



The Gospel of Mark

THE JESUS WE'RE ACHING FOR

LISA HARPER

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ABOUT LISA

Rarely are the terms “hilarious storyteller” and “theological scholar” used in the same sentence, much less used to describe the same person, but Lisa Harper is anything but stereotypical. She is a master storyteller, whose writing and speaking overflows with colorful pop culture references that connect the dots between the Bible and modern life.

Her vocational resume includes six years as the director of Focus on the Family’s national women’s ministry, followed by six years as the women’s ministry director at a large church. Her academic resume includes a master’s in theological studies with honors from Covenant Seminary. Now a sought-after Bible teacher and speaker, Lisa is featured on the national Women of Faith tour and speaks at many other large multi-denominational events—such as Christine Caine’s *Propel*, LifeWay women’s events, and Women of Joy conferences—as well as at hundreds of churches all over the world. She’s been on numerous syndicated radio and television programs and was featured on the cover of *Today’s Christian Woman*.

Lisa has written 11 books, including *Believing Jesus*, *Stumbling into Grace*, and *A Perfect Mess*. In spite of her credentials, the most noticeable thing about Lisa Harper is her authenticity. “I’m so grateful for the opportunities God’s given me,” Lisa says, “but don’t forget: He often uses donkeys and rocks!”

INTRODUCTION

Since Missy's been home from Haiti for almost two years and is a whopping six years old, I recently added some simple chores to her daily routine so as to help her develop character, a sense of responsibility, and sow some work ethic seeds. For instance, now when we come home from a Target™ run (you know the ones when you planned on just picking up laundry detergent yet somehow walk out with a cart full of gardening paraphernalia and some "deeply discounted" appliance, hair-care product, or quesadilla maker?), she's expected to help me carry in the loot instead of just merrily skipping in front of me empty handed. Unfortunately, her first assistance attempt was a comical train-wreck because when I was looking the other way she dutifully mimicked me and looped one too many plastic bags up her little forearms then toppled over when she attempted to walk toward the house. I'll never forget her darling exasperated expression or the way she protested, "Mama, 'dis is too HAWD!"

This is surely the internal reaction some women have when it comes to Bible study. 'Dis is too hawd! Especially the it's-been-a-while-since-I've-been-in-church or the I've-never-been-in-a-small-group-and-didn't-know-crop-pants-were-required crowd. Because let's admit it—if you've never been in a Bible study before it does appear to be a bit difficult at first what with all the looking up of verses, filling in blanks, and divulging deep thoughts. So let's make a pact that our study of Mark is going to be a safe place to engage with God, OK? That we're going to be the kind of community where every woman feels comfortable asking questions about Him, sharing the highs and lows of her story, and ultimately leans more fully into the arms of the Jesus we're all aching for.

In light of that goal it's not necessary to choose a single group leader for this study (I can almost hear the audible gasps from the type As reading this!), and may actually be more beneficial to choose a couple of friendly chicks to co-lead, because that will help make the environment less personality-driven and more participation-driven.

HERE'S A FEW TIPS TO PROMOTE HEALTHY INVOLVEMENT:

- Establish a no-monopoly chat zone. Encourage everyone to answer at least one question rather than having one big-talker answer all of them.
- Allow for "silence cushions" between questions to give introverts time to formulate their thoughts and participate.

- Throw spitballs at anyone who responds to a question with a basic yes-or-no answer. OK, maybe spitballs are a tad punitive, but encourage real responses!
- Be quick to listen and slow to give advice or attempt to fix the other chicks' problems in your circle. Just say no to Dr. Phil wannabes!
- Make your best effort to begin and end on time.
- Don't focus on moving through all the material each time you get together; instead, focus on how your small-group tribe is moving toward Jesus.

In an effort to make Mark user-friendly, we've created a Bible study book geared toward participation instead of intimidation. We've also segmented it into chunks instead of days, so you can complete the questions when you have time—when your baby's sleeping, when your husband's glued to a football game, or when you're finally home from work and have changed into a pair of comfy sweatpants. The last thing we want is to make the homework so cumbersome and time-consuming that your group dwindles down to nonexistent.

Each week starts with a two-page video and group guide. For the first session, you'll just watch the video and get to know each other. Then, during the following week, complete your first week's study. When you gather for the second session, discuss the week 1 study and watch the second session video.

Your format can depend on your group's

size. If your group has few members, discuss the previous week's study first and then watch the video, allowing for some time to discuss the video's questions afterward. If you have a large group, you'll probably want to watch the video first and then combine the discussion of video questions and the previous week's work.

Now, may I encourage you to breathe deeply, smile genuinely (even if it's just to yourself), and turn the page? Then doodle wildly in the margins. Be as honest as possible in every response. And fire away with your thoughts, since few questions have right or wrong answers. Feel free to throw this Bible study book on the floor with gusto if something I've written steps on one of your emotional bruises—or hug it close to your chest when Jesus whispers how valuable you are to Him while you're perusing a passage.

