



Sermon Transcript

February 18, 2018

Gospel of Mark: The Good News of Jesus

The Centrality of the Cross

Mark 8:22-9:1

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on February 18, 2018 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon can be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
Mark 8:22 - 9:1

²² And they came to Bethsaida. And some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him. ²³ And he took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village, and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Do you see anything?" ²⁴ And he looked up and said, "I see people, but they look like trees, walking." ²⁵ Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. ²⁶ And he sent him to his home, saying, "Do not even enter the village."

²⁷ And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" ²⁸ And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets." ²⁹ And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." ³⁰ And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.

³¹ And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

³⁴ And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶ For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? ³⁷ For what can a man give in return for his soul? ³⁸ For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

⁹ And he said to them, "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power."

Introduction

This morning we come to “the center.” Quite literally that is true. The Gospel of Mark is sixteen chapters long and this morning we find ourselves at that half-way point in the book as we look at the final portion of Mark 8. At the same time, it is no coincidence that the center of this book brings us to “the center” of our faith. It is here where we are forced to consider the identity of Jesus. It is here where we begin hearing about the cross of Jesus. It is here where we are given instructions on what it means to follow Jesus. Needless to say, these are important things for us to consider no matter where we are in our spiritual journey.

This center portion of the Gospel of Mark is central to the point Mark is trying to make about Jesus. It is Mark’s intent to demonstrate to us that Jesus is the “*Christ, the Son of God.*” That is how he introduces Jesus to us in the very first verse of the book, “*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*” At the end of the book, in Mark 15, we find a Roman centurion standing at the foot of the cross, and looking up at Jesus he says, “*Truly this man was the Son of God.*” This morning, at the very center of the book, we hear Peter confess about Jesus, “*You are the Christ.*”

This confession Peter makes at the center of the Gospel of Mark serves as a hinge between the first half and the second half of the Gospel of Mark. It marks a turning point in the book. Up to this point, in the Gospel of Mark, the power of Jesus has been on display through his miracles. We saw him heal the paralytic, calm the storm, deliver the man possessed by a demon, raise a girl from the dead and feed the 5,000 with five loaves of bread and two fish. And so Peter is looking back on this and he is putting it all together and he comes to the conclusion that Jesus is the promised Messiah. He says to Jesus, “*You are the Christ.*” Indeed, he is.

But now, from the center of the book, we begin to transition to the second half of the book and the focus becomes the cross. From here on out, the second half of the book is all about the cross. While Peter was able to recognize that Jesus was Israel’s King, the promised Messiah, he and the disciples were not expecting Jesus to die on a cross. David Garland says it this way, “This passage serves as a hinge between the first half of the Gospel, where Jesus’ power is so prominent, and the second half, where his weakness becomes predominant.”¹

Our passage this morning is the first of three “crucial conversations” Jesus has with his disciples about the cross. In Mark 8:31 it says, “*And he began to teach them that the Son*

of Man must suffer many things . . . be killed and after three days rise again.” In Mark 9:30-32, Jesus again says, *“The Son of Man is going to be delivered in to the hands of men and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.”* And then, finally, in Mark 10:32-34, a third time, Jesus says to his disciples, *“See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests . . . And they will . . . kill him. And after three days he will rise.”* Three times he tells them what is coming, and yet, they don’t understand it until after it happens.

Do you know what it interesting about this section of Mark, that stretches from Mark 8:22 to Mark 10:52? This section begins and ends with Jesus healing a blind man. In fact, this section begins with a rather strange encounter Jesus has with a blind man. When they brought the man to Jesus, Jesus took his saliva and rubbed it on the man’s eyes and asked him, *“Do you see anything?”* What is unique about this miracle is that unlike the other miracles, when Jesus performs it, it doesn’t fully take. The man says, *“I see people, but they look like trees walking.”* His vision wasn’t completely restored. Then we read, *“Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw clearly.”* This gradual opening of the eyes of this blind man is a fitting introduction to these three crucial conversations Jesus has about the cross. Right now, the disciples see that Jesus is the Christ, but they don’t fully see what that means. They don’t yet see the cross and what it really means to follow Jesus.

