses the man and then utters a loud shriek through his voice. Yet Jesus instantly frees the man from his oppression.

Then the people in the synagogue respond. Now if that happened here, what would we all leave talking about – the man with the unclean spirit? But the people first declare – "What is this? A new teaching with authority!" They marvel most at Jesus' teaching. Then they're amazed that Jesus backs up his teaching by dealing with the unclean spirit who obeys Jesus' command. It makes me wonder if seeing people with unclean spirits was a much more common phenomenon among them. They just had never seen anyone deal with the spirits in such an authoritative way.

So this account gives us the first answer to our question. “Why is Jesus worth following?” **Jesus has absolute authority over the kingdom of darkness.** There is a spiritual world out there beyond what we can see. The Scriptures testify to angels and demons. The apostle Paul talks about the spiritual forces of evil in Ephesians 6:12. He writes “We do not struggle against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” That sounds pretty daunting. But Paul goes on to describe the armor of God that any believer can put on to stand firm and resist these forces.

Yet even more comforting is the fact the Jesus has supreme authority over all of them. They cannot withstand Him or His Word. He releases people who were once oppressed or dominated by darkness. They had no hope. But Jesus comes along and suddenly they experience deliverance. It’s one thing to claim you are a savior like Jim Jones. It’s quite another to deliver salvation like Jesus did. As a result of this incident, Mark tells us Jesus’ fame spread throughout Galilee. The account continues into the next scene. **Second scene – Mark 1:29-34**

²⁹ And immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰ Now Simon's mother-in-law lay ill with a fever, and immediately they told him about her. ³¹ And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

³² That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. ³³ And the whole city was gathered together at the door. ³⁴ And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. And he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

Jesus walks from the synagogue to the house of Simon and Andrew. Simon is another name for Peter. They lived in Capernaum, a city right on the Sea of Galilee. So they would go out and fish right from this town. In those days, many members of the same extended family lived in the same house complex. So Peter’s mother in law lives there and lies ill with a fever. They immediately tell Jesus about her. They didn’t have Tylenol, Advil or Aspirin. They didn’t know what caused fevers. They considered them life threatening. So Jesus goes over to her.

He takes her by the hand and raises her up physically. In that moment of touch, He heals her. Her fever leaves instantly. She is restored so completely that she begins to serve them some food. So this scene gives us another reason why Jesus is worth following. **Jesus has compassionate love for those who suffer.** He could have just said to Peter’s mother in law, “be healed.” Yet he takes the time to go and touch her personally. In this we see our Lord who knows us and sees our struggles.

Peter's mother in law is not the only one who benefits from Jesus' ministry that day. At sundown when the Sabbath ends, people were allowed to go out of their houses again. They've heard about the healing at the synagogue. They have heard the famous Jesus is at Simon and Andrew's place. So the whole city comes with friends and family suffering from illness and demon oppression. Verse 34 tells us "And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. And he would not permit the demons to speak because they knew him."

So here again we see His absolute authority over the kingdom of darkness. But **Jesus also displays His authority over disease and illness**. He does not turn the sick away. In a similar way to his treatment of Peter's mother in law, He sees and likely touches each sick person brought to Him.

But He's not doing all this just to make a name for Himself. He's not a magician who goes around and does these tricks to make money. He has a much deeper purpose. We find it back in Mark 1:14-15. "Now after John (the Baptist) was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God and saying, "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand."

So Jesus announces the arrival of the kingdom of God. And He demonstrates its arrival. Through casting out demons, Jesus displays that the kingdom of God advances against the kingdom of darkness. Through healing those who are sick, Jesus displays the kingdom of God advances against the fallen world of sickness, disease and death. Though Jesus spent a lot of time in His Galilean ministry healing and casting out demons, He prioritized proclaiming the kingdom of God.

Not every sick person in that region got healed. But Jesus revealed a glimpse of the kingdom of God in its fullness. In healing a few, he showed that one day when the kingdom of God arrives in its fullness, all of God's people will be healed and made whole.

So why is Jesus worth following? He has absolute authority over the kingdom of darkness. He has absolute authority over disease. He is compassionate towards those who suffer. There's one more we'll look at today from verses 35-38.

Third Scene – Mark 1:35-38

³⁵ And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. ³⁶ And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, ³⁷ and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you." ³⁸ And he said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out." ³⁹ And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Why is Jesus worth following? He did not succumb to the temptation of celebrity but remained faithful to His calling to proclaim God's kingdom. It's very early in the morning after an exhausting ministry day. But Jesus gets up to go and pray to commune with his Father. Eventually Peter and the others come to him with the news that everyone is looking for him. Of course they are. They've heard about His ministry the night before. They want to see more healings. They may have found more sick people.

