24. Mark 8:1–21

In those days when there was again a great crowd and they did not have anything to eat, he summoned the students and said to them, "I have compassion on the crowd, because they have already stayed with me three days, and they do not have anything to eat. And if I send them away to their homes hungry, they will become faint on the road. And some of them have come from far away." And his students answered him, "From where will anyone be able to satisfy these people with bread here in the uninhabited land?" And he asked them, "How many loaves of bread do you have?" And they said, "Seven." And he ordered the crowd to get down on the ground. And he took the seven loaves and gave thanks and broke them and kept giving them to his students to set them out, and they set them before the crowd. And they had a few fish. And he blessed them and said that these too were to be set out. And they ate and were satisfied, and they took up seven mat baskets of leftover crumbs. And there were about four thousand people. And he dismissed them. And at once he got into the boat with his students and came to the region of Dalmanoutha (8:1–10).

And the Pharisees came out and began to argue with him and seek from him a sign from heaven to test him. And groaning intensely in his spirit he said, "Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly I say to you, I swear no sign will be given to this generation!" And he left them and got back into the boat and went away to the other side (8:11–13).

And they forgot to take bread, and, except for one loaf, they did not have any with them in the boat. And he commanded them, "Look out, watch out for the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." And they discussed with one another that they did not have any bread. And when he knew, he said to them, "Why are you discussing that you do not have any bread? Do you not yet comprehend or understand? Do you have your mind closed? Having eyes, do you not see, and having ears, do you not hear? And do you not recall? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many wicker baskets full of crumbs did you take
It is striking that Mark chose to tell the story of the feeding of the multitude twice. Naturally, it is conceivable that Jesus worked such a miracle more than once. Even if he did so, however, the oral tradition would have had difficulty keeping such similar incidents separate, and, in any event, an evangelist was under no obligation to record everything Jesus did. What is perhaps more likely, however, is that Jesus only did the miracle once, and the oral tradition was not entirely consistent on such numbers as how many people Jesus fed with how many loaves of bread. Luke, even though he uses Mark, records only one such feeding (Luke 9:10–17). John, who may have worked independently, does the same (John 6:1–13).¹

Mark suggests that the numerical details in the feedings have a tremendous significance and challenges the reader to figure out what it is. In 8:17–18, Jesus berates his disciples for obtuseness. They have eyes and yet do not see, and ears and yet do not hear. This rebuke is all the more stinging because it echoes the description in 4:12 of outsiders. The disciples are no better than outsiders! Then Jesus reminds the disciples of the exact numbers in the feedings. The first time, he broke five loaves and fed five thousand people; twelve baskets of crumbs were left. By contrast, the second time, he broke seven loaves and fed four thousand people; and seven baskets of crumbs were left. Then Jesus asks in amazement whether the disciples still do not understand. Such attacks on the disciples, of course, put pressure on the reader. We certainly do not wish to share in Jesus’ condemnation!

As Countryman has argued,² the point of the numbers is that Jesus’ miracles are decreasing. In the first miracle, Jesus started with less bread, fed more people, and more was left over. Therefore, the second feeding was in every respect inferior.³
Of course, the reason for the decline is the continuing lack of faith. One is tempted to write the increasing lack of faith. After Jesus feeds the five thousand, the disciples surely should realize he can do a similar miracle. Yet, when the story of the second feeding begins, Jesus points out once again that the crowd needs to eat, and the disciples respond by saying that no one could feed such a mob. When Jesus repeats the miracle, his students still learn nothing. Only a few verses later, they are alone with Jesus and become concerned that they have only one loaf of bread!

Not surprisingly, Mark emphasizes in this context that even though faith produces miracles, miracles do not produce real faith. Just after he feeds the four thousand, the Pharisees tempt Jesus by asking him to work a miraculous sign. Jesus refuses. He then warns his students to beware of the "leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." Clearly, the leaven of the Pharisees is demanding miracles as a precondition for faith. Of course, the faith which would result from such demonstrations would be incompatible with that trust in Jesus which perseveres in following him despite difficulties. Apparently, Herod too has this inferior type of faith. The only other Markan passage in which Herod's name appears is 6:14–29. There, Herod orders the execution of John the Baptist, and then, when he hears that Jesus is working miracles, Herod assumes Jesus is John raised from the dead. Jesus' miracles have produced some sort of faith in Herod—but not persevering trust in him.

