

KINGDOM RULES: UPSIDE-DOWN DISCIPLESHIP

Douglas Petersen

*Virtually every major biblical teaching undergirds and demands social concern and helps to shape its character.*¹

Jesus' teachings in the Gospel of Mark provide the marching orders for holistic ministry, i.e., discipling people to faith in Jesus Christ, and demonstrating our own faith through our actions and service among the needy. The purpose of this article is to establish that the transformational experience of salvation, the ethical actions of social concern, and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, as they are seen primarily in the Gospel of Mark, are inextricably linked together in any expression of holistic ministry.

Focusing on Mark 8:22–10:52, the core of Jesus' teaching on discipleship, I contrast the social and ethical norms of power, authority, control, knowledge, status and wealth, which were accepted in first-century culture, with the ethical standards that Jesus required of his followers under the rules of the kingdom of God. These two ethical systems are polar opposites. Jesus taught that greatness in leadership, as God measures it, directly relates to our actions on behalf of the marginalized and disenfranchised. These include: the poor, the sick, the disabled, the unclean, outcasts, outsiders, and especially, or perhaps specifically, children.

¹The three dimensions of social action are often described as: (1) relief, or providing short term assistance to people in the midst of a mess; (2) development, or equipping people with the tools to move towards self-sufficiency; and (3) structural change, or addressing the societal structures that enable or not well-being, justice, and dignity. See Ronald J. Sider, *Good News and Good Works: A Theology for the Whole Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 139.

1. ***THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD***

Mark's account, the first of the Gospels to be written, begins with a bang—no birth narrative, no build-up, just a single statement: “The gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (1:1). It continues by recounting that when the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus at his baptism, he was anointed to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom of God and to inaugurate God's right to reign through his ministry. Mark follows the baptism account with Jesus' startling announcement, “The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the good news” (1:14-15).² The central theme of Jesus' mission and message was “the good news of the kingdom of God.” The Messiah, the king of this kingdom, had come!

The Miracles, People's Response, and Religious Opposition (1:16–3:6)

The nature of Jesus' identity as the Messiah revolved around powerful deeds of exorcisms and miracles, and his teachings about the kingdom of God. After Jesus cast out demons, news about him spread everywhere (1:28). People brought to him “all who were ill” until the “whole city” had gathered at the door (1:32–34). When Jesus healed a leper his popularity grew so much that he could no longer enter a city. He stayed in the countryside (1:45) or went to the seashore (2:13), but the people still came to him from everywhere. One time when Jesus entered a home, the press of people was such that men cut a hole in the roof of the house in order to lower down a paralytic so that Jesus could heal him (2:3–12).³

On the surface, Mark's telling of Jesus' powerful deeds synced perfectly with Jewish expectations about the coming Messiah. When the “time is fulfilled,” the Messiah would usher in God's kingdom. The mere fact that God proposed to bring in his kingdom was no secret. People expected it. They also expected that when God

² See Gordon Fee, “Kingdom of God and the Church's Global Mission,” in *Called & Empowered: Global Mission in Pentecostal Perspective*, eds. Murray W. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus, and Douglas Petersen (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 7–21. In this brilliant essay, Fee summarizes the concept of the kingdom of God in the teachings of Jesus and its significance for the global mission of the church.

³ For the most comprehensive treatment of miracles in the Bible, see Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

instituted the kingdom it would be with apocalyptic force exercising his power over all creation. Led by the Messiah, a great day of messianic salvation, as foretold by Isaiah, would bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind, the ability to hear to the deaf, and freedom to the oppressed (Isa 35:5–6; 61:1–2). God would right all the wrongs caused by exploitation and injustice, and the hated Roman regime would finally be overthrown. The coming of the kingdom would result in a reversal of the order of things. While the crowds loved Jesus, the religious establishment hated him. And the disciples, whom Jesus called to be with him, were just confused.

Clearly, when Jesus announced the new rule of the coming kingdom, people were beside themselves with excitement and anticipation. They came in droves to see Jesus and to bring to him the sick, disabled, and demon-possessed. The crowds, captivated by his miracles, were “amazed” and “astonished” exclaiming that they “had never seen anything like it.” It was not long before Jesus’ own disciples were asking, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?” (4:41).

In contrast to the excitement of the ordinary people, the religious establishment reacted with growing hostility; Jesus did not seem to recognize their authority. He broke their rules. They were the guardians of God’s affairs on earth and they intended to use their positions of power and authority to enforce the rules. They determined to control both Jesus and the crowds. When these leaders discovered they could not control Jesus, they began to plan his death.

