

MARK AND THE MARGINS: REFLECTIONS ON THE GOSPEL OF MARK AND CARING FOR THE MARGINALIZED

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[Despite all the ways we've bought into the cultural rhetoric of "success," the Gospels call us from the privileged to join Jesus at the margins.]

Editor's Note:

Since this entire issue is built around God's concern for the marginalized, we felt that it was important to establish the absolute centrality of this subject in the Scriptures themselves. From the over 2,000 verses in the Bible that speak directly to justice and mercy for the poor and oppressed, God's intentions for us are remarkably clear. As a budding New Testament scholar with real-life experience in the local church, Scott Ryan brings the focus in even closer by guiding through Jesus' own words and example. It is our hope that this issue will first and foremost draw you back into the texts that bring clarity and urgency to our Kingdom work among those that both the culture and the Church have discarded.

—Jonathan Martin

Marginalized people stand on the fringes of our communities and society. Perhaps it is the man standing in the median of the local thoroughfare with a cardboard sign, or the single mother who works multiple jobs to provide for her children. Perhaps it is those in our communities who are differently "abled," mentally or physically. The question is, do we have the eyes to see and respond appropriately? The cultural rhetoric of "success" bleeds into our church communities, and often we succumb to defining *power* and *prestige* in similar ways to what we find in the business world. Yet, it seems the New Testament persistently pushes us to focus our eyes not on the "successful" around us, but on those living on the margins—those who may not seem to be in positions of influence or importance.

The Challenge of the Gospel Narratives

It is interesting that we gravitate toward those in seeming positions of power when reading the Gospel narratives. For instance, the disciples are often lionized as the prime examples of what it looks like to follow Jesus. In the Gospel of Mark, however, this approach is challenged and turned on its head. The apostles are those closest to Jesus throughout the story, but repeatedly Mark makes clear that these men do not fully understand Jesus and His mission. Mark narrates three separate predictions of Jesus' suffering, and the point of each one is that suffering is essential to His identity as the Messiah (8:27-38; 9:30-37; 10:32-34). Such information runs counter to Jewish messianic expectations of the day. It is probable that the disciples expected Jesus literally to restore the kingdom of Israel with force. But, this expectation was disappointed when they



encountered a Messiah who came to serve, suffer, die, and be raised again.

The third and final passion prediction in Mark is in chapter 10. This comes just after Jesus' interaction with the rich man, who inquires about what one must do to inherit eternal life. After Jesus tells him to sell everything, he "went away sad, because he had great wealth" (v. 22). The scene ends in verse 31 with the insistence that "many who are first will be last, and the last first." On the heels of the text, Jesus offers the following words for His disciples: "We are going up to Jerusalem . . . and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise" (vv. 33-34). Interestingly, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, approach Jesus immediately after Jesus reveals this. They ask, "Teacher . . . we want you to do for us whatever we ask" (v. 35). Jesus replies, "What do you want me to do for you?" (v. 36). The brothers proceed to request a seat at Jesus' right and left in glory—places of power and prestige.

At this point, Jesus begins to challenge their request. He asks James and John if they are able to drink His cup and be baptized with His baptism (v. 38), which are presumably references to His impending suffering and death. Although Jesus affirms that they are able to drink from His cup and be baptized with His baptism, He also states that these places are not His to grant. This is where the story gets interesting. The other disciples are indignant with James and John at this request for power (v. 41), so Jesus calls the disciples together and offers a programmatic statement: "You know that those who are regarded as

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rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (vv. 42-45).

Jesus’ words at this point challenge our tendency to elevate those who possess power and prestige. We have a lucid counterculture aphorism from the Messiah, which implores the disciples (and the readers of the text) not to structure their communities in ways similar to the surrounding world. Even if those around us crave positions of power and use these positions to take advantage of others, it should not be so with disciples of Jesus. Instead, like Jesus, the reader must take the lowly place of a slave, identifying with those who are on the fringes of society (the Greek word in Mark 10:44 is *doulos* and is best translated as “slave”). Thus, those on the margins are pushed to the center, and the Gospel exhorts us to see the world through a different lens—the lens of a God who became a human being, assumed a lowly state, and died on a cross for God’s creation.

The Grand Reversal of the Kingdom

This point is further confirmed if we continue reading in the Gospel. The story immediately following the sons of Zebedee is the healing of a blind man named Bartimaeus (vv. 46-52). As Jesus leaves Jericho, a blind beggar sitting literally on the fringes of the roadside cries out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” (vv. 47-48). Jesus hears the man, stops, calls him, and says: “What do you want me to do for you?” (v. 51). At first glance we might pass right over

this question. But, given the previous scene, we notice that Jesus asks this man a similar question to the one He asked of James and John in verse 36. Mark appears to offer signals to the reader that Jesus identifies with this one on the margins of society while the disciples remain blind to Jesus’ mission.

One last point about Mark’s Gospel is in order. Recall that James and John asked to sit at the “right” and the “left” of Jesus in glory. The next time that these two terms come up in the Gospel is at the Crucifixion scene. In chapter 15, we might expect to see the disciples remaining faithful to Jesus as He suffers, especially given Jesus’ predictions of this event, but they have long since deserted their leader. Jesus is crucified between two criminals. Verse 27 states: “They crucified two robbers with him, one on his right and one on his left.” Note that the Messiah himself does not end up in a place of expected glory wielding worldly power; instead, He is alone and hung on a tree to die between two marginalized people of society. This is His moment of glory. This is what it means to sit at the “right” and “left” of Jesus. In a literarily creative fashion, Mark again exhorts the reader to see the world through a new lens. Instead of exalting those in culturally powerful positions, those who follow Jesus must identify with those who are pushed to the margins of society. Thus, the powerful in our communities are moved to edges and the marginalized take center stage.

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