

Five Small Locusts and Two Cups of Honey

Mark 1:1-8

Introduction

We will begin today, to expositively go through the Gospel of Mark, which I call the “Gospel of Action”.

As I read the first verse of the first chapter of Mark, a word stuck out – the word “beginning”. This caused me to go back in my mind to Genesis 1:1, which says,

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

It should strike us, but not as a surprise, that God does not begin with the proof of His existence nor does He give all the reasons we should believe that He created the heavens and the earth. He simply says,

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

Creation is not open for debate. It is, in fact, an announcement.

We read the first few words of this New Testament Gospel of Mark and also have an announcement. It, as well, is not open for discussion or debate. Mark writes,

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

This does not have the necessity of proof. It is simply an announcement.

Barclay translates this first verse,

This is the beginning of the story.

I like that. It is as if Mark says, “Look, this is how it all started, way back then, with the beginning

of Jesus Christ; this is the gospel of that One who is the Son of God.”

You should underline the word “gospel” in that verse, and make a note of the reference I Corinthians 15. Paul will define for us, in I Corinthians 15, that the gospel is the fact that Jesus Christ died for our sins, was buried according to the scriptures, and then, rose again. That is the announcement.

So Mark, the disciple of action, just jumps in and begins with the public ministry of Jesus Christ.

Look at verse 2.

***As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:
“Behold, I send My messenger ahead of
You, who will prepare Your way;”***

I want to give some points on this verse. We will begin with Christ’s seemingly strange choice of heralds. We are going to look today, at John the Baptizer, or as we know him, John the Baptist.

John the Baptist – Messenger to Prepare the Way for Jesus Christ

It is interesting that when Jesus Christ decided to announce His birth, He did not interrupt the synagogue meeting; He did not find the most religious man in the rabbinical system, but instead, by way of His angels, He announced it to the shepherds.

Shepherds were considered unclean in the rabbinical system and in that religious system because a shepherd could not tell his flock, “You just munch on that grass over there while I leave for about five hours to go to the synagogue and worship.” So,

because they were not able to get away, shepherds were continually unclean; defiled.

When Jesus Christ wanted to announce His birth, He went to someone considered unclean. It was a strange choice.

Now, Jesus is about to announce His coming kingdom. He seeks a herald to introduce to the world, His ministry,

. . . Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29)

Once again, Jesus does not go to the local seminary in Jerusalem; He does not seek out the most religious individual – the one with the flowing robe who reads the scriptures on the sabbath morning. Jesus chooses, instead, a strange man, that we are about to look at.

This strange man was a man who probably had wild looking hair and a full beard; a man who had lived in the desert all of his life; a man who was totally separate from the religious system. Jesus Christ says, “I want *him* to announce My coming kingdom.”

John the Baptist does make the announcement. He is not the same man as John the apostle, but is an Old Testament prophet. Look at verse 3.

The voice of one crying in the wilderness, “Make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.”

Notice the similar phrase in the last part of verse 2,

. . . who will prepare Your way;

Why was there a necessity for preparation?

There were almost four hundred years between the time of Malachi and the opening of the Gospel of Mark. I believe Mark was the first gospel written, even before Matthew, although Mark appears second in our canon of Scripture. These four hundred years between Malachi and Mark, were called the “silent years” because God did not speak. We are going to discover that some rather interesting things were developing over these four hundred years of silence.

The preaching and baptizing of John the Baptist

God, after four hundred years of silence, needed someone to come onto the scene and wake everyone up. John the Baptist did that, saying, “Listen, prepare

the way. Straighten out your crooked paths. Clean up your act.”

Notice again, his preaching in the last part of verse 3.

. . . Make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.

John the Baptist was a man who was supposed to come onto the scene and begin to soften the hearts of the people who had lived without God, although they claimed to know God.

I could not help but wonder, as I was studying this, who was the person in your life, who played the role of John the Baptist? Was there someone? Was there someone in your life, who came along and began to soften your heart with the seed of the gospel perhaps; with some spoken word maybe; with just a prayer on your behalf? Was there some person who acted like John the Baptist and prepared the way for Christ in your heart?