Jesus, the Disciples, and the Mystery of the Kingdom (3:7–8:21)

It is evident from Mark’s Gospel that at times, even his disciples were uncertain about Jesus. They were confused. They did not understand (5:31; 6:52; 7:18; 8:17–21). Certainly, Jesus acted like the Messiah. He cast out demons, healed the sick and disabled, and even raised the dead. He calmed the storm, fed thousands, and walked on water. The disciples saw plenty of miracles. These signs of the kingdom were exactly what they expected from the Messiah. However, the great reversal wasn’t happening. Jesus didn’t seem to be doing anything about the powerful, the religious, the rich, or the Romans. Rather he was spending his time with the poor, the sick, the insignificant, the outcasts, and the children. Furthermore, what Jesus said to the disciples in private about the nature of life in the kingdom of God made no sense at all. What was the problem?

In actual fact, the kingdom of God—the dynamic, redemptive reign of God—had come in power. God had broken into history in the person and mission of Jesus to deliver people from the grip of evil. By casting out demons and healing the blind, the deaf, and the mute, Jesus was establishing his right to rule. The miracles and wonders of Jesus’ ministry were critical signs demonstrating that the kingdom of God had come. The future had broken into the present. The kingdom was God’s gift to defeat sin and evil; it was good news to be believed. This good news meant that in Jesus Christ there was forgiveness for all and people would be set free from Satan’s tyranny.

But the kingdom was also a mystery; much of what the disciples saw and heard was not quite what they expected. The kingdom, which Jesus said would appear fully at the end of the age, was now operating in hidden form manifesting itself imperceptibly, invisibly, and secretly in people’s lives. Moreover, Jesus taught that the Messiah, forgiver of sin and performer of spectacular miracles, would also have to suffer at the hands of the Romans. Everything changed and yet nothing changed! How was this good news?

Quite simply, the disciples didn’t get it. They were painfully slow to understand Jesus’ kingdom agenda (6:52). The miracles they understood, but the rest—not so much! Mark illustrates the conundrum with which the disciples wrestled: The kingdom of God with all its power had indeed broken into the present, but the Messiah who ushered in this kingdom and did great miracles, was also the Messiah who must suffer and die. And this “good news” required a human response—repentance, a complete turnaround of life, dependence on God’s mercy, submission to his rules, and a life of discipleship, which meant in essence “to become like Jesus” in self-denial and self-sacrifice on behalf of others (8:34).⁴ This is what Jesus’ disciples were slow to understand. If miracles could unlock the window to their understanding, then when Jesus walked on the water (6:48) or fed the multitudes from almost nothing (6:33–44; 8:1–9)—then they should have had the key; and yet they remained locked out. Shortly after the second miracle feeding, the disciples grew hungry and began “to discuss with themselves that they had no bread” (8:16). Jesus asked them how many baskets of food were left over after the feedings, and without missing a beat, the disciples answered, “Nineteen.” Jesus, surely in frustration, asked them, “Do you not understand?” (8: 21). The irony escaped the disciples.

⁴Fee, “Kingdom of God and the Church’s Global Mission,” 13.

2. ***KINGDOM RULES: UPSIDE-DOWN DISCIPLESHIP*** ***(8:22–10:52)***

As Mark approached the middle of his telling of the gospel story, he focused like a laser on what Luke Timothy Johnson calls, “the drama of discipleship.”⁵ The setting for this drama took place during the journey Jesus and his disciples made toward Jerusalem (8:22–10:52). During this period, the crowds and the religious leaders faded into the background. Jesus directed his full attention on the disciples as he laid out the elements of a “pedagogical project” designed to reshape their understanding of the Messiah’s mission, which in turn would define their own.⁶

The curriculum revolved around the theme that Jesus, as the Messiah, must suffer, die, and be resurrected. His disciples had trouble understanding this concept, so Jesus continued to teach them, both by showing and telling, the true nature and cost of discipleship. The disciples had witnessed his miracles and correctly identified Jesus as the Messiah, but they never dreamed that the Messiah would have to die. Richard Hays states the dilemma precisely: “The secret of the kingdom of God is that Jesus must die as the crucified Messiah.”⁷ Nor could the disciples comprehend that if they entertained any hopes of greatness in this new kingdom, they too must take up the cross and follow Jesus through a life of suffering and service. Indeed, for the disciples, the mystery of the kingdom would represent a reversal of the order of things in ways that they had never imagined. Life under the new rule of God required a dramatic change in the rules of leadership.⁸

From beginning to end, Mark sets his narrative against the backdrop that that his audience knows how the story turns out.⁹ Mark

⁵Luke Timothy Johnson, *Writings of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 174–175 and *Jesus and the Gospels* (Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company, 2004), 26–27.

⁶Johnson, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 26–27.

⁷Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 76.

⁸Since Jesus’ teachings were directed specifically to the Twelve—to those in whom he placed his ultimate trust and to whom he passed the torch of kingdom mission, I will use the terms “leader/disciple” and “discipleship/leadership” interchangeably.

