

What Does This Mean?

Mark 1:21-28

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When you were a child, what was a cartoon or a radio show that you never missed? Whether it was a Saturday morning or a Thursday evening, you could always be found in front of the TV or around the radio? Would you help solve mysteries by riding around in the Mystery Machine with the gang of Scooby Doo? Or, could you be found on top Trigger with Roy Rogers riding through the Wild West?

For me, a cartoon that I seemed to connect with was the Wile E. Coyote and Road Runner show. I think that part of the reason that I enjoyed the show was because I knew what was going to happen every time. You know the story; the Coyote would develop these elaborate traps to catch his nemesis, the Road Runner. They often consisted of an anvil, or a rope, or a mirage that the Road Runner would masterfully defeat. And then, inevitably, the Coyote would check to see why his trap did not work and in the process, would be the victim of his own device: the anvil would fall on his own head, the rope would entangle him, the mirage of the broken bridge wasn't a mirage for the Coyote as he would plummet to the bottom of a raging river. It's a story that no matter when you started watching, you could easily pickup with what was happening. If you have seen one of them, then you have seen them all.

And as I reflect back on watching the cartoon, I seem to remember really enjoying the character of the Road Runner. He did the same thing every episode.

He was also in a rush...always speeding across the screen with his legs in such a hurry a swirling cloud of dust below him where his feet should be. In fact, the only time that the Road Runner would stop would be long enough to quickly glance at the approaching elaborate entrapment made by the Coyote. He would then shrug his shoulders, turn to the TV camera and say, 'Beep Beep!' and then he was off. In each episode, you knew what you were getting from the Road Runner.

The Gospel of Mark, in my mind, is similar to the Road Runner. From the very beginning, Mark has given us the ending to his story. Mark 1:1 says "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Mark has already established with us as readers that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Everything that follows is highlighting this thesis. It is sort of like watching "The Sixth Sense", but knowing from the start of the movie that Bruce Willis is dead. Knowing this detail drastically shapes how you understand the rest of the movie. From the very beginning, you know what you are getting with Mark.

And, Mark loves the Greek word "euthus" meaning "immediately". "Euthus" is littered all over Mark's gospel. Like the Road Runner, Mark is in a hurry. He does not have time to give details or dwell on elaborate stories. He has a point to emphasize. He

shows the reader how this Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. He will stop for a second, give a brief story, and then “euthus” “Beep! Beep!” he’s off to another story.

For instance, in the Gospel of Mark we don’t birth narrative of Jesus. We open up with a prophecy from Isaiah. We then give a nod to John the Baptist, “euthus” spend 3 verses on the baptism of Jesus, “euthus” 2 verses on the Temptation in the Wilderness, call Simon, Andrew, James and John to be disciples. Mark is forming a dust storm under his feet as he is sprinting his way through the story of Jesus.

And then, all of a sudden, Mark stops, like the Road Runner, looks around, and gives us a brief narrative...the first specific story of Jesus’ public ministry. A story of Jesus teaching in the Synagogue.

I

“They went into Capernaum; and ‘Beep! Beep!’ on the Sabbath Jesus entered the Synagogue and began to teach.” Let’s put ourselves in this situation. Who would have been at this gathering? According to Jewish law, wherever there were at least 10 Jewish families, there had to be a Synagogue. Now, a Synagogue is not the Temple. The Synagogue’s main purpose was for teaching. The gathering would typically consist of some times for prayer, reading of scrolls and then someone would elaborate or teach a lesson from the scrolls. There would be a “Ruler of the Synagogue” whose main duties consisted of administration and the arrangement of the services held at the Synagogue. There would be a “Distributor of Alms” who would pass out basic necessities to those people that could not provide for themselves. The poor would receive 14 meals per week from the “Distributor of Alms.” The “Chazzan” was the man whose job consisted of storing the sacred scrolls on which the sacred writings were written and to blow the silver trumpet each week, which would signal to all that the Sabbath had arrived.

So, we have these leaders and we have at least 10 Jewish families. But what you didn’t find in a Synagogue was a permanent teacher or preacher. It was the Ruler of the Synagogue’s responsibility to find people that would teach each week. So, according to Mark, Jesus of Nazareth has already entered the area of Galilee and has been preaching about the kingdom of God. Word has gotten around about Jesus, and our Ruler of the Synagogue has asked Jesus to teach us this week in Capernaum. It was in this setting that Mark records Jesus’ first highlighted, public narrative. Oh, what a place to begin the ministry of Jesus...in the local worship gathering.

And what happens? Jesus begins to teach from a scroll. And we, the people, are amazed at what we hear. Jesus doesn’t quote the traditions or the sayings of old as the scribes, the experts of the Law, do. He teaches with his own authority. We tap each other on the shoulder and say, “Are you hearing this? This is incredible. He is teaching as someone who has *authority*.”