This also made me ask a rather challenging question. Have I ever played the role; have you ever played the role of John the Baptist in someone else’s life to prepare the way for Christ?

Notice verse 4.

John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

This is a rather confusing passage. We need to dig a little deeper today. Rather than just pass over this verse and say, “Well, we don’t believe that baptism is for the remission of sin,” we need to discuss this so that you understand some things.

Understand first, that John is an Old Testament prophet. When he baptized, he was not baptizing like we baptize in the New Testament church – he was still in the Old Testament economy. It is not until after the cross that we have the introduction of the New Covenant. So John is still living, in a sense, in the Old Testament system.

John baptized people and verse 4 says that he baptized “a baptism of repentance”. This baptism was the outward sign of repentance, and that would be the inward change for the remission of sins that would be the end result.

John was not doing a New Testament church believer’s baptism. He was doing, what we call, a proselyte baptism.

When a Gentile decided to follow after God and was going to begin pursuing God, along with all the God-fearing Jews, several things had to happen:

- first, if he were a man, he had to be circumcised in order to get in alliance with the Abrahamic covenant;
- secondly, a sacrifice had to be made;
- thirdly, he had to be baptized – the old proselyte baptism.

Evidently, John was baptizing by immersion, as Mark tells us that he went down into the water with Christ and then, came up out of the water (Mark 1:10). We are not sure that all the prophets did it in that way, but there was the baptism. That baptism, in the Old Testament, was so closely linked with the fact that they were beginning to follow God that in their minds, they did not have repentance without baptism.

Now, in the New Testament sense of the word, we understand that we are baptized as a result of repentance. With the Old Testament baptism, it seemed like they were taking one step forward and in that one step, they found not only repentance, but baptism.

John had many people come to be baptized. The fascinating thing about John's proselyte baptism, however, was that he was asking Jews to go through it – not Gentiles, but Jews. Imagine the humility in telling a Jew, a Pharisee, a scribe, an Essene, "Hey, you need to be baptized if you are going to become a God-fearer."

They would say, "Well, wait a second! We are God-fearers already."

This is why John's message was so interesting. He came on the scene and said, "All of you need to prepare for the coming Messiah. And you need to reveal to the world your repentance by taking this public right of baptism."

As a result, those involved in the religious system of that day hated John the Baptist. He was a little too convicting for them.

So, that was John's preaching and his baptizing.

Differences in John's baptism and Christ's baptism

Let me give three differences between John's baptism and Christ's baptism. There are more than three perhaps, but I will give these three.

1. First, John's baptism was the old sign – and that was the proselyte baptism.

Look at verse 8.

I baptize you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

Do not confuse John's baptism with what we do in the New Testament church when someone comes to Christ. Christ's baptism is the new sign – and that new sign is the Holy Spirit.

Unlike the Old Testament times, you and I have the baptism of the Holy Spirit when we accept Jesus Christ. I Corinthians 12:13 tells us that baptism is past tense,

For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body . . .

This is at the moment of conversion. So it is different than John's baptism.

2. Secondly, John's baptism was external. Christ's baptism, being of the Holy Spirit, is internal.
3. Thirdly, John's baptism bathed the body. Christ's baptism cleanses the heart.

The audience of John the Baptist

Now notice the audience of John the Baptist. Look at verse 5.

And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.

Notice that it is almost as if, while they were being baptized, they were confessing their sin.

Let me give some background into this Old Testament time. By the way, Mark was written to the Roman Christians.

Seneca, a historian who lived in Rome during this time, called Rome "the cesspool of the ancient world."

Greek civilization, after Alexander the Great had conquered basically the known world, had begun to Hellenize or "Greek-ize" the world. The problem with the Greek civilization was that it was pagan to the core. They worshiped the body. That is the reason all of the statues that you see are of naked bodies. We are seeing a resurgence of this today. It seemed that in the Greek mind, the physical was worshiped. There was gross immorality, and homosexuality was

rampant in that world. It was to that world that John the Baptist came onto the scene.

