

EXPLORING THE THEME OF DISCIPLESHIP IN MARK

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to explore and convey the theme Discipleship in the Book of Mark. As we examine, the discipleship in Mark, a few questions are in view. How is discipleship presented in the Mark Gospel? Explain the preparation needed to become a disciple of Christ in the Book of Mark. Lastly, who were the persons to follow the path of Discipleship in Mark Gospel? What seems significance or questionable before beginning the study is to define the term “Disciple” and the concept of “Discipleship.” The Greek term refers generally to any “student,” “pupil” “apprentice,” or adherent,” as opposed to a “teacher.” In the ancient world, however, it is most often associated, with people who were devoted followers of a Greek religious leader or teacher of philosophy.

There are examples of discipleship in Mark Gospel referring to people committed to following a great leader, Jesus, and emulating His life and passing on His teachings. Therefore, in the Book of Mark, discipleship meant much more than just transferring of information. Discipleship is referred to imitating the teacher’s life, duplicating His values, and reproducing His teachings.¹ Jesus plainly showed His disciples the importance of fellowship, accountability, evangelizing, educating, empowering, equipping, commitment to personal devotion and reproducing disciples and winning other to Christ.

Discipleship As Presented In Mark

¹ Understanding The Meaning of the Term ‘Disciple,’” 2. Understanding The Meaning of the Term "Disciple" | Bible.org, accessed April 7, 2020, <https://bible.org/seriespage/2-understanding-meaning-term-disciple>)

Now having a clear understanding of the term discipleship, how is discipleship present in Mark Gospel? By contrast, the spotlight is almost always on the idea of discipleship in Mark; there is a general agreement among scholars that discipleship is a major theme in Mark's Gospel.² The first act Mark records of Jesus setting up the dominion of God on earth is his choosing of disciples, in this case, two pairs of brothers (1:16-20). The fact that three of the first four (Andrew excluded) were to become the inner circle within the Twelve (5:37; 9:2; 13:3). It has been recorded that Jesus would make them fishers of human being or fisherman of men. This phrase was used in reference as describing their future vocation. Three points should be noted: (1). The call is to follow and be with Jesus, which is perhaps the primary characteristic of a disciple (1:16-20;2:14;3:14); (2) it is Jesus who will make the disciples what they will become and (3) their task of a new sort of fishing is yet in the future and involves dealing with other human beings, in particular fishing them out of the chaotic water which are dark and dangerous.³

Mark's Gospel records how Jesus' disciples failed to understand Jesus' true mission and purpose. They had trouble processing the whole death and Messianic identity and the disciples had a serious problem with the anonymous woman who anointed Jesus' feet at the Lord's Supper. Jesus shocked them with His reply, that the woman anointed him for his burial and her actions pleased Him and would be remembered. The disciple's objective suggest that the woman affirmed something about Jesus that they failed to comprehend and process.

Nevertheless, Mark's portrayal of the disciple's commitment was on one hand and incomprehension on the other. Eventually, by the end of the story, the latter leads to the

² Administrator, and Administrator. "A Major Theme in Mark's Gospel." *BYU New Testament Commentary*, December 16, 2013. <https://www.byunewtestamentcommentary.com/a-major-theme-in-marks-gospel/>.

³ Witherington, Ben. *The Gospel of Mark: a Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Grand Rapids (Mich.): W.B. Eerdmans, 2001. (p.421)

abandonment of the former, but this does not deviate the fact that the disciples are portrayed as having initially responded properly to the call to discipleship, and indeed are portrayed as successfully emulating Jesus' acts of healing and teaching to some degree. It is important to do justice to the various nuances of the portrayal of the disciples in Mark. Since the work is a biography, it would be a mistake to think it is solely about the disciples, whether in Jesus' day or in Mark's. To the contrary, the focus is Christological, even to the extent that Jesus ends up being the model of following the way of the cross.⁴ Jesus being the ultimate example of following the way, prepared the disciples for their work ahead of them.