My sincere hope and fervent prayer is that the King of all kings will woo us closer to Himself than ever before this season. That Holy Spirit—our Comforter and Counselor—will seal in us a profound assurance of God's compassion. And that greater comprehension of His love for us will lead to us becoming more passionate ambassadors of His gospel. I simply Can. Not. Wait. to see how our Savior shows up as we run hard toward Him together! In the meantime, please know that I'm honored and delighted to get to take this divine journey with you.

Warmest regards,

Lisa

SESSION 1. VIDEO & GROUP GUIDE

*Biblical scholars agree that the Book of Mark was the _____
_____ written.*

The word gospel, euangelion in Greek, means _____.

*Not only is Mark the first Gospel, predating Matthew, Luke, and John,
but it is based on the apostolic _____ of _____.*

The Book of Acts records the gathering of the first _____.

*Despite the early losses in their lives, Peter and John Mark went on to be
remembered not as _____ but as _____.*

Two Reasons for the Urgency Expressed in the Book of Mark

- 1. Peter and John Mark _____ the undeserved compassion
of Jesus.*
- 2. The compassion their first century _____ was so
desperate for.*

During the first century, the world was under the dominion of _____.

*Our ache accelerates Jesus' _____. And the heart of God is _____
by the wounds of mankind.*

Discussion Questions:

What drew you to study the Gospel of Mark and what are some facts you already knew about Mark—the man or the Gospel?

What is one thing from the video teaching that was new to you or you found interesting?

What do you hope to gain most from this Bible study? Discuss a few goals you hope to accomplish through this study.



AGGRESSIVE GRACE

WEEK ONE

Mark 2:1–3:6

REAL LIFE

“The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men.”¹

C.S. LEWIS

I wasn't what you'd describe as an actively disobedient kid. I mean if my parents specifically told me not to do something, I typically complied. For instance, when mom brought my baby brother, John Price, home from the hospital she gave me a lengthy excursus about the soft spot on the top of his head before allowing me to hold him.

I'd anxiously anticipated playing with John Price for months and months, but I heeded mom's sober warning about how if I accidentally poked a sharp object like a fork, a screwdriver, or even my pointer finger into that tender spot where his tiny skull hadn't completely closed yet I could cause him irreparable brain damage. I decided to stick to my normal extracurricular routine of climbing trees, playing freeze tag with the Brooks kids, and riding my bike in the glorious wake of fog that trailed the mosquito truck on warm summer evenings instead.

It doesn't take a genius to figure out that cruising a purple Schwinn with glittering streamers and a banana seat through a cloud of carcinogens is way better than accidentally poking a hole in some floppy baby's head and causing his guts to squirt out all over everything. Gross, who needs that kind of drama? Not only did I heed mom's warning when it came to J.P.'s fragile fontanel, I carefully inscribed a huge “X” on the top of his head with a black indelible marker when mom wasn't looking just in case some clueless stranger got close to my little brother's noggin with a mechanical pencil or one of those things bearded Vermont men stab into trees to get maple syrup. Family lore has it that it took months for the big, black “X” to fade, thereby prompting questions from passersby if mom forgot to put on his baby beanie before taking him out in public!

One can never be too careful about accidentally causing a sibling's head to erupt.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are formally classified as the Synoptic Gospels, which means they are similar in their content and literary style (*synoptic*: 1. pertaining to or constituting a synopsis; affording or taking a general view of the principal parts of a subject. 2. taking a common view; used chiefly in reference to the first three Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, from their similarity in content, order, and statement).² The literary style and content of John's Gospel account differs significantly from the first three (i.e. he doesn't include parables yet does include unique Christological experiences like the washing of the disciple's feet), which is why his recording of Jesus' earthly life and ministry is not classified as synoptic.

However, if my parents neglected to forbid me to do something, well then it was fair game. Like when they neglected to tell me that it wasn't a good idea to leave a nice girl's eighth grade slumber party in the middle of the night with a wild girl who thought she knew a shortcut to the McDonald's that was twelve miles away by car. At the time it sounded logical—even compassionate—to traipse across town at two in the morning to bring back nourishment for our peers. Good night, if those survival reality television shows were popular in the late '70s, we probably would've been lauded for our brave ingenuity instead of being firmly reprimanded by two policemen when we came limping back to the soirée around noon, several hours after our empty sleeping bags were discovered.

After enduring the emotive sobs and entreaties of said good girl (who felt very betrayed that we didn't invite her to accompany us on the ill-fated adventure), the frosty disapproval of her parents, and a second, even harsher, reprimand from

mom and Dad Angel (my stepfather) on the way home, I decided it would be best not to disclose the nasty cut on the bottom of my right foot that was a result of stepping on a broken bottle while wearing flip flops on the trek.