However, there was a movement that began, if you will follow me, and began very well. It was a movement that sought to separate from this Greek, pagan world and to become separated unto God.

The leaders of this movement were men who called themselves Pharisees. "Pharisee" literally means, "to be separate". So the Pharisees pulled out from that culture; from that society and said, "We're going to be different. We're going to be godly. We're going to be separatists."

This movement began well, but problems arose. The Pharisees developed, on top of the Law of the Old Testament, not only the extension of the Law, but they began to write oral traditions called the *Mishnah*. In fact, the *Mishnah* grew to be several thousands of pages long. Then, they had to write something to explain the *Mishnah*, so they wrote, what they called, the *Talmud*. The *Talmud* was the commentary that explained the *Mishnah* that was the additions to the Old Testament Law. They also began the synagogue system and much more. So in less than a hundred years, there was a movement that began well, but ended in a totally external religious system that we refer to, almost with spit in our teeth, as Phariseeism.

Let me give some illustrations of the additions to the Law.

Exodus 20:8 says,

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.

There are twenty-four chapters in the *Mishnah* on this one phrase. They thought they needed to explain it. Basically, this verse says that you are not supposed to work on the sabbath. So the Pharisees came along and defined "work". These are crucial things, you understand. For example:

- If you have a sore throat on the sabbath, you may swallow vinegar, but not gargle it, for that would be work.
- No woman should look in the mirror on the sabbath, for she might see a gray hair and be tempted to pull it out and that would be considered work.
- A knot can be tied in a rope, if you only use one hand. (Imagine using one hand to tie your shoes!) They did have four exceptions to this rule, fortunately. You could use two hands when:

- tying your wine skins;
- tying your sandal straps;
- tying a woman's cap;
- tying a woman's girdle.
- If a man needs water and cannot tie a knot with one hand in the rope to let down the water bucket into his well, then he may tie it to his wife's girdle and let it down, for a two-handed knot in a girdle is quite legal. (This is fascinating! I wonder how many men lost their wives down wells? "It's okay, dear, I'll pull you up as soon as I can.")

Another example is from Jeremiah 17:21-24. Verse 21 says,

. . . Take heed for yourselves, and do not carry any load [burden] on the sabbath day .
..

Now this is simple enough. However, the Pharisees had to define "burden". For example:

- When eating, all food picked up at a single time must weigh less than a dried fig. (You should see me on Sunday afternoons – I blow this one!)
- When drinking, any drink picked up at one time must weigh less than one swallow of milk.

The *Talmud* addressed such crucial issues in defining a burden as whether a woman should wear a broach, whether a man could wear his wooden leg, and whether a person could wear dentures on the sabbath.

All of these additions were just as important as the Old Testament Law.

In defining travel; a sabbath day's journey, you could only go so far. The Pharisees said travel on the sabbath had to be limited to a thousand yards from one's home. In other words, you could only walk a thousand yards from where you lived. If you walked one thousand one yards, you were defiled; you had traveled.

So, they came up with a fascinating thing to do, "yet if a rope is tied before sundown on Friday, across the end of the street, the whole street becomes one house." In other words, if you took a rope and tied it from your doorknob to someone else's doorknob way down at the end of the street, then all of that would be

considered simply one step and you could go a thousand yards beyond the end of that rope.

This is important stuff.

It is into this climate that John the Baptist comes and begins to prepare the way for the coming Christ. He says, “Listen, you have missed it,” and he begins to try to wake them up.

There were three groups that John was talking to:

- There were the Essenes, who were isolationists. They ran to Qumran and lived in caves. Because they believed it was wrong to marry, they soon died out.
- There were the Sadducees, who were liberals. They denied any supernatural element of the Bible.
- There were the Pharisees, who would be called the moderates or the legalists.

So, during the four hundred silent years, you can see what evolved – the machinations of men and the legalism and all of that. These people did not reject Jesus Christ because He broke the Law. You may remember that they were always accusing Him. However, He fulfilled the Mosaic Law. They rejected Him because He did not keep the *Talmud* and the writings of the *Mishnah*.