Questions for Reflection:

Where does genuine faith in God and in Jesus come from?
Can we get true faith by demanding that God or Jesus do something for us first, such as work a miraculous sign?
And they came to Bethsaida. And they brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him. And after he had grasped the blind man’s hand, he led him out of the village. And he spat into his eyes and laid his hands on him and asked him, “Do you see anything?” And looking up he said, “I see people, but they look like walking trees.” Then he laid his hands on his eyes again, and he looked intently, and he was cured and saw everything clearly. And he sent him to his house by saying, “Do not even go into the village!” (8:22–26).

Just as Mark invites us to connect the feeding of the four thousand with the earlier feeding of the five, so here he apparently wants us to connect this story with that of the healing of the man who was deaf and dumb (7:32–37). There are many parallels between them. The content of the two stories is similar. Most strikingly, these are the only narratives in Mark in which Jesus employs saliva. The wording is also similar. For example, both stories begin, “And they brought to him . . . and begged him to . . .”

In connection with the earlier healing, this passage admirably continues the two themes Mark has been developing about miracles. Once again, Jesus tries to keep the public from learning about a miracle where there is no faith. In the story, we get no indication that anyone has any real belief in Jesus. Consequently, Jesus takes the man outside the village and heals him in private. Then he orders him not to return to the village. Of course, the story also illustrates in an especially dramatic way that the lack of faith is reducing Jesus’ ability to work miracles. Not only, as in the earlier story, must Jesus employ saliva and the laying on of hands. Now, he must take two tries. After the first attempt, the man’s sight is still so poor that people look like walking trees.
Nevertheless, the passage also prepares us for the two related stories that will follow. In the next narrative, Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, but objects when Jesus declares that he and his students must suffer. In the following story, a voice from heaven declares that Jesus is God’s Son, and subsequently Jesus again tells his students that he must suffer. Accordingly, the two-stage healing of the blind man symbolizes the two-stage confession which will follow immediately. When Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah but denies the need to suffer, Peter is beginning to see, but his limited sight is comparable to being unable to distinguish between human beings and walking trees. True sight is to perceive that Jesus is God’s Son and that he and we must suffer. Significantly, just before the story of the healing of the blind man, Mark uses sight figuratively, and so prepares us to interpret the story symbolically. In 8:18, Jesus berates the disciples for their spiritual obtuseness by noting that even though they have eyes they do not “see.”

**Questions for Reflection:**

In general, is it harder to help someone who lacks trust? Why? Do some people today confess that Jesus is the Messiah and yet assume that, thanks to Jesus, they will not have to suffer? Is such faith realistic? Is it Christian?

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**26. Mark 8:27 – 9:13**

*And Jesus and his students went out into the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the road he kept asking his students, saying to them, “Who do people say that I am?” And they said to him, “John the Baptist; yet others say, Elijah, and others, one of the Prophets.”*
And he asked them, “But you, who do you say that I am?” In reply Peter said to him, “You are the Messiah!” (8:27–29).

And he reprimanded them so they would not speak to anyone about him. And he began to teach them that the son of humanity had to suffer much and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise. And he spoke the message openly. And Peter took him aside and began to reprimand him. But after he turned and saw his students, he reprimanded Peter and said, “Get out of my sight, Satan, because you are not thinking about the things of God but of human beings” (8:30–33).

And he summoned the crowd along with his students and said to them, “If anyone wants to follow after me, let them deny themself and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever will lose their life because of the good news will save it. For how will it benefit a person to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? For what would a person give as an exchange for their life? For whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the son of humanity will also be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.” And he said to them, “Truly I say to you that there are some of those standing here who will not taste of death until they see God’s rule has come in power” (8:34–9:1).