**Would you typically rather suffer in silence after doing something stupid or deal with the negative repercussions immediately and up-front?
Why?**

When the cut began to throb that night, I held my foot over the bathtub, doused it with rubbing alcohol, wrapped it in an Ace™ bandage, and made a mental note to wear sturdier footwear if I ever went on another nighttime excursion. When it hurt too badly to stand on the next morning, I told mom I thought I was coming down with the flu—a white lie she swallowed whole after taking my temperature and finding it to be unusually high.

Later that day mom asked if I had omitted anything from the slumber-party-disappearance story, so I finally confessed everything. When she lifted the sheet she saw the angry red streaks—signs of a serious infection—running up and down my leg. She bundled me into the Buick and raced to the hospital where a white-headed doctor with protruding Albert-Einstein-ish eyebrows told me, “This is going to hurt something awful, honey, but we don’t have time for you to get numb if we’re going to save your foot!” I don’t remember much else after seeing the flash of his scalpel and watching mom slump into a plastic chair to keep from fainting.

Now I knew from the moment I stepped on that broken bottle that it was a nasty cut, but I assumed it was nothing a little rubbing alcohol couldn’t cure. I was more concerned about whether it would keep me from competing in the track meet later that week. Or whether I would get grounded if mom found out about the injury. The concern that weighed most heavily on my adolescent mind was whether I’d lose phone privileges, which would surely render me a 13 year-old pariah. That I could lose my foot or possibly even my life never occurred to me.

What concern weighs most heavily on your mind today?

For centuries, Saint Augustine’s view that Matthew was written prior to Mark prevailed in theological circles. That is, until the middle of the nineteenth century when a debate called “The Synoptic Problem” arose in academic circles. After careful study of the interrelationships of the four Gospels many scholars eventually agreed it was more likely that Mark was actually the first Gospel account recorded (officially titled “The Markan Hypothesis”). With a few notable exceptions the priority of Mark is now the view widely held by modern theological tradition.³

Describe at least one example when you resembled the old adage “couldn’t see the forest for the trees” in your walk of faith.

Read 2 Peter 1:3-11. How would you synopsise this passage into one sentence?

How would you describe the connection Peter made between *perspective* and *perseverance* (pay special attention to verse 9)?

REAL TRUTH

Mark 2 tells how one man's greatest concern pales next to Jesus' far-greater compassion:

A few days later, when Jesus came back to Capernaum, the news spread that he was at home. Many people gathered together so that there was no room in the house, not even outside the door. And Jesus was teaching them God's message. Four people came, carrying a paralyzed man. Since they could not get to Jesus because of the crowd, they dug a hole in the roof right above where he was speaking. When they got through, they lowered the mat with the paralyzed man on it. When Jesus saw the faith of these people, he said to the paralyzed man, "Young man, your sins are forgiven."

MARK 2:1-5, NCV

Notice that neither the paralytic, nor his buddies, asked for forgiveness. They went to great lengths in their quest for physical healing. The man humbled himself to the point of being dead weight. He allowed his homies to lug him across town to a Bible study in a house because he heard the guest rabbi was a healer. But when they neared the address, cars lined the entire street and they couldn't even find a place in the yard.

I wonder what the man thought when he realized he couldn't get close to the Healer. Perhaps he closed his eyes and sigh heavily, thinking, *I knew this was a long shot. Why did I allow myself to get my hopes up again? Maybe it is time for me to let the dream of walking go. Maybe I should stop hoping for more and just make the best of what is.*

We can only speculate what the paralyzed man was thinking. None of his words are recorded, much less his thoughts. Still, Mark specified that his friends' faith moved Jesus, possibly implying his lack thereof. So I can't help wondering if his heart was sinking after being toted all over town to no avail. Did he protest when his cohorts jostled him up the stairs to the roof and cut a hole into the sure-to-be-furious homeowner's ceiling?

If I was the one being lowered and rudely interrupting Jesus' sermon, I think misgivings would've been racing through my mind. Apologies would have poured from my mouth faster than the mud and straw could rain down on the less-than-amused guests.

Wouldn't you love to know what the paralyzed man was thinking in that moment? Was he hopeful that a cure was within reach or humiliated that his need was out in the open for all to see? Maybe he felt some of both.

How do you think you'd respond in that situation if you were the one being lowered?

What about if you were one of the Bible study attendees who was being showered with debris?

Describe a time when one of your private needs was publicly exposed (e.g., when your child got expelled from school for drinking or when someone told you they were praying for your marital and/or financial troubles even though you hadn't shared that particular request with them). How did the unexpected exposure make you feel?

READ JAMES 5:13-18. The beginning of this passage distills the Christian life to a profoundly simple application: If you're hurt, PRAY to God. If things are going well for you, PRAISE Him. In the past year, which exercise of faith have you found yourself practicing more often, prayer or praise? Why?