⁹For a veritable treasure chest of online resources for the study of the New Testament and the Gospel of Mark see Rev. Felix Just, S. J., “*The Gospel according to Mark*,” <http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Mark.htm> (accessed May 29, 2012).

sequences the stories and teachings in this section to make it appear as though the confusion of the disciples goes from bad to worse, moving from merely a lack of comprehension to a full-blown misunderstanding of who the Messiah really is and what is required of them as followers. In his narrative, Mark does not concern himself as to whether the disciples understand who Jesus really is. As his readers are well aware, after the resurrection and the Day of Pentecost, the disciples clearly did understand. Instead, Mark's primary concern is for readers to answer for themselves the open-ended question, "Who do you say that I am?" (8:29).

In response to this question, Mark weaved together a beautiful tapestry¹⁰ that demonstrated the disciples' rather difficult journey toward understanding the nature and character of Jesus and what the ethical attitudes and behaviors of authentic leadership should look like under God's reign (8:22–10:52).¹¹ In just 118 verses, Mark uses a variety of literary techniques to reshape the disciples' perspective of the Messiah and establish a pattern of what the ethical attitudes and behaviors of authentic leadership should look like under God's reign. Moving rapidly through seventeen episodes, cutting rapidly from one scene to the next while interacting with more than a dozen characters, Mark keeps the focus on the teacher and his students. As the narrator, Mark provides the kind of information that guides readers to align themselves with "God's point of view," the reversal of the order of things, rather than with the cultural and ethical norms that represent a "human's point of view."¹²

Leadership Norms Contrasted with Kingdom Discipleship

As we work through the episodes that follow, we must be careful not to read into the stories our own cultural attitudes framed by

¹⁰ Jerry Camery-Hoggatt, *Irony in Mark's Gospel: Texts and Subtexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) and *Speaking of God: Reading and Preaching the Word of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995). On the Gospel of Mark, Camery-Hoggatt is recognized as one of the best scholars in the world. I am privileged to have Jerry as a colleague. His office is twenty feet from mine and he is never too busy to answer my questions. The content of some of our discussions is reflected in this chapter.

¹¹ For a detailed treatment of Mark's use of literary devices in his telling of the story, see David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story*, 2nd edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

¹² David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark As Story*, 2nd edition (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 45.

accepted social and ethical standards of the twenty-first century. If we do, we will miss the reasons the disciples were “amazed” and “astonished” at what Jesus was asking of them, and continues to ask of us. A brief review of the order of things in the world of leadership in the first century may be helpful.

People who have grown up in more or less democratic societies, far removed from first-century beliefs and practices, may find it difficult to comprehend the massive power imbalance that existed between those in authority at the top of the ladder of civil, political, and religious society and the women, the children, the poor, the unclean, and the outcasts at the bottom. It is even more difficult to fathom that the shared social and ethical standards—beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors—that sustained and reinforced these societal structures were understood by almost everyone, from top to bottom, to be the order of things, the way God had allegedly ordained them.

To get the full import of the reversal for which Jesus was calling, we must recognize that the ethical and social norms of Jewish antiquity were the acceptable standards of an orderly society. The Jewish leaders adhered to a set of values and traditions that were justifiable and normative within Judaism. For Jewish authorities, and certainly for Romans, leadership was synonymous with power, authority, influence, and control.¹³ Wealth was considered a symbol of the blessing of God. Leaders held posts of honor and power, and derived their identity from their status. Additionally their position of power ensured that they were able to hold on to their power. To some degree, all leaders exercised religious, economic, and political power because these spheres were so intertwined as to be indivisible.

Leaders acted as agents. They spoke and acted on behalf of the group they represented or the one who sent them. Both Jewish and Roman leaders believed that God authorized their right to rule, even though they had allegiances to others. Jewish leaders were accountable to the Romans and in many ways dependent upon the popular support of the people. Since these religious leaders feared both the Romans and the people, it was impossible to “love the Lord with all their minds”

¹³ Many scholars have argued that by the time of the first century, Jewish culture was not culturally monolithic. The cultural norms of the Mediterranean world, most overtly represented and dominated by the Romans, such as honor and shame, status and role, patron/client relationships and the concept of reciprocity, had penetrated Jewish culture, having a much stronger impact on Jewish society than had been previously acknowledged. In any case, while this may be true, these types of social and ethical norms, perhaps to a lesser extent, were already part and parcel of the fabric of Jewish culture.

because they were dependent upon other human powers who wielded more clout than they.

Leaders did not like to serve. Service, in first century culture, was neither noble nor honorable, but was viewed by all leaders to be the labor of women and slaves. Leaders used their power to ensure that those below them served them; they “lorded their authority over others”; they used their power to secure their positions. Their role, as they understood it, was one of domination rather than service. They guarded the temple, kept the rules of the religious and social order, and, at all costs, did whatever they needed to maintain their own power and control.