And after six days Jesus took along Peter and James and John and brought them up on a high mountain privately by themselves. And he was transformed before them, and his clothes became shining, very white, as no launderer on earth could bleach. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking together with Jesus. And in response Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good that we are here, and let us make three booths, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” For he did not know what to respond, for they had become terrified. And a cloud covered them, and there was a voice from the cloud, “This is my beloved Son, listen to him!” And suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only. And as they were coming down from the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one
what they saw until the son of humanity rose from the dead. And they kept the matter to themselves, discussing what rising from the dead was. And they asked him, “The scribes say that Elijah must come first?” And he said to them, “Elijah is coming first and is going to restore all things; and how is it written about the son of humanity that he must suffer much and be despised? But I tell you that, nevertheless, Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they wanted, just as it is written about him” (9:2-13).

Mark invites the reader to view Peter’s confession and the transfiguration together. The preface to the second narrative tells us that the transfiguration happened six days later and so connects the two stories. Moreover, the prophecy at the end of the first story that people will soon see “God’s rule has come in power” points to the second. The vision of Jesus in shining garments and talking with Moses and Elijah foreshadows the coming kingdom.

Mark emphasizes that this combined section is important by repeating in it the themes and even the actual words of the opening verses of the gospel. Thus, the gospel begins by telling us that Jesus is the Messiah and God’s Son (1:1), and now Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, and God proclaims that Jesus is “my beloved Son.” Of course, these words also remind the reader of Jesus’ baptism when God says to Jesus, “You are my beloved Son” (1:11).

In this section, Jesus openly declares to his students for the first time that he is God’s Son. Previously, Jesus tries to suppress this information. When the demons reveal who he truly is, Jesus silences them (e.g., 3:11). Then he chooses a special group of followers and begins to give them hints concerning his true identity. Now, however, Jesus tells them explicitly. He asks the disciples who they think he is and elicits Peter’s response that he is the Messiah. Then he leads the inner core of his followers up the mountain. There he is transformed before them, and God himself proclaims to them that Jesus is his “beloved Son.”
As God’s Son, Jesus is greater than any earthly messiah. When Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, he apparently assumes that Jesus is merely the most important monarch in the world. During the following scene, Peter wishes to accord the same dignity to Moses and Elijah as to Jesus. Peter offers to make a shrine for each. However, the heavenly voice corrects him. Jesus is God’s Son, and the disciples must listen to him alone.

Jesus insists that the disciples must keep his identity secret until his mission of suffering has been completed. When Peter proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus responds by insisting that Peter inform no one since Jesus must suffer. Similarly, Mark emphasizes that the transfiguration is confidential. Before the vision, Jesus takes the inner core of his followers up a mountain “privately by themselves.” After the heavenly voice declares that Jesus is God’s Son, Jesus insists that his followers must not share this secret until he has risen from the dead.

Accordingly, these stories bring the first half of the gospel to a climax by explaining why Jesus has tried to keep his identity secret and by summarizing what he has been trying to teach his disciples. He has tried to keep his identity secret to avoid public acclaim so he can pursue his mission to serve humbly and be rejected. He has been trying to teach his disciples that they can trust him and patiently endure because he is God’s Son. Significantly, when Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah and then objects to him suffering, Jesus dismisses him as “Satan.” Previously, Satan tried to derail Jesus’ mission of suffering by using the demons to declare publicly that Jesus is God’s Son. Now, Satan is using Peter to accomplish the same goal.

These stories also give us a preview of the gospel’s second half, which emphasizes that Jesus must suffer before being glorified and that we must imitate his example. Mark stresses that he is introducing an important new theme by saying that Jesus “began to teach them . . .” The confession of Peter is the first of three blocks of material which predict the passion, and
each block has a similar structure. The structure is that Jesus first announces he must suffer, die, and rise from the dead. Then, we have a story in which the disciples demonstrate that they do not understand what Jesus really means. Finally, Jesus teaches the need for humble discipleship. In this first prediction, of course, the negative reaction by the disciples is Peter’s insistence that Jesus must not suffer. Jesus then teaches that anyone who would follow him must deny themself and take up their cross. Similar themes appear near the end of the story of the transfiguration. There, Jesus points out that John the Baptist ("Elijah") has suffered already and that he himself must suffer too, but that in the end he will rise from the dead. However, Mark emphasizes that the disciples did not understand what rising from the dead meant.