Regardless of what was racing through the paralytic's mind when his gurney jerked to a halt in front of Jesus, the comfort that flooded him following our Redeemer's response surely eclipsed it:

And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic,
"Son, your sins are forgiven."

MARK 2:5

The Greek word *son* here is *teknon* or “child.”⁴ It’s a tender term of acceptance and affection much like the pet name I called Missy this morning. When she asked if she could have orange juice with her breakfast, I said, “Of course, baby.” She’s my little girl and I love her with all my heart. I would’ve been willing to walk to the grocery store and fetch her orange juice. Since the day God allowed me to bring her home from Haiti, Missy has never felt like a burden to me. In fact, I actually enjoy meeting her needs—whether it’s getting her beverage of choice from the fridge or giving her a twice daily dose of HIV meds—because She’s. My. Kid.

THE JEWISH BIBLE is also known as the *Tanakh*. *Tanakh* is not a word but an acronym, T-N-K, based on the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible—Torah (the Law), Nevi’im (the Prophets), and Ketuvim (the Writings).⁵

Whose needs do you typically enjoy meeting?

What sort of needs tend to make you feel burdened or resentful?

Missy doesn’t usually ask for the three anti-retroviral medications that are keeping the human immunodeficiency virus at bay in her bloodstream. Since she just turned six, she doesn’t yet understand that without those meds the virus—now undetectable in her little body—would begin to replicate and grow. Her currently beefy immune system would be compromised, leaving her vulnerable to infection and disease. Without the meds I carefully measure and supervise her swallowing every morning and every night, her HIV might progress into full-blown AIDS. Furthermore, my Punkin’s prescriptions don’t taste good (I have yet to understand why they don’t make bubblegum or grape flavored meds for kids since there are millions of cases of pediatric HIV but I digress), so taking meds is not the most pleasant part of her day.

So I bought the cutest, kid-oriented pill pouches and syringes I could find. I made up a silly song and dance routine to make med-time more fun. You’d better bet I am conscientiously committed to ensuring my daughter takes the medicine she doesn’t have the foresight to ask for yet, because as the reasonable adult in our relationship, I know they’re saving her life.

If only I could walk again, everything would be OK, had surely crossed the paralytic's mind more than once. But our Savior knew that desire wasn't remotely big enough. He knew fixing the man's legs wouldn't fix the gaping hole in his heart. Our Creator Redeemer knew that simply becoming ambulatory couldn't restore the soul-crippling affliction of being separated from God. So the Messiah went beyond the paralytic's immediate comprehension of need. The King lavished the paralytic with infinitely more treasure than he had the foresight to ask. Jesus dispensed forgiveness—a prescription paid for with His own blood. He didn't just heal the man's legs; He saved the man's life.

The pardon Jesus handed the paralytic revealed that he wasn't asking audaciously enough—that his greatest desire was still too dinky. Would you describe the prayers you've been praying lately as audacious or anemic? Explain why.

READ MARK 11:22-24. What's the most audacious "mountain tossed into the sea" prayer request on your heart this season? Do you feel like you're whispering it toward heaven with hesitation and trepidation or bellowing it to the Heavenly Father who delights in meeting your needs?

READ MATTHEW 9:10-13 AND MARK 2:15-17. The Pharisees were considered to be very bright scholars—especially in light of their largely illiterate culture—but they were slow on the uptake when it came to recognizing their own spiritual neediness. Describe a situation when it took awhile for it to dawn on you that you were spiritually "sick" as well and desperately needed the healing only Jesus can offer.

REAL ACHE

Decades ago, before God spanked me and gave me multiple time-outs for the sin of gossip and before I realized that most of Nashville's iconic music community is somehow connected or related, I shoved my foot so far into my proverbial mouth it's a wonder it didn't get lodged there forever. I was making small talk with a few people who worked for a record label in town following a concert by a singer/songwriter whose warbling had fallen far short of harmonic. So, wanting to sound like the savvy musical connoisseur I wasn't, I said something along the lines of, "Her gifts as a lyricist are noticeably stronger than her gifts as a vocalist." Of course, I knew immediately by the raised eyebrows and everyone's sudden obsession with the carpeting that I'd said something that had dramatically changed our group dynamic. We'd shifted from a superficial, albeit friendly, conversation to an awkward, almost hostile silence. It wasn't until many uncomfortable minutes later that a compassionate acquaintance pulled me aside and explained that the artist I'd so rudely maligned was the wife of one of them in the circle!