Jesus already had fame throughout Galilee according to verse 28. He could have capitalized on this moment to increase it. He could have stayed in Capernaum to inhale the praise of the adoring crowds. But He says, "Let us go on to the next towns that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out." Jesus does not let the crowds distract Him. He is not addicted to popularity. He keeps a laser like focus on His Father's mission which is proclamation of the arrival of God's kingdom. This arrival reveals God's interest in all people for their good.

We all know what it's like to have someone interested in us only because they want something from us – our money; our vote; our body; our influence. But Jesus is interested in us because He has something for us – the greatest gift we could ever receive – life in the kingdom of God. Jesus never got off track because He placed such a high value on connection with His Father.

Jim Jones led 900 of his followers to destruction. But Jesus leads His followers out of destruction. Jim Jones promised utopia and delivered death. Jesus promises God's kingdom and delivers new life.

How can we respond? Well Jesus tells us in the final phrase of Mark 1:15. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the Gospel." But repent of what? Living solely for ourselves; living as if we are the absolute authority; living with no regard for Christ and His Lordship. It means to walk humbly and step out in the direction we think He's leading us. It means reorienting our lives to Him and His direction trusting that He does have the best in mind for us.

In my life, this has meant accepting some directions I would naturally have not chosen. I did not want to go into the ministry. I did not want to be called pastor. I did not like the implications of what that meant for my life and a possible future spouse and children. Yet God gently yet firmly directed me to where He wanted me to go. He slowly but surely changed my heart to accept His direction for my life. That's part of living under Christ's authority. It's been worth it. It's been so satisfying and life changing in a good way.

We might think that's so restricting compared to the tremendous freedom everyone else has to do whatever they want to do with their lives. But to me, it seems we receive way more comfort from Jesus guiding us through times of uncertainty and big decisions. It's a big relief to know that Jesus does have absolute authority and does watch out for us and does care about our fears and struggles. So we must repent of living solely for ourselves independent of Jesus absolute authority.

Then we need to believe the gospel. For some here, it means that we need to accept for the very first time in our lives that Jesus is who He claims to be and who the Gospels portray Him to be. He's not one among many other religious founders. He's not just a historical figure who some religious people followed long ago. He is the Lord who has absolute authority over demons. He has the power to heal a disease in an instant. He is the only way to God. He gave His life up to die on the cross so that we could be forgiven of our sins, adopted into God's family and begin the journey of living in the kingdom of heaven. And we need to not only believe this in our heads but with our lives. In the first, century, to believe in someone meant to follow them and trust them – not just mentally agree with what they say. So if you have not yet believed the Gospel, will you do that? It's no small decision. But it will lead to life. It means a reorientation of your life to Jesus. Will you confess Jesus as your Lord and place the trust of your life completely onto Him? If you want to act on that, you can pray right now. Or you can pray with another Christian you know. Or you can come forward after the service and pray with those at front.

But once we've initially believed the Gospel, we're not done with our need to believe the gospel. The Apostle Paul says in Galatians 2:20 – I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live but Christ lives in me. And the life I live now in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me." Now if Paul had already received Christ by faith and believed the Gospel by faith, why does he say He lives by faith now?

Well, the journey of faith is a lifelong pursuit. We need to live by faith every day. Last week, we talked about lust and our need to wage war on it in our lives by faith in Christ. We need to trust that what God pronounces and promises is better than acting on our lust. We need to trust that God's way of reorienting our lives to Him and His kingdom purposes is better for us than living self-focused lives.

That is an every day journey of faith. I am not saying we have to receive Christ into our lives every day. But we need to live by faith that God is real/ that God is doing His work in us to make us more like Christ/ that God's kingdom

continues to advance until one day Jesus will return. Then we will see the kingdom of God in its fullness. We are called to continue to believe this and trust in the Lord every day.

The more we do that, the more God reveals Himself to us. The more He sees us through, the more confidence we gain in Him. The longer we live by faith, the more we realize that trusting Him is the most secure foundation upon which to build our lives. So Jesus says “Repent and believe the Gospel. Place your troubles in the hands of the one with absolute authority over demons and disease – the hands that took Peter’s mother in law’s hand. He will take your hand and lead you.