This section ends in Mark 10:46-52 with the healing of another blind man. It is the story of a man by the name of Bartimaeus. It is the final miracle recorded for us in the Gospel of Mark. As Jesus is making his way to Jerusalem, Bartimaeus is on the side of the road crying out, *“Son of David, have mercy on me!”* The title, *“Son of David”* is a recognition that Jesus was the Messiah. But the cry for mercy gets to the heart of the kind of deliverance Jesus came to bring. And so Jesus stops and calls for Bartimaeus to be brought to him and he says to Bartimaeus, *“Go your way, your faith has made you well.”* That is an interesting statement, because throughout the Gospel of Mark, after Jesus healed someone, they would literally go “their way.” But do you know what it says about Bartimaeus? It says, *“And immediately he recovered his sight and followed [Jesus] on the way.”* What a fitting way to end this section. When our eyes are open to Jesus and the cross, we learn what it looks like to follow him.

It strikes me, as we begin looking at these three crucial conversations about the cross, that there are most likely three kinds of people here this morning. I wouldn’t be surprised if there are some here this morning who are “blind to Jesus and the cross.” I encourage you to give Jesus a hearing over the next several weeks and ask him to open

your eyes. I think often, this opening of our eyes to Jesus is a progressive work that Jesus does in us over time. There are some here this morning who have “cloudy vision.” You have some sense of Jesus and who he is, but your eyes have not yet been fully opened. As we progress through these crucial conversations, we are going to see who Jesus is and what he has done for us on the cross. May you come to see fully your need for Jesus. And then finally, in each of these three crucial conversations, we learn what it looks like to follow Jesus. I will tell you right now, there is nothing glamorous about it. All your problems aren’t going to go away because of Jesus, in fact you might add a few problems to your life as you follow Jesus. Jesus is not a one way ticket to prosperity. Rather, you will discover that the way of Jesus is a way of “humility, service and suffering.”² When it says that Bartimaeus “*followed him on the way*” at the end of Mark 10, it leads right to Mark 11 and the “Triumphal Entry” of Jesus on what we call Palm Sunday. This kicks off the week that leads to the cross. That too is our way forward as we follow Jesus.

The central question of our faith is, “Who is Jesus?” The central activity of Jesus is the cross. The central calling on our lives is to follow Jesus and carry our cross. May Jesus open our eyes to what it is we must see.

The Central Question: Who is Jesus?

The first of our three “crucial conversations” about Jesus and the cross starts with a question from Jesus. It is one of the most crucial questions you need to consider. Jesus asks the question in two parts. “*Who do people say that I am?*” And then he follows with the question to his disciples, “*But who do you say that I am?*” Who is this Jesus? John Stott, in his book *Basic Christianity*, put it this way. “So the crucial question is this: was this Jesus, the carpenter of Nazareth, the Son of God or not? . . . In essence, Christianity is Christ . . . Take Christ from Christianity, and you remove the heart from it; there is practically nothing left.”³ So, in the center of the Gospel of Mark, we have the central question of our faith. Who is this Jesus?

In the first of these two questions, Jesus is basically collecting polling data. What is the “public opinion” about Jesus? What are they saying about Jesus “out on the street?” The disciples report what they are hearing “out there.” Some are saying that Jesus is “*John the Baptist; and others say Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.*” Basically, the word on the street is that people are recognizing that Jesus is a “man of God.” Like John the Baptist and Elijah and the prophets, Jesus was a messenger of God. That is the definition of a prophet. A prophet comes with a word from God. But where public opinion fell short is that they failed to see how Jesus distinguished himself from all who came before

him. He was not one among the many messengers of God who was preparing the way for God's salvation to come to man. Rather, he was "the One" the prophets were all pointing to as they looked forward to God's coming salvation. Do we not hear the last of these prophets, John the Baptist, say of Jesus in John 1:29-30, "*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.'*" This is no ordinary man! This is not one of many in a long line of messengers from God. John the Baptist said of Jesus, this man who was born after me, actually existed before me! How can that be? He is the one who distinguishes himself from all others. He is the eternal Son of God.