When Jesus called the paralytic "son" and then pronounced his sins forgiven, it triggered a dramatic shift in that first century Capernaum crowd too:

When Jesus saw the faith of these people, he said to the paralyzed man, "Young man, your sins are forgiven." Some of the teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this man say things like that? He is speaking as if he were God. Only God can forgive sins." Jesus knew immediately what these teachers of the law were thinking. So he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to tell this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to tell him, 'Stand up. Take your mat and walk'? But I will prove to you that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So Jesus said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, stand up, take your mat, and go home." Immediately the paralyzed man stood up, took his mat, and walked out while everyone was watching him. The people were amazed and praised God. They said, "We have never seen anything like this!"

MARK 2:5-12, NCV

The more common term for “unclean spirit” (Mark 1:23) is “demon,” which is used 63 times in the New Testament. Here’s what we know about demons according to Scripture:

- Demonic forces are likely made up of the angels who fell with Satan in his rebellion against God (Rev. 12:4).
- Some demons roam freely (Mark 1:21-34); others are confined (2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6).
- They are powerful personalities, although not omnipotent (Mark 1:24).
- Their activity may have increased during the time of Christ and will do so again in the coming end times (Rev. 6:19).
- They are set up under Satan’s control (Eph. 6:11-12), probably in rank and possibly in geography (Dan. 10:10-12).
- They have limited authority and can promote disunity, propagate false doctrine, inflict disease, cause mental difficulties, and hinder Christian growth.
- Demons can oppress but not possess Christ-followers.⁶

Prior to this incident people had been astonished and impressed by the authority of Jesus. In chapter one, after witnessing Jesus heal a demoniac, the crowd is described as “amazed” (Mark 1:27). But now, for the first time, His miraculous authority made some people mad. The toes He stepped on here were significant, too. He offended the Pharisees, who were reputed to be among the smartest, holiest, and most devout among Jewish men. Yet in spite of the fact that He was well aware He’d rubbed these religious leaders the wrong way, Jesus knew immediately what they were thinking, so He asked them:

“Why do you question this in your hearts?”
MARK 2:8, NLT

He didn’t back down. Not even slightly.

Some of the early Christians were so passionate about their faith in Jesus that they were accused of turning the world upside down. Our Christian ancestors ticked off entire towns and got themselves in gobs of hot water (e.g., Acts 17:1-9).

Have you ever offended someone because your faith in Christ was too bold for their liking? If so, what did you specifically do or say that set them off?

READ 2 CORINTHIANS 2:14-16. Describe a situation in which you think it’s not only appropriate but even necessary to be “offensive”—or as Paul puts it here, “to those who are perishing, we are a dreadful smell of death and doom” (v.16, NLT)—to unbelievers?

READ PROVERBS 27:6. In the context of being a false flatterer or an honest true friend—even when the truth stings—how would you rate yourself?

1 2 3 4 5 6
Significant Suck-Up Compassionate Toe Crusher

In fact, if you'll join me and leapfrog over the passage about Jesus' commissioning a less-than-scrupulous IRS agent (Matthew) to be a disciple and sharing a message that included an interesting wineskin metaphor (Mark 2:13-22), we'll get to two more politically incorrect encounters of Christ where He dances on top of even more dangerous feet:

One Sabbath day, as Jesus was walking through some fields of grain, his followers began to pick some grain to eat. The Pharisees said to Jesus, "Why are your followers doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath day?"

Jesus answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and those with him were hungry and needed food? During the time of Abiathar the high priest, David went into God's house and ate the holy bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And David also gave some of the bread to those who were with him."

Then Jesus said to the Pharisees, "The Sabbath day was made to help people; they were not made to be ruled by the Sabbath day. So then, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath day."

Another time when Jesus went into a synagogue, a man with a crippled hand was there. Some people watched Jesus closely to see if he would heal the man on the Sabbath day so they could accuse him.

Jesus said to the man with the crippled hand, "Stand up here in the middle of everyone."

Then Jesus asked the people, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath day: to do good or to do evil, to save a life or to kill?" But they said nothing to answer him.

Jesus was angry as he looked at the people, and he felt very sad because they were stubborn. Then he said to the man, "Hold out your hand." The man held out his hand and it was healed. Then the Pharisees left and began making plans with the Herodians about a way to kill Jesus.

MARK 2:23-3:6, NCV

Jesus had already caused the Pharisees' eyebrows to twitch when He pronounced the paralytic's sins forgiven, but now He catapulted off the ledge of Jewish propriety by proclaiming the futility of religiosity and Himself preeminent over the Sabbath—a cornerstone of Jewish faith. Yikers, talk about incendiary! The Messiah may as well have waved a giant red cape in front of an itching-to-gore-a-matador bull.

God gave Moses the Law on Mount Sinai (Ex. 20–31). *Torah* (meaning *law*) refers to the first five books of Scripture or to the Law within the books. Later Jewish scholars codified lists of laws—which they also called *torah*. The later Jewish teachers created a system derived from the Law for both communal order and connection with God. You cannot overstate the significance of this Law in orthodox Jewish culture. You could liken it to the scaffolding of their entire people group—it held them up and held them together. Yet while the Law was relatively effective as an infrastructure and system of worship, it never ever had the power to redeem sinners. God didn't give Moses the Law so that by it we could be saved but that by it we could recognize our need for a Savior!