And then, all of a sudden, a man, a crazed man with an unclean spirit interrupts Jesus’ teaching and begins to shout out, “What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One

of God!” I don’t know if you have ever been in a service when someone blatantly interrupts the preacher, but it is actually pretty awkward. Talk about a showstopper. What will Jesus do?

He commands the spirit, “Be quiet, and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit screeches an agonizing scream, throws the man into convulsions, and leaves.

The people are amazed. “What is this? A new teaching with authority?” And then, “Beep! Beep!” Mark is off to the next story.

II

Wait a second, Mark. Slow down. I need to catch my breath. Look at what has just happened. Jesus is teaching. The people are amazed. An unnamed possessed man enters the scene. Jesus performs an exorcism. The people are amazed at a possible new teaching with authority. And then, Mark, you are off.

If we pay attention to what Mark tells us, the emphasis of this story is not the miraculous exorcism. And while, if I were writing the gospel, I would probably go into a lot of detail of this extraordinary event, this is not what Mark is highlighting. For Mark, it is the teaching of Jesus that demands his attention. Look at the response of the people in verse 22. They were amazed at Jesus teaching, for he taught with authority. And then, in verse 27, after the exorcism, the people don’t necessarily focus on the supernatural event that has just taken place; rather, it is this new teaching that Jesus brings. “What is this?” the people ask.

So, if Mark is making us stop to look at what Jesus taught, then we are going to need to ask, ‘What did Jesus teach?’ And this is what is frustrating about the text. Mark doesn’t say. He doesn’t tell us what it was that Jesus said. There aren’t any red letters in the lecture. Mark doesn’t provide us with any PowerPoint slides. He doesn’t even give us a bullet point outline of Jesus’ sermon. It makes no sense. Mark, if you want us to pay attention to what Jesus taught, then, it would be helpful to, I don’t know, tell us what he said!

But, Mark rarely tells us of the content of Jesus’ message. In this Gospel, we don’t find a Sermon on the Mount, as in Matthew. Luke covers his Gospel with Jesus’ parables, but Mark only throws us a bone every now and then. I want to be privy to his message. If the people are amazed at Jesus’ teaching, I want to hear what he taught. I want to lean in to the message of this apparent Son of God. But how can I do this...how can I follow his message if I don’t know what he said?

III

But maybe Mark is trying to show us something. It is not necessarily the content of Jesus’ verbal message that we are meant to grasp. The words, the phrases, the proclamations that Jesus made are subordinate to what we see Jesus doing. Mark is telling us that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and then he says, “Let me *show* you why I believe this.”

Jesus saw a man in a Synagogue that needed help and he helped the man. Later, Jesus heals a man that couldn't walk when his friends lowered him from the top off the roof. Jesus asked Levi, a tax collector, a trader, to be part of his inner-circle. He blesses little children. He befriends prostitutes. He eats with tax collectors. He heals on the Sabbath.

I think too often I approach faith from a head-knowledge perspective. If I can just figure out *this* aspect of theology. If I can understand how God works in *this* way, then my love of God and love of man will be achieved.

There are other times, when I think that I have made up my mind about how God interacts in the world and then my agenda turns into convincing others to think like I do. My relationship with others is not genuine; I simply want to convince them that my understanding of God is the right understanding.

I wonder if our churches do that, too? We as Christians do a lot of talking about being a loving people, about being an inclusive type of people, yet we surround ourselves with like-minded persons, with like-practicing type of persons. Or if we do put ourselves in the vulnerable situation of a new environment, we befriend others; we try to teach them of the message of Jesus. But then, slowly and surely, bit by bit, we begin to indoctrinate them into our way of thinking. We say, "Come as you are to our church. Come to this place of accepting. Oh, and when you get here, would you mind saying this creed the way that we say it? You know, in the Lord's Prayer, we say 'forgive us our debts' instead of 'forgive our trespasses'. I know it's not a big deal, but it would really be nice if you wouldn't mind being baptized that way that we are baptized. And we are a premillennial thinking people and not a postmillennial thinking people. Just so you know."

But, is what Jesus' message is about? I sometimes imagine Jesus leaning in and whispering into my ear, "David, my message is not of cognitive substance. It is not simply a lesson to learn, or a mental decision to make, or a formula to memorize. David, watch me. See what I have done. See what I am doing. I sit at the table with sinners. I journey with those that are hurting. I help those that need help and love those that have been labeled un-lovable. It doesn't matter where they are or who they are. I am with them and I deeply love them. Imitate this. Imitate me." It is a message of inclusion.

And so we watch the one whom Mark has called the "Christ, the Son of God" with keen eyes. We see what he does. His teaching is more than a teaching of words...it is a way of being. It is a way of accepting. It is a way of loving. He brings us a new teaching...a teaching with authority. And like those in the Synagogue, we ask ourselves, "What is this? What does this mean?"...What does this mean?