These social, economic, and political norms enabled the continuation of an orderly and predictable society that was already precariously located within the larger environs of a chaotic world. To replace existing attitudes and behavior in such a context with the countercultural and paradoxical demands of Jesus could never be accomplished through human efforts. It is little wonder why the disciples were “astonished” by the nature of Jesus’ demands of discipleship.

Jesus’ teachings were perceived by his disciples as countercultural and by the authorities as subversive and revolutionary. The disciple who followed Jesus was not to act anything like the religious and political authorities. Behaviors that were highly prized—characterized by position, power, authority, influence, and wealth—needed to be reversed. Jesus challenged the traditional social and cultural norms with Scripture. He accused the leaders of his day of being hard-hearted because they substituted human traditions for God’s intentions (7:9–13). Worse, they were blind and deaf to the rule of God and to the Son of God through whom this rule was inaugurated.

Mark wanted all to see that the cultural norms that everyone accepted—whether in Judea or in Rome—were contrary to the ethical demands of the kingdom. This upside-down way defined authentic discipleship. The manner by which followers of Christ treated the people without earthly power or influence—the unimportant, unclean, outcasts, children, women, beggars, blind, foreigners, and widows—would be the measurement of their success.

It is with Peter’s confession that Jesus was the Messiah, a critical turning point in the disciples’ journey toward discipleship, that Mark begins the heart of his gospel in which Jesus is heavily engaged in teaching his disciples (8:22–10:52). Throughout this entire section, Mark introduces a new subtheme that carries with it a sobering

implication: What happens to Jesus will happen to his followers, too. The disciples must learn that for them, as for Jesus, leadership is service, defeat is victory, and death is the pathway to life. Mark embeds the narrative with three specific predictions of the coming passion (8:31–33; 9:30–32; 10:32–34). The predictions are quite explicit, but the narrative indicates with equal clarity that the disciples failed to understand their meaning. Following each prediction there is a dialogue with the disciples that indicates that they were blind to what Jesus was saying to them. It is not insignificant, then, that the entire discipleship section is bounded on either side by stories of blind men (one at Bethsaida, 8:22–26 and Bartimaeus, 10:46–52).

On the front end of this section is a story about the two-staged healing of the blind man from Bethsaida, and on the back end, a story of the healing of blind Bartimaeus from Jericho. In between these two healing stories, Jesus revealed the core content of authentic discipleship, by foretelling his suffering, death, and resurrection (8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34). After each of these “passion predictions,” the disciples were more confounded, as they seemed determined to shape Jesus’ announcement according to their own expectations. In response to their misunderstandings, Jesus combined teaching with riveting visual examples, a show-and-tell approach, to hammer home the ethical norms of authentic discipleship.

The Blind Man at Bethsaida

The first bookend surrounding this section of Jesus’ teaching is the healing of a blind man of Bethsaida. After Jesus touched the blind man the first time, the man could see, but not very well. The man said, “I can see people, but they look like trees, walking” (8:24). It was only after Jesus touched the man a second time that his sight was completely restored. Certainly, Jesus healed the man out of a heart of deep compassion, but by placing the story where he did, Mark established a critical pedagogical stake that will become evident after Peter’s confession of faith. The disciples could see too, but like the blind man, not very well. They needed a second touch that would not come until after the resurrection. This story, the healing of the blind man, sets up this entire section.

Lose Your Life in Order to Save It (8:27–9:29)

Mark uses the story of the blind man of Bethsaida to redirect the focus from the disciples’ earlier question about Jesus, “Who then is

this [man]?” (4:41) to the more central question Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” (8:29).¹⁴ Peter’s immediate response, “You are the Christ,” a recognition of Jesus as the Messiah, was the right answer. But in this first passion prediction (8:31), when Jesus announced that the Son of Man must suffer, be rejected, die, and after three days rise again, Peter was flabbergasted. He had just declared Jesus to be the Christ, the Messiah, and he couldn’t comprehend all this suffering and death talk. Jesus’ words made no sense to him or to any of the other disciples. Of all the expectations the disciples may have had of what the kingdom of God might look like, the concepts of service, suffering, and death were not among them.¹⁵

Peter’s confession made explicit the blindness of the disciples.¹⁶ Peter rebuked Jesus, and Jesus returned the rebuke by saying that Peter was thinking from a human point of view (8:33). But from God’s point of view, Jesus had to suffer, and further, that all who wished to follow him were “summoned to a similar vocation” to lose their life in order to save it.¹⁷ Jesus taught, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it” (8:34–35). Peter’s declaration that Jesus is the Messiah was “a shadow of the truth,” but he was really like the blind man who saw “trees walking” after Jesus’ first touch. Peter and the rest needed a second touch in order to see clearly.