Why do you think following religious rules makes most of us feel more justified or secure in our faith?

What's an example of something you've done mainly just to cause other Christians to think you're spiritually mature?

READ MATTHEW 23. How would you synopsise Jesus' sermon (often referred to as "The Seven Woes") about the futility of religious activity in a book or movie title?

Since picking grain on the Sabbath was one of the thirty-nine types of work or activity the Jewish priesthood had decided was a sin, that's the first molehill the Pharisees tried to turn into a mountain:

As his disciples made a path, they pulled off heads of grain. The Pharisees told on them to Jesus: “Look, your disciples are breaking Sabbath rules!”

MARK 2:24, THE MESSAGE

I can only imagine the steam coming out of their haughty ears when Jesus affirmed the basic premise of Sabbath (physical rest) but went on to assert Himself as the Lord of the Sabbath in light of His unique ability to provide the spiritual rest for which humanity is desperate:

Then Jesus said to the Pharisees, “The Sabbath day was made to help people; they were not made to be ruled by the Sabbath day. So then, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath day.”

MARK 2:27-28, NCV

Therefore it comes as no surprise that they’re depicted as vultures in the next scene—watching Jesus’ every move with a predatory glare from the top row of the synagogue bleachers:

Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. *Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath.*

MARK 3:1-2, NIV (EMPHASIS MINE)

I’ve been in a fluffy season for more than a decade now—interspersed with brief periods of leanness when I can actually feel my hip bones while lying down on my back—therefore I’ve been to multiple Weight Watchers® and Jenny Craig® “weigh-ins.” And the one thing I’ve noticed is that no matter what the time of day or time of year, most of us wear as little as possible when we weigh in. It might be the middle of an ice storm in February but doggone it, I’m still going to wear the thinnest nylon running pants or shorts in my closet, a wisp of a T-shirt and flip flops or shoes I can easily slip off. I don’t even wear much jewelry on those terrible, horrible, no good, standing-on-the-scale-next-to-a-perky-weight-management-counselor days because Every. Single. Ounce. Counts!

Defining your relationship with God solely based on the Law can be just as depressing because Every. Single. Infraction. Counts. Every impatient word while stuck in traffic. Every unkind thought in a slow checkout line at the grocery store. Every lapse in judgment. Every minute of insecurity. They all add up to tip the scale toward fantastically flawed. No perfectly law-abiding human exists. Paul says it bluntly and succinctly in Romans 3:

For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.

ROMANS 3:23, KJV

No wonder the Pharisees were grouchy; they were surely exhausted from trying to uphold the façade of moral perfection! Sadly, instead of owning up to their faults and receiving forgiveness and healing from the One who already knew the truth about them anyway, their hard hearts withered to the point of conspiring with the Herodians to kill Him.

I'll try not to bore you with a long missive on the disparity between the Pharisees and the Herodians, but that they put aside their huge animosity toward each other to form an alliance against Jesus is significant. The Herodians represented the ruling power and hedonistic culture of Rome. They were pluralistic, polytheistic pagans. They acted like entitled fraternity boys with fat wallets and no scruples. Herodians were the absolute opposite of the pursed-lipped, allergic-to-fun, law-abiding Pharisees.

That these crews came together to take down the Son of God is as radical a concept as the leaders of the red states and the blue states coming together to back the same presidential candidate. It highlights the shocking similarity between unrestrained immorality—*I'm going to do whatever feels good to me in the moment!*—and restrained moral conformity—*I'm going to follow the rules better than anyone else even if it kills me!* In both cases, the practitioner is attempting to be their own god. And both approaches lead to self-righteousness. To an ironic "we're so much better than people who think they're better than other people" arrogance. Isn't it interesting how pious pew warmers can actually form a subconscious alliance with irreligious partiers?

What similar personality traits have you noticed in modern day Pharisees and wild-as-a-buck partiers who avoid Christianity like the plague?

Which extreme—secularism or religious conformity—do you tend to gravitate toward if you're not careful? Why do you think that is your temptation?

Someone once said, "Every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future." Do you think it's important to remember our past failures and if so, why?

When has your disappointment with your past failures driven you further away from the forgiveness and healing of Jesus? When has your disappointment with your past failures driven you to Him?