A powerful example of this is found in (Mark 6:30-44), after an intense time of preaching and teaching, Jesus and the disciples get away to repose; however, the crowd followed them. Jesus does not send them away, instead Jesus had to succumb to the needs of the people based on His love and compassion for them. This prompts a teaching moment for the disciples. How would they respond or react to the interruption of the crowd? After all, they were desperate for some much-needed rest or "me time." Surely, they would overcome any selfish frustration and seize the opportunity to meet the needs of the people.

Jesus demonstrates selfless love as He healed the sick and provided divine resources for the people. Jesus' actions echoed the passage in (Mark 16:24) Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. To be a disciple, one must renounce whatever comes into competition with the love and service of Christ, living not to ourselves and selfish motives, but unto God and the welfare of others."⁵

⁴ Witherington, Ben. *The Gospel of Mark: a Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Grand Rapids (Mich.): W.B. Eerdmans, 2001. (p.56).

⁵ "Mark Chapter 3." Enduring Word, August 5, 2019. <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/mark-3/>.

The Preparation For Discipleship in Mark

In (Mark 3:13-15), we have the account where Jesus chooses the twelve, but before He does, He goes up to the mountain and spend time in prayer. It was after spending the night in prayer, He choose twelve men from His inner circle to prepare and train them as followers and leaders for the work of ministry. Those chosen are brothers (James and John, Peter and Andrew); business associates (Peter, James, and John were all fishermen); political opponents (Matthew, the Roman-collaborating tax collector, and Simon, the Roman-hating zealot); and one who would betray Jesus (Judas Iscariot). He appointed them to listen and learn from Him how to serve, operate in His authority, to include healing sickness, casting out demon and to experience the miraculous works and power of God. Many followed Jesus, but He chose only a few to be in position of authority. Jesus' ultimate purpose was to train the disciple to reproduce disciples to reach and transform a lost world. Jesus was interested in quality discipleship and not quantity disciples. Unlike churches of today, Jesus' objective was making disciples, not converting people for membership purposes only.⁶

Further reference to His training and preparation of discipleship is viewed in (Acts 1:21-26); Jesus' ascension into the heaven, and the early church is in the process choosing a replacement disciple for Judas. The essential elements were similar to Jesus choosing the original twelve, they prayed for divine guidance and wisdom for those that would be appointed to carry on a leadership position. We must consider the fact that Jesus' perquisite in preparation for discipleship required prayer, guidance and wisdom from God. In turn, the time spent seeking

⁶ Matthew 16:24 Then Jesus told His disciples, "If anyone wants to come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. Accessed April 15, 2020. <https://biblehub.com/matthew/16-24.htm>.

God draws you closer to Lord and keeps you completely dependent on the Holy Spirit for the work of ministry.

The People that Followed the Path of Discipleship in Mark

Those that followed the path of Discipleship in Mark Gospel can be viewed in a variety of ways from the beginning to the end of the book. Jesus called His first group of Disciples in (Mark 1), He is following the system of the first century, when many rabbis would recruit young men to follow them. The hope was that the rabbi would then train up the young men so that once they had died or retired, they could teach his theology and philosophy. Jesus followed the pattern of the rabbis. He was teaching and training groups of disciples of His kind that they may reproduce others to follow the way of Christ. Jesus' was building upon the Kingdom of God and His teaching was certainly supreme overall theology and philosophy.

In (Mark 1:15), Jesus says, "The time has come. The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news." Jesus foresaw that the Kingdom of a God was being inaugurated into the world. These were God's ideals, values, and truths that were ready to break into all societies and cultures across the world. Jesus came to shake and shift the world. However, Jesus' disciples were key instruments in the process. Jesus says the Kingdom of God is coming and immediately after, He employs people to help Him with this mission. This is how the Kingdom of God expands, through people recruiting others to follow Jesus and spread the ideal of the Kingdom of God. Mark makes it clear that discipleship is relevant to the Kingdom of God and it motivates others to join in the discipleship call.⁷ Levi was a tax collector who Jesus recruited to be one of his disciples.

⁷ By. "Seven Ways Discipleship Is Shown in Mark's Gospel." Just Disciple, October 9, 2019. <https://justdisciple.com/how-is-discipleship-shown-in-marks-gospel/>.