Normally, I would be tempted to move quickly into the second question Jesus asks when he turns to the disciples and says, "*But who do you say that I am?*" But recent polling data causes me to pause and not assume that we are all on the same page when it comes to the nature of Jesus. Recently, LifeWay Publishers, was commissioned by Ligonier Ministries to conduct a survey on faith in America. While they found that the overwhelming number of people in America identified themselves as Christian, they found a large portion of these self described Christians embracing beliefs that would be have been considered heretical by the early church. Shane Morris said of this study, "These are not minor points of doctrine, but core ideas that define Christianity itself. The sad part? Even when we are denying the divinity of Christ, we can't keep our story straight." While 70% affirm their belief in the Trinity, almost half believe that Jesus is "the first and greatest being created by God."⁴ That is a denial of the divinity of Jesus.

Somewhat puzzled by this finding, the assumption was that when you do a survey like this, all kinds of people may call themselves Christian who may not understand what that means. That skews the results of the survey. So from this survey they tried to identify those who would be considered evangelical. Only participants who called the Bible their highest authority, said personal evangelism is important, and indicated that trusting in Jesus' death on the cross is the only way of salvation, were labeled "evangelical." Of that group, 70% - more than the population at large - said that Jesus "was the first and greatest being created by God."⁵ This was the essence of the debate in the fourth century that produced the Nicene Creed. The debate was over the nature of Jesus and whether he was fully God or simply "like God." Our entire faith rests on this matter. And so the creed of the church is this, "We believe . . . In one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence of the Father. Through him [Jesus] all things were made. For us and our salvation, he came down from heaven."⁶ Anything short of this ceases to be Christian.

And so Jesus turns to his disciples and asks, “*But who do you say that I am?*” It is a good reminder that we do not determine truth by popular opinion and what we read in the polls. And so, Peter turns and says to Jesus, “*You are the Christ.*” The word “*Christ*” is a title that means “anointed one.” It is anchored in the promise made to David a thousand years prior to Jesus that he would have a descendant who would establish God’s kingdom that would last forever. The prophets spoke about how this kingdom would usher in God’s justice and through this “son of David” God would deliver Israel. Basically, Peter is confessing that Jesus is “that One” who fulfills the promise of God.

The Central Activity: The Cross

Upon this confession of Peter, for the first time, Jesus turns their attention to the cross. It says in verse 31, “*And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again.*” We already noted that this marks the turning point in the Gospel of Mark, because the rest of the book is about Jesus going to the cross. What we are going to discover here is that the cross becomes the central activity of Jesus, the defining moment of what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah. The centrality of the cross is seen in the disproportionate amount of space each Gospel writer gives to the events of that final week that leads to the cross. John Stott said that Matthew’s Gospel devotes forty percent, Mark sixty percent, Luke thirty-three percent and John fifty percent of their account of the entire life of Christ to this one week.⁷

After Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ, Jesus begins to teach them about the cross. Clearly, this is something unexpected. After Peter makes this confession, it says, “*And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.*” Why? How often did we see Jesus perform a miracle and he instructed the person who had been healed to keep it quiet and not tell anyone? Why? It is not that Peter was wrong in confessing that Jesus was the Messiah. The problem was that they did not yet understand what that meant. They didn’t yet understand about the necessity and the centrality of the cross. When Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah he was following the notion of his day that God would send someone who would deliver Israel from the pagan powers of their day and establish a land of peace and justice and righteousness. There was no room for a suffering Messiah in their image of the Christ. That is why Peter acted the way he did when Jesus first began to teach about the cross. Peter protested against such a notion as the cross. In verse 32, it says, “*And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.*” Jesus in turn, rebuked Peter and said, “*For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.*” The cross is at the center of the mind of God.

“And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again.” The word that jumps out to me in this initial instruction of Jesus is the word “*must*.” Jesus “*must suffer . . . must be rejected . . . must be killed.*” It speaks to the necessity of the cross as the central activity of Jesus.

