

Rejection, Not Cautious Questions
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March 30, 2008

Last fall we began a project, study project, a little different. There was a goal behind it, a purpose behind it. Our goal, one of our purposes as a church, is to be a congregation that—anywhere, anytime we find ourselves—we can speak clearly and accurately with respect to Jesus Christ. Any circumstance, any situation, any condition, where we're talking to someone...in the community, in our home, or wherever it may be...we want to be a people that can speak clearly and accurately with respect to Jesus Christ. That's one of our goals as a congregation.

There's no easy way to get there. There's no easy way that we can just simply say, 'Oh, yeah, I know about Jesus,' and be authentic with that statement. The only way we can get where we speak clearly and accurately with respect to Jesus is to actually stop and get a good, clear, accurate view of Jesus. And that's been our goal throughout this winter. We chose to do it in the old-fashioned way. We simply chose, as a congregation, to read through the gospel of Mark, a clear and accurate presentation of Jesus Christ and His ministry, His words and His works. We chose to begin at the very beginning and read it out loud together as a congregation, from start to finish. In a world of high tech, where there's videos, TVs, projectors, and everything else, we chose to do something very different—slow down and read out loud so we can get a clear and accurate picture of Jesus Christ.

We're nearing the end of that project. I've enjoyed it; I've loved doing it. And there are bible studies that have been doing it throughout the congregation. We're getting near the end of it. In fact, we're coming to the last major section. And as we come through this last major section that we'll begin to read today, I'm gonna introduce it by reading a fairly long portion; and then we'll pick it up as the weeks go ahead. But there's one major theme, there's one major drumbeat that is gonna dominate the next week's reading. And I want you to get it right at the start.

The main thing that we're gonna be seeing as we move forward in the gospel of Mark right now is that Jesus Christ was rejected. It wasn't just that He was pushed aside. It wasn't just that people were hesitant about Him or resistant to Him. He was completely rejected. He was totally denied. Even His closest follower cursed and denied even ever knowing Him. Jesus Christ was totally rejected. And over the next number of weeks I need you to grasp that. And I need you to grasp it—and I believe the gospel of Mark is gonna present it to us in a way that you will grasp it as something that revives your faith; that by the time you're done with this truth, your confidence in the reality of Jesus Christ will be greater than when we began this reading; that when you absorb the totality of the rejection Jesus went through, it will be something that gives you a greater confidence in Him than you ever had before. It's kinda strange, but I believe it's exactly what God would have us experience—knowing how thoroughly and completely rejected Jesus was will renew, revive, and strengthen our confidence in Him and all that He is today. That's where we're headed in the weeks ahead. Let's pray before we begin.

Our Father in heaven,

We chose to do this last fall, and it wasn't something we did lightly. We sensed Your call in it, a call to the scriptures, a call to look at Jesus. And so we're continuing that, Father.

And Father, as we go through the weeks ahead and we see His rejection, we pray and we ask that You, Father, would grant to each one of us the mind to grasp and understand what was happening, the heart to actually cherish it, and the lives that will be shaped by it.

Father, we pray this in the name of Jesus, Your rejected One. Amen.

Passage of scripture that's gonna introduce this theme of rejection is found in Mark, chapter 11. We're gonna start our reading at verse 27, and we're gonna go all the way to chapter 12, verse 27. It's gonna be a fairly lengthy portion of scripture, more than we normally read in a congregational setting like this. But we're gonna do it, because it's gonna introduce this theme of rejection. And also, as it introduces it, it's gonna give us the grip of faith that comes with this theme and this reality in Christ's ministry. As we enter into it there's gonna be some names that are gonna catch us by surprise. Not by surprise...there's confusion. There's gonna be a series of debates going on—confrontations, give-and-takes, questions and answers with Jesus that are somewhat hostile—as people approach Him and He replies to 'em.