Mark followed Peter’s confession with two episodes to underscore how little the disciples really understood: the transfiguration of Jesus (9:2–8) and the healing of the boy with an unclean spirit (9:14–29). In the first episode, Jesus took Peter, James, and John to a “high mountain” (understood in Scripture as a place of divine revelation), where the three disciples caught a glimpse of Jesus in his divine glory as king. Even Moses (the Law) and Elijah (the prophets) affirmed that Jesus was the Messiah. But after Peter suggested that they set up three booths, one for each of these personages, God himself spoke: “This one is my beloved son, Listen to him! . . . And suddenly the disciples no longer saw anyone except Jesus alone with them.” The transfiguration

¹⁴Hays, *Moral Vision*, 75.

¹⁵Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Living Gospel* (London: Continuum, 2004), 52.

¹⁶Camery-Hoggatt, *Mark*, 157.

¹⁷Hays, *Moral Vision*, 79.

pointed to the future of the glory of Christ, that the suffering to which Jesus referred after Peter's confession was but for a season. But Peter (James and John) still didn't quite get it. The glory of the transfiguration enraptured him. But that the purposes of God would also include a road of suffering and service escaped him completely.

The splendor of the transfiguration quickly became a fleeting memory for Peter, James, and John. As they descended from the mountain, they were confronted with the reality of evil. A man, desperate for help, had brought his child to the disciples. "Teacher, I brought you my son, possessed with a spirit which makes him mute; and whenever it seizes him, it slams him to the ground and he foams at the mouth, and grinds his teeth and stiffens out. I told your disciples to cast it out, and they could not do it" (9:17-18). As Jesus turned to the boy, the evil spirit immediately acted out, throwing the boy to the ground in convulsions. When Jesus asked the father how long these horrific episodes had been going on, the father responded, "From childhood" (9:21). Jesus rebuked the evil spirit, saying, "You deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him and do not enter him again." The evil spirit shrieked for the last time, convulsed the body of its victim, and then left the boy (9:5-27).

To be sure, Jesus performed this exorcism because of his love and compassion toward the boy and his father. But there was a lesson to be taught as well. The disciples, like the blind man who saw "men like trees walking" after Jesus' first touch, were incapable of seeing the full picture of the glorious but suffering Messiah. Similarly Mark related the story of the boy who was a deaf mute to demonstrate the disciples' incapacity to hear or speak of the mystery of the kingdom of God. Mark wanted to stress that it was not enough to know that "Jesus is the Christ." The disciples must also face the terrible consequences of that reality. Mark's narrative structure, mirroring this double understanding, required that Peter's statement of faith be deepened into a commitment of faith. The call to discipleship was and is more than following a miracle worker; it was and is also about taking up the cross.¹⁸

¹⁸David E. Garland, *Mark* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 80.

To Be First, You Must First Be Last (9:30–10:31)

In the second passion prediction, Jesus again foretold his death, announcing that, “The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later” (9:31). Despite the recent mountaintop experience, the disciples started arguing among themselves as to which of them was the greatest. Jesus’ rebuttal to their arrogance was sharp. He overturned the social norms of leadership with his next statement, “If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all” (9:35). From now on, leadership in God’s kingdom would be characterized by a life in the service of people whom society deemed unimportant and had no power to repay the kindness.

These standards of measurement were different than anything the disciples had ever heard. No wonder they were surprised when Jesus even placed children on the stage as the main characters of his attention. The centrality of children in Mark’s Gospel is often treated as an aside, misinterpreted, or missed altogether by both contemporary scholars and readers. It is unlikely, however, that the earliest audiences missed the point.¹⁹

Mark told two stories about Jesus with children. Each of them was set in a different context (9:33–35; 10:13–15). Between these two interactions with children, Mark placed three other episodes, which, when read in isolation seem unrelated, but when linked together illuminate the two stories that frame them. In other words, the two interactions with children deepen our understanding of each of the three episodes.²⁰ The interchange between Jesus and his disciples in each of these scenes emphasizes the themes of service and humility—the reversal of the order of things.

In the first story of Jesus with the children, Jesus introduces an essential element for this new upside-down type of leadership. He took a child in his arms and made a startling statement: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me” (9:37). The word for

¹⁹ Wesley D. Avram, “The Missional Significance of Children: A Look at the Gospel of Mark” devotional presented at the Overseas Ministries Study Center, New Haven, CT, (April 30, 2006). See also John T. Carroll, “Children in the Bible,” *Interpretation* 55, no. 2 (April 2001), 121–134.

²⁰ The reader is also prompted, through a series of strings that connect them, to recall at least two other distinct but similar children’s stories that Mark had told earlier.

“welcoming,” *decomai*,²¹ implies serving and was generally used in the context of hospitality. How the disciples welcomed a child, Jesus said, was a measure of how much they really welcomed him. Furthermore, how they welcomed him was then a measure of how much they welcomed God! The treatment of children—the least of all—was the new measurement of greatness.