The appearance of John the Baptist

Now, notice the appearance of John the Baptist. Verse 6 makes it seem even stranger.

John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey.

This man’s entire life was a protest – everything he did and the way that he looked.

I imagine he probably looked like Elijah. You may remember that II Kings says Elijah was a hairy man (II Kings 1:8).

I can just imagine John the Baptist – he has lived in the wilderness, called the Jeshimon; in the devastation and barrenness. The wind probably dried his hair and he probably had a full beard, as well. I imagine he had as much hair on his arms and legs as perhaps, a St. Bernard! I can just picture him.

Understand that you are paying me to sit in my study and think these strange thoughts – and I come up with some strange ones! He is the kind of burley man, I think, that never pulled any punches.

John the Baptizer stepped on the scene wearing an outfit made of woven camel hair that was probably short and without sleeves. His skin was as tough as leather because of the desert sun that continuously beat down on him. He was strange looking.

He was the kind of man that I imagine would probably go hunting in the desert for a grizzly, with a baseball bat. That is all he needed, “Just let me at him.”

John the Baptist comes on the scene and he is ready to make changes. And, he *never* minces words with the Pharisees, Essenes, Sadducees, and the common people.

The masses loved him, by the way. The masses came to him.

Notice as well, he has as strange an appetite as some of you, from what I understand. He ate locusts and wild honey. We have studied some strange people with strange appetites. Some of you have told me you like mashed peas and even cauliflower. I just want to add to that list – French fried locusts. That is just as strange! That is what John the Baptist ate.

Imagine him all alone at the campfire, sitting down with a skillet, frying locusts and then, dipping them in honey and eating them. He was a strange man.

However, understand that John the Baptist did not aim at uniqueness. Make a note of the fact that he did not aim at uniqueness, he aimed at obedience. His life was not determined to just be strange, he was doing what he wanted to do for the cause and glory of Christ. So, he was aiming at obedience.

Temptations John the Baptist avoided

In the life of a man like this, I think he would face the same three temptations that you and I are going to face as leaders in the home or at work or wherever. Let me give three temptations that I think John the Baptist faced and avoided.

1. The first one would be the temptation of emphasizing personal importance.

Look at verse 7a.

And he was preaching and saying, “After me One is coming who is mightier than I . . .”

Underline the phrase, “mightier than I”. The people looked at John with unbelievable reverence. He was so different. His lifestyle convicted their

indulgences. Yet, rather than take the glory for the mighty things that he was doing and the mighty man that he was considered to be, he said,

. . . After me One is coming who is mightier than I . . .

2. A second temptation would be of concealing personal weakness.

Look at the next phrase in verse 7.

. . . After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals.

You may be aware that in that day, it was the job of the servant to untie the sandals of the guests and then, bathe their feet. When it rained, there would be rivers of mud in the streets. When it was hot, there would be mounds of dust. People would arrive at a home with filthy feet. It would be the servant's job to stoop and untie the sandals. John says, "I am not even worthy; I don't even match that of a servant. I am less than a servant and am not worthy to untie His sandals."

John the Baptist was not one to conceal his personal weakness. He let everyone know that he was human. He would not allow himself to be put on a pedestal.

3. The third temptation that I think John avoided would be that of magnifying personal achievement.

He says in verse 8,

I baptize you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

He says, ". . . but He will baptize you . . .".

In other words, "I've done what I've done and it has been obedience. Oh, but He will do much more."

He said this, rather than magnify his own personal achievement.

John 3:30 was the secret of John the Baptist's life. You may know the phrase,

He must increase, but I must decrease.

Williams translates it,

He must grow greater and greater and greater and I must grow less and less and less.