And there's gonna be some names and individuals and titles that we're not exactly sure what they're about as this goes on. For example, they'll talk about the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes approaching Him. And we're not sure what all those are in terms of...unless we've done some historical background. The chief priests were the ones that were leading the religious life of Israel, and they were the ones in charge of the temple, and the sacrifices, and making sure the people were taught the truth of the scriptures. The elders were the leading nobles and leading personages of the different tribes and communities. And these were the guys who were kinda the influential ones, that had positions of power and authority in the community. The scribes—these were the legal experts. And by that I mean they were the ones that were really focused on biblical law. They understood the Old Testament extremely well. They devoted their lives to studying it. And if you had any question about 'was this right, or was this wrong, is this moral or not, did God do this or say this or not,' these are the ones who knew chapter and verse with respect to that.

Together the three of these, chief priests, elders, and scribes, formed the Sanhedrin. It was a group of 71 individuals who were the leading council for Israel at the time. The Roman government had put Jerusalem, and put Israel, into subjection. They ruled it, but they granted to the Sanhedrin almost absolute religious authority. They said to these 71 leaders—these chief priests, elders and scribes, that council—they said 'You can make the call on everything religious. You judge your people, you rule your people related to that stuff. We will also give you,' and they did give them, 'some political authority.' But most of theirs was religious. They had to get approval by the Roman government on certain things if they were gonna follow through and do things, and there was things that they actually couldn't do unless the Roman officials actually took it over and did it.

So you're gonna see some names like that. You're also gonna see some names like Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees. And probably one of the easiest analogies—these all tended to have religious connections...the Herodians not quite so much; they were affiliated with the king, but it also affected their religious outlook and view. And the way to think of these is almost like saying, you know, these are almost like the Baptists, the Lutherans, and the Episcopalians of their day. They all had their kinda special niches in theology and their approach to life, and how they felt biblical life should be lived.

The Pharisees were the ones who were probably the most extreme and committed to really following God. The Herodians really compromised a lot, and they kinda wanted to work with the king. And the Sadducees were the aristocracy. They were kinda the learned intellectuals. They were very wealthy, and they didn't really wanna get into silly religious ideas. We're gonna see all these people appear as we go through our reading today, so just to kinda have that in the background.

The most important thing is to remember the setting. Everything takes place today in the temple. Jesus is in the temple grounds; He had come...it's His last week in his ministry. He has come into Jerusalem during the Holy Week, and He is in the temple. And that's where all the events today will take place. The temple is a mammoth...just a mammoth place. Jerusalem, the city, was the center of Israel. It was the hub; it was what everything revolved around. And Jerusalem itself revolved around the temple. It was a 30-acre compound. We showed you this picture—it's a model mock-up of ancient Jerusalem and the temple during the time of Christ. And that was about a 30-acre compound, that big, large area. And then the rest of the city was just kind of at its feet.

To give you a sense of the size and the comparison there, this little building right there [*points to upper right corner of the temple area*]...showed it to you a number of weeks ago...was a small fortress; it housed six hundred Roman soldiers, garrisoned six hundred Roman soldiers. It had a court area; it had an armory; so it's not a small building. But it looks small next to this temple. The stairs, right here, that went up to the main level of the compound...that set of stairs was three stories high. This place was mammoth! It was ornate. There was gold that glittered in the sun...it was a beautiful, mammoth place. And everything we're seeing today, or reading about today, took place in that compound area, only it wasn't empty like it looks in this picture.

During the high holy week of Passover that city of Jerusalem that had about 25-30,000 people in it would swell during the holy days to 100-125,000 people. They would just overwhelm that city. And they would congregate in the temple area. And there would be vendors there selling tokens to the pilgrims. There would be vendors there selling tokens; there would be people, moneychangers there exchanging money so that they could have temple currency. And then there was animals...animals everywhere! 'Cause during this week there would be thousands of animals sacrificed in the temple as sin offerings. And they would be selling...buying and selling these animals. And so this was a crowded, busy place with thousands of people.

But early in the week Jesus had literally taken it over. He had come in, He had thrown the moneychangers out, He had stopped the vendors, and He had run the animal merchandisers out. He was kinda like a one-man takeover.

And this had been goin' on, and the authorities weren't sure what to do about this, because the crowds really liked Jesus and what He was sayin'. And it was an impressive stretch of time. Finally, we'll pick it up in our story today, chapter 11, verse 27. And you'll have a feel for this. Jesus would go out in the evening, about 2 miles out to another city, a little village—Bethany, and then He would come back into Jerusalem, and that's what's happening as our story picks up today. Verse 27 of chapter 11: it says

They...