The irony in Jesus’ statement was obvious to the reader, for children were at the bottom of the social scale.²² While children were not marginalized in Jewish antiquity in the same sense as were the poor, the unclean, or the outcast, children were the most vulnerable because of their utter defenselessness. They were completely dependent upon adults and so their social standing was at the bottom of familial structures. In an adult world where leaders fought to retain power, children were totally unimportant; in effect they were nonpersons. But according to the upside-down kingdom, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” In other words, Jesus established that greatness would be measured by one’s service to children in contrast to the normative measures of power, influence, control, or wealth. For this reason, children moved to the top of the list of leadership priorities. Furthermore, a leader’s actions could not just be mere expressions of tokenism or displays of affection, but as Judith Gundry-Volf insists, “True greatness meant not just love but service that . . . places children at the center of the community’s attention as prime objects of its love and service, and requires all who would be great in the community to serve children.”²³ In dramatic fashion, Jesus redefined care for children as a mark of greatness.²⁴

The scene shifts momentarily to underscore the disciples’ lack of understanding of this. Still bound by a paradigm of leadership that prized authority and control, the disciples complained to Jesus about

²¹ The NRSV translates *decomai* in the second children’s story as “receiving” (10:37).

²² It is important to recognize that there is a fundamental difference between the unimportance and insignificance of children and the nonperson status of the outcast. In the Old Testament, the Jews believed that children were a gift of God, and served as a symbol of the guarantee of the covenant between God and the people of Israel. Children were occasionally instruments of God’s activity. In the sense of personhood, children had immense value. However, similar to the outcast, children had little value from a perspective of leadership. To leaders, children were at the bottom of the food chain.

²³ Judith M. Gundry-Volf, “The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament,” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 43.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 43, 44.

others who were casting out demons in Christ's name without their expressed permission (9:38–41). Ironically, the disciples were anxious to put a stop to these, who they saw as unauthorized outsiders, casting out demons, even though these were successful and they, the disciples, were not (9:14–29). In trying to control outsiders in this way, the disciples were attempting to exercise authority in the very way that Jesus was trying to reverse.

Subsequently, the story returns to the importance that Jesus placed upon welcoming children as the quintessential marker describing the nature of transformational leadership or kingdom discipleship. The verbal thread referencing "Christ's name" links the prior episode about controlling outsiders to this one when Jesus declared that no act of kindness to the least of these is too small. Jesus cautioned the disciples that no matter what they might do, they must never be guilty of putting a "stumbling block before one of these little ones. . . . It would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea" (9:42).

Children were of such inestimable value to God that the disciples were to welcome children, protect them, and never harm them. The disciples found it inexplicable that the path to kingdom greatness included concrete acts of service to the least in their community and that the manner in which they treated children could be a measure of their love for Jesus.

The next scene illustrates the same point from another angle. Parents were bringing their children to Jesus in hope that he might touch or bless them. This was not unlike the accounts of relatives and friends bringing the sick, the possessed, and even the dead which are scattered throughout Mark. But rather than welcoming the opportunity to demonstrate what leadership should look like under the new rules of the kingdom, the disciples confronted and scolded the parents for bothering the Master.

Earlier in his Gospel, Mark recounts similar stories of multitudes bringing their sick in hope that Jesus might just touch them. These stories reveal that there was no extent to which people would not go in order to get near to Jesus. They begged, cajoled, cried, or just tried to get close enough to touch the hem of his robe.

Given Mark's penchant to include stories of a kind, it would not be too much of a stretch to think that Mark intended the reader to recall at this point in his Gospel the previous stories of the healing of the demon-possessed daughter of the mother from Phoenicia living in Syria (7:24–30), or the raising from the dead the twelve-year-old

daughter of Jarius, a leader of the synagogue (5:21–24, 35–43). He may have hoped they would remember the woman with the flow of blood who only wanted to touch the hem of Jesus' robe. Jesus restored her to health and fertility, making it possible for the woman to have a child (5:25–34). None of these stories, including the one we treated earlier about the boy with an unclean spirit, romanticize a joyful world of beautiful, happy, and healthy children. The stories are about sickness, desperation, and despair. The children are suffering such severe disabilities that it would be easy for anyone to feel uncomfortable in their presence. Although Mark does not explicitly say so, this scene of parents bringing the children to Jesus so he might touch them may well have been set in a similar context. While it is possible that the disciples were overcome by the immensity of the task and simply didn't know what to do in the face of such need so that they were prompted to overreact, it is more likely that they were behaving in typical fashion for their time and culture.