Because both Jesus and his followers must suffer, he insists that he is not merely the Messiah but also the son of humanity. Peter declares Jesus is the Messiah, but objects when Jesus announces that he must suffer. Therefore, Jesus identifies himself as the "son of humanity"—that is, as a human being. As such, he will be our example and our judge. He will suffer the way that only human beings can. On the last day he will also judge us on whether we have been faithful to his example. Whoever is ashamed of him, of them Jesus will also be ashamed at the final judgment!

Significantly, Mark suggests that we only learn who Jesus is by following him, especially following him to the cross. Thus, Jesus first asks the disciples who other people say that he is. In response, we get the same rumors Herod heard in chapter 6, namely that Jesus is John the Baptist or Elijah or one of the Prophets (8:28; cf. 6:14–15). Then Jesus asks the disciples who they say he is. Because Peter has followed him and received secret instruction and seen private miracles, he is able to declare that Jesus is the Messiah. However, to know that Jesus is the Son of God, Christians must be ready to follow Jesus to the cross. Hence, the disciples apparently do not fully grasp what the heavenly voice means when it declares that Jesus is God's
Son. Instead, the disciples struggle to understand what the rising from the dead might be.

Mark makes it clear that Jesus’ message of the need to suffer is for everyone—including the reader. Whereas the rest of the material in this section occurs in private, Jesus’ declaration on the need to take up one’s cross is public. Mark explicitly states that Jesus summoned “the crowd along with his students.” Significantly, the rest of the narrative gives us no reason to think that such a crowd is in fact present. Mark suddenly introduces them here in order to stress to his reader that what Jesus is about to say is of general interest. Then Jesus speaks about “anyone” who would follow him.

Mark reminds his readers that Jesus will return soon to reward those who remain faithful. Jesus dramatically concludes his remarks in chapter 8 by insisting that some of his original audience will still be alive when “God’s rule has come in power.” Historically, Jesus’ comment must have been somewhat ambiguous, but, as we shall see, Mark apparently took it to mean that Jesus would return in glory during the lifetime of his original followers. Of course, when Mark was writing years later, the amount of time in which this prophecy could come true had diminished considerably. Hence, Mark is reminding his readers that they will “see” Jesus in the relatively near future.

Questions for Reflection:

Who do non-Christians today say that Jesus is? How do we who follow Jesus learn that he is not merely a great human being, but God’s Son? Do we in our own lives and our own communities have moments like the transfiguration when we get a foretaste of God’s rule coming in power?
And when they came to the students, they saw a great crowd around them and scribes arguing with them. And at once all the crowd saw him and were astonished, and they ran to him and greeted him. And he asked them, “What were you arguing about with them?” And one of the crowd replied to him, “Teacher, I brought my son to you, since he has a spirit which makes him mute. And wherever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams at the mouth and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. And I said to your students to drive it out, and they were not able.” And in reply he said to them, “O faithless generation! How long will I be with you? How long will I put up with you? Bring him to me.” And they brought him to him. And when the spirit saw him, at once it convulsed him, and he fell on the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. And he asked his father, “How long has he been like this?” And he said, “From childhood. And often it throws him even into fire, even into water, to kill him, but if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” But Jesus said to him, “If you can! All things are possible to one who has faith!” At once the father of the child shouted, “I believe; help my unbelief.” When Jesus saw that a crowd was running together, he reprimanded the unclean spirit by saying to it, “Spirit who causes dumbness and deafness, I order you, come out of him and do not go into him anymore.” And shouting and convulsing him greatly, it came out. And he became as if dead, so that many said that he had died. But Jesus grasped his hand and raised him, and he rose. And when he had gone into a house, his students asked him privately, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?” And he said to them, “This type cannot be sent out by anything except prayer” (9:14–29).