I think the challenge for us is that the cross has become so familiar to us that it is no longer “shocking.” Clearly, it was a shocking revelation to Peter. And if you think about it, it is not hard to understand why. The cross was a form of Roman execution and it was brutal. Cicero, the ancient Roman orator was so repulsed by this form of execution that he said, “The very word ‘cross’ should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears.”⁸ And now here comes the central message of Christianity and at the center of our faith stands a cross, of all things. Paul says it this way in 1 Corinthians 1:23. “*We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.*” To the Gentile, the cross was an instrument of shame and the Christians were ridiculed for the absurdity of worshiping a crucified man. And to the Jew, this was a stumbling block, not only because that is not what they expected from their Messiah, but also because in the Old Testament it says, “*the curse of God is on the one who is hanged on a tree.*”

And that is the point, is it not? That is the reason for that key word “*must*.” It speaks to the kind of deliverance that Jesus, the Messiah, came to bring. As we saw with the miracle of delivering the man from the demon and bringing the daughter of Jairus back to life that Jesus has come to deliver us from sin and death. We saw through the healing of the paralytic he has authority to pronounce the forgiveness of sin. How does he do that? Peter would later write in 1 Peter 2:24 that Jesus “*bore our sins in his body on the tree.*” In other words, he took the curse of our sin, which is death. This same Peter would say in 1 Peter 1 that we were redeemed from our sin “*not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.*” This is the reason Jesus “*must suffer . . . must be rejected . . . must be killed.*” He died to take away our sin because we can not take it away ourselves.

Notice that the word “*must*” does not stop with the death of Jesus. In all three of these “crucial conversations” Jesus assures them that *after three days* [he must] *rise again*. Even though Jesus spoke of his resurrection three times, we know how the story unfolds. After his crucifixion, they were as surprised as anyone to see the resurrected Christ. But how can this be? How could Jesus rise from the dead? It is because of who he is. He is the *Son of Man*. That is how he identifies himself to them in this passage. He says, “*the*

Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again.” As we have seen before, this title for Jesus comes from Daniel 7 where we read of a “son of man” who comes from heaven and is given an everlasting kingdom and his kingdom shall not be destroyed. In other words, Jesus is able to atone for our sin through his death on the cross because he is God in the flesh and thus he is able to conquer sin and death.

At this point, the vision of the disciples is not very clear. When it comes to Jesus all they see are “people who look like trees walking.” But after it all comes to be they see clearly and what was once considered absurd and scandalous has become the central message of our faith. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:18, *“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.”* Peter, who in our passage rebuked Jesus for speaking of the cross, on the Day of Pentecost proclaimed, *“this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it . . . Repent and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.”*

Indeed, Peter, Jesus is the Messiah. But the work of the Messiah was to come and die on the cross where he bore our sin in his body. Or as Peter would later put it in 1 Peter 3:18, *“Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.”* This is the central activity of Jesus; the cross. It is through the cross that we are able to come to God through faith. Garland says, “the gist of his teaching is that the messianic king will reign from a splintery cross.”⁹ Through the cross we are saved.

The Central Calling: Follow Jesus

With each of the three “crucial conversations” Jesus has with the disciples about the cross, we discover something about what it means to follow Jesus. In verse 34 we are told that if we want to follow Jesus, we too have a cross to bear. Jesus said, *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”* This statement implies that we are not just called to confess our faith in Jesus. Rather, like Bartimaeus, once our eyes are opened and we clearly see who Jesus is and what he has done for us on the cross, we are to follow him.

It is an acknowledgment that following after Jesus is a call to sacrifice. It is a call to obedience. It is a call to suffering. David Garland puts it this way, “Unlike some contemporary peddlers of the gospel, Jesus does not offer his disciples varieties of self-

fulfillment, intoxicating spiritual experiences, or intellectual stimulation. He presents them with a cross. He does not invite them to try the cross on for size to see if they like it. He does not ask for volunteers to carry one for extra credit . . . They must become like Jesus in obedience and live the cross.”¹⁰

If you remember, Mark is writing this account of the life of Jesus to a church in Rome that is suffering because of following Jesus. They are facing persecution. Peter encourages this suffering church to follow in the steps of Jesus. He writes in 1 Peter 2:21, *“For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.”* John Stott says that the word “example” is the Greek word that means “teacher’s copybook.” It is “the perfect alphabet on which a pupil models his script as he learns to write.”¹¹ It is tracing over what the teacher has written. So too, we trace our lives according to the pattern of Jesus.