Just as they did in the case of the unauthorized exorcists, the disciples simply wanted to exercise control. In the midst of Jesus' massive popularity, they were after all, the guardians of the gate.²⁵ They would decide who got access to Jesus. They did not believe that the parents or their children should be wasting Jesus' time. Whatever the case, the disciples had already forgotten that children were to be served first. For this reason, the disciples rebuked the parents, failing to see the place that children had in the kingdom of God. Jesus was indignant with the disciples' actions and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it. After saying this, he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them" (10:14–16).

It is evident that in the first episode the way one welcomed children was the way one welcomed Christ. Slightly but significantly different in the second episode is that Jesus did not tell his disciples to become like little children, but rather he said, "The way one receives or welcomes children is the way one receives the Kingdom of God."²⁶

²⁵Garland, *Mark*, 384.

²⁶Luke Timothy Johnson, *Living Gospel*, 57. The theological significance of "receive the Kingdom as a child" is an interesting debate, but not central to this essay where the focus is on the essential character of Christian leadership.

How they treated a child was a measure of how seriously they operated under the rule of God. To be great would entail putting children first.

In another story, that of the rich young ruler, Mark presented a vivid contrast between the ethical standards of the kingdom as represented by its treatment of children and the ethical standards of the day. Too committed to his own possessions and glory, the rich young ruler could not bring himself to do what Jesus asked of him—namely, to sell everything he owned and follow Jesus. After the rich young man left, Jesus remarked to his disciples that it was “hard . . . for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God” (10:24–25). The disciples were astonished. If this young man with all his money was lost, they asked, “Then who can be saved?” (10:26). The disciples, like everyone else, equated riches with God’s blessings. As astonishing as it may have been for the disciples, the truth was that greatness in the kingdom could no more be obtained by wealth than it could by power and authority. The rich young ruler, unable to put Jesus first, stands in the pages of Scripture as an example of failed discipleship.

Can You Drink the Cup? (10:32–45)

In 10:33–44, Jesus once again foretold his death—the third passion prediction—and added in graphic detail that the Son of Man would be delivered over, condemned to death, mocked, spat upon, scourged, killed, but three days afterward would be resurrected. For the third time, the disciples misunderstood. With Jesus’ impending death, James and John, still coveting positions of authority, asked for places of honor when Jesus was seated in glory (10:37). Jesus retorted, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?” They had obviously heard the part concerning that Jesus would rise again, but they seemed conveniently deaf to the part about his suffering and death! In response, Jesus told them that worldly leaders measured greatness by their capacity to exercise authority and reminded them that they were not to imitate that (10:43). The path of the disciple passes through suffering and service. Jesus taught, “Whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (10:44–45).

Because of Jesus’ death and resurrection, those who follow him (disciples) receive true life. Indeed, this true life is the gift of salvation now and forever. The power of Satan, as Gordon Fee writes, “is on its way out; its stranglehold on humanity in every form—sin,

sickness, oppression, possession, injustice—has received its deathblow.”²⁷ Recipients of this good news are forgiven because of God’s grace and mercy. It follows that because they have received such inestimable grace and mercy, true disciples extend it to others in abundance. This messianic salvation not only sets them free, but by the power of the Spirit they are also enabled to imitate Jesus. The mystery of the kingdom is that the suffering servant, who was crucified, is the Messiah, and he is the Messiah precisely because he suffered. In this light, the true disciple must take up his cross and follow in Jesus’ footsteps. The purpose of this chapter is to establish that the transformational experience of salvation

As briefly discussed earlier, the instantaneous healing of the blind beggar named Bartimaeus is the second of two bookends (10:46–52) Mark employs in the middle of his Gospel. The first bookend is the character of the twice-touched blind man of Bethsaida (8:22–26). In viewing these two stories at the beginning and end of the discipleship segment of Mark’s Gospel, the irony is evident. In contrast to the disciples’ misunderstanding and hardness of heart, the blind man from Bethsaida and blind Bartimaeus—two people who could not even see—recognized that Jesus was the Christ.

In the story of Bartimaeus, a blind beggar was sitting on the side of the road just outside Jericho when Jesus, the disciples, and a large crowd were leaving town on their way to Jerusalem. When Bartimaeus heard that Jesus of Nazareth was in the crowd, he cried out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” (10:47). Several irritated people in the crowd told him to be quiet, and there was no indication that the disciples felt any differently, thus reflecting their continuing ignorance that the new rules of life in the kingdom “involved serving precisely the weakest.”²⁸

Ironically, while Bartimaeus was considered a public nuisance because of his blindness, most scholars hold that identifying Jesus as the Son of David in his cry for mercy displayed prophetic insight.²⁹

²⁷ Fee, “Kingdom of God and the Church’s Global Mission,” 14.

²⁸ Craig Keener, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 489. In addition to Keener’s commentary, see also Sherman G. Johnson, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987), 182; A. A. Anderson, *2 Samuel* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 85; Morna Hooker, *The Son of Man in Mark* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1967); Vincent Taylor, ed. *Gospel According to St. Mark* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1963).