I would suggest that Mark added the emphasis on lack of faith to this story. As it stands, the text gives two contrasting explanations about why the disciples could not cast out the demon. At the conclusion, Jesus tells his students that what was needed was prayer. This sort of demon cannot be driven out
“by anything except prayer.” Earlier in the story, however, Jesus insists that the disciples’ lack of faith is the problem. When the boy’s father informs Jesus that his disciples have failed, Jesus responds, “O faithless generation!” Perhaps, then, Mark inserted material on the need for faith. Of course, in the edited story the two explanations do not actually contradict one another. Prayer strengthens faith.

As edited by Mark, this colorful narrative continues the pattern of declining miracles due to declining faith. In the previous miracle, Jesus had to lay his hands on the blind man twice to effect a total cure. However, at least the first attempt produced a positive result. The man went from total blindness to partial sight. By contrast, in the story we are presently considering, after Jesus orders the demon to come out, the boy goes into convulsions and almost dies. Only then is Jesus able to heal him by grasping the child’s hand and raising him up. The story emphasizes that lack of faith is the problem. When the crowd initially sees Jesus, it is astonished. Similarly, when the father pleads with Jesus to help if he can, Jesus objects, “‘If you can!’ All things are possible to one who has faith!”

The story emphatically confirms another pattern in Mark: That Jesus tries to keep miracles secret if there is no faith, but works public miracles if there is. In response to Jesus’ insistence that anything is possible with faith, the man shows that he has faith—but barely: “I believe; help my unbelief.” Just as the man is on the border between faith and doubt, so the miracle is on the border between being private and public. Mark tells us that Jesus performed the exorcism “when Jesus saw that a crowd was running together.” Interestingly, this detail contradicts the first part of the narrative and so must have been a clumsy addition which Mark made. The opening of the story tells us “a great crowd” was already present.

Within the larger structure of Mark, the details of this story suggest that the time for miracles has largely passed. In the preceding chapters, the miracles have become more and more
difficult as people’s faith has become less and less. Now Jesus is barely able to work them. Meanwhile the cross looms larger and larger. Accordingly, Mark suggests that Jesus’ mission to work miracles is basically over. Excluding the resurrection, there are only two more miracles in Mark, and, as we shall see, in both the symbolic meaning is more important than the wonder itself.

Questions for Reflection:

Do most of us come to Jesus in effect saying, “I believe; help my unbelief”? How does Jesus respond to this request today? What is the relationship between faith and prayer? In the Christian life do we sometimes get to a point when the time for miracles is basically over and we must now simply suffer? How can God be present in these times?

28. Mark 9:30–37

And he went out from there and was passing by through Galilee, and he did not want anyone to know, for he was teaching his students and saying to them, “The son of humanity is given into the hands of human beings, and they will kill him, and when he has been killed, after three days he will rise.” But they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to ask him (9:30–32).

And they came to Capernaum. And when they were in the house, he asked them, “What were you discussing on the road?” But they were silent, for they had been discussing with one another on the road who was the greatest (9:33–34).

And after he sat down, he called the twelve and said to them, “If anyone wants to be first, they will be last of all and servant of all.”
And he took a child and placed it in their midst, and when he had taken it into his arms, he said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, does not receive me, but him who sent me (9:35-37).

This block of material repeats both the themes and structure of the material associated with Jesus’ first passion prediction. Once again, Jesus is trying to hide from the public to avoid acclaim and is teaching the disciples in private that he must suffer. However, once more, the disciples do not understand. Instead, they are arguing among themselves who is the greatest. In response, Jesus teaches the need for humble discipleship. Whoever would be first must be last.

Questions for Reflection:

What does Jesus mean when he says that whoever receives even a child receives him? In what sense is it in fact true that the first is last and the last first? Is this true in the world? Is it true in the church? Is it true in heaven? Are those who are “last” able to have a deeper relationship with Jesus who made himself last by accepting the cross?

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29. Mark 9:38 – 10:31

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for there is no one who will do a miracle in my name and will quickly be able to defame me, for whoever is not against us is for us. For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in my name because you are Christians, truly I say to you that they will not lose their reward" (9:38-41).
“And whoever makes one of these little ones who believe fall, it would be better for them if instead a large millstone hung around their neck and they had been thrown into the sea. And if your hand makes you fall, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed than to have two hands and go away into Gehenna, to the inextinguishable fire. And if your foot makes you fall, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life lame than to have two feet and be thrown into Gehenna. And if your eye makes you fall, throw it away. For you it is better with one eye to enter into God’s rule than to have two eyes and be thrown into Gehenna, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not extinguished. For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if the salt becomes tasteless, with what will you season it? Have salt among yourselves and live in peace with one another” (9:42-50).

