

Teaching Disciples: Part I



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Mark 8:22–38; Matt. 20:29–34; John 12:25; Mark 9:1–50; Mal. 4:5, 6; Luke 9:30, 31.*

Memory Text: “When He had called the people to Himself, with His disciples also, He said to them, “Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (*Mark 8:34, NKJV*).

The first half of Mark focuses on who Jesus is. His powerful teaching and miracles point in the same direction: He is the Messiah. At this crucial turning point in the narrative, Jesus will ask the disciples who they believe Him to be.

Peter will give a clarion answer to that question, and Jesus will immediately begin to explain where His steps as Messiah are headed, which we know is the cross.

In the last part of Mark 8 through the end of Mark 10, Jesus focuses on teaching His disciples about His journey. In these chapters, He will give predictions about the Cross. These will be followed by special instruction on discipleship. These powerful lessons remain relevant today.

This section of the second Gospel is marked off by the healing of two different blind men, one at the middle of Mark 8 and the other at the end of Mark 10. These miracle “bookends” illustrate dramatically how discipleship includes spiritual insight regarding who Jesus is and where He is going. As His teachings challenged the twelve disciples about two thousand years ago, so they continue to confront disciples today with the deep cost, and benefit, of following Jesus.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 17.

Seeing Clearly

Read Mark 8:22–30. Why did it take Jesus two touches to heal the blind man, and what lessons came out of this account?

The Gospels report a number of blind people healed by Jesus. Besides the passage here in Mark 8, blind Bartimaeus is healed as reported in Mark 10:46–52. Matthew refers to two blind men (Matt. 20:29–34), and John 9 tells the story of Jesus’ healing a man born blind who washes in the Pool of Siloam.

But this story in Mark 8 is unique. It appears only in Mark, and it is the only miracle of Jesus that requires two actions to bring perfect health. As part of the story, it is a touching detail that Jesus takes the man by the hand and leads him out of the village. One can sense His sympathy for the man’s disability.

But why two touches? As this is the only miracle in which two actions are involved, it is not likely because of any lack of power on Jesus’ part. Instead, it is more likely an acted parable, illustrating how spiritual insight sometimes takes time to unfold. That is what is happening for Jesus’ disciples. The entire section, Mark 8:22–10:52 begins and ends with the healing of a blind man. In this section of Mark, Jesus is especially teaching his disciples about His coming death. They have trouble grasping it even though He tells them numerous times. Just like the blind man, they need “two touches” to see clearly. Restoring of sight becomes a metaphor for insightful discipleship.

Teachers love questions. They are often the key to unlocking a student’s understanding. In this passage in Mark 8, the turning point of the book has arrived. Three characteristics confirm this assertion. First, Jesus questions His disciples about His identity, something He has not done before this point. Second, Peter is the first person not demon-possessed who declares that Jesus is the Messiah. Third, immediately following this revelation of who Jesus is, He begins to explain where He is going—to the cross.

Why does Jesus tell His disciples to tell no one that He is the Messiah? It seems counterintuitive to establishing the kingdom of God. However, in Jesus’ day, “Messiah” had political overtones of overthrowing Roman rule. Jesus did not come to be that kind of messiah; hence His call for silence on His identity.

What does this story teach us about times when it’s important not to say some things, however true they might be?

The Cost of Discipleship

Read Mark 8:31–38. What does Jesus teach here about the cost of following Christ?

The disciples have come to a crucial turning point in their relationship with Jesus. They now know that He is the Messiah. The reader of Mark has known this from the beginning of the book (*Mark 1:1*) and thus has had an advantage over the sometimes bumbling disciples.

When Jesus first called the disciples, He said He would make them fishers of men (*Mark 1:17*). There was no talk of trouble. But now that they really know who He is, He unfolds to them the goal of His mission—that it is necessary for Him to suffer many things, to be rejected and killed, and then to rise again after three days.

It is shocking news. Peter, who just confessed that Jesus is the Messiah, takes Him aside and rebukes Him for saying such things. All of this was told in indirect discourse, but now the Gospel writer reports the words of Jesus, words that must have stung as Peter heard them. He calls Peter “Satan” and tells him to get out of His way since such thoughts are not in accord with the will of God.

“Peter’s words were not such as would be a help and solace to Jesus in the great trial before Him. They were not in harmony with God’s purpose of grace toward a lost world, nor with the lesson of self-sacrifice that Jesus had come to teach by His own example.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 415.

Followers of Jesus are called to have the same goal He has—to take the cross and to follow Him. Crucifixion was the most cruel, humiliating, and intimidating method of execution that the Romans had. Everyone wanted to avoid the cross. So, why would anyone want to take up the cross as a symbol of their devotion to Jesus?

Jesus explains not only the cost of discipleship but also its great value. In the paradox of Christian faith, losing one’s life becomes the way to find it. In contrast, gaining the whole world but forfeiting eternal life is nonsensical. As missionary Jim Elliott put it so eloquently in his journal of October 28, 1949: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.”

“ ‘He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life’ ” (*John 12:25, NKJV*). How have you experienced the reality of these words?