²⁹ John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, eds. *The Gospel of Mark* (Collegeville: Sacra Pagina, 2002), 319.

When he asked “that [he] may see again,” he got even more: “your faith has saved you.” Bartimaeus emerged from the story as an exemplar of faith and a real-life example of how a leader should respond—to see and follow Jesus.³⁰ This is what being a disciple means.

3. *AN OPEN ENDING: A CHARISMATIC COMMUNITY*

Whether the final chapter of Mark ends in verse 8, or as some scholars posit in verse 20, the conclusion is the same—namely, that all of these events had to take place in order for the disciples to finally understand what Jesus was saying. After the resurrection and the coming of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, the disciples, like the blind man from Bethsaida after Jesus touched him the second time, “began to see everything clearly.” The disciples would never have understood the miracles and teachings of Jesus without the cross, resurrection, and empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

Within twenty-five years, this little ragtag band of disciples, empowered by the Holy Spirit, crossed geographic, linguistic, cultural, sociological, and demographic frontiers proclaiming the good news of the gospel and planting churches from Jerusalem to Asia Minor and into Europe. The Holy Spirit baptism and empowerment, available to all believers after the Day of Pentecost, equipped the disciples and the entire community of believers to do and teach all that Jesus did and taught.³¹ The ministry of Jesus as the Anointed One by the Holy Spirit inaugurated the kingdom of God in human history.

The kingdom of God, the central theological concept used by Mark in his Gospel to describe Jesus’ mission and ministry, set the agenda for the ministry of the believers in the early church community. The kingdom mission and ministry of Jesus are transferred and made operational within the charismatic community by the empowerment of the Spirit at Pentecost.³²

³⁰ I am indebted to my colleague, systematic theologian Frank Macchia and his brother, Michael Macchia, for their generous time and input working through with me the implications of the stories of the blind man from Bethsaida and blind Bartimaeus of Jericho.

³¹ Murray W. Dempster, “Evangelism, Social Concern, and the Kingdom of God,” in *Called & Empowered*, eds. Murray W. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus, and Douglas Petersen (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 49.

³² *Ibid.*, 23.

The Acts narrative, continuing the story of Jesus after the Gospels end, offers an organizing principle for a holistic ministry infused by the power of the Spirit. In Acts, the Holy Spirit is presented as the one who empowers the church to overcome the entrenched gender, economic, cultural, and religious barriers of a divided world within its own community. Accordingly in the outpouring of the Spirit on the entire Christian community at Pentecost, the unfolding of “God’s will for justice becomes an empowering dynamic.”³³ The charismatic community not only enjoyed the visible signs of the promised kingdom age, but by the power of the Spirit, they also exhibited the “reversal of the order of things” by breaking down the barriers between Jew and Gentile, male and female, rich and poor, and slave and free. By the time the story of Acts concludes, the Spirit-empowered community of faith had taken the gospel everywhere in word and deed.

Mark’s account is brilliant, finely and carefully crafted. He wrote his Gospel to people who were enduring suffering. Mark arranged the stories about Jesus to remind the reader that though Jesus may have seemed like an unexpected Messiah, his suffering and death were not an accident. Jesus was the Messiah, God’s Son. By the time Mark told his story, the disciples were paragons of faith. Mark believed that if hearers would allow it, what Christ had done in and through the disciples, he also could do for them.

It is important to understand that Mark’s Gospel is also a story of the present. As a modern-day reader two millennia later, I, too, must wrestle with the same confusion as that of the disciples. I must make some sort of judgment. I must come to a position, but the rhetorical structure of the narrative rigidly limits the kinds of positions I am free to take. If I agree with the disciples or share their misunderstandings, I will come under the judgment of the story’s implied point of view. Indeed, Mark manages my response to Jesus’ teachings, and the methods by which that management takes place are clearly visible. Mark accomplishes his ends by stating the point, then belaboring it, then driving it home into my heart over and over.

I confess that I also struggle with the issues that troubled Jesus’ disciples and often for the same reasons. Sometimes I don’t understand, misunderstand, or don’t want to understand. I tend to tailor Jesus’ teachings to my own interests. I read what I want to read. The ethics of the kingdom are still a complete reversal of what we accept as

³³ Murray W. Dempster, “Pentecostal Social Concern and the Biblical Mandate of Social Justice,” *Pneuma* 9 (Fall 1987): 148.

normative in the twenty-first century. I freely recognize that I have no chance to imitate Jesus' model of service in leadership without the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit in my life.

One Father's Day a few years past, my wife, Myrna, gave me a plaque to hang in my office, as a constant reminder of what really matters:

One hundred years from now,
It won't matter what car I drove,
What kind of house I lived in,
How much I had in my bank account,
Nor what my clothes looked like,
But, the world may be a little better
Because I was important in the life of a child.

- Unknown