And from there, he rose and came into the region of Judea across the Jordan, and again crowds were flocking to him. And, as he was accustomed, he again taught them. And the Pharisees came and asked him if it was allowed for a man to divorce his wife. They were testing him. And in reply he said to them, “What did Moses command you?” And they said, “Moses permitted writing a divorce certificate and sending her off.” But Jesus said to them, “On account of your hardheadedness he wrote for you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, ‘He made them male and female.’ ‘Because of this a man will leave his father and mother . . . and the two will be one flesh.’ So then, they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has yoked together, let no human being separate!” And back in the house the students asked him about this. And he said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery” (10:1-12).

And they were bringing children to him so he would touch them. But the disciples reprimanded them. But when Jesus saw it, he became indignant and said to them, “Let the children come to me; do not forbid them. For God’s rule belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive God’s rule as a child will
not go into it at all.” And taking them into his arms, he blessed them by laying his hands on them (10:13–16).

And as he was going out into the road, a man ran up and fell on his knees before him and asked him, “Good teacher, what am I to do so I may inherit eternal life?” But Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God only. You know the commandments: Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not testify falsely, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.” And he said to him, “Teacher, all these things I have kept from my youth.” And Jesus looking at him loved him and said to him, “One thing you lack: Go off, sell all you have and give to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven, and come, follow me!” But he was shocked at the saying and went away grieved, for he had much property (10:17–22).

And Jesus looked around and said to his students, “With what difficulty will those who have wealth go into God’s rule!” But the students were amazed at his words. But Jesus, in reply, again said to them, “Children, how difficult it is to go into God’s rule! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to go into God’s rule.” But they were greatly astonished and said to one another, “And who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “With human beings it is impossible, but not with God! For all things are possible with God” (10:23–27).

Peter began to say to him, “Look, we left everything and have followed you.” Jesus said, “Truly I say to you, there is no one who left a house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands on account of me and on account of the good news, who will not receive a hundred times as much now in this age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the coming age, eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last, first” (10:28–31).

There is no break between the second passion prediction and the material we are considering here. After the second passion prediction and the debate among the disciples about who is greatest, Jesus declares that the first must be last because
whoever receives even a child in his name receives Jesus himself. The present section expands on this teaching and ends by reiterating that the "first will be last, and the last, first."

In this section, Mark passes on a series of teachings concerning how Christians should treat various people. The first block of material tells us that we must be charitable toward outsiders who are not hurting us. "Whoever is not against us is for us." Indeed, we may be confident that anyone who gives assistance to a Christian—even if it is no more than a "cup of water"—will certainly have a reward. The second block stresses that we must not cause anyone within the community to sin. Instead, we must live in peace with each other. The next blocks stress that we must not divorce our spouses and marry someone else and that we must always be open to the needs of children. Finally, we have a section warning the rich that they must give their possessions to the poor.

Mark then summarizes the message of the entire unit by stressing that Christians are to be a single family in which we are servants of one another. When Peter states, "We left everything and have followed you," he speaks for Mark's original Christian readers. They, too, gave up much to follow Jesus. In reply, Jesus insists that anyone who abandoned relatives or property will receive a hundred times as much even in this life. The way they will do so is evident. Every member of the church will be a brother or sister, parent or child to all other members, and everyone's property will be at the disposal of all. Hence, indeed "the first will be last, and the last, first."

By such solidarity, Mark's intended readers will be able to endure persecution. Evidently, at least many of Mark's readers had already lost their personal property and natural families. Moreover, as Mark emphasizes, when they followed Jesus and gained a hundred times as many relatives and a hundred times as much property, they also gained "persecutions." Apparently then, it is precisely by being a family, by supporting one another
as brothers and sisters, that we will be able to endure the present tribulation and in the end gain “eternal life.”