...speaking of Jesus and the disciples...

...came again to Jerusalem.

They came back into the city.

And as He was walking in the temple...

...that large compound area...

...the chief priests, and the scribes, and the elders came to Him, and they began saying to Him, "By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave You this authority to do these things?"

And Jesus said to them, "I'll ask you one question, one question, and then I'll tell you by what authority I do these things if you answer me."

And here's the question. He says,

"Was the baptism of John from heaven, or from men?"

...speaking of John the Baptist and his ministry. Jesus says 'Was that from heaven or from earth?'

"Answer Me."

And they began reasoning among themselves,

...these chief priests, scribes, and elders, the Sanhedrin representatives. They began reasoning among themselves...

...saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' then He will say, 'Then why did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From men,'—they were afraid of the people, for everyone considered John to have been a real prophet.

They're in a bind, so they answered Jesus, and they said, 'We don't know. We don't know if it's from heaven or from earth.'

And Jesus said to them, "Nor will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

And now Jesus will do something that He often did; He'll give a parable to picture a situation. At this point you need to try to visualize this with your imagination. It's a story, meant to be a bit of a riddle.

He began to speak to them in parables. He said, "A man planted a vineyard, and put a wall around it, and dug a vat under the wine press, and built a tower, and rented it out to vine-growers, and then he went on a journey. And the harvest time came and he sent a slave to the vine-growers in order to receive some of the produce of the vineyard from the vine-growers. And they took him, and they beat him, and they sent him away empty-handed.

"Again he sent them another slave, and they wounded him in the head, and they treated him shamefully. And he sent another, and that one they killed; and so with many others, beating some, and killing others.

"He...

...the owner...

"...had one more to send, a beloved son; and he sent him last of all, saying, 'They will respect my son.'

"But those vine-growers said to one another, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours!' And they took him, and they killed him, and they threw him out of the vineyard.

"What will the owner do with the vineyard?" Jesus says. What will he do? "He will come and destroy the vine-growers, and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this in scripture?"

*'The stone which the builders rejected,
This became the chief corner stone;
This came about from the Lord,
And it is marvelous in our eyes?'*

It says...

They were seeking to seize Him; but they feared the people, for they understood that He spoke the parable against them. And they left Him and went away.

But they don't leave Him alone. The next verse says that they sent to Him...and here come some of those interesting names...

They sent some of the Pharisees and the Herodians to Him, in order to trap Him in a statement. And they came and they said to Him, "Teacher, we know that You are truthful, and defer to no one; for You're not partial to any one, but teach the way of God in truth."

'We know You're great. Now here's the question.'

"Is it lawful to pay a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?"

Is it lawful to pay tax?

"Shall we pay, or not pay?"

But He, knowing their hypocrisy,

...what they were up to...

...said to them, "Why are you testing Me? Bring Me a denarius to look at." And they brought Him one. And He picked up the coin and He said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?"

And they said to Him, "Caesar's."

And Jesus said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they were amazed at Him.

Some Sadducees (who say there is no resurrection) came to Jesus, and they began questioning Him, saying, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that

If a man's brother dies, and leaves behind a wife, and leaves no child, his brother should marry the wife, and raise up children for his brother.

"There were seven brothers; and the first one took a wife, and died, leaving no children. The second one married her, and died, leaving behind no children; and the third likewise; and so all seven left no children. Last of all, the woman died.

"Now, in the resurrection, when they rise again, which one's wife will she be? For all seven married her."

Jesus said to them, "Is this not the reason you are mistaken, that you do not understand the Scriptures, or the power of God? For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. But regarding the fact that the dead rise again, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the burning bush, how God spoke to him, saying,

'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?'

"He is not the God of the dead, but of the living; and you are greatly mistaken."

I said that's a longer reading than we normally go through. But I wanted you to get a feel for what it was like in the temple at that time, as these leaders and these religious authorities were coming to Jesus and challenging Him.