REAL HOPE

Last week—when I was in emotional high weeds because I had so much work to do in order to meet the deadline for this study—I was sitting at the kitchen table typing and realized my cell phone wasn't next to my laptop, where I was pretty sure I'd left it. Missy was comfortably sprawled out on the couch about twenty feet away watching *The Fox and The Hound* (one of her favorite Disney classics), so I called out, "Hey honey, have you seen my phone?" To which she chirped happily, "Yes ma'am!" I got up from the table and walked over to her and asked, "Baby, I need to check something on my phone so will you please tell me where it is?" She grinned mischievously and replied, "I put it in a drawah, mama!" I wasn't feeling especially tolerant at the time but realizing she thought we were playing a game, I tried to play along, "OK, baby, how about you show me what drawer you chose to hide mama's phone in?" She bounced to her feet and began skipping from room to room, opening drawer after drawer, none of which contained my phone.

After about fifteen minutes of the increasingly frustrating routine of Missy emphatically declaring, "It's in 'dis drawah, mama!" only to find that it wasn't, and after I'd stopped the festivities several times to clarify how important it was for her to show me where she'd hidden my phone (Missy's only been speaking English for 15 months and sometimes there's still a communication gap), I reached the bottom of my patient parent bucket. I knelt down to her level, looked directly into her beautiful brown eyes, and said in a very firm tone that sounded shockingly like the one my mother used with me when I misbehaved at Missy's age, "Melissa, this Is. Not. Funny. At. All. If you don't show me where you put my phone right now I will turn off the movie and you're going to bed early." Of course, her eyes filled with crocodile tears and her bottom lip began to tremble, but since I think consistency is critical in parenting, I followed through by putting my hand on her tiny shoulder and herding her to her bedroom, turning the TV off in route much to her dismay.

A little while later, I came trudging back downstairs with a sagging spirit because I don't enjoy disciplining Missy even though I know it's for her good. Plus, I was fretting about the fact that I didn't have time to go to the Apple store to get a new phone the next day, not to mention dreading what crucial data had been gobbled from my iPhone innards never to be seen again by the ubiquitous, carnivorous "cloud." Sadness, frustration, and worry were getting their party started in my head when I glanced at the Bible next to my laptop and wondered, "What is that weird lump in my study Bible?" Before I flipped it open to find the "missing" phone, my heart had already begun its swift descent to my stomach. It's a wonder the Holy Spirit didn't zap my posterior with lightning as I bolted back upstairs to Missy's room to apologize.

I sat down on the edge of her bed and took her hand in mine, but before I was able to explain why I was sorry, her face split into a grin, she blurted out sincerely, “Dat’s okay, mama. I lub you!”, wrapped her arms around me, and squeezed. My tenderhearted baby girl is so uncomfortable when she feels distance between us that she jumped the gun and forgave me before I even had time to confess! Which left me as the one with hot tears running down my face (only mine weren’t of the dramatic, large lizard variety).

The thing that slays me more than anything else in the passages we’ve pondered thus far in Mark’s Gospel account is the fact that Jesus forgave the paralytic and the dude didn’t even repent! In fact, as best I can tell, this is the only encounter in the Gospels when Jesus’ redemption wasn’t somehow associated with repentance, either professed by the sinner, like when Peter recognized he was a hot mess after Jesus orchestrated a miraculous catch of fish and said, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Luke 5:8b)—or commanded by Christ Himself, like when He lavishly forgave the chick who’d been caught in adultery but added the admonition, “Go, and from now on sin no more” when He sent her on her way (John 8:11b).

So does that mean Mark was attempting to vault over a compulsory doctrinal element or pervert salvific principles? Nope. It means that Jesus was so incredibly eager to restore the paralytic into a right relationship with his Heavenly Father that He preempted the guy’s repentance (which Jesus foreknew because He’s omnipotent) with mercy. I don’t know about you, but the idea of Jesus pursuing me with aggressive grace puts me in the mood to admit my mistakes much faster!

When have you experienced the grace of God totally apart from your own seeking it?

Bestselling author Anne Lamott wrote, “Grace means you’re in a different universe from where you had been stuck, when you had absolutely no way to get there on your own.”⁷

What (or who) has God’s grace gotten you “unstuck” from recently?

One of my favorite living pastors/authors/theologians is Dr. Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York. I listened to his entire sermon series on Mark (titled “King’s Cross” and available at www.gospelinlife.com) while researching Mark. And one of the remarkable things he said—among many—is this: “Religion teaches, ‘I obey, therefore I’m accepted.’ The Gospel teaches, ‘I’m completely accepted, therefore I obey.’”⁸

In other words, when our hearts have been transformed by the unconditional love of Jesus Christ, the moral law reminds us of what He accomplished on the cross for us and stimulates humility. We set our course toward holiness not in an attempt to justify ourselves but as a grateful response to the One who lovingly rescued us from that awful, accusatory scale!

What end does God accomplish through His kindness according to Romans 2:4?

How has God’s mercy steered you toward repentance lately?

READ EXODUS 34:6. Describe a time when you messed up so badly, you were afraid you were going to be on the receiving end of a lightning bolt—or at least something super punitive—and instead experienced the tangible compassion of Christ.

How did you respond to His kindness?