Mark’s portrayal of the Christian family would naturally inspire Christians to resist church leaders who seek power and privilege during a period of crisis. In a time of catastrophe, church leaders may try to gain power and privilege for themselves by preying on people’s fears and making extravagant promises, perhaps in the name of God. These leaders may claim that they are following the example of Jesus. Mark, however, insists that it is through solidarity with one another that Christians survive persecutions. Such solidarity thrives when those who would be first truly imitate Jesus and act as servants of all. Therefore, Mark’s theology would encourage his readers not to follow Christian demagogues.

At the same time, however, Mark suggests we need not be overly critical of Christian prophets who are not part of the official leadership structure, as long as they are doing no harm. When John reports that he tried to censure an exorcist who was not obeying them (the twelve?), Jesus rebukes him. “Whoever is not against us is for us.”

The story of the unauthorized exorcist also highlights the failure of the disciples who now seem to be spiritually inferior, even to outsiders. Previously, Jesus gave them the power to drive out demons (6:7), and they had successfully exorcised many people (6:13). However, by the time we get to chapter 9, the disciples apparently begin to lose this ability since they are unable to exorcise the epileptic boy. Now, Mark reports that an outsider is successfully casting out demons in Jesus’ name.

**Questions for Reflection:**

In what ways are Christians today a single family? In what ways are we not? Is it true in our experience that “whoever is not against us is for us”? Do Christian individuals or
groups who are not part of “official” Christianity sometimes accomplish things that members of the church cannot do? How do we respond to such individuals and groups?

30. Mark 10:32–45

Now they were going up on the road to Jerusalem, and Jesus was going ahead of them, and they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. And he again took aside the twelve and began to tell them the things that were about to happen to him. “Look, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the son of humanity will be handed over to the chief priests and to the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and they will hand him over to the Gentiles, and they will ridicule him and spit on him and whip him and kill him, and after three days he will rise” (10:32–34).

And James and John, Zebedee’s sons, came to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask you.” And he said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant to us that we may sit, one at your right and one at your left, in your glory.” But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup which I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” But they said to him, “We can.” But Jesus said to them, “The cup which I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized you will be baptized. But to sit on my right or on my left is not mine to give, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” And when the ten heard, they began to be angry at James and John. And Jesus summoned them and said to them, “You know that those who are recognized to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great tyrannize them. But it is not this way among you, but whoever wants to become great among you will be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you will
be slave of all. For the son of humanity also did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (10:35–45).

The third passion prediction basically resembles the others and brings the section which begins with Peter’s confession to a close. Throughout the section Jesus has been steadily leading his disciples toward Jerusalem. Now, he explicitly points out to them (and the reader) that their destination is near. Once again, Jesus foretells his suffering and death, though this time he does so in much greater detail. Then again, we have a negative reaction from the disciples. James and John ask to sit at Jesus’ right and left in the kingdom, and when the ten hear, they are angry. Finally, we have the teaching about the need for humble servanthood. Those who would be great must be servants of all in imitation of Jesus who is giving his life as a ransom for others.

As in the previous passion predictions, we get no hint that the disciples understand, and their lack of understanding challenges the reader to do better. The beginning of the story especially stresses the disciples’ obtuseness. As Jesus leads them toward Jerusalem, they are “amazed.” The reader, however, should remember the first two passion predictions and not be surprised. Jesus is humble and must suffer, and we must be humble and suffer too.

Questions for Reflection:

Are we able to drink Jesus’ cup of suffering? How can we become more able? Are members of the church today—and, especially, members of the leadership—often more concerned with getting the places of honor than with imitating Jesus?
And they came to Jericho. And as he and his students and a considerable crowd were going out of Jericho, the son of Timaeus, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting beside the road. And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, “Son of David, Jesus, have mercy on me!” And many reprimanded him so he would be quiet. But he shouted much louder, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” And Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.” And they called the blind man by saying to him, “Cheer up, rise, he is calling you.” And he threw off his coat and jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. And in response to him, Jesus said, “What do you want me to do for you?” And the blind man said to him, “My Master, let me see again!” And Jesus said to him, “Go, your faith has saved you.” And at once he could see again, and he followed him on the road (10:46-52).