We carry our cross. We put the needs of others before ourselves and we enter their suffering. We willingly carry the ridicule of others who think the message of the cross is foolish. We don’t revile back and we don’t retaliate. Rather, we love and we serve, just like Jesus did. Here is the irony of it, Jesus accomplishes his work through our suffering. Through our quiet endurance and faith in Jesus, he uses us. How is it that in places where there is great persecution, the church is growing? We often talk about what God has done in China. We have noted that the place the church is growing the fastest in the world is in Iran. That gives me great hope for New England, the darkest corner of our country. As the church in New England continues to proclaim Jesus and the message of the cross and quietly and humbly serves this community—not with mega churches and superstar pastors—but in humble and small ways, God advances his church.

When it comes to your faith, embrace the cross. I am not just talking about the cross of Jesus where you find the wonderful promise of forgiveness. But embrace the way of the cross and enter into a life of sacrifice and obedience and if need be—suffering. This is the call of all who would embrace Jesus.

Conclusion

What do you see? Do you see Jesus as he has revealed himself to us?

The central question for you to consider is simply this: Who is Jesus? He is the Christ, the Son of God. Once you see this to be true, everything else falls into place. He is able to atone for your sin and he is worthy of following.

The central activity of Jesus is the cross. To this day it is offensive that someone would have to be sacrificed for our sins. But that someone is not just anyone. It is Jesus, the Son of God who bore our sin on that tree. This will always be offensive to some. But to those who are being saved, it is the power of God for salvation. This is why we preach Christ crucified and why I hope you hear that message every Sunday.

The central calling is for you and me to pick up our cross and follow Jesus. If the cross of Jesus is the way to life, then the cross of Jesus and suffering is the example to follow. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was martyred by the Nazi's at the end of World War II said, "The cross is laid on every Christian . . . When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die."¹² So often, it is through our suffering that God does his work through us.

May the center of this book and the center of our faith—Jesus crucified—be at the center of your life.

¹David Garland *Mark: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 323

²William Lane *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 293

³John Stott *Basic Christianity* Third Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) Kindle Reader Location 187

⁴G. Shane Morris, "Survey Finds Most American Christians Are Actually Heretics" www.thefederalist.com October 10, 2016

⁵Ibid

⁶Nicene Creed <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/creeds/nicene-creed>—the term "only begotten" means that he is the only one who has the same nature as the Father." See "The Son of God: Begotten Not Made" by Allen Ross www.bible.org

⁷Stott, Kindle Reader Location, 916

⁸Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Pro Lege Manilia. Pro Caecina. Pro Cluentios. Pro Rabirio Perduellionos*, trans. H. Grose Hodge (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) 467

⁹Garland, 321

¹⁰Ibid., 334

¹¹Stott, Kindle Reader Location 960

¹²Dietrick Bonhoeffer *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1963) 99

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COMMUNITY GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. In groups of three or four
 - Share a highlight from your week
 - Share which of the emotions you are most currently feeling and why.
Sad, Angry, Scared, Happy, Excited, Tender
 - Pray for each other
2. What did you learn from the sermon on Sunday?

Diving Into The Word

3. Read Mark 8:22-26. Reflect on your own spiritual journey and describe the moment when your understanding of Jesus became clear.
4. Read Mark 8:27-30. Why are the questions Jesus asks here important to our faith? How would you answer these questions? (What do others say about Jesus? What do you say about Jesus?) See Colossians 1:15-23
5. Read Mark 8:31-33. What does this tell us about the cross? See 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 and discuss why the cross is foolish and a stumbling block to some. Why is it the power of God to those being saved?
6. Read Mark 8:34-9:1. What does it mean to “take up your cross?” What instruction does 1 Peter 1:18-25 give us for following Jesus? How does this help us understand what it means to follow Jesus?

Taking It Home

7. Share one thing that you are taking with you as a result of your discussion.
8. What is one step of obedience you want to take this week?