READ MARK 2:18-22. Has the Holy Spirit given you any fresh spiritual insight through the Gospel of Mark yet? If so, what?

THE GOSPEL OF MARK: AN INTRODUCTION

Throughout most of Christian history, many people saw Mark's Gospel as short, incomplete, and impatient—basically a hasty abridgment of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Its status as being genuine Scripture was always secure. Yet among the Synoptic Gospels, some New Testament scholars thought Mark to be less important than the fuller accounts of Matthew and Luke. The early church was especially interested in Matthew since common consensus held that it was the oldest Gospel account. This evaluation held for centuries, but views about relations and chronologies for the Synoptics shifted once New Testament theologians began in-depth comparative studies.

In the nineteenth century, many scholars began to indicate they believed Mark had actually preceded Matthew and Luke. Further, they theorized that Matthew and Luke used Mark as a prototype and source when authoring their own accounts. They called this theory the "Markan Priority." Scholars who denied biblical inspiration concluded that Matthew and Luke embellished and expanded Mark's account to create a more robustly divine Jesus. Discerning evangelical scholars, however, rejected such skepticism. They accepted the Markan Priority, affirming that Mark was the earliest of the Synoptics and that Matthew and Luke each used Mark's Gospel as one of their sources. This interpretation did not diminish their understanding that the Holy Spirit indeed inspired the Gospel writers in their work. Further, by seeing Mark as the oldest and foundational for the three Synoptics, these scholars began to investigate how Matthew and Luke handled Mark's material as the Spirit led them. This Mark-as-foundational

understanding allowed scholars to discern what special emphases each Gospel writer wished to bring to the forefront for their chosen audiences. The Markan Priority lifted Mark's Gospel from the shadows, giving it a prominence that it retains to this day.

AUTHORSHIP

Like the others, Mark's Gospel is anonymous. The epigram "According to Mark" was added some time after Mark composed his work, possibly by A.D. 125. Long-standing tradition identifies this Mark as John Mark of the New Testament. John Mark's mother hosted meetings of early believers in her Jerusalem home during the early days of Christianity (Acts. 12:12). This put Mark within the sphere of apostles and eyewitnesses to Jesus' life. In fact, Mark accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey, but deserted the endeavor at Perga and returned to Jerusalem (13:13). Traveling with Paul would have provided Mark with an excellent chance to learn the content of Paul's preaching about

Christ. Mark was later restored to Paul's confidence, giving him additional chances to glean vital biographical data that Paul had gathered about Jesus (2 Tim. 4:11).

Mark also enjoyed the benefit of learning under the personal tutelage of Simon Peter, the stalwart and passionate companion of Jesus during His earthly ministry. So familiar was Peter with Mark that he goes so far as to call him "my son" (1 Pet. 5:13). Arguably Peter had greater influence on Mark than Paul did. Early tradition even held that Mark's Gospel was written as a reflection of Peter's preaching. In approximately, A.D. 325, the church historian Eusebius recorded a portion of Bishop Papias' writings. Speaking of the origins of the Gospel of Mark, Papias said, "Mark being the interpreter of Peter whatsoever he recorded he wrote with great accuracy but not however, in the order in which it was spoken or done by our Lord."⁹ The biblical evidence for John Mark's close relationships with Peter and Paul, and the early church unanimously attributing this account to Mark, help to establish him firmly as the author.

DATE AND AUDIENCE

Putting a precise date to Mark's Gospel is not possible. Skeptics assume Mark must have been written sometime after the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 since, in their view, Jesus' supernatural prophecies had to have been added after those events (Mark 13:2).

However, evidence suggests a date in the mid-60s or earlier. For instance, some scholars hold that the Book of Acts ends with events that actually date to around A.D. 62. Luke obviously wrote his Gospel before his

Book of Acts—meaning he wrote his Gospel before 62. Further, given the likelihood that Mark was written before Luke, we can reasonably date Mark to A.D. 60 or earlier. This is a well-attested view in current scholarship.¹⁰

A second possibility is that Mark was written in the middle or late 60s, before the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. This theory is based on the assumption that Papias was implying that Mark wrote his Gospel after Peter's death. This theory is weakened, though, by the fact that other early opinions (like that of Clement of Alexandria) held that Peter was alive when Mark was written. If Peter were indeed alive, this would mean Mark wrote his Gospel in the 50s.

Evidence—such as Mark's use of Latin terms and general emphasis on suffering, both of which the Christians in Rome could well understand—seems also to indicate Mark wrote while in Rome. Further, early Christian tradition affirmed that Mark was in Rome when he wrote his Gospel.

MARK TODAY

Mark has risen from obscurity in the past century and now has a place of prominence in studies of the Gospels. Likewise it should rank high in the attentions of Jesus' followers today, for in this urgent little Gospel we are admonished to give our all to the Son who has given His all for us.