Jesus had reached again along the lakeshore at Capernaum (Mark 2:13). When He is finished, He walks over to the small tax office or customs house alongside the highway. Sitting inside is a despised man, Matthew Levi by name, whom Jesus has seen several times in the crowds as he has been teaching. Jesus looks at him and says simply: "Follow me." The word in Greek is, *akoloutheo*, which means, literally, "come after" from *a*, copulative, and *keleuthos*, "road," properly, "walking the same road." Then it means "accompany, go along with." But it also has a specific meaning, "to follow someone as a disciple." It goes along in the tradition of the Rabbinical master-pupil relationship. Jesus' invitation is a two-word command: "Follow me." Think what Levi feels like when he hears those two words beating like a doorknocker on his soul. He is being called to leave his productive trade as a tax collector to become almost a beggar, sustaining himself on the sometimes-meager contributions made to his Rabbi or Master. In an instant he is being called from wealth to poverty.⁸

This invitation to discipleship for Levi reveals a two-fold purpose, Jesus was seeking out Levi on purpose to make a point. Jesus reveals that the Kingdom of God transcends ethnic and political barriers. Jesus was displaying that the acceptance of following God is not discriminant. As modern-day disciples, we do no justice for the Kingdom if we only offer invitation of discipleship and the love of God to those we want to correspond with, but we must offer it to enemies alike. We must learn to set aside our difference to welcome all to partake in the Kingdom of God. It is noteworthy to mention, Levi was probably one of the most unloved and unlike men in Capernaum because of the nature of his job. However, Jesus presents the Gospel and the invitation to discipleship to him, which went against the social norms of that day and Levi became a follower of Jesus and his life was forever changed.

⁸ "#13. Calling Levi the Tax Collector (Luke 5:27-32)." JesusWalk. Accessed April 18, 2020. http://www.jesuswalk.com/lessons/5_27-32.htm.

Mark's Gospel contains two parables that concern work, and both are relevant to how people respond to the gospel in different ways. The first of these parables in (Mark 4:26-29), compares the kingdom of God to growing grain from seed. It has similarities to the more familiar parable of the mustard seed, which follows immediately afterwards, and to the parable of the sower (Mark 4:1-8). Although the parable is set in the workplace of agriculture, the role of the farmer is deliberately minimized. "He does not know how" the grain grows (Mark 4:27) instead, the emphasis is on how the kingdom's growth is brought about by the inexplicable power of God. Nonetheless, the farmer must "rise night and day" to cultivate the crop (Mark 4:26) and go in with his sickle (Mark 4:28) to reap the harvest. God's miracle is given among those who do their assigned work. The second uniquely parable, in (Mark 13:32-37), illustrates the need for Jesus' disciples to watch for the second coming of Jesus. Intriguingly, Jesus says, "It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch" (Mark 13:3). While he is away, each servant is charged to keep doing his work. The kingdom is not like a master who goes to a far country and promises to eventually call his servants to join him there. No, the master will be coming back, and he gives his servants the work of growing and maintaining his household for his eventual return.⁹

Both parables can be interpreted that Jesus' disciples are revealed as diligent workers, no matter the nature of their occupation. The parables of the sower gives an example of how some will hear the Word of God and respond, some will hear the Word and it will not take root in their heart. Some will hear the Word of God and it would appear to take root, however the enemy (Satan) takes it away and some will total reject the Word due to a hardened

⁹ Work, Theology of. "Parables at Work (Mark 4:26-29 and 13:32-37): Bible Commentary." Theology of Work. Accessed April 18, 2020. <https://www.theologyofwork.org/new-testament/mark/rhythms-of-work-rest-and-worship/parables-at-work-mark-426-29-and-1332-37>.

heart. Jesus reveals the symbolic means to the different kind of soil that receive the seed of the Word, the soil represents the different kinds of human response to the Gospel message. Additionally, the parable serves as a means of a practical example for discipleship in the churches today. Many will receive and respond to the Gospel and some will reject and dismiss the Gospel, either way Mark helps us put in perspective that the preached Word must be effectively preached for some to understand the nature of discipleship.