You know, it is reasonable to have caution over matters of faith. In fact, we *should* have caution, a reasonable caution, over matters of faith. For example: the issue of authority. To me, that's one of the most crucial issues that needs to be addressed any time somebody wants to talk about God and matters of faith. When I get into a religious discussion with somebody, and they wanna start discussin' 'is this the way things are? You know, what should happen? What shouldn't happen?', all that sort of thing, one of the first things I wanna know is 'where do you get your answers from? What's the authority that's providing your direction? I mean, is this just coming from you? Or is there somebody else? Is there a book you're reading? Where is the authority behind the information you have?'

That should be one of the first questions you ask any time you get in a religious discussion. In fact, I don't even want to get into religious discussions 'til I've settled that question with somebody, 'cause it's like tryin' to play a game of cards with two different rule books. Let's settle what the authority we're dealin' with is first.

And that's what these individuals are doin'. They're sayin', 'by what authority You're doin' these things? Why are You taking over the temple the way You are? Who gave You this sort of authority?' And all the way through His ministry He'd done things that disturb people; like His rulings on how to practice the Sabbath, and His companionship with sinners, and stuff like that that. But this was...I mean, He'd gone off the charts here when He took over the temple the way He did. And they're sayin', 'by what authority are You behind this?' That's a legitimate question.

And as Jesus dealt with these people He realized they weren't asking it with integrity. He gave 'em an opportunity; if they would have wrestled with the question about John with integrity, He would have talked with 'em. But they wouldn't.

You know, there's many people like that, who'll hide behind the phrase 'I just don't know' when we get in a bind between answers we don't like. The authority question has to be answered with integrity. It must be dealt with— with integrity. These guys weren't gonna deal with it that way. So Jesus didn't even go with.

Issues of the day: I mean, we should raise questions of individuals about 'what is your stance on particular issues.' The particular issue they brought up is one that we're very familiar with. It's really the church/state issue. They said, you know, 'Shall we pay tax to Caesar? And, you know, should we be funding the very government that is so oppressive to us? Should we be...should we be payin' taxes to that government that has a garrison of six hundred soldiers overseeing our temple? And should we be payin' taxes to this government with money that has a picture of Caesar on it, and on the back of it is a statement claiming that he's a divine being?' Church/state issues are legitimate issues to wrestle with.

But they're not wrestling with it. They came to trap Him. They sent the Pharisees, who didn't want to pay the tax. They sent the Herodians, who thought it was a good idea. Either direction Jesus answered, they would jump on Him. So Jesus does one of the neatest little side-steps you'll ever find, and He ignores their question.

Tell you what—it's reasonable to question truth claims, very reasonable. When somebody says, 'I believe this is what's happening. I believe this is the way life is. I believe this is what life-after-death is,' you have every right...and it's reasonable...to question that. And that's what the Sadducees were doin'. They're wondering about this thing called the resurrection, this promise of life after death. They felt it was beyond reason to believe that people would live beyond death, and they would have new bodies and continuing existence. And they just thought that was unreasonable.

More importantly, they didn't think it was in the Bible; because they argued that you could only trust the books of Moses—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. All the other books of the Bible...can't trust those. They would only trust those first five books of the Bible. And they had searched those first five books of the Bible back and forth, back and forth; and they saw no mention, no description anywhere of a resurrection. And so number one—it wasn't reasonable. Number two—it wasn't in the books of Moses. It must not be. You live, you die. That's it.

I love Jesus' response. He says, 'You don't understand the power of God. He can bring the dead back to life any time. In fact, He's going to, and He's going to bring 'em back in a whole new state of existence. That's power!' Number two, and this is the one I really love—Moses did teach the resurrection. And Jesus points out one little verse that the Sadducees had read over and over and over again. And He points out the tense of the verb, where it says that 'God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.' And it says this long after Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were dead, which means that *they were still in existence*. They're still alive, even though they had died.