The Mountain and the Multitude

Read Mark 9:1–13. What did Peter, James, and John see one night with Jesus?

In Mark 9:1, Jesus predicts that some standing with Him would not taste death before seeing the kingdom of God come in power. That prediction is fulfilled within a few days when He takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain alone. There He is transfigured before them into the glory of the heavenly kingdom.

Elijah and Moses appear from the heavenly realm and converse with Jesus. Luke notes that they were talking about Jesus' departure (Greek *exodos*) that He was about to accomplish in Jerusalem (*Luke 9:30, 31*). Thus, this scene of glory is tied to Jesus' coming death on the cross (*compare with Mark 9:9*). It would give hope when the disciples see Him crucified.

Upon descending the mountain the following morning, the three disciples ask Jesus about Elijah coming first. Likely this idea is tied to the expectation that Elijah would reappear before the Messiah (*compare with Mal. 4:5, 6*). Jesus replies that Elijah has already come, a reference to John the Baptist. Just as they killed John, so Jesus will die at their hands, but He will rise after three days.

After the night of glory, the scene at the bottom of the mountain was sad chaos (*see Mark 9:14–29*). The nine disciples had encountered a demon-possessed boy whom they could not heal. When Jesus arrives at the scene, everyone runs to see Him. The story unfolds of the demon's power over the child. Jesus seems to take a long time inquiring about the details of the demon possession. It proves too much for the father, who blurts out, " 'If You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us' " (*Mark 9:22, NKJV*).

Jesus immediately picks up on the expression of doubt. The Lord's response can be paraphrased, "What do you mean, 'If You can'?" (*Mark 9:23*). Suddenly, like a bolt of lightning from the sky, the father sees that it is not only his son who has a problem—he has a problem of unbelief. And his unbelief could result in his son not being healed. The desperate father casts himself on Jesus' mercy with the memorable line, " 'I believe; help my unbelief!' " (*Mark 9:24, NKJV*). Jesus heals the boy.

In what situations, if any, have you had to cry out, " 'I believe; help my unbelief' " ? What did you learn from those experiences?

Who Is the Greatest?

Read Mark 9:30–41. What is different about Jesus' second prediction of His death and resurrection (*compare with Mark 8:31*)? Also, what do the disciples argue about, and what instruction does Jesus give?

In the first prediction, Jesus refers to those who will reject Him and kill Him. In the second prediction, Jesus refers to the fact that He will be betrayed. The betrayer is not pointed out at this time, but the reader already knows who it is because of the identification of Judas (*see Mark 3:19*). Again, the Lord refers to being killed and then rising after three days. But the disciples seem even less interested in the details of this prediction than in the first. Unwelcome news does not garner discussion.

In Mark 8:27, Jesus was north of the Sea of Galilee near Caesarea Philippi. In Mark 9:30, He is passing through Galilee, and in Mark 9:33, He enters Capernaum. Thus, it is not difficult to envisage His journey from north to south. However, He enters Capernaum alone as the twelve disciples lag behind. In the house, He inquires about their discussion on the way. No one speaks up, a sure sign of their discomfort at the question, almost like children caught doing something they know is wrong. Their conversation had been about who was the greatest. As little as most people are willing to admit it, this question of who is greatest is something everyone thinks about. But in the kingdom of God, this idea gets turned upside down.

Jesus responds to the problem in two steps. First, He utters the clear statement that to be first (greatest), you have to become a servant. Then Jesus illustrates His meaning by an action. Evidently a child was standing nearby listening. Jesus takes the child and places him in the midst of the group. That would be intimidating for the child. But then Jesus takes the child in His arms, relaxing the scene. He teaches that if you receive the child, you receive Him. And if you receive Him, you receive His Father. Thus, the lowest child is linked to God Himself.

John asks a question about outsiders, and Jesus teaches the important lesson that those not against us are for us. The Lord affirms that helping those in Christian service, even in small ways, does not go unnoticed in heaven.

What is the biblical idea of greatness in contrast to the world's idea? Which one are you striving for?

The Healthy Man in Hell

Read Mark 9:42–50. What ties the teachings of Jesus together in this passage?

At first, this passage may seem to be a collection of disparate teachings of Jesus thrown together without any rhyme or reason. However, a closer look reveals that each successive teaching has a catchword connection to the previous one. The passage revolves around three main terms that move the instruction forward step by step—“causes to sin,” “fire,” and “salt.”

The first teaching is about “little ones,” referring to new believers. Teachers and leaders are tasked in the kingdom of God with the responsibility to care for these new converts with special care, similar to the Old Testament ethic of caring for those weakest in ancient society—widows, orphans, and foreigners. Jesus speaks in hyperbole that it would be better to be drowned in the sea than to cause one of these “little ones” to sin.

The catchphrase “causes to sin” leads to the longest teaching in this passage. Two conundrums confront the reader. First, is Jesus really teaching people to cut off a hand or foot or pluck out an eye? Second, is He teaching an eternally burning hell? The answer to the first question is no, Jesus is not teaching mutilation—that was rejected in Judaism (*compare with Deut. 14:1; 1 Kings 18:27, 28*). The Lord is using hyperbole to make His point. If losing a hand, foot, or eye is terrible, how much more a disaster should it be for the Christian to sin!