In the Gospel of Mark, women occupied a vital part in the mission and message of Jesus as examples of model disciples. Sometimes these examples are general, but sometimes they are specific. Generally, women are subjects of Jesus' teaching about the kingdom and discipleship. They follow Him as part of the general multitudes and receive His teaching. Specifically, they have faith in His ability to perform miracles. They exhibit sacrifice in being willing to give up all their possessions for others. The special nature of women as model disciples is perhaps best demonstrated by their presence as key witnesses to the most important events in the history of the universe. First, beginning at the crucifixion events, women are among those who stand far away watching Jesus.

Mark states, "There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the Less and of Joses, and Salome and many other women who came up with Him to Jerusalem", (Mark 15:40-41). The disciples fled earlier (Mark 14:50), but the women stay and keep an eye on Jesus and witness the events. Second, women observe where Joseph of Arimathea buried the body of Jesus (Mark 15:47). Mark states, "Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses observed where He was laid" (Mark 15:47). Mark does not simply leave the key witness of women at the passion events, but they continue to Easter morning, where they are the first witnesses to the empty tomb. Mark records,

“Now when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, that they might come and anoint Him”, (Mk.16:1). Their reason for coming was to serve Jesus. As a result of their service, they receive the reward of being the first people to witness the most triumphal event in history – the Resurrection. The angel speaks to them first and states, “Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen!”, (Mk.16:6). However, the angel tells them to “Go tell His disciples – and Peter – that He is going before you into Galilee”, (Mk.16:7). Even though the disciples spent more time with Jesus, the angel tells the women to tell the disciples about the Resurrection!

Mark’s emphasis on the importance of women continues to the Resurrection appearances where Jesus appears first to women. Mark states, “Now when He rose early on the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom He had cast seven demons”, (Mk.16:9). She faithfully tells the disciples like the angel told her at the empty tomb. However, the depressed disciples “when they heard that He was alive and had been seen by her, they did not believe”, (Mk.16:11). Mark does not let up on the failure of the disciples and the triumph of the women. He records, “After that, He appeared in another form to two of them as they walked and went into the country”, (Mk.16:12). Again, these faithful women “went and told it to the rest, but they did not believe them either”, (Mk.16:13). Therefore, the disciples reject the women’s testimony twice!¹⁰

However, this did not null and void the women being viewed as disciples in Mark; as their interaction with Jesus, and the sharing with others about their experience is worthy to consider them disciples. This is relevant today as we have the Holy Spirit within to help us share boldly with others how Jesus has revealed himself to us. Regardless of the

¹⁰ b777. “Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry.” CARM.org, October 2, 2017. <https://carm.org/women-as-model-disciples-in-mark>.

contention of the men disciples, the fact of the matter is women were significantly influential in the life and ministry of Jesus. They were model disciples of that time and their actions still have a strong effect for many women today. Essentially, women served an important and powerful role in Mark's Gospel and in our Christian view today.

Conclusion

One can conclude that Mark found the disciples intriguing enough that discipleship was one of the major themes in the book. He continues to explore the subject throughout the entire Gospel. Mark does an incredible job describing disciples and the concept of discipleship. He uses a wide range of examples, to include the Twelve who had the primary task of following Jesus' example of suffering, teach and healing the sick. However, the Twelve had a huge misconception about the concept of discipleship and the Kingdom of God. Jesus used the example of an unlikely person whom He recruited as a disciple on purpose to drive home a point that God transcends ethnic and political barriers to produce followers of Christ. Jesus used the example of parables to communicate how people respond to the Gospel in different ways. Additionally, because Jesus had no preference of gender as it related to Discipleship, Mark emphasizes the importance of why women were examples of model disciples. It is obviously clear that Disciples are committed to follow the life and ministry of Jesus, who was the perfect example of the discipleship in Mark Gospel. Jesus showed forth the importance of fellowship, accountability, evangelizing, educating, empowering, equipping and commitment to personal devotion to reproducing disciples and winning others to Christ. The Discipleship theme in the Gospel of Mark invites readers to finish the work that Jesus and the early disciples starting, by affirming their own call to discipleship. We need to share with the world the work that God is doing in our heart, as it pertains to winning others to the Kingdom.

As a devoted Christian and Bible reader, you can view the disciples in the Gospel of Mark as an account to model your Christian walk after in the various examples mentioned in this study.

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