Interesting—those are the only ones that Jesus answered. They had brought a real question, but His conclusion for 'em is 'You're mistaken. You are greatly mistaken. All of that is...those are legitimate questions to raise, but you are wrong!' You go through this and you realize that this wasn't reasonable caution going on in this situation. This was a determined rejection of Jesus and all that He is. And that's what that little parable was all about...is Jesus is tryin' to make it clear with that little picture that these guys, these leaders, are not there tryin' to honestly deal with Him, and His claims, and all that He is. They're just simply renters that don't want to pay the rent. They want all that God has, but they don't want to give God His due. In fact, they would go so far in the parable, He says, as to kill the very son the owner would send. The point's pretty clear in the parable. The judgment that God gives with it, or Jesus gives with it—He says, 'What is that landowner gonna do? He's gonna remove those renters.' And that's exactly what God did in 70 AD. The Sanhedrin and the rulers of Israel were done, and He gave it to somebody different, somebody named Jesus.

And then Jesus adds this, and it's the key verse to the whole passage. He says this—'Listen, this is just what scripture talked about. The stone which the builders rejected...this became the chief cornerstone. The one that these rulers are saying 'really, really He's not it; He can't be it,' became the chief cornerstone. He became the center of it. He became the One everything's built around. He goes on and quotes. He says, 'That came about from the Lord. God did that.'

Think about it. The very one these people were rejecting, the very one that they were trying to trap, the very one that they would ultimately crucify and condemn, eventually became the Messiah, the Christ, the One God held up. He says, 'That's God doing that.' How did God do it? God did it with the resurrection. He was declared the Son of God with power, by the resurrection from the dead. That's one of the later New Testament books, the book of Romans, looking back at the events that transpired as that week unfolded. Jesus was rejected, but God declared Him to be the Son of God. God exalted Him as the Messiah with the resurrection. *That's God's doing.*

You say, "Well, maybe. We know the leaders rejected Him, and there's all kinds of instances in history where individuals were rejected by the people in power. But the crowd, the popular opinion, was still with Him. And after they were rejected, after they were killed, there were myths and legends that the people held onto, and they exalted this person to be somebody special. Maybe that's what happened with Jesus."

No. It is not what happened with Jesus. If you know anything about how myths and legends develop, you know that the Christian message did not have the time and the opportunity to become a myth and a legend. And even more than that, the very people who would have developed the popular opinion and the popular myth were the ones who eventually, in this story, were spitting on Him and cursing Him, and jeering Him. He did not die a popular hero. The rulers rejected Him and the people rejected Him.

They go, "Maybe it was...maybe it was His close followers. They're the ones that made Him so special. They're the ones that presented the message, and gathered the people around, and started the church. They were the ones with some sort of complicated conspiracy, that they hung in there, and they managed to make Him become something that He really wasn't."

No. If you know anything about conspiracies, and how they develop, and how they're held together, you know that the Christian message could not have developed as a conspiracy. And even more, it wasn't just the leaders that rejected Him. It wasn't just the people that rejected Him. It was His closest followers that rejected Him. And when they nailed Him to the cross there was not a person there thinking 'How can we keep this going and make Him king?' They gave up on Him. They gave up on Him.

So how did His name become the name we praise? How did His name become the name just a few minutes ago we filled this room with, two thousand years later, in a culture far different and far, far away? How does Jesus come to be worshipped?

It's God's doing.

When Jesus makes that quote, He adds this statement—“*And it's marvelous in our eyes.*”

One of the hardest things about being a Christian...Peter describes it later in his life...is that we've never seen Jesus, but we love Him. We don't see Him right now, but we believe in Him. We're people of faith, and that's hard. In circumstances and conditions, and in our culture, it's hard to be a people of faith. You know what? There's times when our soul needs the wonder of a miracle, the wonder of a work of God, the wonder of God's doing in our life, that our faith can look at and grip, and hold, and cherish. We can't conjure those up. We can't just say a formula and have <BOOM!> there's a miracle.

But I can tell you what we can do, and I do...is I'll stop and I'll say the name “Jesus.” And when I remember how completely and totally rejected He was by the rulers, by the people, and by His own followers, I find that I even know that name is a miracle. It's a work of God, and I cherish it.

Let's stand.

Our Father in heaven,

As we go from here today, I pray that You would use Your word, with the touch of Your Spirit, to renew and strengthen our faith in the reality of Jesus and all that He is.

In His glorious name we pray, amen.