We may suspect that Mark altered the traditional end of this story by adding that Bartimaeus followed him “on the road.” In the oral tradition, this detail would probably not have been remembered. Indeed, the detail would be pointless if the story were told separately. We would not even know what the road in question was. Moreover, in the story as Mark tells it, the detail is disturbing. After all, Jesus tells Bartimaeus to go, but instead of going, Bartimaeus follows him. Strikingly, even though Matthew and Luke both take the story from Mark, neither retains this odd concluding phrase.

The healing of Bartimaeus is a transitional narrative which links the passion predictions with the passion itself. As we have seen, just before this miracle Jesus gives the last and most detailed passion prediction. Immediately after it, Jesus approaches Jerusalem where the passion will take place.

Within Mark’s overall structure, the story balances the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida and consequently also symbolizes that true sight is accepting the cross. The first
healing of a blind man comes immediately before the first passion prediction. The second comes immediately after the last. Since, as we have seen, the first miracle symbolizes what partial and full sight are, we might expect that some similar symbolism may be present in this second story. In fact, the story suggests that true sight is to follow Jesus on the way to the cross. As soon as Bartimaeus is healed, we read “he followed him on the road.” The phrase “on the road” occurs in each of the three units predicting the passion (8:27, 9:33, 10:32). Accordingly, the “road” is the road to the crucifixion.

The miracle fits well with the pattern that Jesus willingly works public miracles if there is faith. Bartimaeus shows his belief in Jesus by his persistence and eagerness in trying to reach him. When he hears that Jesus has come, he shouts for Jesus to have mercy on him, and when the crowd tries to hush him, he shouts louder. When he learns that Jesus has summoned him, he throws off his coat and jumps to his feet. After Jesus heals him, Jesus himself declares that it is Bartimaeus’s faith which has saved him. Because there is faith, Mark emphasizes that the miracle is fully public. Not only are the disciples present, but there is also “a considerable crowd.”

The story demonstrates that it is the previous lack of faith which has been reducing Jesus’ ability to perform miracles. After the continuing decline in Jesus’ power to work wonders (see above), the effortlessness with which he heals Bartimaeus is striking. Jesus does not have to try twice or use saliva or lay his hands on the sufferer. Strictly speaking, he does not even pronounce a healing word (cf., e.g., “be opened”; 7:34). If there is faith, miracles are easy, indeed so easy that Jesus can declare that it is Bartimaeus’s faith that has saved him.

The story reverses Jesus’ previous pattern of trying to keep the public from realizing that he is the Messiah, God’s Son. As we have seen, previously Jesus always tries to silence anyone, whether a demon or a human being, who proclaims who Jesus really is. Now, we have the opposite. The crowd tries to silence
Bartimaeus when he addresses Jesus as “Son of David,” and Jesus himself insists that Bartimaeus come forward.

The reason the story reverses the pattern is that Jesus is on the verge of being crucified, and so secrecy is no longer needed. Up to this time, Jesus has attempted to hide his true identity so that people would not keep him from going to Jerusalem and being crucified. Immediately after the healing of Bartimaeus, Jesus arrives in the environs of Jerusalem. Now there is no longer any danger that he will escape death. Indeed, as we shall see, it is precisely by insisting publicly that he is the Messiah, God's Son, that Jesus will force his enemies to kill him.

Questions for Reflection:

Today does the proclamation that Jesus is God's Son comfort the world or fundamentally attack its assumptions and values? Will someone who truly represents “Christian values” have an easier or harder time getting elected to public office or rising in a corporation? Is it faith that heals or is it God? How does Christian faith work differently than such things as “positive thinking” and “self-actualization”?

32. Mark 11:1–25

And when they got near to Jerusalem to Bethphage and Bethany toward the Mount of Olives, he sent out two of his students by saying to them, “Go off into the village opposite you, and as you go into it, at once you will find a tethered colt on which no person has yet sat. Untie it and bring it. And if anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ say, ‘The Lord has need of it, and at once he is going to send it back here.’” And they went away and found the colt tethered by a door outside on the street, and they untied it. And