The second question also receives a negative answer; no, Jesus is not teaching an eternally burning hell. How do we know? First, the passage contains a certain comedic aspect. Consider people entering the heavenly city with one eye or one foot or one hand. Then consider people who are whole going to hell. Should it not be the other way around? The healthy man in hell? That is comedy. Such comedy over a serious topic leads one to consider that Jesus is illustrating a point with hyperbole. Sin should be taken so seriously that it would be better to lose a hand, foot, or eye than to sin.

As to hell being eternal, its consequences are eternal, not the fire of hell itself. “‘For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him *should not perish* but have eternal life’ ” (*John 3:16, ESV; emphasis supplied*). Those who are lost do not burn forever; instead, they perish forever—a very big difference!

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Ministry,” pp. 426–431; “Who Is the Greatest?” pp. 432–442, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“Before honor is humility. To fill a high place before men, Heaven chooses the worker who, like John the Baptist, takes a lowly place before God. The most childlike disciple is the most efficient in labor for God. The heavenly intelligences can co-operate with him who is seeking, not to exalt self, but to save souls.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 436.

“By all that has given us advantage over another,—be it education and refinement, nobility of character, Christian training, religious experience,—we are in debt to those less favored; and, so far as lies in our power, we are to minister unto them. If we are strong, we are to stay up the hands of the weak. Angels of glory, that do always behold the face of the Father in heaven, joy in ministering to His little ones. Trembling souls, who have many objectionable traits of character, are their special charge. Angels are ever present where they are most needed, with those who have the hardest battle with self to fight, and whose surroundings are the most discouraging. And in this ministry Christ’s true followers will co-operate.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 440.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Read again Mark 8:27–29. How often do you confess to others your belief in Jesus as the Christ?
- 2 What is the right balance between the mountaintop experience of communion with Christ and the down-on-the-plain experience of service to others’ needs?
- 3 In class, discuss the answer to the question about greatness at the end of Wednesday’s study. What did you determine is the difference between how the world views greatness and how God does? Who are some of the people the world deems great that perhaps God doesn’t? In contrast, whom might God deem great that the world ignores or even disdains? What does this difference tell us about how warped and twisted the world’s ideals really are?
- 4 How can we learn to take sin so seriously that, as Jesus said, you’re better off to be maimed than to sin?

Food Choices Trigger Uproar

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

One Sabbath, Anush and Mother returned home from church to learn that Father had made plans for a countryside picnic. “Let’s barbeque,” he said.

Anush remembered how the Israelites had prepared their Sabbath meals on Friday, before the Sabbath hours (*Exodus 16*), and wondered whether it was a good idea to barbeque on Sabbath. Out loud, she said, “No, Father. That’s not a good plan. I don’t even eat meat.” She had become a vegetarian.

Father called off the picnic, but he still didn’t grasp that Anush no longer ate meat. The next day, he prepared chicken for Sunday lunch and handed her a piece. “Father, I don’t eat meat,” Anush said.

Now Father understood, and he was upset. He thought it was abnormal not to eat meat. The next day, he forbade Anush and Mother from going to prayer meeting at the house church in their town. When the pair protested, Father angrily aired frustrations that he had collected against Adventists. He criticized the biblical requirement to return tithes and offerings (*Mal. 3:8–10*).

“Tithes and offerings are a business,” he said. “You are just supporting a business.”

He accused the Adventist Church of being a foreign group intent on destroying Armenia. He lashed out at Anush’s lifestyle. “Today you say, ‘I don’t eat meat,’ and tomorrow you will say, ‘I don’t have a father,’” he said.

Anush sat still and prayed silently, “What should I say, Lord?” Every time Father spoke against God or the church, she prayed, “This is not addressed to me. This is addressed to You. It’s Your responsibility to answer.” She remembered Romans 2:4, which says, “The goodness of God leads . . . to repentance” (*NKJV*). She sensed God was saying to extend a similar goodness to her father. She prayed, “There’s nothing that I can do except love Father.”

Father owned a small grocery store. When he left Mother or Anush in charge, they wouldn’t sell alcohol or cigarettes. Now, as Father berated them, he felt condemned. “Do you think that I’m evil and you’re good because I sell alcohol and cigarettes and you don’t?” he asked. “I’m a better Christian than you. I’m going to lead Sabbath worship services from now on. You can no longer go to church. I will lead the worship services.”

That ended the conversation. Anush went to her room, and Mother followed. Both were shocked. “What will we do?” Mother asked.

Anush suggested cooperating with Father as long as he didn’t oppose the Bible. “He said we will worship at home on Sabbath,” she said. “He didn’t take away our Bibles. He even respects the Sabbath. Let’s wait for the Sabbath. If he keeps his word, we will keep the Sabbath at home with him. If he forgets his word, we will pray and see how God guides us.”

Part of last quarter’s Thirteenth Sabbath Offering went to open a center of influence for families like Anush’s in Yerevan, Armenia. Thank you for helping spread the gospel with your offerings. Next week: Father allows Anush and Mother to return to church.