I read a story about D. L. Moody of a time that he invited all the European pastors to his Northfield, Massachusetts, conference. It was evidently, the

custom in Europe, when you were staying in a public place, to leave your shoes outside the door. During the night, the hall servants would come by, polish the shoes, and return them to the door. Late on the first night of the conference, D. L. Moody was walking down the dormitory hallway and saw all the pairs of shoes at the doors. He realized these men did not know that there were no hall servants in America. Rather than embarrass them, he gathered all the shoes, took them to a room, and then, went to some of the American pastors, told them the story, and invited them to help him. They all gave pious excuses. So, he went back to the room and, by himself, began to polish all of the shoes.

The story would have never gotten out, but someone unexpectedly came to the room and noticed what Moody was doing. They sat down and helped him and then, told some other people. After that, every night of that conference, different men would gather the shoes and polish them. These were pastors and leaders – men who were willing to live as normal human beings.

That was John the Baptist. That was humility.

Application

By way of application, in closing, let me give some needed similarities between the life of John the Baptist and you and me. Why was he making an impact on his world? What was it about his life that made a difference? What is it in his life that we should seek to have in our lives? We do not want to imitate him, but to emulate his character.

Character traits of John the Baptist to emulate

Let me give three character traits of John the Baptist for us to emulate. There are many more, but I will give three.

1. First, John the Baptist lived what he said.

He said,

. . . Make ready the way of the Lord . . .

He said that and no one could point a finger at him and say, "Ah, but *you're* not doing it. You're telling me to do something that, John, you're not doing yourself."

He lived what he said.

I think of you and me saying, "I'm a Christian, I know Christ."

However, do we live that way? Do we live in such a way that people cannot point their finger at us and say, “Ah, you say you know Christ, but I don’t see it.”?

John would come to the Pharisees and say, “Listen, I want to see the fruit of your repentance; I want to see proof.”

Is there proof in my life and in your life that we belong to Christ?

There is a difference, ladies and gentlemen, between outward morality and true righteousness – and John had it.

2. Secondly, John the Baptist was completely humble.

He reminded me of the apostle Paul. Paul said, in the early part of his ministry, in I Corinthians 15:9,

... I am the least of the apostles ...

Do you remember that phrase? Paul whittled it down. He said, “Out of these twelve men, the apostles, who are leaders, I come in last place.”

That was a humble statement. It said a lot.

As Paul lived the Christian life, he would later say, in Ephesians 3:8,

[I am] the very least of all saints ...

Now, it is not just twelve men, it is the whole Christian world. Paul said, “I come in last place.”

Then, at the end of his life, in I Timothy 1:15, Paul writes to his son in the faith, Timothy, and says,

... Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.

I wonder if that is the progression in my life. I look around our church and think, “Yea, all of these Christians, I come in last.”

Do I, however, think that I, of the entire Christian world, am the least? And, in the entire world, of all of the sinners, even though I am forgiven, do I think I am foremost?

3. Thirdly, John the Baptist pointed others to Jesus Christ.

When you get on the phone to make a long distance call, you may use the services of an operator. You tell her what you want to do and she says, “If you will hold please, I will connect you.”

The ministry of John the Baptist was one of merely connecting people with the Lamb of God. He was the go-between.

When the operator connects you, she gets out of the way and is gone. She does not listen; she does not linger; she disconnects herself.

In your life and in mine, if we ever hope to make an impact, we need to be the connector between people who do not know Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world. And, as we bring them together, we should go back stage and take a secondary role because Jesus comes first.

Charles Spurgeon, one of the great leaders of a century ago, was a brilliant man and yet, very humble. In fact, as he lay on the bed that would become his death bed, there were several men, who were in ministry, around his bed. Spurgeon, a man with a tremendous mind, said to them, “The older I get and the closer I get to heaven, the simpler my theology becomes. It is now just as simple as this – Jesus loves me.”

I am so glad there was a John the Baptist in my life. I am so glad Jesus Christ has given me the opportunity of being a John the Baptist in someone else’s life. However, I can fail, and I do fail, unless I am pointing people to Him, unless I am living humbly, unless I am directing their attention to the One who is greater than I.

Have you been delivered? Have you accepted the message of repentance and given your life to the Lamb of God, who wants to take away your sin as He did mine?

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